

THE PEDAGOGIC DOMAIN AND EPISTEMIC ACCESS IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The unexpected emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has had adverse effects on diverse students' epistemic access in the context of South African higher education. While this has seen an increasing urge for research to understand epistemic access and success of disadvantaged students, there has not been a specific focus on the issue as it specifically relates to students with disabilities, who are unique in their own way, thereby requiring an intervention that considers their differences. Using the decolonial analytical framework, the article explored the challenges in the pedagogic domain, and their implications for the epistemic access of students with disabilities during the pandemic. Data were collected through the synthesis of international and South African literature on the issue, as it specifically relates to students with disabilities during the pandemic. The key finding was that the pandemic exacerbated the pedagogic challenges already confronted by students with disabilities, thereby gravely affecting their access to learning. The objective of the article was to present the pedagogic challenges and how they have limited students with disabilities' epistemic access, as exacerbated by the pandemic. This was so that interventions that could assist their learning in the "new normal", could be thought about, in the South African context, in Africa and globally.

Keywords: South African higher education, pedagogic domain, epistemic access, students with disabilities, challenges, COVID-19, decolonial theory

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

For the past three decades after attainment of independence in South Africa, research in higher education has bordered around understanding the epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students. With an increase in formal access to higher education, throughout problems that emerged have revealed that there are issues in epistemic access and success. Previously, deficit models were used in which lack of the necessary capital and habitus to manoeuvre the university environment was cited for students from historically disadvantaged

schooling and home backgrounds (Fataar 2012). The narrative was disrupted by Cross and Atinde (2015) when they coined the concept of “compensatory capital”, which explains that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds also have the assets they bring from their backgrounds to use as they manoeuvre the different university environments to attain epistemic access (Cross and Atinde 2015; Cross 2018). While the issue of epistemic access and success has already been a subject of debate, the emergence of the pandemic has invoked more research around issues of pedagogic challenges and how they have impacted the epistemic access of diverse students.

The problem identified for this article is that the issue of pedagogic challenges and their effects on students with disabilities’ epistemic access during the pandemic, has been under-researched as it specifically relates to students with disabilities. Very few studies exist on the pedagogic domain broadly, and as it relates to teaching and learning, and particularly students with disabilities in the context of South African higher education (Ndlovu 2020; Ngubane and Zongozzi 2021; Ntombela 2021). Thus, even though the studies focused on students with disabilities, they did not consider the aspect of epistemic access. It is against this background that the article takes a unique angle in which it particularly focuses on the epistemic access of students with disabilities within the broad pedagogic domain, to understand the challenges they confronted during the pandemic; a critical period that had a significant effect on all diverse students in South African higher education specifically and globally.

As the article explored students with disabilities’ pedagogic challenges and their epistemic access, it sought to answer the questions:

- (a) How did the challenges confronted by students with disabilities within the pedagogic domain impact their epistemic access in the South African context of higher education during the pandemic?
- (b) How does coloniality of power explain the invisible underlying cause for the epistemic access challenges confronted by students with disabilities during the pandemic?
- (c) To what extent can agency by students with disabilities enable their epistemic access in the “new normal” in South African higher education?

While there is a paucity of studies focused on the issue in the context of students with disabilities, extensive research has been conducted on challenges of students without disabilities and those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (Mpungose 2020; USAF 2020; Motala and Menon 2020; Harding and Brodie 2020). Psychosocial issues resulting from isolation have been cited (Motala and Menon 2020). Common challenges relating to access to

online platforms by historically disadvantaged students in rural contexts in particular, have also been highlighted. Poor connectivity in terms of internet and electricity and problems related to lack of mobile data, including home environments that are not conducive for learning (Harding and Brodie 2020; USAF 2020), have been discussed in previous studies. This is to say that the issue of pedagogic challenges during the pandemic, and their implications for epistemic access for students in general, is a path that has already been extensively walked. It could be argued that the effects of the pandemic were felt by both the academics and students and warranted research so that the effects could be minimised in South African higher education. Research that focuses on students with disabilities is thus essential because they are the marginalised category, who are always thought about last, when pressing adversities as the pandemic strike.

