



Setting Accommodation in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level Examinations: Perceptions of Candidates with Visual Impairment in Cameroon

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Abstract: Accommodations signify any change in the way a child is taught or tested without changing the construct he/she is required to demonstrate. Setting accommodations are changes in the conditions of the examination setting, such as special lighting, adaptive furniture, or changes in the location itself, accomplished by moving the student(s) to a separate room or organizing them in to smaller groups. However, one of the challenges confounding educators today is how to determine accommodations that will appropriately help candidates with disabilities, including those with visual impairment, to adequately demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a testing arena in parity with their sighted peers (Shriner & Destefano, 2003). This difficulty is compounded by the fact that an accommodation that helps one candidate may not work in the same way for another, thereby necessitating that accommodations be selected and administered on individualized basis. The Cameroon GCE Board started administering examinations to candidates with visual impairment in 2005, but understanding that candidates with visual impairment come to the testing environment with a broad range of strengths and weaknesses, it was necessary to get their perceptions on the setting accommodation currently in use at the Cameroon GCE Board in order to ascertain that the accommodation is meeting their needs. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory provided the theoretical perspective of this study. This qualitative study adopted the case study design for the inquiry. 12 candidates with visual impairment constituted the sample. Findings showed that candidates with visual impairment write the GCE in a separate room which was perceived by some of them as discriminatory, the Centre environments were not disability friendly, chairs and tables were not suitable for the use of the slate and stylus, while invigilators in some cases were noisy. Based on these findings, the study recommended that the GCE Board should ensure uniformity in the provision of the setting accommodation across Centres by setting accessibility stands and implement the setting accommodation after individual candidate evaluations.

Keywords: Setting Accommodations, Perceptions, Visual Impairment

1. INTRODUCTION

Accommodations in setting are intended to change or alter the environment to facilitate both learning and the demonstration of student's knowledge during examinations. Setting accommodations consist of a private room, screens to block out distractions, and other changes to the test taker's surroundings. They are provided to introduce changes either where a test is taken or the way in which the environment is set up. Students with visual impairment often require taking a test individually or in small groups to ensure that test accommodations are implemented without interference to the concentration of other students. For example, if a visually impaired candidate is being read to, recording answers using technology that is noisy or providing oral answers to a scribe, it would be proper for the student to take the test individually under the supervision of an invigilator so that other test takers are not disturbed.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Changing the environment is especially helpful to students who are easily distracted. Administering the test individually or testing in a separate room, testing in a small group, adjusting the lighting to the needs of the test taking population and providing noise buffers such as headphones, earphones, or earplugs are becoming mandatory practices in many testing situations. (Special Connections, 2005d. Accommodations in Setting affect either where a test is taken or the way in which the environment is set up. Changing the environment is especially helpful to students who are easily distracted. Some examples include:”

- Administering the test individually (e.g., to the student alone)
- Testing in a separate room
- Testing in a small group
- Adjusting the lighting
- Providing noise buffers such as headphones, earphones, or earplugs (Adapted from Special Connections, 2005d).

Ware & Farrell (2009) have pointed out that the formal assessment of children through public examinations is a central feature of all education systems but regret that standard examination formats and practices may present barriers to visually impaired pupils, thus hindering them from demonstrating their true abilities under such standard examination conditions. Students with certain characteristics like visual or hearing impairment may have particular difficulties showing what they know and can do on a given test.

Etsey, Owolabi and Ntim (2009) citing Koenig and Bachman (2004), have indicated that visual impairment is frequently cited as a disability that impacts the way in which a student participates in education. For students who have significant visual impairment, braille is considered the most efficient code used for reading and is widely accepted as an accommodation that can preserve the validity of an assessment. They also insist that it is important that in assessing the visually impaired, fair and appropriate procedures are put in place. This is quite compelling as research literature provides clear evidence that a significant proportion (more than half) of visually impaired children have other disabilities in addition to their visual impairment which in many instances pose multiple difficulties in the form of severe or profound learning difficulties.

