Increasing Participation in Education of Deaf Learners in South Africa and Zimbabwe

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Abstract

In this article, we adopt the social model of disability which views deafness as a positive diversity and cultural marker and not as a disability, and is framed within Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Using desktop analysis, we review the literature and analyse policy frameworks on the educational conditions and practices of deaf education in South Africa and Zimbabwe. We also explore the best practices for improving the educational participation of deaf learners using integrative literature review, experience and intuition. On the whole, the article is premised on the linguistic human rights of Deaf people. From our widespread reading and experiences, we use deductive reasoning to conclude that the poor performance of deaf learners in education in South Africa and Zimbabwe is caused by limited access to quality education as a result of the lack of full participation in the learning process. We therefore propose transformative strategies for educating deaf learners in the form of sign bilingual education, Deaf-centric approaches to teaching and learning and perpetuation of visual rather than audiological technological equipment. Sign bilingual education is a relatively new inclusive education model which calls for the fair use of Sign Language and oral languages in the education of deaf learners. Ultimately, we implore future researchers in the two countries to use scientific inquiry to tackle issues of availability and accessibility of ICTs. We also implore governments to rigorously implement transformative policies towards the advancement of full and equal participation of deaf learners in education.

Keywords: participation; deaf learners; inclusive education; transformative strategies; sign bilingual education

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Introduction

Deaf learners especially in sub-Saharan countries experience widespread exclusion and marginalisation in education and consequently in employment and other socio-economic activities. Exclusion and marginalisation in education is often mirrored through limited or total lack of participation, which leads to poor performance by deaf learners. Considerable research evidence supports the revelation that cultivating active educational participation improves attainment and academic performance of deaf learners. Educational participation of deaf learners is muffled by systematic barriers such as Sign Language incompetency and negative attitudes among teachers and peers, the absence of Sign Language interpreters and non-compliance with comprehensive policies on progressive and transformative strategies in the education of deaf learners. This has resulted in shockingly high failure rates in school-leaving examinations and in unprecedented levels of poverty among deaf people in developing countries. In this article, we present a background which analyses educational conditions and practices in the education of deaf learners in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Reference is made to relevant international and regional treaties and conventions as well as to local sectorial polices to determine best practices.

Background

South Africa and Zimbabwe share a rich history of the evolution of deaf education which is strongly influenced by missionary doctrine and socio-political dynamics spanning from the pre-colonial and colonial eras. Missionaries in both countries initiated deaf education through establishing special schools of deaf learners albeit with low academic expectations. Meanwhile, divisive colonial education policies fuelled the segregation of deaf learners especially along racial lines leading to the general disfranchisement of deaf education. In Zimbabwe, deaf children were taught in special schools where they generally underwent elementary education before undertaking practical skills training (Musengi 2019). The education of deaf learners was considered more of a charitable and religious obligation of churches and other charitable organisations than a legal right. The situation has now changed as many deaf learners in Zimbabwe are now educated in inclusive settings and more deaf-friendly policies are in force as indicated later in this article.

Similar developments ensued in South Africa for which the dominant medium of communication in the special schools was oralism (Mayinje 2022; Mapepa and Magano 2018). However, the white deaf schools were superiorly equipped. Differentiated approaches were used in the two sets of deaf schools. Well-designed oralist approaches were used in white deaf schools while the black learners in black deaf schools (which were established later) were subjected to manual codes which were regarded as inferior to pure oralist methods. The ultimate result saw the black deaf learners in black schools developing Sign Language better than their white counterparts, but they did this on their own (Morgan et al. 2016). Later, policies were changed so that oralism became the sole

medium of instruction in all schools for deaf learners in South Africa. This was to the disadvantage of deaf learners as they could not fully and meaningfully participate in learning without access to superior provisions given to their white counterparts and to Sign Language.

Cawthon (2001) implores that deaf students rely more on non-verbal labelling techniques than would be expected with hearing peers, but still express a full range of communicative skills. Although most deaf learners have no intellectual barriers, they still experience communication barriers which hamper their active participation in learning in the classroom owing to a lack of exposure to Sign Language. This can best be resolved if deaf students are deliberately exposed to Sign Language as a human right and not a matter of choice. As Krausneker (2015, 419) puts it,

> In many countries, because of missing language rights, schooling is still done in a language modality that deaf children cannot access, the general level of education is low, and access to higher education is often not provided . . . It is not that deaf people cannot participate because they have an auditory problem . . . it is because the majority are unfamiliar with the language that deaf people use and interpreters are rarely provided. In the field of social and political work, deafness . . . is generally dealt with within the confined area of 'disabilities' which ignores the important linguistic question of the status and rights of Sign Languages.

The literature indicates that both in South Africa and Zimbabwe deaf learners are still not fully exposed to Sign Language since many teachers of deaf learners in these countries are not proficient in the language. Many deaf learners in these two countries therefore learn Sign Language mainly from older peers and deaf adults away from the gaze of teachers because the teachers often lack Sign Language skills. Generally, by excluding Sign Language from deaf education, the language rights of deaf learners are violated (Krausneker 2015; Magongwa 2010). Consequently, the academic problems experienced by deaf learners are primarily a result of poor communication between the teachers and deaf learners, which leads to a lack of participation in the class activities. In any case, deaf learners are at higher risk of facing barriers to participation than their hearing peers (Schwab et al. 2019). Deaf learners therefore hold that their primary barrier to educational participation in inclusive educational settings is a linguistic one and not a disability one in itself. This means that deaf leaf learners fail not because they are disabled but because examinations are presented in a language modality with which they are not familiar. The deaf education landscape in South Africa in particular has changed for the better since the landmark ruling in the case in which Kyle Springate challenged the use of oral language in final examinations (DeafSA 2018). However, a lot still needs to be done to improve participation and performance levels particularly in inclusive settings.

