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Emotional and Embodied Aspects in the Education of Learners with Visual Impairment: The Use of Standpoint ‘Panel Chats’ in Teacher Training

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ABSTRACT

Training teachers of learners with visual impairment (VI) emphasise instrumental skills such as curriculum adaptation and assistive technology, at times ignoring anxieties and attitudes within teachers surrounding disability. South Africa’s education system faces a huge backlog in VI teacher training, which is being addressed by intensive short courses developed through the Teacher Empowerment for Disability Inclusion (TEDI) project. With only 5 days of contact, hard choices must be made regarding what teachers most need to prepare for the VI learner. The Authors felt that personal and attitudinal shifts (in teachers entirely new to VI) were pivotal. Besides ‘harder’ skills, trainees took part (as audience) in a daily panel discussion by four academically successful VI graduates, with experiences of both inclusive and special education. The panel strategy had five aims: i) counter stereotypes by showcasing high-achieving VI persons; ii) provide humanising, first-hand experience of VI; iii) raise and digest difficult emotions to do with VI; iv) model a sense of mutual acceptance between learners and teachers and v) add humour and lightness to difficult issues. This paper presents qualitative data on the outcomes of these aims, based on written submissions by panellists, and questionnaire and focus group material from trainees.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive education; teacher training; visual impairment

Introduction

Persons with visual impairment (VI) in South Africa experience marginalisation, inequality and exclusion from full participation in social life, including in education (Fish-Hodgson & Khumalo, 2015; Lourens & Swartz, 2019). A significant contributing factor to this exclusion is that teachers of persons with VI are not adequately trained in inclusive education practices that address barriers to learning (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2014; McKenzie, Kelly, & Shanda, 2018). Through intensive short courses, the Teacher Empowerment for Disability Inclusion (TEDI) project is working to address this gap.

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The project team was confronted with the difficult challenge of creating a short course for teachers who have learners with VI in their classes, almost all of whom have hitherto received no specialised training. Added to that was the consideration that a majority of these teachers work in schools that face resource challenges, in terms of teaching and learning materials, infrastructure, and human capacity. With a platform of only five days of face-to-face tuition at their disposal, difficult decisions had to be made about how to prioritise the various aspects and layers of teaching skills needed for inclusion of visually impaired learners. Besides attending to specific pedagogical skills, the task was to provide an experience which would inspire teachers, unlock creativity and facilitate a personal engagement with the ‘new reality’ of VI, preparing teachers for the challenge of having at times to create their own solutions to problems with access.

Key to any teacher training is a focus on not only technical and instrumental skills, but also on how teachers can develop empathic and supportive relationships with their learners in order to meet diverse needs (Jensen, Skibsted, & Christensen, 2015). The shared global history of disability segregation, along with the emotional evocativeness of disability-difference (Watermeyer, 2012; 2013) mean that emotional and relational aspects of teaching require particular attention where childhood disability is concerned. VI, in particular, has been associated with stereotyping based on anxious fantasies within the observer regarding ‘what it may be like’ to live without full vision (Kleege, 2006), potentially manifesting in barriers to relationship. In fact, prejudiced constructions of blindness date back to antiquity, often taking the form of dichotomous beliefs about the nature and potential of persons with VI. These caricatures present an impoverished and split set of human possibilities, with VI often being seen as some form of divine punishment for wrongdoing (Barasch, 2001).

To address these challenges, the course team devised the idea of daily ‘panel chats’, in addition to the more didactic sessions dealing with topics such as the expanded core curriculum, how to produce accessible learning and teaching materials, curriculum adaptation for VI learners, and so forth. The panel sessions provided first-hand, standpoint engagement with the life experiences and opinions of four highly educated visually impaired adults, who had undergone basic education in both inclusive and special school settings. These candid discussions were presented with deliberate aims in mind, such as countering stereotypes, supporting teachers in grappling with difficult emotions, and animating material on pedagogy with real-life memories and opinions from ‘service users’.

In this paper, we present qualitative data gathered from panel members as well as the pilot cohort of teachers who took the course, regarding how the panel chats were experienced, and in which ways they did, or did not, achieve the goals intended. We believe that the discussion provides useful insights into personal and emotional aspects of the professional development of teachers of learners with VI, with special relevance to low-resourced education systems of the Global South.

To provide context, we begin the paper with a review of literature pertaining to VI in South Africa, with a specific focus on VI learners and teacher training.

**Visual Impairment and Education in South Africa**

Around the world, blindness and moderate to severe VI affects approximately 1.3 billion people (World Health Organisation, 2018). Compared to high-income countries, low-
middle-income countries are disproportionately affected by VI (Lilian et al., 2018), with the highest prevalence of blindness being in Africa (Cockburn et al., 2012). In South Africa, the most prevalent disability type in the country is VI (11%; Statistics South Africa, 2011).

