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Challenges Students with Visual Impairments Encounter in Their Social Relationship with Non-disabled Students: The Case of Two Inclusive Senior High Schools in Ghana

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Abstract:
The purpose of the study was to explore the challenges students with visual impairments encounter in their social relationship with their sighted counterparts. The case study design was used for the study. The sample size was 15 students with visual impairments. The method for data collection was interviews. The convenience sampling technique was used to select the sample size. Data was analyzed thematically using data from the respondents. Results from the study showed that students without visual impairments stereotyped students with visual impairment, discriminated against them, and did not support students with visual impairments. It was recommended that regular students be educated on disability issues to minimize prejudice and misconceptions. Also, teachers should create an environment for students to better interact among themselves.

Keywords: Visual impairment, disability, discrimination, stereotype, inclusion, sighted students

1. Introduction

Human beings make sense of their world through interaction with others. For children with visual impairment, interaction with others is crucial to overcoming some of the visual limitations they experience. It also assists them make connections and helps to develop their understanding of the world. Social interaction plays a crucial role in children's development and for children to develop and be successful in many contexts they require both social and academic achievement. There is a dynamic interaction between social and academic achievement; that is improving social competences does not only have a positive impact on interpersonal skills and the quality of interactions children establish, but also on their academic achievement, and to be prepared and ready to learn, children need to have healthy social development (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006).

Furthermore, a high degree of acceptance and participation in school activities is reported as essential for learning. Research has shown that the opportunity for contacts and interactions with regular peers is one of the main motives that parents have for sending their students with special needs to a regular school (Nakken &Pijl, 2002). Notwithstanding these positive effects of inclusive education, research has shown that, compared to regular students, students with visual impairment are more often teased and ignored in inclusive settings (Osei-Bonsu, 2013), which is, in fact, harmful to their self-image and academic performance.

Research on social inclusion, consistently shows that students with special needs educated in regular classrooms are less accepted than their classmates without special educational needs (Vianello & Lanfranchi, 2011), and are more socially isolated. These negative tendencies, according to Sparling (2002) stem from the socio-cultural influences of society, the nature of a child's disability, perceived teacher attitudes, teacher modeling, peer pressure and ignorance. Such disabling environments contribute to the social marginalization and isolation of students with visual impairment within the Ghanaian context. In Ghana, it appears students with visual impairment in inclusive schools encounter these difficulties relating socially with their sighted counterparts. A large-scale study by Koster, Pijl, Nakken, and Housten (2010) it was reported that students with special needs have fewer interactions with classmates, and are less accepted than students without special needs. Sighted peers ignore the overtures of students with visual impairment; as a result, many students with visual impairment according to Webster and Roe (2008) tend to engage in social activities for less time and at lower levels of engagement as compared to students without visual impairments. These negative experiences affect these students' well-being particularly in inclusive

schools. In finding the relation between the social position and social skills of pupils with special needs in mainstream school in Norway, Frostad and Pijl (2007) also found that students with disabilities and those with behavior problems had a considerably more difficult time finding and keeping friends.

Also, an ethnographic study by Matheson, Olsen and Weisner (2007), sought to find out the nature of friendships of 27 Euro American teenagers with developmental disabilities through a semi-structured interview. The study engaged six field workers who visited and lived with a maximum of 7 participants assigned to them. They were to record their observations of the assigned participants and their self-described friends and peers. The ethnographic observations indicated that the large majority of the teens in the study did have friendships and were socially engaged in ways that they themselves found satisfying. However, it was revealed that they had positive and stable friendship with their peers with developmental disabilities than with typically developing peers.

Awini (2015) investigated the nature of social participation of pupils with visual impairments in school activities in selected regular basic schools in Ghana using the mixed method approach. A focus group interview was conducted on 14 pupils while questionnaires were administered to 42 teachers. The pupils and teachers were selected using purposive and simple random sampling techniques respectively. The results revealed that the sighted peers of the pupils with visual impairments interacted with them, played regularly with them, had fun together, worked with them during group assignments, and were never treated harshly by their sighted peers. The study concluded that there was some fair level of social participation of students with visual impairments and blindness in activities in the schools.

Another study by Acheampong (2017) sought to explore among others, the pattern of social interaction between students with visual impairments and their sighted colleagues at University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. Thirty out of 62 students with visual impairment were purposively sampled for the study. Focused group semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and data was coded and analyzed using the thematic approach. Among the findings reported was that students with visual impairments were accepted and supported by their sighted peers in the university, which created friendship among them.

