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Inclusion for a Student with Vision Impairment: “They accept me, like, as in I am there, but they just won’t talk to me.”


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Abstract

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Keywords

Inclusion, Vision Impairment, Qualitative Study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Bullying

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Inclusion for a Student with Vision Impairment: “They accept me, like, as in I am there, but they just won’t talk to me.”

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We explore the experiences of Nick, a secondary school student with vision impairment in an Australian mainstream school in this study, and we particularly focus on whether he perceived his education as inclusive. We have used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in this single individual case as this approach explores our participant’s understandings which may be revealed by close examination of mindful experiences. The “gem” spoken by Nick (pseudonym), our 16-year old participant, was “They accept me, like as in I am there, but they just won’t talk to me.” This statement summarises his sense of not belonging, of being other, and of being bullied. The inability of his school to provide an inclusive education was apparent to him, and his often-unfulfilled need for access to specialist teachers of vision impairment is explored. Our study includes vivid quotes from Nick to bring his voice to our phenomenological interpretation. Keywords: Inclusion, Vision Impairment, Qualitative Study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Bullying

Inclusive Education and Disability

Education determines more than a child’s economic future—it is also critical to a child’s social and emotional development, to establishing a sense of identity and a sense of place in the world. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 6)

In this article, we explore the lived experience of Nick, a secondary school student with vision impairment who attended an Australian mainstream school. Nick’s experiences reveal that his schooling was not inclusive and that he often felt marginalised. Like many students globally, Australian students have the right to schooling in an inclusive environment in which barriers to accessing quality education are identified and removed, and diversity is respected. Inclusive education requires equity and access to high-quality education for all. It respects students’ diversity (UNESCO, 2012). In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act of 1992, the Disability Standards for Education from 2005 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014, 2016a), and national and state curriculum policies mandate that teachers are to ensure that all students with disability can participate in education on the same basis as their peers “through rigorous, meaningful, and dignified learning programs” (Australian Curriculum, 2015, para. 1). Educators who adopt an inclusive approach to education strive to promote equality and respect in their classrooms.

Inadequate educational access for students with disability generally results in students’ diminished capacity for the rest of their lives and under-education leads to “unemployment, lower levels of health, social isolation, and a lifetime of disadvantage” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016b, p. 4). This has been recognised for decades. In 1996, it was estimated that the global financial cost of childhood blindness (defined according to the World Health Organization as best corrected vision of 20/400 or worse), in terms of loss of earning capacity, was between US\$6 trillion and \$27 trillion—which surpasses the cost of adult blindness (Rahi, Gilbert, Foster, & Minassian, 1999). Most of the loss occurs in low prevalence, high-income

countries like the USA. The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) considers education: “One of the most powerful levers available to make society more equitable” (OECD, 2007, p. 11). The highest performing education systems across OECD countries are those that “combine quality with equity” (OECD, 2012, p. 11). A recent OECD statistic contends that Australia is ranked 21 out of 29 countries for employment of people with disability (OECD, 2010). Almost one-third of submissions to the development of the National Disability Services (2012) highlighted that:

Far from ensuring young people with disabilities have every opportunity to realise their potential, the education system acts as a barrier to greater achievement and independence in their lives. (p. 47)

Viewing education through a lens of inclusion “implies a shift from seeing the child as a problem to seeing the education system as a problem” (UNESCO, 2005, p. 26). An inclusive education model focuses educational policy and practice on the problems associated with diversity within the social institution (Peters & Oliver, 2009). Despite the objective of the Standards to eliminate discrimination, the National Disability Services (2012) of Australia reported that the direct experience of students with disability was that discrimination continues to be rife within the current education system. Bullying and harassment were identified as common experiences for many students with disability. Vision Australia (2015, p. 13) claimed that access to social participation “is vital for children’s social and emotional development.”