In 2013 there were 1,307 VI learners enrolled in special schools in South Africa, out of a total of 116,530 learners with disabilities, and 433 VI learners enrolled in ordinary schools out of a total of 11,981 learners with disabilities (DBE, 2015). While official education policy in South Africa calls for inclusive education, and a major reduction in the number of special schools, in 2017 there were over 11 000 learners on waiting lists for these schools (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2017). The disturbing backdrop to this is that in 2012 it was estimated that approximately 600 000 learners with disabilities were not in any form of schooling (Department of Basic Education, 2015), which is more than double the 280 000 estimated excluded learners in 2001 (Department of Education [DoE], 2001). Besides contravening international human rights principles, this exclusion from education is out of line with the goals of the South African inclusive policy, Education White Paper 6, which stipulates that learners who experience barriers to learning (including learners with disabilities) should receive appropriate support and education in a range of educational settings (DoE, 2001).

Of those learners with disabilities who are in school (including those with VI), evidence suggests that they are not being provided with sufficient reasonable accommodation or support to ensure they can access education on an equal basis to their non-disabled peers. Additionally, many disabled learners in special schools do not have access to the same subjects as those in ordinary schools and are unable to effectively access the curriculum (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Further, many special schools for VI learners are confronted with a lack of resources and underequipped, untrained and unsupported teachers, contributing to a low standard of education (Fish-Hodgson & Khumalo, 2015). Evidence suggests that many special schools do not properly prepare VI learners for tertiary education (Lourens, 2015), and that those VI students who enrol in tertiary training often face challenges in accessing reasonable accommodations because inclusion policies are yet to be properly implemented in most university settings (Lourens & Swartz, 2019).

It is clear that persons with VI in South Africa continue to experience marginalisation, inequality and exclusion from full participation in social life in virtually all sectors. A key contributing factor to this exclusion is the education that they receive, which is profoundly influenced by the quality of training that has been offered to their teachers. Despite the requirement that teachers be knowledgeable in inclusive education practices such as curriculum differentiation and addressing barriers to learning (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2015), most teachers in South Africa lack specialised knowledge in the education of learners with specific impairments, including learners with VI (DBE, 2014). Indeed, there is minimal evidence in teacher training courses at South African universities of curriculum aimed at equipping teachers to offer specialised support to learners with disabilities. While there is in-service training available to teachers via provincial education departments, non-governmental organisations and disabled people’s organisations, there are few incentives for teachers to complete such training, especially since it is often not accredited (McKenzie et al., 2018).

Research shows that supportive relationships between teachers and their learners have importance in relation to academic performance, social development, well-being, and learners’ motivation to learn (Aspelin & Johnson, 2019). However, this particular dimension of teaching –
what some have called ‘relational competence’ (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019, p. 264) – remains relatively under-explored and not adequately addressed (if at all) in teacher education programs, particularly with respect to teaching learners with disabilities (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019). Relational competence has been defined as ‘being able to meet students and parents with openness and respect, to show empathy and to be able to take responsibility for one’s own part of the relationship as a teacher’ (Jensen et al., 2015, p. 206). Jordan, Schwartz, and McGhie (2009) argue that the ability to engage each learner and develop a teacher–learner relationship is essential for the practice of inclusive education, and for effective teaching overall.

Since it is commonplace for disability-difference to evoke anxiety in the observer (Watermeyer, 2013), it is possible that teachers to whom VI is a new and unknown phenomenon might find emotional refuge in an over-emphasis on instrumental aspects of teaching, at the expense of the relational. This ‘manic defence’ (Watermeyer & Swartz, 2008), can have a dehumanising effect, as it reduces the VI learner to a set of pedagogical problems to be solved, rather than a feeling, thinking human who has experiences which others can identify with. A solid relationship between teacher and learner, which is the essential foundation of clear communication and cooperation in dealing with teaching and learning challenges, must begin with real contact, rather than an understandable but unhelpful instrumental drive for control.

Teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive practices are also crucial to ensuring successful inclusion, as these factors influence commitment to their implementation (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Although teachers often agree with the concept of inclusion, evidence suggests that in the case of more severe disabilities and behavioural challenges they tend to believe that the needs of such learners would be best met in separate classrooms (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Teachers express a range of concerns about the inclusion of learners with disabilities in ordinary settings, including feeling as though they do not have the specialised teaching skills to meet the needs of these learners; worrying that time spent with learners with special educational needs will detract from time available for learners without these needs; lack of adequate support services; and being doubtful about the ability of these learners to participate academically and socially in the classroom (Jordan et al., 2009; Savolainen et al., 2012). Despite these opinions, research demonstrates that learners with disabilities who are educated in ordinary settings benefit more when compared to learners in segregated settings (Jordan et al., 2009). Not only do these learners learn from a young age that they are truly part of society, but their nondisabled peers also have the experience of an inclusive world where difference is part of life (Lourens, McKinney, & Swartz, 2016).

