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Access to education in Africa: responding to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

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Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities mandates that disabled people should have full rights to education in inclusive settings. However, to ensure that educational polices and settings are designed to meet this criterion seems challenging to African countries that have ratified this Convention. This article arises from the 2nd African Network of Evidence-to-Action on Disability Symposium. This fluid network was established to address the gap between research and practice in the region. The article reports proceedings and the emerging themes from the Education, Training and Work Commission; one of the six commissions of this Symposium, focusing specifically on the education aspect. It also challenges various stakeholders to move from evidence to action to ensure the educational rights of disabled people in inclusive settings.

Keywords: disability; disabled people; inclusive education; collaboration; Africa; African Network on Evidence-to-Action on Disability; United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; Global South

Points of interest

- The article reports proceedings and the emerging themes of one of the commissions at the 2nd African Network on Evidence-to-Action on Disability Symposium that took place in South Africa in 2009.
- Although access to education is a basic right, many disabled people in Africa still struggle to have access to it. Teacher training seems not to prepare teachers for meaningful implementation of inclusive education.
- There was an absence of early intervention and early childhood education presentations at this Symposium, yet it is a key strategy for developing the potential of children with disabilities.
- Advocacy and awareness-raising remain essential to address discrimination, beliefs and myths about disability that drive disabled people into chronic poverty.

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- Collaboration among various stakeholders is vital for the development of appropriate and sustainable policies on inclusive teaching and learning in Africa.

Introduction

Education is, to a great extent, a gateway to a better future. There is credible evidence suggesting that employment opportunities for university graduates are most likely to double or treble compared with prospects for non-graduates (Chataika 2010; Bloom, Canning, and Chan 2006). Education is believed to 'build children and youth's skills to develop their full potential as individuals and citizens' (United Nations Children's Educational Fund [UNICEF] 2007, vii). Furthermore, education unlocks economic growth, and its importance cannot be overemphasised if Africa is to reduce poverty among its citizens (Chataika 2010).

While educational opportunities are improving for African youth over the years, the greatest gains seem to be in terms of gender parity and access to primary education (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa [UNECA] 2009). The education of children with disabilities and the development of education beyond primary school seem to be lagging behind. This implies that disabled people in Africa do not realise the true benefits of education (UNECA 2009). Higher education can produce both public and private benefits to people (Bloom, Canning, and Chan 2006). Private benefits include better employment prospects, higher salaries, and the capacity to save and invest. Public benefits include better health, controlled population growth, improved quality of life and effective governance (Bloom, Canning, and Chan 2006). Nonetheless, mainstream education is still beyond the reach of many disabled people (Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson 2005; Chataika 2010), despite various African nations agreeing to the second Millennium Development Goal on Universal Primary Education by 2015 (Bloom, Canning, and Chan 2006). Furthermore, 23 African countries have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), compelling these states to guarantee education for disabled people (United Nations Enable 2011).

We are inspired by Oliver (1996), who argues that the social model of disability paves the way for social action by disabled people to challenge barriers to participation, as well as exclusionary practices. It is against this background that we present this article, supported by the presentations and discussions at the second African Network on Evidence-to-Action on Disability (AfriNEAD) Symposium held in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2009.[1]

We begin by providing an overview of inclusive education within a global context before tracing the major trends in education for disabled people in Africa. Thereafter, we briefly examine how inclusive education is operationalised and implemented in some African countries. A description of the work of AfriNEAD and the processes that were involved in setting up the Education, Training and Working Commission then follows. We then present the emerging themes, and conclude with some recommendations for future research, advocacy and policy-making. In this paper, we use 'disabled people' and 'people with disabilities' interchangeably, as these concepts are acceptable in African countries that were represented at the Symposium.

The global context

The 1994 Salamanca Statement was pivotal in positioning inclusive education as the most effective way of ensuring the educational rights of disabled people (United Nations Education and Science Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] 1994). Much ground has been covered on inclusive education in other articles (for example, Inclusion International. 2009; Ferguson 2008; Mutepfa, Mpofu, and Chataika 2007; Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson 2005; Kisanji 1998).

