

**The impression that I get: Educational inclusion explored through
the voices of young people with vision impairment**

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Abstract

Despite the notion of educational inclusion of students with disabilities increasing in popularity, the day-to-day reality of its effectiveness remains mostly unknown. This paper reports key findings of a small-scale qualitative study that was conducted with a group of young people with vision impairment who attended an inclusive secondary school. The aim of the research was to ascertain their voiced experiences of their inclusion. Relevant to the study was the researcher's insider status, which allowed for his unique insight and shared experiences with participants to influence data collection and analysis. The students reported a constant trade off that occurred between their aspirations for access and autonomy and practices of other stakeholders in the school that both facilitated and inhibited their inclusion. In sum, the students' inclusion was ineffective because of habitual inhibiting actions of others. Recommendations are made based on Slee's (2001) call for altered teaching and learning realities to promote educational inclusion, and a model of social justice that could bring about increased student agency (Higgins, Macarthur & Kelly, 2009).

Key Words

Inclusive education
Qualitative research
Researcher as insider
Student agency

Introduction

“Oh, you’re in mainstream with a chaperone. It’s like going to a party with your parents, or something.” (17-year-old “included” student, 2010).

The tone of resignation evident in this comment of a young person with vision impairment (VI) about his inclusion in a mainstream school demonstrates his reality; his reality of searching for equality in an educational environment in which he feels stigmatised because of constant support mechanisms that are in place to “enhance” his education. This was one response to a question I put to five young people with varying degrees of impaired vision, to learn whether or not they believed they were appropriately included in the mainstream school that they attended. I was motivated to form a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) on emergent findings. Foreman (2001) reported that most students with VI in Australia attended inclusive schools at the turn of the century. However, until now, no theoretical representation has existed that represents their schooling.

I was a researcher with insider status. I have severe VI myself, and had attended a similar school in the 1990s. The young people’s observations of their inclusion resonated tremendously with me. Issues of student and teacher perceptions, pedagogy, support, human and physical resources, equipment, social interaction with peers, and a variety of other experiences all contributed to shaping both of our schooling realities, despite obvious differences in our circumstances. I had graduated from secondary school more than 10 years prior to the interviews, whereas the participants were still yet to do so. Throughout the fieldwork process, I dared not express my accord with the participants, nor did I make it clear in research reports. Yet it would be imprudent of me not to recognise that my own situation gave me a unique insight into their circumstances and impacted on my role as the researcher.

In this paper I set out to explain how both the qualitative methodology adopted for this small-scale study and the use of student voice to inform it, along with my own insider status, worked together to shape the research agenda. I also present some findings in relation to the theoretical model that emerged from this study, and briefly demonstrate how the young people’s voiced experiences contributed to its development.

Background

In the Australian State of Queensland, where this study was conducted; educational inclusion of young people with VI commonly tracks the special education knowledge and tradition. Children with VI are eligible to enrol in public schools in which special educational programs (SEPs) operate on their grounds (Education Queensland, 2007a), or other types of settings in which students receive

particular educational services on a less permanent basis such as visits from advisory teachers (AVTs) (Education Queensland, 2007b).

Despite the existence of such support for students with VI to study in inclusive schools, the Australian Blindness Forum (2008) expressed concern that in the national context, specialist intervention at an educational level for students with VI is at times inequitable, lacking in quality, reach and effect. They further claim that as a consequence, many young people with VI leave compulsory schooling with underdeveloped skills for further education, employment and independent living. This suggests that inclusive programs that follow special educational traditions may be inadequate to address the unique needs of young people with VI. Although Brown (2009) finds that numerous studies have been conducted that concentrate on enhancing educational provisions for VI students particularly in inclusive settings, there appears to be a dearth of literature that evaluates educational inclusion from their unique perspectives. Thus, I was motivated to explore the perspectives of current students with VI, and learn how their own experiences either converge or differ to my own.