The question then is how do we go about changing teachers’ attitudes so that they have a more favourable view towards implementing inclusive education? Forlin, Loreman, Sharma, and Earle (2009) argue that improving the self-efficacy of teachers – ‘increasing their understanding and confidence in meeting the needs of diverse learners’ (205) – will contribute to more positive attitudes and reduce concerns among teachers. A South African study on teachers’ attitudes and self-efficacy found that the more teachers believed they were able to implement inclusive practices in a practical and concrete way, the more positive their attitudes were towards inclusion (Savolainen et al., 2012).

Another way of changing attitudes and improving self-efficacy among teachers is through direct exposure to persons with disabilities. Several research studies suggest that the most effective way to change attitudes among teachers is to combine more formal instruction with either direct interactions with people with disabilities, or with simulation activities that allow
for experiential learning (Forlin et al., 2009). Caroll, Forling and Jobling (2003) investigated the impact of a 10-week special needs course on pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards people with disabilities. Importantly, the course included guest lecturers with disabilities who were regularly involved in tutorial groups with the teacher trainees. In addition, a buddy system was arranged at local schools where teacher trainees were linked to a learner with a disability. The key findings illustrate that after the course pre-service teachers felt less ignorant and more sure of how to behave around people with disabilities. They also felt less pity and paid more attention to the person, as opposed to the disability.

With all of the above issues in teacher training in mind, the Authors spearheaded a team which developed a short course for South African teachers of learners with VI. The course was piloted in October 2018 with a group of in-service teachers, all of whom had VI learners in their classes, from two South African provinces.

**Background to the Short Course**

In an effort to address the lack of teacher training specifically focused on teaching learners with disabilities, the Teacher Empowerment for Disability Inclusion (TEDI) project – a partnership between the University of Cape Town and Christoffel-Blindenmission (CBM), and co-funded by the European Union and CBM – has developed short courses that aim to empower teachers to provide quality education for learners with severe to profound disabilities. The training focuses on inclusivity and diversity in general, as well as teacher skills associated with three forms of impairment – specifically VI, deafness, and severe to profound intellectual disability. This paper focuses on the five-day course entitled, ‘Teaching Learners with Visual Impairment’. The aim of the course was to provide skills for teaching VI learners in a range of educational environments, including special, full-service, and ordinary schools, with an emphasis on low-resourced settings. In order to achieve this, the course covered the following key areas:

- Classroom accommodations
- Accessible learning and teaching support materials (LTSM)
- The expanded core curriculum for VI learners
- Psycho-social issues in the lives of learners with VI
- Disability as a human rights and social justice issue
- Use of assistive technology to access the curriculum

In developing this course, a team of experts, including principals, teachers, disability activists and academics met as a group on a regular basis over a period of 1 year. The course was aimed at in-service teachers whose work involves, or may in the future involve, learners with VI. Teachers in this field have few training opportunities, and consequently this course needed to cover a range of topics in as much depth as possible. In light of the fact that the course was voluntary and for in-service teachers, we were also practically constrained by the length we could make the course, given that this has implications for how much leave teachers can take from their employment as well as the possible academic impact on learners when teachers are absent.

As reviewed above, there are arguably two key elements to teacher training for teaching learners with disabilities: (i) The technical and instrumental element that focuses on equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge and (ii) The relational or emotional element that focuses on teachers’ personal feelings regarding
disability and inclusion. To address the latter, relational element, the team devised the idea of daily ‘panel chats’, involving direct engagement with a group of four highly educated visually impaired people who are products of the South African education system. With the intention of shifting the relationships which trainees had with the idea of VI, and with VI persons themselves, the panel chats aimed to enliven, disarm and deepen personal engagement in the room, through modelling an openness to difficult topics. More specifically, the strategy had the following five objectives:

Surprise and counter stereotypes by showcasing high achieving adults with VI
Provide humanising, first-person experience of life with VI, including memories of schooling
Raise, normalise and digest difficult emotions to do with disability in general, and VI in particular
Model a sense of mutual acceptance and empathy between learners with VI and their teachers
Model the use of humour and lightness in dealing with difficult and emotive issues.

In the balance of this paper, we draw on qualitative data gleaned from panellists and trainees, to explore the use of the panel chats strategy as a means of kick-starting learning in the relational domain for teachers who have had no specialist VI training, or for whom the inclusion of VI learners in their classes is a new and unknown experience. As shall become clear, we believe our strategy to hold promise in circumstances such as ours, where teachers function in low-resource environments, and the training platform (in terms of contact hours) is limited by necessity. We believe that with such constraints, the importance of attending to personal and relational aspects of teaching the VI learner, with the potential that this brings to unlock confidence and creativity, can hardly be over-emphasised.

