

Transformational Efficacy of a Curriculum for People with Visual Impairment

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ABSTRACT This article argues that a relevant school curriculum is the kingpin in determining the level at which people with visual impairments (and other groups of marginalised people) could participate in decision making on matters that affect them. Resultant changes in income and self-portrayal come with favourable power dynamics, positive self-perception and improved social recognition. The study reviewed findings made by 20 teachers from four special schools and 30 blind students from a vocational training college. A mixed method was used with interviews and questionnaires as suitable instruments in the study. Fifty participants were purposefully sampled. The themes that emerged in the study were philosophy of emancipation, education and self-emancipation, equity, access and empowerment. Although this study was conducted in South Africa, its findings might affect people with visual impairments worldwide.

INTRODUCTION

This study attempts to highlight the importance of education in capacitating people with visual impairments with both an awareness of unjust practices and core requirements for productive human activity. The study could also inform other groups of marginalised people and empowerment agents about the importance of a relevant school curriculum for empowerment. This contribution hinges on the purpose-oriented philosophy of human existence. It is based on the belief that life has a purpose which we should seek to discover through the process of our own lives. It therefore seeks to engage minds on the essentials: that there is equal value to all human beings and it is a mature and noble human engagement to discover that value and to restore the pride that each and everyone deserves if synergies should be created for the betterment of the world that all of us inhabit. This study further seeks to inspire readers to re-appreciate the importance of education and information sharing in dispelling pseudo divisions that rock the human population and cause creative inertia which, in turn, threatens the world today (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) 2008; Constitution of South Africa 1996).

Literature, from organisations which mainly believe in philanthropy, glorifies the giver but dims the recipient. There should be a pool of academically valuable literature that seeks to empower the erstwhile recipient with information on the importance of education, the main tool for personal and group survival in today's world. In an editorial to *Conquest* magazine, Palmer (1996) urges leaders to conquer pride and seek education. He says there is no leader who is 'too big or too old to go to school.' Palmer goes on to say, '... it is futile to seek power if you are not equipped to handle it.' Education is delivered through a curriculum, so the paper dwells on core issues of the curriculum.

In addition, as only ten percent of persons with visual impairment are literate (Groce and Bakshi 2009), this paper could influence decision-makers, to afford blind and visually impaired persons equal opportunities for relevant education.

Students with low vision or those who are legally blind need help in using their residual vision more efficiently and in working with special aids and materials. Students who have visual impairments combined with other types of disabilities have a greater need for an interdisciplinary approach and may require greater emphasis on self care and daily living skills. Stu-

dents with visual impairments are educated in separate classrooms or specialized schools. A specialized placement may be due to the presence of additional disabilities that create complex educational needs or to the preference of the student's family. Emanating from the above, this paper explores through a literature review research conducted on visual impairments. Furthermore, research methodology and research results are highlighted.

Research Objectives

The major objective of this research is to investigate the transformational efficacy of the curriculum as it relates to the education of blind and visually impaired students.

Responding to Key Questions

The following questions assisted the researchers in meeting the requirements of the above objective:

- ♦ Is there any change in the education of blind and visually impaired learners in South Africa since the advent of democracy in 1994?
- ♦ Do visually impaired learners enjoy the right to education like their sighted counterparts?
- ♦ What benefits can they derive from an accessible and/or transformed curriculum?

Literature Review

Visual impairment is the consequence of a functional loss of vision, rather than the eye disorder itself. Eye disorders which can lead to visual impairments can include retinal degeneration, albinism, cataracts, glaucoma and muscular problems that result in visual disturbances, corneal disorders, diabetic retinopathy, congenital disorders, and infection.

As maintained by Davidson (2002), students with visual impairment need additional help with special equipment and modifications in the regular curriculum to emphasize listening skills, communication, orientation and mobility, career options, and daily living skills. Some specialized schools encourage and enroll students with visual impairments for short-term placements. Such students from other schools would be in need of a specific skill such as orientation and mobility

or assistive technologies. This option may be especially worthwhile after a student experiences a decrease in vision and needs an intensive opportunity to learn adaptive skills. Specialized schools may offer summer programs that allow students with visual impairments to socialize with peers who have common experiences, and many students remember such programs as valuable in helping them develop an understanding of the effects of their own low vision or blindness. *The National Agenda for the Education of Children and Youth with Visual Impairments, Including Those with Multiple Disabilities*, a set of goals established by families and professionals in 1995, has provided a framework for advocacy for a continuum of high quality educational services for learners who are visually impaired (Corn et al. 1995). Transformational leadership had an impact on the collective teacher efficacy of the school; teacher efficacy alone predicted teacher commitment to community partnerships; and transformational leadership had direct and indirect effects on teacher commitment to school mission and commitment to professional learning community.