Methodology

I undertook this small-scale study for my master in education, to find how educational inclusion is experienced by young people with VI who currently attend school. O'Day and Killeen (2002) suggest that qualitative frameworks are most useful when researchers seek to understand the complexities of having a disability in social contexts. With this in mind, I employed a qualitative framework to explore the voiced experiences of participants about their schooling. Within that framework, I chose Strauss and Corbin's (1990) prescribed version of grounded theory methodology. This enabled me to systematically develop a substantive framework to represent the relationships among factors identified in participants' experiences of educational inclusion.

Student Voice

As I have indicated, a principal objective of this study was to listen to the voices of participants to learn how they experienced their inclusion. Authors call for educational research that takes into account the voices of young people with disabilities (Moriña Díez, 2010) particularly in an educational context (Ainscow, 2005), to gain a greater understanding of their unique perspectives and enable them to be a part of solutions (Armstrong, 2005, Slee, 1996, 2011). Moreover, Slee (2011) argues that by empowering young people with disabilities by listening to them about their unique needs and aspirations, research in inclusive education can re-establish the focus of educational inclusion onto social justice. I expected that the results of this investigation would both identify good and bad inclusive practices, and offer solutions as illustrated by the young people.

Participants

I recruited four boys and one girl across year levels 8-12 and aged 13-17 years to the study after their parents gave written consent for their involvement. Though all participants were legally blind, they each had varying degrees of impaired sight, ranging from total blindness to low vision. Each had also experienced different times of onset of their vision impairment. Further, every student had enrolled in the school from the beginning of year 8, and had studied there for at least a full term before commencing participation in the study.

Setting

All participants attended one secondary school in South East Queensland on whose grounds operated a SEP. The participants shared access to the special education unit (SEU) with many other students who had a variety of disabilities. A teacher who was trained in special education for students with VI (TVI) was permanently based in the SEU.

Insider Status

Slee (1996) calls for educational researchers with disabilities to conduct studies such as this one, to challenge school cultures that continue to couple special educational traditions with inclusion. I have significantly impaired vision and was educated in a similarly appointed school in the 1990s. This afforded me the potential advantage of being a researcher with insider status because of both my familiarity with the implications of having VI in a predominantly sighted world, and of the operations of such an educational setting. There is a risk that having insider status can lead researchers to make unwanted assumptions through their familiarity. Therefore I followed Labaree's (2002) suggestions of striving for objectivity, avoiding any predisposed ideas and familiarity with occurrences at the setting, and being alert to construct and deconstruct presumptions of truth as found in the data. In all, my position enabled me to pursue lines of inquiry in both data collection and analysis, that outsider researchers would ordinarily either overlook altogether, or inadvertently neglect to recognise their significance to the young people's experiences. This enabled for a richer theory to emerge from the findings.

Instruments

I collected data for this study through semi-structured focus group and individual face-to-face interviews over terms two and three of the 2010 school year. I commenced fieldwork by conducting two focus group interviews with participants split into two groups, and held another focus group on the last day of data collection to present the theory that had emerged through analysis up to that point. I also conducted a total of twenty-eight individual interviews with participants in the ensuing weeks. These interviews were held in a special meeting room in the SEU, and lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, depending on time constraints.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of three phases: open, axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using this inductive process, connections were made, rich descriptions were generated from the raw data, and core themes emerged, which led to the generation of a theory grounded in the data.

Findings

Here I present the core features that underline the emergent theory of inclusive education for the young people, concentrating on the academic dimension of their education. As shown in Figure 1, two elements were central to their experiences of inclusion relating to student agency: having seamless access to the academic and social dimensions of the school and being able to exercise autonomy within a school culture that is respectful toward diversity. Other stakeholders at the school including class teachers, the TVI, and paraprofessionals both facilitated and inhibited the students' inclusion through their actions that directly impacted these elements. I expand these issues further by elucidating the young people's narrative, and examining the facilitators and inhibitors of their inclusion.

