

**Barriers to research access during COVID-19:
Interviewing students with disabilities in South African higher education**

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Abstract

Carrying out research using face-to-face interviews with students with disabilities has been most difficult in higher education during COVID-19 pandemic. This paper seeks to answer the question: what are the barriers confronted by researchers in conducting interview research with students with disabilities in South African higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic? Data were collected by analysing and synthesising South African and international literature available in Research Gate, ERIC, JSTOR, Sabinet, ProQuest, books, journal articles, and online resources. With Critical Disability Theory illuminating the study, the major finding was that there are communication barriers when interviewing students with disabilities. The nature of the communication challenges varies from one category of disability to the other and have been exacerbated during COVID-19, thus limiting the voice of those students in research which could contribute to improvement in their learning.

Keywords: COVID-19, in-depth interview, South African higher education, students with disabilities, research

Introduction

Research in higher education plays an important role in the generation, production, dissemination and sharing of knowledge (Vessuri, 2008). It is a rigorous and systematic process that uses well-defined methodology and methods of finding answers for questions; it further culminates in the development of new knowledge (Blaxter, et al., 2010). From a general perspective, research provides the fundamental framework necessary for the promotion and advancement of knowledge and understanding, clarification of doubt, provision of insight for actions, as well as the development of society and individuals. Some educational research is specifically about the synthesis of experiences from the teaching and learning contexts of educational strategies. Such research aims to provide learning opportunities for the promotion of healthy cognitive development, growth and learning of all diverse learners (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2020). By implication, all types of research in general, and research activities and methodology in particular, are as varied as the researchers and they are conducted across a



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wide array of settings, all with the ultimate goal of developing knowledge for improving society (Charles, 2011).

Currently, the global effects of coronavirus disease (COVID-19), a pandemic that started in China in 2019, has spread and continued to affect the whole world. The pandemic has had significant negative impacts on all sectors, including broadly on education, teaching, and learning, and specifically on research in higher education. The pandemic was so sudden that there was no adequate preparation either for academics or students for the change from the usual face-to-face teaching and learning. This has also had severe effects on research. Institutions of higher education around the globe including South Africa had to suddenly shift to online platforms (Kupe, 2020; Mpungose, 2020). This was the only way to save the 2020 academic year (Nzimande, 2020; Dell, 2020). Just like for teaching and learning, research had to shift to online platforms. Jandric, et al. (2020) had an overwhelming response to the call for articles for their journal namely, 'Post-digital Science and Education', dealing with online research during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This reflected that research, as intertwined and interlinked with teaching and learning, has inevitably moved to online platforms as well.

Research context in South African higher education

South Africa carries out extensive research through its higher education system. This is done as it seeks transformation and restructuring from the previous regime. For intensive research universities in South Africa, research is a core business (Swartz, et al., 2019) and as such, academics and students in higher education are initiated and groomed into the practice of constructing knowledge in different disciplines via research (Ballim, 2015). This has seen the National Research Foundation (NRF) investing significant funding in research that supports academics (and particularly post-graduate students) in various research endeavours in higher education. These have included issues of COVID-19 (NRF, 2021). Research in South African higher education is focused on specific themes, which Tight (2003) and others have categorised as teaching and learning, curriculum design, quality, student experiences, policy, institutional management, and higher education transformation. The themes have of late also included issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The listed categories are not exhaustive and Bitzer (2009) argues that much still needs to be done in terms of research in South African higher education.

Contemporary research in South African higher education is focused on improving structures, practices, and processes in higher education, with the aim of enabling epistemic access to all diverse students in teaching and learning. This has seen increased research on issues of epistemic access and success, with diverse students taking centre stage (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2011; Cross & Atinde, 2015; Cross, 2018). An example is the on-going research study on epistemic and success of disadvantaged students in higher education by the Commission on higher education (CHE) that is being carried out by six institutions of higher education in South Africa. One could argue that such research should also involve students with disabilities as one of the previously disadvantaged social groups; based on the need for this group to also have epistemic access and success in higher education. Mertens (2015) argues that the oppressed

should play an active role in research that pertains to them; thus, students with disabilities themselves should be seen to be actively involved in research so that their voice is heard. It could broadly improve the education that they receive, as well their particular teaching and learning that requires specialised knowledge and skills.

As per the National Plan (Department of Education [DoE], 2001a), students with disabilities form part of the social groups that have been historically disadvantaged in South Africa. This is by virtue of their need to be included in the teaching and learning provided by current higher education system in the country. Thus, it needs to be reiterated that this category of students also needs to actively participate in research on issues that affect them become well understood and disseminated. This will address the need for the marginalised to play an active role in research that pertains to them so that they are not merely objects of research but rather are core-producers of knowledge (Mertens, 2015). Such a role takes into account that research has always been the basis and foundation upon which interventions can be planned and implemented.