Context of the Study

It is imperative to note that two authors of this paper are blind. One of them is a Programme Manager, Education and Training (with a PhD Qualification), whilst the other one is a Senior Education specialist (with a Masters degree). For their education, they relied on Braille, tactile adaptations such as raised maps, speech access, use of real objects and materials, and auditory descriptions. These researchers benefited from specialized instruction in skills that are not part of the standard curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method was used in this study. Smit (2001) argues that the assumptions used in quantitative methods are based on a logical positivist philosophy. It therefore means that social evidence is treated as a singular objective reality which is separated from the feelings and beliefs of individuals. On the other hand, qualitative research is based on a naturalistic phenomenological philosophy, which assumes that realities

are socially constructed by both the individual and society.

Qualitative research methodology is a good vehicle for portraying social evidence than quantitative methods. The authors' intention to discover the opinions of blind individuals regarding the main components of an empowering curriculum influenced the selection of the decision to select qualitative methodology. The decision to select this method was further influenced by the fact that the method provides insight into the difficulties which blind and visually impaired learners experience during the course of their educational lives. Finally, blind and visually impaired learners would have found it very challenging to work through quantitative questionnaires independently without being helped by assistants.

Research Sample

The study used purposive sampling with thirty visually impaired participants from Optima Vocational College, a division of the South African National Council for The Blind and 20 teachers from four special schools: two in Gauteng and two in Limpopo provinces. The students from Optima vocational college were categorized as follows; ten from the section of Braille, ten from call center training and ten from computer training. The total number of participants was fifty (50). Teachers were drawn in equal numbers from each of the four special schools. See Appendix 1 for different participants.

Data Collection Strategies and Techniques

Focus group interviews were employed as techniques for data collection. Seven focus group interviews were conducted (four with teachers and three with students at Optima Vocational College). Through those interviews, researchers sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of the problems experienced by blind and visually impaired learners in accessing the curriculum; and teachers' suggestions on best practices. The data collection technique allowed researchers to interview a purposefully sampled group of people rather than each person individually. The results capture major findings that emerged from participants' responses.

PROCEDURES AND DATA ANALYSIS

Ethical Considerations

Ethical researchers do not fabricate or falsify data in their publications. If the researcher discovers that the data published are erroneous, it is the researcher's responsibility to correct the error through retraction, an addendum, or other appropriate means.

Before the commencement of the research, researchers obtained voluntary consent from the participants. The participants were told about the general nature of the study as well as about any potential harm or risk that the study might cause. They were assured of confidentiality, and they were also told that they were free to decline participation. In addition, they were offered the opportunity to receive a report about the results and conclusions of the research project. Researchers explained the overall aim of the study and decided in advance to use pseudonyms for the names of the participants. The purpose of confidentiality and anonymity was also elaborated on. The participants felt at ease when anonymity was guaranteed. They viewed their critical voices as public testimony and stated that they were waiting anxiously to see their personal discourses as part of this research article.

Recording

Before starting to gather empirical data, it was advisable to spend a minute in considering whether the information that we needed could be reachable with other methods than the often relatively arduous empirical work. Such methods included the following:

- Finding the information in already existing texts and literature,
- Interrogating people that have the information,
- Phenomenological meditation where you use as material your own remembrances and earlier experiences with the objects.

Empirical operations were usually the most expensive phase in a research project and they deserved to be planned carefully. AnnoTape was a solution for recording, analyzing and transcribing audio data for qualitative research, marketing, journalism and broadcast, and sound archiving. AnnoTape turns the computer into a 'virtual' tape recorder:

- ♦ Record sound files - interviews, conversations, broadcasts - direct to the hard disk of your computer
- ♦ Store up to one hundred hours of sound, together with text-based data, all in one integrated database
- ♦ Analyse data by annotating and indexing the original sound and text files
- ♦ Effectively creating 'snippets' of virtual tape for a database of audio data
- ♦ Transcribes only those 'snippets' of sound you really need, using AnnoTape's transcription environment

A tape recorder was used for recording data, as a back up to the computer.

Transcriptions

This part opened with guidance on how to tune into the data before transcribing. Then, after explaining how to do a rough transcription, conversation analysis was presented. A summary was given at the end.

Categorising and Thematic Analysis

Theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research. It is also one of the most mysterious. Data was categorized and put into themes.

Analysis of data is a process of transforming, and modeling data with the goal of highlighting useful information, suggesting results, and supporting decision making. Data analysis has multiple facets and approaches, encompassing diverse techniques under a variety of themes, in different social science domains of learning. The following results emerged from the interviews with different participants.