Issues of exclusion from education affect all children, not only those who are disabled. However, disability is a major exclusionary factor of schooling in Africa (World Vision. 2007). A large-scale study reported a high degree of exclusion from any form of education for children with disabilities in Africa (Inclusion International 2009). In support, a UNESCO report established that, of the 77 million out-of-school children worldwide, approximately 25 million were excluded on the basis of disability (UNESCO 2006). The World Vision report also indicated that fewer than 10% of disabled children of school-going age attended school in Africa; and most of those who attend school, do so in segregated settings (World Vision 2007). The UNCRPD is explicit about inclusive education as the preferred strategy for the education of disabled people (UNICEF 2008).

The UNCRPD states that disabled people should be guaranteed the right to inclusive education at all levels, without discrimination, and on the basis of equal opportunity (UNICEF 2008). This means that children with disabilities should have entitlement to free and compulsory primary education. In addition, disabled people should have access to secondary and tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning. Central to this understanding is a recognition and commitment within the general education system to embrace different forms of communication, which protect and promote the linguistic identity of the deaf community (UNICEF 2008).

The African context

Substantial research evidence exists in Africa with regard to the education of disabled people. The Ministry of Education in Botswana is making efforts to initiate an inclusive education system (Dart 2009). The government has prioritised the need to increase access to education, with the first 10 years of school being highly subsidised. However, since primary education is not compulsory, it becomes challenging to ascertain how the Article 24 obligation of the UNCRPD is to be fulfilled. Article 24 mandates governments to recognise the rights of disabled people to education, ensuring an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning. In Botswana, there is also a concerted attempt to integrate special needs education courses into teacher training so that student-teachers become aware of the varying needs of their potential learners (Dart 2009).

In Lesotho, an education policy was passed in the latter part of the 1980s, stating that all learners should have access to the curriculum and an integrated education system (Johnstone 2007). However, policy implementation still remains a challenge. Limited resources such as insufficient teacher training, inadequate staff support and the lack of accountability and monitoring have been some of the barriers to the effective implementation of inclusive education and training in Lesotho. However, a few

examples of good practice for including students with disabilities that exist are largely dependent on teachers who are willing to go an extra mile (Johnstone 2007).

Namibia has a disability policy that looks at marginalised groups, but not an education policy that focuses on inclusive education (Zimba, Möwes, and Naanda 2007). Although specialised education is offered in the Postgraduate Diploma in Special Education training programme, teachers in the mainstream are reportedly not adequately equipped to accommodate students with special educational needs (Zimba, Möwes, and Naanda 2007).

In South Africa, the education system inherited by the post-apartheid government was divided along racial lines. This required the development of a range of new policies that focused on establishing basic human rights and dignity for all, especially for the previously disenfranchised populations. Policies include Education White Paper 6, with the principal function of creating educational opportunities for learners who have not been able to access existing educational provision or who have experienced learning difficulties, specifically because the education system has failed to accommodate their learning needs' (Department of National Education 2001, 6). It also makes reference to higher education and training, as well as to the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education 2001).

In Zambia, special needs education that had been initiated by missionary work and expanded by philanthropists and non-governmental organisations, largely from western societies, has been in existence for about a century (Kalabula 2000). In 1971 the Ministry of Education took over this function by paying teachers' salaries and making available some grants to run the schools. However, Kalabula (2000) argues that society still considers it illogical to spend money on disabled people whom they think cannot plough back into the national economy. This view is based on the tragic or individual model of disability, which perceives disabled people as a 'burden' or incapable of contribution to national development (Oliver 1996).

Zimbabwe's interest in following the inclusive global trend is supported by some government policy documents and, by implication, several pieces of legislation (Peresuh and Barcham 1998). However, gaps are evident between the ideological obligations to universal education and the actual practice on the ground. 'All children', as it appears in most legislative instruments, including Zimbabwe's 1987 Education Act, does not automatically cover disabled children (Chataika 2007).