The argument of the article is that while the pandemic has significant implications for pedagogy, the challenges for epistemic access for students with disabilities only magnifies the inequalities and exclusion that the particular category of students experienced even prior to the pandemic. Their pedagogic challenges and limited epistemic access did not emerge during the pandemic but were more visible as exacerbated by the pandemic.

The issue of epistemic access in South African higher education has been highlighted, tracing it back to the historic moments in which deficit models were used to explain it for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. The article is then premised on the theoretical tool of coloniality of power, which illuminates the invisible underlying cause of the challenges of epistemic access for students with disabilities, specifically during the pandemic. The systematic literature review is provided as the methodology in which data were collected. A general overview of pedagogy in South African higher education is discussed as the foundation on which epistemic access for students with disabilities could be understood in the context of the pandemic. Taking this further, the challenges specifically for epistemic access of students with disabilities are discussed and finally, agency is proposed in terms of how students with disabilities could use it to access pedagogy, and to enhance their epistemic access in the new normal.

DECOLONIAL THEORY AS FRAMEWORK

Decolonial theory and decolonial approaches have been adopted for the possibility of liberation of students with disabilities, that they access pedagogy and gain epistemic access. The challenge of lack of total transformation, to include all diverse students, and more specifically those with disabilities, has persisted and persists to date in the South African higher education (Ndlovu 2017). Theoretically, decolonial theory broadly, and the coloniality of power particularly is predominantly used in this article to inform understanding of the deep-seated invisible

underlying cause for the continued challenges for students with disabilities in gaining epistemic access, and also the need for a decolonial approach, which is agency by students with disabilities themselves, to demand for their inclusion, so that they have epistemic access.

The first tool drawn from decolonial theory to understand pedagogy and students with disabilities during the pandemic is coloniality of power. Prominent decolonial scholars, among others include Quijano (2000), Maldonado-Torres (2007), Mignolo (2007 2011) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012; 2013), have expounded extensively on the four legs of decolonial theory, of which coloniality of power is part. The theoretical concept explains the networks of relations of exploitation, domination, control of labour, nature and its productive resources, knowledge and authority by the dominant powers, which is still in existence long after colonialism has ended. Coloniality of power is thus useful for understanding the existing colonial matrix of power, which affects all dimensions of social existence, ranging from sexuality, authority, politics, economy, subjectivity, language and race (Quijano 2000). According to decolonial scholars, coloniality of power is the reason why there has been continuous domination of the South by Western influences.

In the light of pedagogy, the theoretical concept of coloniality of power helps in understanding the hierarchical organisation of structures and practices in higher education, which are exclusive to the Other. Quijano (2000) explained that the social order arises from the dominant society using power to organise society. It is such an organisation that those in higher hierarchy speak for those in the lower. One would argue that such hierarchisation of the structures and practice is the reason why oppression of the other social groups as those with disabilities continues, despite democracy in countries such as South Africa, efforts of transformation in higher education (Badat 2010) and comprehensive policies of inclusion (Department of Education 2001). Coloniality of power therefore could help to illuminate deeply and unveil why students with disabilities confront challenges in epistemic access, which has been exacerbated during the pandemic.

The second tool specifically drawn from decolonial theory for this article is agency, which is part of decoloniality. Agency is understood in different ways depending on context. Two outstanding ways explain agency: that it is binary inseparable from structure (Sahlins 1985) and that agency and structure are two different entities (Giddens 1979). In the first instance, Sahlins (1985) argued that there is no radical binary contrast between agency and structure because the two cannot be exclusive alternatives. It means that the binaries of agency and structure produce each other in action, as they are not oppositional but mutually inclusive. Thus, according to Sahlins (1985), it is that the structure constructs agency and in turn, a structure is constructed through agency and it, in this respect, is that the two are viewed as inseparable. This suggests

that student-agency is possible only when the structure (in this case, the institution) provides a conducive atmosphere. While this could be true, on one hand, on the other, it could be argued, that Sahlin's view of agency and structure could be seen as reductionist, as it depicts the subject (student) as passive, complacent and not able to make change unless positively influenced by the structure.