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education itself is considered ideal for deaf learners as it presents opportunities for broader participation and social skills development in classroom situations which mirror the reality in society at large. When deaf children lack contact with hearing peers, they experience challenges developing social skills leading to negative self-perception, externalising behaviour such as aggression and internalising behaviour such as anxiety (Amka and Mirnawati 2020). These authors elucidate that inclusive education focuses on eradication of such social obstacles faced by deaf learners without ignoring issues of policy, practice and cultural development to manage student diversity within an equality of rights and opportunities framework. Genuine inclusive education practices ensure full participation by all learners including deaf learners. The conception and practice of inclusive education of deaf learners is characterised by diverse controversies but the original ideology is a good one as it aims at overcoming barriers that the learners face so that they meaningfully participate in learning. Indeed, uncertainty and confusion exist about the meaning of the inclusive education paradigm in regular schools, yet commitment to it around the world continues to grow (Ainscow et al. 2012; Sharma et al. 2013).

Alasim (2018) points out that, although there is an increase in the number of deaf learners in inclusive schools in many countries, numerous studies have argued that these learners experience difficulties participating in teaching and learning. For example, some studies have suggested that inclusive education of deaf learners has contributed to loneliness and social isolation as well as negative influence on Sign Language development (Alasim 2018; Stinson and Liu 1999). However, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations 2006) insists that systemic reforms imbued in inclusive education are meant to overcome barriers to provide all learners (including deaf learners) with fair and participatory learning experiences. Inclusive education should, therefore, provide conditions where deaf leaners can equitably and successfully participate in education (Musengi 2019). This can only be possible when deaf learners are afforded full access to Sign Language.

Participation

Participation as a construct is grounded in democratic theory and is concerned with including people in actions and processes that concern their needs and/or welfare (Carpentier 2012). In the context of this article, learner participation entails all ways in which deaf learners engage together with their teachers and hearing peers in learning activities to create positive outcomes and changes (Education Scotland 2018) in learning environments. This definition is in line with the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child which provides that every child (including deaf children) has a right to participate in education. Deaf learners should therefore be encouraged to exercise their right to participation in education because all learners should learn through participating in all learning activities in and outside the classroom. Accordingly, effective participation by deaf learners would mean that they gain a good quality

education which is relevant, valuable and supportive of achievement and attainment (Education Scotland 2018). Our understanding of participation is that it is not limited to the classroom but extends to science laboratories, sporting activities and other co-curricular activities. Since participation is guided by certain basic principles that mirror inclusive education ideologies, it is important that the principles are observed in every inclusive teaching and learning space.

The basic principles of educational participation entail that equal opportunities be given to all learners including deaf learners to enable inclusive, voluntary participation. All learners' rights including those of deaf learners should be equally respected and differences among individual learners should be celebrated as a positive diversity of humanity (Education Scotland 2018; UNHCR 2017). According to Education Scotland (2018), for effective participation of deaf learners in education, there ought to be transparency and accountability among all participants in the learning communion, that is the teachers, hearing peers, Sign Language interpreters, deaf assistants and equally important the deaf learners themselves. In addition, particular attention should be paid to group dynamics through, for instance, intergenerational dialogue between learners and the teachers and other adults as well as power sharing where deaf learners are also given duties of responsibility in the classroom and the school at large. In addition, all learning activities should be accessible to all learners including deaf learners and should bear relevance of content, purpose and outcome. For deaf learners, this can be achieved primarily through the use of Sign Language. Deaf learners participate best through the use of their mother tongue which is Sign Language just like hearing learners would participate best through the use of their oral mother tongues. Participation in inclusive learning settings has overwhelming benefits particularly for disadvantaged learners such as deaf learners. In effect, participation is a leeway to access quality education.

Stinson and Liu (1999, 200) insinuate that, overall, "Greater participation may result in better (quality) learning by the student and greater feelings of being connected to the class than if there is less (or no) participation." This also provides the bases for genuine acceptance of deaf learners. Education Scotland (2018) concurs with Stinson and Liu (1999) that scholastic participation leads to improved learner–teacher and peer-to-peer relations and, consequently, improved teaching and learning. The net result is improved commitment, achievement and attainment. Accordingly, full participation in inclusive educational activities also results in improved guidance and support, which, in turn, results in well-being and a reciprocal sense of feeling valued, trusted and respected leading to sustained development of social and life skills such as teamwork, problem-solving and citizenship (Education Scotland 2018).