Zimbabwe's Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education department is responsible for disabled learners' primary and secondary school education. It is tasked with the identification and placement of children with special educational needs in appropriate special education facilities. Further, it provides teachers with in-service training and support in the application of applied behaviour analysis, teaching of disabled pupils, as well as a wide range of counselling services (Mutepfa, Mpofu, and Chataika 2007). The United College of Education in Zimbabwe has also been training special educational teachers since 1983, some of whom act as resource teachers, after being posted to various mainstream schools practicing inclusive education (Chataika 2007). Positive results have been reported in such instances, indicating the importance of training and support (Chataika 2007). However, most of these teachers leave for greener pastures, making the country lose the needed trained personnel.

When education for all is spoken of in countries such as Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Ghana, Malawi, Uganda and Tanzania, issues of students with disabilities tend to attract a low profile. More emphasis seems to be placed on gender equality, abolishing school fees to increase enrolments, cost-sharing, school uniforms, school

subsidies, flexible timetabling, cultural impediments to school attendance, increasing female teachers, reducing school starting ages, pregnancy policy and adult and non-formal education, private education, and class size (Colclough et al. 2003). While these efforts can be seen as supportive of disabled learners, the fact that disability is not mentioned specifically strengthens the assumption that their specific needs are not seriously considered in educational provision. Evidence on higher education and inclusion does not seem to draw the deserved attention. It is against this background that AfriNEAD delegates and presenters came together to discuss, share ideas and propose useful recommendations for change.

African Network on Evidence-to-Action on Disability

The scarcity of African voices in disability research, which has for a long time been dominated by the Global North, led to the formation of the AfriNEAD. The AfriNEAD is the brainchild of the Centre for Rehabilitation Studies, Stellenbosch University, The African Decade of Persons with Disabilities, and the Centre for Global Health at Trinity College in Dublin (Mji et al. 2009). This fluid network facilitates networking among researchers, disabled people and their organisations, government representatives, business, civil society and international partners who hold the same vision. The idea is to facilitate a multidimensional, inter-sectoral, interactive forum for debate around evidence-to-action on disability with a view to ensuring that disability is part of the national development agenda in Africa.

AfriNEAD activities promote culturally sensitive evidence-to-action research that makes a real impact on communities. It seeks to accomplish this by using existing and new empirical evidence from disability research to meaningfully inform advocacy work, policy and practice (Mji et al. 2009). This unique network seeks to address African problems with African solutions in order for disabled people to realise their rights enshrined in national and international legal frameworks. The intention is to mainstream disability into the national development agenda in Africa. It further seeks to build communities of trust with partners from the Global North.

The first AfriNEAD Symposium took place in November 2007 in South Africa, attracting delegates from 14 African countries, and a few from the Global North. In line with the UNCRPD, the theme of the Symposium was 'Realising the rights of people with disabilities in Africa'. Some of the papers presented at the conference were developed into a special issue publication (see *Journal of Disability and Rehabilitation*, 2009, vol. 31, no 1). Following the success of the first Symposium and to follow up on critical issues that emerged, delegates decided to make the Symposium a bi-annual event.

The aim of the 2009 AfriNEAD Symposium was to identify and develop pathways that would stimulate and galvanise action in these critical areas. Six commissions were set up to unpack the Symposium's title: 'The ABC for Research Evidence-to-action: Putting the UNCRPD Principles into Action for Rights-based Change'. The commissions were as follows:

(1) Development process in Africa: poverty, politics and indigenous knowledge.
(2) Education, training and work.
(3) Health, HIV/AIDS and community-based rehabilitation.
(4) Holistic wellness: recreation, tourism, sexuality and religion.
(5) Land, water and sanitation.

(6)   Research evidence.

This paper reports on second commission, focusing largely on education.

Education, training and work commission

A team of 10 people (including the authors) was put in place to spearhead the work of the commission. These team members were from South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya, and had shown a keen interest on the education, work and training of disabled people. The commission received 10 abstracts – five on education, three on training and two on employment. The keynote speaker presented a paper that set the tone of the commission's deliberations.

