

Albinism in Botswana junior secondary schools – a double case study

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Introduction

In this study the experiences of two pupils with albinism in two different community junior secondary schools in Botswana are recounted through the eyes of two student teachers on teaching practice during February and March of 2005 in the respective schools. Ose Chizwe observed a male aged 15 years (subsequently referred to as M), and Lily Kowa observed a female aged 16 (subsequently referred to as F). Their accounts were analysed by and interrogated through the conversation between the principal author and a third year student teacher, Tiro Nkanotsang, who himself is albino. Conclusions are drawn as to how representative the experience of these two pupils might be for pupils with albinism in general in Botswana schools and suggestions made as to how best support such pupils.

Albinism in Botswana

The position of many people with albinism in a number of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa can only be described as dire. There have been widespread reports in the global media in recent years recounting severe discrimination and even murder (BBC 2008). As discussed below, reactions are less extreme in Botswana, but there still appears to be an amount of prejudice. The study recounts the reported experiences of two pupils – both

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ethnically black, Batswana - with albinism in community junior secondary schools in Botswana. This puts them in particular contexts: physical, social, and educational.

Physical

Botswana is a sparsely populated, semi arid country. It is often sunny, hot and dusty. Years of drought are not uncommon. It is wealthy by African standards mainly as a result of well-managed diamond mining. The democratic government has used this wealth for social developments such as education, health care and general infrastructure (Denbow and Thebe 2006).

Albinism occurs universally though its prevalence differs markedly. It is caused by a defect in the production of melanin. There is a reduction or absence of this pigment in the skin. The skin is easily burnt by sunlight and skin cancer is a major risk factor. All persons with albinism also have sight problems: sensitivity to bright light and short sightedness. According to the National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation (a North American organisation),

People with albinism always have problems with vision, and many have low vision. Many are "legally blind," but most use their vision for reading, and do not use braille. (NOAH a undated)

It is a hereditary condition. Main (1987) draws on the work of Kromberg (1982) to discuss the high prevalence of albinism in the Southern Sotho peoples of whom the Tswana are a part (the great majority of people in Botswana - c. 80% - are Tswana though greater numbers of Tswana live in South Africa). In this group the prevalence is 1 in 2254, much higher than other comparable southern African Bantu groups (e.g. 1 in 4000 in the Xhosa, 1 in 9700 in the Pedi and 1 in 28614 in the Shangaan (Main op cit:

195)). This can be ascribed to traditional practices in Southern Sotho groups where marriages among close relatives were encouraged to ensure that cattle remained among the family group or for the maintenance of political advantage. Whilst maintaining wealth and influence in the family, this practice also increases the chances of the incidence of genetic disorders such as albinism. With increased mobility and breakdown of traditional culture such practises are becoming less common and so presumably such high rates will decline.

Social

Albinism is a physical state but its effects are as much a result of social reactions to the condition as they are of the state itself. In Tswana traditional life there are many different customs and beliefs surrounding the causes and social treatment of people with albinism (the novel 'Because Pula Means Rain' by Jenny Robson (1998) set in contemporary Botswana and featuring a 16 year old boy with albinism as the main character describes many of these. The novel won the UNESCO prize for 'Children's and Young People's Literature in the Service of Tolerance' in 2000). Below Tiro describes some of the beliefs and practises in contemporary Botswana.

It is said that albinos simply disappear. He reflected that this might be because in the past a mother who gave birth to such a child would be encouraged to put the baby in a pot with some herbs and place it out into the forest for the animals to take. This mirrors the Maasai practice described by Munyere (2004, p. 31) whereby these babies would be denied breast milk and then exposed to the environment 'so that it would die before the husband realised.' Also albinos traditionally would not be seen at the normal community

celebrations such as weddings, village meetings and funerals. Even today he states that if he walks through a village many small children will spit on their own clothing, a practise that arises from the belief that spitting out saliva when you see an albino ensures that any babies that you might have will not be albino. The name used for an albino – leswahe – denotes a thing whose colour has been cleaned off (in Setswana the prefix ‘le’ denotes an object rather than a person).

Tiro notes that although attitudes have certainly changed for the better in recent years he can still detect a ‘barrier’ in many social contexts; for example in government offices, staff often seem reticent to give him their full attention until he has shown, by his own personality, that he is a ‘normal’ person. In other words it is up to him to prove that he deserves the respect and consideration that other people get automatically.