Since negative social experiences have adverse effects on academic achievements as well as overall development of students with visual impairment, it was important to examine the social relationship of students with visual impairments and their sighted peers in order to understand the social relationship that exist between them in inclusive schools. Therefore, the key objective of this study was to examine the challenges students with visual impairment encounter in their social relationship with their sighted peers in selected inclusive senior high schools in Ghana.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design, Population and Sample

This qualitative study adopted the case study design to examine the challenges students with visual impairment encounter in their social relationship with their sighted peers in two inclusive senior high schools in Ghana. The population for the study was made all 28students with visual impairments at Okuapeman Senior High School and Ghana National Senior High Schools in Eastern and Central regions of Ghana respectively. These schools were chosen for the study because they are the two out of three Senior High Schools in the southern part of Ghana that included students with visual impairments. The population comprised of 9 participants from Ghana National College and 19 from Okuapeman Senior High School.

The researchers used convenience sampling technique to select the participants for the study. This technique was used because the participants were students with visual impairments who were available at the time of the study. Lune and Berg (2017) contend that in convenience sampling, the sample relies on available subjects; those who are close at hand or easily accessible. Therefore, only 15 out of a population of 28 students with visual impairments were sampled from both schools for the study because 13 of the students were in their final year and were writing the final examination for Senior High School students (West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination) hence were not available to provide data. Nine of the participants were from Okuapeman Senior High School and six participants from Ghana National College. The table below shows the gender distribution of participants in both schools.

School	Female	Male	No. of SWVI
GNC	2	4	6
OSH	3	6	9
TOTAL	5	10	15

Table 1: Sample distribution of participants in both schools
Source: Researchers' Computations from field Data, May, 2017

KEY: *GNC = Ghana National College   OSH = Okuapeman Senior High School   SWVI = Students with visual impairment*

A semi-structured interview was adopted to elicit data from the participants for the study. The researchers used semi-structured interviews because it gives room for using unstructured probes that may be necessary to elicit more or detailed

information from the participants during the interview process, and also allows researchers to follow information-rich directions that are spontaneously initiated by the interviewee's response to questions (Lune & Berg, 2017).

The interviews were conducted during school hours in each of the school's resource centre. The researchers sought permission to audio tape the interview session using a digital recorder. Again, the researchers assured the participants that the tape recording was to ensure accuracy in transcribing and would be treated confidentially. The interview took about 30 minutes each to complete; this involved six students with visual impairment from Ghana National College and nine students with visual impairment from Okuapeman Senior High School.

2.2. Data Analysis

The interview data gathered was analysed thematically. The analysis primarily involved an interactive process of reading, reflecting, coding the transcripts and then drawing out major themes and patterns of views from it.

3. Discussion of Findings

The themes that emerged from the analysis of participants' comments on the challenges students with visual impairments face in their social relationship revealed were: stereotyping and name calling, misconceptions, lack of support and co-operation, feeling of discrimination and neglect. In this study, GNCS1-6 represents visually impaired student interviewees from Ghana National College; again, OSHS1-9 represents visually impaired student interviewees from Okuapeman Senior High School.

3.1.1. Stereotyping and name calling

It was revealed from the interviews with students with visual impairment that sighted students often teased, called them names and stereotyped them. These issues were major challenges for the students with visual impairment in both schools. It was revealed that the stereotyping, teasing and name calling affects participants' emotional wellbeing and academic performance. The participants revealed their displeasure of the name calling and stereotyping behavours of their sighted counterparts. It was further revealed that labelled students' self-perception was bound to others' perceptions and reactions of other students. These comments by some of the students attest to the fact that participants were displeased and emotionally affected by the name calling, teasing and stereotyping of their sighted mates:

Two students remarked that:

...two weeks ago, I was playing with a mate and he took it serious. In the course of exchanging words, he told me "that is why you are blind". It affected me but I told him a disability does not make anyone less. Also, some of us are older than them so they laugh at us (GNC-S3; M)

....ok, normally in the form of teasing. Although I don't usually pay attention to them, I feel bad when I hear some of these teasing (GNC-S2; F).

Another student expressed her view this way:

...they give me names which I do not like. When I was in form one an incident happened between my colleague and I. I disclosed the challenge to the teacher and he punished her. As a result of that they named me as ''chooker'' which I dislike very much and also I am very emotional so the slightest thing makes me worried to the extent of not BEING able to learn. They sometimes say that they are not as blind as I am. Yesterday, a certain girl was ironing and her uniform got burnt and another girl said ''I do not know whether they are blind to allow their uniform to burn'' I was learning by then. When I heard it, I became confused because we the visually impaired we do not behave as they do (GNC-S4; F).

