Assessing Soft Skills among Students with Disabilities in Teacher Training Institutions in Zambia

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Abstract

This paper presents results of a study conducted to assess soft skills among students with disabilities in four (4) teacher training institutions in Zambia. The study, conducted in 2014 in two Zambian universities and two colleges of education randomly sampled thirty seven (37) students with disabilities. The study used a selected set of Dr Karen Wolffe's (2011) ten (10) category transitional competencies. Using a quantitative approach, respondents were required to answer 'Yes' or 'No' to whether they were able to perform certain soft skills or not. Data was analyzed using SPSS. The study discovered that students with disabilities lacked compensatory related skills. They also lacked skills and opportunities for leisure. They however recorded having socialization skills, real life related skills, self-advocacy and problems solving skills. Among the many recommendations, institutions training teachers should design courses or integrate into existing courses the necessary soft skills.
Keywords: soft skills, competencies, students with disabilities, student teachers, curriculum

Introduction

The Ministry of General Education (MoGE) embraces the principle of inclusive education in the national education policy document, *Educating Our Future*. Institutions of learning including the University of Zambia, Nkrumah University and Colleges of Education such as Mansa and Zambia Institute of Special Education practice this principle of inclusiveness by enrolling students with disabilities to train as teachers. These institutions enroll students with different degrees of hearing, visual and physical impairments. While efforts are made to ensure that students with disabilities receive quality education, emphasis is on teaching skills that lead to the award of certificates (hard skills) skills leading to employment. If soft skills are taught, they are not intended. They are learned as part of the hidden and or null curriculum. While other students without disabilities acquire soft skills easily even through interaction, disabilities hinder disabled students from acquiring such skills unless they are taught. The need for teaching soft skills alongside hard skills gives compensatory advantage to students with disabilities so that they are optimally prepared for life after training.

Statement of a Problem

Disabilities delay children's optimal development. Children with disabilities face different challenges. The visually impaired cannot see or see clearly, thereby being denied the opportunities for play and interaction so that emotional, social and intellectual developments are maximized at the right age levels. Learners with hearing impairments do not hear or hear properly, thereby restricting interaction with peers, a necessary aspect for optimal development in children. Children who are physically challenged are restricted to their homes and lag behind in knowledge of their environment. Interaction is equally restricted due to lack of movement. With other reasons such as negative attitudes towards the disabled, many children do not have opportunities to develop soft skills that can enable them easily integrate into society and compete favorably for jobs. The need for soft skills augments learning and supplements hard skills in the pursuit for employment of graduating students. The question that this study endeavored to answer was "do students with disabilities training to be teachers in universities and colleges of education possess soft skills?"

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following questions;

- To assess the possession of soft skills among students with disabilities in universities and colleges of education.
- To investigate the nature of soft skills possessed by students with disabilities
- To determine the need for the introduction of soft skills education in the teacher training curriculum.

Research Questions

- Do students with disabilities in universities and colleges of education possess soft skills?
- What types of soft skills are well developed among students with disabilities in teacher training institutions?
- What types of soft skills are not well developed among students with disabilities in teacher training institutions?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to assess soft skills among students with disabilities training as

teachers in universities and colleges of education in Zambia.

Significance of the Study

The study may guide teacher training institutions, parents, philanthropic organizations interested in the education of the individuals with disabilities to pay particular attention to the teaching of soft skills so that students with disabilities are prepared adequately for life after training. Such preparation should start right from schools and training institutions. This entails adapting the curriculum and pay attention to soft skills as much as it does with hard skills and bringing out

clearly what is expected to be learned under soft skills. It would help improve the training partnership between training institutions and the industry thereby providing experience in training.

Limitations
The study used Dr. Karen Wolffe's (2011) Transition Competencies Checklist for students. The competencies used by Dr..Wolffe may not fit well with the cultural and economic context in Zambia. Some items therefore were not tested on the students with disabilities in the institutions sampled. The study did not assess the actual disposition of the skills through observation or interaction with the students with disabilities. Students were required to simply tick 'Yes' or 'No' from what they thought they were able to do or not. This opens gaps for further studies through observations and interaction with students with disabilities to ascertain the soft skills they possess.

Literature Review
The concept of soft skills has been explored from different perspectives including education. Some scholars understand soft skills as emotional intelligence. Obioma, *et al* (2013), define soft skills as a sociological term relating to Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EQ) consisting of clusters of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that characterize relationships with other people. In organisations concerned with face to face dealings with customers, hard skills alone do not help such businesses to grow, but soft skills on top of hard skills help (ibid).