The benefits of participation which act as part of the justification for the need for this article were also confirmed by Schwab et al. (2019). The authors argue that meaningful participation fills the attainment gap between deaf and hearing learners. Meaningful participation for deaf learners is when they have full access to Sign Language and their culture, interests and needs, and when their efforts are recognised and genuinely

appreciated. Both in South Africa and Zimbabwe, several barriers stand in the way of full participation of learners who are deaf in learning environments. These learning environments, as earlier posited, are not limited to the classroom but extend to science laboratories, libraries, sporting fields, field trips and other learning spaces.

Barriers to the Participation of Deaf Learners in Education

Deaf learners are at higher risk of experiencing barriers to full participation in inclusive education settings. According to Alasim (2018), factors that might limit participation of deaf learners in inclusive education include communication barriers, teachers' attitudes and lack of knowledge about inclusion, classroom disorganisation and hearing peers' lack of awareness about deafness. The lack of understanding of Deaf culture and Sign Language incompetency among deaf education stakeholders exacerbate the situation. When teachers fail to structure classroom activities to facilitate the participation of deaf learners, more barriers are created. In addition, teachers' negative attitudes influence the attitudes of hearing learners, which result in more social barriers.

Stinson and Liu (1999) observed that unsupportive or negative attitudes of teachers which invariably influence those of hearing peers towards deaf learners, communication barriers owing to a lack of Sign Language proficiency especially among teachers of deaf learners and misinterpretation of deaf learners as being less able and afraid of participating in learning activities are the major barriers to effective participation and attainment of quality education by deaf learners. Teachers often respond by neglecting deaf learners while deaf learners respond by isolating themselves when they realise that they are being excluded from teaching and learning activities. In this way, deaf learners choose to be reluctant to participate. Stinson and Liu (1999) also noted that the lack of skills to repair miscommunications and the lack of turn-taking strategies among both hearing and deaf learners, low self-esteem and negative suspicions among deaf learners add to the list of barriers to participation in education by deaf learners.

International Conventions on the Education of Deaf Learners

On the international scene, inclusive education for different categories of disadvantaged learner including those who are deaf is a topical issue. Various conventions and treaties to which both South Africa and Zimbabwe have assented have been held over the years to advance the rights of people with disabilities and to provide guidelines on the best practices for the education of learners with special needs. Generally, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights mandates participation in cultural activities of choice and non-discrimination on the basis of difference and declares education as a fundamental right (United Nations 1948). Similarly, the UNCRPD (United Nations 2006) promotes and protects the rights of persons with disabilities, including deaf people while recognising Sign Language and the importance of accessibility to education, information and communication. Article 3 of the UNCRPD assents to equality of opportunities, participation and accessibility to education, for example. For deaf learners, this is possible when they participate equally with their peers in teaching and

learning activities. More particularly, article 24 of the UNCRPD emphasises the importance of facilitating the learning of Sign Language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community. It also alludes to the need to employ qualified teachers who are able to teach deaf learners using Sign Language. This is the most important practice for increasing the participation of deaf learners in education.

On the African continent, the African Union's Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa of 1981 ratified in 2018 is cognisant of the importance of full and effective participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities. It recognises the right to education of deaf learners and therefore provides for facilitation of respect, recognition, promotion, preservation and development of Sign Language. This, according to article 16(4)(c), is to enable participation and inclusion of deaf learners in education.

Theoretical Framework

We compiled this review article through the lens of the social model of disability which views deafness as a positive diversity and cultural marker and not as a disability. The article is framed within Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and regards access to Sign Language as a linguistic human right for learners who are deaf. Vygotskian theory describes human learning as a social process and the origination of human intelligence in society or cultural settings. For deaf learners, the theory entails participation in inclusive settings through the mediation of Sign Language and appreciation of Deaf culture (Marginson and Dang 2016). The theory is leveraged on what Vygotsky (1978) termed the zone of proximal development which requires social support and scaffolding from teachers and more experienced peers to facilitate the learner's participation in the teaching and learning process and subsequent intellectual development. According to Vygotsky's (1978) concept of proximal development, teachers are implored to structure interactions (in this case, between deaf and hearing learners), and to guide their participation through scaffolding (Alasim 2018; McLeod 2024). In this way, the theory stands relevant in researching inclusive educational development and transformation for deaf learners.

Methodology

This article is a desktop analysis adopting mainly the integrative or critical literature review approach whose purpose, according to Synder (2019), is not to cover all articles ever published on the topic but rather to combine perspectives to create a more nuanced understanding. From such understanding, we were able to evaluate the state of knowledge on deaf-centric practices and provide an overview of the ways in which the participation of deaf learners in inclusive settings could be improved. Synder (2019) adds that integrative reviews are able to create research agendas, identify research gaps and are used to assess, critique and synthesise literature on a particular issue in a way that enables new theoretical frameworks or perspectives to emerge. We did this by

critically examining literature and policy frameworks to advance a renewed understanding of increasing participation of deaf learners in education in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The focus was on studies conducted in both countries including three that were previously conducted by one of the authors in Zimbabwe (Sibanda 2015, 2018, 2023). We also used their experiences and intuitions in synthesising the data from previous studies.