It is imperative that, in the spirit of respect and inclusion, we explore the gaps between policy rhetoric and the reality of the lives of students with a disability: the experiences and understandings of students. The World Report on Disability (World Health Organization and World Bank, 2011) concurs that referring to the experience of impairment is essential in determining barriers, and they recommend that educators and policy makers should “consult and involve children in decisions about their education” (p. 227). To do this, qualitative approaches to research are most effective (World Health Organization and World Bank, 2011). Research that focuses on listening to students with disabilities offers an opportunity to voice concerns, which hopefully enables the students to influence solutions (Armstrong, 2005; Curtin & Clarke, 2005; Messiou, 2012; Slee, 1996, 2011). In this study, we sought to find out, “What were the experiences of schooling for a student with vision impairment?” We interviewed Nick about his schooling. We particularly focused on the social aspects of his experience.

The researchers are Jill Opie and Jane Southcott. Jill was a secondary mathematics teacher who worked with many students with vision impairment in a special unit at her school. This experience of working with and talking to students led Jill to want to undertake research about the experiences of students with vision impairment in mainstream schools. Jill is passionate about the importance of respectful relationships and inclusive practices. She has undertaken a number of qualitative case studies with different participants during her Master of Education (Special) and her Doctorate. Jill has worked with students with a range of disabilities and learning needs throughout her career, and from her extensive school experiences, she became aware that many of her colleagues had little understanding of the specific needs of students with vision impairment. Jill decided that she wanted to undertake research to explore what students thought about their schooling, particularly how they felt about the enablers and barriers to inclusion they had encountered. Jane was keen to be Jill’s supervisor as inclusive educational practices have long been central to how she engages with students. As a school teacher, Jane taught students with a broad range of different abilities (i.e., physical and cognitive) and worked hard to understand how she could create inclusive educational environments. As a doctoral supervisor, Jane works with students on topics that

address inclusion and equity in education. Jill's research very much aligned with Jane's principles and interests.

The Participant

Nick was attending a private Victorian secondary school after transferring from his country school after Year 7 and was in Year 10 and 16-years-old when he opted into the study with parental permission. With ethical approval from our university, we called for participants for this research study through the Guide Dogs newsletter (Guide Dogs Victoria, 2016). Guide Dogs provide a range of services including mobility training. Nick contacted us and agreed to take part. He was keen to talk about his experiences. In Victoria, there is no school specifically for students with vision impairment. His parent/guardian had tried to find out from Vision Australia if there was a mainstream school that already had students with vision impairment, but this information was unavailable for reasons of privacy. Nick's parents chose his current school because of its rowing program. Nick had been introduced to rowing by his family carer and proved to be a talented and proficient rower. Nick was the only student with vision impairment at the school and, apparently, also the first at the school. Despite his family's efforts, Nick was unique. We talked to him about his experiences and came to understand his perspectives about his mainstream schooling.

Methodology

We chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for this study (Smith, 2011). IPA has three primary theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Influenced by Husserl's phenomenology, IPA is concerned with examining experience "in its own terms," and is not overly influenced by "prior psychological theorizing or by personal proclivities of the researcher" (Smith, 2017, p. 303). The need for us as researchers to bracket previous knowledge and assumptions and remain genuinely open, curious, and critically self-aware/reflexive underpins this approach (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Finlay, 2013). Before we began collecting data for this study, we talked at length about our shared experiences as educators who worked with students with disabilities. Jill talked about how passionately she wished to make things better for students with vision impairment. Jane talked about how she had created learning environments that allowed students with disabilities to be included in all activities in ways that were respectful. We agreed that both of us were driven by altruistic ideals stemming from our notions of justice and fairness. We also recognised that this was about us and, as phenomenological researchers, we had to put our passions to one side, so we could truly listen to the people who agreed to take part in our research. Bracketing in this way informs both the data collection and its analysis. In data collection, we had to ask open questions, refrain from commenting and changing directions, and be patient and prepared to follow where the participant wanted to go. In our analysis, we had to continue to try to adopt this unbiased stance, and one way in which we did this was to analyse individually and then compare our understandings. Thus, we were able to interrogate each other about what we each understood and why.