RESULTS

The study found out that:

Emancipation

- ♦ According to teachers, emancipation comprised two stages: a stage at which outside assistance such as enacting an enabling law is used to validate proactive actions and a stage whereby individuals and communities with adequate relevant initial education de-

termine and shape their future. Respondents' deductions concur with the researchers' observation that emancipation comes with benefits such as independence, awareness of one's rights, in depth awareness of prevailing social conditions and opportunities to actively and fully participate in matters that affect both the individual and their communities. Learners considered emancipation to be an ongoing process.

Education and Self-emancipation

- ♦ The study revealed that 'education changes people' is not a mere adage. Education proclaims itself in people's daily lives. The fact that education emancipates socially marginalised people could be traced back to the days of liberation struggles in Africa. The study further revealed that educated people were self-assertive and it gives voice to the voiceless, enabling individuals to behave as equals to other people. To the blind education fosters self-assertiveness, self-representation, and equality.
- ♦ On whether there has been noticeable change in education in South Africa since the advent of democracy in 1994, there are divergent views. To educators, change was noticeable in the form of laws and policies which were put in place to pave way for equitable educational provision and to safeguard the educational interests of all learners. On the contrary, students maintained that if change had really taken place they would not be finding a host of problems in securing chances to enter higher and tertiary institutions.

Equity

- ♦ As far as equity is concerned, the study revealed that even with adequate skills and competencies, blind and visually impaired individuals are often unemployed and under employed. There was therefore a need to find solutions to the problems of social justice and equity for the blind and visually impaired people.
- ♦ To respondents interviewed, social equity and justice require action while social action requires leaders who are critically reflective, future oriented thinkers prepared

to take risks and accept responsibility and accountability for enacting those visions. These managerial attributes result from a good education.

Access

- The study revealed that blind and visually impaired people who could work and want to work still face many barriers. There are few opportunities to develop relevant skills and experience, they face practical challenges such as inaccessible transport, and sometimes experience negative attitudes from potential employers. The study further revealed that the word 'access' is restricted in its meaning and/or intention. It is confined to be referring to accessing information and the built environment. That was evident in the case study of the wheelchair user.

Empowerment

- Finally, the study revealed that successful empowerment is hinged on both institutional processes (a conducive environment) and individuals' initiative. That will promote true participation.

DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Philosophy of Emancipation

Theme one addresses the third question.

Eighty-six percent of the participants indicated that self-emancipation comes with the realisation that human beings are just a type of creature (with variations of male or female). Together, they are just one of the many members of the biotic community. It would be equally correct to add that human beings are (further) shaped and capacitated on a continuum of possibilities, and with infinitely variant needs (Higgs and Smith 2006). Emancipation is a legal process that gives a teenager who is seventeen or older legal independence from his or her parents or guardians. Emancipation can be an important legal tool for certain teenagers, but you should give it careful thought before moving ahead.

The most important thing is that philosophies of emancipation come with awareness – a mere realisation of conditions that have been prevail-

ing in existing cultures. Equipped with that realisation of a prevailing phenomenon (in this case visual impairment); the development of a new and deeper understanding of prevailing conditions could be changed through the deconstruction of their founding rationale (Slattery 2006). In this case it is a new understanding that people do not differ on the basis of differences in sex-specifying anatomy, or on the basis of other physical, sensory and mental structural variations, be they genetic, prenatal or postnatal in origin. The issue of humanity then lies in the mere existence of an individual belonging to the species called *homo sapiens* rather than on other cosmetic reasons that validate segregation.

In a similar argument, Oliver (1993) bemoans the veneration and exaltation of such typical human abilities as walking, talking and seeing to the status of standards defining the boundary between humanity and sub-humanity. Indeed, such respect for psycho-biological wholeness looks like an illusion of delusive proportion, like one insisting on a claim to know the specific details of a particular path in the windblown desert sands. The energy expended on scanning for human differences and the resultant segregation is not worth the effort, and it severely limits many who could contribute to the national pie from optimal participation.

On the basis of the above, the authors of this article believe that seeing any differences that lead to demeaning other human beings on the mere basis of physical appearance, sensory capacity or psychological structure is a result of misinformation. It could therefore be attributed to inadequate or inappropriate social education. The idea of education is closely related to the earlier argument on the possibility for the basic realisation of attributes that make an organism qualify as a 'human being'. Emancipation comes as a result of the contextualisation of a collection of human 'cultural beliefs'; a process of questioning traditional knowledge, refining cultural beliefs and acting to emancipate those who are oppressed.