From the interpersonal level, soft skills explain one's ability to team work, solve problems and communicate effectively. For anyone to succeed in a community where life is shared with others, one needs such skills. According to the psychologist Daniel Goldman, soft skills contribute to a person's ability to manage him or herself and relate to other people. To Goldman, these skills are as much as IQ or technical skills necessary in job success. For one to succeed in a job, there is need to be proficient in communication, conflict resolution, negotiation, problem solving, strategic thinking, teaming etc (Obioma etal 2013). Though these scholars limit soft skills to job, soft skills are generally survival skills. Since soft skills involve interpersonal skills, it is highly possible that individuals with disabilities would have difficulties in acquiring soft skills. For instance, certain emotions are expressed by the use of sight. Jeffrey (2006) presented that a child born with total blindness may not be able to respond to a love smile because he has never seen it and may not understand the connotation. On the other hand, a child with pre-lingua deafness may not appreciate other people's cheering or sorrowing because he has no reference to the occurrence. Soft skills are also helpful at an intrapersonal level. They help one relate to his or her immediate environment or relate within him or herself. Understanding oneself is a key skill that helps us know how best we can interact with others. When you understand yourself, your weaknesses and strengths, you would know how to carry yourself along with others beyond the learning environment.

Hard skills are commonly known skills that the school system has adopted prepare students for employment. Training for jobs opportunities provides qualifications for a particular job. The focus is on hard skills. The knowledge and skills acquired relate directly to the job one is training for. Such skills can be assessed through tests and examinations. They are skills an employer would ask you to produce evidence for, skills expressed through the curriculum vitae explaining the skills you have obtained from your training for the job. Haggar (2007) says hard skills refer to experience and or "skills that a prospective employee should have to execute his or her job." Hard skills refer to the demonstrable skills that you possess. For example, a secretary has demonstrated skills in

typing, operating a computer qualifications etc Maier (n.d). However, "individuals who have both categories, hard skills and soft skills, are commonly the one ones to be positively evaluated and hired". (Haggar, 2007:18). A study by Banja (2012) found that University of Zambia graduates took about 6 to 12 months to adapt to their new jobs. Valid in his study, Banja recommended the lengthening of periods of industrial attachment for students to compensate for the insufficient practical training and help address an imbalance in the skills profile for graduates. Though Banja (2012) could have referred this failure for graduates to adapt to hard skills, this adaptation mainly relates to lack of soft skills in the graduates. It is one thing to master the content and skills in your job, and another to be able to deliver what you are an expert in. A study by Allen (2014) in Tanzania revealed that most graduates failed to find jobs because they failed to compete with others who had both academic and non-academic skills, non-academic skills here referring to soft skills.

Current research indicates the need for soft skills is also crucial for personal development. Asuru and Ogidi (2013) observed that soft skills enable a learner to excel in cognition and learners with such skills stand out in the midst of other learners. Quoting Joshua (2008), Asuru and Ogidi (2013) assert that soft skills make excellent scholars in the learners; they enhance individual interactive abilities, boost learning and increase productivity. This was also echoed by Udoma (2010) who related soft skills to effective learning, participation, mastery of learned material and improved relationships with other learners, teachers and a developed positive attitude towards oneself thereby encouraging school attendance. Our education systems should therefore prepare graduates in both skills for them to adapt well not only their learning but also to places where they will work.

Research has shown that children with disabilities are denied several opportunities that are supposed to give them optimal development. Children with disabilities have since history been victims of isolation and rejection, syndromes that deny them the interaction needed for the development of soft skills. Adams (2007) observed that youths with disabilities lag behind their peers without disabilities in school completion, post school employment and participation in postsecondary education (Benz, Lindstrom, Unrich and Waintrup, 2004 in Adams 2007). Adams further reveals that the student's inability to attain soft skills may be a barrier to employment. Soft skills include the ability to accept direction, ask for help, dress properly, have appropriate hygiene, and deal with conflict Roman, 1998 in Adams 2007)

The worry for curriculum designers currently is curriculum choking. Each time new ideas are born, curriculum designers get worried of how best such ideas can be enshrined or integrated into the curriculum. Asuru and Ogidi (2013) noted that the Nigerian education system had included soft skills in the curriculum but haphazardly measured as part of the affective domain. Teachers faced challenges in assessing soft skills because there was more emphasis on the cognitive domain than the affective. Teachers also faced several challenges assessing soft skills for several reasons which included incompetency, over emphasis on cognitive domain, poor knowledge of test construction and wider subjectivity among others. The Zambian Curriculum Framework of 2013 does not directly state whether soft skills are offered (in the curriculum). However, the new curriculum emphasizes competences such as interaction and effective communication from early education through to secondary school level (MESVTEE, 2013). At tertiary level, particularly at teacher training level, it is expected that effective communication competency is achieved and that there is understanding of material taught, skills in methodologies, creativity, constructiveness and innovation as well as ability to provide competent leadership, all of which are classified soft skills.

