

chapter 16

Disability Studies in Inclusive Education

Overview: Visual impairment

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Section learning outcomes

After completing this section, you will be able to:

- ✓ Describe important eye conditions that lead to visual impairment and how these present.
- ✓ Examine the effect of low vision or blindness on visually impaired children in the classroom.
- ✓ Identify barriers to learning experienced by learners who are blind or have low vision.
- ✓ Apply teaching strategies for inclusive learning in their own educational context for learners who are blind or have low vision.
- ✓ Analyse how the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can be used to create conducive learning environments for learners who are blind or have low vision.
- ✓ Explain the importance of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) to learners with visual impairments.
- ✓ Describe a range of assistive technology devices for learners with visual impairments.
- ✓ Explain the importance of human rights and legal issues for learners who are blind or have low vision.
- ✓ Reflect on the experiences and psycho-emotional issues in the lives of learners with visual impairments and their families in an empathetic way.

Introduction

In this section, we continue to discuss the impact of different types of impairments, with a focus on visual impairment. We discuss the important eye conditions that lead to visual impairments and how they present. We then examine the effects of low vision or blindness on visually impaired children in the classroom. Further, we discuss barriers to learning experienced by learners who are blind or have low vision. In trying to address these barriers, we discuss how to use teaching strategies and the UDL approach as a tool to create conducive learning environments for learners who are blind or have low vision. The importance of human rights and legal issues for learners who are blind or have low vision is discussed. We also look at a life story of a student who is blind from an education perspective and reflect on the experiences and psycho-emotional issues in the lives of learners with visual impairments.



As the title of this section suggests, this textbook places disability experiences at the heart of our discussion. What does it mean to have a learner who is visually impaired? What does it mean to have a child or family member who is blind? What does it mean to teach a child with low vision or total blindness? Disability experience is not only about people with disabilities, but also about how disability is seen in society and in schools. Is it something to be pitied or to be fixed; or is it about having an impairment that requires an accommodation and adaptations in the environment? Let us begin this section by reading about the educational experiences of Benedict Leteane.

Insider view: Perspectives on education

The phrase “Lesendi kamogare” is a Setswana phrase meaning “the light within”. This phrase describes Benedict Leteane’s educational life story as a person with total blindness. This is his story:

I was born into a world of shadows, a world that others navigated effortlessly through sight while I struggled to perceive even a glimmer of light. My name is Benedict and I carried with me a rare condition called congenital glaucoma, a cruel twist of fate that took my sight away at the tender age of 13. But this is not a tale of darkness; it’s a story of how the light within me burned brighter than any obstacle I faced.

My parents were caught off guard by my condition, discovering it only later in my life. The challenges that awaited me were daunting, yet I was determined not to let my blindness define my journey. I grew up facing countless hurdles, stumbling over a world seemingly designed for those blessed with sight. But in the depths of that darkness, I found my resilience.

Adapting to a world without sight was an uphill battle, but with each challenge I grew stronger. I developed a resolve that refused to be confined by my visual impairment. My parents understood the importance of education, enrolling me in special school in Thabantsho (more than 200km from home) that catered to the needs of the visually impaired. In those halls of learning, I found my sanctuary, a place where my thirst for knowledge was met with understanding and support. I am not at all glamourising special schools. The fact that my parents sent me to a school for the blind meant that I am a different child, that I did not belong with other children besides those who are like me.

Education became my lifeline. Within those walls, I not only learned about the world but also discovered my own potential. My parents, recognising the brilliance that lay within me, transformed into advocates for awareness of visual impairment. They stood by my side, unwavering pillars of strength, reminding me that my condition was only a chapter in my story,



not the entire narrative. The school had couple of challenges, such as braille books arriving late from the publishers. Most of our educators could not read braille. As a result, we used typewriters to write essays, tests and exams so that our educators could read and mark our work. Sadly, due to the educators' lack of knowledge and skills in teaching science, technology, engineering and mathematics, we were limited in subject choices.

With the unwavering support of my parents, I pursued higher education at the esteemed University of Western Cape in South Africa. The challenges were immense, but I refused to waver. I call the challenges I faced “pedagogical exclusion”. That is, most lecturers were not aware of my needs as a person with a visual impairment. I was often told “We don’t know how to teach you.” I remember asking a friend to help me understand psychology statistics because my lecturer had no idea how to teach me as a blind student. Furthermore, there was a constant fight between my peers and I on one side and our lecturers on the other about extension of time for exercises, assignments and exams. Also, I had to wait couple of weeks before I could receive materials in the correct format. It was here that I embarked on a groundbreaking journey, one that would see me become a pioneer in the realm of learning design.

As I delved deeper into my studies, my passion for inclusive education, Universal Design and accessible learning materials blossomed. I recognised that technology held the key to dismantling the barriers that kept individuals like me from thriving. Fuelled by my own experiences, I channelled my creativity into designing innovative solutions that would bridge the gap between sighted and visually impaired learners.

My efforts caught the attention of the University of Cape Town. They saw my potential and offered me a unique role – the first blind learning designer dedicated to enhancing accessibility and inclusivity within the institution. With humility and gratitude, I accepted the challenge. I collaborated with faculty members, sharing insights and expertise to create adaptive learning materials that benefited learners of all abilities.

My journey didn’t just impact my career; it transformed my entire life. My story, once a tale of adversity, became a source of inspiration for educators, designers and policy-makers worldwide. I was invited to share my experiences at conferences, seminars and workshops, sparking conversations about the importance of inclusive education and accessible learning environments.

Through it all, my parents stood by me, witnessing the remarkable transformation that my glaucoma had set in motion. What had seemed like a curse had ignited an unquenchable fire within me. Today, I continue to blaze a trail as the first blind learning designer in the world, illuminating the path for visually impaired learners. My journey is a testament to the human spirit’s resilience and the boundless potential that resides within us all.



My story serves as a reminder that even in the darkest of times, the light of knowledge can shine brilliantly. I am Benedict, a beacon of hope, a testament to the fact that our challenges need not define us. With unwavering determination, we can all find the light within and let it guide us to remarkable heights.



REFLECTION

Estimated time: 10 minutes

Reflect on Benedict's story and think about your earliest experience of disability. When did you first become aware that there were people in your community or school who were disabled? How did you respond and what were you taught about this at the time?

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