Emerging themes

A recurring theme in all the presentations was the need for African governments that have ratified the UNCRPD to ensure the domestication and implementation of the tenets of this historical legal framework (AfriNEAD 2009). Within the education, training and work commission, delegates directed governments to use the human rights approach and promote inclusive communities. The education commission's main themes were inclusive education, advocacy and awareness-raising, capacity development and support, early intervention and early childhood education, data about disabilities, and research evidence. These are discussed below using relevant examples. Evidently, many of these arose from the South African context; and we view this as a result of the conference being held in South Africa, and it was therefore well represented. AfriNEAD has recognised this as a potential source of research bias. For that reason, Zimbabwe is hosting the 2011 Symposium, and it becomes rotational thereafter.

Inclusive education

Delegates were concerned about the problems associated with the importation of western constructions into African settings. For instance, Mpofu and Nyanungo (1998) noted that instruments developed and normed in the Global North, such as the Wide Range Achievement Test, are still being used on African children. The behaviours sampled by these psycho-educational tests, which determine decisions about competence in African children, may be irrelevant in two ways (Mpofu and Nyanungo 1998): firstly, regarding the world view of the African children; and secondly, in respect of the measurement of competence of children in African settings. Competence can be understood only within the context of the environment in which the person participates regularly and with reference to peers in that environment. For example, African children are not socialised to dialogue with a stranger in a secluded environment (e.g. testing room) about questions of no apparent practical significance (Mpofu and Nyanungo 1998). Thus many children, who may function quite well in their environments, may be seen as pupils with learning disabilities or with maladaptive behaviour. There are indications that African forms of inclusive education are evident in indigenous customary education (Kisanji 1998). This potential has not been sufficiently recognised or capitalised upon due to the dependence on models originating from the Global North. This lack of fit between Afri-

can realities and special education theories works against inclusion. However, delegates felt that 'inclusive education' has multiple meanings across the world. Miles and Singal (2010, 8–9) also raised this issue, and cited Slee (2004), Dyson (2004) and Ainscow et al. (2006) to clarify their point, where they pointed out that inclusive education has different meanings in different contexts, thus presenting confusing mixed messages. Africa needs to seriously take note of this confusion.

Despite noting challenges about inclusive education, delegates from Botswana, Zimbabwe, Kenya and South Africa provided evidence of the processes and practices of inclusive education in their education sectors. These countries conceptualise inclusion broadly by acknowledging all children and youth as full members of society, and recognising their rights regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status or impairment. However, delegates indicated that, in practice, inclusion is far from being achieved in their countries.

Informed by the Salamanca statement, inclusion implies the development of inclusive, supportive communities and the removal of barriers to fundamental universal rights (UNICEF 2007). Although disability is viewed as a human right in policies and legislation, there is a glaring gap between theory and practice. More specifically, disability issues seem to be treated *ad hoc* in education and many children and youth with disabilities have limited access to basic education and support.

Teachers are regarded as key role-players in implementing inclusive education, yet they experience difficulties. In line with the South African Human Sciences Research Council. (2005) findings, teachers at the Symposium reported that: they have not been trained to teach children with disabilities in mainstream schools; they receive limited support from the school and support services; they have huge workloads and large classes; there is lack of human and physical resources; and they experience stress because of constant changes resulting from policies. Many of these teachers work in communities that have to survive poverty and difficult socio-economic circumstances.

Advocacy and awareness-raising

Another common theme was related to negative attitudes, myths, beliefs, associated stigma and discrimination at all levels. One of the presenters indicated that many children with disabilities are still kept at home without access to education (Mmatli 2009). Delegates therefore felt the need for advocacy and awareness-raising to change societal attitudes towards people with disabilities. Disability awareness has the power to create appreciation for the skills and abilities of this group of people, and the value they add to society (UNICEF 2007, 2008). However, in South Africa for example, Wildeman and Nomdo (2007) found little evidence of active and well-directed advocacy and information campaigns to change the hearts and minds of the relevant education staff.