Thus, research on teaching and learning for students with disabilities should ideally be carried out with those students themselves. Such an approach represents one of the most under-researched areas in higher education in South Africa, hence the importance of this paper. Although research has recently been conducted online, with the partial return to campuses in 2021 and as lockdowns became a bit more relaxed, a hybrid approach has been adopted by many institutions of higher education in South Africa. This integrates face-to-face and online platforms for teaching, learning and research. Kupe (2020) argues that these activities cannot remain online indefinitely because people as humanity need to connect through education as a social activity. It is against this background of research that barriers standing between researchers and students with disabilities during COVID-19 are being explored in this paper. Researchers in the context of this paper refer to academics in higher education, and for whom research forms part of their core business, alongside teaching and community engagement.

Methodology is an important aspect of research because it determines the scientific rigour of the research itself and the relationship between the results and the conclusions drawn (Carter & Little, 2007). To obtain data from participants researchers use various methodological approaches that are either qualitative (Creswell, 2003) or quantitative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013); furthermore, a range of relevant tools are used as methods for collecting data. Among others, data collection methods include survey questionnaires and interviews. A commonly used method of collecting data for qualitative studies is the interview method, which can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. The focus of this paper is on interviewing, particularly as a semi-structured tool for collecting data from students with disabilities during COVID-19.

The semi-structured interview method seeks depth and clarification from the participants regarding the elements under study that need to be understood further. It has 'pre-determined questions, which can be modified, reworded, explained to the interviewee or omitted if [the] situation deems necessary' (Robson, 2002: 270). There is flexibility in this kind of interview, and the questions can be manipulated as deemed fit by the interviewer. This enables the capturing of participants' perspectives in a detailed way. Using this type of interview, a researcher must

source the qualitative data that he or she needs (Mertens, 2007). There is, however, the liberty to probe further when the researcher still needs more data on phenomena, and this enables deep investigation that yields rich data. Participants also have the opportunity of raising other issues that are not asked about, but that may be pertinent to the study. This is important, especially in a transformative study where the participants' power is in their voicing; this form of interview gives interviewees voice and provides space for subjective and interpretive meaning (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

This form of interview also allows for free interaction between the researcher and participants and 'permits interviewer-interviewee interaction that has great potential to generate new revealing data on the subject' (Legard, 2003: 142). This generates additional useful data; further, it allows for the development of trust through interaction, which is central within a transformative paradigm in which the researcher and participants work in partnership (Mertens, 2009). This in turn yields data that can be useful in improving teaching and learning. Thus, using the semi-structured interview as a method of collecting data from students with disabilities by researchers is of interest because it could enable students with disabilities to speak out. It could also ensure their voice is heard in teaching and learning. However, obtaining this data requires specific knowledge, skills, and expertise from researchers to attain effective communication between the two parties.

The paper is specifically focused on the barrier that exists between researchers and students with disabilities in the South African context of higher education. The in-depth interview as a research method is of particular interest because it is the method that can allow the voice of students with disabilities to emerge and be strongly heard. Their voice could improve teaching and learning because they have a lived experience of disability and they know exactly what they need (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Hosking, 2008). The aim of the paper is therefore to understand the specific barriers that limits students with disabilities' voice in research. This is important if teaching, and consequently their learning, are to be improved during COVID-19 and beyond. The barriers that exist may also apply to students without disabilities, but the focus is on the barriers as they exist between researchers and students with disabilities because there could be unique compared to other students, in the context of higher education in South African during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical framework: Critical Disability Theory

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) is a framework that considers the material and local contextual conditions of specific contexts and how they shape the marginalisation or privilege of social groups, more particularly those with disabilities (Shildrick, 2012). It is a theory that questions the social practices and structures that result in the marginalisation of those with disabilities and other social groups who are marginalised (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). It is in this context that the focus is on research with students with disabilities, the theory becomes most relevant because it can help explain how the specific barriers or privileges are yielded during the process of research.

The theory is focused on the Global South perspective of writing disability and non-Western settings (Meekosha, 2011). This is especially relevant for the study that is focused on research within South African higher education located in the Global South. Proponents of CDT argue for a shift from understanding issues of disability, inclusion, and exclusion from the Eurocentric Global West perspective, to one that includes voices from the South (Grech, 2015). It cannot be overstated that a theory primarily concerned with privileging the voice from the Global South (Grech, 2015) has relevance in this paper. The voice of students with disabilities needs to be heard, and it is through research that their voice can emerge. It is their voice that can enable improvement of processes, structures and practices in teaching and learning because it is those with a lived experience of disability, who know exactly what they need (Hosking, 2008), and in this particular case, they know how they should be taught and how they learn best. Once access to them has been made possible and they have been successfully interviewed, relevant data can be obtained from them.

Critical Disability Theory is also relevant for this paper because it privileges the voice of those with a lived experience (Devlin & Pothier, 2006); this involves creating opportunities for persons with disabilities to share their lived experiences of disability and for their voices to be heard. The proponents of the approach are concerned with making improvements and changing the status quo for those who are oppressed. CDT draws from Critical Theory, which deals with emancipation from oppression (Marcuse, 1964; Adorno 1973; Horkheimer, 1974) and seeks to bring social change by generating awareness of those hegemonic practices as a way to liberate the oppressed. The proponents of CDT thus aim to improve the living conditions of all people, but particularly those with disabilities who are discriminated against and undervalued (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). A theory that seeks improvement and change is most appropriate and it aligns well with the paper because the aim is to ultimately improve teaching and learning of students with disabilities in the context of South African higher education. The paper explores the barriers in the interview research between researchers and students with disabilities, as a way in which, at the end of the day, change can be solicited, and improvements made during COVID-19 and beyond, through research with those with lived experience.

