Exploring the Perspectives and Parental Roles in the Academic Performance of University Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

The present study focusses on exploring the impact of parental support on the academic performance of students with disabilities. A qualitative study approach was used to explore students with disabilities' perspectives of parental support and the impact it has on their academic performance. This qualitative study purposively selected eight participants. They were subjected to semi-structured, open-ended, one-on-one interviews, and these interviews were recorded using an audio recorder with their permission. The collected data was analysed using thematic content analysis. Parental support may take numerous forms, including emotional, physical, and financial assistance. As a result, parental support influences academic success and the adjustment of students living with disabilities to their new environment. However, parental knowledge, attitudes, and tolerance of a student's disability have been shown to be obstacles to meaningful parental support. This study concludes that for students with disabilities to perform to their maximum potential, parents must be trained and empowered to provide necessary support including motivating their children.

Keywords: *Academic performance; role of parents; university students; students with disability*

Introduction

At a university level, providing the appropriate support for students with disabilities can be contended to be mandatory and a legal mandate of the university. Therefore, measures have been made to accommodate students with impairments, such as the implementation of Acts and laws to safeguard students with disabilities (Gow *et al.,* 2020). In this regard, the South African government has put in place the National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996) and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (Act 4 of 2000) (Moyo and Mamobolo, 2014). The purpose behind this is to require all higher education institutions to make reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities so that they have equitable access to all services and programs offered. Furthermore, this is to ensure that no one is discriminated against or denied the right to an education because of their disability.

During their journey from high school to university, students with disabilities face a variety of problems. According to a study conducted by Rahat and lhan (2016), students with disabilities are at risk of failing to complete their university degrees or failing to complete their studies within the stipulated time frame. This is due to the student's difficulty to adjust to the new environment and its

expectations. Furthermore, freshman students with poor self-esteem and students with disabilities are at risk of losing motivation, dropping out, or finding university life difficult (Von Otter, 2014). As a result, students with disabilities should be ready for the transition from high school to university by gaining the requisite skills and understanding of university life and expectations. Disability scholars and disability rights activists have made a considerable commitment towards bringing into recognition the needs of students with disabilities within society (Green, 2007). The disability rights activists contend that people are disabled not by their hindrances but rather by basic and attitudinal barriers. Students with disabilities are regarded and perceived as being more at risk as they are subjected to discrimination and stigma. Nevertheless, universities are now obligated to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This was done by passing the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Clark, 2007). One of the roles of these Acts is to protect students with disabilities.

This current study focuses on exploring the impact of parental support on the academic performance of students with disabilities, and this paper shares results from a study done in partial fulfilment for a Master of Social Science in Health Promotion at University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa. Education professionals believe that involving guardians and parents in the education of students with disabilities is essential (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). However, there has been few studies on the perspectives of university students with disabilities on parental assistance and the impact it may have on their academic success. As part of a larger project to investigate inequities in South African higher education, this qualitative study examines the views of parental support among UKZN students with disabilities and the influence it has on their academic performance.

Preliminary Literature Review

Parenting styles are categorised into two dimensions: (1) demandingness (the extent to which parents exert control, maturity demands, and supervision) and (2) responsiveness (referring to the extent to which parents show affection, warmth, acceptance, and involvement) (Maccoby and Martin, 1983). Based on this, a four-tiered classification of parenting styles was established, which includes authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and negligent parents (Baumrind, 1991; Checa and Abundis-Gutierrez, 2018). According to studies, authoritative parenting is associated with good academic performance, implying that the influence of other parenting styles, while having some effect on students' academic achievement, is not as favourable as that of authoritative parenting (Munyi, 2012). Despite this, numerous studies suggest that students whose parents are more active in their education perform better in school (Pulkkinen, 1982; Steinberg *et al.,* 1992; Milevsky, 2020). These youngsters are more likely to succeed academically, proving the link between the authoritative parenting style and strong academic performance. However, just as parental participation results in high academic performance for children, the strong academic achievement of students is also a result of parental participation (Wong *et al.,* 2021).

Parental participation is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for both parents and students, with consequences for academic and behavioural outcomes (Turney and Kao, 2009). This suggests that parental participation in their children's academic lives has an impact on their general behavior and academic life, where many hurdles and variables may prevent successful parental participation. Considering this, integrating families in school activities has been a key emphasis of academics, particularly those dealing with at-risk students (Petersen, 1992). Furthermore, parents' own feelings about their abilities to assist, as well as their lack of knowledge and awareness of the school system, influence their comfort level with being involved in their children's academic lives. As a result, there are several barriers to meaningful parental engagement, such as one's socioeconomic situation,

parental values and perceptions, and parental education level (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Munyi, 2012).

