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Factors that affect the experience of smooth transitions across educational sectors in Malta on disabled young people with sensorial disabilities

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Abstract:
This article focuses on the factors that enable or limit smooth transitions across educational and employment sectors. Smooth transitions have an impact on the element of continuity on the lived experiences of disabled students and other stakeholders. The mixed-methods study explored the experience of inclusive education of disabled students with physical and sensorial disabilities in further and higher education in Malta. In this paper I reflect on the data obtained from one-time semi-structured interviews with disabled young people that have attended or were attending further and higher education at the time of data collection. The participants' reflections provided examples of how the quality of the lived experiences of inclusive education influences identity and academic development throughout their educational journey. The dynamics within and across educational institutions influence the extent disabled students develop agency, empowerment and self-advocacy. A collaborative approach among stakeholders or the lack of it has an impact on disabled students to develop one's full learning potential and find employment. The reflections signify that inclusive education is not just a matter of having one's right met, but its short-term and long-term effectiveness is highly dependent on the quality of the students' experiential continuum within the educational institutions.

Keywords: inclusion, disability, further education, higher education

Introduction

This paper reflects on how the experiences of Maltese disabled students during their course of studies and during the transition period between educational levels and employment affect one's social and educational development. In exploring the ontology of lived experiences, student participants who have first-hand experience of disability and inclusive education in further and higher education were considered knowledgeable about these phenomena. The lived experiences were reflected upon to develop inferences as, "such reflection upon experience gives rise to a distinction between what we experience (the experienced) and the experiencing – the how" (Dewey, 1930, p. 196). The reflections revealed the contentious political debate on how the implementation of inclusive educational policies shape the young students' identity and academic level development.

Methodology

The theoretical framework of this article stems from Dewey's theory of experience and the related "category of continuity or the experiential continuum," whereby its direction affects the growth of the persona and the quality of progressive education that is endeavoured from the early years onwards (Dewey, 1938, p. 17). The social model of disability was utilised to build disability discourse that highlights the environmental, social and educational enabling/disabling factors at further and higher education that are social by nature (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation [UPIAS], 1976; Fernie & Henning, 2006; Seale, 2006). The interpretive theoretical framework of poststructuralism was utilised to conceptualise hidden meanings within the text on the notions of 'other' and identity. Corker (2005) sustains that poststructuralism "deals specifically with language and discourse and, as such, is bound up with issues of meaning, representation and identity" (p. 224).

Identity is not only a constituent of the self, but also a social one. Titchkosky (2006) argues that, "the experience of disability gives rise to the opportunity to examine how the meaning of people's lives is built together with other people" (p. 10). When merging the interpretative frameworks of poststructuralism and critical disability studies, it is argued that notions of disability discourse and the type of inclusive/exclusive culture within further and higher education institutions can be explored by analysing experiences of dis/ablement.

Twelve disabled young people with physical and/or sensory disabilities who have attended or were attending further and higher education at the time of data collection participated in a one-time semi-structured interview. The participants were eight males and four females and their age ranged between 20 and 40 years. Cousin (2009) elucidates that "by collecting and transcribing interview talk, the researcher can produce rich empirical data about the lives and perspectives of individuals" (p. 71). To increase fluency, semi-structured interviews permit deviations from the order and number of the prearranged structure of questions and to extend the discussion if needed (Opie, 2004; Cousin 2009).

'Snowball sampling', where "participants are asked to recruit individuals to join the study", was used to enrol the participants (Collins, 2010, p. 358). Piloting the interview indicated whether the responses would address the research questions and whether aspects as regards access to information needed further consideration. To respect the participants' choice, for persons with hearing impairment and some of those with visual impairment, the interviews were conducted using computer mediated communication such as email and Skype but with audio tool only. One interview was conducted via a telephone. These methods of conducting interviews provided the qualitative data needed and they were the most effective to gather the essential information (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Each interview was approximately an hour long. The interviews were designed following Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009, p. 102) guidelines which included 'thematising', 'designing', 'interviewing', 'transcribing', 'analysing', 'verifying' and 'reporting'. For ethical purposes pseudonyms were used and as indicated below, codes are used to indicate the type of participant that is quoted.

