

Preliminary Summary Report:

Strengthening teaching for children with profound hearing, visual and intellectual disabilities in South Africa.

Introduction

TEDI focuses on learners with severe to profound sensory or intellectual impairments (SPSII), and acknowledges that children with impairments are hindered by an environment which is not responsive to their needs, within a social model of disability[1].

Rationale of the Study

Despite policy commitment, progress toward achieving quality education for learners with SPSII is slow. The lack of adequate teacher education is one major area that has been identified as a cause [2]. The European Commission, in partnership with the Department of Higher Education and Training, universities and civil society, aims to develop relevant teacher education programmes.

Study Context

A strong policy framework supports the rights of learners with SPSII in South Africa, [3], [4], [5], [6]. However, implementation of the policies that create an accessible educational framework for learners with SPSII remains inadequate. The majority of children excluded from education have severe to profound disabilities and the majority of SPSII learners with who are in school, attend special schools [7], [8].

The TEDI initiative aims to:

Develop teachers that can address the specialized educational needs of children with profound visual, hearing and intellectual impairment.

South Africa is failing to achieve its education goals, specifically the key imperative, that learners who experience barriers to learning should receive appropriate support in a range of educational settings [4], [5].

Study Aim

This study aims to develop an understanding of the needs of the learner, and how to improve teacher education in order to overcome barriers to learning experienced by learners with SPSII.

Research Methodology

Once endorsement and ethical approval was confirmed interviews were conducted within eight schools that accommodate learners with SPSII. A representative sample was taken from six special schools and two full service schools across the provinces. Two schools specialising in each impairment type and two full service schools were visited. Interviews and questions were conducted using semi-structured interviews and focus groups (see Table 1).

Interviews

- 111 interviews were conducted
- 130 individuals were consulted

Table 1. Total number of individuals interviewed

District Officials	11
Province Officials	6
Parent focus groups of 1–8 parents	27
Teachers	39
SMTs	8
Learners	39

Participants were selected based on their knowledge of the educational needs of learners with SPSII. The following stakeholders were identified: teachers, parents, learners, the provincial directors of inclusive education, member(s) of the district based support team and member(s) of school management team.

The greatest challenge was gaining access to learners, due to the complication of obtaining parental consent.

Interviews with hearing participants were conducted in English or Afrikaans. The option of South African Sign Language (SASL) and interpretation was offered where appropriate.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and loaded onto the Dedoose data analysis software. A sub-set of the data was used to establish coding. The coding criteria were defined and coding is largely completed. Further in-depth analysis will follow. The data is compiled into categories and higher order themes to present a coherent picture of the current status of learner needs and teachers' capacity to meet them.

Data included

The expectation existed that learners would give feedback about impairment-specific needs. However, sometimes the needs which may be expressed by any learner, blurred with impairment-specific needs. It is especially vital, in the life of a child with impairments, that these basic needs be consistently met because of the additional challenges the learner faces every day. Therefore, such expression of needs are included in this report.

Impairment based needs?



There are needs that exist whether or not a learner has an impairment and there are needs that relate directly to their impairment.

Findings: Perspectives on the specialised educational needs of learners with SPSII

Teacher's relationship skills

Teachers who go the extra mile were described, and greatly appreciated by their students. The opposite picture was also presented; some learners saw teachers as allowing their own emotional struggles to interfere with their work. Many learners identified problems regarding teacher patience with, and understanding of, their needs.

In various ways, learners described the hardship of living with disability in circumstances of unreliable access and support. They felt that teachers do not always understand these difficulties.

Deeper analysis of teacher and parent comments suggested that some teachers may not be not equipped emotionally to support learners with SPSII. Such teachers tended to focus on feeling and offering sympathy, rather than creating opportunities for empowerment.

Teachers' pedagogical skills

Learner access to curriculum material was identified as a cause for concern. Much of the teaching was described as uncreative and 'parrot fashion', with teachers reading aloud from textbooks.

A suitable pace, and time to study, were often requested by learners, with descriptions of notes being provided only the day before a test. Teachers, parents and learners reported problems with classroom discipline. Some teachers felt that learners used their disabilities to shirk responsibility.

Pedagogical skills

"Discipline is also important as our teachers are so afraid to discipline our children ... maybe it is the disability thing."

Parent

Learners identified various factors contributing to noisy and chaotic classrooms including: a lack of adequate control by teachers, a mix of age ranges in hostel study classes and the mixing of braille users and low vision learners, resulting in all having to cope with the noise of braille typewriters. Some learners described classes where little teaching took place. Teachers with disabilities, especially with visual impairment, described experiencing difficulties with discipline.

Narrowing of educational expectations

Many special school learners reported lost opportunities. For example, subjects such as maths and physics were not offered at their schools, because these subjects are regarded as unfeasible for learners with sensory impairments.

Some teachers identified that problems with learning stem from low intellect among learners. Such conclusions are a cause of deep concern, as these issues may arise as a consequence of barriers to communication, not low intellect on the learner's part. Failures in communication can lead to an impoverished assessment of a learner's potential and an assumption that expectations should be lowered.