The Design of the Panel Chats

On each of the five days of the course, for one session the more didactic training would be suspended, and instead a panel discussion would be held. During this time, the four panellists would comment on, and hence animate, the course materials of the day with personal experience and opinions from the perspective of persons living with VI. All sessions were video-recorded as data.

The panel consisted of two university lecturers (both trained psychologists, and disability studies scholars), and two postgraduate students in disability studies (one at masters and one at doctoral level). Here follow brief introductions:

BK

BK has two honours degrees (in social anthropology and development studies) and is currently studying towards an M. Phil. in disability studies at the University of Cape Town. He is deeply involved in civil society organisations surrounding education for adults and young people with VI. He was educated in a residential special school for blind learners.
MB
MB has a master’s degree in gender studies and is currently in the final year of her doctoral work in disability studies at the University of Cape Town. She has extensive civil society experience in employment for VI persons, especially youth. Author’s schooling took place at both special and ordinary schools.

HL
HL is a trained counselling psychologist, disability studies scholar, and lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Johannesburg. As a child and young person, Author attended a residential special school for blind learners.

BW
HL is a trained clinical psychologist, disability studies scholar, and lecturer in the Division of Disability Studies at the University of Cape Town. His basic education took place at an ordinary school.

Course Trainees
Thirty-eight trainees applied and were accepted for the Teaching Learners with Visual Impairment course, and of these 26 attended. The trainees were predominantly classroom teachers and learner support teachers, but also included one social worker and one occupational therapist.

Perspectives on the Panel Chats
In what follows, we draw on the perspectives of both trainees and panellists regarding their experience of the panel chats. The trainees were asked to complete two course evaluation surveys (one immediately after the course and one two months after course completion), and also participated in a focus group discussion. From this data, we extracted any reference made specifically to the panel chats. The panellists, in turn, were asked to review the session videos, and write about their experiences, guided by the five objectives of the strategy, which are listed above.

In what follows, each of the five objectives of the daily panel chats will be examined in turn. In each section, we deal with the perspectives of the panellists and those of the trainees regarding how they experienced what took place, and on how and whether the panel chats achieved their intended aims.

Showcasing the Lives of High-Achieving Persons with VI
The composition of the panel – who, between them, have nine postgraduate degrees (with another two on the way) – starkly contradicts common beliefs about VI in South African special schools. Evidence shows that the basic education experienced by learners with VI typically does not prepare them for tertiary study (Lourens, 2015). These learners are often
afforded limited subject choices, and little or no career guidance (McKenzie et al., 2018). One subtext of common beliefs in special schools, therefore, is that learners with VI are not suited to the pursuit of a tertiary qualification (Lourens, 2015). VI role models, within education and the public domain, are all but unheard of. As one of the trainees noted: ‘I never knew that a visually impaired person is able to go to school as far as university lesson. The course has enlightened me that a visual impaired learner is able to work and be employed’.

There is therefore little visible in South African society to contradict stereotypes of marginality, low attainment, inability and dependency which are firmly associated with VI persons. Indeed, VI persons from around the world report the pervasiveness of prejudice and low expectations regarding their lifestyles and abilities (Kleege, 2012). Without being in any way inauthentic, the panellists aimed to give trainees an experience of the ‘normalcy’ of the juxtaposition of high educational achievement with VI, and of professional adults with VI who, rather than being stereotype busting ‘supercrips’, were simply going about the business of life.

The two panellists who had received most of their early education in special schools both described having been discouraged by teachers from pursuing tertiary study. HL was told at high school that it was ‘impossible’ for her to become a psychologist, while BW- the other psychologist on the panel – who attended an ordinary high school, was told the same thing as an undergraduate at university. In this and other respects, panellists described how their teachers and other influential figures in their early lives had, overtly or subtly, directed them towards certain ways of being, and discouraged others. There were, all agreed, very clear and dominant discursive ideas about who blind people should be, and how they should behave (Kleege, 2006; Michalko, 1998; Scott, 1969). What was evident in the room, therefore, was a contrast between the limiting expectations about the potential of persons with VI which panellists had received, and the reality of their adult selves. The fact of political correctness surrounding disability can often obscure the reality of deeply held, emotionally laden ideas about the ways VI fundamentally limits human potential. By contrast, the panel chats seemed, at times, to disarm trainees, allowing for real candour regarding their anxieties about life with VI.

