



Building Systems of Support for People with Disabilities (PWD) in Pongola Town: A Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) Strategy

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.4.723.48293>

ABSTRACT

People with Disabilities (PWD) exist in a continuum of the global population and their integration into support systems enhances their functioning and wellbeing. Meaningful construction of support systems therefore entails inculcating disability confidence by embracing PWD in vital components of society which are health, education, livelihood, social and empowerment. In this context, the primary focus of this study is to interrogate the sensitivity of the Pongola community pertaining to the highlighted indicators as a confirmation of its CBR strategy aimed at accepting PWD as valuable members of their community. The paper examines the available CBR integration strategies through a qualitative methodology. Empirical evidence is then analysed using a thematic approach and the conclusion asserts that CBR programs do exist although challenges pose hindrances to the building of comprehensive support systems. Recommendations are then presented to that end in order to come up with holistic supportive communities that are esteemed with disability confidence in their integration policies.

Key Terms: global population, support systems, disability confidence, health, education, livelihood, social empowerment, qualitative methodology, empirical evidence, holistic supportive communities

Introduction

The research paper is anchored in the social model of disability (Barnes, 1996). Primarily, the Social model of disability takes into consideration the individual as the person first and considers their community and environment as social interactions which impose barriers that affect functionality of the individuals (Buder and Perry, 2021). The restrictive environment oppresses, segregates, excludes and disempowers the individual with a disability (Barnes, 1996). In this regard, it is the environment that disables hence the need to modify it so as to be responsive and sensitive to the needs of people with disabilities (UPIAS, 1976, Perry, 2019). In the same vein, community-based rehabilitation as a social model phenomenon, enhances the quality of life (QL) of People with Disabilities (PWDs), provides more equitable opportunities, social integration, promoting and protecting their human rights (WHO, 2011). Consequently, a person with impairment will not acquire a disability if supporting environments are adopted through the integration of economic, political and social structures (Swain, Finkelstein, French, & Oliver, 1994). Rather than the 'fault' residing in the individual, the disability becomes part of the social constraints imposed on those with impairments through the lack of inclusive accessible built environment and systems of support, transport, service attitudes and employment practices (Barnes, 1996, Chigunwe, 2020). The CBR framework is a product of this theoretical philosophy because it addresses the problems that affect people with disabilities (PWDs) from within society. CBR focuses on the quality and context of the environment since the development of an individual is affected by complex changes that arise as a contribution of socio-environmental influences (Perry, 2019). The social model is aligned to the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in December 2006, (WHO, 2008). The UN convention has great emphasis on the need of accessibility to the physical, social, economic and cultural environment in facilitating persons with disabilities to abundantly enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms (Samaha, 2007) which is the motive behind the social model of disability and the CBR agenda.

It is against this background that the researcher interrogates the CBR efficacy in embracing PWDs in Pongola Town to establish the existence of disability inclusion in societal structures.

Research Objectives

- To explore the nature and critical characteristics used as systems of support towards the CBR strategy for PWD in Pongola
- To evaluate the extent to which CBR supports PWD in economic, education, health and social empowerment in Pongola.
- To assess the utility of CBR in eradicating societal barriers such as attitude and harmful beliefs faced by PWD in these communities.
- To examine the challenges that are being encountered in the implementation of community-based rehabilitation programmes.

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed (Creswell, 2009, Morgan, 2014, De Vos, 2011). The research engaged purposive, snowball and target sampling techniques to compile a sample for the research and twelve participants were involved comprising of eight males and eight females for gender balance. Semi-structured interviews were useful and a questionnaire was used as an interview guide. Permission was sought from respondents to tape record interviews. Field notes of the interviews were written down immediately after each interview session to avoid loss of valuable data. Interviews were conducted in isiZulu and an interpreter was instrumental during the interview process and the transcription of verbatim, thus descriptive data was produced in the participant's own spoken words. The research employed a thematic analysis to interpret collated data. The coded data drew out themes and sub-themes emerged for further interpretation and discussion of findings.

Research Findings and Discussion

The nature and essential characteristic of CBR in Ncotshane Township

Research findings revealed that CBR is a community intervention strategy aimed at restoration of lost functionality on the individual with a disability through active participation in mainstream facets of society which include; education, employment, community projects and health as reiterated by UN (2006) in the UNCRPD.