For us, this was vital to the IPA process, which explores the meaning of personal experience as an interpretative endeavour on the part of both participant and researcher and is described as a process of engaging in the double hermeneutic of "the researcher trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborne, 2015, p. 26). IPA is idiographic, committed to the detailed analysis of personal experience (Smith & Osborn, 2015). It offers "detailed, nuanced analyses of *particular* instances of lived experience" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 37). The intensity of activity for each case means that IPA studies

are usually conducted on single or relatively small sample sizes (Smith, 2008, 2011). Smith et al. (2009, p. 38) contend that a good case study with an insightful analysis of data from a sensitively conducted interview can make a “significant contribution”, and rigorous single-subject research may reveal the unexpected (Horner et al., 2005). Data were collected as in-depth, exploratory, semi-structured interviews—as this allowed us to hear what the participant had to say in his unfolding account of his experiences and decide when and where to probe further (Kvale, 1996, 2009; Seidman, 1998; Smith, 2017; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As Smith contends, interviews do not follow a prescribed form. A research question and interview schedule are “used very flexibly during the interview as the participant is probed on areas arising” (Smith, 2017, p. 303). Nick was very forthcoming. He shared experiences and his feelings about them. He needed little encouragement, was quite verbose, and seemed excited that someone was taking an interest in him.

Jill interviewed Nick three times. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim before being subjected to an idiographic qualitative analysis which looked for essential themes. According to Smith (1996), IPA researchers explore chains of connection between embodied experience, talk about that experience, and a participant’s making sense of, and emotional reaction to, that experience. Our data analysis was guided by “an attitude of openness and a willingness to dwell in the data” consistent with the approach taken toward data collection (Cassidy, Reynolds, Naylor, & De Souza, 2011, p. 269). The focus remains on Nick’s attempt to make sense of his experience since the analysis progresses from the descriptive to the interpretative (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). We read and reread the interviews before Jill transcribed them. Then we both annotated the transcriptions; each of us looked in detail for essential themes. When others read the written words, they cannot hear the inflection of Nick’s voice and meaningful pauses are lost. As researchers, it was imperative that we listened repeatedly to ensure an understanding of what was said and what was being inferred before any interpretation of meaning was made. The interpretative analysis afforded us an opportunity to explore Nick’s understanding through the “telling” of his “own stories” in his own words (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, p. 18) and to deal with the data in a speculative fashion: to think about what it means for Nick to have made these claims and to have expressed these feelings and concerns in this particular situation (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

Our initial notes included points of interest, key descriptive comments, repetitive phrases, and more interpretative conceptual comments. Moving away from the transcripts and working with the initial notes, we compiled categories and identified emergent themes (Southcott & Joseph, 2015). At this stage, we pruned the themes to maintain the depth and complexity by focussing on the most important and interesting data. We sought to enhance the credibility of this research by independently analysing the interview transcripts in isolation prior to a robust, round-table discussion about the plausibility of the emergent themes (Smith & Osborn, 2003). We both brought our different life experiences and perspectives to the analysis, which supported our sense making (Fade, 2004). We made connections between identified themes and created a summary of pivotal themes placed in tentative categories that brought to the fore pertinent points of interest. From these, key words and explanatory notes were placed in a table and linked to the original marginal notes on the transcript as a preliminary interpretation. Finally, we prioritized the groupings and reported the data thematically, as illustrated by direct quotations from the transcripts to present Nick’s voice (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

We carefully analysed Nick’s comments and reflections in an endeavour to see beyond the obvious to implied meaning, in order to seek what really mattered. While there is no specific method that can be applied to IPA to judge validity, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) favour a four principles approach involving reviewers looking at the research from the perspective of sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and

importance. Reviewers might also be concerned with a “commitment to the idiographic approach, attention directed toward an experiential account of significance to the participant, interpretative as well as hermeneutic analysis, and caution in moving toward general claims” (Cassidy et al., 2011, p. 267). We offered Nick the opportunity to review the transcript of his interview and to talk about our interpretation, but he declined.

Using IPA for this single individual case highlights the extent of understanding which we can reveal by close examination of the mindful experiences of one person. We explored how Nick understood his experiences in an Australian mainstream school. The themes that arose in our analysis concerned Nick’s perceived isolation and lack of friends, the bullying he experienced, and his resilience. We also include problems that arose for Nick: access to all aspects of the curriculum and difficulties with technology and support.