South Africa

Mapepa and Magano (2018) seem to suggest that barriers to participation in education by deaf learners are widespread in the South African deaf education system although there have been notable policy changes. According to Storbeck and Martin (2010), the most challenging part of being involved in Deaf education in South Africa is knowing that deaf learners, for the most part, are fully capable of achieving the same educational outcomes expected of any other learner but are, frustratingly, not currently achieving equal outcomes in an atmosphere of low expectations. The authors observe that deaf learners in South Africa are perceived by the system as being unable to excel. This analysis suggests that education stakeholders including teachers in South Africa have low academic expectations of deaf learners. They, in effect, have negative attitudes towards deaf learners and doubt their ability to perform like their hearing peers, yet the teachers themselves lack appropriate skills to facilitate the full participation in teaching and learning activities (Mapepa and Magano 2018). Negative attitudes, ignorance about the potential of deaf learners and the lack of critical skills among teachers on their own pose barriers to the full participation of deaf learners in education.

Similarly, deaf learners are faced with teachers who need to be taught Sign Language by the deaf learners themselves. Ngobeni et al. (2020) note with concern that learners waste time teaching their educators South African Sign Language (SASL) instead of participating in effective learning activities. Storbeck (2000, 54) earlier argued, “This unique learner-becomes-teacher situation should never happen . . . but it happens constantly in classrooms in South Africa.” The situation could be a result of failure by many schools in South Africa to provide SASL interpreters (Ngobeni et al. 2020). Magongwa (2010) narrates that, although policies in South Africa aim at deaf learners attaining full potential and at mitigating barriers to participation in education, deaf students are still disadvantaged owing to a lack of access to SASL. The author observes that this disadvantage spills over to tertiary education and training where in higher education institutions, especially in the Faculties of Humanities, two official languages of which one should be the home language are required for entry. This is despite that for deaf learners the home language is often SASL which was not previously offered as an examinable subject at school level. Bell et al. (2016) opine that, if barriers to education facing deaf learners in institutions of higher learning in South Africa are not removed, these learners are more likely to be excluded from participating in socio-economic activities too. This scenario presents a systematic barrier which excluded deaf learners from participating in higher education even if they had a full matric certificate.

However, it is encouraging that, for example, the University of the Free State and the University of the Witwatersrand admit deaf learners in different university programmes and provide comprehensive support such as SASL interpretation services amid SASL now being examinable at matric level.

For Magongwa (2010), another barrier is the lack of deaf role models. This situation, according to DeafSA (2006, 2012, 2018), is a manifestation of the exclusion of deaf people from equal opportunities in education which has further resulted in a scenario where one third of deaf people in South Africa are functionally illiterate. In any case, SASL, which is the vernacular language of deaf learners in South Africa and the language in which deaf learners are taught, was not offered as a school subject until recently, in 2015. In this regard, many deaf people have been largely excluded from tertiary education and employment as 80% are unemployed (Magongwa 2010).

In their study in which they used lesson observations as the main method of collecting data, Ngobeni et al. (2020) established that some of the main barriers to participation by deaf learners in schools were the lack of visual teaching aids and equipment as well as lack of SASL fluency among teachers leading to frequent communication breakdown with the deaf learners. They found that, because of these barriers, there was no active participation in learning activities by deaf learners. Many teachers of deaf learners in South Africa entered Deaf education with little or no prior experience in deaf education nor do policies make it a requirement to do so. There was no policy which required teachers to be trained in deaf pedagogy and SASL before they could assume duty at a Deaf school. Storbeck and Martin (2010) therefore note that teachers in South Africa are faced with learners they cannot communicate with. When they can, the communication is rudimentary at best, because they lack the requisite qualifications to teach and effectively facilitate meaningful participation of deaf learners in education.

Policy and Practice in Deaf Education in South Africa

All the previously mentioned negations are despite a number of positive comprehensive pronouncements in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA 1996a) and in a number of subsequent policy frameworks. Chapter 65(5)(a)(iii) of the Constitution calls for the promotion and creation of conditions for the development and use of Sign Language but does not provide specific guidelines on the ways in which this should be done and enforced. Often these specific guidelines are specified in operational sectorial policies. Chapter 65(7) of the Constitution mandates the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) to preside over general language equality, equity and parity of esteem issues without giving specific guidelines. In dealing with these issues, PanSALB is therefore implored to consider that Sign Language uses a different modality from that of oral languages and that as a result it would need more resources to reach the desired parity levels owing to its previous negligence.

Chapter 2(6)(4) of the South African Schools Act (SASA) (RSA 1996c), without necessarily referring to SASL, recognises Sign Language as an official language for the

purpose of learning at a public school. In addition, the National Education Policy Act (RSA 1996b) directs that every child has to receive education in the language of their choice and participate in their preferred cultural activities without discrimination. For deaf learners, this entails the use of Sign Language and practice of Deaf culture even in inclusive settings. In addition, the Language in Education Policy (Department of Basic Education 1997) aims to support the teaching and learning of SASL yet the norms and standards for language policy in education in section 6(1) of the SASA (RSA 1996c) deal with the protection of individual language rights and promotion of linguistic diversity, therefore the advancement of multilingualism. It also recognises SASL as a legitimate language of instruction for deaf learners. It took more than a decade for this to be implemented in earnest since the enactment of the SASA in 1996. Nevertheless, in 2018, SASL was recognised as a home language which led to its subsequent official language status through the promulgation of the Constitution Eighteenth Amendment Act (RSA 2023).