His reflections are echoed by other Batswana with albinism. For example one such delegate at a workshop is reported in a Botswana newspaper as informing the audience that ‘before getting married he had to tell his wife to brace herself for the names and sniggers that he has always endured,’ and that ‘...as a person living with albinism, he cannot just walk into any home and pick up a cup to drink water.’ (Ngakane 2009 np) – indicating that he is excluded from one of the norms of traditional Tswana hospitality.

Education

The current population of Botswana is approximately 1.8 million. Education enrolment in 2005 for all primary and secondary schools was estimated at 487,400 (CSO 2005a). At the rate mentioned above this means that there were approximately 217 children with albinism in Botswana schools. Enrolment rates at the first grade in Botswana are high,

between 98% and 99% according to official figures (ibid: 4). Drop out rates are approximately 2% in each year, but many of these will re-enter the system at a later date. It would be illuminating to find out whether the proportion of school age children with albinism not attending school or dropping out is the same as the proportion of the general population.

Both pupils in this study were at junior secondary schools (JSS). These make up forms 1 – 3 of secondary education. Students enter JSS after 7 years of primary school. There is a leaving exam at the end of primary education but progression to JSS is no longer dependant on the result of this exam. Two further years are available at senior secondary school for approximately 75% of JSS completers.

By most African standards junior secondary schools are relatively well equipped. At the time of the observations in this paper they were free (now there are school fees, from which some pupils are exempted if deemed to be socially disadvantaged). Chalk, textbooks and exercise books are normally readily available. There is electricity and water (most of the time). Pupils receive a midday meal. Most now have a functioning computer room for information technology education. Class size can be up to 45 students in some subjects but the average is 35 (CSO 2005b). Most teachers are Batswana (with a diminishing number of expatriates in some subjects). They have a diploma in secondary education and some a degree. At the time of these observations very few would have had any exposure to special needs education in their pre service though this is now changing (Dart 2006). One teacher in this study is reported to have done a degree in special education at the University of Botswana. Studies that have been done investigating professional practice in the classrooms of schools in Botswana reveal that:

Teacher dominance, right answerism, elite language, transmission of information, teacher avoidance of pupil contributions, slavish use of textbooks etc., are some of the behaviours and characteristics which researchers and other opinion makers have identified in Botswana classrooms ... (Mokobane 2000: 104)

Education in Botswana is guided by specific policies. The first national policy on education (Government of Botswana 1977) is guided by the principle of Kagisano. Education for Kagisano (peace) has four underlying values; unity, development, democracy and self reliance. To this has more recently been added a fifth - that of Botho. According to the 'Long Term Vision for Botswana' (Government of Botswana: 1997)

Botho...refers to one of the tenets of African culture...(it) defines a process for earning respect by first giving it and to gain empowerment by empowering others...It disapproves of anti social, disgraceful, inhuman and criminal behaviour and encourages social justice for all...it must stretch to its utmost limits the largeness of the spirit of all Batswana. (p. 2)

The report of the Commission on Education (Government of Botswana 1993) made specific mention of special education and devoted an entire chapter to examine it and make proposals for its development. These were largely taken up in the Revised National Policy of Education (Government of Botswana 1994). In this the education system was encouraged to integrate children with special needs as far as possible into the ordinary classroom and all schools were to set up School Intervention Teams to help with the identification and support of 'handicapped children'. More recent government documentation (e.g. National Development Plan 9) talks of 'inclusive' education (Government of Botswana 2003), also reflecting various international agreements that Botswana is signatory to such as the commitment to Education For All (Unesco 2000). However there appears to have been less thought given at a practitioner level of what the implications for a truly 'inclusive' education system are or how these notions of inclusion

might interact with the national guiding principles (Kagisano / Botho) described above (Dart 2007).

Description and method of the study

Case studies are likely to have the following characteristics (Robson 2002, Hitchcock & Hughes 1995)

- They tend to employ multi methods of data collection and analysis
- They involve individuals / actors / organisations in a particular context / setting
- They are empirical in that they collect data and analyse events / phenomena in a particular case
- The presentation of the case tries to capture the richness of detail of the given situation

We feel that the study reported here meets these criteria to a greater or lesser degree and hence we use the term ‘case study’ in describing the report (or more accurately a ‘multiple case study’ as there are two subjects involved).