It would appear that emancipation of the marginalised comes with breaking the status quo. In a prophetic comment (Matthew 24: 1), Jesus foretold a time when no stone would be left on another. The temple he was referring to might have appeared quite beautiful and com-

forting to those who used it as it was, and took it as their own— but they did not think about the sheer weight that each stone bore in maintaining that order which sustained the building. In time each stone would stand free from the builder's bond and find relief in a new 'social' order. Perhaps society should consider this prophetic metaphor as a rudimentary foundation for the emancipation of marginalised populations – that the socio-economic status quo needs to be broken for the emancipation of people with visual impairment to prevail.

Sixty percent of teachers believed that emancipation comprises two basic levels: the stage at which outside resources (human, legal, infrastructural and material) have to be used to kick start the empowerment process; and the stage at which individuals and communities, equipped with adequate relevant initial education and other resources, spearhead their own interests. The same notion though put differently, was shared by seventy percent of the students. In the students' view, emancipation is an ongoing process, which is given impetus as communities continually analyse and evaluate their socio-ecological contexts. The idea would be to make the whole environment suitable for the life and thrift of all human beings. If the total environment is not well adapted for the possible livelihoods of all its inhabitants, then it would be limiting. Yet the state of the environment reflects on the interests of those in control of the dominant culture (McLaren 1998 in Slattery 2006). To that end, the particular way in which people with disabilities are handled at national level could have hegemonic origins.

Researchers realised that emancipation has the following benefits: independence, awareness of one's rights, in-depth awareness of prevailing social conditions and opportunities to participate in matters that affect both the individual and other people.

Theme 2: Education and Self-emancipation

This theme responds to the first question.

Ninety five percent of the respondents were of the opinion that 'Education changes people' is not a mere adage. It seems to proclaim itself in the daily lives of millions of people. That education is a panacea for the emancipation of individuals and groups of socially marginalised people could be inferred from the struggles which

explicitly raged unabated in the 19th and 20th centuries with regard to Africans' eligibility for education. In that light, Kuster (1994) quotes from a Zimbabwean Commission Report of 1925, that:

"There is a large number of employers, men and women, who state with conviction that they will not wittingly employ a mission boy. We have it from the kindly and just employer of over two thousand Natives that 'if you want to spoil a good nigger send him to a mission. He is casual and approaches you as an equal'".

In the same commission report, Zimbabwean women were asked to give their own opinion of educated natives and they said that educated natives were "self-assertive". There were other comments which implied that such school leavers were also more disrespectful than "raw Natives" (Kuster 1994: 108). Although expressed in the context of early notions of African education in Zimbabwe, the above quotation from the commission report, by implication, suggests that education brings 'voice' to the otherwise 'voiceless'. It enables one to be more self-assertive and to behave as an 'equal'. If the observation made by the employer quoted in the above excerpt is also true for persons with visual impairments, then it confirms the power of education in the struggle for self-representation, self-assertiveness and equality.

All educators concurred that in South Africa there had been dramatic change on the education frontier since 1994. New inclusive laws have been enacted: Education White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education, Integrated National Disability Strategy, Equal Opportunities Act, to name but a few. Students were rather sceptical about the changes that have taken place since 1994. They might have held those sentiments since they alluded to encountering notable difficulties with entering tertiary education institutions. They alluded to the fact that they were not aware of the educational terrain that prevailed prior to 1994 so they were unable to note differences.

Although students could not confirm the changes that had taken place in the South African education system since 1994, they confirmed the importance of education and they also saw it as a key to success. In support of the students' view, a Report to the [American] Nation by the National Federation of the Blind, Jernigan Institute (2009: 1) states the following:

"A good education is the key to success, and every American deserves an equal opportunity

to receive a good education. Inherent to being educated is being literate. The ability to read and write means access to information that, in turn, leads to understanding and knowledge. And knowledge is power – the power to: achieve, function in the family, thrive in the community, succeed in a job, and contribute to society”.

Expressed differently, appropriate curriculum should address ‘the economic, ecological, social, health and theological issues that threaten our survival’, as expressed by Slattery (2006: xvii) in a preface to his book on curriculum development. By implication, Slattery (2006) informs his audience that without education people cannot deal effectively with environmental factors that threaten their survival. Those tangible and prospective benefits of education should also transcend to people with visual impairment, much as they do to other sectors of the human population.

It could be further vehemently argued that illiteracy among the blind and visually impaired is avoidable, basing on the observation made by Enrique (1990), that while practically all industrialised countries have computerised Braille production systems to meet the needs of all Braille users; barely five percent of all blind people in the developing world receive any kind of education (not to mention the most basic Braille literacy classes). Enrique (1990) lists poverty, lack of medical attention, malnourishment and social disorders as the reasons behind the limited use of Braille and the consequent low education. Enrique (1990) is quick to hint that the pattern of more men being educated than women seen among the sighted is also visible among the blind and visually impaired. This pattern accompanies the proportional ratio of blind men and women in the recognised forms of employment, and the hierarchy of the jobs they engage in.