Context and intersectionality are two theoretical concepts that were specifically drawn from CDT; these illuminate and explain the barriers that exist between researchers and students with disabilities in the context of South African higher education, especially during the time of disruption and social unrest resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The two concepts are important for containing overgeneralisations that could otherwise be made on the barriers encountered in interview research with students with disabilities. The two selected concepts have also been selected as the tool for understanding the possible underlying causes for the barriers confronted. This is important in that when the underlying cause is established, interventions that address the cause can be thought about. The two concepts are discussed in detail in the section below and they are used to illuminate and inform the results in the discussion section.

Context

As a theoretical concept of CDT, context refers to how disability is generally perceived, constructed and understood in a specific social environment (Sherry, 2009). It can be argued that the context within which disability is located is important because it shapes and influences how those involved (who could be stakeholders in a specific social context) understand disability. Sherry (2009) thus asserts that understanding disability should be contextual because disability in itself is conceptualised differently from one context to the other.

In African (including South African) societies, the conception of disability is informed by cultural tradition and African belief systems, in which disability is perceived as a curse (Kisanji, 1995). Persons with disabilities have traditionally been viewed as charity cases to be 'normalised' in institutions (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). In South African higher education, disability has been associated with inability (Howell, 2006). Persons with disabilities have thus often been cast as 'less normal' and therefore less human (Barnes, et al., 2008); hence they have been ostracised, stigmatised, and segregated. Such cultural attitudes have been to the extent that some families have had to hide their children with disabilities (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). In the process, such children are denied access to education, teaching and learning at the basic education level and consequently from the higher level as well.

In some African countries such as Swaziland and South Africa, society still holds some beliefs of cultural origin that certain categories of disabilities have specific meaning and implications for life; thus, blame is apportioned to families with persons with disabilities or persons with disabilities themselves (Dlamini, 2017). For example, in Swaziland, there are cultural beliefs that body parts of someone with albinism helps in attaining some status in society and gaining wealth. It is believed that the body of a person with albinism can earn one a fortune and has greater healing powers (De Jong, 2015). The existence of such a belief results in gruesome and ritualistic murders of children with albinism; such acts are suspected to be committed by those aspiring to political positions, status and achievements in society (Ndlovu, 2016). It has been reported that even the names given to children with disabilities are stigmatising and degrading of people with disabilities; these are derived from Swazi cultural beliefs (Ndlovu, 2016). One could argue that within such a cultural context, disability and those with disabilities will be considered negatively and consequently, there are negative implications for their education, teaching, learning, and research carried out with those with disabilities.

In the context of higher education, negative conceptions about the capabilities of students with disabilities have also been reported. Such negative conceptions have resulted in academics having low expectations of those students (Howell, 2006); even though they have demonstrated their capability by meeting the higher education eligibility criteria like their counterparts. When the academic staff in South African higher education institutions illustrate an unwillingness to support students with disabilities view them as a burden, it could be linked to the context within which disability is constructed and perceived. The issue of context, therefore, becomes critical in explaining some academic staff's behaviour towards students with disabilities, and the low self-esteem of those students themselves. Presently, these traits are exacerbated because of anxieties

caused by COVID-19. One would thus argue that negativity and stereotypes about disabilities in the context of South Africa are important to understand because this shapes how disability is understood and consequently constructed. This in turn influences how those with disabilities are conceived. Context also influences perceptions and as William (1999) argues, perceptions determine people's actions. As informed by the context, perceptions determine how students with disabilities are accessed in research practice and this has implications for teaching and learning.

South Africa and its higher education system have their unique history politics, and economy informed and influenced by and neoliberal policies. It is within this setting that education, teaching, learning, and research exists. Neoliberalism has to do with competitive economic and political practices that advance individual entrepreneurial freedom and marketisation (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism is also a tool for restoring the power of the elite that fuels inequalities and results in marginalisation rather than inclusion (Gabbard & Atkinson, 2007). By commodification of education within a neoliberal context, class division and privileging of the elite's access to education, teaching, learning and research could be perpetuated. Research with students with disabilities might be limited in higher education, based on the understanding and beliefs held by ableist societies and at some workplaces that imply that disabled bodies are less productive than the able-bodied (Jammaers, et al., 2016). Thus, with funding being an economic issue, limited attention may be given to research dealing with students with disabilities. It is in this regard that, as explained in the CDT, context is an important consideration when thinking about and discussing disability issues, versus teaching and learning and research specifically carried out with students with disabilities. Context-specific factors may have implications for the affected students, and those who differ from students without disabilities.

Context is therefore a useful analytic lens in this paper because it provides an important contextual background that might be overlooked in the analysis process. Understanding of contextual differences is important for providing insight into the barriers in South African higher education between researchers and students with disabilities. For research using semi-structured interviews, all the phenomena that affect context are useful for understanding the barriers in a research process between researchers and students with disabilities. This was located within the space and the context of a specific time, namely the COVID-19 pandemic.