CBR implementation of PWD through inclusive education

Learners expressed that being accepted in the ordinary schools is one of the most important things in their education experiences. They have expressed that to be part of the school system is their right especially the ones doing the senior phase (grade 9) and further education and training phase (FET) grade 11. One of the male respondents a grade 9 learner at one of the schools had the following to say:

"I am now in grade nine (9) and everything is going well but this tall building is a problem for me, as you can see, this is a two story building and I wonder how I am going to go up there next year".

One of the respondents at one of the local schools is a young girl who uses a wheelchair doing grade R. Her lower limbs are affected with a permanent paralysis from birth. She had the following to say about her learning experiences;

"I came here last year for grade RR and I am happy to be here. I cannot do a lot of things on my own especially getting into the classroom because there is a ridge that blocks my wheelchair. I cannot also move around the school and get into the toilets for myself because of the steps that are around the school. My sister who is in grade 9 comes to take me to the toilet during break time and also to lift me up to put me in the taxi for me to go home.

CBR is enhanced through employment in all economic sectors.

One respondent who is a male wheelchair user said the following about himself being employed.

"I have been employed by the local municipality for the past six years. I leave independently and able to take care of myself. I just travel about five hundred metres to the local library where I work. I am able to wheel myself to and from work because the tarred road is smooth and usable".

Another 34-year-old male accident victim said the following;

"After I incurred serious injuries in an accident that made me affected in both my lower and upper limbs, I could not do anything for myself. I was helped by the government to get proper treatment and rehabilitation services until I was able to use my legs and hands again".

A 27-year-old female teacher with a physical disability (right lower limb affected) said the following:

"I was educated right from primary school through free education until I finished my degree with the University of South Africa (UNISA). I got a sponsorship from the government (NSFAS) to go to university and obtained my teaching degree in the senior phase (grade 7-9) teaching IsiZulu and creative arts".

Empowerment of PWDs through CBR

Findings revealed that when equal opportunities are given to PWDs, they get economically and socially empowered. Apart from that, there is also poverty reduction, development of basic numeracy and literacy and also the ability to lead independent livelihoods.

Economic empowerment through CBR participation

An employed bursar at one of the schools who has hearing disability (hearing impairment) reiterated the following;

"After I finished metric, I went to a TVET college where I attained a Diploma in computers. I am employed as a bursar by the school on permanent terms. I do all the administration and running of the school's examinations"

A municipality clerk with a physical disability had the following to say concerning economic empowerment;

"I am employed by the municipality and I get my salary at the end of the month. My family is well taken care of as I am able to give them food on the table."

A female teacher said the following in relation to her economic status;

"I can't complain at all because I am employed as an educator just like other educators who are getting paid at the end of each month. I do not need to go asking for alms so that I can survive. I am self-sufficient financially".

A 38-year-old lady who is a wheelchair user explained;

"I am doing self-help projects as way to keep myself busy and occupied do avoid stressful moments. I decided to expand my project initiatives into broiler chickens and piggery and I learnt that it is not just about projects but it's all about generating income for my family".

Social empowerment through CBR

Social empowerment as a CBR product proved to be a vital prerequisite especially to the school going children who expressed a lot of excitement about intermingling with others during the learning process and in their community activities. One of the grade 11 learners highlighted by explaining;

"There is nothing that is so interesting like going out with friends, play soccer and learn together. I have a lot of friends who have now understood me and know how to communicate with me especially with my hearing problem".

Participant, who is a male wheelchair user, reiterated the following;

"I need life as a man and being able to make interpersonal relationships is very important to show normalcy. I enjoy going around with my friends in the social places and having drinks and braai. I feel a sense of belonging within a group of people who support me. I like it very much because I am also able to contribute financially, I am not a dependent somebody. I enjoy partying very much".

Poverty reduction and independent livelihoods

Poverty reduction and independent living is also another important aspect that is strengthened through CBR participation and the following sentiments were said by participants:

A male teacher who has a disability said:

"As long as everyone who has a disability gets any form of employment it means you will not live in poverty because you will be self-sufficient and live independently. Employment gets you out of the poverty circles and you will not have to sorely depend on the disability grant from the government".

A 34-year-old lady with a disability explained:

"When people see that you have a disability what comes in their mind is that you cannot do anything for a living. As a mother I have to work to feed my family because without that I will have to depend on other people for provisions. I need to make my own money otherwise my children will live in poverty. You see, the disability grant is money that is meant to cushion someone not to depend on it as a means of survival. I need extra money for a good life that's why I am a small business entrepreneur".

