SUCCESS AMONG BLIND STUDENTS IN KENYA: THE CASE OF KENYATTA UNIVERSITY

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SUCCESS AMONG BLIND STUDENTS IN KENYA: THE CASE OF KENYATTA UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Notably research effort on education of persons with visual impairments has been expended on primary and secondary schooling. However, the research from which this paper is developed ventured into a relatively less researched area, namely the university education sector as part of a larger study that sought to interrogate outcomes of education for persons with disability. The analysis maintains a positive focus to interrogate the resilient social factors salient in the success stories of the insignificant population of learners with blindness that make it to the University in Kenya. A biographical approach was utilized to document accounts of five female and five male Kenyatta University students at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Data were analysed with help of Atlas ti. The study establishes that forging of social relationships, self advocacy, pursuing a level of independence; social agency and assertiveness reflect the key social strategies of success for blind students who have successfully transitioned to university. It is subsequently recommended that parents and teachers should pursue strong sibling and peer support for learners with blindness to help increase their confidence, influence higher aspirations and increase chances for transition to higher education.

Key words: Social Barriers, Visual Impairments, Transition, Emancipation in Disability, Kenya.

Learners with Blindness': Social and Cultural Contexts of Transition

Generally, blindness is understood as visual impairment characterised by having no sight or having sight that is so defective that the use of visual aids (for example, lenses) cannot improve it. Blindness can be adventitious or congenital. Congenital blindness refers to blindness that one is born with or has existed since birth while adventitious blindness refers to blindness

that occurs after birth or later on in life (Hupp 2003). In a study on Cognitive Differences between congenital and adventitiously blind individuals Lyndum (2001) established that the only differences in cognitive functioning appear to be related to age of onset and not the kind of visual impairment. The findings further indicated that individuals with congenital blindness have indeed developed alternate methods of cognitively processing nonverbal, abstract or complex information involving a high degree of spatial orientation.

The challenges that blind persons face, especially in navigating social barriers in education, have been widely documented. For instance, Vancil (2001) observes that visually impaired learners in the USA grapple with a myriad of challenges in higher education, the problems range from poor living arrangements, orientation, mobility, organizational skills, readers, assignments, need for assertiveness, and self advocacy to social skills. According to Vancil (2001), these challenges form a barrier that further leads to low academic performance by learners with visual impairments, and therefore inhibiting transition. In a related study, Eden and Flame (1999) reported that students with visual disabilities unlike their sighted peers may not identify options for solving problems as readily because they may not see the problem approach.

Though research on social barriers is limited in the developing countries, few accounts of how these can be overcome among learners with blindness have been documented through systematic research and focusing on the social dimensions that influence the outcomes of education. In a study in India, Sriram (2008) argues that one of the challenges that learners with visual impairments face includes the quality of scribes allowed to write for the learners. The author maintains that it is easy for learners with visual impairments to get bogged down in these challenges, and points out that taking responsibility for ones education helps a learner with blindness to focus on internal strength while making choices about academic pursuits. Alemna (2004), in a report on Library Provision for Blind Students in Africa, decries the dearth of appropriate learning materials such as books in Braille and talking books to aid students with blindness. The author further contends that the existing library systems do not provide adequate services to students who are blind, thus hampering their educational success that is key in enhancing successful transition to higher levels of education.

A Kenyan study by Songe (2005) cited lack of qualified staff as a barrier to total inclusion in education of students with visual impairments. The findings show that 5 per cent of the lecturers lacked experience while 10 per cent lacked knowledge. This, according to the researcher, interferes with proper implementation of the curriculum. In this study, 80 per cent of students and 90 per cent of the lecturers who participated in the research indicated that none of the special equipment needed by the visually impaired learners was available in the institution.

Pugh and Erin (1999) argues from a sociological persective that for transition to higher education for learners with visual impairments to be enhanced, students with visual impairements should have learning teams who work together to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate programming and services. The study recommends that a qualified teacher must direct and lead the learning team in developing goals and objectives that are educationally relevant.

The authors recommend that members of the learning team should include classroom teachers, parents and administrators who should set appropriate expectations for progress and performance and they should provide strategies for assessing learning needs. The team should also provide direct instruction in disability-specific impairments skill areas like Braille learning because students who have visual impairements have special and diverse educational needs.

Vancil (2001) describes several ways of countering challenges faced by learners with visual impairments and recommends that learners with visual impairments should, where possible, move into a single room where one's belongings may not be moved around. In addition, they should Braille label folders and binders, acquire a sturdy water- resistant backpack with several well organized compartments, hire readers based on experience and learn to establish a 24 hour advance notice cancellation with readers.