Autonomy and its Significance

The participants were empowered when they were able to exercise autonomy at school. Crocker and Knight (2005) define autonomy as a person's ability to exercise choice and cause their own behaviour. In accordance with this definition, the young people believed they could enjoy autonomy when they were able to make individual choices about their studies and complete academic tasks with minimal intervention from educational and support staff; similarly to their sighted peers. Further, as one participant explained, having enhanced autonomy was of high importance, "So that you're prepared for real life. 'Cause there's no one out there to help you in the world [away from school]". However, the students believed that their freedom to exercise choice was compromised when other stakeholders underestimated their capabilities. For example, many of the students believed they could attend and actively participate in classes without support personnel, whose presence tended to suppress both their social and academic inclusion.

Seamlessness of Access Facilitated

All of the young people reported that having access to the academic and social dimensions of their schooling was an essential part of their inclusion. Each attended regular classes for some (if not all) scheduled lessons, and were facilitated to access all subjects offered at the school from the core curriculum regardless of the complexities they might encounter. Teacher aides traditionally provided the students “lite” support, by preparing and distributing resources to them in their lessons. The young people believed that it was important that they could access all subjects and study them in regular classrooms alongside their sighted peers because it gave them a sense of “normality”. As one noted, “I’m no different when it comes to learning than other students”. One participant maintained that studying in regular classes would lead to his being able to apply for a university position and scholarship because he could compete with others on a level footing. “It’s going to give me the bump up.”

Participants also reported that being able to attend regular classes added to their social inclusion in the school, which was of high importance for each of them. One noted that he had a sense of “pleasure” because he was “able to talk to friends in class”, which he could not do when he had been withdrawn to attend the SEU. Another participant added that attending regular classes facilitated him to “Work with them (sighted peers) as well; not just ... by myself, or out of mainstream.”