Findings

Our findings are presented under three headings which we drew from our data analysis of Nick’s schooling experiences and reflection on how he described his life to us: (a) Nick has no friends; (b) Nick is keen to show that being blind does not mean helpless; (c) Nick has been the subject of significant bullying.

Nick Has No Friends

We realised from the outset of the interviews that Nick was describing being very isolated from his peers. Why this was so and the impact of this on his schooling required more intensive reflection and interpretation. Nick felt isolated and left alone at school. He felt he had no friends among his peers and no one made any effort to speak with him. We immediately realised that Nick could not read Jill’s facial expressions, so she verbalised what might have been implicit in a look or a gesture. Nick’s inability to see facial expressions or gain much visually from his surroundings did not seem to be apparent to his aide or teachers, as he had no social skill intervention or training. Nick was never provided with a Visiting Teacher (VT) who was a specialist trained in vision impairment. As he attended a private (rather than state) school, his funding was limited and used for an assistant for him at school camps rather than employing a VT for a few sessions a year. A VT could have given the teachers information about the social repercussions of being unable to “read” people visually. This information was not available to staff or to Nick.

Nick reflected, “I don’t really have a friend at school. They accept me, like, as in I am there. Like, they won’t be mean to me, but they just won’t talk to me.” He started at the school in Year 8, whereas most students started in Year 7 or had come up from the junior school during which time many friendships had been developed. Nick felt this exacerbated his isolation. He attempted to justify his rejection by stating:

Some people have been at school since prep. And I am the first person they know who is visually impaired. And I think it is just like a thing in people’s head sometimes—like they want to talk to you, but they’re just too nervous in that they just don’t want to offend you.

Nick returned to the idea of not having friends repeatedly. He variously stated, “Friendships at [my school]—they don’t really understand. I don’t really know. They accept me to an extent, but they don’t talk to me” and “I don’t have a close friend. No. I don’t have a friend.” He reflected on the behaviour of his rowing crew:

Well some of my [rowing] crew are nice, it's just that they don't talk to me at school. This is just my theory: that if you are seen talking to me, it's like, oh my god, you're talking to Nick; why are you talking to him? That's just my theory. I'm not certain other people think that; I'm just saying that I must be a strange person to them because I can't see.

It is as if Nick does not feel he is worthy of being spoken to in public. He appears to accept and even justify that boys ignore him because he is "strange" and "can't see" as a way to understand their rejection of him.

When asked if he talks to other people when he is in his homeroom, Nick replied after a significant pause, "Ummm, my homeroom teacher who is all right." He then added another boy's name, calling him by his nickname, but not with any confidence. Even in a crowded room he feels very much on his own. Nick further revealed his isolation stating, "I sit by myself in class." He is normally first in class, but others deliberately avoid sitting next to him. "Yes, I feel pretty much on my own." Beyond the lessons, he remained alone. He explained, "Well I don't have lunch with anybody."

It was clear to us that Nick desperately wanted a friend. After confiding he had no friends in the first two interviews, he made a point in the third interview to say he now had a friend, Joe, the music captain at the school, who had since spoken to Nick. It appears just one contact was enough for Nick to give him friendship status. Nick stated, "I do have a friend now. He plays guitar . . . he said I should try to get into a guitar ensemble and play at lunchtimes too." Nick admitted to not playing the guitar well, but he hopes if he takes up the bass instead that he might have a chance as "it is easier, I think." Nick added, "Joe is a big person in the music school—everyone knows him" and stated, "but I don't go to music at lunchtimes." He was very keen to let us know of the new development of "having a friend", although he had taken no steps to learn the bass or take the interaction further. It may have been important to his self-esteem to ensure that we did not think less of him because he had no friends as revealed in the first two interviews. He did not want to appear different to others or open to pity.

Nick Is Keen to Show that Being Blind Does Not Mean Helpless

Nick commented, "I want to put in as much as I can, not just to show myself, but to show other students that I may be blind, but I can do a lot." It was extremely important to Nick that he was not seen as needy. He wanted to be recognized as someone who can do things and who should not be left out just because of his vision impairment. He stated:

Basically, I want to try to get leadership positions to say to people that I may be blind, but I can do something. [Pause] Like it's just all you can do. All you can do is try. And, like, I have tried to do a lot of things. And sometimes you don't come out on the top; you come out on the bottom. But you just have to get up and try something new.