Munrie (2009), in a study of the Transition Experiences of College students with visual impairments established that colleges in America provided most of the services students with visual impairments needed to be successful in their academic pursuit. Regarding reading medium, the researcher recommends that students with blindness should use all kinds of alternatives such as taking notes in Braille, using readers for last-minute assignments, audio taping classes, and condensing relevant information. Accordingly, different reading media and accessible computers should be used in high school so that by the time students enter college, they should have perfected the techniques. According to the researcher, this would boost transition and retention of learners with visual impairments in higher education.

Munrie (2009) also asserts that preparation for college should begin in high school, when learners with visual impairments first explore various colleges and seek to match their needs with the colleges' programmes. Additionally, students with visual impairments must advocate for themselves, be assertive, and be aware of their legal rights.

Kiarie (2004) reports that Kenya Society for the Blind (KSB), Kenya Union of the Blind (KUB) and Cristobel Blinden Mission (CBM) have programs to oversee the enrolment of children with visual impairments in special and public schools in Kenya. According to the author, other efforts include workshops and seminars at the Kenya Institute of Special Education to sensitize the public on the needs of students with disabilities (Kiarie 2004). Accordingly, plans for accommodating students with visual impairments in national examinations and trained teachers are areas which have witnessed improvement as pertain to the education of learners with visual impairments in Kenya (Kiarie 2004).

The Kenya Society for the Blind (KSB, 2006) estimated that learners with visual impairments have the lowest participation in education in Kenya. The KSB (2006) report points out that enrolment, attendance and completion of formal education among these students is low. KSB (2006) attributes this to stigmatization, retrogressive cultural beliefs, poor attitudes and ignorance on potential of children with visual impairments by their parents.

Averagely, 142 students with different kinds of visual impairments sit for Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examinations in Kenya yearly (Ministry of Education 2008) and approximately only 13 percent of these (as per the enrolment of students with visual impairments in public universities) join university each year, most of whom get admitted as self –sponsored students (Wawire 2009). This study sought and investigated social factors that have enabled the relatively few learners with blindness to transit to the university amidst many obstacles that thwart their way. The study conducted an in-depth investigation into the schooling pathways of these learners by obtaining biographies and success stories from them. Pertinent to the research were the emancipatory lessons in overcoming barriers to transition to university and to the world of work as a means to self-emancipation. Understanding the social factors that influence students' educational success is important in providing insights into the role played by the education system in enhancing transitions for learners with blindness and not in the least, other disabilities.

The study problem for the study was to investigate the socio-education factors that were perceived to have enhanced the pathways to successful transitions into university for students with blindness using Kenyatta University, Kenya, as a case study. In so-doing, the authors found Paulo Freire's theory on emancipation to be relevant and insightful especially for the category of students who often suffer multiple experiences of marginalisation.

Revisiting Paulo Freire's Emancipation

Freire (1971) examines the struggle for justice and equity within the educational system and proposes a new pedagogy. Accordingly, education should be carried out in an environment that upholds social justice, fairness and equity with regard to gender, race, class, disability, and sexual orientation, consequently, creating equity within public issues. The key to liberation in social and educational issues is the awakening of critical awareness and the thinking process in the individual (Freire 1971). This happens through a new type of education that seeks to empower the disadvantaged, and those who suffer with them and fight by their side. According to Freire (1971), freedom and equity is acquired by conquest, not by gift, thus learners with blindness should not relent in their struggle to bring about the desired change as freedom and equity will be the result of praxis (informed action), when a balance between theory and practice is achieved.

Thus the disadvantaged and in this case, learners with blindness must see outside themselves, understand their situation, and emancipate themselves. Freire (1971) sees peer relationships among learners as a determinant of the outcomes of schools. Hence methods including cooperative group work and diverse group interactions should be utilized.

According to Freire (1971), parent/teacher and student/teacher relationships are central, as are access to information and resources for all students including those with disabilities. He asserts that it is important to address equity issues in the classrooms. Freire (1971) maintains that the teacher should keep in mind that students come from numerous cultures, languages and lifestyles and a monoculture framework will not suit all students' needs. Additionally, the curriculum should be built on acknowledgment of the experiences of students and

consequently, educators should match students' cultures and needs to the curriculum and instructional practices. This would ensure that the individual needs of learners with blindness are put into consideration.