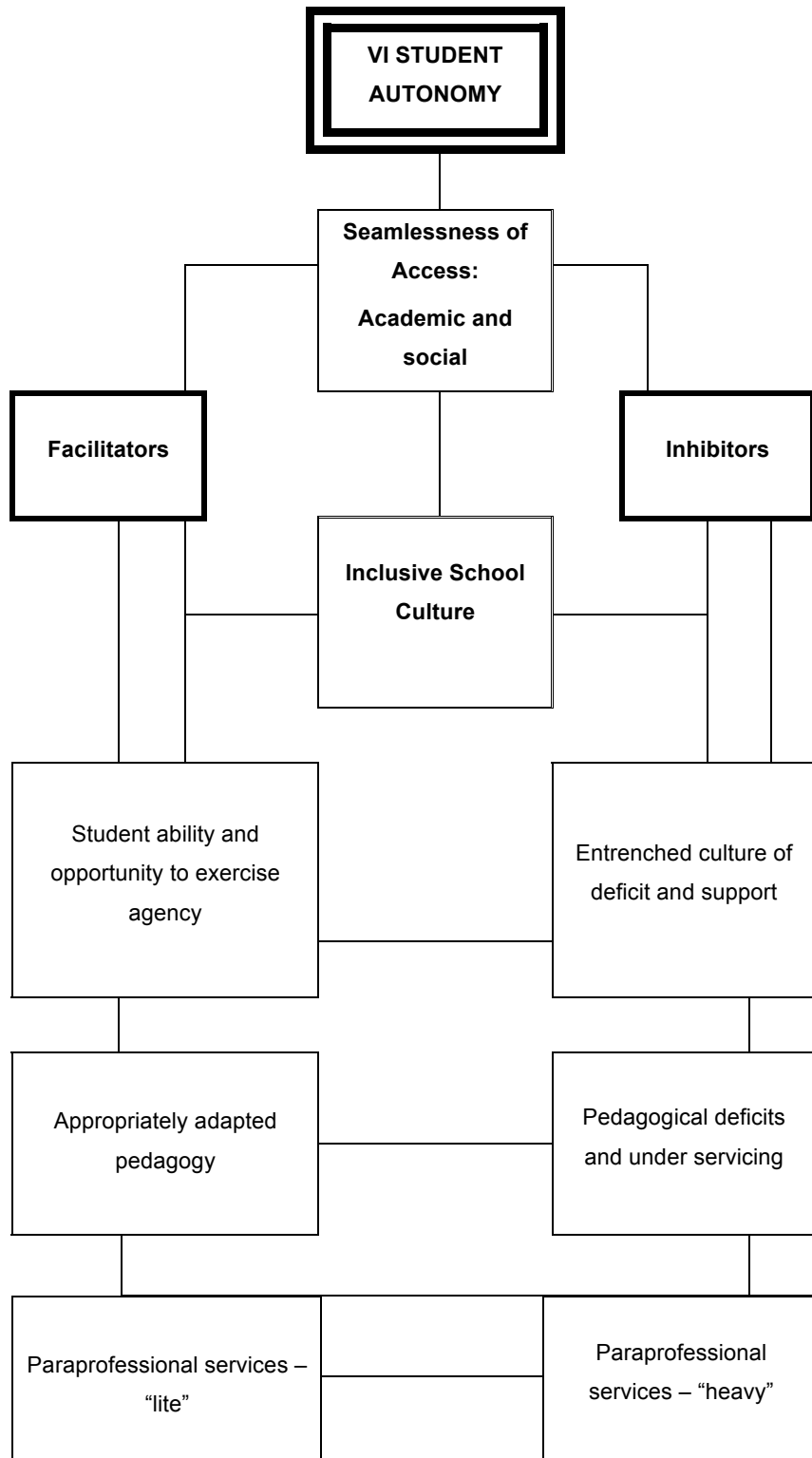


Figure 1: Conceptual Theory of Inclusive Education viewed by young people with VI

Class teachers played a crucial role in facilitating the young people to gain access to the academic dimension of their schooling. The participants reported that some class teachers did so by using an array of inclusive practices including: appropriate communication modes (verbal class instructions and modelling), providing intuitive descriptions and/or using 3-dimensional realia to represent diagrammatic material, making accessible resources available to students in a timely manner, and being approachable outside of classes for individual consultations. Class teachers who utilised a combination of these strategies enabled participants to achieve parity with sighted peers by providing them seamless access to study material.

Some participants also had their study programs complement with individual lessons from the ECC in areas such as orientation and mobility, and assistive technology. The TVI generally tended students' individual needs in these areas, and withdrew them from regular classes to teach them directly in the SEU, or place them with specialist instructors who visited periodically from outside the school. One participant was withdrawn from his technology class to take instruction in typing and use of assistive equipment from the TVI. He noted, taking classes in ECC material was "helping me get a little bit faster so I can catch up with everybody else". It is noteworthy that this young person compared himself with his sighted peers in this context, and believed that he was only withdrawn from regular classes on a temporary basis to enhance his computer skills.

Seamlessness of Access Inhibited

Both educational and support staff frequently inhibited the young people's access to the academic and social dimensions of their schooling. For example, because many learners with a range of disabilities were enrolled into the school, the TVI had assumed broadened responsibilities to support all of them who studied under the umbrella of the SEP. Most participants believed that because they all attended mainstream classes for a majority of lessons, this changeover of responsibility was irrelevant to them.

However, as a consequence of his expanded role, some participant sensed that the TVI could no longer concentrate on their unique educational needs, subsequently inhibiting their access to elements of their studies and potential to increase their autonomy. For example, one young person in year 12 recognised that he only had basic skills in using assistive technology, and was unable to independently perform tasks such as using his screen reader to navigate web pages, formatting, printing and scanning documents. Moreover, the TVI had neglected to provide him with explicit training in these areas. As the young person related, "He was going to do [it] I think last semester or this semester but he's been too busy". As a consequence, this participant had to rely on teacher aides to support him to perform these menial tasks. Some participants acknowledged that they were disadvantaged by this lack of capacity to learn these extended skills, which could impact their lives after school when support from paraprofessionals was not available to them.

