Research article

Learning Communities for Teaching Practice School Placements: A Higher Education Initiative to Promote Equity for Students with Disabilities

Roshanthni Subrayen* & Sachin Suknunan**

Abstract

In South Africa, scholarship on the teaching practice learning experiences for students with disabilities is a relatively new area of sociological inquiry. Social justice arrangements in the South African Higher Education policy frameworks identify the equity imperative as being of critical importance for social redress and transformation for all students. This qualitative study drew on the teaching practice school placement experiences of five Bachelor of Education students with either visual or physical disabilities and who were part of a teaching practice learning community. The findings of this study suggest that, for students with visual and physical disabilities, learning communities were perceived to be a structure that enhanced equity arrangements for human development and well-being in teaching practice school placements. In addition, and in alignment with equity arrangements, the need for a social justice reform agenda for teaching practice school placements emerged from the data. The study concludes that learning communities as a context-specific institutional structure support freedom, agency, dialogue and participation, and respect for disability required for capability expansion for human development and well-being in the teaching practice school placements of students with visual and physical disabilities. These were found to enhance equity arrangements for students with visual disabilities and physical disabilities.
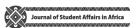
Keywords

equity; learning community; physical disabilities; teaching practice school placements; visual disabilities

Introduction

South African Higher Education (SAHE) policy frameworks draw attention to the equity imperative in higher education for students with disabilities. Human rights and social justice provisions are visible in higher education policies (DoE, 1997, 2018) that highlight the importance of specialised support for students with disabilities. To this effect the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) plays a critical role in promoting the right to higher education for persons with disabilities.

* Dr Roshanthni Subrayen is the Disability Coordinator at the Disability Support Unit, Student Services Division, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Email: subrayen@ukzn.ac.za

** Dr Sachin Suknunan works in the Student Services Division, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Email: suknunan@ukzn.ac.za

Scholarship on disability in higher education suggests that students with disabilities experience systemic barriers in SAHE (Bell, 2013; Ndlovu & Walton, 2016). This article aims to understand how SAHE is meeting social justice arrangements for students with disabilities in their teaching practice school placements. The findings and discussion presented in this article are based on part of the researcher's PhD study (Subrayen, 2017) that examined the equity, access and participation experiences of both students with visual and physical disabilities in their teaching practice school placements.

Literature Review

The social model of disability argues for disability as a human rights and social justice concern. This problematises disability as a system of discrimination, hence according respect to equity arrangements through the expansion of capabilities for human development (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). Human development in the context of the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) provides nuances for social justice and inclusion to reduce inequities to strengthen human development. Central to the Capability Approach are freedoms and agency, democratic participation and dialogue, and respect for human diversity, all serving as critical information bases of inclusive policy arrangements. To this effect, education is a basic capability that allows individuals sufficient freedom and agency to choose valuable and worthwhile lives, should they choose to do so (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999).

In South Africa, Walker (2010) agrees that education is a basic capability and can influence the expansion and development of other capabilities in higher education. Walker (2010) strengthens her argument by claiming that student well-being and agency, autonomy, democratic participation and respect for human diversity might be offered for capability development. This can bring us closer to social change and transformation in higher education for students with disabilities (Walker, 2010).

This study argues for Tinto's (2003, 2004) learning community structure for student development to support capability expansion for human development for students with disabilities in their teaching practice placements. Tinto (2003, 2004) defines learning communities as a student development structure for beginning, undecided and academically developing students. Students with similar attributes come together on common themes and establish deep levels of dialogue in a focused and coherent manner to enhance their academic integration, thus serving as equitable and enabling spaces in teaching practice for students with disabilities.

In SAHE policies (DoE, 1997, 2018) disability is recognised as a system of discrimination requiring social redress and transformation. This means that disability should be guided by a "conscious and reflective blend" of multi-dimensional processes to improve equity as a social justice arrangement (Carlisle, Jackson & George, 2006, p. 57).

Contrary to this determination of social justice, research evidence globally and nationally, suggests regular instances of inequities experienced in higher education by students with disabilities. These inequities relate to gender, student funding, stigma, environmental,

attitudinal and social barriers, sexual harassment and inadequate technological software (Bell, 2013; Hammad & Singal, 2015; Opini, 2011). In addition, there is concern amongst researchers about the experiences of students with disabilities in their practice learning placements, referring to academic work undertaken outside the university within a stipulated time frame, during their academic course of study. It is in this context that professional competencies and application of theoretical knowledge and skills are assessed as an integral component of the students' academic curriculum (Department for Education and Skills, 2002; Ndlovu & Walton, 2016).