This case study could be described as opportunistic. I had kept the original feedback from Ose and Lily for reference but Tiro’s arrival at the college afforded the opportunity to explore and test that feedback in greater depth. This rather ‘ad hoc’ approach is of course a possible weakness. However, Punch (2009; 123) argues that case studies have the potential to contribute to our knowledge where it is ‘shallow, fragmentary, incomplete or non-existent.’ The first three adjectives would certainly apply with regard to the school experiences of children with albinism in Botswana. A literature review failed to locate any studies involving these pupils and it seemed a pity to let such an opportunity go to waste.

The weaknesses are of course apparent. It cannot be ignored that we rely on the feedback from two student teachers with very limited experience in teaching let alone research. I came across the two accounts of these pupils whilst assessing the work of student teachers from Molepolole College of Education on teaching practice at the beginning of their second year of a three year programme. They spend approximately 10 weeks in a school where they teach their major and minor subjects. Students also follow a basic awareness course in Special Needs Education at the college (Dart 2006) and for this they are given a particular assignment for their school placement.

For the year in question (2005) the second year assignment was called OAITSE! (Molepolole College of Education 2005) - Observing and Assessing Inclusive Teaching and School Environments ('O a itse' in Setswana means 'You know!/?') This observation exercise consists of a series of questions structured in such a way that the student teacher takes note and reflects on; the learning processes going on in one of their own classes, the particular pupils in the class who seem to have extra support needs, a particular pupil with reference to their needs, the way this pupil is supported in the wider school, and their home backgrounds and histories. The assignment also encourages the student teacher to consider the whole-school response - in terms of attitudes and practice - to pupils with support needs.

The OAITSE assignment was introduced to the student teachers at college before they went to their schools. Opportunities were given for students to raise concerns and questions. Whilst in the field there was no direct supervision of the assignment from the college staff (it would have been impossible for 2 staff members to follow up 600 students in placements across the south of Botswana). This causes problems in terms of

the validity of the assignments' observations and conclusions. However checks are built in for this. Each student teacher has to arrange for the teaching practice coordinator in each school to monitor the assignment at various stages during its completion. Both the assignments used as a basis for this study appear to have been regularly monitored by the appropriate person in the school and my conversations with the student teachers left me in no doubt that the case studies were genuinely reported.

The assignment does provide a clear framework to operate in and it is worth noting that the feedback that each student returned under the various sections in it had a similar focus, indicating that there is at least some measure of validity in the OAITSE instrument itself. It was not possible to verify at first hand the original observations and reflections, but it was possible to test whether or not they seemed a fair account of what might be happening in schools. This data triangulation (Robson op cit) was done through Tiro's own reflections, and limited accounts in the media (both national and local as evidenced in the introduction) of the sorts of issues that people with albinism face. An early draft was also sent to a colleague in the Division of Special Education at the Ministry of Education. There was no feedback from that source to indicate that these accounts were in any way extraordinary or highly unlikely. With this process in mind we believe that the data gathered and the analysis and testing of it allow us to move beyond pure description and to conceptualise some of the issues involved which then allow us, with caution, to develop propositions that could be further tested (Punch op cit).

Of course being a case study statistical generalisability cannot be claimed (Robson op cit). In other words we cannot claim that the experiences of these two pupils represent the broad experience of all pupils with albinism in Botswana junior secondary schools

though taken with a variety of other existing evidence it would not seem unreasonable to use the outcomes of this research to develop further investigations in this matter.

With the permission of the two student teachers I gave a copy of their reports to Tiro. We agreed that we would read the reports independently and in so doing identify the major issues arising from the accounts through a process of coding the data. This coding of the data is an attempt to identify and develop concepts within the data set ‘in terms of their properties and dimensions’ (O’Donoghue 2007, p. 91).

This allowed for a measure of validation of the major issues to emerge from the accounts and helped guard against the biases of either reader. With hindsight it would have been useful to have engaged an independent third party in this process. A reader with some distance from the project might have provided different insights and checks on our assumptions. The issues that we identified individually were broadly similar and we agreed on four broad themes that these could be gathered under to aid discussion.

The experiences of the two pupils

Both pupils were in form one of their junior secondary school. One was male (M) aged 15, and the other female (F) aged 16. Their ages indicate that their schooling has been delayed at some time. This could have been due to a late start at primary school, repetition of one or more years, or a break between primary and secondary schooling. It is not clear from the studies what the reason is, and it should be noted that it is not uncommon for pupils in form one to be of these ages.