'Conventional content analysis' which entailed conducting thematic analysis of textual material was adopted (Max Bergman, 2010, p. 387). Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) elucidate that for thematic analysis, the examination of themes entails "looking for patterns across the interconnecting" data (p. 253). Data analysis was done manually to familiarise with the complexity of the data and the language used to express the inner world of experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The findings which are presented in the next section indicate that the political challenges within and across educational institutions and employment entities are permeated with social constructs.

Results

The findings were grouped into themes that discuss the challenging dynamics that the participants revealed in relation to the politics between the self and one's identity, the politics between the self and others in experiencing inclusive education and the politics between the self and entities of education, assessment and employment.

The politics between the self and one's identity

Marks (2008) explains that self-determination encompasses key skills such as self-regulation, self-knowledge, self-reflection, problem solving, goal setting, self-monitoring, and decision making. The student participants sought to be autonomous, determined to further their education and develop effective self-help strategies and self-advocacy skills. It was maintained that disabled students need to have a strong determination as many times due to personal limitations, it takes them a bit longer to achieve something than a non-disabled person. They also needed to be creative, outgoing and assertive so that they would be included in group activities. These self-help strategies facilitated social inclusion and the acquisition of what was theirs by right. Most of the participants argued that their parents transmitted their advocacy skills to them and encouraged them to be creative and flexible in thinking of alternative solutions so that they would participate in activities with their friends. The participants acknowledged that it was not easy to believe in their potential and convince others of their abilities. Developing skills of persuasion and reassurance were essential to overcome personal moments of apprehension and when others were afraid of their welfare. Being brought up in an inclusive environment and an inclusive culture influenced their self-determination which entailed an ongoing evaluation and affirmation of their perceptions of their abilities:

> "I want to contribute, I want to further my studies, I don't know what I shall achieve, it could be that I'll pass, it could be that I won't pass. They are telling me stop" (Clark)
> "I also worked twice as hard as hearing students as I wanted to succeed and achieve. Not many deaf students manage to do this" (Ann)

Sanders (2006) argues that when parents overprotect their children, they cause their child to become powerless, be limited in developing advocacy skills and during their transition to adulthood, they become dependent on others. The

analysis of the interviews revealed that parental and other adult overprotection has a negative impact on the development of identity, independence and social abilities during adolescence. The experience of having decisions taken by adults was considered as patronising and disempowering especially during adolescence where the development of agency and independence are encouraged. Segregation from peers also limits young people from developing self-help strategies how to cope with perils. As discussed by Callus, Bonello, Mifsud and Fenech (2019), protection should not be equated to overprotection and there should be a balance between parental protection to mitigate abuse from others and having trust in society towards the wellbeing towards their disabled adult children:

> "There was a certain element of negative attitudes, paternalism, overprotection. They offered me Sociology and Philosophy that absolutely I didn't need. Sometimes we have a tendency that we impose what we think is good for the person" (Rupert)
> "I do not agree that you segregate persons with disability in separate schools. … I never had an LSA (Learning Support Assistant) and my parents have always encouraged me to be part of the rest of the group. … My friends are also an essential part as they've always considered me the leader of the pack" (Oswald)

The interviewees pointed out that a smooth transition from secondary to further and higher education institutions was highly dependent on the level of preparation that was carried out from the student's side and the educational institutions. Designing courses using pedagogies that are student-centred rather than service-centred were regarded important to create a praxis in the learning landscape. This implies flexibility in the provision of courses and services provided to meet students' needs, to help students complete courses successfully at their own pace without wasting time and energy repeating courses or units:

> "If we'll change the pedagogy that it would be an inclusive pedagogy and that it will be person-centred, we'll make a big difference" (Martin)
> "At secondary, I was used to a system where we were a bit pampered. When I went there and I found the situation a bit different, I was a bit shocked at the beginning. … For whom it's not possible, I believe that an LSA (Learning Support Assistant) should be provided" (Kristof)

Riddell and Weedon (2014) explain that students with hidden impairments are the largest group of disabled students. Thus, understanding their experiences is important because during their personal and professional lives they face dilemmas in terms of whether to disclose the invisibility of their impairment. In this research, disclosure of one's impairment was considered as a sensitive issue as it exposed an aspect of their identity. It was acknowledged that disclosure was hard particularly when a person would be developing an impairment during adolescence or young adulthood, has not accepted the impairment fully, or it is a hidden impairment. Other participants regarded disclosure as a means to educate others, to make other people sensitive to one's needs, or as a prerequisite to obtain access arrangements for exams. Some participants questioned the effectiveness of disclosure on application forms of courses as it was not a guarantee that the information was communicated to lecturers:

> "In the application I wrote that I am visually impaired and I remember the introduction meeting. I told her, "What facilities are there for persons who are visually impaired?" This poor person was shocked by surprise" (Martin)
> "During puberty and during adolescence you'll still be shy. … When I applied online for a Masters, I wrote that I had this hearing impairment. When I came for the viva, I was really afraid of having a Skype session. Meanwhile, I told my tutor about my impairment" (Sarah)

The notion of 'passing' which refers to pretending to cope with the situation at hand, emerged as a troubling issue (Michalko, 2002, p. 21). Passing was referred to by participants with hearing impairment. Since hearing impairment is a hidden impairment, they did not want to be attached with a disability identity (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2010). During adolescence, the participants were embarrassed to show their vulnerability and dependency on their peers. They developed resilience to cope with self-consciousness of their impairment and academic needs. The state of being in pretention surfaced feelings of guilt, shame and yet a relief of showing to others that they were fine:

> "The transition from secondary to post-secondary school and to university made me aware how much I needed assistance. It wasn't easy asking other students to lend me notes. Since I was still a teenager, I felt

very embarrassed. Sometimes, I even pretended that I did not need notes to avoid having to ask students to lend me the notes" (Ann)

Beaty (1992) elucidates that self-concept is described as an individual's perception of who the person within is. Data analysis of the interviews showed that during adolescence, self-concept of one's abilities in contrast to peers was a delicate issue and affects identity development. Lack of self-confidence due to low self-esteem had a negative impact on a social and educational level as it limits a person's social cohesion with the rest of the community. It was pointed out that during the secondary years, disabled students should become conscious and be prepared for the lifestyle typical to post-secondary schools where a student is expected to be autonomous and confident to speak up. Otherwise, the student would be shocked and the chances of withdrawing from courses increase. Empowerment from learning support assistants, family and friends help a person to develop an outgoing personality. Lack of environmental accessibility limits the extent to which disabled persons can be independent and makes them self-conscious of the natural limitations caused by their impairment. The participants considered that their dignity was respected in proportion to their level of independence:

"I was finding it hard to accept my condition, let alone to go and tell him I have so and so" (Martin)
"Since I was a bit shy, it was difficult for me to make friends. Adolescence made me become an introvert as I started to realise that for certain things, it was going to be more difficult for me to achieve them. I met an LSA (Learning Support Assistant) who helped me to bring out my character. Because of him and my parents I came out again" (Kristof)

Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl and Petry (2012) explain that "loneliness is a subjective, unpleasant and distressing experience resulting from a discrepancy between the perceived quantity and quality of one's desired and one's actual relationships" (p. 1889) and implies that students would be socially at risk. In this research, the construct of loneliness was considered as a factor that affects students' psychological wellbeing and it was related to social exclusion and educational disadvantage. Deaf participants experienced loneliness, lack of communication and social exclusion due to lack of knowledge of sign language amongst the public. Having a sense of belonging and a social network were contributory factors in terms of receiving and reciprocating support. Loneliness was remarked as a peril of distance learning opportunities which

not all students are able to withstand. Deaf participants and those with hearing impairment indicated that lack of communication with lecturers, peers and people while conducting research was detrimental on a social and educational level. Deaf participants claimed that lip reading, good-will of friends who lend their notes, peripatetic teachers for the Deaf, lecturers who put effort to overcome barriers and parental support were crucial during their schooling years:

> "The idea of an online degree, even though it was convenient for me as I could do everything from home, I started feeling a bit lonely. When I was at university, I used to find support from my friends. The fact that I was alone, I decided to stop" (Rupert)
> "Inaccessibility to communication and information. … Deaf students have always struggled during their education since they cannot be informed of what is happening around them. Some Deaf students are not completely happy, as they are a bit lonely in peer group communication and they also find difficulties to understand the teacher" (Gerald)

The self and others in experiencing inclusive education

The participants noted that the active participation of disabled persons creates a social capital of disability activists. By means of dialogue and collaboration, they became critical persons in identifying disabling and enabling factors and in giving suggestions about how systems and practices could be improved on campus. Duplaga (2017, p. 15) maintains that "the internet may be a source of opportunities for people with disabilities both in terms of accessing information and increasing social inclusion." In this research it emerged that social capital made the participants feel secure while being introduced to new environments such as further/higher education institutions. Meeting key persons served as anchorage that prevented the participants from being drifted during the course. Support from individuals empowered them to develop self-advocacy and agency:

> "At university, there is a unit that assists. During the first year, it's very important, you'll arrange lectures, you'll integrate with society, you'll know what you have to do, how to apply for exams and the government needs to strengthen this" (John)

> "When it was time to enter university, I had a friend. He introduced me to the people whom I was going to be involved with. The planning is important across the board, all along" (Rupert)

The provision of support from family, friends, academic and non-academic staff within schools and the public helped the participants to overcome daily educational and environmental disabling barriers and obtain emotional support to overcome challenges. Persons with hearing impairment stressed the beneficial impact of receiving support from peers to obtain notes. Support helped the participants to feel secure, develop resilience and perseverance especially during the first year of the course. When an impairment develops during adolescence or young adulthood, support from the staff within the school community and friends was regarded as crucial to come in terms with one's new identity and getting used to a new lifestyle. Thus, support had a physical and psychological impact on the participants:

> "At university, they don't accept LSAs (Learning Support Assistants) as much as possible. I had the help of my friends. I was very lucky that I was in a course where we were eleven only. We were a team and we used to cope" (Kristof)
> "At post-secondary school and university, I did not have a facilitator. I had to depend on friends. Since I am deaf and depend upon lip reading, I'm unable to listen and write at the same time. So, I had to copy or borrow notes from friends" (Ann)

The participants appreciated when they received support in person, via telephone and online means such as email, social networks and Skype. However, the support was not consistent, and was highly dependent on one's personal outlook towards disability rather than standardised from a rights-based approach. Gaad and Almotairi (2013) recommend decision makers to invest in training and providing specialised speech therapists, psychologists, teachers' aides to make inclusive education viable in higher education. In this research, personnel employed within the Access Disability Support Services were identified as key persons who support disabled students on campus. Their support facilitated students' transition from one sector to another, acted as an intermediary between administrators, students or lecturers, and in obtaining access arrangements:

> "As lecturers, they were all very supportive from the first year till the last and I think that it was a big stimulus. It's not the first time that lecturers send us their presentations via email" (Martin)
> "The course administrators tend to understand that if there is a disabled person, they need to organise ground floor rooms. When I applied, they said that if there were any issues, they would try very hard to address them" (Roxanne)