Intersectionality

As students with disabilities are mistakenly understood to be a homogenous social group with 'special needs', the concept of intersectionality helps to understand that those students are also diverse in themselves. This is because disability embodies and intersects with other identities such as race, gender, class, economic and educational backgrounds or ethnicity (Sherry, 2009). It is argued that students with disabilities could share the same impairment, but have different needs (Picard, 2015). This implies that the same disability category might require different support and that explains the heterogenic that goes with disability. In turn, this results in critical disability scholars emphasising intra/intersectionality as a factor of diversity. Sherry (2009) argues that

disability should be placed at the centre of other identities and should not be seen as an isolated entity. Here intersectionality disrupts the notion of homogeneity; it also enables the understanding and consideration of the fact that other identities also intersect with disabilities (Moodley & Graham, 2015). These identities might shape and influence those with disabilities in a variety of ways. Therefore, by virtue of intersectionality, barriers (and their respective intensities) that exist between researchers and students with disabilities may vary during COVID-19. Intersectionality, in this case, helped to contain overgeneralisations and the glossing over of specifics, which could have been misleading, more especially in the research context where interventions need to be thought about.

While disability has always been associated with disadvantage and oppression, intersectionality helps to understand that disability could also yield privilege. Crenshaw (1989) explains that because of intersectionality in which disability juxtaposition with other identities and privileged positions, disability should not always be viewed as being a disadvantage. Mertens (2009) concurs with the assertions as she argues that intersectionality can privilege persons with disabilities rather than always yielding double oppression. It is thus argued that disability should be seen as a springboard; it is a space from which to think through a host of other political and theoretical issues that apply to all identities (Goodley, 2011). This is because persons with disabilities are intersectional subjects who also embody other positions, and who are powerful and valued in an ableist culture (Goodley, 2013). In essence, persons with disabilities could also be placed in positions of power and they are not always in the positions of oppression as assumed.

Intersectionality with powerful and privileged positions in society can interplay with, and advantage the social group. For example, a person with disabilities from an economically sound background and with all the support he or she needs to meet her, or his unique impairment needs, might not experience oppression because of being a disabled person. Instead, they are privileged by being in a position of economic power. Such a person may even be more privileged than persons without disabilities from disadvantaged economic backgrounds. Thus, a 'disabled' body also has power in other identities, including by way of association with or having access to powerful people. Thus, there has been a shift from the view of double oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), whereby disability has always been considered in the light of the intersection of one axis of oppression with another. Thus, understanding intersectionality in light of disability and privilege could help to disrupt the perspective of always viewing persons with disability as disadvantaged, in the ways of inequality and unequal to those without disabilities as popularly manifested in African societies. In the context of this paper, this understanding helped to isolate privileges encountered during research with some students with disabilities, rather than overgeneralising the barriers for all disabled students.

Thus, like a torchlight, the theoretical tools of context and intersectionality informed the discussion in this study. The two concepts illuminated why, during research that used in-depth interviews during COVID-19, there was a communication barrier between researchers and

students with disabilities. They also showed why during the pandemic the barrier was found to be more extensive between some categories of disability than others.

Methodology

Searching strategy and databases

The study adopted a qualitative design and data were collected from the available literature. The search strategy involved scanning for and combing relevant literature globally and in the South African context. Searches were conducted on databases including Research Gate, ERIC, JSTOR, Sabinet, ProQuest, books, journal articles and online resources. A combination of search terms, namely 'disability', 'teaching', 'learning', 'research access', 'South African higher education', 'COVID-19', 'Critical Disability Theory' and 'barriers-students with disabilities', were used to obtain sources for review. The search yielded 190 texts, published between 1960 and 2021. The texts included South African and international books, book chapters, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, research reports, as well as online resources such as unpublished conference proceedings and discussion papers.

Alternative search strategies, as snowballing sampling (Aveyard, 2014), were also adopted. This is a search strategy in literature review in which relevant literature that had been identified through the previous initial electronic searches by other scholars and reference lists are used. Hand searching and author searching of relevant journals was another search strategy that was utilised for finding relevant literature. The combined search strategies yielded both South African and international literature relevant to the study. International literature was important for gaining a broader understanding of research access to students with disabilities in the context of higher education outside of South Africa.

Identification and selection of relevant literature

From the 190 texts yielded through the search, the author identified the relevant sources for review. The author began by reading the abstracts of the articles that have been obtained and the relevant literature was selected through the inclusion and exclusion criteria that was used. At first level, the author needed literature that has to do with research access during COVID-19 and the inclusion criteria was: 'research access to students with disabilities during COVID-19'. There was dearth of literature and limited sources suited the inclusion criteria, resulting in very few sources selected. Thus, though the paper meant to focus on research access to students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was limited literature specific to research access with students with disabilities during the period of COVID-19 both internationally and in the South African context. As the available literature would not provide adequate data for analysis, the author had to select more relevant literature, which could be reviewed, to understand the subject of research. As research access is intrinsically interlinked with teaching and learning, the author then selected literature on teaching and learning of students with disabilities before and during COVID-19. The inclusion criterion at the second level was: 'Teaching and learning of students with disabilities before and during COVID-19' and vast literature was selected from the

criteria. Literature on teaching learning before and during the pandemic was suitable because it was useful to use as the basis or background against which research access to students with disabilities could be understood during COVID-19 pandemic.