In the second instance, where agency and structure are explained as separate entities, Giddens argued that despite the constraints imposed by the structure, agency is still possible (Giddens 1979). He stated that it is reductionist to "reduce structure to everything and social agency to nothing" (Giddens 1979, 534–535). This means that students are capable of agency within a constraining environment (higher education contexts), and agency is not always influenced by its structure. Giddens (1979, 534–535) further explained that through their "knowledgeability" the social actors are capable of resisting the determining power of the structure. In agreement, Torfing (1999) added that social actors are strategically thinkers who have the epistemic capacities to outmanoeuvre the constraints or limits set by the structure of the social system. From the assertions, social actors are capable of using their agency to sidestep obstacles imposed by the structure. In essence, student-agency is possible as a separate entity from the structure.

Thirdly, agency in the decolonial context is understood as the deliberate actions in varying degrees, to resist oppression and to influence change. When making specific reference to women as subalterns, Spivak (1988) argued that agency is speaking out. It could be argued that in this context, agency is about action and speaking out against oppression. Thus, agency can dismantle oppression within coloniality. Ndlovu (2015) added that the first important thing is for the social agents, more importantly the "Other" to be aware of how they are influenced by coloniality in the specific structure within which they exist, and they seek change through agency. In essence, the "Other" who is aware and conscious of the oppression imposed by the structure could outmanoeuvre the obstacles placed on them by a structure, by way of agency. Student-agency is thus possible even for students with disabilities, for them to actively participate in academic practice. It is from the different ways in which agency is understood as an issue of decoloniality, that the author used the theoretical concept to illuminate the hidden, invisible and underlying cause for limitations confronted in the pedagogic domain as it relates to students with disabilities' epistemic access in the context of South African higher education.

THE WAY OF DECOLONIALITY AS THE POSSIBILITY TO IMPROVE EPISTEMIC ACCESS

A decolonial approach has been found relevant and thus adopted to assist students with

disabilities in terms of “decolonising” pedagogy so that they are also included during the pandemic, which has become the “new normal”. In the present historical moment, students with disabilities’ voices are currently underrepresented in the pedagogic domain. As such, the Western knowledges often present a hierarchical order of power, in which the “teacher” is the knower and the student has to fit into the academic practice designed by the “knower” as a recipient of knowledge. The decolonial approach is thus useful in terms of deconstruction of existing hierarchies, which has always affected the Other, resulting in their exclusion in participating actively in academic practice. By virtue of the approach favouring multiplicity and drawing on multiple knowledge systems and ways of knowing, students with disabilities with a lived experience could also have their perspective integrated in pedagogy, in a way that could give them epistemic access to become active participants of the academic practice in the new normal.

It is in this respect that the issue of challenges of epistemic access for students with disabilities is premised on decolonial theory largely and on coloniality of power specifically, to unveil the hidden underlying cause of the challenges confronted by students with disabilities in terms of epistemic access.

DESCRIPTION OF METHOD

A qualitative design was adopted as the methodology and a systematic literature review was used as a method to obtain data. The literature review was the most relevant method to use because it enabled data to be sourced on epistemic access of students with disabilities during the pandemic, as published in a number of online sources, journals, book chapters and books. The online databases, which include ProQuest, EBSCO, ERIC, JSTOR, PsycInfo, SAGE, SpringerLINK and Taylor and Francis Online, were used in the search process for relevant literature. The terms “pedagogy, epistemic access, students with disabilities, South African higher education, Covid-19”, and their combinations, were used as search terms, to source data.

SELECTION OF RELEVANT LITERATURE FOR REVIEW

The search yielded 176 texts, published between 1979 and 2021. The texts included South African and international books, book chapters, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, the Constitution of South Africa, and research reports, as well as online resources which included unpublished conference and discussion papers. Sixty documents with texts related to pedagogy and as it relates to epistemic access of students with disabilities in South African higher education, years before and during the pandemic, were selected. The texts published before the pandemic were also relevant to provide the background information to

mirror whether the challenges of epistemic access were due to the pandemic or were confronted even before the pandemic. International literature related to pedagogy and epistemic access was selected to gain a broader understanding of the issues as they relate to students with disabilities in a wider context of higher education outside of South Africa. Though the selected literature could not be generalised to all students with disabilities' epistemic access, in all their categories, in all institutions across South Africa, the most important criteria was relevance. Bassey (1981) viewed relevance as good as generalisability as relevant data are more important than many irrelevant ones for data source.

