

MOVING AGAINST THE TIDE OF EXCLUSIVITY: IDENTITY NARRATIVE STUDY OF A GRADUATE WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

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Abstract. Modern trend in educating persons with special needs points to the direction of inclusivity and demands the elimination of all forms of educational barriers that can impede their academic successes. However, there appears to exist an entrenched discrimination against persons living with special needs in Nigeria. This warrants they put in extra efforts for them to progress in their academic pursuit. The study explored the identity narrative of a graduate with visual impairment from a Nigerian University with particular reference to his encounters with societal challenges from his early childhood till when he graduated and how he made sense of his everyday world. The qualitative research paradigm was adopted in this study using semi-structured interview as the primary data tool. The narrative inquiry was used during the interview. Data analysis was based on content analysis. Findings indicated that there was the emergence of both desired and undesired identities in his narratives and in spite of the overwhelming challenges our participant faced, the desire for uncommon success **is** found in his narratives and he actively turned negative challenges in his way into steps that helped him arrive at his desired destination exemplifying

an agentic role in constructing meaning in his social world. It was concluded from the study that ability to positively reconstruct ones' negative experiences could lead to self-fulfillment. Resilience and belief in his abilities in spite of crushing experiences are keys to unlocking the potentialities of our respondent.

Keywords: visual disability, narrative, identity, exclusivity, inclusion

Introduction

Prevalence of blindness among people of all ages in Nigeria is estimated at 0.78% of the general population.¹⁾ This is a rough estimate given the fact that statistics concerning persons living with disability including those with visual impairment is lacking (Amusat, 2009) making it very difficult to ascertain the number of these individuals in universities in Nigeria. Venturing into academic pursuit in the Nigerian environment by a person living with visual impairment demands unusual guts since they are seen as victims. This is worsened by the lackluster attitude of stakeholders in enacting and implementing policies/laws that could help ameliorate the challenges of persons living with disability which has fueled wrong perceptions of disability (Amusat, 2009).

The inclusive education movement recognizes that education of the child irrespective of his/her ability/disability, disposition, race, gender, religion, and socio-cultural background is an inalienable right. Nations of the world have keyed in to inclusive education policy even though it is being noted that progress in many developing nations is very slow. This movement is a radical paradigm shift from the medical model to the social model recognizing the fact that disability is not inherent in the child but could be pronounced in the face of social barriers that see the child as an object of exclusion. When these individuals are objectified, the society unnecessarily assigns them roles which may be totally incongruent with their being. They are seen as persons to be pitied, weak, helpless and unfortunate contrary to positive social and personal identities rooted in notions of power, respect and control (Cameron, 2007). Negative stereotypes

and cultural representations that project persons with disabilities (Visual impairment inclusive) as weaklings and object of pity have the concomitant effect of pushing them to accept to act out such pitiable roles (Cameron, 2007).

Even though Nigeria is a signatory to international declarations on equal access to education, children with special needs seem to be excluded from being educated in such a way that they could meaningfully live and contribute their quota in the society. Lots of reasons have been adduced for this by researchers which include cultural/religious factors, non-implementation of inclusive education policies, inadequate funding, stereotype (Adebisi et al., 2014). Across different ethnic groups in Nigeria, persons living with VI are labeled derogatorily, used as object for begging in public places, abandoned, rejected as evil and seen as ill-luck to their families, and in extreme cases left to die when they are young. In some Cheshire homes, parents are found to give wrong home/residential addresses so that they would not be traced to help in taking care of these children. Some Cheshire homes wake up in the morning to find these babies abandoned at their gates without traces to their parents. They are usually known by the visual impairment label rather than their names. It is not strange to hear such names as “Tom the blind” referring to the person that has visual impairment.