Nick does not ask teachers for help. He does not want others to see him as needing help, does not want to disturb teachers, and does not want teachers to know he is struggling and put him on a modified program. He maintained that, "I don't want to look like I am doing different work . . . because I am now in mainstream, and I don't want to look like I am weak". He added, "It's just always how I've been. I don't like looking like I need help." There are occasions when Nick cannot do what is expected, but he rarely lets this be known. He explained how he feels when he has to admit an inability.

Sometimes, I have to go up and say [that] this is just not possible for me to do. It's very hard. Teachers—they don't understand, really. They just don't understand, so they don't know how to react. They don't know, and that's what I don't know. A big fear I have of people is of the unknown . . . what will happen if such and such happens. What will be their reaction? I sometimes feel like that when I speak with the teachers.

There is lack of communication between Nick and his teachers. This has perpetuated his feeling of insecurity and avoidance of ridicule. We sensed his fear of teacher reaction: a fear of an unknown response. We also reminded ourselves that Nick cannot see the reaction on the teacher's face or read the reaction of his classmates.

It appeared to us that even if his teachers were aware of the difficulties Nick experienced in the classroom, they were unable to ensure that he was getting the same quality education as his peers. Nick was conscious of other students and self-effacing: "The thing is, I don't want to interrupt the class just because of me." He puts others before himself and puts a low status on himself. Nick attributed this reluctance to seek help to his grandfather. He stated, "This does come back from my grandfather engraving that in me. I have to learn myself and that's the thing." He continued, "I always have a problem asking for help. My grandfather taught me this. He said it would just make me look weak. And I have learnt that." Teachers would have been aware of Nick's struggles. Nick shared his student report with Jill, and it was obvious that he was struggling in all academic areas. When asked if he felt he could ask for help from another student, Nick replied:

I just don't really want to do that. I've never really done that: asked another student for help. I've just never done it. I don't know if I'm just too scared or nervous or whatever . . . what the reaction is going to be, what they might think of me. 'Cos now it's all like the social status in this school, it's like lots of cliques and that nonsense.

Image is important to Nick, and he avoids any show of neediness. He is fiercely independent, but he also reveals a naivety regarding how other students see him. This could be attributed to his lack of visual cues from his surrounding environment. He confided, "They never knew I was on a modified because I was still in the same classroom and still virtually doing the same thing. So they didn't know I was doing a modified."

Nick experienced physical difficulties particularly when there were six periods in a day rather than five, as then his eyes are tired and his "nystagmus is going insane." He admitted that he sometimes has to let teachers know he is having sight issues.

I try and do my best with my sight, and sometimes it makes me feel a bit weird, and I have to say that I don't know how I will go in this class 'cos of my sight. Weird because of how, I don't know, how [the teachers] will react and what they will make me do.

Nick seemed to feel that if he showed any neediness he would be letting his grandfather and himself down. It seemed to be of paramount importance to him not to stand out, not ask for help, not appear needy, and to not show weakness. He did not want to appear different, which is also revealed in his reaction regarding physical education (PE). Nick asserted that he appreciated the school encouraging him to join in the PE activities, but he was uncomfortable with their methods.

[My school] went out and bought a whole lot of different equipment for me for PE, and it does make me feel different. (*Embarrassed semi-laugh*). PE—it's always well adapted—well, not really adapted. It is using the equipment they have got for me most times, but the same games, they have barely modified them. I am just part of it and use the equipment but (*whispered*) other students don't know.

It was apparent that the school had not had discussions with Nick regarding what accommodations he would be comfortable with, and it embarrasses him to think others may see him as needy. He tries to kid himself that other students will not notice the “special equipment” incorporated in the lessons. Again, Nick was unable to gauge other people's perceptions with his very limited sight.