The quotes following are taken verbatim from the student teachers’ OAITSE assignments and it is worth stressing again at this point that these are two student teachers with very

little research experience writing in their second language. This might have implications for the way in which they express their observations and so care needs to be taken when making inferences from them.

Theme One - Teaching and learning

Poor learning achievement

Both pupils were performing poorly across the range of subjects. Not only were they performing badly now but the evidence seems to be that they had always done so, even in primary school.

M - His overall performance is low. ... he cannot write what is expected, he sometimes loses concentration in class. This makes him to lag behind when given instructions. At the end he writes incorrect things and gets lower marks.

F - ... her problems made her a slow learner... she was unable to write well... her performance was unsatisfactory ...

According to the marks provided by the teachers in the schools (refer to tables one and two below), M ranged from 19% in Setswana to 52% in Religious Education with an average overall mark of 33%. F ranged from 10% in Math to 52% in Moral Education with an average overall mark of 17%.

Insufficient response from teachers in terms of supporting the pupils' learning

There appeared to be a lack of understanding from the teaching staff at the schools of the problems that the pupils were facing, and a lack of recognition of the efforts that they were making in school. For example M sometimes did not hand in his work as he did not want to receive the negative feedback that he got from teachers. Ose noted;

M - He also dislikes people who complain about his performance at school especially teachers. This makes him sometimes to decide not to submit his

assignments or homework. He also indicates that he hates punishment at school, like being beaten

Lily expressed surprise that it appeared to her that few teachers in her school seemed to be aware of the problems that F was facing.

No member of staff from the schools had visited the children's families even though in one school there was a teacher who had studied special education at the University of Botswana. Even the simplest of interventions such as encouraging the pupils to sit closer to the board had not been implemented.

The comments of Lily and Ose seem to be given credence by an analysis of the comments made by teachers on the report cards reproduced in the tables below. These appear to indicate that there is very little recognition of the problems that these pupils face. Some do make reference to the fact that the pupils have a problem with eyesight but most simply comment about them having to work harder or to get more help at home. Only one indicates that more support is needed from the teacher.

Table one – Teachers' comments (M)

Subject	Ave. mark	Teachers' comments
English	22%	Needs to be encouraged at home. There is still room for performance better than this.
Setswana	19%	Marks below average. Work very hard to improve.
Social Studies	40%	Has visual problems. Needs close monitoring.
Business Studies	28%	Not pleasing at all. Needs to work harder in order to perform better.
RE	52%	Has potential to do better than this. Needs to see an optician to address his eye problem.

Table two – Teachers’ comments (F)

Subject	Ave. mark	Teachers’ comments
Setswana	25%	Does not understand the language very well. Need to work very hard in order to achieve more.
Social Studies	15%	Needs assistance from your parents. Still room for improvement.
Moral Education	35%	He does not perform well due to poor sight.
Agriculture	30%	Has visual problems and needs assistance from teacher and other pupils. Can do much better if she gets spectacles.
Business Studies.	15%	Your marks are very low. Please work hard.

There appears to be evidence both from within Botswana (e.g. Mokobane op cit) and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa that many teachers often have,

‘...well-developed images of good primary teachers which typically focus on the personal and affective aspects of being a teacher, rather than methods of effective teaching and learning of content.’ (Lewin and Stuart 2003, p. 698)

These images, Lewin and Stuart suggest, encourage a highly teacher centred, transmission based model of teaching, models that are reinforced rather than investigated in initial teacher training. Within such a model a pupil facing barriers to learning that the two pupils in this study face might find their needs overlooked. It should be noted that feedback from the many OAITSE assignments received indicates that this is not uncommon in Botswana junior secondary schools but that there are also shining examples of teachers working against the odds to support pupils with a wide range of educational and social problems.

Lack of school structures for identification and support of pupils.

School M had no particular system for pro-actively identifying and tracking support for pupils with special educational needs though any problems reported by the pupils

themselves or by the parents were followed up by the Guidance and Counselling Committee. School F had a Special Education Committee but it was reported as not functioning. The school had a member of staff who had been trained in special education at the University.