Disabled students' participation enabled staff within further and higher education institutions and employment sectors during job placements to became familiar with a typology of a student or employee that exposes some form of otherness than the traditional student/employee. Their activism created consciousness and had an emancipatory effect on improving accessibility in the building, accessibility in learning and the working environments. The adaptations had a beneficial effect for all students and staff (Chanock, Stevens & Freeman, 2011). The participants in this research also became conscious of the power they shared stemming from their experiential knowledge. Experience in having disabled students at further and higher education made non-disabled administrators, lecturers or other staff members conscious of how things have to be organised to accommodate the needs of disabled persons. The participation of disabled students created a cultural and a social praxis that transformed disabled and non-disabled persons in learning how to implement inclusive education and foster social inclusion:

> "It's not the first time that I was approached by the Head of Department with regard to disabilities to find ways how we can include other students" (Martin)

Morley and Croft (2011) sustain that disabled students' participation in higher education seemed to be the outcome of their individual and collective agency to challenge the structures that seemed to establish different educational outcomes for them. In this research, the interviewees showed that developing effective communication skills, advocacy skills and agency are self-help strategies that facilitate disabled and non-disabled persons to understand each other's point of view. Disposition towards developing collaboration promote social inclusion, social cohesion and enhances the implementation of inclusive education. Effective communication and collaboration reduce the incidence that non-disabled persons would develop or strengthen cultural misunderstandings and negative assumptions about disabled people. In

contrast, disabled people would learn and understand the way non-disabled see and experience the world, and learn on the importance of being clear and polite in requesting, refusing or accepting help:

> "The fact that someone asks me, it's something educational. It's something beautiful. Unfortunately, I find people at university and outside who do what comes to their mind, they assume" (Martin)

A smooth transition from secondary to further and higher education institutions was highly dependent on the level of preparation that was carried out from the student's side and the educational institutions. Designing courses, using pedagogies that are student-centred rather than service-centred were regarded important to create a praxis in the learning landscape. This implies flexibility in the provision of courses and services provided to meet students' needs, to help students complete courses successfully at their own pace without wasting time and energy repeating courses or units:

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The availability of state support services such as a personal assistant helped the participants to gain independence while having their privacy and dignity respected. The participants underlined the importance of creating connections between schooling and employment. In line with the affirmative model of disability (Swain & French, 2000) the participants embraced their disability as an integral part of their identity and argued that our society needs to value the potential of each individual and creates opportunities where every person is able to function and contribute to society:

> "Support Agency. They help me as for example, I can't go alone to a rest room. You would have a particular time. It's also important that schools would know of these Agencies2 (Kristof)
> "Deaf people always struggle to find work due their inferior education also due the employers` attitude towards Deaf people" (Gerald)

Preparedness also entails that disabled and non-disabled individuals at educational institutions or employment entities develop conceptual and practical frameworks that include instruction about disability issues and promote values of adaptability, flexibility and creativity to find alternative solutions to challenging situations. Peer preparation among students and colleagues was regarded beneficial as it helps non-disabled peers to develop disability etiquette and the aptitude towards developing positive collegial relationships with disabled persons. Downing (2006) argues that "peers provide more natural support, which works to increase social interactions and communication skills, maintain or enhance students' academic engagement, and may reduce displays of inappropriate behaviours" (p. 329). From this research, it emerged that work placements set the platform for employers to identify and address disabling barriers proactively:

> "If there won't be support so that I enter the world of employment, it would be more difficult to find employment. A person with a disability needs that his future would be planne". (John)
> "As regards approach, the workers told me that they were prepared before I came so that they won't exclude me or something" (Rose)

The self and entities of education, assessment and employment

The interviewees interpreted accessibility in terms of environmental, information and assessment accessibility that facilitates social and educational development. When accessibility was available from a rights standpoint, the participants felt included, respected and experienced a degree of normalisation. Lack of environmental accessibility was considered a major obstacle for disabled persons from living a full life, like any other student and citizen. Environmental inaccessibility for persons with visual impairment was considered as a main stumbling block. Participants with visual impairment indicated that lecture rooms lacked resources to control light, and public areas lacked audio and tactile cues and embossed signage. Buildings are not built following the Universal Design framework which is aimed at reducing seclusion and humiliation caused by environmental barriers (Shakespeare, 2006; Seale, 2006):