It can safely be understood that the Zambian curriculum has taken care of soft skills, though the content does not come out specifically to address soft skills in themselves. In an effort to emphasize soft skills acquisition in the new curriculum, MESVTEE (2013: 49) says "Entrepreneurship education shall be integrated in the curriculum for teacher education". The ministry has also recognized information and communication technology to be offered in teacher training institutions. Analyzing the Zambian school curriculum, soft skills are covered either as single subject areas or as integrated. For example entrepreneurship is integrated in business studies, agriculture, art and design, physical education and home economics at junior secondary school level academic and vocational path way curriculum. Other soft skills are expected to be covered in subjects like religious education, social studies. However, when soft skills are assessed as subject areas, they become hard skills. What is required is providing avenues for teaching and assessing soft skills in more practical ways than theoretical.

Methodology

The study used Dr. Karen Wolffe's (2011) Transition Competencies Checklist for students to assess soft skills among students with disabilities in teacher training institutions. The tool was given to a student to answer 'yes' or 'no' on several domains. Dr. Karen Wolffe (2011) came up with ten (10) domains of soft skills each with its indicators. These are; an understanding of work based on real life experiences, well-developed leisure and socialization skills, well-developed problem solving skills, application of self-advocacy skills, application of compensatory skills, knowledge of career options and sources of information, an understanding of levels of ability and impact with regard to job placement, mastery of career counseling content areas, evidence of participation in work experience opportunities, an understanding of employers' concerns. Where a category did not apply to a particular student, such a student was asked not to provide answers to the category that did not concern him or her. The study was quantitative. It targeted student teachers with disabilities at the University of Zambia (UNZA), Nkrumah University in Kabwe, Zambia Institute of Special Education (ZAMISE) and Mansa College of Education. There were thirty seven (37) respondents sampled from two (2) universities and two (2) colleges of education. The data was analyzed quantitatively using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Tables showing numbers and percentages of the 'YES' and 'NO' responses provided were generated and conclusions were drawn from the responses provided. In some cases data were cross tabulated to check on consistence and relationships among variables. Respondents were not allowed to write their names of the checklist for ethical reasons.

Findings and Discussion

The study captured total thirty seven (37) students. Of the respondents captured, twenty seven (27) were male and ten (10) were females distributed into four (4) physically disabled, twenty six (26) visually impaired and seven (7) hearing impaired students. Four (4) of the students indicated that they had mild disabilities, nineteen (19) were moderate and fourteen (14) had severe disabilities. Below are the results presented in tables showing the nature of soft skills students with disabilities have.

Skills Relating to Real Life Experiences   **Table 1**

S/N	Transition Competency	Yes		No	
		#	%	#	%
1	Performing chores at home	36	97.3	1	2.7
2	Performing chores at school	31	83.8	5	13.5
3	I volunteer	28	75.7	6	16.2
4	I participate in community activities	23	62.2	13	35.1
5	I know jobs my family members do	37	100	0	0
6	I know jobs my neighbors do	26	70.3	10	27

The results show some admirable strength in soft skills relating to real life situations among students with disabilities in teacher training institutions. Understanding real life situations would help the students adapt to new learning environments. Performing simple daily life activities and working with the community as well as knowledge of what the neighborhood is able to do helps the students to attain independent living skills. Though the results show a positive trend among the students, there is still need to help the few (***see table 1***) who have not attained those levels especially with a focus on **3, 4, 5** and **6**.

Skills relating to Leisure and Socialization
This domain focused on developed leisure and socialization skills. This study reveals that students with disabilities like 37 (100%) and are liked by other people 35 (94.6%). Of all the respondents 21 (56.8 %) do not like watching television, a reason that could be attributed to their disability while 15 (40.5%) were able to watch television. There were however 29 (78.4%) that enjoyed listening to the radio against 7 (18.8%). Below is a table showing the rest of the leisure and socialization skills for students with disabilities.