It also appears that children with special needs are not viewed from an educational perspective but from a medical / social perspective. Children with major issues at both schools are reported to the social workers at the district council. This of course can be very necessary as there are many pupils at schools in Botswana who urgently need social support as a result of the HIV crisis or other factors, and it is good to see schools making these links, but there would seem to be little acknowledgment made of the support needed at a classroom and school level for many of these children (support that should be offered through the School Intervention Team structure). Both student teachers noted how children with learning problems appeared to be ignored by the schools. Ose noted in her reflection:

I think most teachers do not try their best to help children with learning difficulties and disabilities. They do not take their time to monitor these pupils' work and find ways in which they can be helped. For example I find out that the students with learning difficulties were not given much attention when they asked for help. Teachers were only referring them to their classmates who in turn cannot give the required help. I think teachers still do not give an ear to these pupils. I also learnt that teachers wait for students to report their problems to them, which clearly points out to me that pupils are ignored or assessment is not done as soon as one expects.

It should be stressed that at the time these comments were made the great majority of teachers in schools would have had only a minimal introduction to special needs education or indeed (as noted above) to pedagogies that are more pupil centred. The sorts of skills required to support pupils that Ose describes above might not be highly technical

(Mittler 2000) but teachers do need the opportunity to integrate them and reflect on them particularly if they conflict with their own images of teaching.

Time delay in implementing support – school and medical interventions

As has been noted, both these pupils are now in their eighth year of schooling (assuming they didn't repeat any years at primary school, which is a possibility). The only obvious intervention that has been made is that of the provision of spectacles and a magnifying glass to pupil M (and one teacher notes that his sight still causes him problems and that he should see an optician). Even simple classroom interventions such as encouraging the pupils to sit in a place in the classroom where they can see the board more clearly do not seem to be in place. Neither of the student teachers was given any information on the pupils or any advice on how to best support them in the class on arrival at their schools and introduction to their classes.

Theme 2 - Medical / health issues

Visual impairment

One of the major issues noted by both the student teachers was the poor eyesight of the pupils and the problems that it caused them.

M - ... has a mild visual difficulty. This affects him much when he is looking at a film or bright coloured charts at the front of the class... The bright rays of the sun make him to squint and he complains of headaches as his eyes become swollen and red...He is unable to see what is written on the board.

F - ...she had problems with her eyes, she could not see properly from the board. This child's problem was so severe because at times she cannot see even from the books, therefore this made her school work complicated, to be done well and on

time...when it was too sunny she could not see properly even from the book. Her poor vision was affecting her academically and this made her a slow learner.

It is reasonable to assume that many of the problems with their learning are associated with their visual problems that are a direct result of their albinism. M had received spectacles in standard 7 (his final year) of primary school. F had no vision aids.

Other medical issues

Both pupils have conditions that also hamper their school life and presumably life in general. Some are related to their albinism and some not.

Ose notes that M has epilepsy that he has had from an early age. It seems to be that his epilepsy is in the form of absences., ‘...his epileptic problem does not make him fall but to lose concentration...’ rather than seizures. This means that he misses out on what is occurring in the classroom and compounds the problems caused by his poor sight. He appears to have no drugs to control it. Nor is there evidence of him getting regular check-ups for this. He is also reported by some of the teachers to suffer from asthma.

F - seems to have a particularly bad skin condition, and it is likely that this is related to her albinism. She has no support to allow her to get the necessary skin cream. The implications for skin cancer in the near future are grave. She does not have spectacles or any other vision aid.

Theme 3 - Self concept

Loneliness

The picture that comes across is of two pupils who are extremely isolated in the school context. M did have two friends in school with whom he spent his time and who supported each other (and who were also reported as being 'low achievers'), but the evidence seems to be that he was not a part of the class group as a whole. According to Lily's observation F appears to have been even more isolated and positively shunned by her school mates.

F - The child was withdrawn and lonely as she had no friends inside and outside class nobody wanted to be associated with her as she also had skin problems... She is very much aware that she is not like other students and other students do not want to be associated with her, they discriminate her because of her appearance.

This was compounded by the fact that the pupils took little part in extra curricula activities on offer at the schools. Ose notes of her pupil;

M - He cannot also participate well in extra mural activities e.g. athletics during hot or sunny days. The bright rays of the sun make him to squint and he complains of headaches as his eyes become swollen and red.

Poor self esteem

Both pupils were reported as having low self esteem. The implications for their education are serious as this fact obviously makes both pupils reluctant to take part in learning activities.

M - He also says that he is afraid of asking teachers what is written on the chalkboard because most of the time they talk to him harshly and this makes him

to be more insecure in learning... he then develops a negative self esteem, that he does not have the potential to do anything.