The argument remains, that with more education, greater numbers of people with visual impairment would be freed from the adverse effects of limited education. They would be more marketable on the job market; they would be more able to contribute to their national economies in larger numbers, bringing with them their creative genius, and they would be more prepared to migrate and meet the dictates of the less limited fate circumscribed in better resourced regions of the world. They would also be more able to contribute to change within their own countries

through expressing their needs and the needs of other people in a bid to make a less selfish environment suitable to all human beings. If education helps to free the typical person in the street from uninformed quietude, then it should also give the same (or even more) voice to a person with disabilities, who is frequently condescended to, misrepresented or ignored by even the most ordinary citizen.

Despite the benefits heralded so far, it seems evident that the ghost of the educational marginalisation of the blind haunts even those who have crossed the bridge to enlightenment. Maguvhe (2003) laments blind researchers’ marginalisation as regards access to printed materials and technological tools. Maguvhe (2003) sees empowerment as enabling access to tools that help one to “read independently” in the context of his article, and advocates for free provision of such materials and equipment in both public libraries and institutions of higher learning. The fact that even the highly educated among the blind still feel the pinch of information starvation through marginal resource allocation should set pointers towards the difficulty with which adequate relevant basic education would have to be achieved by the large majority of blind learners, particularly in the developing world.

Theme 3: Equity

Theme three responds to question two.

Ninety-five percent of the respondents maintained that although people with visual impairments may just have the skills and competencies required within an organization they are often unemployed and under-employed. It is important to consider how organisations can tap this potential source of employees. People with disabilities should always be considered in all employment opportunities. A disability can be either permanent (for example, a hearing or mobility impairment) or temporary (for example, a treatable illness or temporary impairment that is the result of an accident). A disability can also be visible (for example, a wheelchair or white cane indicates the person has a disability) or invisible (for example, a mental illness). The need to find solutions to the problems of social justice and equity for people labeled disabled is the thread that runs through this study. Respondents also maintained that social equity and justice require

action and social action requires leaders who are critically reflective, future-oriented thinkers willing to take risks and accept responsibilities for enacting these visions.

Gouy (2010) literally laments the absurdity of the African condition that, although the world's blind population has dropped due to initiatives such as the World Health Organization's Vision 2020, Africa has remained at the epicentre of a disease earthquake. The Acting Executive Director of the African Union for the Blind (2010) refers to a list of preventable diseases and conditions that continue to afflict the African population and cause unnecessary blindness. The authors of this article acknowledge that much is being done on the African continent to prevent the rampant eye infection cited above, yet they also recognise the role that poverty, overcrowding and ignorance play in exacerbating the spread of disease. Education plays a big role in community health initiatives. Cuba has been known to have a sound health care system for many decades now, yet it is known to be suffering under sustained sanctions particularly from its giant neighbour, the United States of America. Cuba is also well known for a high literacy rate which currently stands at a staggering ninety seven percent (Davidson 2002). This statistic does not, however, indicate the literacy rate among the blind. It is only inferred that there is proportional representation of all population strata in their literacy strategy and literacy campaign. It is further inferred in this article that there might be substantial gains that high literacy among the population has on the facilitation and transmission of health care programmes. In South Africa, possibly the government saw the benefits of mass education on the improvement of society and introduced the Kha Ri Gude (Let Us Learn) mass literacy campaign in 2008.

Today, because many are denied the chance to get adequate education to vocalise their interests vociferously, the world has engaged the use of standardised accountability movements which help facilitate the adoption of social accountability policies such as the No Child Left Behind (2002) legislation in the United States of America (Slattery 2006). In South Africa, the Employment Equity Act stands in evidence of this growing commitment that governments are taking in response to growing pressure exerted by global interest groups created by a diversity of enlightened people who clamour for their legitimate right

to human integrity, social recognition, employment and other expressions of equality (Eggle 2002). The right to non-discrimination extends to all conceivable groups of people who need legitimate representational support, as highlighted in the Employment Equity Act.

Notwithstanding the coercive benefits of available legal social accountability tools, there is need for awareness among supposed beneficiaries, which is brought about by general education. In a broader philosophical perspective, if a person does not possess a benchmarked educational qualification for employability (such as Grade 12 or GCE Ordinary Levels) is 'legitimate' grounds for employment-related discrimination. This qualification-related 'elimination' of many people who could have had a chance to vie for a range of employment posts is a kind of discrimination if one considers that only about five percent of all blind people in the developing world are known to be receiving beneficial education (African Union for the Blind 2010).