In his didactic sessions on the course, BW had reiterated the idea that the key to growth in one’s relationship with disability is a deep recognition that, like race, it is to do with human difference, and that we, as humans, find difference hard (Watermeyer & Swartz, 2008, 2016). The significance of recognising this lies in how it can free us to be more authentic and compassionate with ourselves, regarding the very real anxieties and fantasies which disability raises for us. It is only when these can be shared that real processing can take place, and emotionally charged prejudices can be shifted (Watermeyer, 2013). In line with these ideas, trainees were very forthcoming about how the panellists surprised their assumptions about VI, and in doing so, brought these more clearly into view:

And what I saw during the course and what I took home … and when I say home, I’m talking about my class, my life, my personal experience, my belief system changed and I could tell them (learners) that you don’t need to be fully able to achieve anything in life.

As Lourens et al. (2016) remark, it is one thing to provide learning materials on career possibilities for disabled persons, it is quite another to show people what these possibilities might look like in the flesh. With perhaps a touch of irony, Author began each chat by introducing the audience to ‘my illustrious panel’, gently reminding the trainees that VI
learners in their classes have so much more potential than is all-too-often believed. In the follow-up focus group, one trainee commented:

‘I was very impressed to see the actual blind people sharing with us how [they] feel with their situation. I never knew that a blind person is like any other people and could do some of the professional jobs’.

While many trainees echoed these sentiments, others responded in a more defensive manner, objecting that they had high expectations of their learners. The panellists had not suggested otherwise, but only recounted their own experiences, in which all had achieved despite low expectations, rather than buoyed by encouraging Authority figures. It is notable, despite the trainees’ objections, that evidence suggests that a culture of low expectations is very prevalent in South African special schools (Section 27, 2015). The unwillingness among some trainees to acknowledge the reality of low expectations in their schools was associated with a strand of resistance to attending to the ‘softer’ aspects of teaching VI learners – that is, issues relating to anxiety and other emotions, and to attitudes. These utterances reflected an anxious need to attend to the instrumental aspects of pedagogy, while seeming to deny the centrality of relationship – what might be understood as a manic defence in response to disability-related anxieties (as will be discussed in the section to follow) (Watermeyer, 2013; Marks, 1999).

**Humanising the Experience of VI**

From the first day of the course, many trainees described their frustration and confusion with VI learners who, after a precipitous loss of vision, were unwilling or ‘resistant’ to taking part in braille or mobility training. In response to these accounts, panellists openly shared personal stories about what it had been like to become visually impaired as a child, describing emotional trauma, profound shifts in familial relationships, anxiety and confusion. Their experience is reflected in a host of auto-ethnographic works in disability studies, which describe the lived reality of vision loss, and its impact on self-identity (Beauchamp-Pryor 2011; Kuusisto, 1998; Lourens, 2020; Michalko, 1998; Nell, 2013; 2019). Care was taken to direct no judgements towards the responses of teachers to their newly visually impaired learners. But what became evident to the panellists was how, until now at least, the teachers had an almost startling lack of awareness that losing one’s sight is a profound, traumatic and life-altering experience. For example, in considering a boy of 11 who had recently lost much of his vision, one trainee could attend only to his urgent need for mobility training, and her bewilderment at his stolid refusal to participate in it, while not being able to contemplate that he was in all likelihood in a state of extreme emotional distress. Panellists explained how, in their lives, transitioning to the use of the assistive devices of blindness carried immense emotional gravity, involving shifts in public identity and sense of self. Moving from ‘normal’ life in the nondisabled world to being seen and ‘administered’ as a blind person was described by all four panellists as an experience of repeated symbolic violence. It included such signals from the world as suddenly being no longer allowed to go to school with one’s peers, being sent away from home, and being required to alter one’s lifestyle and self-presentation in ways which evoked distancing and ambivalence from others. To all of the panellists, the shift in social positioning had felt almost militaristic in its forcefulness, as one felt told by the world that ‘this is who you are now, this is what you get, and this is how you
must behave’. In a critique of representations of disabled people in English literature, Kriegel (1987) mirrors this experience, concluding that while others cry ‘I am what I am’, the disabled figure is instead required to submit, saying ‘I am what you tell me I am’ (33). The key message which panellists tried to convey was that taking on aspects of a VI lifestyle such as braille and a white cane also meant giving up parts of oneself, and taking on a ‘blind identity’ which is generally not valued by the social world (Kuusisto, 1998). As a young teenager who had recently lost his vision, BK stated bluntly that the white cane meant ‘unattractive, ugly, dumb blind person’.