Within the framework of Freire's theory on education for self-emancipation, this study seeks to explore the educational experiences of learners with blindness by positioning them as "actors" in the process of "freeing" themselves from possible maligning conditions that may be hinged in their disabilities. Of special focus is the way in which the blind learners managed to negotiate their education pathways to the university level amidst numerous social challenges.

Study Methodology

In line with the qualitative methodology, the research employed a narrative design. The location of the study was Kenyatta University, Main Campus in Nairobi. At the conception of this study the University had 51 students with visual impairments that ranged from mild to profound. Out of this number, 24 were blind (interview, office of the dean of students, 2nd Feb 2009).

The sample was arrived at purposively. The sample consisted of five male and five female students with blindness. Two (one male and one female) respondents were Doctoral students, four (two male and two females) were in their third year of undergraduate studies while of the remaining four, two (male and female) were in their second year and two (male and female) were in their first year of undergraduate studies respectively. Data were collected using an interview guide, recorded by use the of a digital voice recorder and later transcribed to yield text data which were then coded and analyzed qualitatively using Atlas ti software. The thematic approach to analysis was utilized to interpret the narratives.

Understanding Social Barriers in Education for Blind Learners

Various understandings of social barriers emerged. Subsequently, students adopted various strategies to overcome the social barriers. Five key social barriers that have been established include: stigma, negative expectation, social exclusion and ignorance and low level of education of parents.

Surmounting stigma

The findings reveal that stigma was surmounted through: Assertiveness, involvement in Sensitization and demystification of disability, self-acceptance, guidance and counselling department and enrolment in special schools. To fight stigma, the respondents' resorted to accepting themselves and ignoring negative attitudes, as explained by a female student thus

> I just had to accept myself...I stopped pitying myself and stopped thinking about what others thought about me....then I moved on and got used to my condition (Carol, interview on 8th Jan 2010).

This finding agrees with Munrie (2008), who established that learners with blindness must come to terms with their disability in order to counter negative sentiments and attitudes. The author asserts that students with blindness should not let bad attitudes from bog them down.

Sensitization and Demystification of Disability

The respondents   played a role in spreading awareness aimed at conquering stigma in that, while at school they composed songs and poems which they recited whenever they were called upon. They also recited them during competitions with other schools (special or regular).

> While composing my (mashairi) poems I focused on disability. I aimed to sensitize people on blindness and I also speak for the blind in the poems. I have composed many 'mashairi' (poems). I recited some during competitions. I am about to publish some of them, and I have already found a publisher. (Chris, interview on 6th Jan 2010)

The findings concur with KSB (2006), which recommends sensitization of the communities as a way of reducing stigma. Accordingly stigmatization is attributed to retrogressive cultural beliefs, poor attitudes and ignorance of the potential of visually impaired children by the society, accordingly, stigma bars transition and participation in education of learners with visual impairments.

The respondents took it upon themselves to educate their audience about causes and effects of disability whenever they had an opportunity. They strived to demystify disability during these activities and also through ordinary verbal explanations as expressed in the following except by a respondent who went to an integrated school:

> When I went to high school, the students feared me, they thought I would depend on them entirely, it was an integrated school, only two of us had sight problems, the other(one) student was partially blind, I was the only one who was totally blind. I looked for an opportunity to explain to them what happened to me and   I told them that there were things that I could do for myself. (Carol, interview on 5th Jan 2010)

Thus it is apparent that students with blindness who attended integrated schools experienced resentment from sighted colleagues. This may have been due to the fact that some of these students had never previously interacted or lived with persons with blindness, and as a result they may have feared them and thought they would be entirely dependant on them. Hence the respondents overcame this by explaining or talking about their disabilities to those around them.

Involvement in Guidance and Counselling

In high school the respondents took their guidance and counselling sessions seriously as the respondents, as a result of counselling, derived courage and confidence as explained:

> Our guidance and counselling department really helped us to cope; I never wanted to miss any counselling session. I did not care so much that some people still rejected me because of my blindness…I became so strong … we were also instructed that it was not yet time to get into intimate relationships' with the opposite sex, and I never got into such relationships (Chris interview on 6th Jan 2010)

A female respondent who went through integrated education responded thus:

> I looked forward to my guidance and counselling sessions as more often than not I was counselled alone…I think due to my impairment, my problems were different. The teacher was so kind and I felt renewed and more confident at the end of every session. (Carol, interview on 5th Jan 2010)

The importance of guidance and counselling was not overemphasized by Eden and Flame (1999) in a report called, Disability and Response. According to the authors, constant guidance and counselling is indispensable for students with disabilities. Further, Eden and Flame (1999) assert that for guidance and counselling to benefit students with disabilities, the sessions should be properly scheduled and done at regular intervals. The authors maintain that adolescents and teenagers with disabilities need constant guidance and counselling. Therefore, constant guidance and counselling in high school may have made the respondents overcome the challenges that came with the teen years better. This may in turn have led to good concentration in class leading to good performance. Apparently guidance and counselling was very handy at this stage.