In the U.K., studies found that disability disclosure in singular- and multiple-practice learning placements presented challenges. Studies by Ashcroft, Sequire, Shapiro and Swiderski (2008) and Botham and Nicholson (2014) suggest that for singular-practice learning placements, disability disclosure was either deferred or delayed to a later stage of the placement due to the possibility of discrimination and stigma, whilst, in multiple-practice learning placements, students had to continuously and repetitively disclose their disability at various times and via various platforms. This negatively influenced their psychological processes required during disability disclosure (Botham & Nicholson, 2014; Morris & Turnbull, 2007). A further complexity relates to short-term practice placements which, due to the short duration, constrained the development of interpersonal skills and confidence, professional relationships and workplace maturity required for disability disclosure (Morris & Turnbull, 2007).

In addition to challenges arising from disability disclosure, other challenges were also noted. Glazzard and Dale (2015) found that normative teaching and learning strategies employed by able-bodied mentors and tutors produced negative attitudes and stereotyping towards student teachers with dyslexia. These normative teaching and learning strategies did not account for specialised support required by student teachers with dyslexia to foster inclusion and participation. This negatively influenced the self-image and confidence of participants' professional identities, leaving them belittled, stressed, humiliated and devalued.

Aside from the above, good practice models in practice learning placements have been noted. Griffith, Worth, Scullard and Gilbert (2010) developed a student centred, six-phase tripartite model to support nursing students in their clinical practice. This model, firstly, enhanced communication and collaboration between practice partners and the student with a disability. Secondly, the model improved the student's confidence to disclose the disability for reasonable accommodations required for clinical practice placements. Other U.K. studies indicate that structured pre-placement meetings with all practice partners and the student with a disability ensured effective communication, facilitation of reasonable accommodations and an understanding of the student's specialised needs in practice placements (Botham & Nicholson, 2014; Griffiths, 2012). For student teachers with dyslexia in their teaching practice school placements, spellcheckers, specialised software, oral communication, computers and word banks enhanced their practice learning placements (Burns & Bell, 2011; Glazzard & Dale, 2015). These best-practice models have contributed to equity arrangements for students with disabilities in practice learning placements.

In contrast to the above, in South Africa, practice learning for students with disabilities is a relatively new area of inquiry, with little evidence to inform practice and policy (Ndlovu & Walton, 2016). This suggests that measures have to be instituted to reduce or eliminate barriers for the achievement of equity in practice learning placements. This is supported by Ndlovu and Walton (2016), who assert that SAHE institutions have a responsibility to adequately prepare students with disabilities in terms of theoretical and professional knowledge for application in practice learning contexts.

Ntombela and Subrayen (2013) in their situational analysis at a SAHE institution claim that despite the imperative of equity (DoE, 1997), students with visual disabilities experience challenges in their teaching practice placements in schools. This relates to the absence of specialised technology and human support for students who are blind. Yet, specialised support for students with disabilities in higher education is consistent with the imperatives of equity to reduce educational inequities (Tebutt, Brodman, Borg, MacLachlan & Khasnabis, 2016).

In other South African research, Subrayen's (2017) qualitative study at a SAHE institution, found that Bachelor of Education students experienced complexities in their teaching practice placements. This related to the absence of self-representation, multiple-power hierarchies acting simultaneously to produce and challenges emerging from the intersections of gender and disability. Subrayen (2017) also found that the chalkboard, a normative resource, imposed restrictions by not accounting for specialised needs of persons with disabilities in accessing the chalkboard. Thus, normative resources controlled, discriminated and hindered the inclusion of persons with disabilities from mainstream social arrangements by not accounting for their specialised needs (Reindal, 2009; Terzi, 2005). The argument made here is for the deconstruction of normative arrangements and for accounting for inclusive social arrangements for students with disabilities.