Methodology

The choice in methods and procedures used is based on the research topic and its main objectives. In the present study, the main motivation was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of the UKZN students with disabilities of parental support and the effects it has on their academic performance. This study specifically explores the impact that parental support may have on the academic performance of students and identifying any possible barriers that may contribute to low parental support.

For this study, a qualitative method was used as the perceptions of students regarding parental support were explored. Qualitative research is further able to provide an in-depth analysis of the experiences of a relatively small number of respondents (Griffin, 2004). Although the number of participants that were used for this study was small, this method enabled the researcher to obtain the necessary in-depth data. This research study incorporated the voices of the participants and the reflexivity of the researcher. This study avoided closed-ended forms of questions that prompt types of responses, but rather opted for an open-ended form of question which enabled participants to freely express themselves. Purposive sampling, a non-probability selection approach, was used to choose eight students with disabilities enrolled at UKZN. Purposive sampling (Polit and Beck, 2009) is a non-random sampling methodology that does not need underlying theories or a specific number of informants. The researcher explained the topic of each interview and emphasised that participation was entirely voluntary. Before the interview began, the participant was given a consent form that further outlined the ethical processes that were in place.

The researcher conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with each of eight individuals. This was done so that the researcher could obtain rich, in-depth information and perspectives on the issue from the students. The interview was recorded using an audio recorder with the participants' permission and cooperation. The interviews lasted around 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English and were guided by a nine-question interview schedule. Thematic analysis was used for this study due to its versatility and use in providing a comprehensive and complete explanation of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step methodology for doing thematic analysis, which includes familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, looking for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and labelling themes, and finally preparing the report.

It is vital to highlight that in the progression of this research study there was bound to emerge several ethical dilemmas, which were to be addressed. Ethical clearance for the research study was obtained from UKZN ethics committee (HSS/1491/017M), thus granting the researcher permission to conduct the research study.

Study Findings and Discussion

Demographic representation of participants

According to the demographic statistics (Table 1), there was an unfair or disproportionate representation of gender, with males outnumbering females. This was owing to the researcher's assumption that these students would be able to offer in-depth information as they had some form

of UKZN experience. The participants were largely males in their twenties who were eager to participate in this research project.

Table 1: Participant's socio-demographics

		Number of Participants
Gender	Female	2
	Male	6
Level of study	2nd year	3
	3rd year	5

The researcher's illustrations assigned codes for anonymity, like participant 1 to participant 8, for the purpose of this study and participants are identified as such in this study.

Perceptions of parental support

Parental participation might be explored as a viable technique of providing additional help to students. The data show that parental participation has a positive effect on students' academic achievements. Parents were found to provide emotional and financial support to students with disabilities. As a result, positive perceptions and attitudes regarding parental assistance have emerged. It was also found to be associated with the student's positivity and improvement. In this regard, Turney and Kao (2009) add that parental involvement offers a unique opportunity for both parents and children, which also has implications for children's academic and behavioural outcomes. While aiding pupils, parents were also found to be motivating a sense of independence, ensuring their survival in a range of situations and settings, and developing a sense of self-reliance. The perception of knowing that actual or imagined support exists mitigates the attitudes of low self-esteem and doubt in one's capabilities in the academic environment for disabled students (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). However, results also show that a lack of support has little effect on academic performance, which coincides with the writing of Walberg (1984) who argues that it is at school going age where self-confidence and independence must be developed so as to allow for greater levels of self-reliance in tertiary education.

Preferred forms of parental support

According to literature, various forms of parental support, such as emotional, financial, social, and spiritual support, have a positive impact on students' academic performances (Chohan & Khan, 2010; Otter, 2014; De la Iglesia *et al.,* 2014). This study confirms this, with findings indicating that parental involvement plays a significant role in a student's university success. As a result, it's no surprise that students who received parental support had favourable views of parental involvement. This is consistent with Hornby and Lafaele's (2011) findings, which state that parents' active involvement in their children's academic lives contributes to their academic success and adjustment. This was supported by the study, which found that various forms of support, such as emotional and financial support, had a positive impact on a student's academic performance. These types of assistance aided students with disabilities in making the transition to university. As a result, students must develop a sense of independence, ensuring self-reliance in most cases, in addition to receiving assistance from the disability unit.