THE PEDAGOGIC DOMAIN IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Defining the pedagogic domain, Cross (2018, 31) stated that it is constituted by “specialised modes of communication and interaction between knowledge communities and comprises the curriculum, teaching, and assessment that together produce and reproduce academic practice”. He further argued that pedagogy largely is the academic life at the university. It could be argued that the pedagogic domain is the core of university life, intrinsically linked to knowledge searching through teaching and learning, research, community engagement, and supervision, with the aim of producing knowledge and dissemination by both students and the academics. While the student has the responsibility of learning as Cross (2018) has alluded, it is within the pedagogic domain that the conditions of becoming a participant in academic practice are shaped. It could thus be argued that for all diverse students to learn to become participants in academic practice, they are influenced by the pedagogic domain within different institutions. How a student negotiates pedagogy could therefore vary from one institution to the other, and consequently, student epistemic access could vary from one institution to the other, depending on how learning conditions are shaped within the pedagogic domain.

Pedagogy covers a number of aspects as among others, methods of teaching, the curriculum and its implementation, including the language of teaching and learning. Akala (2021) argued that supervision generally, and of doctoral students in higher education in particular, is part of pedagogy. Exclusion in pedagogy during the pandemic is therefore multi-faceted and it means different things to different people. While the focus is on pedagogical challenges in the South African context of higher education, it is important to highlight that, not only in South African higher education are students with disabilities negatively affected in pedagogy largely during the pandemic, but even in developed countries, which have always had better support structures for students with disabilities. Meleo-Erwin et al. (2020) argued that in New York, students with disabilities did not have access to support in the form of recording of lectures and notes and deadlines were not extended for their projects, during the

pandemic. When students with disabilities in developed countries such as the United States, confront pedagogical challenges during the pandemic, the results could be positive; however, the worst-case scenario could be possible for similar students in developing countries, including South Africa.

In the South African context of higher education, even prior to the pandemic, there were still a number of obstacles within the particular domain that constrained the conditions for all diverse students, limiting them to becoming participants in academic practice. Among other constraints, large group lectures that reduce teacher immediacy (Cross 2018), exclusive methods of assessment based on competition, methods (Maringe 2017) and exclusive use of the English language as the medium of instruction (Metz 2017), which is not the first language to most students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. The challenges outlined that as the pedagogic domain has so much impact on epistemic access, it could compound to impact negatively on students with and without disabilities' learning to become active participants in academic practice. While all diverse students are constrained in participating fully in the practice, the conditions could be exacerbated for students with disabilities because they confront the same obstacles as all other students and those pertaining to their unique needs in particular (Ndlovu and Walton 2016).

EPISTEMIC ACCESS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Epistemic access has been a common area of research in South Africa, with a number of scholars, such as Morrow (2009), Sehoole and Adeyemo (2016) and Cross (2018) having explored the issue deeply, with the aim of making improvements for success for all diverse students, and more especially those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. It is while in the current moment that the problem of epistemic access is being thought about in the context of students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, that recent research has revealed that not only students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds have epistemic access issues but also all diverse students, including those who are privileged (Essop 2020). Hlalele (2008) raised the issue of the articulation gap between schooling and higher education as the challenge for epistemic access that needs attention. Essop (2020) has echoed this, stating that there is a need for studies to focus on the transition from schooling to higher education to understand the articulation gap, which has an impact on epistemic access of all diverse students. It is in this respect that for students with disabilities, as another diverse category that is often overlooked, their epistemic access becomes important in this article as it could yield a useful foundation upon which intervention could be based.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES' EPISTEMIC ACCESS

Epistemic access, as explained by Morrow (2009, 40), is “learning how to become a participant in an academic practice”. Furthermore, for Morrow (2009), the student-domain is integral for epistemic access as the students are the ones who should actively participate in the teaching and learning practice, to acquire knowledge in higher education. Cross (2018) viewed epistemic access as the by-product of both student and institutional domains, in which the student has the responsibility for learning, at the same time that the institution has the responsibility of creating conducive conditions for students to become active participants in academic practice. Students with disabilities are no exception in applying themselves to be active participants in academic practice. While the institutional domain is fundamental for their epistemic access, it is important to consider that they have unique challenges, which, as already highlighted, are not confronted by their counterparts who are without disabilities. It is in this respect that the pedagogic domain during the pandemic, is of paramount importance to this article as there are numerous changes which have further negatively affected the epistemic access of all students, including those with disabilities.