Parents at the conference felt that professionals underestimated children with disabilities and argued that society, more specifically teachers, non-disabled learners, parents and other role-players in education, need to be educated about disability. Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) and parents felt that this awareness can be created most effectively by families and children/persons with disabilities themselves. Furthermore, organisations representing children emphasised the right of children with disabilities to be included in decision-making processes that have to do with their education and support.

A number of disabled speakers highlighted the importance of 'teaching' people with disabilities to *be* disabled. A lot of time is spent giving therapy and trying to 'fix' them, when in many cases they cannot be 'fixed'. Disability activists insisted that disabled people should be comfortable in their bodies, and should learn that 'to be different does not mean to be inferior'. There was a call for disabled people to take responsibility by living a life full of confidence and dignity. Disabled delegates also appealed to plan beyond advocacy by training people with disabilities to become professionals. Geiger (2009) pointed out that disabled people should not only aim to become politicians through affirmative action, but rather to act as professionals in the technical decision-making processes of any national development initiative.

Capacity development and support

Delegates strongly felt the need to have more locally-based training in inclusive education. The values of inclusive education and disability issues should infuse the curriculum for teacher training and not just be an add-on to a module (Oswald and Swart in press). Furthermore, in-service teacher training and support should be continuous and school-based, and tailor-made for the needs and contexts of school communities. For instance, the current in-service training of South African teachers is described as 'brief, fragmented, incoherent encounters that are decontextualised and isolated from real classroom situations' (Department of Basic Education 2010a, 59). This was also a huge concern for some delegates from other African countries since their education systems were far from being inclusive.

Parents and DPOs acknowledged the need for them to play an important role in developing an understanding of disability, and using appropriate modes of communication, teaching methodologies and resources to support children and youth with disabilities. Also, parents and professionals emphasised their important role within the development of family–school partnerships at all levels of education. They recommended the establishment of parent support groups, especially in rural areas. Parents also stressed the need for facilitated support from DPOs and professionals on issues of advocacy together with their rights and those of their children to realise Article 7 of the UNCRPD.

The presenters and delegates cited evidence of peer-to-peer training and peer education programmes that can break down barriers between children and youth while dispelling myths about disability. Delegates advocated coordinated services and the sharing of information among families; especially for children with disabilities, to ensure stronger advocacy strategies.

Early intervention and early childhood education

Delegates were concerned about the absence of presentations on early childhood education, signifying unjustifiable negligence in this area. The reasons for this exclusion are not evident at this point but deserve further examination. However, it was emphasised that early intervention and early childhood education for children with disabilities is a key strategy in achieving Millennium Development Goal 2, and ensuring that Article 24 of the UNCRPD is realised. Delegates concluded that if there is early identification and intervention, and if children with disabilities learn in inclusive settings, there would be greater opportunities for them to climb the academic ladder,

and eventually contribute to national development. Perhaps the lack of early child-hood education in Africa is the reason why there were no papers in this area as it might not be an area of public interest (Gwitimah and Khupe 2008). We can only speculate as to why early childhood was not of interest to presenters by posing a few questions: is the agenda led by DPOs focusing more on disabled adults' issues and not early childhood? Is it because most of the early childhood education services are extensively privatised in many African countries, and therefore are not a public con-cern? Does late diagnosis of disability result in early childhood education being over-looked? Were presenters interested in early childhood not able attend the Symposium? These and many other questions suggest that early education of chil-dren with disabilities are both a challenge and a priority that needs to be addressed in Africa (see also South Africa's education report on the (Department of Basic Educa-tion 2010b).

The commission's recommendations included the need for age requirements for school admission and school leaving to be flexible to accommodate all learners. This concern was raised by many African delegates who indicated that many chil-dren with disabilities start school late due to late identification. By implication, intervention strategies come later when these children have outgrown the recom-mended school starting age. Accordingly, they will be significantly older than their classmates and will therefore complete primary school when they are 'too old'. Del-egates therefore agreed that early childhood education should be a priority at the next Symposium, calling for abstracts and papers from the education, training and work commission to deliberately target this area.