The lived experiences of persons living with visual impairment in their pursuit for higher education will be a definition of societal configuration and personal reaction to societal forces. Persons with disabilities (those with visual impairment) have noted that discrimination against them in Nigeria runs through all the fabrics of the society in such areas as acceptance, community participation, placement in schools, teaching and learning approaches and employment opportunities and that those with VI have to work very hard to convince the Nigerian society that they can excel in social life, academic pursuit, marital life and job placement (Ashi et al., 2015). The society has a way it has constructed persons with visual impairment which leads to their exclusion in society. Researchers have noted that persons with VI have inward yearning to live normal

life with sighted individuals (Parvin, 2015) but are likely to struggle to make a mark in life because of societal exclusion. Many of them aspire to get to the peak of their academic carriers but are denied access to education because of social barriers. In such hostile and demoralizing environment to persons living with visual impairment like the Nigerian environment, one begins to wonder what makes some successful graduates with visual impairment oblivious of the tormenting learning experiences.

Motivation for the study

The personal experience of the first author informed the study. As a graduate assistant in his university he had an opportunity to work with persons living with visual impairment. This happened when, for the first time, some students with visual impairment were admitted in his Faculty. The faculty was actually 'confused' with what to do with them. There was no Braille expert in the Faculty, no universal architectural designs in almost all the classroom blocks, no material for them in the library and recorders for them were lacking. They had to hassle on their own! His Department asked him to handle two of them may be because he was the youngest in the department and was going through his training in educational psychology. It was daunting because he was also not knowledgeable on how to cater for them. Skeletal services such as reading for them in examinations and informing lecturers not make questions with mathematical symbols and signs compulsory for them were provided. They set out to face their world. In the midst of this, the first author discovered that some could cope more than others and theorized that it could be the way they constructed their social world that made the difference because there was glaring inhibiting experiences and wondered how the successful among them constructed his world and succeeded academically. This actually led to this study which investigated the identity narrative of a successful graduate with VI who graduated from such a Nigerian university. This is with the hope that it would provide a

springboard for counseling and psychological interventions for persons with VI who are struggling in similar circumstances.

Research questions

(1) What identity emerged from the experiences of our respondent as regards interactions with his social world; (2) What academic challenges emerged from the narratives of our respondent in his bid to attain his academic aspiration; (3) How did he make sense (reconstruct) of his social world in building his identity and overcame the challenges?

Method

Research design/data collection procedure

This qualitative research is underpinned by epistemological constructionist framework in which reality is constructed through a person's active experience of it. This is driven by the fact that narrative and narrativity as concepts of social epistemology and social ontology enable individuals to know, understand and make sense of the social world, and that through this we constitute our identities (Somers, 1994). Narrative inquiry was used in this study in which authors generated narratives with the participant using interview. This is because the researchers sought to study the lived experiences of the respondent. Since human beings are storying creatures, researchers in narrative studies believe that narratives are filled with social and cultural meaning (Mendieta, 2013). McAdams & McLean (2013) explained that narrative identity is 'a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and the imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose'.

The vehicle through which the narratives were conveyed was through semi-structured interview with the respondent. For the fact that information of this nature might be difficult for some persons to reveal, the researchers established harmonious relationship with the respondent and relayed the essence of

the study. The consent of the respondent was sought and he accepted to participate in the study. There were several visitations to the respondent within and outside his residence. The first interview was conducted in his residence but due to technical faults got damaged. The interview was re-conducted outside his residence lasting for about one hour. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of our respondent. Questions responded to during the interview aimed at answering the research questions were: (a) what is your background like starting from childhood;(b) how do you think these challenges shaped your person;(c) what kept your passion to further your education in spite of your childhood experiences;(d) what limitations do you think existed in society that could have hindered your academic aspiration;(e) recall your first year in the university, what would you say were your experiences;(f) what were your academic challenges in the university and your perceptions towards your lecturers and the learning environments; (g) how did you manage the challenges you faced in your study;(h) how do you think your education has shaped your worldviews?

The respondent was given the opportunity to air his narratives without restriction. When startling narratives were given, there was an attempt by the interviewer to probe further to gain insight into the narrative. This helped the researchers exert some efforts that were needed for adequate data to be collected. The interviews were played back to him and he listened to them.