In the same vein, the White Paper 6 on Education which alludes to inclusive education for learners with disabilities outlines the government's commitment to making the South African education system fair, efficient and just (Department of Education 2001). It embodies the Bill of Rights contained in the South African Constitution but does not specify the needs of learners with various disabilities and the guidelines of increasing participation in education for each category. For example, the White Paper does not provide guidelines for the education of deaf learners. In effect, the conceptualisation of disability in the White Paper 6 seems to be more inclined to physical disabilities.

However, these efforts of enacting relevant policies that seem to support participation of deaf learners in education have not been proportionate to what is happening on the ground owing to slow or a lack of implementation and enforcement of the provisions stated above. Many challenges to full participation of deaf learners have persisted as expressed in some research elsewhere in this article. Slow implementation of the policy provisions may have been the main cause of the previously mentioned negations and challenges. Perhaps, SASL being recognised as one of the 12 official languages of South Africa through the Constitution Eighteenth Amendment Act (RSA 2023) will lead to renewed efforts to enable fair access to and participation in education through increased development of SASL. Consequently, access to SASL by deaf learners is likely to increase their participation in education.

In another positive development, the Department of Basic Education (n.d.) developed the SASL Home Language Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) for all grades starting from 2015. In 2010, the Minister of Education appointed the Curriculum Management Team to oversee the development of and implementation of SASL as a school subject (Department of Basic Education 2014). Another team was then appointed by the Department of Education to write CAPS for SASL as a home language. This culminated in teaching of SASL as a language of learning and teaching

in schools (Umalusi 2018). Ultimately SASL matric examinations have been ongoing since 2018.

There is, however, concern that assessment is done without pen and paper. Instead, the examiner shows a hard copy question paper and the candidate signs back the answers under camera. Umalusi (2018) believes that the ideal is for each candidate to be equipped with a computer with video capabilities or a web camera for examination purposes. Although the current practices have significantly increased the educational participation of deaf learners in South Africa, challenges of the limited number of qualified and experienced deaf teachers remain (Department of Basic Education 2014). More deaf teachers of deaf learners, trained deaf assistants and SASL interpreters are needed to normalise the situation. In addition, there is a lack of SASL home language textbooks and appropriate ICTs to enable full and equal participation of deaf learners in education in South Africa. These revelations suggest that the CAPS for SASL were developed without proportionate logistical provisions and human resources development for effective implementation.

Training of Teachers of Deaf Learners and Sign Language Interpreters in South Africa

According to the Department of Basic Education (2014), a few institutions of higher learning offer training of teachers of deaf learners in South Africa. Only the University of the Free State and the University of the Witwatersrand offer comprehensive training of teachers of deaf learners. Some universities only offer inclusive education courses often as electives. This is one of the reasons for the shortage of such teachers in schools for deaf learners. Meanwhile, Kelly et al. (2020) believe that teachers of deaf learners in South Africa are not sufficiently trained to understand the educational needs of their learners. Many of them are not even proficient in SASL. Many of them do not understand the needs of deaf learners (Akach et al. 2009; Druchen 2010; Mapepa and Magano 2018). Akach et al. (2009) further report that 90% of the teachers in South Africa taught deaf children without knowledge of SASL while Glaser and Van Pletzen (2012) found that only 14% of the teachers of deaf learners in South Africa had well developed SASL.

The teachers' inability to use SASL affects the teaching and learning process and disables deaf learners' full educational participation. To exacerbate the situation, most principals who headed Deaf schools were not specially trained in Deaf education, which led to the trial-and-error leadership in many Deaf schools in South Africa (Ngobeni et al. 2020; Storbeck and Martin 2010). Even personnel at the Department of Basic Education lacked specialist skills in Deaf education, which led to a weakened ability to fully implement policies and effectively supervise schools for deaf learners. On these bases, Magongwa (2010) concludes that the main barrier to the participation of deaf learners is the lack of formal training of teachers in Deaf pedagogy and SASL fluency. To date, these challenges have remained unaddressed. In the White Paper 6, the Department of Education (2001) admits that deaf learners see their primary barrier to

participation in education as a linguistic one rather than that of severity of disability. This means that deaf learners fail to participate in education because of the lack of access to SASL and not because of the limitation of deafness in itself.

The issue of lack of training also affects the deployment of SASL interpreters. Sign Language interpreters also serve as cultural mediators between hearing and Deaf culture. It is therefore important that they are thoroughly trained. Andriakopoulou et al. (2007) suggest that Sign Language interpreters be rigorously trained in Sign Language and Deaf culture among other criteria. They must also abide by a code of conduct. In South Africa, professional Sign Language interpreters subscribe to the South African Institute of Translators (Glaser and Pletzen 2012). A number of organisations besides the University of the Free State and the University of the Witwatersrand do offer Sign Language interpretation training. These include the National Institute of the Deaf, Sign Language Education and Development, Hands in Motion, the SASL Interpreter Association and Talking Hands (Gallaudet University 2024). It will be interesting to conduct a study on the quality of training provided by these organisations.