Barriers to parental involvement

Data shows the existence of obstacles that impede on successful parental participation. One such obstacle is the lack of awareness of various challenges presented by environmental factors. Hill and Taylor (2004) cite level of education as a contributor to a lack of awareness. Parents without

qualifications tend not to understand university systems and the challenges encountered, it therefore becomes a barrier to know what lacks and where. Parents who are unaware of their child's disability needs are unable to adequately help their children. As a result, it is critical that parents learn about their children's disabilities, gaining a thorough understanding of their condition and its necessities (Turney and Kao, 2009). Knowledge of the condition helps them to better support their children and provides them with the capacity to assist. It was also found that people's views and ideas about disabilities had an impact on their expectations. An obstacle to parental support is a lack of belief in the children and low expectations for education. Nonetheless, while information may be argued to give parents with an awareness of the condition (disability), acceptance of the disability remains critical. A parent of a disabled child may find it difficult to accept their condition, resulting in them being ineffectively active in the child's life. The participant found that most of the parents he has spoken to who have a child with a disability lack acceptance and, as a result, fail to provide their children with the necessary support.

The transition to university

Transition from high school to tertiary institutions presents both opportunities of growth and detachment anxiety (Eckes and Ochoa, 2005). Physical disability, therefore, further exacerbates these challenges if support structures are not adequate. The findings show that, while some students found the transition to university tough and difficult, some were well prepared and therefore able to adjust. It was found, however, that individuals experienced comparable experiences during their early university years, even though they welcomed them differently.

The level of assistance required by students with disabilities is mostly determined by their type of disability. It is, therefore, important for higher education institutions to always advance their capacity and develop knowledge on various types of disabilities to readily step in when unfamiliar cases are present (Stodden, 2001; Wagner *et al.*, 2005). By doing so, transitions for individuals with disability becomes less anxiety inducing. The rise in the number of students with disabilities enrolled within universities means there should be an increase in the availability of disability-friendly accommodation and access to facilities (Madaus, 2005). Most worrying is the issue of self-disclosure of students with disabilities.

According to Wagner *et al.* (2005), some enrolling in higher education tend to hold the belief that they do not have a disability. Therefore, students with disabilities may not see the need for being classified as such nor want to be treated differently, but rather prefer being treated like other students without disabilities. According to Eckes and Ochoa (2005), a student with a disability is expected to self-identify as having a disability to enable him/her to be able to request the necessary accommodations and support from the university. The contrary argument posed by Ankeny and Lehmann (2011) reflects on the parental role in shielding children with disabilities, such that when they reach tertiary education it becomes a straggle to adapt to the new environment of independence. The parental role, therefore, consequently becomes an instigator of low self-esteem and perpetuates dependency instead of self-reliance (Eckes and Ochoa, 2005).

The study's objective is to learn about students' attitudes regarding parental participation, perceived barriers, and the impact of parental involvement. Although this study's findings on parental support were mixed, this study's conclusions were similar with those found in the literature. It was found that parental involvement was important in students' academic success at university. As a result, it is not surprising that students who received parental assistance had favourable attitudes of parental engagement. This study also showed evidence that other forms of support, such as emotional and

financial assistance, had a positive impact on students' academic achievements. These types of assistance supported and expedited the transition of students with disabilities to university.

Furthermore, this study revealed that the parenting style techniques used influenced students' academic achievements. This study found two types of parenting styles, authoritative and neglectful. The research found that parents' appreciation of their children's accomplishments assisted them in moving past the uncertainties and obstacles they had as a result of their disability, thereby correlating with previous research findings (Cabrera *et al.,* 2014). Parents of disabled students also voiced financial assistance, which proved to be one of the students' necessities. Students with disabilities typically obtain disability bursaries and sponsorships to help with academic fees and university accommodation. It was also stated that university life comes with additional costs, such as sunscreen for students with albinism, which scholarships do not cover. Consequently, it may be claimed that, though restricted, some financial aid from parents is beneficial. As a result, it is worth emphasising that parents' active involvement in their children's academic lives has a positive impact on academic performance.

Nonetheless, the data revealed that students with disabilities thought it was their obligation to achieve highly in university. These results agree with Chohan and Khan (2010), who argue that as a child grows older, he or she will be aware of scholastic expectations and standards. As a result, it is demonstrated that a lack of parental support does not necessarily hinder a student's academic performance. The limitations of students hinder their capacity to participate in everyday regular duties such as bathing. This would suggest that the students might benefit from additional help, such as caretakers. However, it has been reported that caretakers abuse students with disabilities and fail to provide the necessary support. As a result, it was proposed that parents be engaged in the selection and hiring of someone to assist the child. The participation of parents in this procedure ensures that the chosen caretaker can be trusted and will successfully support the student with a disability.