Participant/sampling method

The participant is the main case of this study given the uniqueness of his person and the fact that typical narrative studies aim at depth rather than breadth. Researchers have noted that the purpose of sampling in qualitative studies is the acquisition of information necessary for the understanding of the complexity, depth, variation, or context surrounding a phenomenon, rather than population representation common in quantitative research (Gentles et al., 2015). To avoid identity disclosure, the participant is described as an adult male graduate teacher in his late 20s. He attended a Nigerian university in which there was virtually

no provisions made for persons with visual impairment in terms of infrastructural facilities, instructional modifications, and social support were very poor. He obtained his first degree in education and graduated in record time. He has an outstanding record in his department and performed excellently in the National Youth Service which was a compulsory service for graduates under 30 years in Nigeria. He has a flair for information communication and technology. He is actively involved in disability advocacy and tries to bring to the awareness of the public the need to socially include persons with disabilities in the society.

Data analysis

Data from the narratives were analyzed based on content analysis of the participant's stories and evaluative language (Lyons & Roulstone, 2016) and participant's construction of meanings was based on interpretation rather than generalization to other cases (Nomnian, 2017). The narrative was transcribed verbatim and data from the interview were read severally. Emerging themes were coded and analyzed.

Findings

The findings of this study focused on the emergent identity of the respondent through his stories, the sociocultural dynamics that shaped his identity in the narratives, and the academic experiences stretching from primary to university education and how he overcame these challenges.

Earliest school experiences

The respondent's early life experiences were marred by the discovery by the mother that there was something wrong with his eyes which eventually truncated the joy that would have followed the birth of a male child in the family. From the narrative, it appears that the respondent was not aware of the real cause of the visual disability and there was evidence of traditional/self-medication in

his case before they actually went to the hospital. The respondent reported this in the narrative below:

[I] was born in the 80s without visual impairment but along the line my mother began to notice something [wrong] in my eyes, and individuals started advising her to use breast milk, urine, sugar-water and so on ---- at the end of the day my right eye got dead, maybe, waiting for miracle to resurrect it [chuckles].

This actually affected his early school experiences after medical treatments were sought for by the parents. The fact that they found it difficult to believe that he had visual impairment delayed his enrolment to a special school and he also at that point denied the fact that he was visually impaired. In his narrative this denial made him pass through turbulent academic carrier.

[A]lthough my mother found it difficult to accept [that], I went to different nursery and primary schools. At that time, I was crying in class because I did not understand what they were doing there I repeated primary one up to two/three years and they were not able to promote me to primary two.

The disappointments associated with these experiences led his classmates to label him “jagara-jagara” writer. This was the derogatory and undesired identity he bore at that time because of the crushing experiences he had leading the mother to take him away from the school he was enrolled in. In spite of these efforts made by the mother, he kept failing in regular schools he went to. This was captured in his narratives in the following excerpt:

[I] was known as ‘jagara-jagara’ writer because I couldn’t see what was in the board....my mother took me away from the school and sent me to [names withheld], where I took primary one examination

and failed because you must write exams before you enter the school. Then she took me to [name withheld] I went through the school without passing... after all the whole thing I sat back at home because it was not working.

There was the resignation to fate. They tried enrolling in a special school after series of attempts to see whether it would work in the regular school failed. The difficulty in going to special school was exacerbated by denying the fact that he had visual impairment. It was difficult for him and the mother to accept that. The school environment was also not encouraging. The mother had no option but to abandon him in the special school.

[M]y first day in school became another issue because I found it difficult to cope with people with visual impairment since I had not believed that I was blind. It is very difficult for someone to accept. But along the line my mother left me there...I was supposed to have gone to special school in 1999 when the hospital told us to go to special school but when my mum visited [name withheld] Special Education Center with me, how the environment was like then, she felt like taking me home. We did not later go back to that school. It was in 2001 that she made up her mind, that even if it was dumping me let me go. She just took me to the school and left in anger because she found it difficult to accept.

This topsy-turvydom had to come to a halt when our respondent realized that he needed to face the challenge headlong. This made him realize that he had an inner strength. This eventually redefined his person and he began to take charge of circumstances surrounding his being. Realizing this led him to begin to take up challenges in agentic and heroic manner, braving the wave of tor-

menting situations. This eventually paid off as he began to be academically successful. He reported this in active voice which shows how he was deliberately overcoming these situations. Further academic successes brought joy to the family and these laurels convinced the mother that the 'blind' boy could learn. These academic laurels were of great value to our respondent and some of them like the primary school report card are still with him till date.