F - She was so withdrawn and very lonely as no students wanted to be associated with her... She hates to be laughed at. She hates to read in class. She never participates in class even if she knows the answer, she never provides it. She only talks when the teacher asks her by name.

They would appear to be locked into a classic 'failure cycle' whereby difficulties in learning are met by negative feedback received in response to genuine attempts to engage in the subject matter. The subject is then avoided leading to a compounding of the original difficulty.

Attitudes of other pupils

The pupils' isolation and loneliness is heightened by the attitudes of their classmates towards them.

M - Pupils do not accept that he has visual problems. Other students in class think that he is not like them. I think that this is due to being an albino. They despise him and they laugh at him when he is given tasks to perform in class. They think that he is not confident and intelligent enough to participate in class activities. This makes him to be demoralised...

He does have a few friends in class and interestingly they are also seen as pupils who are not academically bright. However as a small group they appear to do the best they can to help each other.

M - But he enjoys himself very much when his two classmates accompany him home. He says they sometimes discuss their assignments together because they have the same thinking capacity or ability in learning.

According to Lily, F is completely isolated:

F - Other pupils discriminate her very much they make sure to stay away from her both in and out of class room. They did not want to be in the same groups during discussions with her. They are unwilling to help her with her schoolwork.

Willingness to persevere

The resilience of both the pupils that enables them to carry on in school despite all the problems that they faced is remarkable. It should be remembered that they both have done (at least) 7 years of primary school in which they probably would have encountered exactly the same sort of issues and challenges that are recounted here. M had at least received spectacles that helped him in his studies but he had only got these in his final year of primary school.

The school had referred F's case to the social workers, which implies that this had not been done during the whole of her primary school career. She had no vision aids to help her with her learning.

Theme 4 - Family background

Poverty

Both pupils come from families that are struggling financially and have little formal education themselves. The students note with regard to the pupils;

M - He lives in an extended family (family consists of grandmother, mother and cousins)...There are many members in the family. His uncles and aunts cannot cope to care for all the children in the family therefore his mother is forced to find piece jobs for him, which is not easy.

F - She is from a nuclear family. She stays with her father, mother and one elder brother and two kid sisters... The father is a night watchman and the salary he earns is not enough to provide for the family...the food comes from the government as the family is needy and depends only on the little money the father gets from being a night watchman.

Such families will find it difficult to provide such items as spectacles for the children and the necessary creams for skin protection. Even the basic requirements for study at home are difficult to provide. It is possible too that they don't have the knowledge necessary or feel able to advocate on behalf of their children at school and with social and medical services. Poverty here is obviously a compounding factor in shaping the experience of these pupils and their families. Indeed it might even be a primary one. It would be interesting to note how experiences differ for children with albinism from better off families.

Supportive families

Despite their poverty and low social status both families attempt to be supportive of their children. M reports to Ose that his family are sometimes annoyed at the fact that he does not do better at school but it seems to be a result of school staff not informing them of the sorts of difficulties that his condition imposes on him.

M - The family members are trying to encourage the child at home so that he can develop a positive self-esteem. They do not visit the school regularly but they sometimes come during parents' day to check on his progress. They are trying to provide him with a healthy diet but it is not easy because most members in the family are not working. The mother tries her best to buy him school uniform and other necessities.

Lily notes that her pupil is supported by her family in every way that they can, including by visiting the school to check on her performance. Their major problem is that they cannot afford medication for her skin complaint.

Even if we assume that the observations and comments in the four themes discussed above should be treated with great caution because of the inexperience of the two student teachers, or the fact that they are reporting on social phenomena in a language that is not

their first, or perhaps even reflect their own unconscious bias against schools whose practices they were unhappy with, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that life in school for these two pupils is often grim. Certainly the treatment that the two pupils appear to receive would seem to be in direct contradiction to the guiding principle of *botho* which values the personhood of all people and ‘...disapproves of anti social, disgraceful, inhuman and criminal behaviour and encourages social justice for all...’ (Government of Botswana 2003, p. 2).

Livingstone (2007, p. 12) possibly sheds some light on this. She observes that in Tswana life certain negative emotional responses – for example fear and disgust of disability – are deemed to carry ‘pathogenic properties’; pregnant women for example are encouraged by some not to look at persons with albinism ‘lest they pass these qualities on to their babies through their experience of fright.’ She states;

‘Among Batswana, like many people... failure to conform to particular bodily norms... and appearance challenge fundamental expressions of personhood and are managed spatially.’