This minimal evidence in South Africa to inform practice and policy means that disability support units and practice partners are strategising without direction on supporting and enabling students with disabilities in their practice learning placements. Arising from this knowledge gap, this article identifies Tinto's (2003, 2004) Learning Community Model for student development as a framework within which to understand and interpret the ways in which students with visual and physical disabilities negotiated their teaching practice placements. The SAHE policy fails in its intentions to provide a framework to support equity redress for students with disabilities in their practice learning placements. Hence, new lines of accountability require debate and consideration to effect social change and transformation. The argument draws attention to a robust social justice reform agenda to dismantle educational inequities that marginalise students with disabilities in higher education (Liasidou, 2012).

Tinto's Learning Community Model

Tinto (2003, 2004) claims that students who require academic support experience higher education in isolation, disconnecting themselves from learning and peer group interactions.

This leads to academic and social barriers hampering student development. To address this challenge, many higher education institutions have included reforms that engage students in teaching and learning pedagogies. One of these reforms refers to learning communities where students work in cooperative and collaborative groups to become socially and academically engaged (Tinto, 2003, 2004). Learning communities are safe spaces where homogenous student cohorts mean that students with similar attributes come together to construct and share skills and knowledge on common themes in a focused and coherent manner. These homogenous cohorts allow for deep levels of dialogue and engagement where every voice matters in the learning community (Tinto, 2003, 2004). Therefore, homogenous student cohorts are applicable and important for this study as students with disabilities (similar attributes) come together with skills and knowledge around matters of disability in their teaching practice placements.

Studies on learning communities in other contexts, more specifically at universities in the United States of America, found that cooperative and collaborative learning for success, sharing of knowledge, decision making and improved teaching practices improved student retention (Berry, Johnson & Montgomery, 2005; Jackson, Stebleton & Laanan, 2013; Engstrom & Tinto, 2010).

It must be noted that research around learning communities for students with disabilities is not a well-developed area of inquiry in South Africa. South Africa is a developing context with its unique historical educational inequities, past education legislations, socioeconomic and language barriers (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012) which vastly differ from historical factors in developed contexts.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology, located within a narrative method of inquiry. A purposive sampling technique was employed, allowing for an in-depth study of the teaching practice placement experiences of Bachelor of Education students with visual and physical disabilities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. A non-probability sampling method was used for the identification and selection of an applicable sample wherein rich data could be obtained.

In the Bachelor of Education curriculum, students engage in a 16-week teaching practice placement in schools during their second, third and fourth years of study. This provides for a nuanced and diversified school-based experience which prepares the students to become educators in a school context.

Before students with a disability embark on their teaching practice placement, they are invited, as a group, to a once-off scheduled teaching practice meeting hosted by the Disability Unit at the said university. This meeting is embedded in Tinto's Learning Community Model (2003; 2004) for student development. The learning community meeting is specifically designed to support the students' preparedness for forthcoming teaching practice placements as students with disabilities. It is here that students with disabilities come together to dialogue and share, individually and collectively, their

knowledge and skills regarding their disability experiences in teaching practice, for example, chalkboard management, benefits of disability disclosure and stigma management in the context of their teaching practice placement.

Arising from the stratified random sampling process, this study reports on the experiences of five participants who were part of a learning community in preparation of their teaching practice placements.

The nature of their disabilities ranged from differing levels of low vision, mobility challenges in both lower limbs, left hand amputation and left upper and lower limb paralysis.

Individual open-ended questions were used allowing for unlimited responses that were rich and in-depth. Some of these questions related to the participants' narration on:

- their experiences in learning communities as influencing equity in their teaching practice placements;
- support offered by learning communities to enhance the transition from the university to teaching practice learning placement schools; and
- learning together, shared knowledge, learning and developing together, and safe spaces for trust and belonging as aligned to Tinto's (2003, 2004) Learning Community Model.

Data Analysis

The NVIVO 11 analytical software program was used to analyse the data. Nodes were developed, modified and adjusted during data analysis. Thereafter, several themes were identified and analytically revised to derive clear and meaningful themes that accurately represented the data generated. A thematic analysis was undertaken through the use of, amongst others, bubble diagram cluster analysis where similar or related words from the data were illustrated in the form of a bubble (Gibbs, 2007). Word-tree analysis was also used to highlight different contexts, phrases and themes (Gibbs, 2007) emerging from participant voices. Finally, word clouds were used, highlighting frequently recurring words that were graphically represented in various font sizes (Gibbs, 2007). These visual tools allowed for the identification of critical themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was received from the University of KwaZulu-Natal to conduct this study. Ethical considerations related to obtaining voluntary informed consent to participate in this study and for the audio recording of the participants' interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were maintained and respected at all times. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all participants. Participants were informed of their freedom and agency to withdraw or refuse participation at any stage of the interview process. As a social justice concern, ethical consideration was given to reasonable accommodations for the reading and signing of the informed consent forms and barrier-free venues for the interview process.