Zimbabwe

Similar to South Africa, the main barrier to the participation of deaf learners in education in Zimbabwe is poor or total lack of Sign Language proficiency among teachers of deaf learners. Many deaf learners themselves have no access to Sign Language with some reaching school going age without a language at all. At school, they are faced with teachers who have limited or no Sign Language proficiency. Although it is admissible that there is a lack of literature on the participation of deaf learners in education, Sibanda (2023) concludes that the general negative medical model-oriented attitudes towards deafness, poor Sign Language proficiency or total lack of it and the home–school language dilemma are some of the linguistic and cultural barriers which militate against full participation of deaf learners in inclusive education in Zimbabwe. These barriers also include cultural stereotypes and intolerances, and communication difficulties caused by the lack of trained specialist teachers of deaf learners, which are collectively mirrored through discrimination, isolation and the lack of participation. These barriers result in poor academic performance.

The inability of teachers of deaf learners to efficiently use Zimbabwe Sign Language (ZSL) denies deaf learners' linguistic access which is vital for educational participation. The lack of adequate linguistic access for deaf learners impinges on their rights to fully participate in inclusive educational activities (Sibanda 2015). Sibanda (2015) measured the ZSL proficiency of practicing teachers of deaf learners and found that 93% of them lacked proficiency in ZSL as they could only attain the lowest two scores on the Modified Sign Language Proficiency Interview scale, that is, the novice and no-functional skills levels. This meant that only 7% of the teachers were proficient therefore fluent in ZSL. This result has implications for the curriculum of the training of teachers of deaf learners at institutions of higher learning. It is likely that the foci of the curricula

are not cultural but pathological deafness where the emphasis is on audiological interventions which are imbued in oralism.

The situation is worsened by the lack of qualified ZSL interpreters (Musengi 2019). Sibanda (2023) concurs with Musengi and reports that the lack of linguistic access for deaf learners in Zimbabwe impinges on their rights to fully participate in inclusive education settings. There is no institution of higher learning known to the researchers or was found in the literature that offers a fully-fledged Sign Language interpretation curriculum in the country. The few Sign Language interpreters in Zimbabwe did short courses, taught themselves or perhaps trained overseas and interpret voluntarily (African Sign Languages Resource Center 2024). For Downs et al. (2000), Sign Language interpreters should be certified professionals who train for many years to do their job and should abide by a code of ethics. All the same, these ZSL interpreters are hardly found in schools. From experience, teachers of deaf learners in Zimbabwe often do ad hoc Sign Language interpretation.

Another barrier to educational participation that deaf learners in Zimbabwe have to face is schools that become restrictive environments for deaf learners as they lack visual assistive technological equipment that supports acquisition of Sign Language. Mashawi (2019) found that this scenario is compounded by a lack of knowledge about the relevance of such equipment in the acquisition of Sign Language. Instead, schools put emphasis on audiological technology which is pro-oralist and detrimental to the acquisition of Sign Language (Mashawi 2019). Many deaf learners especially in mainstream schools can hardly participate in learning activities when they have limited or no access to visual aids for Sign Language development. In effect, the learners are not fully supported to enable full participation in their education. For Alasim (2018), it is the duty of the teachers to create conditions and develop strategies to eliminate barriers to participation. But efforts to increase participation may have greater success if teachers employ specific strategies to foster participation in an environment supported by Deaf-centric policies.

Policy and Practice in Zimbabwe

Special schools for deaf learners still exist in Zimbabwe but, unlike in South Africa, many deaf learners are educated in resource units located in mainstream schools. Sign Language is the preferred language of instruction but has not been offered as a school subject until January 2024 when the ZSL syllabus was completed, despite legislation directing that it should be so. The Government of Zimbabwe (2013) through the Constitution Amendment Number 20 Section 6 in subsections 3 and 4 provide for Sign Language use in all settings including education. In addition, the Education Amendment Act of 2019 designates ZSL as the priority language of instruction for deaf learners. Unlike in South Africa where Sign Language is an official language, the Constitution of Zimbabwe only lists it as one of the 16 officially recognised languages.

Meanwhile, the Education Director's Circular Minute Number 20 of 2001 directs that ZSL be taught as a school subject or learning area (Government of Zimbabwe 2001, 2019). Similarly, section 3.9.10 of Zimbabwe's National Disability Policy (Government of Zimbabwe 2021) proposes to ensure the learning of ZSL and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the Deaf community. Offering ZSL as a separate and examinable school subject has been long overdue and is a welcome development. Hall and Ballard (2024) reports that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has developed an examinable syllabus for learners of ZSL, whether deaf or hearing. This development was a culmination of the ZSL Bill which advocates for ZSL to be the primary medium of instruction for deaf learners and for free Sign Language interpretation services. However, the syllabus is still being perfected and has not yet been examined.

Training of Teachers of Deaf Learners and Sign Language Interpreters in Zimbabwe

Similar to South Africa, Zimbabwe has a general shortage of specialist teachers of deaf learners especially Deaf teachers of deaf learners. This is despite one teacher training college, namely United College of Education, and at least three universities, namely, the Great Zimbabwe University, the University of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Open University, being involved in the training of teachers of deaf learners. However, it is questionable why even some trained specialist teachers of deaf learners from these institutions lack proficiency in ZSL. Evaluation studies of the training curricula of these institutions should be conducted. The United College of Education used to offer in-service training of specialist teachers but is now offering pre-service training of teachers in inclusive education without much specialisation. The in-service programme was affected by complications faced by potential trainees in securing study leave from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education.