Leisure and Socialization related Skills   **Table 2**

S/N	Competency	YES	NO
1	I like to go out by myself	19 (51.4%)	18 (48.6)
2	I like watching athletics	18 (48.6%)	19 (51.4)
3	I like going to clubs	13 (35.1%)	24 (64.9%)
4	I like dancing	19 (51.4%)	17 (45.9%)
5	I like singing	29 (78.4%)	8 (21.6%)
6	I like to go to movies	7 (18.9%)	29 (78.4%)
7	I like playing video games	10 (27%)	27 (73%)
8	I like to walk	29 (78.4%)	8 (21.6%)
9	I spend time on my hobbies	29 (78.4)	7 (18.9%)
10	I get a lot of exercise	21 (56.8%)	16 (43.2%)
11	Sometimes I wonder if I can afford the things I want	29 (78.4)	7 (18.9%)
12	I find it difficult to go out and have a good time	13 (35.1%)	21 (56.8%)
13	I provide favors for others (helping other students)	33 (89.2%)	4 (10.8%)
14	I return favors	29 (78.4 %)	8 (21.6%)
15	I am a good listener.	33 (89.2%)	4 (10.8%)
16	I am a good speaker.	28 (75.7%)	9 (24.3%)
17	I am comfortable asking for help.	32 (86.5%)	5 (13.5%)
18	I am comfortable speaking with someone I've just met.	32 (86.5%)	5 (13.5%)

Cross tabulated data about what different disabilities liked   Table 3

	LIKE TELEVISION		LIKE RADIO		LIKE READING		GOING OUT WITH FRIENDS	
	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
Physical Disability	3	1	3	1	4	0	4	0
Visual Impairment	8	17	25	0	11	14	19	6
Hearing Impairment	4	3	1	6	7	0	6	1

The general view from the above results is that students with disabilities have developed socialization skills. However, the students have problems with activities related to leisure. The results showed average and slightly above average scores of students who participated in related activities see serial numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, and 12 in table 2 above. Though the severely visually impaired cannot see, it is important that they listen to television broadcasts. It is through television that job adverts are given, a lot of interaction is performed and there are a lot of skills visually impaired persons can benefit from listening. For the hearing impaired, though may not benefit from listening to the radio, television broadcasts are accompanied with signed language interpreters and written rolling scripts from which they can benefit. Social and electronic media are effective leisure and socialization platforms. However, access to such platforms may be restricted by the disability. It is therefore important that electronic media must be made available to people with disabilities. This study revealed that most disabled students 22(59.5%) were able to read books, magazines and newspapers while 14(37.8%) were not. It can also be said that the low vision students and the hearing impaired had access to such materials making additional experience. The blind have no access to books, magazines, and newspapers because these are produced largely in hard copy format. When data were cross-tabulated, it was discovered that all students with hearing and physical impairments liked reading books, magazines and newspapers. Eleven (11) of the visually impaired liked to read books, magazines and newspapers. All physically disabled students liked listening to radio except for one (1), while twenty five (25) visually impaired students enjoyed listening to radio. Only one of the hearing impaired students was able to listen to the radio.

Skills Related to Problem Solving   Table 4

S/N	Competency	Yes	No
1	I recognize when I have a problem	34 (91.9%)	3 (8.1%)
2	I try to solve my problems myself.	35 (94.6%)	2 (5.4%)
3	I understand my legal rights and responsibilities	33 (89.2%)	4 (10.8%)
4	I ask for help with a problem when I need it.	36 (97.3%)	1 (2.7%)
5	I consider several solutions to my problems.	37 (100%)	0 (0%)
6	I take steps to solve a problem.	35 (94.6%)	2 (5.4%)
7	I evaluate the outcome of my solutions.	33 (89.2%)	4 (10.8%)
8	I understand the possible consequences of my choices.	33 (89.2%)	3 (8.1%)
9	Other people try to solve my problems for me.	30 (81.1%)	7 (18.9%)
10	I feel comfortable asking others not to interfere when I am trying to solve a problem	26 (70.3%)	11 (29.7%)

The results show that students with disabilities in teacher training institutions have superb developed skills related to problem solving. Problem solving is a key life skill needed to live in our environments. The

analysis of several alternatives to problems helps persons with disabilities to make suitable decisions. The different domains complement each other. For example, exposing learners to activities that allow them to interact and relax allows them an opportunity to develop better ways of solving problems, seeking help, and developing confidence. The learning environment also requires that learners interact and share meaning full learning experience. Such can only happen when soft skills are well developed.