This picture becomes gloomier when one considers that an estimated eighty percent of the world's blind population lives in the developing world. Thus, when seventy five percent of a staggering eighty percent of a certain identifiable group of people in the entire world are resigned to the same fate for reasons such as 'regional poverty', those who are able to scrape below the veneer see mass injustice. Without invoking sentimental feelings, the authors of this paper consider that the apparent lack of capacity by global governments to create effective synergies to raise literacy among the blind to a level significantly higher than the said five percent is part of 'education discrimination'. There appears to be a lack of willpower on the part of state machineries, similar to what Oliver (1993) calls "institutionalised discrimination".

In a keynote address to the International Conference of the South African Association for Learning and Educational Differences, Forlin (2004) laments the dire incapacity of schools in dealing with student diversity in today's classrooms. He suggests that genuine accommodative change should be initiated both at systemic and school levels. This implies that planners at levels higher than schools should play a pivotal role if education for all children (including those with visual impairment) is to be a reality. It is also interesting to note that Forlin and Engelbrecht (1998) in Forlin (2004: 2) charge that the partici-

pation of different stakeholders in inclusive education should no longer be considered volitional; it is now a “rights issue which is underpinned by the social justice perspective” The authors of this article are of the opinion that there is not yet a strong enough voice to challenge governments to wake up to the call for mass education for children with visual impairment, not to mention other groups of marginalised populations. They foresee deafening governmental outcries about the expense of “changes in curriculum, pedagogy, staff development, school climate, and structures”; as expressed by Sapon-Shevin (1996: 2) in relation to the difficulties encountered with initiating inclusive education in schools. It seems as if it takes strong commitment for public bodies to act enthusiastically and decisively on matters that change the status quo.

Theme 4: Access

This theme addresses question 2 and 3 respectively.

Seventy- nine percent of the respondents were of the opinion that visually impaired people who can work and who want to work face many barriers. They have fewer opportunities to develop skills and experience, face practical obstacles, such as inaccessible transport, and often experience negative attitudes from employers. Respondents further expressed that in many instances (and situations), the word ‘access’ is restricted and/or limited in its meaning and intention. It so happens that the term is often confined to a reference to accessing information and the built environments. Eggle (2002: 50) defines access as follows: “... having the way or means to (or of) approaching, getting, or using the necessary technology (such as a computer) in one’s home, work, school, or public library, whether or not it is used”.

Respondent Y shared his college experience in Gauteng province. The college failed dismally to provide fully accessible housing to a student with cerebral palsy. Certain rooms in ten of the college’s residence halls had been structurally modified to a limited extent for mobility impaired students but did not meet the accessibility standards set forth in the South African Standard Institute specifications for buildings and facilities accessible to and usable by the physically handicapped. Four rooms in ten other residence halls were fully modified to comply with the re-

quired standards. The college allocated the complaining student one of the rooms that was not fully accessible because he could not move independently between his room and the toilet, and was receiving assistance from a personal care assistant in transferring from his wheelchair. As a result, the student whose wheelchair could not fit in the passageway between his dorm room and the toilet/shower room had to be carried or dragged from one room to the other. After he complained about this to the college administration, he was allocated a fully accessible room. This should not be seen happening at institutions because it is against the law.

Respondent X alluded that a rude teacher at his previous school mentioned the following;

“How many times must we remind you that you are a blind student? You cannot take part in any Physical Education activity? There is no one to supervise you at all the times unless if you are prepared to supplement our salary costs. If you want to take part in any extra curricular activity, you must just deregister and look for a special school. You are a problem at this school and we are all tired of your attitude.”

Disabled students must be allowed the opportunity to participate in physical education programmes. According to regulations at many institutions all students are presumed qualified to participate in regular physical education programmes. Exceptions to this presumption may be made on a case by case basis and require a substantial nondiscriminatory justification.

However, the authors of this paper regard access to mean (and encompass) access to all public facilities, buildings, information, education, employment opportunities, economic resources, assistive/adaptive technologies, and the sustained proactive cooperation of those in the dominant culture. There are a variety of wheelchairs on the market, including manual, motorized, stand-up, elevating, reclining, sports, beach, and stair-climbing. Individuals, working with medical professionals, choose a wheelchair to meet their specific needs, depending on their limitations and activities. Seventy- nine percent of the respondents complained about working at a place where there are no lifts. Sometimes meetings are held at upper floors of buildings where there are no lifts and wheelchairs users and those who use crutches end up being excluded.