The young people reported that erroneous and/or neglectful teaching practices led some class teachers to restrict their access to study material. As one participant noted, “Other teachers, maybe they just don’t compensate for me being in their class, they don’t do anything”. Two participants reported that they occasionally went to classes to find that their teachers had left hand written notes on classroom doors indicating room or schedule changes. When this occurred, not only did they lose valuable lesson time while trying to find their classes, but they also had their independence compromised through having to seek assistance to decipher written messages and find alternative locations. Some of the young people also complained that teachers often gave them written feedback on their work, which they were unable to read. As one noted, “Usually they write on the printed stuff I give them. So then I do need someone to read [it to me]”.

Some teachers also inappropriately adapted pedagogy during classes, leaving participants unable to follow learning material. One young person related an incident of this taking place.

She [the class teacher] thinks that I can see well enough to see the stuff on the board. And she tries to write bigger, or enlarge the print on the page, but I still can’t see it, and it just gets to me, because she’s doing it in front of the class for me, but I still can’t see it.

The frustration experienced by this participant was increased through embarrassment he felt at the teacher’s apparent misunderstanding of his requirements in a public way in front of his peers.

When the young people experienced such difficulties, they generally approached the TVI for assistance, whose response was to assign teacher aides to them for in-class support. Because all teachers seemed to overlook the young people’s requirements for adjusted pedagogy from time to time, teacher aides provided concurrent support to most of them in lessons. As one explained:

I probably do need a teacher aide [in most classes], because any notes written on the board, like [for example] ... the teacher might write up the answer, or whatever, and do something on [the] spur of the moment, and I’m not getting that.

Each participant spoke at length about the double edged sword that having teacher aides accompany them to most lessons presented. Despite enabling the young people to regain access to their studies through their support, teacher aides were reportedly authoritarian in their approach; they hindered class socialisation and inhibited the students’ autonomy by overcompensating for them. As one participant described, they often tried to “keep you on a leash”. In addition, participants reported that due to the apparent recent diversion of the TVI, teacher aides seemed to have assumed the bulk of this role. This apparent change in responsibility appeared to put teacher aides in a higher position of authority. Moreover, participants believed that they had to forego learning VI-specific skills with assistive technology because teacher aides were not suitably qualified to replace the TVI, and were therefore unable to train them adequately.

Inclusive School Culture

As shown in Figure 1, participants believed that the school’s culture was highly relevant to their inclusion in it. They questioned the culture of the school, suggesting that it was not, in the main,

inclusive, and was instead competitive and impersonal. Carrington and Elkins (2002) define a school's culture as the beliefs, attitudes and collective understanding of members (e.g. teachers and students) about their particular roles. These concepts contribute to how organisations operate, and resolve problems. Carrington and Elkins also contend that inclusive school cultures value diversity. The young people's reports of practices within the school indicated that the culture was not respectful toward diversity, and showed evidence of disorganisation.

Class teachers often underserved the students by encumbering their access to appropriate pedagogy. Further, the young people's reports of having their autonomy compromised appeared to be caused by an entrenched culture of deficit and support within the school's apparent capacity to accommodate students who were enrolled in the SEP. Tuttle and Tuttle (2004) contend that the dependence that people with VI tend to have on others can impact on their levels of autonomy and interdependence, because they often perceive themselves as constantly being in need of assistance. These findings are applicable in the present case, as the school engaged "heavy" support roles of paraprofessionals, which inhibited the students' capacity to act autonomously. As a consequence, opportunities for the students to enact agency and demonstrate their capabilities were haphazard.