Nick Has Been the Subject of Significant Bullying

Nick recalled that, “At [camp] there were seven in the house. So because there were two people in each room, I had my own room.” To us, this was another example of Nick's isolation and a circumstance that could have been avoided by the school. They were collaborators in his isolation by having only seven boys in the house—not eight. They were negligent in ensuring he was not being excluded. While at the school camp, Nick described being subjected to a raft of bullying practices. He arranged his food supplies in a cupboard, only to find students would deliberately move them. Nick was exasperated by this and stated, “They just didn't understand how I managed when I was at home—like, I would have certain places to put things. And they would just move them, and I was like, well, you have got to be kidding me!” When reflecting on the boys in his house, he uttered, “Oh, my housemates. Oh (*sighs—long pause*). They were (*pause*), oh, I got pranked quite a few times. They pranked me—pouring water in my bed, putting soap in my ice-cream. It was funny? (*Questioning tone*).” Nick clearly did not think it was funny, but he accepted this as the norm. When Jill asked if many boys were pranked, he admitted that it was really just him and stated that “they were just very, very awful sometimes.”

Nick is a gifted rower and this ability may have been one of the reasons the school agreed to his attending. Nick competes in rowing at the National level against students from other Australian states. The school chose not to place him in the top team. He explained, “I don't mind not being in the A crew, but it kind of means that they are putting an A division rower in a B division boat. Which is kind of unfair, but no one would know.” He adds, “I would have set up the crews in a different way than the coach has set it up. But I am fine with that; they know what they are doing. (*pause and then with sarcastic tone*) Allegedly!” It appears he is so familiar with such negative experiences, he just accepts it as his due. He may not like it, but he will not complain or put his case forward to see why he was excluded in this way. Nick does feel the discrimination but is philosophical: “I also row in a single scull. Just me in the boat. I row by myself. I know it is all me, so if I do something wrong, it is me, no one else's fault.” He will not attribute any blame onto others in any aspect of his schooling. We could argue that this downgrading of Nick's ability was discriminatory, but we are only looking from Nick's perspective. By writing this, we recognise that our bracketing is slipping. Clearly, as inclusive educators, we feel that Nick has been treated shabbily. As researchers, we allow Nick to speak for himself.

While on an interstate school camp, Nick interacted with some Indigenous boys.

Some of the Aboriginal kids . . . they were so good; they were better than Melbourne kids. They were. They were caring and actually understood. I don't

know how. They just treated me as normal. Like, I didn't have to say anything. Nothing. (*light happy laugh*).

This statement revealed that no matter what excuses Nick finds for his peers not being friendly, he is hurt by their attitude. Nick felt that the Aboriginal boys could see past his vision impairment and just see him for who he was: simply another boy—a student interested in their culture and keen to talk. He also recalled meeting a person with vision impairment in the town who spoke with him. Nick described, “We had to do some community work in town and there was actually a blind person there in the town, and I had a chat with him for a whole hour!” We realised that Nick felt isolated and starved of real communication. He was deeply appreciative when a stranger was prepared to spend time talking to him. Nick had thought about this and told Jill that,

By being the first [student with vision impairment] at both schools I've been to, I was kind of the guinea pig, so if there were more [students with vision impairment] it would have been easy with friends. It is just hard being the only person with vision impairment at my school because you have all these sighted people.