The authors of this paper argue that access should be viewed in a more holistic way. The

argument is clarified and strengthened by Shimizu (2009) with regards to daily trips of persons with visual impairment living in Japan. In the research the mean number of trips per person per week was 11.4; which could be considered to mean that many people with visual impairment travelled daily. The issue is not so much about why they travel and where they go, but about the factors that have accounted for the increase in their independence for travel. Shimizu (2009: 766) says: “a number of factors have increased the choices and resources that are available to these travellers”. Shimizu (2009) went on to say that factors such as orientation and mobility proficiency, accessibility and availability of transport – and certainly the degree of participants’ need for travel are determinant to mobility.

It is even more revealing to note from the article that the majority of participants who travelled alone on foot, by rail or by bus were also noted to fall within the most active group among people with visual impairment. They also constituted the majority of travellers in the research (sixty- nine percent). It would be prudent to keep in mind that the degree of independence reflected in the research just discussed is a result of appropriate education and training in the entire Japanese population. It is a matter of access; access to appropriate independence training to the entire blind population in Japan.

Christoffel Blindenmission (s.p.) advisory working group on educational policy for children with visual impairment considers access to information and communication technology as very important to every blind child. The advisory working group mentions that such technology “makes the complex simple; ... addresses the individual needs of the learner.” They go on to acknowledge that technology has a very large number of applications in the education of people with visual impairment, “who are currently deprived of any educational and vocational opportunities”.

It would be appropriate to mention that even those blind children who are fortunate to go through education have barriers imposed upon them, for example in Science, where, according to Fraser and Maguvhe (2008: 3), curriculum based limitations

[w]ill hinder the blind and visually-impaired learner from learning and actively par-

ticipating in the learning mediation to his or her full potential. Teachers are not aware of what should be done to accommodate blind and visually-impaired learners during the acquisition of Science Process Skills and/ or assessment.

Matters of access to educational resources are handled in many different ways depending on the policy of the organisation in charge of offering particular welfare services in an area. Some are already using strategies aligned to inclusive education principles while others (such as Christophel Blind Mission cited above) are still using resource rooms, itinerant teachers and integrated units. Probably the most important concern should be with enabling optimum numbers of children to attend school; not the schooling philosophy that is used to educate them, at least for now when a very small number of blind learners access any form of education. The authors of this paper view access in terms of availability of educational and other services, social utilities and legal provisions that help one to improve one’s social position and get satisfaction from life’s daily engagements: thrifts and struggles which embody a productive life.

Theme 5: Empowerment

This theme addresses all the three questions. Eighty nine percent of the respondents were of the opinion that, in order to give the visually impaired people the opportunity to be heard, and take part in their communities’ development; the government must set up disability community boards. The establishment of the Office on the Status of Disabled Persons in the Presidency and Premier Offices (OSDP) is confirmation of a move to increase participation of persons with disabilities. That effort has received further impetus by the establishment of the Ministry of Women, Children and Persons with Disabilities. Representation of disabled people is also seen in government and parastatals such as the South African Human Rights Commission and the Constitutional Court. In addition at least two percent of the workforce in government and private sectors should comprise persons with disabilities. Participants lamented that disabled people are not fully represented, and therefore unable to voice their concerns in their communities and at work. The Inclusive development project must build the capacity of disability intervention strat-

egies. This must be an innovative project as it uses existing community structures to enable disabled people to realise their rights, and encourage them to partake in the decision making processes on matters that affect their lives. The concept of empowerment is quite diverse if one considers that the various aspects covered in the sections above (emancipation, education, equity and access) are in themselves dimensions of empowerment. The concept of empowerment is further complicated by the dimension of authority. One would always want to know who is in charge of the empowerment process.

Respondent W was born in a poor family and his parents were unemployed. He eventually went to a school for the blind in Limpopo province. The highest qualification offered at the school is Grade 7. He learned braille, orientation and mobility, skills of daily living and typical academic subjects in the educational curricula at that school, and was determined to know more. He indicated that some teachers would actively discourage blind students from aspiring to study at higher levels, telling them:

"Look, you are not going to be able to get jobs out there, so you are better off staying at home and learning to perfect handicrafts. Do not even dream of going to university, it is not good for you. People will always laugh at you. When there are strikes, who will be there for you? You will be knocked down by cars. If I were you, I would simply stay at home and enjoy the government grant meant for the disabled".

So instead of encouraging and advocating for students, they were discouraging students. Respondent W managed to fight his way into a regular secondary school. It was not accessible for blind students and the teachers were not good at relating to someone who was blind, but he could not let anything stop him from achieving his goal. On completion of grade 12, he decided to enroll in the Faculty of Humanities with the University of Cape Town. He ultimately graduated in 2003. As a university graduate, he joined one of the organisations of the blind and through its talking library facility he was able to learn more. Its training opportunities enhanced his leadership and advocacy skills. This also raised his awareness, so that he could better understand his related issues as a disabled person.