FINDINGS

Challenge of isolation and emotional trauma during the pandemic

Students with disabilities were faced with the challenge of isolation and emotional trauma during the pandemic. Unlike their able-bodied counterparts, students with disabilities' epistemic access are dependent on the many support systems that are provided by staff members on the campus, whose service and support became inaccessible during the pandemic, when students operated from their homes. For example, alternative media of learning such as braille is converted by support staff at the Disability Units. Sign language interpreters for enabling communication provide this kind of support at institutions of higher education. For students with disabilities, participating actively in practice without support was limited during the pandemic, hence the negative implications for their epistemic access. Cross and Govender (2021) argued that there is a challenge in terms of “social presence” for all diverse students during the pandemic, with social presence being the pedagogic distance in which student-lecturer connection is compromised by lack of physical contact. It could be argued that while lack of social presence presents an emotional disconnect between students and the academic, the experience is exacerbated for students with disabilities, because for them it is not only the disconnect between them and the academic staff, but also other service providers on whom they

rely for their epistemic access.

Students with learning disabilities in particular, are adversely affected in terms of epistemic access during the pandemic. Social presence is a necessity for pedagogy as it helps to build trust and intimacy in academic practice, through body language such as smiles, eye contact, gestures and positive head nods, which are exchanged between the students, the academics and other peers (Hostetter and Busch 2006). This kind of intimacy is much needed by those with learning disabilities, as Bates (2015) argued that for that category of disability “love is a basic need”, they need to be treated kindly by someone who provides companionship and is affectionate. Besides, as Booksh et al. (2010) also observed, students with intellectual disabilities do not have control over learning processes independently as they lack problem-solving skills, planning and time management (Lee Booksh et. al. 2010). While not disputing that they could get this kind of social presence from family members, students also require it for their epistemic access, not only from academics but also other service and support providers, so they could actively participate in academic practice. Since the pandemic has disrupted social presence for all diverse students, this has undoubtedly negative implications for the epistemic access of more particularly the category of students with intellectual disabilities.

Exclusive academic practice

Students with disabilities confronted the challenge of an exclusive academic practice during the pandemic. Academic practice is designed by the academics, who are central to teaching and learning. For epistemic access, students with disabilities are expected to actively participate in the academic practice like all other students in higher education. However, literature reveals that even prior to the pandemic, academic staff lacked training and knowledge on different categories of disabilities (Mutanga 2017). Some academic staff were not willing to include students with disabilities in the practice because they saw them as a burden (Matshedisho 2007; Mutanga 2017). Some lecturers used media that was exclusive to students without disabilities such as using slides, which compromised students with visual impairments (Kajee 2010; Ndlovu 2020). It could be argued that students with disabilities may not actively participate in the academic practice designed by the academics, who are not knowledgeable about their needs, and are not willing to adapt for them as they see them as burdensome. All challenges confronted by students with disabilities could not be attributed solemnly to the pandemic because they existed even before the pandemic. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has exacerbated the challenges for teaching as literature reveals that academics in the South African context of higher education also experienced difficulties with online platforms, which they had to shift to, without adequate preparation (Mhlanga and Moloji 2020), as it was a matter of emergency. The complication is

greater for academics to include students with disabilities online because those categories of students require specialised teaching and learning media that cater for their impairment-related disadvantages. Designing an academic practice for students with disabilities is further complicated in that even students with the same impairment may require different strategies of teaching because of their different learning needs (Picard 2015). The academic staff who lack training and knowledge of different categories of disabilities may find it even more difficult to design accessible learning media on online platforms suitable for all categories of disabilities, to actively participate in the academic practice during the pandemic. This means that epistemic access which could inevitably be limited, need not be over-emphasised.