On the third level, the inclusion criterion was credibility of sources. The author's inclusion criterion was 'credibility of source' which resulted in the selection of journal articles, books, and book chapters as peer reviewed and refereed publications. Though the 'credibility of source' criterion included more of peer reviewed sources, the author also included online ones, more specifically those on COVID-19 matters in the light of teaching, learning, and students with disabilities by virtue of relevance to the subject of research. 101 texts published some years before and those few during the pandemic, which were related to the access to teaching, learning and research in higher education of students with disabilities, were then selected for review.

The paper valued relevance, rather than generalisability (Basse, 1981). This means that appropriate and useful data could be drawn from the few relevant data sources, rather than from many irrelevant ones. It further implies that the depth of analysis of the relevant literature was of greater importance than the volume of selected literature. Relevant literature was then synthesised and analysed to establish the trends and significant themes.

Communication barriers to interview research

Literature reveals that there is a communication barrier between researchers and students with disabilities when using semi-structured interviews as a method of collecting data in the South African context of higher education. The communication barriers vary from one category of disability to the other. However, the communication barriers did not start with COVID-19. Students with disabilities and researchers as the academics confronted communication barriers even in teaching and learning before COVID-19. This is because accessing those categories of students has always required specific skills and knowledge for effective communication. In the South African context of higher education, literature reveals that academic staff lack knowledge about the different categories of disabilities (Sukhraj-Ely, 2008; Mutanga, 2017). At the same time, they lack training on how to handle students with disabilities, especially in teaching and learning contexts (Matshediso, 2007). This lack of knowledge has negative implications, including communicating with the particular students when conducting in-depth research interviews. It might be relatively common knowledge that specific skills and expertise are required to handle students with a particular set of disabilities in the context of classroom teaching and learning. However, it might be less well understood that this also applies when conducting research using in-depth interviews; here competent communication also requires skills tailored to different individuals who might fall in the same category of disability. For example, for effective communication between researchers and students who are completely hearing-impaired, it requires both parties to have sufficient knowledge and skill of sign language and its interpretation. Literature reveals such knowledge and skills are lacking among South African researchers in higher education. There is a shortage of sign language interpreters in South Africa as a whole, because it is a very expensive service (Zulu, 2014). Without adequate sign language

interpreters, multi-layered communication barriers exist between the researcher and those students with total hearing impairments, who require sign language interpretation during the interview process. Bienvenue and Colonomos (1992) observed that more than ninety percent of children with hearing impairments are born into hearing families who have limited or no prior knowledge or experience of hearing impairment. It suggests that when they are being interviewed from their homes, as has been dictated by COVID-19, students with hearing impairments may not get assistance from hearing family members. However, the communication barrier resulting from inadequate sign language interpreters is not restricted to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects; rather, it has always been there. However, funding to overcome the barrier has been reduced in recent times in favour of addressing pressing COVID-19 issues including combating the disease in itself (Salmi, 2020).

The communication barrier exists not only because academic staff lack the knowledge of, and disabilities and training on, how to effectively access students with disabilities. Students with disabilities also make it difficult for academics to access them because some do not disclose their disabilities. It could be argued that non-disclosure closes the door to communication entirely, resulting in extreme communication barriers. Literature is fraught with instances in which students' disabilities are not disclosed based on their fear of discrimination (Kendall, 2016; Eccles et al., 2018; Zaussinger & Terzieva, 2018). In the experience of the author, students were already avoiding disclosure of their disabilities before COVID-19. This confirms that the communication barrier is not simply a COVID-19 issue but was present even before the pandemic.

The status quo regarding communication barriers between researchers conducting in-depth interviews with students with hearing impairments have been exacerbated. Although the extent of the communication barriers may differ depending on the severity of hearing loss, the term 'hearing impairment' is used in the present study in its broader sense to encompass both partial and total hearing loss. When research is conducted face-to-face, and to comply with the World Health Organization COVID-19 regulations in which both researchers and students cover their mouths; an additional communication barrier thus exists because students with mild hearing impairment may not easily hear the questions being asked, and at the same time the researcher may not hear the response clearly. When all are wearing masks, there is a further communication barrier for those with total or partial hearing loss who use lip-reading as a way of understanding what is being said. Students with hearing impairments may not lip-read when mouths are covered (Herfurth, 2020). The barriers may be different when in-depth interviews are conducted online because masks are unlikely to be worn, but with the researchers lacking the knowledge of interviewing students with hearing impairment, the communication barrier still exists. The researchers may not know what to do when students are not hearing questions that are asked clearly. It needs to be noted that although the same communication barriers may exist between researchers and students without disabilities, they are exacerbated for those with disabilities because of their impairment-related disadvantages.