Resources

The Office on the Rights of the Child states that:

> Children with disabilities require additional support and services to maximise their participation in society and to enable them to realise the rights they have in common with all children. Protecting the rights of disabled children requires monitoring at an individual level, as well as monitoring the contexts in which children with disabilities live, and the services and support provided to them. (2009, xxi)

However, human, financial and physical resources and infrastructure were identified as major constraints to inclusion in African countries that were represented. Wild-eman and Nomdo (2007) argue that successful implementation of inclusion requires additional resources for assistive devices, development of district-based support teams and adaptation of schools. Socio-economic factors dictate that the majority of families rely on public services because they cannot afford private services (Department of Social Development 2009). Where available, these services seem to be concentrated in the urban areas, whereas the majority of people in Africa live in rural areas.

Higher education and training

The UNCRPD requires member states to ensure that disabled people are able to access tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning on an equal basis with others without discrimination. Presentations on equal access and reasonable accommodation for disabled students in higher education highlighted infrastructural, institutional and environmental barriers faced by disabled students in

higher education (Kilonzo 2009; Lyner-Cleophas, Swart, and Bell 2009; Chataika 2009). These included inaccessible environments, lack of reasonable accommodation, negative attitudes, discriminatory application and admission procedures and lack of disability policies and resources that unnecessarily disadvantage disabled students. However, some delegates indicated that lecturers often have to work creatively with limited resources to accommodate disabled students. In her presentation, Chataika (2009) described a reasonable accommodation as 'any action that helps to alleviate a substantial disadvantage resulting from an individual's impairment or medical condition'. The accommodations that were identified include provision of note-takers, time extensions, assistive computer technology, test modifications, taped lectures, voice-activated software, accessible teaching methods and sign-language interpreters (Chataika 2009; Lyner-Cleophas, Swart, and Bell 2009). However, Chataika specified that accommodations are not automatic since students must qualify for each accommodation to ensure that they do not unnecessary have an added advantage over other students.

Representatives of higher education institutions acknowledged the need for an enabling environment (social, physical, attitudinal) for all students and lecturers (De Villiers 2009). Some universities have orientation programmes for university staff, with a component of disability awareness included. It was stressed that developing relevant support and understanding should be a process that requires openness, monitoring, flexibility and the optimisation of resources and time. However, there was a general appeal to promote a culture of ethical conduct, respect and embracing diversity (soft skills) in all programmes and professional training. This could mean having a compulsory module on disability/diversity for every university student in order to produce future leaders, policy-makers and programme planners who are disability sensitive. Others felt that there was a need to have lessons in sign language so that graduates will be able to communicate with the deaf community. Students reported that they are often excluded from certain faculties such as science, because of inflexible entry requirements. They also stated that self-representation and self-advocacy are important skills to develop before entering higher education (Lyner-Cleophas, Swart, and Bell 2009). Delegates urged teacher training institutions to accommodate disabled teachers so that they can become role-models for disabled children and other members of the school community.

Research evidence

Most delegates reported lack of reliable and relevant data on the nature and prevalence of disability. They noted that existing data about disabilities are inadequate because they are often collected for specific purposes, and do not cover a broad range of factors. Historically, this has been due to a variety of reasons that include: failure to mainstream disability into government statistical processes; use of divergent survey methodologies; negative attitudes towards disabled people; poor infrastructure; and violence – factors that impede data collection (Wildeman and Nomdo 2007). Consequently, there are insufficient data on children and youth with disabilities to inform programme planning and service provision (Department of Social Development 2009; Wildeman and Nomdo 2007).

Delegates emphasised the need for reliable national archive portals for disability-related evidence for policy-makers, programme planners, service providers, DPOs and other stakeholders to refer to, in their day-to-day activities. Research evi-

dence based on available statistics indicates that: there are more children with disabilities living in rural areas; children living in these areas are likely to be more severely disabled; and socio-economic level has a direct impact on the prevalence of disability (Department of Social Development 2009; UNICEF 2007). Constraints, including poverty, negative attitudes, lack of services, limited access to services and poor medical care, result in multiple discrimination. These challenges further push away disabled people from taking part in national development, thus throwing them into deeper poverty. There is an urgent need for all stakeholders to come together to address these challenges if disabled people are to enjoy the rights enshrined in the UNCRPD to ensure poverty reduction in Africa.