[I] started facing my challenges. Later, I had to accept that I have sight challenge... I found that there was something in me. That was when I went to special school. We had what we call A dot One. We have our own way of writing...and I learnt it so quick. I went there around November and I took first position, I can get the report card and it is still there. That was when I understood that there was something in me. then when I went home, I told my mum that I have learnt how to write a, b, c, d. I could spell [mentioned his name]. She was very happy. Some little, little spellings... I started spelling them for her. She was like this blind boy is getting something [laughs].

Later school experiences

Some identities also emerged in later school experiences. They took the form of the ones that emerged in his narratives in early school experiences. Apparently, there was no serious deviation from how he constructed his identity here and the forces that led to the construction of these identities when compared with what were obtainable in his early school experiences. There were both desirable identity and undesirable identities. It appears that the undesirable identities resulted from stereotypical perception of the society which our respondent confronted also in an agentic manner reconstructing societal configuration of a person with visual impairment. In some cases, he was seen as more competent

than the sighted individuals. The following excerpt shows the undesirable identity resulting from the labels in society.

[T]hen in my secondary school level, when I come into the normal class, they started saying things like: this blind person, and some of these words when we hear them begin to take us back.

Also the theme of perceived incompetency of persons with visual impairment emerged as another form of labeling in the narrative of the respondent. Because of this, the society finds it difficult to believe that he could be in school. People wondered how he would be in school and never believed that he was in school until they started seeing him in school uniform. This was captured in this excerpt below:

[I]f you tell them that you are in school, they found it difficult to believe. It was later when I came out from [name withheld] school where I attended my secondary school that they started seeing me wearing school uniform, people that know me now believed that am in school. Initially they found it difficult to believe that a visually impaired person can be in school.

There was also the theme of desired identity in his narratives during his later school experiences. These identities were actually as a result of deliberate efforts made by the respondent which paid off. He narrated his experiences as though he was that hero that braced difficult paths and emerged victorious. One of these desired identities was academic competence in later school experiences. This was captured thus:

[I] did my TP successfully and go to that school and asked them about the Special One, that was what I told them as my name. I participated in everything, both sporting activities, inter-house sports, I was their coach, the house I was controlling came second. I taught them Government and was their best Government teacher....

Also emerged in his narrative is the desired identity of human right defender. He was able to stand for those who were being cheated and resisted the marginalization of those with visual impairment in both his secondary school and the university. He and his colleagues had to write the West African Examination Council (WAEC) to start releasing their results which they had failed to release in the past. The letter they wrote paid off and persons with visual impairment began to get their results. Also he fought for the school authorities in his secondary school to provide accommodation for those with visual impairment when they were almost rejected. He also got them do that. These were captured in the following excerpts:

[T]hen later on we started working, we started working on it... we wrote to WAEC and they started releasing the results because initially they were not releasing the results for the visually impaired persons. Many of us that wrote WAEC then did not see our results. It was later when we started writing to WAEC asking why they were ceasing our results. Then they started doing so, and by the grace of God now they are releasing their results.

[I] stood up for them even when the then government [school authorities] wanted to throw them [persons with visual impairment] out from the school. I stood for them because they were complaining about

accommodation...after the argument, these people [persons with visual impairment] queued up and they were given accommodation.

The good leader identity also emerged as he progressed in his educational endeavour. From the narratives, he took up leadership positions in order to fight the ills of the society against persons living with disabilities. This was done to give them the opportunity to excel in life. In his leadership style, he stands to be a defender of the people he represents.

[W]hen I was in J. S. 1, I became the secretary for the Nigerian Association for the Blind, Youth Wing, [name of state withheld] as a whole...I stood up that I must be part of the executive, I contested and won the post of secretary. Before I left secondary school, I became the youth leader, [name of state withheld] Association for Persons with Visual Impairment, Youth Wing.

