



‘Nothing about us without us’: Assessing the Attitudes of Deaf Learners towards Inclusive Education

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Author’s contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/JESBS/2021/v34i230311

Editor(s):

(1) Dr. Alina Georgeta Mag, “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Romania.

Reviewers:

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Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/68669>

Original Research Article

Received 05 March 2021

Accepted 15 May 2021

Published 17 May 2021

ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study conducted on South African Deaf learners’ attitudes towards inclusive education. Respondents were a non-probability (convenience) sample of seven learners aged between 17 and 25 years. A questionnaire containing ten open-ended questions was designed and administered to assess learners’ attitudes towards inclusive education. The questionnaire took participants between 30 and 60 minutes to complete in a group-based context. The help of a sign language interpreter was undertaken. The data collected were analysed using thematic analysis. The results reveal that six of the respondents were in favour of being granted the opportunity to express their innermost feelings rather than be told by teachers what their attitudes should be.

Keywords: Inclusive education; mainstreaming; deaf education; special educational needs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusion, or inclusive education, is regarded as an aspect of educational psychology in South Africa. Educational psychologists are expected to play a role in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Inclusion constitutes an international and national policy imperative that promotes the rights of children with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers in mainstream classrooms [1]. The inclusion of children with hearing impairments in mainstream classrooms has not yet become the focus of extensive research in education [2]. The inclusive paradigm requires that Deaf learners be educated in regular schools. In the process of implementing inclusive policies, educators often feel that they lack the knowledge and experience necessary to provide effective support for deaf learners. As a result, these learners are seldom effectively catered for in regular settings and frequently tend to experience frustration and failure.

In accordance with Education policy in the period post 1994, there is currently a move in South Africa towards implementing inclusive education in regular/mainstream schools an inclusive approach to educating learners who experience barriers to learning. Such an inclusive philosophy is considered, at policy level, to be the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all [3].

From an inclusive viewpoint, it is important that all learners are given the best education possible from an academic, emotional and social perspective, and emphasis is placed on educating the whole child by meeting individual needs through the identification and accommodation of any barriers to learning. Within such an education and training system, it is important that Deaf learners are not excluded and that the practice of inclusion takes into account the needs of all Deaf learners.

On the international front, it appears that research focused on learner attitudes towards inclusive education is not given attention. A case in point is a study by Secer [4] who looked at the effects of in-service teacher training on Turkish preschool teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. The focus of this study was on teacher attitudes, not learner attitudes. This is a major shortcoming of the study concerned because successful implementation of inclusive education requires

consideration of learner attitudes and, more specifically, of Deaf learner attitudes.

Another example of the dearth of research into Deaf learner attitudes towards inclusive education can be seen in the study by Alghazo, Dodeen and Algaryouti [5] in which the attitudes of preservice educators towards people with disabilities were investigated. If one looks closely at that study, one finds that the focus is on preservice educators and that there is no attempt to take Deaf learner attitudes into consideration. Deaf learner attitudes are critical in the successful implementation of inclusive education. More attention should have been paid to establishing how Deaf learners feel about inclusive education.

D'Alonzo, Giordano and Vanleeuwen's [6] study could also be seen as another international study that did not pay attention to Deaf learners' attitudes towards inclusive education. The study investigated perceptions by teachers as to the benefits and liabilities of inclusion. This is an important study because the perceptions of educators are critical in the successful implementation of inclusive education. The study makes sound recommendations, such as meeting the need for more educator support in order for inclusive education to be successful. The study could have been more useful if Deaf learners' attitudes had been considered. It seems as if educators' voices are of paramount significance, to the exclusion of learners' voices. The absence of Deaf learners' voices here indicates that more research needs to be done, aimed at targeting Deaf learner attitudes. It should be remembered that Deaf learners, in particular, are recipients of inclusive education. If the Deaf learners are antagonistic, inclusive education has less chance of being successful.

As has already been indicated, the inclusion of Deaf learners in educational research has not yet received the desired attention. The situation even worse when it comes to Deaf learners' attitudes towards inclusive education. There are numerous studies that have been conducted in Deaf education, but these have failed to include the Deaf child. A study by Mall & Swartz [7] explored the attitudes of educators working in schools for Deaf and hard-of hearing pupils in South Africa toward condom education for their pupils. Even though this was an important study, it did not pay attention to the inclusion of the Deaf learner. The focus was on educators, thus negating the fact that condom education is part of inclusive

education and that the views and attitudes of Deaf learners are critical.

The inclusion of Sign Language when advancing inclusive education is critical. One of the major challenges faced by South African Sign Language (SASL) is the need to fight for its survival because it has been viewed as less important than the other (spoken) languages in country. This has led to Deaf education researchers, such as Nkosi (2010), to put pen to paper on the challenges faced by South African Sign Language. He asserts that SASL continues to be viewed as less important than the other languages. This is an important observation, but it does not take into consideration the fact that Sign Language can form part of inclusive education. In an inclusive learning environment, Sign Language is considered to be equally important.