Without disrespecting the trainees, the panellists understood the ‘sidestepping’ of emotional aspects of vision loss as a form of manic defence (Watermeyer & Swartz, 2008). In other words, quite natural anxieties surrounding what it might be like to be blind, nudged teachers into the more comfortable, familiar role of problem-solvers, soothing feelings of un-control with instrumental action. This urge to ‘put right’, which can come at the expense of understanding the life-worlds of disabled people, is familiar in critiques of rehabilitation (Marks, 1999). This is partly reflected in the following excerpt from one of the trainees:

I’m one of those teachers that believe, right, you’ve got a shortcoming here, but you’ve got so many strengths as well. So I try and focus in on the strength and building up the weaknesses so that it doesn’t become a crutch to them. A lot of kids are using visually impaired … ‘I can’t do this because I’m blind’. My attitude: So what, give me another excuse. So you’re blind, right, that’s why you’re here. We teach you and we teach you the skills that you need. And I think that is what it comes down to, that we need to teach our children that it’s not a crutch.

Without intending to, professionals in the midst of such struggles with disability-difference can inadvertently dehumanise disabled people, distancing the living, feeling person inside who is ‘just like me’, and recreating her (to some extent) as an emotionally neutral problem to be solved. The notion of the ‘blind child’, as an objectified, depersonalised recipient of corrective intervention, is one which, despite its anachronistic core, haunts special education institutions, because of the opportunity to avoid complex emotion which it affords. Allowing this notion in can strip individual blind children of agency and unique histories, and denies the emotional complexity that is inherent to the experience of vision loss.

The panellists’ honest descriptions of what vision loss meant in their lives brought feeling into the room, and trainees told of how learners they had known were, even in memory, re-animated and made more understandable by the experience. After one session, the panellists agreed that it felt as though they were voicing something of the pain of learners ‘out there’ who found it difficult to make themselves heard.

Many trainees felt deeply moved, and that the behaviour of learners with vision loss now made more sense. For example, this trainee said:

‘Being in the world of the visual impairment people was the most enjoyable moment. I have learned a lot about them and how they feel and how they want to be treated’.

However, others expressed resistance to ‘getting under the skin’ of the experience of VI. In a discussion concerning how especially difficult it may be for adolescents to take on the trappings of the ‘blind identity’, one trainee disagreed, saying that this was ‘no different’ to how all teenagers struggle with looking different. HL responded by gently pointing out that, while that is true, vision loss at any age, for anyone, is traumatic, and taking on visible signs of disability will interweave with that distress.
**Digesting Difficult Emotions**

In his teaching on the course, as well as in framing the panel chats, BW reiterated that, for everyone, disability is associated with difficult emotions, including anxiety. This idea draws on a critical psychoanalytic view of disablism (Watermeyer, 2013; Marks, 1999), which highlights how disability tends to evoke disavowed parts of the emotional world of the observer, resonating with universally human feelings of shame, inadequacy and dependence, among others. In the critical psychoanalytic view, it is these feelings – or, more precisely, the psychological defence mechanisms which they trigger – which are at the heart of the distancing and prejudiced responses from the social world which are so familiar to visibly disabled people. Even where prejudice is not clearly visible, the anxiety which VI can engender often leads to the silencing of the experience of people who live with vision loss, who may learn from an early age that others cannot cope with their reality (French, 1993; Watermeyer, 2009). In explaining these dynamics, Author emphasised that there is no shame in these anxieties – on the contrary, fears of difference, as well as of our shared human frailty, are universal. Further, moving beyond fear and social distance requires safe spaces in which one can explore and express one’s fears about the lives of persons who, at first glance, seem very different to ‘us’. Based on this introduction, the panel sought to model a comfort and easy candour with their own vulnerability, as well as with the uncertainty others may have about life with VI.

Through this exposure, it was hoped that trainees would both have an intimate experience of emotional vulnerability associated with the onset of VI, and also be given permission to feel and explore their own feelings about vision loss. On the final day, one trainee commented: ‘Brian said we will have conversations that are free and honest and I saw that. And we were allowed to even cry and to voice our worries and feelings’.

For others, working with their feelings about VI was more difficult. After a panellist had relayed a story about emotionally abusive staff in the school hostel she had lived in, a teacher responded by quite abruptly stating that ‘at our school we only have very nurturing staff’. It seemed that at that moment it felt too hard for this teacher to hear the panellist’s painful story, and the panellist, HL, felt that her experience had been deflected, if not denied. In response, Author affirmed that, ‘of course, this is not happening in all schools. To Author, this interaction represented ‘a microcosm’ of what she had experienced in school – that is, showing vulnerability in a world that did not and would not permit it. As already noted, social forces maintaining silence around the experience of both embodied and environmental aspects of disability remain pervasive (French, 1993; Lourens, 2020; Swartz et al., 2018; Watermeyer, 2016).