According to the findings of this study, students with disabilities demand the physical presence of their parents, regardless of their awareness to the impossibility of this. Nonetheless, the university environment expects students to be self-sufficient, ensuring that they can work independently. This setting prepares students for the outside world by instilling values such as freedom and self-determination in them. According to the findings of this study, parents do not have high expectations regarding their children's success. As a result, parental participation and support are restricted. Participants also stated that their parents and family members questioned their ability to succeed academically. Participants, on the other hand, might attain their goals independent of parental backing if they used self-determination. Students with impairments demand more encouragement and inspiration from their parents. This educates students to look above the limitations imposed by their disability and be motivated to attain their academic goals. One of this study's goals was to identify the barriers to parental involvement. The research reveals various barriers that contribute to this problem, including parents' lack of awareness. It is critical that parents learn about their children's disabilities to have a thorough understanding of their condition and its requirements. Knowledge of the condition helps them to effectively support their children and gives them the capacity to assist.

Nonetheless, not all parents share similar sentiments, as some had reservations about their children's abilities and prospects for success from the beginning. The findings suggested that the individuals challenged their parents' ideas by overcoming their limitations. Disability stigmas and stereotypes serve as the foundation for unfavourable attitudes and frameworks that qualify for invalidation and marginalization (Von Otter, 2014). As a result of deeply established cultural practices and ideas, a handicap becomes a weird human experience. This inhibits and hinders the connections of students

with disabilities with their classmates and adults who do not have impairments. According to the findings of this study, some parents encouraged and fostered a sense of identity in their children. This verified that participants are able to function normally in a university context. Students with impairments face a variety of problems throughout their university transition, which has an impact on their university adjustment and academic success. Students with impairments, according to Jones (1996), are often at risk when they join university owing to their exceptionalities. They may, however, adapt and adjust to the new environment because of the people and services they encounter at university. According to this study's findings, students with disabilities require caretakers to assist them with their fundamental requirements.

This study also found that the additional workload proved to be a challenge. Students with impairments are accommodated at UKZN by the Disability Unit. The Disability Unit provides students with a variety of services, including mentors, lecture venue inquiries, and student assistance. The data revealed that when students are adequately prepared, the transfer to university is easy. Brinckerhoff (1996) claims that students with impairments are often discouraged from continuing their education after high school. Early transition planning, on the other hand, encourages them to consider post-secondary school possibilities. Prospective students are more educated about campus life and expectations as a result. They can then be better groomed and prepared for their new environment. This study found that while some participants had previously studied at special schools, others had attended regular schools. It should be emphasised that mainstream schools do not provide enough accommodations for students with disabilities. However, mainstream schools promote independence and serve children who do not have disabilities.

Nonetheless, while this may be interpreted negatively, the findings demonstrated that mainstream schooling was beneficial. It was shown that traditional schools helped students to acquire a feeling of self-advocacy. These abilities ensured that students could easily adjust to the academic atmosphere. The adaptation of standard academic methods increased the likelihood that the student would be able to effectively adjust to the increased workload at the university level.

Limitations, Conclusion and Recommendations

Like other research studies, this study also has its own limitations. In terms of limitations, the study did not reflect all students with disabilities' overall impressions of parental support and its impact on academic performance. The research included many students with physical disabilities, albinism, and vision impairment. As a result, this study did not collect impressions of students with other types of disabilities, such as hearing impairments. Lastly, because only a small number of students volunteered to engage in this study over a short period of time, the researcher only interviewed eight individuals (two females and six males). Overall, parental assistance was regarded as positive and beneficial as it helped to create a smoother transfer and adjustment to university. Parental support has a favourable impact on students' academic success. It should be noted, however, that some students do not receive parental assistance, which has an impact on their attitudes and views of parental support. Most students believed that parental assistance was pointless and stressed that it is their independence that enables them to fit in to the new environment.

According to this study, the students received emotional, physical, and financial support from their parents. These types of assistance have a positive impact on academic success and the transition to the new campus environment. This study concludes that several hurdles to successful parental participation exist, such as a lack of understanding, awareness, and acceptance of students with disabilities. Moreover, parental disbelief further contributes to a lack of parental participation. It is recommended that a deeper knowledge of the child's disability may empower parents to know the

extent of care and support that the child may require. Also, further studies need to focus on the socioeconomic status of parents and the age of students and explore their significant role on the academic performance of students.

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