Challenge to shifting to online learning

The pandemic has disrupted services for persons with disabilities worldwide as the World Health Organization (WHO) reported and cited by Kim and Fienup (2021). In South African higher education, the pandemic has had a negative impact on all students' learning because of the sudden shift to online teaching and learning, however the impact was exacerbated for students with disabilities (Ntombela 2021). The shift to online teaching and learning came without adequate preparation for both students and the academics in South African institutions of higher education. Ntombela (2021) argued that shifting to online teaching revealed the extent to which the academics were underprepared to support students with disabilities, confirming that those categories of students were excluded in the academic practice even before the pandemic (Mutanga 2017; Ndlovu 2020). In other institutions, students with disabilities have been supported in their learning by the support structures such as the Disability Unit before the pandemic but such support is limited during the pandemic as learning takes place at home in most cases. Ngubane and Zongozzi (2021) argued that at the University of South Africa (UNISA), which operated online even before the pandemic, students with disabilities had difficulties accessing learning materials in alternative formats. However, they do have access to printed learning materials and assistive technologies, which they used to get from the university libraries. This happens when those categories of students do not have digital literacy, are computer illiterate, and lack online learning skills. The scholars argue that as such, students with disabilities feel that they have lost their dignity as staff members neglect them and are not sensitive to their learning needs (Ngubane and Zongozzi 2021). What Ngubane and Zongozzi (2021) highlight, compound to limit active participation in academic practice by students with disabilities. It could be argued that students with disabilities at UNISA, which is a non-contact university, should not have experienced challenges during the pandemic because students have always accessed learning remotely. Highlighted challenges confirm that pedagogic issues and

lack of active participation in the academic practice for students with disabilities is not a pandemic-related issue in South African higher education, but a long-standing issue, which the pandemic has unveiled and magnified.

Besides the UNISA case, it has been revealed that students with disabilities in South African higher education, lack specialised equipment and the support from the Disability Units, to facilitate the conversion to accessible formats (Ntombela 2021). The lack of support and specialised equipment in their homes, which impact negatively on students with disabilities' participation in the academic practice during the pandemic, is evident. Ndlovu (2020) also observed that there are categories such as profound visual limitation and hearing impairments, in which students with such impairments may not benefit from online platforms as those platforms require sight and hearing. Though it has been revealed that some Disability Units continued the support to students with disabilities during the pandemic (Disability Unit 2020), it must not be overlooked that in South African higher education, not all institutions that have Disability Units, as Matshediso (2007) argued. It suggests that students with disabilities at institutions without disability support, found it difficult to access knowledge before the pandemic and continued to be excluded from online platforms used during the pandemic.

Limited student-agency in participation in the academic practice

While students with disabilities have the same responsibility for active participation in academic practice as all other students, literature reveals they do not declare their disabilities to the academics for fear of being stigmatised and discriminated against (Vickerman and Blundell 2010; Grimes et al. 2018). While they have reasons for not declaring their disabilities to the academic, it could be seen as a lack of responsibility for their learning because academics cannot prepare an academic practice for students who are invisible. Non-declaration of disabilities occurred before the pandemic, when there was contact teaching and learning in institutions of higher education, and students with disabilities were physically present in the classrooms. By virtue of those students not declaring their disabilities even before the pandemic, academics did not even know that there were students with disabilities in their classrooms, more specifically the invisible disabilities such as hearing impairments. Ntombela (2021) stated that when teaching moved to online platforms, academics did not have any idea which students have disabilities in their classes, their learning needs, and the support they need. In essence, the exclusion from the academic practice and limited epistemic access in such a situation is because the academics were not even aware of the presence of such students and thus did not include them. Their lack of active participation is as a result of their limited agency in the practice. Epistemic access for students with disabilities who do not actively participate

in academic practice because of invisibility was limited before and during the pandemic.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Consideration of difference within difference

Intersectionality cannot be glossed over where it concerns the epistemic access of students with disabilities. It is important to understand that not all students with disabilities in all their categories had limited access to academic practice during the pandemic. Some categories, such as mild sensory limitations and physical disabilities, are not as limiting as those with severe visual and hearing impairments. Students manifesting with some disability categories accessed learning in the same way as any other student without disabilities because of family support, unique exposure and associations with powerful identities that privileged them (Sherry 2009; Goodley 2013). An example relates to Manase (2021) who argued that students with learning disabilities interviewed in her study stated that they were comfortable with online platforms as they found them a less structured approach to learning, that afforded them engagement with their studies without distractions of big, overcrowded lecture-halls, that are intimidating and cause severe anxiety and panic attacks. Students with physical impairments were advantaged during the pandemic when they could access learning from home because they no longer had to manoeuvre the inaccessible built environment of the university (Ndlovu 2020). It could be argued that the challenges confronted in pedagogy during the pandemic may have affected all disability categories with the same intensity and thus have an impact on their active participation in the academic practice, and consequently their epistemic access.