In Zimbabwe, Sign Language Interpreters have formed the Sign Language Interpreters Association of Zimbabwe (SLIAZ) which is registered under the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare as a voluntary organisation. The ideal is to have the SLIAZ registered as a professional organisation that is regulated through a specific code of conduct. The African Sign Languages Resource Center (2024) claims that there are no trained Sign Language interpreters in Zimbabwe but that volunteers and at times teachers of deaf learners are used. However, the Deaf Zimbabwe Trust is known for offering Higher Education Examination Council certified courses in National Foundation Certificate in Sign Language interpretation (https://deafzimbabwetrust.org), the Zimbabwe Open University runs regular short courses (www.zou.ac.zw) and the Sign Language Interpreter Trust (SLIT) runs workshops in Sign Language interpretation to meet the growing demand for Sign Language interpreters in Zimbabwe (Dube 2023).

The situation faced by deaf learners in both countries calls for transformative strategies to increase participation and access to quality education through effective development and use of Sign Language.

Transformative Strategies

The major shift in Deaf education which many researchers propose as a panacea for the multiplicity of barriers to the participation of deaf learners in inclusive education settings is one which enables deaf learners to access their education using Sign Language. Although the rise of inclusive education has constituted a major transformation in the education of deaf children, one consequence has been that the identification of many of these children in the Deaf community may be weaker than that found in students attending residential schools (McCartney 2017). This is one reason special schools for deaf learners still exist in South Africa and Zimbabwe although in Zimbabwe many deaf learners are currently educated in resource units in mainstream schools in the name of inclusive education.

Sign Bilingual Education

To fill the many gaps that have been noticed in the practice and implementation of inclusive education of deaf learners, many researchers have proposed sign bilingual education. Tang (2016) believes this resonates with the inclusion of deaf learners as it creates opportunities for dual naturalistic input of language to trigger early bilingual acquisition of both Sign Language and spoken languages in the form of reading and writing. Sign bilingual education is therefore premised on full utilisation of Sign Language interpreters, deaf teachers and deaf assistants. Sign Language is used as the language of instruction and oral language for literacy development of particularly reading and writing skills. In countries where it is well established, sign bilingual education has been found to hold the potential for increasing access and participation in education and consequently for significantly improving the performance of deaf learners (Marschark et al. 2014). In effect, sign bilingual education advocates for early exposure to Sign Language where both deaf and hearing learners are taught Sign Language as a compulsory subject and are exposed to Deaf culture in more naturalistic settings (Tang 2016). However, it is advisable that Deaf culture studies be conducted by Deaf teachers or at least Deaf resource persons. When opportunities are extended to hearing students to learn Sign Language and about Deaf culture, they enhance awareness and acceptance and invariably increase the participation of deaf learners in education.

The World Federation of the Deaf (2011) admits that sign bilingual education has the potential to mitigate the many barriers to participation. Sibanda (2018) in arguing for sign bilingual education as a strategy posits that inclusive education for deaf learners should go beyond mere rhetoric and casual placement and reframed as an educational system which enables full access to Sign Language and Deaf culture as well as active social and academic participation. Sign bilingual education has the potential to remove barriers to inclusion of deaf learners and to increase their participation in educational activities since it promotes acquisition and effective use of Sign Language. Several transformative strategies such as the use of sign language interpreters, training and development of deaf teachers, teaching sign language as a school subject, allowing deaf

learners to interact with deaf adults and the promotion of assistive technologies that encourage the acquisition and development of sign language give impetus to the implementation of sign bilingual education.

Use of Sign Language Interpreters

The inability to communicate with deaf learners affects their overall participation in the teaching and learning process. Where teachers lack appropriate Sign Language proficiency, interpreters should be provided. The use of interpreters is critical to increasing and fostering participation of deaf learners. This should, however, be supplemented by a helping and Deaf-centric ethic, for example, positive attitude, ability to maintain eye contact, sensitivity to Deaf culture and communicative learner diversity (Mayinje 2022). For Cawthon (2001), sign language interpreters can be used to supplement teacher speech and facilitate deaf learners' participation in classroom discourses. They also act as cultural mediators between deaf learners and hearing stakeholders. Musayaroh and Aprilia (2018) believe that in the absence of Sign Language interpreters, for example, hearing teachers are often unaware of the degree of communication difficulties deaf learners experience. Equally important, deaf student activeness in class participation depends on their own communicative skills and the classroom atmosphere (Kwabe et al. as cited in Musayaroh and Aprilia 2018), of which Sign Language interpreters are able to facilitate.

Co-Teaching

Another important strategy is using co-teaching where a specialist teacher of deaf learners (deaf or hearing) who is fluent in Sign Language teaches the inclusive class with deaf children together with the mainstream teacher (Tang 2016). Alternatively, a qualified hearing specialist teacher co-teaches the class with a deaf teacher or deaf assistant. In South Africa, the Curriculum Management Team that was appointed by the Minister of Education in 2010 proposed a bilingual–bicultural approach where a qualified hearing specialist teacher is paired with a trained deaf assistant (Umalusi 2018) in teaching deaf learners. In another arrangement, deaf assistants and deaf resource persons can be used especially when Sign Language interpreters are hard to come by or are not available at all. With regard to deaf assistants, they could be literate but trained adults who are well versed in Deaf culture, yet they went through secondary education and have a demonstrable basic grasp of major school subjects as well as the inclusive education ethos.