> "As regards the environment, we did progress but we're not seeing the needs of persons with a disability. At university, there would be voice recognition, names of places and different sounds" (John)

> "Going around the university, in certain places, you only see columns. In classes, it's not the first time that the sunlight control is very poor. … A person without light perception is going to find it very hard to distinguish a place from another as you don't have certain tactile signs on the ground. … On the doors, there should be Braille signs or embossed letters" (Martin)

Seale, Georgeson, Mamas and Swain (2015) maintain that support services need to consider that "disabled students can lack the 'right' kind of digital capital to enable them to succeed within higher education environments" (p. 127). They recommend that the use of technology by disabled students would be diverse, constructive and empowering. The interviewees remarked that technological equipment such as an iPad helps persons with visual impairment to download eBooks and journal articles from online sources. Technology was considered as means to increase physical and information accessibility for persons with different disabilities.

> "Braille is still important and it's beautiful. Today the computer replaced it. I prefer to hold the mobile or the computer and stay reading online" (John)
> "Technology, even the fact that you have online libraries, you have thousands of books. The iPad is fantastic as apart from the possibility to enlarge and reduce the font, you can also regulate the background" (Martin)

Education was regarded as the key to empowerment and independence. Lack of financial assistance to buy technological equipment, environmental inaccessibility and lack of human resources to assist disabled people to do their daily activities, to reach their full learning potential and become employed imprison disabled persons. The findings indicated that Deaf students face great challenges during data collection. Moreover, while non-disabled peers have access to academic books at the libraries free of charge, persons with visual impairment have to purchase their resources. Lack of assistive technology in labs, and lack of audio and tactile resources in public places reduces the confidence of persons with visual impairment to move freely and securely. Such educational and environmental disabling barriers put additional pressure on students to finish assignments and research on time:

> "There should be financial assistance to buy additional equipment. I personally feel that educating a disabled person and getting them into the workplace where they will be paying taxes and not taking benefits, and contributing to the economy should be pay back enough" (Roxanne)
> "When I was doing research for my thesis, I used to struggle to get information as I cannot phone people to get information. I used to write emails or SMSing, but these means weren`t always successful since these are one-way communication. I was going to give up due other people's lack of care especially from the professors" (Gerald)

Konur (2002) argues that educators and administrators involved in higher education programmes have a crucial role in "making proper assessment adjustments for disabled students undertaking examinations to ensure that their academic achievement is measured rather than their disabilities" (p. 149). The interviewees signposted that unrealistic time frames during examinations affected the extent disabled persons could show what they know and thus they felt oppressed. Being given extra time is beneficial, but one's mental abilities are lowered after a prolonged time. Lack of distance learning facilities in local further/higher education institutions was also considered as oppressing disabled persons who cannot attend lectures on campus from furthering their education. This situation was regarded as a deficit. Oppression inculcated frustration among participants:

> "The computer exam, three hours. Even a normal person gets tired after three hours, let alone a blind person" (John)
> "Due to the medical care that I need, I won't be able to attend them. … A group of students is audio recording the lectures for me. There should be the structures for the university to have distance learning. They are doing it on voluntary basis. The reality is that there's a deficit" (Clark)

Discussion

Based on Dewey's theory of experience, the evidence demonstrated that the experience of inclusive education is socially constructed and encompasses elements of continuity across the educational sectors and society in valuing inclusive education and each member in society. The extent to which environmental, educational and social disabling barriers are removed and enabling factors are enhanced depends upon whether there is a rights-based ideology on a philosophical and a pragmatic level amongst stakeholders and

whether they have a constructive attitude towards making mechanisms and practices accessible to a diverse student population.