This finding is consistent with Lindsay and McPherson(2011) who reported in their study that children with disabilities are victims of verbal (name calling and stereotyping) and physical bullying and social exclusion within the school context. Again, this finding is in support of the views expressed by Derrington and Kendell (2004),that individuals with disabilities including those with visual impairments experience hostile attitudes and name-calling, making some of them stay away from their peers without disabilities. A self-fulfilling image might result when a person accepts the label and incorporates it into his or her self-conceptualization, with reduced performance expectations and damaged self-esteem as unfortunate by-products (McGrew & Evans, 2003; Rosenthal, 2002).Again, this finding is consistent with

3.1.2. Lack of support and co-operation

Findings from the analysis of data regarding the challenges participants encounter in their relationship with the sighted peers revealed that the sighted students did not support and co-operated with them. Also, participants' interview revealed that they had challenges in making a friend whom they could depend on as to guide them around the school compound. It was evident from the interviews that the participants in both schools had challenges with their relationship and experiences with the sighted peers in the dormitories, classrooms and during outdoor activities. I was clear participants lacked support of the sighted in accessing the schools' physical environment. Again, it was revealed that both males and female participants experiences similar challenges with their sighted peers in the schools. One student remarked that:

You see, I'm a low vision student in my class, and I need to sit in front but the sighted already occupy the front seats so on one occasion, I told them to allow me to sit at the front because of my problem but they said that place has been reserved for someone else. Up to now, they do not allow me to sit at the front (GNC-S2; F).

Another student indicated:

......in my dormitory we wear white so if my shirt is dirty and I am washing, I need someone to check whether it has been washed well. If I ask they would say it is ok but the next day when you wear the shirt, the person who told you that it was ok would be the one spreading you all over that your shirt is dirty (OSH-S4; M).

A third student had this to say:

In the school, in terms of moving about, there are sighted ones who are around but if there is maybe a stone or open gutter on your way, instead of them to direct you, they look on and allow you to hit your leg against it or fall into the gutter and they laugh at you but a few others try to help anyway (OSH-S2; M).

The findings on the friendship pattern of the participants support studies by Frostad and Pijl, (2007), Pijl, Frostad and Flem (2008) and Koster, Pijl, Nakken, and Houten (2010) who found that students with disabilities had fewer friends without disabilities and were less accepted in the mainstreamed schools. However, these findings were inconsistent with the findings of Acheampong (2017), Awini (2015) and Matheson, Olsen and Weisner (2007) who reported that majority of students with disabilities have friends who were not disabled and the sighted peers of the students with visual impairments interacted with them, supported them and did not treated harshly.

3.1.3. Discrimination

It was evident from the analysis of the responses of the participants that students with visual impairments in the schools were discriminated against. Sighted students discriminated against the students with visual impairment because of the mode of writing (braille machines) and were not willing to accommodate the use of the machines in their classes. The findings further revealed that students with visual impairment were discriminated against with regards to group assignments. Participants reported that the sighted students did not involve them in doing group assignments given.It was also revealed that sighted students avoided having students with visual impairments on their table at the dining hall, by misinformation and deception. All the participants reported some incidence of discrimination by the sighted towards students with visual impairments. These are how some participants reported the incidence of discrimination against them. Two students expressed their views this way:

*......when we are writing with the Braille machine and because the machine makes noise, some of them get agitated and begin to complain that we are disturbing them. So sometimes we just have to put up with them so if there is no teacher who understands our plight and explain to the sighted students then we are in trouble with the sighted; but most of the teachers understand us (*GNC*-S2; F).*

Some of the sighted would deliberately do some things to you which you would even regret of being visually impaired. When we have a group assignment, they won't even involve us; they will do the assignment and just neglect us. It makes me feel that if I were not visually impaired, they would not have treated me this way. (OSH-S4; M)

Another student revealed:

*Ok, let's assume in the dining hall, previously you can sit at any place and every table is to take ten students. When I get to the dining hall, due to their selfish interest, they want to get more food; when you ask them the number on the table, they would say the table is full but we later get to know that they lied and discriminated against us (*GNC*-S1;F).*

One other student had this to say:

Anytime they are going to meet to do the group work, they will never call the visually impaired students and so when we are doing the presentation, and they ask questions, we are unable to answer because we were not present when they were doing the work (OSH-S3; M).

The finding of this study is inconsistent with the that of de Boer, Pijl and Minnaert (2012) who report in their study of social participation of students with disabilities that students without disabilities generally hold neutral attitudes towards peers with disabilities. The researchers reported that several variables such as gender, age, experience with and knowledge about disabilities, parental influence were relating to the attitudes of students towards peers with disabilities. Also, contrary to the finding of this study, Kalyvas, Koutsouki and Skordilis (2011) reported in their study that university students exhibit positive attitudes and intentions towards integrating individuals with disabilities in schools. The findings of the studies discussed above, are contradictory to the findings of this study perhaps due to the difference in age and the levels of knowledge about disabilities between the participants.

3.2. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings, it can be concluded that students with visual impairment encountered challenges such as stereotyping, discrimination, misconceptions and neglect in their relationship with the non-disabled which did not favour their social development in the schools. The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study:

1. Teachers should create classroom environment that encourages frequent peer interaction and general social skill development.
2. Special educators should teach social skills such as expressing affection, anger, sharing joy, laughter and jokes; interpersonal problem-solving skills with peers.
3. Sighted students should be educated to remove the misconceptions they have about persons with visual impairment.

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