Wood et al. (2009) challenged research institutes in Africa to take into account the scarcity of research on children and youth with disabilities. Delegates acknowledged the need to conduct research on neglected areas such as: early childhood intervention; intervention strategies for out-of-school disabled children; a situational analysis of education provision for children with profound and multiple disabilities; the dissemination of success stories about disabled students; and more stories about the personal experiences of disabled students in higher education. There was also a call for research institutes to work closely with DPOs and other regional organisations working on disability, such as the South African Federation on the Disabled and the Secretariat on the African Decade on Persons with Disabilities in order to build communities of trust. This also entails working with parent-led organisations that have demonstrated notable successes in accessing education for their children. There was also a call for intersectoral collaboration, particularly between health and education, at the level of early childhood education for early intervention to ease the transition into regular schools.

Delegates also stressed the need to have quantitative data on the number of disabled children who are out of school; and specific reasons for their exclusion since there is a dearth of information in this area. Above all, delegates challenged each other to engage in collaborative research and co-authorship in order to have more African voices in disability-related publications. It is because of the need for co-authorship that motivated the authors of this article to come together and be able to bring African voices into the public domain.

Finally, delegates advocated for the development of an integrated database for disability and service provision in Africa to ensure effective research evidence utilisation, thus minimising duplication of efforts. Such an initiative would ensure effective utilisation of few resources in Africa, particularly in the disability field.

Concluding remarks

The AfriNEAD Symposium has given impetus to a truly African research agenda by providing a platform for researchers from Africa. This article reported what transpired at the AfriNEAD Symposium in relation to Education, Work and Training Commission. We acknowledge the multidimensional nature of inclusive education. Despite the above concern, we note the need to engage disabled people and their families in the development of inclusive educational systems, and recognise that limited resources in Africa should be optimally used. Parents and parent-led organisations are critical in achieving this goal as they are in a position to mobilise and hold education systems accountable to the undertaking that their governments have made in signing the UNCPRD. Similarly, governments should take their obligation

to implement inclusive education seriously and make provision for funds to support existing and new policies. The importance of intersectoral collaboration, particularly between health and education, at the level of early childhood education for early intervention to ease the transition into regular schools is noted. Institutions of higher education need to be made aware of their responsibility not only to become accessible to disabled people, but also to educate their students in ways that are inclusive. Thus, universities should endeavour to make their environment and curriculum accessible, as well as generating new knowledge about disability; not just as a health and welfare issue, but also as an issue of difference and diversity such as gender or race. More African disability writers should emerge so that Africans tell their own stories. Kisanji (1998), for example, paints a very different picture of growing up disabled in a traditional African community than the often-accepted one of children being hidden away and mothers being ostracised. Research should be guided by these priorities in order to serve a useful purpose in guiding further action in African countries.

There is a need to develop an integrated database for disability and service provision in Africa to ensure effective research evidence utilisation. The existing and new continental research evidence should be effectively utilised in policy and programme planning. Most importantly, each country should develop local understandings of the concepts of 'education for all' and 'inclusion' as they are essential to the 'development of appropriate and sustainable policies on teaching and learning' (Miles and Singal 2010, 12). The key message here is for policy-makers and practitioners to explore existing opportunities within their local contexts, rather than solely focusing on less-culturally sensitive technological solutions emerging from other contexts.

Finally, we challenge African countries to ensure disability mainstreaming into the development agenda. By bringing together researchers, disabled people, policy-makers, civil society, and development partners, AfriNEAD's intention is to create a critical mass, which understands disability as a cross-cutting human rights issue, in any national development initiative.

Acknowledgements

Note

1.   See www.afrinead.org.

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