Discussion

On a personal level, I had embarked on this research to explore if educational inclusion of this kind for young people with VI had improved since my leaving secondary education. Disappointingly, I found that it had not. Over servicing by paraprofessionals, if anything, appeared to have increased to make up for the shortcomings of the practices of educational staff and the TVI. These findings are foreboding for educational inclusion for young people with VI who attend such settings.

I am accustomed to the endless struggle that people with disabilities have for autonomy, and I encounter issues on a daily basis regarding access to information in this predominantly sighted world. I am also agonisingly aware of the necessity for people in my situation to have specific skills that will at least enable them to play their best hands in striving for equality when seeking further education or employment. In sum, participants of this study were denied basic education in many areas that would certainly affect their ability to live up to these expectations in the future after their graduations.

A major finding of this study was that there was a culture of deficit and support evident in the school for young people enrolled in the SEP. Paraprofessionals were generally relied upon in an ironic attempt to fill gaps in both the misappropriation of pedagogical practices of class teachers, and the responsibilities of the TVI. Receiving support from these personnel in lessons appeared to not only inhibit the students' autonomy, but also enable class teachers to ignore their fundamental roles of facilitating learning for all students. Further, the young people were not receiving explicit instruction on VI-specific skills to increase their autonomy that would ordinarily be the responsibility

of the TVI. These findings indicated that although it was promoted as an inclusive school, aspects of its culture were not respectful of diversity.

In contrast, should the young people have been able to exercise agency, their inclusion would have been more effective, and their futures more promising. Higgins, MacArthur and Kelly (2009) advance the 'A, C, D' model of social justice, that suggests when students with disabilities are given opportunities to exercise 'a' agency and demonstrate their 'c' capabilities, their sense of autonomy and competence increases, which contributes to changing others' perceptions of 'd' diversity. Unlike previous theoretical conceptions of inclusion for otherwise marginalised groups of students, that of Higgins et al. allows for these students to have access to resources and recognition in classrooms. Their own research shows that improved pedagogy and social relationships can improve the inclusion of students with disabilities.

The participants of the current study could experience enhanced inclusion if they were able to access the learning environment, and function within it with self-determination. Further, their futures as life-long learners would be more likely to materialise if they were challenged at school to act autonomously rather than being nurtured by paraprofessionals, while being taught the relevant VI-specific skills they require to increase their autonomy. Slee (2001) questions how teachers can be educated aspirations people like myself have for social justice and educational inclusion. While I have not set out to address teachers' views in this study, these results certainly indicate that young people with VI covet inclusion and social justice, demonstrated in their struggle for equality. Moreover, through their story, the young people who participated in this study have demonstrated that they were merely hypothetically included in a mainstream school, which was not suitable to them. Their continual push to achieve autonomy in an educational environment that was ill-equipped to provide them opportunities to do so indicates that educational delivery needs a refurbishment that emphasises this aspect of social justice.

Limitations

Although I comprehensively examined participants' experiences of inclusion in this investigation, a limitation is the lack of generalisability of findings beyond the study setting. Only a small sample of participants from a single secondary school took part in this study, which is not representative of the population of VI students attending inclusive schools. Further, my own insight as an insider researcher may have influenced findings and analysis to a great extent.

Implications for the doctorate

Expansion of the emergent theory is of high importance, to test its robustness, and increase its reach. To do so, I have invoked analytical techniques of Foucault on data thus collected, to gain a greater understanding of the social impact of various pre-identified factors on student inclusion. I have also come to recognise the role of my own voice in my research. Therefore, I am applying



poststructuralist techniques to my own situation as a person living with VI in the community who has completed high school. This position enables me to deploy my ideology in conducting educational research, as I seek to find social justice for all with disabilities in the broader community. Overall, I expect my research efforts to produce a robust theory that enables educators greater understanding of how stakeholders in educational inclusion of marginalised students is experienced, and ways in which enhancements can be made with a view to improving social justice both in educational settings and beyond.

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