Students with mobility disabilities and visual loss have a limited communication barrier between them and the researchers during in-depth online interviews conducted since the onset

of the COVID-19 pandemic. These categories of students were disadvantaged before COVID-19 by inaccessible physical environments in institutions (Hall & Belch, 2000; Engelbrecht, & De Beer, 2014) and society in general. With online platforms now being used for teaching, learning and research, they have been advantaged rather than limited in terms of accessibility and their learning has become easier (Ndlovu, 2020). The same applies to research; thus, communication using semi-structured interviews from their homes have made it even much easier for that category of disability. The communication barrier between researchers and students with physical and visual disabilities may exist in a situation where face-to-face research happens in an inaccessible environment. Although there could be delays as students negotiate the inaccessible environment, when an online platform is used, the interview process may be the same as for students without disabilities. If there were any barriers, these are likely to be those that also affect other students in disadvantaged social contexts; these barriers have to do with connectivity and lack of electricity, challenges reported to be affecting most students from disadvantaged rural social contexts in South Africa (Harding & Brodie, 2020; Dube, 2020).

Besides lack of knowledge and training on handling different categories of disabilities, the literature reveals that those academic staff who are researchers in South African higher education are not willing to include students with disabilities in their teaching (Crous, 2004; Mutanga, 2017). When unwilling to be involved in teaching and learning with students with disabilities, the researchers may also be unwilling to engage with students with disabilities in research; such unwillingness and exclusion can be traced back to lack of knowledge about disabilities and training (Matshedisho, 2010; Haywood, 2014). During COVID-19, researchers may be avoiding conducting in-depth interviews with students with disabilities, for fear of facing communication challenges they cannot handle.

Discussion

The existence of a multi-layered communication barriers between researchers and students with disabilities during COVID-19 could be explained in the light of the current social context of higher education in South Africa. Institutional transformation in higher education remains incomplete, this applies to teaching, learning and more especially to research for all diverse students (Ndlovu, 2017). Just like in the case of teaching and learning, research has shifted to online platforms (Mpungose, 2020); thus, a barrier of communication exists between researchers and students with disabilities because extra support is needed for impairment-related needs of those students. Disability units could provide such support in institutions. While this is the case, it is also reported that even before COVID-19, some disability units found it difficult to function because of inadequate funding (Fotim Report, 2011). Researchers are thus not currently fully supported in effectively communicating with students with disabilities, especially those with hearing limitations via online platforms. Furthermore, the academics staff themselves who are the researchers had not been attending workshops organised to teach them on handling different disabilities, because attendance had not been compulsory (Matshedisho, 2007) before COVID-19. It should be expected that when these same researchers are conducting interview-based research with

students with disabilities, since the onset of COVID-19, communication would be ineffective. One could argue that if support could not be adequately provided during face-to-face interactions before COVID-19, it is unlikely to be provided when both the researchers and students with disabilities are operating from their homes during COVID-19.

Findings on the lack of knowledge and expertise as the cause of the communication barriers between researchers and students with hearing impairments are consistent with the literature. Hearing researchers understand hearing-impaired persons to be 'outsiders' (Mykelbust, 1960; Higgins, 1980) and they do not explore "the complex structures of meaning" that those with that impairment 'use to make sense of their world' (Corker, 1996: 202). Ladd (2003) also critically observed that there was serious inequality and lack of research into the understanding of identity development of persons with hearing impairment from their own perspective. Research dealing with those with hearing impairment has always been limited, as researchers do not generally understand how those with hearing impairment understand the world. That this could have a negative effect on interview research cannot be overemphasised.

Internationally literature reveals that there has been some research access to students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers at the Arizona University in America, for an example, managed to use the interview method to interview 66 students with disabilities about their experiences on transition to online platforms, across seven institutions with large enrollments (Gin, et al., 2021). The study however does not specify whether there were students with hearing impairments, who could have the communication barrier during interviews. It may not be adequate literature to be representative of the fact that there is no communication barrier with students with disabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the study could be seen as indicating that in developed countries as America, research access through the interview method with students with disabilities is possible even during COVID-19 pandemic, and there is communication between students with disabilities and researchers. Besides in countries as United Kingdom, support for teaching learning and research for students with disabilities in higher education was reported to be high before the COVID-19 (Chataika, 2007), suggesting that research access to students with disabilities (through interview method) could be much better than in the South African context. It could be argued however that intersectionality need not be overlooked even in the international context, as research access largely and use of interview method specifically, could yield varying results, from one country to the other and one institution to the other in terms of the communication barrier.