The authors agree with Gore (1989: 3 in Carl 1995: 5) that "[e]mpowerment embodies a notion

of power as external, power which can be given, which can be provided, power as property. Power must be something which can be controlled. It implies some kind of vision". The authors further believe that power once conferred to one, can be maintained through both singular initiatives and cooperative effort. In organisational politics power is commonly defined in terms of the width of one's sphere of influence on other people; but the authors of this article consider it as one's (or a community's) latitude to decide and perform productively on matters that affect them, taking necessary risks just as any other people who might be taking similar decisions and actions. Yet this degree of democracy implies that the empowered person should first acquire relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable him/her to decide on his/her own (or communal) interests and articulate matters of interest on platforms where they would be most likely to be attended to in the wider public domain. In a context relating to teachers, Carl (1995: 5) actually calls the process of giving necessary operating knowledge for decision making and control to a hitherto oppressed person "professionalisation". Thus every proponent of a personal or group cause should be a kind of professional in his/her cause. The writers of this article believe that appropriate basic education is the minimum knowledge necessary for equipping people with visual impairment to spearhead their interests and control their lives to their optimum level.

As the world moves from the medical model to the socio-critical perspective, the demand for societal leadership in providing for accessible public utilities, information resources and buildings is just the tip of the iceberg. There are other demands that run parallel to such access: the demand for quality education, disability-friendly leisure time utilities and a host of actionable rights. The realisation of empowerment is a dialectical paradox in that the wider society usually makes changes to the environment when there is enough voice to push them; yet on the other hand, the voice that calls for significant change is only reasonably amplified when there is adequate basic education, legal and physical infrastructure to support torchbearers.

Education equips people with skills of inquiry, enables people to raise concerns on emerging issues, and shapes beliefs and attitudes. In that process, it informs human actions. In practice, some educational programmes meant to

empower children and adults who are otherwise marginalised are not well managed and accounted for in terms of timely reporting and the documentation of learner's progress (Dzapasi 2000 in Chireshe et al. 2003: 31). Although the observation made above relates to poor reporting on clinical remedial education programmes then applied in Zimbabwean schools, similar programme accountability deficits are notable in South African Adult Basic Education and Training centres for the blind. The issue of educational empowerment seems to be dodgy in this instance. Those who manage learning programmes should at least possess basic management qualifications to run programmes effectively. The authors of this article believe that striving for self-empowerment also requires founding elements of appropriate basic education, zeal and goal directedness.

Adequate appropriate basic education enables the permeation of survival-linked forms of social education, such as the rationale for creating pressure groups to ensure social action on matters of concern and issues on civic and voter education to bear fruit. In a fast-changing world, it is difficult for people to discern the far-reaching consequences of some actions and choices. It is through education that the implications of individual and group decisions could be evaluated and contingency measures taken to ameliorate possible negative consequences of actions.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to expose the point that a relevant education has, to change the perceptions, engagements and fortunes of the blind and visually impaired. From the results discussed, it could be concluded that:

- ♦ relevant education is a key component and driver of emancipation and transformation.
- ♦ academics are aware of the institutional changes taking place in the education sector while students are not.
- ♦ that although there are blind and visually impaired people who are well qualified for different jobs, many are either unemployed or under employed.
- ♦ social equity and justice require social action to materialize. This could be possible if there are leaders who are critically reflective, future-oriented thinkers willing to take risks and accept responsibilities for enacting these visions. This is a result of relevant education.

- ♦ the general public and some sections of the enlightened fraternity do not associate access with empowerment.
- ♦ blind and visually impaired people in South Africa have fewer opportunities to develop skills and experience.
- ♦ blind and visually impaired people often experience negative attitudes from teachers and employers who doubt their abilities and potential.
- ♦ access to built environments is still a challenge because some buildings are not constructed according to universal specifications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results and conclusions, the authors of this article recommend that social agents run awareness campaigns for the blind and visually impaired so that they could participate with informed

That there be robust and radical effort to implement policies on disability.

The authors also recommend that education be considered an all inclusive process, availing the same opportunities to both learners with typical sight and the blind and visually impaired learners in South Africa.

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APPENDIX I

Table 1: Different respondents

Respondents	Differences	Number	Province
Students	Braille	10	Gauteng (GP)
	Call center	10	Gauteng
	Computer	10	Gauteng
Teachers	Primary schools	10	Limpopo and GP
	Secondary schools	10	Limpopo and GP

APPENDIX II

Glossary

Kha Ri Gude is a TshiVenda word which means 'Let Us Learn', in English. TshiVenda is one of several indigenous South African Languages.