Language barrier

Many learners and teachers identified the lack of teachers who are proficient in SASL and braille, and this is a pivotal problem.

Provision of appropriate materials and equipment

Hostel residents describe hostels that don't support after-school learning. Visually impaired learners described having to rely on classmates with better vision to read their work to them, as no accessible versions of the material were available. Others described inappropriate testing methods.

SASL

'I wish that the teachers can be more understanding and ... get workshops for signing. They can't understand us as deaf people.'

Learner



For example, tests written on the board or test questions that ask for diagrams to be examined by blind and visually impaired learners.

Learners also felt that their educational possibilities were narrowed by the lack, or non-use, of science laboratories, and adequate school libraries.

Availability of accessible Learning and Teaching Support Materials (LTSM)

Both learners and teachers with visual impairments described a host of problems with the provision of accessible learning materials, from delivery and conversion of textbooks, to unreliable photocopiers. Learners described a reliance on projectors and boards to share information. This creates a barrier, preventing many students from accessing information. Students are often not able to copy information at the same pace. Around the topic of provision of appropriate materials there is a strong sense of chaos and unpredictability, leading to anxiety amongst learners.

Students with access to technical assistive devices report great improvements in their ability to continuously participate in the class, without disruptions. The positive effect of assistance was particularly evident in the schools for deaf learners where the new SASL curriculum is being implemented.

Support for learners

Learners described a lack of, and need for, psychological and social work support relating to their experiences of schooling, of disability, and of community-based problems (such as violence). Similarly, teachers identified a lack of professional support staff.

Support assistance

"... most of the children are having problems so if we can have the psychologists, social workers at least maybe they can help"

Teacher

Support assistance for teachers and care workers

It is apparent that teachers do not feel empowered to accommodate the range of student needs they experience, even in specialised schools. There was a sense among teachers that meeting the full spectrum of learner needs was impractical.

Teachers described a lack of teaching assistants. This means that teachers, especially those with disabilities, are unable to do their jobs properly.

Teachers and district officials presented a picture of disparity between the student's grade placement and their skill level, such as intermediate phase learners without basic literacy and numeracy skills. This was attributed to inadequate teaching (especially a lack of SASL and braille-proficient teachers in the foundation phase), and at times to low intellect among learners.

In some provinces, there are support teams for intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorder, but there is a lack of expertise in working with visual and hearing impairment. One province is attempting to create specialist teams.

There is also an issue around the training of facilitators that work with learners with SPSII. For example, hostel staff and other support staff are employed by the school, which means that their training is not the direct responsibility of the district. Given that teachers and support staff in special schools are not able to access formal courses with an impairment-specific focus, their training frequently begins with the induction programme at the school. Efforts to expand training are haphazard and rarely accompanied by ongoing support.