Findings and Discussion

The value of learning communities for teaching practice placements for students with disabilities

It was found that learning communities presented as a context-specific structure to promote capability expansion for human development. Sen (1999) contends that persons with disabilities require various capability inputs, for example, inclusive policies, specialised resources and infrastructure to achieve the same level of human development and well-being as able-bodied individuals.

As such, three sub-themes are reflected below, indicating the ways in which learning communities contributed to the achievement of equity in teaching practice placements for students with disabilities.

A community of belonging

In the following responses, participants voiced their feelings regarding the positive impact of learning communities for the achievement of equity in their teaching practice school placements.

One participant commented:

But if there is that [learning] community, they will feel'ah, I belong here, and there are people I can associate with.   (Participant 2)

This was supported by another participant:

It is a safety net … you feel free because you are all the same. We all disabled. You are not afraid to speak out. We all share the same thing, so no one is judging anyone.   (Participant 3)

Participant 1 reported that:

It makes people more open about their disability, so not hiding it, because they do feel inferior, unaccepted. So, if we are students with disabilities, it becomes easy to share our experiences and how we go about teaching practice, so that we will produce the best.

It is evident that learning communities provided belonging, participatory action, respect for individual and collective agencies, and voice affirmation on disability disclosure for teaching practice. The learning community structure allowed participants their freedom and agencies for decision making which contributed to the expansion of individual capabilities necessary for human development. It can be assumed then that learning communities, in addition to contributing to student development (Tinto, 2003, 2004), also contributed to the expansion of capabilities of students with disabilities in the context of their teaching practice school placements.

Similar findings were noted in a study undertaken by Engstrom and Tinto (2010) whereby students who participated in learning communities experienced academic integration as contributing to deep levels of trust, a sense of belonging, freedom to express themselves, motivation, respect, and academic gains through cooperative and collaborative learning. These attributes enhanced their levels of confidence and self-esteem. Engstrom and Tinto's findings (2010) suggest that collaboration and cooperative learning supported student development.

In addition to learning communities fostering a sense of belonging to enhance equity, Botham and Nicholson (2014) and Griffiths, et al. (2010) found that collaboration and cooperation between practice partners and the student contributed to equity arrangements in practice learning placements, while this study found that participatory action, freedom, and agency and respect for human diversity (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) allowed an understanding of the way in which learning communities promoted human development and well-being for teaching practice. This translated to a safe space for disability disclosure, decision making, respect and non-judgemental attitudes, which reduced systemic barriers in the participants' teaching practice placements.

Therefore, it can be concluded that learning communities acted as a catalyst to reduce barriers and expand human development for students with disabilities in their teaching practice placements.

Learning communities: A structure to support the expansion of individual capabilities for human development

It was found that learning communities expanded important individual capabilities of the participants. This is supported in the responses below:

> Learning community is part of our professional development … I know that my fellow members, they did very well during their teaching practice. So, it affected learner's performance positively, due to the fact that my professional development is increasing.
>
> (Participant 3)

Participant 1 mentioned the following:

> When you develop something you start from small, like in this learning community. Then you expand, your development grows … because you keep sharing it.

These positive outcomes relate to learning communities as a structure for expanding the professional and personal capabilities of the participants. Furthermore, participation in learning communities promoted positive attributes for life through sharing of knowledge and skills with able-bodied students and with able-bodied learners in the classroom. In an attempt to highlight learning communities as a contributor to student success, Tinto (2003, 2004) argues that learning communities for students requiring academic support contribute to retention and success for students in higher education. From the

perspective of disability, it can be argued that learning communities serve as a context-specific tool, as clarified earlier, to promote the achievement of equity and, ultimately, equality. The foregoing is supported by participant responses in relation to learning communities as an equity tool to enhance equity and social justice in higher education for students with disabilities.