It would be an overgeneralisation to say that during the interview process, a communication barrier exists between all researchers and all students with similar disabilities in the South African context of higher education. The degree of the communication barrier varies from one institutional research context to the other. Walton (2016) argues that South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in Africa. For example, while other disability units do not have adequate funding, one particular institution supports more than ten disability categories. The latter unit is said to offer the best support in the whole country for those with disabilities and was given an award by the Department of Higher Education and Training, (Ndlovu, 2017). Based on

the availability of resources and disability support, effective communication is possible for both researchers and students with disabilities from formerly advantaged institutions, and in contrast, the communication barriers could be heightened in formerly disadvantaged institutions. Some disability units have reportedly continued to support students with disabilities in their homes during COVID-19 (Disability Unit, 2020). One would argue that there could be a better communication experience involving interview research between researchers from institutions with disability units that have extended support into homes, even during COVID-19 (Disability Unit, 2020). The extent to which the previously advantaged institutions with better resources (CHE, 2008) and those institutions with better disability support units for students with disabilities (Ndlovu, 2017), may not be same. As other scholars argue, COVID-19 has exacerbated and entrenched the inequalities (Graham, 2020) that existed even before the pandemic. In this respect, from the CDT perspective, consideration of the context plays a vital role because it helps the understanding that contexts differ from one to the next and from time to time. During the time of COVID-19, the communication barrier is more pronounced, though it existed in the time before.

Intersectionality also illuminates the issues of a communication barrier not existing between researchers and students with physical and visual impairment in an oral interview. It is seen in the light of diversity. Students with disabilities are diverse in themselves, rather than being homogeneous (Swart & Greyling, 2011). This implies that they do not experience the same barriers; a barrier to a person in one category of disability might not be a barrier to someone in another. A communication barrier does not necessarily affect students with visual and mobility disabilities because they have the sense of hearing that is required in an oral interview. Whether by way of face-to-face or online interviews, both the researchers and students in the above category would not have a barrier in communication because there is no impairment-related limitation that can hinder their communication. Furthermore, as Sherry (2009) and Goodley (2013) postulate, disability can intersect with other identities that privilege rather than oppress; it can be argued that students with mobility disabilities and visual loss are more privileged than oppressed during COVID-19 as they no longer face the barriers of inaccessible physical structures that limited them before COVID-19. Thus, it could be argued that they are advantaged rather than disadvantaged when semi-structured oral interviews are being conducted with them from their homes via online platforms. If they confront a communication barrier, it is not resulting from disability but could be contextual like all any other student could confront.

It is an overgeneralisation again to assume that all students with mobility and visual impairment have less of a communication barrier during COVID-19 because they are no longer limited by inaccessible physical contexts in institutions of higher education. When nuanced, the interplay of both context and intersectionality could still have some negative implications. Hollier (2007) argues that lack of sight specifically has different challenges in disability-unfriendly environments. Thus, even though the inaccessible physical environments no longer limit them, the social context within which a student with physical or visual impairment is located during the pandemic could still limit the student (even in their homes). For example, there could still be

insufficient support from members of the family in ensuring access to the interview by the student; thus, a severely physically challenged student may have limitations such as in reaching the equipment used for the interview. Therefore, when there is no support from members of the family, the student may not be able to participate in an interview despite being at home. The home environment in itself could be a barrier that makes communication in an interview difficult.

Intersectionality also explains diversity on the part of researchers, and not only students with disabilities. The researchers themselves are also not a homogenous group and the communication barrier may not exist for all researchers when conducting an oral interview with students with disabilities. By virtue of diversity, there have always been lecturers who are willing to include and those unwilling to include students with disabilities in their teaching (Matshediso, 2007). In a study conducted with students with disabilities in an institution of higher education, disabled students confirmed that there are lecturers who include them and those who exclude them. A communication barrier could exist between those who have always been unwilling to include students with disabilities. It cannot be expected that they communicate effectively with students in oral online interviews during COVID-19, where they have also been pressured to adapt to a 'new normal'. One could argue that despite the challenges presented by the inadequate training that affects all researchers, the communication barrier might be less pronounced for those who have always been willing to include students with disabilities even before COVID-19. The latter often might go the extra mile with students with disabilities.

Furthermore, being located in different social contexts, some universities train their academic staff to use online platforms effectively. They also use a variety of media to reach out to all students, including the disadvantaged (a group that students with disabilities may form a part of). The communication barrier might be less pronounced than for researchers who are unwilling, less trained, and from disadvantaged university contexts.

In summary, the communication barrier is more pronounced between the researchers and students with hearing impairments. The barrier is imposed by the impairment itself. Students with these impairments have added limitations in an oral interview process because hearing is required during communication. At the same time, researchers themselves generally lack sign language knowledge and skills. Furthermore, in the present South African higher education context, one cannot provide the sign language services that are necessary for facilitating an effective oral interview. Shakespeare (2010) argues that an impairment in itself can be limiting, and this is an undeniable fact. She has gone further to say no amount of environmental transformation can enable the inclusion of some categories of disability. She has given the example of herself since she cannot drive a car because she has a total visual loss (Shakespeare, 2010). Her inability to drive has nothing to do with the environment but the limitation is an issue of the visual impairment she has in itself. Thus, although some scholars including Michael Oliver argue that it is an uncondusive social environment that poses a barrier and limits the functionality of persons with disabilities (Oliver, 1990), the limitation imposed by an impairment in itself cannot be glossed over. Thus, inn both face-to-face and online interviews, students themselves are

limited by both the impairment itself and the social context in which sign language is limited for researchers.