Livingston’s work highlights the complexity of societal response to people whose characteristics are not ‘normal’ even by many who genuinely care for the well-being of such people.

An investigation of these experiences through the eyes of Tiro

Using these themes I engaged Tiro in a tape recorded conversation in which he was asked to consider his own experience using as a framework the questions reproduced below.

I wrote a summary of what I considered to be the main points from the recording and passed it to Tiro to check for accuracy and expression. It is probably too grand to claim that our single two hour recorded conversation qualifies us as researchers in the ‘Life

History' tradition of qualitative research but there are elements of that present. The brief summary below is rich in events and specific detail. It deals in 'the particular, the detailed and the experiential' (O'Donoghue op cit, p. 144). Commenting on similar life accounts from the Zimbabwean context Dzvimbo (2001, p. 194) states that such individual stories 'enable us to see how we can reject grand narratives and instead see disability through the eyes, voices and genealogy that was once silenced.' It lacks the deeper scrutiny of contexts and texts that a genuine life history would require and of course it could be argued that Tiro was already attuned to particular issues as a result of engaging in the accounts of the two pupils who are the focus of this research.

Tiro always talks about 'being an albino' rather than being a person 'with albinism' so that manner of speech is retained even though the account is not reported verbatim.

- How does the experience of the pupils compare to your own experience?

Tiro reflected that the experience of these two children very much mirrored his own. His own school life could be divided into three phases. During standard 1 he sat at the back of the class, self conscious, taking very little in, being teased by many of his classmates and often treated very harshly by his teachers who would sometimes beat him for not being able to copy from the board or understand what was going on in class. After standard one he left school and went to the cattle post for two years as a herd boy. This he enjoyed as he was away from the stress of the classroom. Herding cattle under the hot Botswana sun is not the ideal choice of occupation for an albino but Tiro notes that it is a common occupation for young albino boys to enter into (later in life he developed serious skin cancer that he continues to need regular radiation treatment for, often having to travel

long distances to access it). It was only after strong encouragement from his family that he decided to re-enter school.

- Would you say that their experience is typical or not for children with albinism in Botswana? Do you have evidence to justify your conclusions?

He was sure through his discussions with other albino friends, that many albino children would be facing similar issues. He pointed out that he had a number of acquaintances who, like he had done, were working out at cattle posts or in other labour intensive jobs

- Why is that you have ‘succeeded’ where these children are ‘failing’?

Tiro highlighted a number of factors. One of the turning points was the fact that an old and almost destitute aunt of his whom his immediate family cared for, urged him to do everything that he could to succeed. To motivate him she pointed out the American doctor in the village who had a nice car and lived in a good house. She said that he was white (like Tiro!) and that he could succeed like the Doctor had. The rest of his family also urged him to try and succeed at school.

With this encouragement he decided to re-enter school. By the time he reached standard 4 he resolved to stand up for himself. He fearlessly entered into fights with anyone who mocked him or opposed him in any way and became infamous in the village for leading a gang of young boys. He refused to be bowed by the punishments of teachers and determined that he was going to succeed no matter what. This effort was not without cost: he developed bad stomach ulcers and eventually was referred to a psychiatrist who

prescribed drugs to try and calm his temper (it being much easier to treat an individual than to change the attitudes of society!).

As he moved into form one of secondary school his temper calmed but his resolve to succeed was maintained. Now he was determined to prove himself by being at the top of the class for every subject. This he achieved by gathering around him fellow pupils who were academically bright and with whom he discussed the lessons of the day. He also continually approached his older sister at home to help with any work he had not understood. He placed himself in positions in the classroom where he could see the board more easily (he did not get any spectacles until he came to the teacher training college).

Apart from this determination, externally and internally motivated, he sees very little difference between himself and the two pupils observed in the research. He noted how he could very easily have ended up as they have, struggling with very low marks and against negative attitudes in the school. Like him though, as has been seen above, they seem resolved to stick it out despite many pressures.

- What can be done to support pupils like this in school? Are there lessons to be learned from your own experiences in relation to the experiences of these two?

Tiro noted the following: Teachers need to take the initiative to show positive attitudes towards pupils with albinism. They need not treat them with any favouritism but there should be no discrimination against them either. To maintain practices that work against their full inclusion into school life is not compatible with the principles and policies that govern education in Botswana (*Kagisano*) and does not show the respect that should be

given to each and every individual in Botswana society (*botho*). Teachers and schools need to actively challenge any negative attitudes.