In particular, various disability studies scholars with VI have confirmed a picture of the disallowing of emotional vulnerability in residential special schools for VI children, as well as in the family (for example, Kleege, 2006; Kuusisto, 1998; Lourens & Swartz, 2019; Michalko, 1998). From her own school experience, Author told of how children at her special school were regularly scolded for crying. One small boy, she recalled, was relatively new to the hostel, and would often cry because of missing his home and parents. A short time later, news spread that the boy’s mother had unexpectedly passed away. A matter of weeks after this, Author was walking behind the boy in a line to enter the school hall for assembly, and again, he was crying. A teacher pulled him out of the line and scolded him harshly for his tears. Author protested to
the teacher, saying that the boy’s mother had recently died. The teacher, however, was unreceptive, saying that enough time had gone by, and it was time for the tears to stop.

Amid a deep discussion of emotional aspects of vision loss, one teacher put up her hand, and stated that understanding these issues is ‘all good and well’, but she was becoming increasingly anxious about having ‘a curriculum to get through’. She spoke earnestly of a heartfelt responsibility to ‘do everything I can’ to prepare her VI learners for the ‘world out there’. What seemed evident here was a mix of realistic concerns regarding a demanding curriculum which left little space for perceived ‘add-ons’, and the use of that same curriculum as a bulwark against both rational and irrational worries to do with whether life with VI is survivable. To explain the latter, her concern was not just with her charges performing well academically, but with somehow ‘arming’ them optimally with skills to navigate, we assume, a hostile world and an embodied and psychological experience of functional limitation. In response, Author acknowledged and normalised her anxiety, paying more attention to this than the content of her remarks. He noted that ‘there is always anxiety where disability is concerned’, and how this anxiety can push us into a ‘doing mode’ which causes us to lose sight of important aspects of teaching beyond the curriculum, especially those pertaining to relationship. At this point as well as many others, panellists took care to express empathy for the pressures teachers were under, to hold responsibility for caring for learners needs at multiple levels, from the scholastic to the emotional.

The panellists held the intent to reflect and acknowledge the feelings of the teachers, thereby modelling to them the importance of acknowledging emotional distress within learners. It was clear to the panellists that for many of the teachers the emotional lives of learners with VI were experienced as an overwhelming and undifferentiated mass, which was too frightening, too strange, to contemplate. The simple modelling of a ‘can-do’ attitude regarding this layer of the lives of VI persons felt like a powerful intervention. Making thought-space available to consider the inner lives of VI learners began to allow trainees to imagine why learners behaved the way they did. For example, the simple idea that learners may be reluctant to ask for assistance because of feeling that they are a nuisance, or that the teacher was too tired or stressed to deal with their needs, felt like a revelation to some.

**Modelling Mutual Acceptance**

From the outset, panellists agreed that mutual acceptance and empathy between disabled and non-disabled people is fundamental to honest communication, real connection, and the creation of a more inclusive environment. In his research on psychological and relational aspects of disablism, BW found that, almost above all, research participants with visible disabilities yearned for relationships which were real and robust, free from the avoidant silences and awkwardness with which they were often confronted (Watermeyer & Swartz, 2008). These participants were very ready to allow that; for others, disability was not easy to think about, and welcomed candid conversations which allowed sharing of differences, thereby deepening relationship. The close cultural association of disability with guilt (Watermeyer, 2013) may leave non-disabled people anxious about being judged ‘insensitive’, leaving complicated or ambivalent feelings about disability untouched, and poorly understood. With such strong emotion never far away, it felt essential to the panellists to not risk any teacher feeling judged as inadequate or prejudiced. Instead, the tone of engagement which was aimed for was one of us ‘muddling through together’ across differences in embodiment
and lifestyle, with difference being something which binds, rather than separates us. The maxim that ‘we are all here to learn from one another’ – that is, teachers from visually impaired persons and vice-versa – was repeated many times. As a corollary, BW stated at several points in his teaching that the single most valuable resource available to the inclusive teacher is a relationship with her learner which is open, accepting and honest, allowing for easy communication in both directions. This allows for the ongoing exploration and modification of solutions to problems with access. When both participants feel safe and secure in the relationship, it is easier for learners to name not only what helps, but what does not help, without fear of offence or being seen as a nuisance. Similarly, teachers may feel freed to think broadly and creatively, without fear of being blamed in a personal way for attempted solutions which do not work well.