In reiteration, the hearing impairment as a disability in itself has a bearing on the communication barrier in an interview. One could argue that a conglomerate of other contextual issues is also involved in conducting the interview research that is oral and requires hearing for communication to happen. This then results in a communication barrier that is more exacerbated than with students with other categories of disability. This is why the communication barrier is especially pronounced during an oral interview process that is being conducted between researchers and students with both partial and full loss of hearing. The barrier to communication has worsened during COVID-19, in that both the researchers and students are also limited by mask-wearing and social distancing.

Finally, it was explained earlier that disability could intersect with other identities of power and privilege, rather than necessarily simply oppressing those with disabilities. Communication barriers might not exist between researchers and students with disabilities who are privileged by class have a sound economic backgrounds and exposure to online platforms during COVID-19. It can further be argued that students from privileged and elite backgrounds develop habitus and social capital as assets; they can easily use these to navigate their new learning environments (Bernstein, 1990). One could argue that even COVID-19, those with disabilities from elite backgrounds by way of privilege might not have experienced any communication barriers when orally interviewed. However, the communication barriers can exist between researchers and students without disabilities who are also disadvantaged. It might also be difficult to communicate with disadvantaged students without disabilities because they have had insufficient exposure to online platforms and have connectivity issues, as has been observed and reported in the South African context (Universities South Africa (USAF), 2020). It could be argued, therefore, that the communication barriers that have existed since the onset of COVID-19 between researchers and students with disabilities, (when an oral semi-structured interview is used), could also be experienced by students without disabilities. Thus, it would be an overgeneralisation to conclude that communication barriers exist between researchers and students with disabilities only during e COVID-19, but the pandemic illuminates, highlights and exacerbate the communication barriers that exist between researchers and students with disabilities

Way forward

Treating the underlying cause of the communication barrier between the researcher and students with disabilities will be the likely way forward. The underlying cause for the barrier is not COVID-19, but rather is the result of insufficient knowledge about disabilities and training on how to handle students with disabilities (Matshedisho, 2010; Haywood, 2014). There is further a lack of willingness by academic staff to engage with students with disabilities (Crous, 2004; Mutanga, 2017). Of importance is the observation that these same staff members comprise the body of South African higher education researchers. To address this holistically and not in piece-meal-, there is the need for general training on 'universal design' (Centre for Universal Design, 1997),

but also more particularly for Universal Design in Learning (UDL). The implementation of these design principles ensures the needs of all diverse students are considered from the outset (Eagleton, 2008; CAST, 2011; Dalton, et al., 2012).

Lyner-Cleophas (2020) argues that for accessing students with disabilities, multiple ways of i) representing information, ii) engaging with learning materials, iii) taking action, iv) expressing, and v) ensuring flexibility need to be employed during COVID-19. This implies that when all this is incorporated from the outset into research planning as required in a UDL context, all students and more particularly students with disabilities, could be included in semi-structured interview research, without a lot of challenges encountered. This will not only be useful during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic but can also be adopted as a 'new normal'.

The unwillingness of staff should be tackled first because when willing, the staff will be motivated to get training, and gain knowledge and skills on handling students with disabilities both in teaching and learning, and in research broadly. By means of awareness campaigns led by the students with disabilities in association with the responsible institutions, student leadership could go a long way in addressing the challenge of unwillingness. The staff must be made to understand that students with disabilities are part of the student body in any institution of higher education; furthermore, being unwilling can be argued to go against both the anti-discrimination legislation (Republic of South Africa, 2000), and inclusive education policy (DoE, 2001b). Staff should also be educated on international legal instruments such as the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2008), to ensure they understand that access to education by students with disabilities is a right, not a privilege. When such an awareness and consciousness has been achieved, staff may willingly learn about handling different disabilities, how to use assistive devices, and attend training workshops. Though the literature reports that very few willingly attend training workshops organised by disability units (Matshedisho, 2007), when there is an improvement in levels of willingness, communication barriers could be overcome. Treating the underlying cause would mean transforming the mind-set and changing the social context of higher education. This needs to be tried out so that the staff who are central in teaching, learning and research are willing to include students with disabilities. With students with disabilities' voice being heard in research, it could help in improving teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The paper has reflected on the communication barrier that exists between researchers and students with disabilities; more specifically those with hearing impairment. The review of the literature has shown that this barrier has hampered the outcomes of disability-focused research that has is being carried out via semi-structured interviews during COVID-19 pandemic. It is concluded that the communication barrier was in place before COVID-19 because higher education in the South African context has not yet transformed sufficiently to include the diversity of students in teaching, learning and research. The resulting communication gap imposes a barrier. The pre-COVID-19 communication barrier has been exacerbated by the pandemic and has rendered the impact of inequalities in access by students ever-more transparent. This has

applied to both those with, and those without disabilities—and the inequalities have been apparent even among the students with disabilities themselves. COVID-19 has highlighted uneven dynamics in the research process based on differential levels of access for different categories of students with disabilities. The in-depth interview methods that are used with students with disabilities in higher education in South Africa, make these different levels of access more pronounced during COVID-19. A totally transformed system that is informed by the principles of Universal Design and 'Universal Design for Learning, could make research between researchers and all diverse students more inclusive. This could assist in dismantling the communication barrier that is hampering research access to students with disabilities during COVID-19 and beyond.

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