Challenges that shaped the respondent's identity

There were lots of challenges that emerged from the respondent's narratives as he journeyed through his academic career. These were the dynamic forces that helped shaped the identity of the respondent. Quite surprisingly, the challenges mainly emanated from the society rather than residing within the respondent. These challenges were quite enormous leading to the point of the respondent reconstructing his experiences. The issue of lack of/adequate instructional facilities and other basic amenities for those with visual impairment in the institutions he went to ran through the gamut of his narrative. This was captured in this excerpt:

[T]he environment was not conducive. We used to fetch water from the stream then ...outside the school, a blind person will be walking in the bush and there was no good road. Sometimes if am coming

back with water, I fell down on the road, the water will pour out. I will go back again and get water.

...there is no enabling environment, we do not have resource center for the blind in [name of school withheld]; but they have it now.

Another challenge was accommodation and financial issues. This actually affected the concentration of the respondent in his academic work. The stress associated with this affected his academic performance. He lived off campus where he could get affordable house and he could not get this near the university environment. This led to transportation problem.

[I] have told you that it was finance and accommodation and nobody cared about that. Sometimes, it was some bus drivers that you will enter their bus and they look at your condition and tell you to go. Even in the department and the faculty there was nothing, no help.

... the financial aspect of it made me not to concentrate because I was taking care of myself, maybe if you are having lecture, I will be thinking about what I will eat in the afternoon? How do I trek to [name of town withheld] because that was where I saw accommodation in a lower rate in a year.

There was also inadequate classroom leading to noisy environment. This also made it difficult for him to record the lectures. Also appalling is the uncaring attitude of some lecturers and students who failed to understand the way persons with visual impairment operate. They saw him as a burden and distraction from their own work.

[I]n History [Department], the English [Department] will be shouting and the lecturer also is shouting and then you will be recording, not knowing if it is what the English are saying or what the lecturer is saying that you are recording.

[I] went to his office to tell him, Sir I have carry over, he said yes what I want him to do. He left me and started quarrelling with the person that brought me to his office instead of him to give me advice so that I will not fail again....

[S]tudents' attitude was not good. They don't carry me along to the group I belong to, to have seminar with them. The day we are to have seminar, I don't know, they just called. Please you are going to present point 14. It was recorded but I could not understand. I told the woman [lecturer] that it was not working... In my final year, the woman [lecturer] insisted that they must carry me along. When they failed to do so, she singled me out. I was the only one that attended my own seminar alone. I presented on South Africa, after the presentation, come see clap.

Making sense of the social world and overcoming the challenges

Glaring is the fact that some of the challenges faced by our respondent could derail the progress of an individual's academic success. But these challenges are not as important as how the respondent was able to overcome them. His narratives showed the evidence of strong inner will, resilience, belief in one's ability, imitating successful individuals as what made him overcome those challenges. Self-realization of the stuff he was made of which the society could not see help him a lot in the face of these experiences. From the narratives, the greatest barrier would have come from him not the society and overcoming the

grilling social world would demand looking inwards. On the issue of strong inner will and resilience his narratives captured it thus:

[A]t some time I encouraged myself that since others are passing the university, then I must go... I usually have this in mind that provided that this person has made it, I must be there.

It was terrible, after going round the faculties looking for Faculty of Education, I went home, without getting at any conclusion. The next day, I came back and they took me to Faculty of Education

... the environment was not conducive for somebody like me, but I still have to manage it and face the challenges, and that is determination

Also he was able to overcome the circumstances because he had strong belief in his abilities. His being efficacious was transmitted through previous successes. This gave him the courage to try new tasks and propelled him to put in more efforts in achieving what he wanted. This was captured thus:

[I]n my final year, how to write the project was another issue. One[lecturer] called me and asked where am going to start. I said since I have passed through the university and went for TP, I can also do it. At the end of day, I wrote it and passed.

Also the passion for success of the respondent was fueled by looking up to those who are successful in their own endeavours. These were actually a kind of role models for him. He believed if they have become successful, he will also achieve success. He was spurred to work harder.