Participant 3 asserted the following:

I think it [learning communities] is specifically going to make equity.

And another participant responded that:

It is more like to make sure that everyone has the same experience.   (Participant 2)

Similarly, Participant 1 stated that:

Learning communities provides a little bit more to the student with a disability in order for them to be able to equally participate in this learning environment.

Participants' responses highlight that a learning community trajectory is a critical tool for higher education in relation to the achievement of equity. From the results, it emerges that the disability-related knowledge and skills were seen as an equity mechanism for the equalisation of opportunities with able-bodied constituencies in teaching practice school placements. The findings indicate that students with disabilities were able to make the connection of accommodating their disability to experience the achievement of equity in their teaching practice school placements.

Whilst this study found learning communities as contributing to equity arrangements in teaching practice placements in schools, Ashcroft et al. (2008) found that work practice in simulated laboratories for physiotherapy students with disabilities improved equity arrangements in clinical practice placements. The findings from this study and Ashcroft et al. (2008) suggest that specialised support enhances equity in practice learning placements. In furthering the discussion of learning communities as an equity tool, this article puts forward the claim that learning communities have the potential to provide a platform for students with disabilities to identify challenges relating to disability in the teaching practice environment and to develop interventions together. This was found to enhance equity teaching practice school placements. This is indicated in the participant responses:

You take whatever you talk about with your peers and it helps you to grow cognitively. Then that person will be able to apply maybe the same strategies or techniques when they go for their teaching practice and be able to actually feel more confident as well.

(Participant 1)

These learning and sharing strategies allowed for the sharing of knowledge and skills, which expanded participants' professional growth and development. This gave rise to

cognitive growth and improved levels of confidence in teaching practice placements. As implied by Tinto (2003, 2004), collaborative and cooperative strategies, shared knowledge and the sharing of knowledge and skills in learning communities allow for positive academic experiences.

Learning communities for teaching practice: Applying a social justice discourse in teaching practice policy and practice

Results suggest that learning communities for teaching practice support the dismantling of sociological barriers, hence contributing to enhancing psychological coping processes. This provides evidence that captures the urgent need for a social justice reform agenda for teaching practice placements for students with disabilities in South Africa.

Participant 5 emphasised the following:

> Learning community must be part of policy. I would say the teaching practice learning community is going to make equity.

Another two participants concurred:

> I think the university must also cater for disabled students in terms of teaching practice … They must try and come up for something for us. They must think about us, because it is clear they forget about us, actually they treat us as normal persons.   (Participant 1)

> I think it should be included in the policy that there needs to be learning community within the university for all disability students.   (Participant 3)

The excerpts above provide evidence that students with disabilities are coerced into teaching practice arrangements designed for able-bodied students, without accounting for specialised support required by students with disabilities in their teaching practice placements. Further, there is a critical need for the design of an inclusive teaching practice policy, one that acknowledges capability expansion for human development derived through Tinto's (2003, 2004) learning community model. These results show how learning communities for teaching practice for students with disabilities have the potential to dismantle normative arrangements required for social change, corrective justice and transformation. As mentioned by Liasidou (2012), a social justice agenda must underpin inclusive educational policy due to its potential to dismantle systemic barriers experienced by students with disabilities in higher education.

Conclusion

This article sought to provide a wider spectrum to human development and well-being to establish equity in relation to disability in the space of teaching practice placements. The findings and discussions arising from this study provide clear evidence of how the

Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) might help us understand how learning communities provide for the achievement of equitable arrangements in teaching practice for students with disabilities.

Further, the results of this study suggest that learning communities can be seen as a good practice model for students with disabilities in their teaching practice school placements. This finding supports learning communities as safe-space communities where members feel trusted, respected and included. Furthermore, learning communities, through participatory action, promoted participants' freedoms and agency in decision making, hence contributing to the expansion of the individual capabilities that are important for human development. In light of this, this article argues that, from a South African perspective, the vision of equity for equal educational opportunities requires a social justice reform agenda for students with disabilities in their teaching practice placements. This is a relevant point of reference for the design of inclusive policy arrangements wherein the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) and Tinto's (2003, 2004) Learning Community Model can serve as informational bases for inclusive policy action. This can be an important milestone to support equity arrangements wherein students with disabilities can be seen as equal to their able-bodied counterparts in teaching practice placements contexts.

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