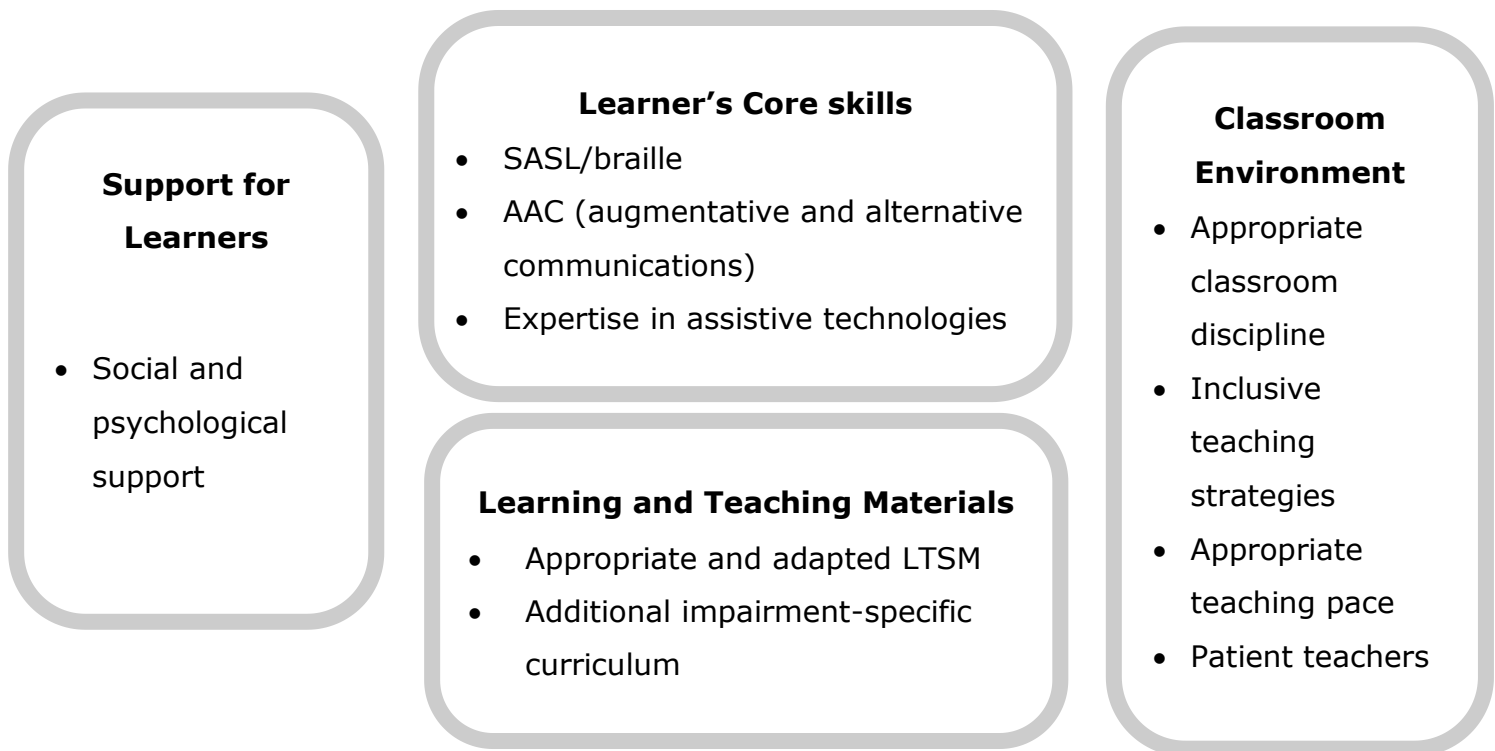
Supporting impaired teachers

"We gave our 3 totally blind teachers iPads which they use daily in the class. So that they can prepare themselves at home and come and give their lessons here at school."

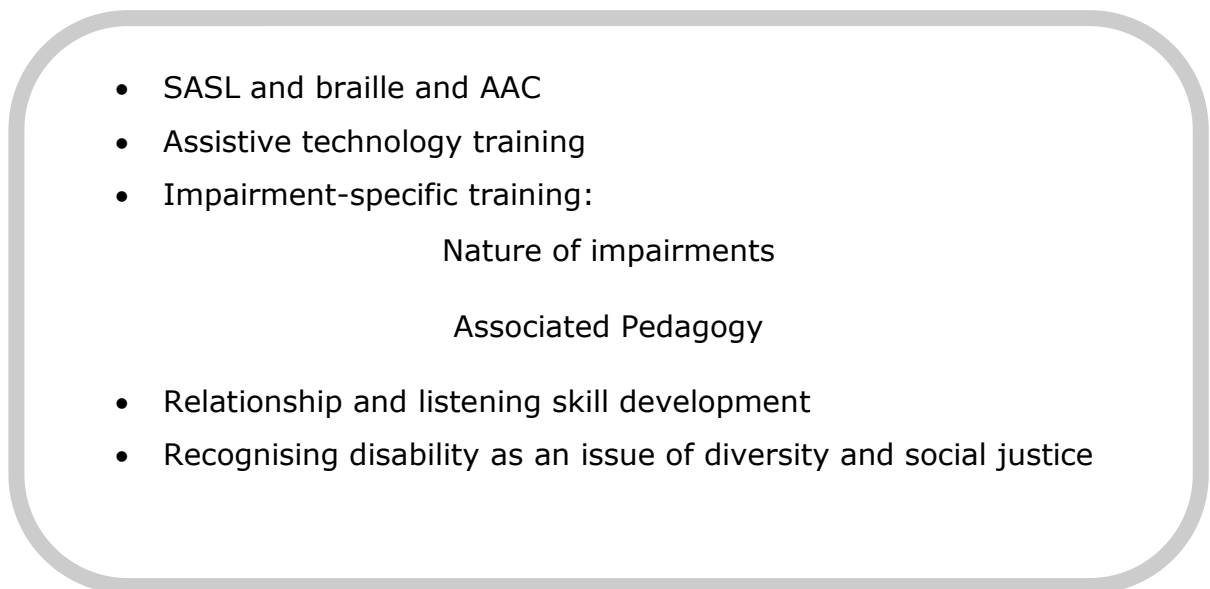
Senior management team



Summary of learner needs



What teacher education is needed to empower teachers to be able to meet the educational needs of learners with SPSII?



Initial conclusions based on stakeholder interviews

There is an urgent need to fill the gap, as regular and full service schools are not receiving impairment-specific training, and training in specialised schools is haphazard. This results in poor communication that ultimately leads to an inability to assess the learners' performance and to intervene at an appropriate level. This, combined with the prevalent attitude that children with disabilities ought to be accommodated in special schools, currently leaves teachers in full service schools unprepared to facilitate the education of learners with SPSII.

Also lacking is a genuine effort to understand the challenges arising from a learner's disability and to consider how this affects their life chances, and thus, what kind of support they need. There is little acknowledgement of the rights of learners with disabilities; rights to education and participation in the life of the community. This results in insufficient consideration of their holistic needs.

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Audio Report

An audio version of this report is available: <http://www.dhrs.uct.ac.za/dhrs/divisions/disability/oer>