Intersectionality and context should not be overlooked where it concerns students with disabilities because they are not homogeneous (Goodley 2013). For example, on one hand, scholars such as Burgstahler (2015) have argued that students with learning disabilities have challenges with learning content because of their inability to independently process information as they lack skills and knowledge for time management (Manase 2021) while on the other, Crespo (2020) reported that some students with learning disabilities found online learning flexible and suitable for their learning needs. Such contradiction suggests that difference within differences needs to be considered when looking at pedagogy of students with disabilities largely and their epistemic access, in particular. Thus, it's not a one-size-fits-all for all categories of students with disabilities as they confronted challenges of epistemic access during the pandemic. It is possible that some students with disabilities, more so those from privileged backgrounds, were able to participate in academic practice even better than those without disabilities from disadvantaged social contexts and backgrounds.

DISCUSSION

Coloniality of power and limited epistemic access of students with disabilities

Coloniality of power explains limited epistemic access as a result of the exclusive academic practice for students with disabilities in the light of a higher education system, which is hierarchically organised, with academics in the higher hierarchy as knowers and students with disabilities in the lower hierarchy, as less-knowers who have little contribution to the practice. Designed by the academics, without first consulting with students with disabilities, to understand how they want to be engaged and what their unique needs are, it could be argued that academic practice is imposed and the students with disabilities have to fit in, by participating in what has already been designed for them. As literature reveals however, academics who design the academic practice are not trained to teach different categories of disabilities, they lack knowledge about disability in general, and they see those students as a burden, hence they are inconsiderate of the unique (special) needs of that category of student. Students with disabilities tend not to actively participate, and this was more pronounced during the pandemic when there was lack of social presence and support. It could be argued that if the higher education system has not totally transformed from its hierarchical organisation, to include all diverse students in knowledge production in the context of teaching and learning (Ndlovu 2017), epistemic access would inevitably continue to be limited for students with disabilities.

Further illuminated in coloniality of power, limited epistemic access resulting from students with disabilities themselves not declaring their disabilities because of fear of stigmatisation, could be understood in the light of internalised oppression. Fear of stigma could be seen as students with disabilities having appropriated the societal label, that they are the Other, and have accepted the hierarchical organisation of higher education that places them in the lower hierarchy. Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) explained that universities as institutions were also power structures that perpetuated oppression and sustained coloniality to oppress the Other. They argued that the dominant universities specifically were used as power structures to sustain coloniality and to oppress the Other (Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). It could be argued that dominant universities could be more oppressive by virtue of their location in the “zone of being” while students with disabilities are socially located in the “zone of non-being”. Santos’ (2007) explanation of the two zones of location helps to understand why dominant universities are power structures that could be more exclusive to students with disabilities as the Other. Literature, however, shows that in South African higher education, it

could be different. The formerly advantaged institutions (in the zone of being) have better support for students with disabilities, by virtue of availability of funding and Disability Units that offer better support for disability (Matshediso 2007). During the pandemic, Disability Units continued supporting students even when at home (Disability Unit 2020). It could be argued that students with disabilities in such institutions could have better epistemic access than in disadvantaged institutions, as they were afforded the opportunity to participate in the academic practice prior to the pandemic.

Seen through lenses of coloniality of power, limited epistemic access due to the exclusion of students with disabilities from pedagogy by way of impairment-related disadvantage and media used during the pandemic, could be seen as resulting from an academic practice that is designed for the “normal”, student, which does not consider the differences of those with disabilities. One would argue that even before the pandemic, learning media during contact classes was exclusive to students without disabilities because of the issue of normativity. The issue of some academics seeing students with disabilities as a burden and unwilling to make an effort to include them in academic practice, suggests that they are more concerned with students without disabilities, who, by way of categorisation of humanity (Quijano 2000), are the normal students for whom the pedagogy largely and the academic practice specifically, is designed. Ndlovu (2015) explained that coloniality thrives on alienating the Other. It could be argued that students with disabilities are the Other, who are alienated in a subtle way through an academic practice that is exclusive. Literature reveals that even the online platforms used during the pandemic, are designed around “normal” students (Ntombela 2021) hence limiting epistemic access for those with disabilities.