Unpacking assertiveness in educational contexts

To fight stigma, the respondents' resorted to being assertive, they would assert the true facts about their disability when the situation called for it. This as is evident in the following excerpt from a male adventitiously blind respondent:

> I explained to people what caused my blindness. I just focused on the truth. I knew that my blindness had been caused by meningitis when I was one and a half years and I dismissed the myths that people spread about me. My assertiveness helped me a lot (Ben, interviewed on 3rd January 2010)

Enrolment in Special Schools

Students' enrolment in special schools also enabled them cope faster and feel accepted. Coping may have been easier in special schools because of the structures and informed attitudes of teachers, workers, and peers. This was more helpful for learners with adventitious blindness. Consequently, the respondents widened peer relationships:

> I felt relieved when I went to St Oda (Special Primary School), we were almost the same, and other students had never seen anything (congenital blindness). At least I knew (had seen) some colours. Enrolment in St Oda helped me a lot. I began to concentrate on my studies here (Dora, interview on 8th Jan 2010)

The peace, comfort and acceptance found in special schools made them concentrate on their academic work rather than waste time fighting stigma. This may in turn have brought about good grades, leading to the respondents' transition to university.

Surmounting Social Exclusion and Neglect

The findings reveal that Social exclusion and neglect were surmounted through: Formation of social relationships (friendships), self advocacy and moral support from parents.

Forging of social relationships (friendships)

To surmount social exclusion, the respondents forged friendships (social relationships) with whoever they came across. Apparently this was one of the most important facilitating factors in the transition of students with blindness to the university. As reported thus.

> I just got out of my cocoon; there was no way I could have made it without friends, both at home and at school. I just became good to everybody I met because I needed to be with people and to be involved in activities in my surrounding . At school I also made many friends. I needed to be shown where the bathroom and the dining hall were. Some of the friends I made would show me or take me to these places.(Carol, interview on 5th Jan 2010)

The study established that apart from providing moral support, forging strong social relationships with peers who were not totally blind helped students with blindness surmount the barrier of inability to read print (especially in the case of supplementary books). These relationships were not forced but students with blindness' outgoing behaviour (which they had learnt over time, out of necessity), endeared them to many students, some of whom were not totally blind. Out of the friends they made, those who had some sight or low vision always volunteered to read for them on request as explained by male congenitally blind respondent who went to a special secondary school:

> Out of the many friends I had, my closest had some sight and they would always read print for me voluntarily. I always had students who could help me out because I had many friends, and I have never lost any of them, we are still friend today. I have made more friends today in Kenyatta University (Edwin, interview on 6th Jan 2010)

Friendship was helpful as it also enabled them engage in healthy academic discussions thus making them understand better and consequently leading to good performance in exams. Good performance more often than not ensured transition to other levels of education and eventually to the University.

Freire's (1971) theory of self emancipation that the study adopted sees peer relationships among learners as a determinant of the outcomes of schools. Accordingly, methods, including cooperative group work, and diverse group interactions should be utilized. This may subsequently lead to good academic performance which may it turn lead to improved transition rates to the university.

Self Advocacy

To surmount social exclusion and neglect too, the respondents resorted to advocate for themselves, thus:

> When holiday tuition was organized in my neighbourhood during school holidays, my parents forgot that I would also benefit through listening. They would look for money to give my siblings, but forgot me. I felt excluded and I told my mother that I, too, could benefit through listening. They finally made arrangements for me to attend the tuition. This made me work so hard. I wanted to prove to everyone that I too, could make it…. now my parents are so happy (Carol, interview on 5th Jan 2010).

Thus boldness and self advocacy came in handy in the fight against exclusion. Self advocacy called for being ones own defender, this may have led to better understanding of the respondents by others, hence leading to better treatment. Better treatment meant that they felt accepted and this may have translated into good grades due to psychological contentment.