To create this tone, BW began the first day’s sessions by stating to the audience that ‘you are the teachers, working with real learners in the real world’ (as against disability scholars at a university), and consequently that ‘we must design the course in terms of your experience and what we can learn from you’. In this way presenters hoped to create a flat, non-hierarchical engagement of mutual knowledge creation, deepening understanding through shared reflection and discussion rather than didactic tuition (Freire, 1997). Teachers brought first-hand knowledge of the exigencies of teaching learners with disabilities in low-resource environments, while the panellists felt that working carefully with emotional aspects of VI would assist in freeing creativity and confidence. Panellists agreed that an important part of developing ‘disability confidence’ (Murfitt, 2016) was the creation of safe forums in which mistakes could be made without judgement. If the teachers had felt in danger of being judged, they would have been unlikely to voice possible misapprehensions about life with VI, or their difficult experiences with individual VI learners, leaving these ideas un-dealt with. During a panel discussion on these issues, BW made the point as follows:

When one feels nervous about disability, it is difficult to say in that situation what you need and don’t need, because everyone is nervous that they’d step on someone’s toes. It’s really hard to create a situation where teacher and learner both feel free to speak openly to one another, because there’s such a lot of feeling flying around.

The panellists hoped that the modelling of this form of discussion in the course would make it more possible for teachers to create such relationships in their work around VI.

Care was taken, however, to ensure that the tone of mutual acceptance was not a barrier to clear, honest critique of poor or unethical practice, such as that experienced by some of the panellists during their school years. Instead, the emphasis was on understanding the systemic issues which may have underpinned these problems. One teacher expressed her openness to thinking about problematic areas of her own practice:

What I want to say from my experience this week is that I’ve learned a lot. Some of it I’ve been doing but I was unaware – the positives. But there are the negatives that I’ve been doing, because I was being defensive in a way; not knowing what to do with the child at that particular moment. But now I’m going with a few lessons, like I must be patient with the learners and the visually impaired community that I’m working with. Because I used to be harsh with them sometimes.

Working with VI learners will always be a complex dance, where sometimes teachers will get it right, and sometimes they will be wrong. Panellists believed that, especially in low-
resource environments, unlocking teacher creativity was essential, and that this could only be done in an environment accepting enough to allow for honest reflexivity.

**Adding Humour and Lightness to an Engagement with Difficult Issues**

The panellists regularly bridged the divide between them and the teachers through the use of humour. As Mulkay so aptly states, ‘humour allows contradictory worlds to coexist’ (cited in Mik-Meyer, 2007). Humour seemed to bind everyone in the room together around a common purpose, and a common humanity – the teachers who shared their anxieties of working with visually impaired learners on the one hand, and the panellists who shared their emotionally laden memories of their teachers and their respective school environments on the other. Through humour, panellists and teachers could find each other half way and acknowledge that, in the midst of these struggles, we are all muddling through.

During the reflective sessions, the panellists and teachers sometimes laughed about difficult issues. For example, HL once remarked that the special school encouraged her to be a call centre agent rather than a psychologist – at base, no laughing matter. HL responded by saying, ‘I think you would be quite charming as a call centre agent’ which, perhaps paradoxically, seemed to affirm HL’s humanity in the face of treatment which was undermining and oppressive.

Many discussions included topic areas which were thorny and difficult to digest, involving stories containing the pain and anxiety of isolation, mistreatment and invalidation. Over the week, panellists seemed to grow in their ability to examine areas of conflict in an accepting, light-hearted way. Attention was paid to ensuring that humour was not used in a defensive manner, but in a way, which disarmed, stimulating a new candour in dealing with sensitive issues. The power of modelling an easy, bold engagement with disability-difference to overcome awkwardness, avoidance and defensive political correctness, was commented on by all panellists.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have argued for the importance of relational-based aspects of training for teachers of learners with VI, as well as other forms of disability. While we do not at all minimise the importance of instrumental skills training, we argue that the personal relationship which teachers have to VI, and persons with VI, is foundational in facilitating a response to the VI learner which is attuned, creative and empowering. In low-resource environments such as our own, and where the platform for teacher training is constrained (in terms of available contact hours), we regard this principle as doubly important. This is due to the fact that in such circumstances teachers are required more than elsewhere to rely on their own sense of self-efficacy, creativity and flexibility to create meaningful solutions that promote access. Such creativity depends on a comfort with difference, and an ease around clear communication with learners and parents regarding meaningful inclusion.

What our experience in this project has shown, is that a non-hierarchical, candid, authentic – but also fun – forum for engaging with emotional and experiential aspects of VI has the capacity to disrupt silences and anxieties which can act as barriers to inclusion. What may, we believe, be grown through this sort of engagement, is a humble and humane ‘can-do’ attitude
which empowers teachers to relate to VI learners through common-sense, human identification, rather than defensive social distancing.

Notes
1. Learner is the preferred term in South Africa for scholar or student.
2. Special schools are, ostensibly at least, ‘schools equipped to deliver education to learners requiring high-intensive educational and other support on either a fulltime or a part-time basis’ (DBE, 2014, p. 8).
3. Full-service schools are ordinary schools which are equipped to provide for the full-range of learning needs of all learners (Department of Education [DoE], 2001, p. 22. Full-service schools are thus, in theory at least, ordinary schools that accommodate learners with disabilities.

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