Discussion

Our recounting of Nick's understandings of his experience of mainstream schooling confirms many of the findings of prior research that found that students with vision impairment were at risk of social exclusion and stigmatisation because of their impairment (Agran, Hong, & Blankenship, 2007; Hess, 2010; Sacks & Wolffe, 1992; Thurston, 2014). Social interaction skills and socially appropriate behaviour are learned primarily by observing the way in which others interact (Lohmeier, Blankenship, & Hatlen, 2009; Wolffe & Kelly, 2011), and the inability of students with vision impairment to recognize faces and receive facial cues is a major factor hindering their social interaction (Curtis & Reed, 2011; Khadka, Ryan, Margrain, Woodhouse, & Davies, 2012). Students with disabilities like Nick are more likely to be victimized, and for students with vision impairment, their difficulty interpreting verbal and nonverbal communication contributes to poor social skills and inability to connect with peers, and it contributes to their victimization (Kaukiainen, 2002). Students with vision impairments need to access all areas of the general education curriculum at a level equitable to their sighted peers in an independent fashion. In order to do so, they require instruction in the areas known as the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) that are guided by specialist teachers trained in vision impairment (Sapp & Hatlen, 2010). Significant relationships exist between the receipt of instruction in ECC areas and meaningful outcomes such as employment, postsecondary training, and engagement in social activities (Ravenscroft, 2013; Sapp & Hatlen, 2010; Wolffe & Kelly, 2011). There is reputedly a “distinct lack of access to appropriately qualified and skilled braille teachers available to students who are blind or have low vision across Australia” (Vision Australia, 2015 p. 5). Social skills are one component of the ECC, and with no VT input, there was no awareness of the need for the ECC, and social issues were not addressed. Ravenscroft (2016) emphasised the importance of a VT who can empower others “by collaborating and consulting with the class teacher and others and by providing ‘awareness raising’ that will inform them about the implications a vision impairment may have. Simple awareness raising is regarded as insufficient, and “mainstream teachers must be empowered to change their practice” (p. 204).

Negative peer attitudes resulting in low self-esteem are recognized as a major barrier to successful inclusion (Lifshitz, Hen, & Weisser, 2007; Sacks & Wolffe, 1998). Nick is

socially isolated. Protective self-preservation tends to dictate that if you do not court rejection, then it does not happen. He has no understanding of behavioural norms and no recognition of how his difference is seen. His self-deluding practices of telling himself that students are “not noticing” modifications and accommodations such as those made in PE are for self-protection. That he is lonely is highlighted by his gratefulness when he is included, demonstrated by his near elation when a blind man spoke to him for a time while at camp, and when some Indigenous boys interacted as if he were just another ordinary boy. Being without friends means he has no protection, no support at school, and no one to discuss how to manage classroom expectations (Opie & Southcott, 2015).

We believe that it is apparent that Nick is desperate to save face. He does all he can to avoid others viewing him as weak. He does not approach teachers for assistance, convinced that he should work things out for himself and that asking is showing weakness. Nick demonstrates little self-advocacy—one important component of the ECC which could have been addressed by a VT (Opie, 2018). He does not complain about the bullying he receives, as this too would be showing weakness to others. He does not appreciate that asking for help is quite usual and that his peers constantly use teacher interaction to benefit their learning. Nick is passive, never proactive in seeking help or advising teachers of his needs. He even makes excuses on their behalf. He has no expectations of the teachers or the school. He feels grateful to the school for simply allowing him to attend. He makes excuses for students pranking him, stating that they just do not understand. Nick makes excuses for teachers not delivering work in an accessible manner or stating they are too busy. He makes no assumption that the school should have an awareness of vision impairment or that it should be educating the school community to understand or that it accepts responsibility for delivering an equitable education. Teachers themselves show little understanding, and he has no expectation that students will understand, nor that this could or would change, and he sees no point in being more proactive against this tide of ignorance.

Nick is clearly a victim of bullying. He is victimized both physically and socially, but he tends to self-blame, justifying the behaviour of others. There is very limited research into the bullying of students with vision impairment. Bullying occurs in many forms, including physical bullying, verbal taunts and threats, social-group exclusion, humiliation and rumour-spreading, and cyberbullying (Dane-Staples, Lieberman, Ratcliff, & Rounds, 2013)—all of which Nick has experienced. Research has found that whether a student is a bully or a victim is highly dependent on their status (Farmer, Wike, Alexander, Rodkin, & Mehtaji, 2015; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). Disability is linked to low status (Dane-Staples, Lieberman, Ratcliff, & Rounds, 2013). Students who perpetrate bullying (i.e., bullies) are distinguished from students who both perpetrate and are victims of harassment (i.e., bully victims) and passive non-aggressive victims (Olweus, 1978). Students identified as “different” due to their disability are consistently placed in the victim role (Rose, Swearer, & Espelage, 2012). Students are excluded by peers due to markers of their appearance (e.g., glasses or nystagmus) (DeCarlo, McGwin, Bixler, Wallander, & Owsley, 2012). For students with vision impairment, their difference is compounded by their need to use assistive technology to operate in the school environment (Scarpa, 2011). Nick presents as a non-aggressive victim. A non-aggressive victim will ignore bullying behaviours or passively accept the attacks from peers (Sekol & Farrington, 2010). Non-aggressive victims may suffer from psychological trauma, withdrawal, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, and low self-esteem, with mental, physical, and social adjustments negatively affected (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Farmer, et al., 2015; Olweus, 1993; Sekol & Farrington, 2010). Non-aggressive victims of bullying have been found to display behavioural vulnerability, are withdrawn and solitary in their behaviour, are avoidant of conflict, and hover on the edge of the peer group (Fox & Boulton, 2005)—all behaviours demonstrated by Nick.