Enlisting Parental Support

Positive results were registered whenever there was parental support, as explained thus:

> My family always put me first, they would consider me first in everything…they were fairly well educated, those days (30-35 years ago) form four was a good education. I worked so hard because I never wanted to let them down. From primary in Mombasa I went to high school then went to a University in America for my undergraduate (Emma, interviewed on 6th Jan 2010)

When parental support lacked as was common in the study, the respondents enlisted/demanded it, self advocacy again became imperative as explained by a female adventitiously blind respondent:

> I would still tell my parents that I could make it… I reminded them all the time, then they began to believe in me and I did not let them down, I scored good grades. (Susan, interview on 6th Jan 2010)

Munrie (2009) asserts that students with visual impairments especially those who are blind must advocate for themselves, be assertive, and be aware of their legal rights.

According to Freire (1971), for emancipation to take place, all learners, including those with blindness should not relent in their struggle to bring about the desired change. Accordingly, the quest for change must be pursued constantly and responsibly as freedom will be the result of praxis (informed action) when a balance between theory and practice is achieved.

Countering Negative Expectation

Negative expectation was countered through: showcasing of one's worth /potential and showing a degree of independence. Apparently negative expectations bred despair amongst students with blindness, thus interfering with gainful studies. To some respondents this also became a driving force as they wanted to prove their worth thus the respondents resorted to looking for a chance to prove and showcase their worth/potential as explained by a male congenitally blind respondent who attended a special secondary school, thus:

> I worked so hard to make others believe that I too could pass exams. I wanted to prove to my aunt and uncle who thought I would not make it that I too could make it (Ben, interviewed on 3rd Jan 2010).

Learners with blindness would also showcase their potential by engaging in a variety of activities which sighted students were able or not able to engage in as explained:

> I represented my school twice at the provincial level, and this really made me happy. It gave me a lot of confidence. I would stand in front of huge audience and they would listen to me. Some of my sighted friends could not recite poems leave alone stand in front of a large audience (Chris, interview on 6th Jan 2010).

Hence, being able to engage in social events like the one mentioned above really boosted the respondents self esteem and made them feel confident. High self esteem may have made them work harder in class, consequently resulting in better grades in examinations.

Pursuing a Degree of Independence

Students with blindness also countered negative expectations by showing their non disabled peers that they had a degree of independence. The findings revealed that a show of independence went a long way in countering negative expectation. Respondents looked for ways of showing that they were not totally dependent, that there were so many things they could do without assistance as explained:

> I would hear them say 'na atafuaje nguo zake (how will she wash her clothes)',I just ignored this sentiments, then on Saturday I asked them where the tap was, they showed me, they pretended they were passing just to prove that I was actually washing my own clothes and hanging them. After this they befriended me. They couldn't believe (laughter), they knew then that I had some degree of independence…..this happened when I went to secondary school (integrated). (Carol, interview on 5th Jan 2010)

Their sighted peers' initial resentment may have arisen from the preconceived belief that making friends with students with blindness would turn them (sighted students) into perpetual assistants, hence infringing on their time, consequently the sighted students resorted to keeping off students with blindness. However students with blindness proved them wrong when they showed a degree of independence.

Blackorby and Wagner, (2005), indicate that students who are blind need not entirely rely on their sighted peers. Accordingly, they should always cautiously strive to be independent and only seek help when they deem it necessary.

Philanthropic Attributes

Teachers, in some of the schools attended by the respondents, formed unions to which they contributed monthly to help   students who were well behaved, hardworking and needy as reported by a male adventitiously blind respondent who attended a special school:

> When the teacher on duty noticed that I did not have subsistence items when I reported, he asked me how I would make it through the term without soap and shoe polish. I told him I would borrow from other students because I did not have any money; I told him a well-wisher had given me transport to school. The teachers confirmed that
> my class work was good and so they included me in the list of students they would assisted. (Alex, interview on 3rd Jan 2010)

CBM and Lillian foundation played an important role in the provision of scholarships and material donations to students with blindness.

> I had perpetual fee problems until I got a sponsor in secondary. I would be sent home all the time, I applied to four organization then finally CBM (Cristefell Blindel Mission) accepted to sponsor me (Mary, interview on 8th Jan 2010)

The following sentiments were also expressed by a female respondent:

> Staying at home really made me long for school and when I finally went, I worked very hard. I am thankful to Lillian Foundation for sponsoring my education. I want to improve the economic situation of my family. I wanted to become a nurse but I couldn't pursue it because I am blind. I am still determined to help my family, though I will now become a teacher. (Carol, interview on 5th Jan 2010)

Conclusion

The study established that forging of social relationships, self advocacy, pursuing a degree of independence; social agency and assertiveness are the key social strategies that enhance transition to university for learners with blindness. This finding complements findings from

other studies outside Africa that have helped to underscore the value of inclusive education as a means of enhancing social relations within and across the various categories of learners without discrimination.

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