[W]hen I went to that special school. I saw lots of visually impaired persons. I met with one [namewithheld] then, the guy was in primary six when I came and I was in primary one and I senior him with a year or two years. I said since this small boy can be in primary six that means I must be there. I will even go more than him. That is what kept me moving because I used to look to those who have made it or in the process of making it. So I started pursuing them

[W]hen I finished my primary school level, there was a man ...he was a welfare officer in [name withheld]. My mother introduced me to him when I was through with my primary school and said 'onye a kpukwaraisi' [this person is blind] and he is a welfare officer! I said I can do that, I went ahead. I finished my secondary school....

Discussion

This study explored the identity narrative of a person with visual impairment as he journeyed through his academic carrier, the academic challenges in his narratives and how he made sense of these and overcame the challenges. In the narrative both desired identities and undesired identities emerged. These undesired identities were actually labels given to the respondent by others which he stated that they were discouraging and could weigh one down when one hears them. Research has shown that community members disrespect and disregard individuals with disability. These identities were incongruent with the real identity of the respondent who actually was positive in the realization of his goal. As a matter of fact, he was undeterred by such labels. His narrative revealed his agentic role in the society in which he did not wait for things to happen but made those things happen in the face of inhibiting factors (Sam, 2013). This finding is in line with the findings of Lyons & Roulstone (2015) in which persons with disability presented positive image of themselves countering dominant discourse about disability. This counter-narrative aligns itself to the social model

of disability that projects the notion of power, respect and control (Cameron, 2007). This narrative shows that disability may be inherent in the way persons with disability are perceived in society not necessarily in the individual.

Also in the course of his academic pursuit, the respondent encountered challenges that excluded him from full inclusion in what goes on in the class. There was the issue of difficult and uncondusive learning environment, negative/uncaring attitude from both teachers and fellow students, and general societal disregard. He wanted the cooperation of both teachers and fellow students, needed social support and provision of instructional facilities both in the classroom and the university library, but these were elusive. In some cases, teachers saw him as a burden and failed to put into considerations his unique needs while some of his course mates avoided him. At a time, they did not inform him of seminar presentations that should be collaboratively prepared together. Similar findings have shown that persons living with visual impairment are vulnerable to social exclusion, discrimination and poverty (Ashi et al., 2015). They found that attitude of the society constitutes the major hindrances to the inclusion of persons living with disability in the Nigerian society.

More so, in reconstructing his social world, the respondent sought avenues to swim against the tide of exclusion in his academic career. The narratives showed that his victory could only come from within considering the fact that his earlier and later educational careers depict similar trend in the way the society regarded him. He had to first of all accept that he has visual impairment which helped him see his inner strengths. When he began to succeed, he was spurred by the successes he recorded. His earlier successes became a building block for further breakthroughs. Ashi et al. (2015) findings showed that persons with visual impairment have to work very hard to convince the Nigerian public of their abilities in every aspect of their lives. This is actually erroneous but it is a popularly held belief that once one has a disability, there may not be anything good that may come from him; hence presenting him as object of ridicule or at best as object of pity.

Conclusion and recommendations

It was concluded from the study that ability to positively reconstruct ones' negative experiences could lead to self-fulfillment. Resilience and belief in one's abilities in spite of crushing experiences are keys to unlocking one's potentialities. Persons with disabilities (visual impairment) could see their problems not resident in themselves but in the society in their bid to survive in life. Hence, hindrances to their success could mostly emanate from the society. It is, therefore, recommended that schools should adopt inclusive practices that will be all embracing so that persons with visual impairment could access education without hindrances. This will entail curriculum modifications, teacher retraining, provision of facilities and modification of existing ones. Also recommended is the mounting of counseling services in all the schools so that persons with visual impairment could regularly be counseled and their self-esteem and self-concept built so that they will see their inner strength. This eventually will lead to greater motivation to pursue their carrier. Government, non-governmental agencies, international agencies should push for laws that protect the rights of persons living with visual impairment and discriminatory attitude from the sighted individuals should be punished under the law.

NOTES

1. http://pbunion.org/Countriessurveyresults/Nigeria/Nigeria_survey_Summary_report.pdf

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