The issues surrounding albinism and the challenges facing albino children should be discussed with each class.

A simple information pack regarding the nature of albinism and the challenges faced by albino children should be available in each school in Botswana, particularly as the rate of albinism is high in the country.

Pupils should be encouraged and allowed to sit where they can best see the board.

They should not be made to share books but have their own copy (this was a struggle he had with many teachers who could not understand why he should be treated differently from other pupils).

Teachers need to talk about the points that they are writing on the board. Children with albinism often become good at listening, as they cannot always rely on their eyesight.

They should be encouraged to use 'study buddies' in school who are willing to talk with them about the lesson content and share their notes if necessary.

Teachers might need to give support before or after class to ensure that material is understood.

Outdoor activities need to be monitored closely. Albino pupils should avoid exposure to the sun by wearing long sleeved shirts, long trousers and a wide brimmed hat at all times outside. Even in class a wide brimmed hat can reduce glare from windows and lights.

Wearing a hat for such a reason is not a sign of disrespect.

Punishments given should be appropriate to the needs of the pupils. Being made to work outside in the sun is injurious to the health of the pupil. The regulations governing

corporal punishment in Botswana schools should be strictly adhered to and it should be noted that the skin of an albino child is easily damaged.

Any handouts should be made in a font size that is readable by the pupil (some schools have photocopiers that can enlarge handouts and there are local education facilities that can provide such a service. They could also enlarge pages from textbooks.).

Tiro liked taking notes from an overhead projector but recognised that for some pupils this would be too bright.

Care needs to be taken to provide high quality contrast of print on background material, such as on visual aids. Many blackboards in Botswana schools are in desperate need of a new coat of blackboard paint. This should not be difficult to arrange and would benefit all pupils and teachers.

Primary schools should ensure that the transfer to secondary level is made as smooth as possible by the communication of any necessary information to the new school, and by giving the pupils the chance to visit the school in advance of their move to familiarise themselves with the surroundings.

Tiro enjoys using a computer. These are still rare at a primary level but are common at secondary. The user can set up his or her preferred font size and adjust the contrast on the screen to minimise glare.

The needs of these children should be taken into account at a pre school stage. The village clinics should note the presence of these babies and toddlers and arrange for the provision of appropriate skin cream, basic education for families around albinism, and at an appropriate age, arrange for eye tests and the provision of suitable spectacles for the children.

Schools should apply for appropriate assessment of the sight of such pupils through the government Central Resource Centre or at local eye clinics at regular intervals and pressure should be brought to bear on the authorities to provide necessary vision aids for those with more severe sight problems.

These suggestions were subsequently cross checked for purposes of validity in an educational context with recommendations made by NOAH (undated b) and they mirror them to a great degree whilst reflecting local needs and contexts.

There is evidence from this study that these two schools did not have active School Intervention Teams despite the fact that the Revised National Policy on Education (Government of Botswana 1994) calls for each school to set one up. Other evidence (Dart 2007) shows that this is broadly true nationally in junior secondary schools. Thus educational policy is not being implemented at a school level. The Division of Special Education in the Botswana Ministry of Education needs to support schools in the implementing of national policy at a school level.

Conclusions

The paper examines two case studies of junior secondary pupils with albinism in Botswana. The salient points regarding the environment in which they function are outlined. The pupils are shown to be struggling at school partly as a result of the difficulties caused by their albinism but also by the attitudes of those around them, and the social context that they find themselves in. The method of the study – a reliance on the accounts of teachers in training and a single interview, means that caution needs to be

applied in interpreting and applying the findings. However, at the very least the study probably supports the following propositions;

The educational experiences of the two pupils are of an unnecessarily poor quality. This is probably not the experience of all pupils with albinism but it is likely to be that of a significant number. It is probable that such problems are compounded by poverty.

With the right support and motivation there is no reason why pupils with albinism cannot achieve academic and social success at school.

The ideas for supporting pupils with albinism that are noted above could be usefully introduced into pre and in-service teacher education programmes in the Botswana context as they reflect practical realities and national principles and policies.

Such programmes should encourage and welcome discussion and examination by participants of local value systems, beliefs and expected norms of behaviour.

Further research into these issues will be of benefit to pupils and schools.

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