This study was informed by Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour, an extension of the theory of reasoned action [8]. According to this theoretical framework or model, attitudes toward a behaviour may be influenced by past experiences, prior knowledge and newly acquired knowledge [8,9]. Attitudes play a critical role in determining behaviour [9]. More specifically, this study is based on the premise that the attitudes of Deaf learners are influenced by past experiences and anxiety about the implementation of inclusive education could be as a result of that.

Intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence a behaviour; they are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behaviour [9]. As a general rule, the stronger the intention to engage in a behaviour, the more likely should be its performance. It should be clear, however, that a behavioural intention can find expression in behaviour only if the behaviour in question is under volitional control. Collectively, these factors represent people's actual control over the behaviour [8]. To the extent that a person has the required opportunities and resources, and intends to perform the behaviour, he or she should succeed in doing so.

The survey of literature, nationally and internationally, reveals a dearth of research on Deaf learners' attitudes towards inclusive education. The research focus has been mainly

on regular/general educators' attitudes towards inclusive education. This study therefore fills the knowledge gap.

2. METHODS

2.1 Respondents and Setting

The respondents were in Grade 12 and were attending a school for the Deaf in the Gauteng Province in South Africa. The participants have been at the same school since Grade R. The participants' first language is Sign Language and they take English as their Second Language. No attempt was made to alter their written responses, so as to maintain originality. The participants had been at the school for more than five years and were all proficient in Sign Language.

2.2 Sampling

The respondents were a non-probability sample of seven learners aged between 17 and 25 years. The type of non-probability sampling chosen was convenience sampling. Convenience sampling (also known as availability sampling) is a specific type of non-probability sampling method that relies on data collection from population members who are conveniently available to participate in a study.

2.3 Research Design and Instrumentation

Given the sensitivity around the issue that was being researched and my interest in subjective realities, a qualitative research design was deemed appropriate for it assumes the subjective construction of reality of those under investigation. Unlike quantitative design that restricts the investigation of the phenomena to predetermined parameters, qualitative research design takes place in a natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:10). This is a case study. A case study attempts to shed light on a phenomenon by studying, in-depth, a single case example of the phenomena. The case can be an individual person, an event, a group, or an institution [10,11]. A questionnaire containing open-ended questions was designed and piloted. The term 'pilot studies' refers to mini versions of a full-scale study (also called 'feasibility' studies), as well as the specific pre-testing of a particular research instrument such as a questionnaire or interview schedule [10]. The aim of the questionnaire was to capture the attitudes of Deaf learners towards inclusive education. It

covers the following areas: Inclusion of Deaf learners, Perceived challenges for the inclusion of Deaf learners, Suggestions for the successful inclusion of Deaf learners and Suggestions for the successful inclusion of Deaf learners.

The rationale behind using an open ended questionnaire was to enable the Deaf learners concerned to write down their responses as there was a language barrier between the researcher and the researched, who most of them communicate using sign language. One of the advantages of open-ended questions is that they are easier and quicker for respondents to answer than questions in other formats and the respondents are more likely to provide answers concerning sensitive topics [12,13].

2.4 Data Analysis

A thematic method of data analysis was primarily followed. Thematic analysis is one of the most common forms of analysis in research. It emphasises pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or "themes") within data. Themes are patterns across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated to a specific research question. The themes become the categories for analysis. Thematic analysis is performed through the process of coding in six phases to create established, meaningful patterns. These phases are: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report [13].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results reveal that six of the respondents were in favour of being granted the opportunity to express their innermost feelings rather than be told by teachers what their attitudes should be. What follows is a presentation of the research findings organised in themes. It should be noted that fictitious names were used. The following themes emerged from the data analysis: Inclusion of Deaf learners, Perceived challenges for the inclusion of Deaf learners, Suggestions for the successful inclusion of Deaf learners and Suggestions for the successful inclusion of Deaf learners.

3.1 Inclusion of Deaf Learners

Six of the seven Deaf learners who participated in this study were of the view that the inclusion of Deaf learners is a good idea. This sentiment is

evident in the statement made by the following respondent:

Alice: Yes. I think so because Deaf learners should have equal education with hearing learners. Deaf learners do not have the same quality of education like the hearing learners, so if they are included in mainstream schools, hearing learners can help them. They can share ideas, socialise with one another etc. But the difficulty can be that Deaf learners and hearing learners would not be able to communicate well because not many hearing people out there know Sign Language and there are not many hearing interpreters who can interpret for Deaf people.

It is clear from the above statement that Deaf learners are aware of their right to equal quality education. The right to equal education is enshrined in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child [14], which says that every child has the right to quality education, to develop his or her personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. This education also includes the preservation and strengthening of positive African morals, traditional values and cultures. This assertion is also in line with the South African Constitution [15], which guarantees the right to equal quality education. The Constitution further states that everyone has the right to be taught at a government school in their own language, but only if this is practical and if the government can afford it.