Nick appears to make excuses for the behaviour of both his peers and teachers, stating that they do not understand. The Kelley interpretation of the Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) explains “how people use information to make attributions for the outcomes of others.” He argues that by reviewing situations, students will attribute the behaviours of others to their person, a particular stimulus, or a situation (Martinko & Thomson, 1998, p. 273). In attribution theory, internal attribution is seen as attributing self-blame, while external attribution blames others (Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003). Students in a study by Dane-Staples, Lieberman, Ratcliff, and Rounds (2013) articulated internal attributions (i.e., self-blame) for their bullying, specifically their vision impairment. Few felt bullied because of external attributions (e.g., others being mean). This is reflected in Nick’s behaviour: he blames himself rather than attributing blame to students for the meanness of their behaviour.

Bullying is not merely a dyadic problem between a bully and a victim, but it is recognized as a group phenomenon which occurs in a social context where various factors serve to promote, maintain, or suppress such behaviour (Olweus, 2001; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Exclusion is exacerbated by classroom situations with higher levels of bullying and victimization linked to inappropriate teacher responses (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Nick’s teachers and aides, with no prior experience of vision impairment or a knowledge of the ECC, were poorly placed to support him (Opie, Deppeler, & Southcott, 2017). The teaching of social skills to students with vision impairment is critical, and can make the difference between social isolation and a fulfilling adult life (Sapp & Hatlen, 2010). But Nick’s teachers, with no input from VT’s, were ignorant of the necessity to support social skill development. The lack of overall school commitment to inclusion found in this study is concerning, and it appears that a paradigm shift is required at the school for a student with vision impairment to experience inclusion. If Nick had attended a school with other students with vision impairment in attendance, teachers there may have had a greater understanding of his particular needs and enhanced his chance of an inclusive education.

Recommendations

While acknowledging the limitation of a single case, we are made aware of the numerous difficulties Nick faced in obtaining an inclusive education (with bullying noted as a significant hindrance). The effect bullying may be having on the academic achievement of students with vision impairment, and students with disability in general, must be considered seriously if we are to challenge any exclusion of these students from school and the work force. We need to address how the school community can be managed by teachers to create social ecologies to support students with vision impairment. Social dynamics that contribute to peer victimization need to be understood so they can be addressed and appropriate intervention undertaken. Universal programs and individual focused strategies within the school community need consideration. Further research into the effect of bullying on the inclusive education of students with vision impairment is critical, as the cost to individual students and to the community cannot be ignored. From talking to Nick, we have become aware that qualitative case studies are necessary to understand experience from the perspective of the individual. More studies like this would add to a chorus of voices that highlight shortcomings and possible solutions. Our first recommendation would be that to ensure respectful inclusive practices, it is vital to speak to people about what they would like. If teachers and school authorities had actually spoken to Nick about his preferences, his experience of schooling would likely have been very different.

Researcher's Note

In phenomenological research, it is essential that researchers question their assumptions and biases to support effective bracketing: the suspension of our various beliefs. We found this very hard to do. We realised from the outset that we are on Nick's side. As teachers, we both wanted to go to his school and tell them what we had found. We found it hard to hold back our sense of outrage at what we perceived as injustice. Nick was much more forgiving that we were. Interviewing Nick has made us very aware of the importance of considering the tensions between empathy and advocacy.

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