Consciousness and Agency as intervention strategies in the new normal

Scholars in the disability field as among others, Ndlovu (2020), Manase (2021) and Ntombela (2021), have proposed the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), as an intervention and way forward that could have assisted students with disabilities’ active participation in academic practice during the pandemic, which has become the “new normal”. The UDL could help in the inclusion of all diverse students in the academic practice because it involves a total overhaul of the system of higher education to be inclusive to all, with structures, practices and processes considering diversity from the outset (CAST 2011; Posey 2021). However, realistically, considering the pace in which restructuring processes of higher education in South Africa is proceeding, and policies of Inclusive Education that are slow in implementation (Lyner-Cleophas et al. 2014), UDL could be a dream long in the pipeline, affecting students with disabilities in their active engagement in academic practice, and consequently attaining

epistemic access. In this article therefore, the proposition is whilst UDL designs are being initiated in stages, students with disabilities themselves need to take the initiative and use their agency to hasten their epistemic access.

Students with disabilities' agency, which is being proposed, is that they speak out just as Spivak (1988) viewed this kind of agency for the oppression of subaltern women. As individuals, students with disabilities could begin by declaring their disabilities to the academic staff through communicating with the responsible staff. It could be argued that it is not all staff members who are not willing to include students with disabilities in the academic practice (Ndlovu 2017). Though it is not compulsory for students with disabilities to declare their disabilities, making themselves visible to the academic staff and making their learning needs known, means that voluntary declaration is a starting point in terms of responsibility for their learning, as argued by Morrow (2009) that every student has responsibility for his or her learning. Speaking out and making it known how their individual learning needs could be met, could help in the creation of an academic environment in which students with disabilities could actively participate in the practice. of the "new normal".

Students with disabilities should be conscientised of the invisible underlying cause for their limited epistemic access during the pandemic, hence the awareness. Ndlovu (2015) argued that there are subjects who are socially located on the oppressed side of colonial difference, but epistemically, they think and speak as their oppressors do. From this assertion, it is important that students are aware of the reasons for their limited epistemic access for them to use their agency to dismantle the oppressive structures and practices put in place during the pandemic. As argued, consciousness is developed and liberation attained when the oppressed understand their actual location in society: that they are constructed as "the Other" and why so (Ndlovu 2015), and then epistemically locate themselves where they belong as it is when they could be agentic.

Agency by the students as a group is not a new event in South African higher education. This is seen from the national project of decolonisation of the universities and the curriculum, which was spearheaded by students during the period of Fees Must Fall student movement of the previous years (Maserumule 2015; Heleta 2016). It could be argued that when there is consciousness of oppression, students could use their agency to fight for change. Students with disabilities also participated in the student protests though they were limited by impairment-related disadvantages when police violence escalated. A study conducted in one institution of higher education also revealed that students used agency to change a number of structures and practices that were oppressive and limiting to their learning and consequently, their epistemic access. For example, they managed to use their agency to change the issue of transport at the

institution, where only one accessible bus was provided on grounds of “reasonable accommodation”, as this delayed them in accessing learning (Ndlovu 2017). It could be argued that students with disabilities are capable of agency, what they need to be conscientised on is the invisible underlying cause of their limited epistemic access, which might not be seen at surface level. It is in this respect that consciousness and consequently agency are proposed as a method of continued fighting in the “new normal”. Their agency during the pandemic and in the “new normal” could enable their active participation in academic practice.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It can be concluded that students with disabilities in South African higher education were more limited in terms of epistemic access during the pandemic. However, the challenges confronting them, limiting their active participation in academic practice are not different from those that confronted them prior to the pandemic. The pandemic is therefore not the ultimate reason for their lack of epistemic access, but it only exacerbated the challenges and illuminated more the inequalities that have always existed between students with and without disabilities and among the different categories of disabilities. Awareness and consciousness of deep-seated underlying causes of the limitations and using agency (in the way of speaking out) as a social group, is viewed as a way which could assist in improving epistemic access for students with disabilities in the new normal.

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