Inclusion of Deaf learners, according to this respondent, is seen as an opportunity to socialise and share ideas. South Africa has a history of separate schooling where learners with special educational needs, such as Deaf learners, were confined in special school. A significant change was made in the 1990s when there was an international rethinking of special needs. This led the South African government to come up with Education White Paper 6 [3]. This framework policy document aims to develop an education system that promotes education for all and develops inclusive and supportive centres of learning that allow all learners to participate in the education process to achieve their full potential and participate as equal members of society.

Even though the above respondent is positive about the inclusion of Deaf learners, she also foresees some challenges – such as the inability of the hearing people to communicate in Sign Language and the shortage of interpreters. When one looks at the South African context, this respondent certainly has a point. Sign Language, as a form of communication, is still confined to schools for the Deaf. The country has a long way to go in this area and it should begin by embarking on an extensive programme of educator development and interpreter training.

The next respondent, below, sees the inclusion of Deaf learners as an opportunity for the hearing learners to learn more about the Deaf culture.

Eunice: I think the inclusion of Deaf learners is good idea. It will give us an opportunity to learn more about each other's culture. More importantly, hearing people need to learn more about the Deaf culture and value us as people

Deaf culture is at the heart of Deaf communities everywhere in the world [16]. Each Deaf community is a cultural group which shares a sign language and a common heritage. Members of Deaf communities all around the world therefore identify themselves as members of a cultural and linguistic group. Identification with the Deaf community is a personal choice and is usually made independent of the individual's hearing status, and the community is not automatically composed of all people who are Deaf or hard of hearing. The Deaf community may also include family members of Deaf people, sign language interpreters and people who work or socialise with Deaf people and who identify with Deaf culture. A person is a member of the Deaf community if he or she self-identifies as a member of the Deaf community, and if other members accept him or her as a member. Very often, this acceptance is strongly linked to competence in a signed language [17].

The next respondent, below, also raised the understanding of Deaf culture as being critical to the successful implementation of inclusive education, but also argues that more awareness programmes would need to be advanced.

Patricia: I think the inclusion of Deaf learners in the mainstream schools as we will all be exposed to the same learning opportunities, but before that there is a lot of work that needs to be done. First, there is a need for hearing learners to

understand the Deaf culture and to raise more awareness among the hearing communities

Deaf awareness means to understand that deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals are just as capable, able, and intelligent as hearing individuals [18]. There are differences in the ways that those who are deaf and hard of hearing communicate, but it is not a handicap or disability. It also means the celebration of the culture, heritage, and language unique to the deaf people of the world [18]. Furthermore, it also means the understanding of the Deaf people's rights. Finally, it is about knowing that Deaf people have dreams and aspirations for the future.

The one learner who was not in favour of inclusive education had this to say:

Rose: No, I do not think the inclusion of is a good idea. There is still a lot work to be done. The attitudes of hearing learners and teachers have to change first. They need to accept us as a people.

Deaf learners have always been marginalised and the education they receive has always been perceived as inferior. Such learners have also been associated with slow learning. The sentiments expressed by this respondent are therefore, understandable.

Perceived challenges for the inclusion of Deaf learners

The respondents in this study expressed a variety of challenges regarding the inclusion of Deaf learners. Some of these challenges are discussed below:

- Exclusion from regular schools as a result they cannot achieve their goals
- The fact that hearing people do not know the Sign Language to communicate with Deaf learners
- Lack of understanding of Deaf culture
- Lack of training among regular school educators
- Fear that hearing learners might not accept them as equal partners in teaching and learning

Suggestions for successful inclusion of Deaf learners

The respondents believed that the inclusion and teaching of Deaf learners is not impossible and, as a result, they made the following suggestions:

- Deaf learners should socialise more with hearing people
- Regular school educators and learners should learn how to communicate in Sign Language
- Awareness programmes that are aimed at conscientising the hearing community about Deaf culture at schools should be undertaken
- If inclusion for the Deaf learners is to be successful, Sign Language should be introduced to hearing learners early in their school years

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the attitudes of Deaf learners towards inclusive education. The literature survey shows that there is a dearth of research attempting to investigate the attitudes of Deaf learners. Most studies conducted seem to focus on regular or mainstream educators' attitudes towards inclusive education. This knowledge gap requires that more research needs to be undertaken in this area. The positive attitudes towards inclusive education displayed in this study should be applauded, given that one might have expected the respondents to have negative attitudes towards inclusive education because of the segregated schooling system they have experienced.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The University of South Africa research ethics committee and the Gauteng Department of Education approved the study (DoE reference: 020121231). The Deaf learners consented to participate in the study in writing. The respondents were reassured that their true names would not be revealed. The researcher used fictitious names. They were informed that they can withdraw anytime if they feel uncomfortable during the data collection process. The data collection process was conducted with the researcher after school hours. English was considered appropriate for the data collection process as the participants spoke different South African languages. It is important to note that the data collection process took place in the staff room. The Deaf learners did not have competing interest as they were all concerned about the plight of the Deaf learners.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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Peer-review history:

The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
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