Self-Advocacy   **Table 5**

S/N	Transition Competency	Yes	No
1	I describe my disability to others.	35 (94.6%)	2 (5.4%)
2	I describe the accommodations that I need to others.	30 (81.1%)	7 (18.9%)
3	I ask for accommodations when needed.	36 (97.3%)	1 (2.7%)
4	I understand my legal rights and responsibilities	33 (89.2%)	4 (10.8%)
5	I handle my own affairs (doctor's appointments, school scheduling, meetings, etc.).	30 (81.1%)	7 (18.9%)

The attainment of self-advocacy skills by students with disabilities is symbol for acceptance. It should not be doubted that students who have reached tertiary of education should be able to accept their disability and move on with it to compete for the opportunities available in society. The ability to describe one's disability to others explains what help is needed in life. For learners, this is very need for classroom interactive learning.

Application of Compensatory Skills
Compensatory skills are important to persons with disabilities because such skills help to cover up for lost functions. If a visually impaired person cannot read printed text, there should be an alternative for him or her to be able to access the same information another person with visual potency has. However, the results of this study suggest that students with disabilities do not use match of the technology related compensatory skills. The study did not however establish whether the lack of use of the technology related soft skills was a result of lack of access to facilities. But Mtonga (2013) discovered that learners with visual impairments lacked computers and relevant software relevant for effective learning in Zambian schools. The students show knowledge of internet use and give an impression that teacher training institutions provide internet services. However, the same institutions seem to lack several specialized technological equipment that facilitates learning and development of several soft skills for students with disabilities. The table below shows cross tabulated data per institution showing the compensatory skills used and not used by students with disabilities.

Cross Tabulated Data on Compensatory skills in Teacher Training Institutions (Table 6)

	MANSA		ZAMISE		NKRUMAH		UNZA	
	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
I use the Internet.	6	2	10	1	5	3	5	1
I use computer with magnification; software	5	3	3	9	0	8	2	5
I use an Electronic dictionary	5	3	4	8	0	8	2	5
I use Specialized work tools with speech/audio output	4	2	4	7	0	8	4	4
I use Talking watch	5	3	6	6	2	6	4	4
I use Computer with braille output	7	1	3	8	0	8	1	6
I use Voice activated computer	7	1	6	6	2	6	3	4
I use Talking calculator	7	1	5	7	1	7	4	4
I use Reading Machine/Scanner	5	3	2	10	0	7	2	6
I use Electronic Note Taking Device	5	3	4	8	1	7	0	7
I use Braille embosser	6	2	2	10	2	6	2	5

From the cross tabulation of results above, Nkrumah University students were more vulnerable in terms of not using technological compensatory skills followed by ZAMISE students. Though students were conversant with internet use, they do not use equipment such as embosser, talking watches and calculators, computers aided with speech output, computers with magnification software, reading machine or scanner, voice activated computers, electronic dictionaries, braille output voice recorders among others. It is not known whether the institutions do not have the equipment and it was also not known whether the few that used such equipment were the owners of such equipment or they were institutional. The general call is on institutions to make available such equipment so as to facilitate. Technological compensatory skills improve communication among the disabled. There is also need to improve on mobility and orientation as students with visual impairments depend mostly on sighted guides. Areas related to transportation require that Government and institutions enrolling these students help to expose the students to in and outside campus activities to provide them with opportunities to interact and have leisure, activities necessary for the development of advanced soft skills.

Recommendations

The following were recommendations for institution enrolling and training students with disabilities, the ministry responsible for education, line ministries and interested institutions and individuals.

1. Institutions such as the University of Zambia can use the already established course structure in other departments where courses have adequate soft skills taught and make such courses compulsory for students with disabilities. For example, courses such as communication skills, information technologies (ICT) can be taken by students with disabilities as compulsory.
2. There is need to design courses that would focus on or integrate soft for students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning.
3. There is need for institutions to have institutional transport policies for student with disabilities to enable students access various learning and entertainment venues to develop their soft skills

4. There is need for training institutions and interested organizations to provide necessary devices that help students with disabilities access their learning environments, classrooms, general and academic information.
5. There is need for institutions to develop academic and non-academic programmes that can support the development of soft skills for students with disabilities. For example, sports, leisure, study tours.
6. Institutions should invest in software development for students with disabilities to enable them have access to the global village by having access to internet, computers and necessary software.
7. Student associations should develop programmes for the development of soft skills for their peers with disabilities.

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