Use of Small Groups

In the classroom or other learning spaces, deaf learners may better participate in small appropriately set-up groups (Ainscow et al. 2012; Stinson and Liu 1999). Even in small groups, proper seating of deaf learners to ensure visibility and sufficiency of lighting may increase their participation. Teachers may facilitate participation through the way they arrange seating as well as through sensitivity to the pace of presentation of information. Musayaroh and Aprilia (2018) implore that participation of deaf learners

can also be achieved through the practice of individualised teaching, smaller class size and sensitivity to learner diversity. In addition, learner activeness in class participation depends on communication skills and the overall atmosphere of the class or lecture room.

Visual Technologies

Another important strategy which is often overlooked because of ignorance, lack of financial resources and relevant technical skills or at times the lack of political will is the provision of relevant visual technological resources. Visual instructional technological teaching media stimulate the visual modality which is the primary input for Sign Language acquisition and development. Video equipment and overhead projectors, for example, are crucial to Sign Language acquisition and development as they provide visual instruction, visual information and visual language to the visual learners (Marschark et al. 2014). Studies have proven that visual technological equipment rather than audiological equipment provides visual communication to deaf learners thereby facilitating the acquisition of Sign Language, which is the mother tongue of deaf people. In this way, visual technological equipment enables educational participation by deaf learners (Mashawi 2019). Provision of visual technological equipment is therefore a way of equalising opportunities and full participation of deaf learners in educational activities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This review was aimed at analysing and establishing conditions that affect the educational participation of deaf learners in South Africa and Zimbabwe through systematic review of literature and studies in the two countries. In addition, the article endeavoured to propose transformative strategies to be adopted to improve the learning conditions of deaf learners in these countries. The motivation behind the article was the assumption by these researchers that the poor educational performance by deaf learners in the two countries could probably be owing to the lack of conditions that enable deaf learners to participate equally in education with their hearing peers. In this way, the researchers strongly challenged the common but baseless argument that deaf learners perform poorly because of deafness as a disability or impairment. The literature and studies from the two countries confirmed our assumption that deaf learners are performing poorly because of the lack of supportive educational systems and transformative strategies that enable full participation and not as a result of intellectual incapacitation. We noted, however, that, despite interesting dimensions to the topic, there is a lack of literature and studies in both countries, especially in recent years. We also noted that there are several deaf-friendly policies in both countries, but that implementation is often slow, or enforcement procedures are lacking effect.

From the literature and our experiences and intuitions, we conclude that the barriers to participation of deaf learners in education in the two countries are generally the same owing to similar deaf education historical backgrounds although South Africa seems

ahead of Zimbabwe with regard to mitigating these barriers. We also conclude that deaf learners can perform better if deaf-centric pedagogies are employed. This can be possible through deployment of properly and sufficiently trained deaf and hearing teachers and trained Sign Language interpreters. The use of deaf-centric pedagogies that enable full participation of deaf learners in education is fundamental to increasing participation of deaf learners. Also critical is the mass training of teachers of deaf learners as it was noted that the lack of properly trained specialist teachers of deaf learners is the major barrier to meaningful participation of deaf learners in both countries. The teacher education training curriculum should therefore be grounded in practical Sign Language, Deaf culture and deaf-friendly transformative teaching and learning strategies. This will enable the production of teachers of deaf learners who are fluent in Sign Language and sensitive to the cultural and pedagogical needs of their students.

Deaf candidates for deaf teacher training should be accepted via affirmative action by relaxing entry requirements, for example, by excluding the requirement for English as language or replacing English with Sign Language. This is because, for a long time, this requirement for English as language which is foreign to deaf people has systematically excluded them from training. Training and deployment of deaf teachers is an indispensable strategy as this would enable deaf teachers to teach both hearing teachers and learners Sign Language and Deaf culture as a basic tenant of sign bilingual education strategy for the inclusion of deaf learners (Sibanda 2018). Sign bilingual education enables access to Sign Language and Deaf culture and therefore promotes the linguistic rights of deaf learners.

Overall, participation should be inclusive and respectful of learners' diverse natures and needs. For deaf learners, the core strategies for achieving participation are the practice of inclusive philosophies including individualised approaches, the use of visual technologies, paying attention to Deaf culture, advocacy for and on behalf of the deaf learners, setting up smaller class sizes or using smaller groups and openness to learner diversity. In our contention, these practices can produce better results in a sign bilingual education arrangement.

We propose a regulatory framework for promoting positive interaction between the learners to facilitate the participation of all learners including deaf learners in each of the two countries. Consequently, policies that regulate qualifications and skills of teachers of deaf learners are required. Teachers of deaf learners are expected to be qualified in Deaf pedagogies and Sign Language. No teacher should be allowed to teach deaf learners without the appropriate skills and qualification. They should possess at least functional ability in Sign Language and demonstrate positive attitudes towards deaf learners. Oralist strategies, attitudes and behaviours that are detrimental to participation by deaf learners (Stinson and Liu 1999) should therefore be discouraged through enforcement of policies. Future researchers in the two countries are therefore

implored to tackle accessibility of visual ICTs and the transformation of policies towards the advancement of full and equal participation of deaf learners in education.

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