Transition periods between sectors emerged as delicate periods of adjustment both for the students, administrators and educators. When reflecting upon how social factors can influence the way schooling is experienced and one's identity is shaped, a social cultural praxis pro-inclusion would channel a collective commitment to celebrate diversity in a way that empowers individuals irrelevant of their differences (Adams & Brown, 2006; Gordon, 2009; Burgstahler, 2010). This statement adheres to Dewey's (1930) assertion that the process of living together renders educational benefits. However, as suggested by Portelli (2010), there is the need for more open fora that deconstruct and reconstruct the 'learning landscape' critically by different stakeholders. This open discussion on inclusive education could be regarded as a process of continuity and growth to reach out to different learners (Ainscow, 2008). An inclusive culture necessitates creative and flexible systems of inclusion to suite different learners rather than having a fixed interpretation of inclusive education. This approach would recognise that each student is unique, has strengths and difficulties and a right for education that is protected by quality assurance (Corbett, 2001).

The findings consolidated the importance of stakeholders to listen to each other's political challenges to mediate a possible strategy of inclusive education that values students' voices and an integral part of its continuum. This pragmatic action presents a situation where individuals are made conscious and widen the range of commitments towards others (Mouffe, 1997). Additionally, the findings indicate that the participants valued collaboration, interdependence, solidarity and moral responsibility towards others that promote social cohesion and community development. This supports the recommendations put forward by Coffield et al. (2008) where positive relationships, communication and collaboration across the whole educational sector among different learners, educators and policy-makers would enhance the quality of inclusive education. There should be significant restructuring and "reculturing processes" within the educational system and its support services that address inequity and inaccessibility in the built environment and the infrastructure within it (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2008, p. 35).

For smooth transitions across entities to be successful, the participants underlined that constructive relationships among different stakeholders

inculcate a pro-inclusion culture. Good relationships are a social construct that create spaces where different stakeholders are considered with an equal power to challenge the construct of difference in the mechanism of the respective educational institution. On the same lines, Fernie and Henning (2006) suggest that, "self-advocacy and self-determination inculcate a sense of partnership between academic staff and students, in which each group is responsible for their respective roles, ensuring students succeed in maximising their academic potential" (p. 26). Moreover, the participants' reflections underlined that constructive support networks increased disabled and non-disabled students' resilience to face challenges and promote social inclusion. Coleman and Hagell (2007) explain that resilience describes positive adaptation to adversity while vulnerability is the failure to adaptation, lack of resistance or maladjustment to adversity. Roberts (2009) deduces that school staff is an important source of support to disabled students to overcome challenges and to improve organisation to meet students' needs. Haihambo (2011) claims that lack of sensitivity from peers and lecturers promote exclusion from group participation. Flexibility, communication, recognition of the benefits of interdependence, open mindedness, mutual understanding and empathy are key to inclusive learning that is student-centred (Corbett, 2001; Haihambo, 2011).

Conclusion

The development of smooth transitions across entities is a means of assisting students to reach their full learning and employment potential. Empowering students to voice themselves, develop self-advocacy skills and agency from the early years stemmed from a rights-based ideology are means to encourage disabled persons to develop an identity of individuals who are able to contribute in the transformation of the educational system that is more democratic and socially just. Collaboration among staff, flexibility and accessibility in the provision of courses, programmes and assessment are useful to balance the provision of inclusive education on a theoretical and pragmatic level (Björnsdóttir, 2017). This implies training so that staff involved in the planning of programmes and lecturers would plan courses suitable for student diversity (Goodrich, 2016).

Further investment is needed to ensure that diverse students have an opportunity to develop their learning potential and gain employability skills. Investment in developing continuity across educational and employment entities proactively would contribute to the development of disabled persons

as an integral component of human capital, a major resource for the development of sustainable communities.

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