Vision is one of the main senses in the learning process. Around 80% of traditional education is offered in a visual mode. Therefore, learners with visual impairments usually face a lot of challenges to access information that is readily available for sighted learners (Permvattana et al., 2006; Richardson & Roy, 2002). Hatlen (2004) also indicates that blindness in human beings causes significant differences, not only in how they learn, but also in how they view their world. These challenges and differences notwithstanding, Armstrong (2009) argues that there is no difference between the educational achievements of sighted students and those with visual impairment if they are provided with reasonable accommodations in the testing arena. Therefore, providing candidates with VI with appropriate examination accommodations is a basic requirement for their success, and is a major factor in ensuring equity of opportunity in their learning and academic achievement. However, accommodating these candidates in end-of-course examinations represents a serious struggle in many African countries, especially the countries that do not have a long history of inclusive education, such as Cameroon.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical perspective of this paper was guided by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory. In 1929, Vygotsky wrote a book titled "The Fundamentals of Defectology: Abnormal Psychology and Learning Disabilities" (Rieber, Carton, 1993) in which he developed the concept of defectology. The theory is based on the idea that human development is the process of a child mastering their experiences in their social environment. The adult and the child's peers play an important role of continual guidance and meaningful relationships during this process. Vygotsky argued that "defects" should not be perceived as abnormality, but need to be brought into social context. He criticized special education as a combination of low expectations and diluted curriculum, and he challenged all educators to have a "positive differential approach" of identifying the children's strength not their disability.

Within this context, he distinguished between two types of disabilities: primary and secondary. For Vygotsky, a child with special needs is not a disabled child. He regarded disability as a socio-cultural developmental phenomenon composed of two types of disabilities: primary and secondary. The primary disability is an organic impairment and as such it may limit the acquisition and the use of some social skills and it means that children acquire knowledge at a slower rate. The secondary

disability arises from distortions of higher psychological functions due to negative social factors. Vygotsky correctly assumed that it is the child's social milieu that may severely limit the course of development, leading to delays or differences that are characteristic of many people with disabilities. Therefore, he named the secondary disability as a socio-cultural disability (Vygotsky, 1993). He explained that the many behavioral traits such as passivity, dependence and the lack of social skills that might characterize children with special needs are in fact the product of poor access to socio-cultural knowledge, lack of social interaction and opportunity to acquire psychological tools. As a result of the primary disability, expectations and attitudes change access to social experiences leading to the development of the secondary disability.

The regard of disability as a socio-cultural phenomenon comes from the understanding that all higher mental functions have social roots. He wrote that "...every function in a child's cultural development appears on the stage twice, on two planes, first - social, then - psychological; first between people as an inter-mental category, then within a child as an intra-mental category" (Vygotsky, 1997b, 106). Children with the secondary disability can develop "compensatory reorganization", which means that they can adopt their higher mental functions in a positive or negative direction. For example, a child with special needs might develop a series of maladaptive behaviour, such as passivity, dependence, aggression etc., which is due to negative adaptive compensatory organization of higher mental functions. On the other hand, if they are surrounded by positive social incentives and inclusive educational settings, the same child could develop self-regulated functions, such as self-commands, self-discussions of the school task, that all lead to positive reorganization of higher mental functions. Of course, this could not be processed without the pedagogical help, as Vygotsky stated, or rather, without inclusive education. In order to prevent or remediate the development of the secondary disability, Vygotsky proposed that changing social attitudes should be one of the first goals of special educators (Gindis, 2003). At some point, he also included the role of personality differences among children, which are important for their inclusion (Das, 1995).

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Eliot, Mckevitt and Keller (2002) indicate that setting accommodations may be needed that require changes to the physical features of the school or workplace. When an off-campus site is selected, it is important that students with disabilities be provided the same opportunity access the same activities which nondisabled people are accessing with ease. Special lighting and tilt-top desks may be needed by students who are blind or visually impaired. An accessible or barrier-free environment is necessary to ensure the mobility of students with disabilities. The buildings should be well-equipped with nonslip surfaces, guide rails, ramps, elevators, and automatic doors for students who have difficulty getting around. Students may need setting accommodations to address accessibility issues, behavior management, and problems with organization of space and materials.

Examples of student characteristics which may indicate the need for flexible setting accommodations include students who have difficulty maintaining attention in a group setting; students who use specialized equipment that may be distracting to others; and students with visual impairments who may need special lighting. In all instances, the setting should be one that is comfortable and appropriate for test administration.

Allman (2009) also insist that the setting for the test situation of visually impaired must allow space for the materials to be used by the student. Besides, she holds that the manipulation of braille, large print materials, braille writers and talking calculators during examinations requires that the student be allowed access to a flat and fairly large work area. Proper lighting which is sometimes overlooked is critical for many readers with visual impairment. Lighting that has been adjusted to suit the student's particular visual needs will help promote sustained reading efficiency. An extra light source at the student's work area can be helpful for some students with visual impairment (Heward, 2000).

Separate examination setting or room is an accommodation strongly recommended for use in administering examinations to visually impaired candidates. This is because this category of candidates are usually granted extra-time and as such can be disturbed by others leaving the examination room at the end of the standard time. Also the candidate who is entitled to extra-time

might be so embarrassed at being seen to be treated differently in the examination room that they may not take advantage of the extra-time allowance. Allman (2009) also recommends that students with visual impairment may need to be administered a test or select group of subtests individually or in small groups as recommended on their Individual Education Plans (IEPs), to ensure that the test accommodations needed by the students are implemented without interfering with the concentration and test taking results of other students. For example, if a visually impaired student is recording answers in an examination by using technology that is noisy or providing answers orally, then the examination must be taken individually under the supervision of a test administrator in order to avoid distracting or influencing the responses of other students. For these reasons, the best practice is to provide separate rooms for these candidates at the same Centre. The Cameroon GCE Board allocates separate examination halls to the visually impaired candidates in their examinations.

5. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Access barriers for candidates with visual impairment in high stakes examinations are often overcome with the provision of necessary accommodations. However, these accommodations in countries that do not have a long history of inclusive education are often provided in a one-size fits all package. This approach has, in most cases, met with resentment from the users when their views are not sort before the provision of the accommodation. Investigating into the perceptions of candidates with visual impairment on the setting accommodation in the GCE Ordinary Level examinations in Cameroon will provide important insights on the use of this accommodation at the GCE Board.

6. RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the perceptions of candidates with visual impairment on the use of the setting accommodation in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Examinations in Cameroon?

7. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study adopted the case study design for the inquiry. One semi-structured interview schedule and an observation checklist (to guide the observation sessions) were developed for data collection. The interview guide consisted of open and closed-ended items of almost equal proportion. Both participants and settings of the study were purposively selected. A total of twelve (12) candidates with visual impairment who have had an experience in writing the GCE Ordinary Level examinations were purposively sampled. The North West and South West Regions were also purposively selected for the study because these are the only two regions in which candidates with visual impairment sit for the GCE examinations. Data were collected through a triangulation of interviews and observation. The data were qualitatively analyzed with particular attention to delineate the emerging themes. A grounding (n^s & %s) of the responses was also included in the analysis to indicate the strength of each emerging theme.

8. FINDINGS

- All the twelve (12) candidates with visual impairment and the five (5) computer/braille experts affirmed that a separate room was provided for candidates with VI during the GCE examinations in Cameroon.
- The two groups of participants in the study indicated that the Centre environments during GCE examinations were inaccessible (not disability friendly) to candidates with visual impairment.
- Five (41.6%) Of the 12 candidates reported that chairs and tables were very convenient while seven (8.3%) of them indicated that the chairs and tables assigned to them were not suitable for the use of the slate and stylus.
- Participants expressed mixed feelings to the separate room accommodation accorded them during the GCE examinations. While some of the candidates appreciated it, others saw it as a practice that reduces their self esteem and did not augur well with inclusive practices.
- Candidates with visual impairment indicated that their invigilators were sometimes noisy since they knew that the candidates were not seeing them.

9. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings of this study indicate a large amount of variability in both the availability and provision of the setting accommodation to candidates with visual impairment across Centres in the GCE examinations. While a number of Centres make a conscious effort to provide a convenient setting to candidates with visual impairment in the GCE examinations, this gesture is however discretionary than mandated by any piece of legislation or regulation from the GCE Board. This is why up to 7 (58.3%) of the 12 candidates pointed out the following lapses on the tables/benches that were assigned to them which they thought negatively affected them during the GCE examinations:

The table was slippery and causing my papers to fall. It takes time to start calling the invigilators to come pick them up for you; 'The benches were not good. Some were shaking and making it difficult to use the slate'; 'There were no special chairs but just the normal benches with small space; 'The seats too are too low and narrow; there was a column on my table that was deep, making it uneasy for me to use the slate and stylus. It was not like the one I had in my school in mile 16 with a flat and smooth surface; the benches were very low and they assign you to sit on them without considering your height.

All these problems affected their concentration in the examination and must have exerted a negative influence on their academic performance.

A number of inconveniences at the Centre settings were reported which psychologically put the candidates in difficulty during the examinations:

There are inconveniences because the toilets are not accessible to students with VI'; we write the examination in a room near the staff room and they just talk as if no examination is going on. Their noise usually comes to disturb our concentration. 'Since GBHS is not my Centre Seat, I could not easily go to their toilet facilities. So I used to be seriously pressed but will prefer to persevere until I get home.

The above inconveniences are in direct contrast to accessibility standards included in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which specify requirements for facilities, such as exterior routes, entries into buildings and rooms, alarms, drinking fountains, and restrooms. ADA mandatorily stipulates that students should be able to use all parts of the building, including classrooms, restrooms, cafeteria, and media center and access rooms or spaces on the school grounds without strain.

Though much effort has been made by the Centres to ensure that candidates with disabilities, those with VI inclusive, sit for the GCE examinations in a separate room from their sighted peers, some resentment was shown by up to 4 (33.3%) of the 12 candidates who see the separate room accommodation as a form of discrimination which stigmatizes them. Worst still, it makes them appear as weak candidates who are taken to a separate room to be offered assistance by the invigilators. From the findings, 2 (16.7%) reported that:

To an extent, I did not like it because when we write in a separate room, the other students think that they are helping us. So when we pass the sighted students do not believe we merited it.

Another 1 (8.3%) participant indicated that: 'many of us using the slate and stylus in one place produce a lot of noise that distracts us from concentration. The slate and stylus produces noise as if fowls are eating.' One more respondent said he felt like he was cut off from society because while in school, he was used to writing examinations with his friends in the same class.

The above feelings of exasperation by some of the candidates are in consonance with research literature which explains that at times, students may be reluctant to use certain testing accommodations because they do not want to appear different from their peers. And if such resistance is exhibited because an accommodation makes him or her look different from peers, then other options should be considered (Thompson, 2005)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Cameroon GCE Board is expected to ensure uniformity in the setting accommodations provided to candidates with visual impairment in the GCE examinations. The availability of tables with flat surfaces convenient for the use of the slate and stylus should be regulated across Centres and not left at the discretion of the Centre authorities. This should be same with the use of invigilators knowledgeable in Braille which were optionally assigned to invigilate candidates with VI in some Centres while others assigned invigilators with no basic knowledge in Braille.
- The Cameroon GCE Board should set accessibility standards for the Centres where candidates with VI are accommodated and carry out inspection visits before the examination takes place to ensure that those Centres are respecting minimum standards for accessibility. This is the practice that is usually carried out by GCE Board authorities before Centres are accredited to function as Food and Nutrition or Computer Science practical Centres.
- The Cameroon GCE Board should seek the opinion of candidates with visual impairment before circumscribing them to write the examination in a separate room from their sighted peers.

10. CONCLUSION

Findings of this study confirmed that candidates with visual impairment have challenges emanating from the examination settings where they are accommodated, which they strongly felt impacted negatively on their academic performance in the GCE Ordinary level examinations in Cameroon. Furthermore, the study confirmed findings of other studies which have equally indicated that the appropriateness of an accommodation should be seen and appreciated more from the perspective of the users (candidates with VI) than from that of the providers (the Cameroon GCE Board).

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