Eradication of physical and attitudinal barriers for PWD in Ncotshane-Pongola

In the notion of physical and attitudinal barriers towards PWDs, theme 4 on CBR participation focussed on the elimination of stigma and discrimination. The theme probed on CBR as measure to combat harmful beliefs and practices regarding disability stigma. CBR agenda on the issue also sort to interrogate if CBR develops Community-based sensitisation and awareness to empower communities towards an inclusive empowerment agenda. Sub-themes:

Access to community buildings by removing physical and architectural barriers

A grade R student at one of the schools said the following about her physical and structural environment;

"I enjoy learning and everything else is fine but I can't use my wheelchair to get inside my classroom because of the ridge on the door front that blocks my way. I don't use my wheelchair as soon as I get in the schoolyard because all the doors have steps. I depend on my sister in grade 9 who lifts me up when I have to go to the toilet. She also has to carry me into and down the taxi every time".

Another wheelchair user said;

"Our community halls are fine and user friendly and most buildings which are government premises. The only problems are some private owned buildings that do not consider people who have disabilities. To them, it's like there is a category of citizens who do not exist due to the way in which buildings are designed".

CBR eliminates stigma and discrimination

A 54-year-old man with a physical disability said the following;

"I was born with a disability and during my days of growing up it was difficult to get along with others. People always believed that I have a disability because my mother was bewitched during her pregnancy. I grew up somehow a bit isolated and when we had cultural ceremonies at home, the family"

elders had to consult with the Sangomas for me so that the ancestors would somehow accept me because of my condition. But things have changed and the society is now transformed, I feel welcomed and I also managed to be part of the school system that welcomed me although at times I could feel some kind of stigma. We have had a lot awareness programmes that have transformed our cultural perceptions and society's beliefs have changed and now embrace people who have disabilities”.

A grade R student expressed the following concerning her school experiences and interaction at school;

“Everyone likes me at school and my teacher likes me”.

Challenges encountered in CBR implementation.

CBR implementation like any other project initiative can be hampered by a number challenges and those that have been identified in the research specifically include among them the following that emerged as sub-themes; inadequate resources, lack of funding, access to infrastructure such as buildings, and other community facilities.

Inadequate resources

Adequate resources are vital for CBR to be a success. Resources represent a spectrum of indicators such as financial, human resources, infrastructure and assistive devices and technologies. Concerning these important requisites respondents said the following;

One of the respondents said the following:

“It is a very difficult to get access to funds from the Department of Social Development (DSD). It looks to me that there are not enough financial resources to cater for the needs of people with disabilities. At times you need to wait for a very long time for you to get government support especially prosthetics”

Lack of funding

Financial resources have an impact towards CBR implementation; a male wheeler said the following;

“Some places in our community are not accessible because of the nature of the buildings. Some business owners say that it is very expensive to renovate buildings especially when they to purchase materials that have to accommodate what is required by people who have disabilities. He said to put ramps maybe affordable unlike trying to build a system that uses elevators.”

Inaccessible infrastructure such as buildings and other community facilities

Inaccessible infrastructure is a major barrier in CBR implementation. A grade 9 learner said the following:

“My class is on the second floor; I broke my right leg when I was running down the stairs. I have to come very early at school so that I can climb the stairs without pressure. I struggle a lot when I have to go to the bathrooms because they are located very far away from our classes.”

One of the male wheelchair users complained about some shops in the Mall in the CBD;

“Some shops in the main Mall have steps especially Ackermann's, Power shopper, Sharp rite and some other clubs and Taverns. They need to have ramps for easy access for some of us who use wheelchairs”.

Lack of understanding and awareness of disability (apathy)

One of the unemployed female respondents with a disability reiterated:

“There is no need for me to struggle as you can see that I can't walk. The government has to give me money. In fact, the government should increase the disability grant, the money is too little. I cannot look for employment, no one can employ me, and I need also to rest after what I went through. The money from the accident fund is taking years to be released; I could not be struggling by now”.

Discussion

The present study explored on the efficacy of CBR for PWD in building support systems in Pongola. The study addressed the different aspects of CBR which have an impact in providing systems of support in developing independent skills and also some challenges that are encountered in the drive towards the implementation of CBR for people with disabilities. The aspects discussed include: the nature and characteristics of Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR), Empowerment of people with physical disabilities, Eradication of physical and attitudinal barriers and the challenges that are encountered in implementing community based rehabilitation (CBR).

Nature and characteristics of community based rehabilitation

This aspect was covered by theme one which sort to investigate the nature and characteristics of CBR from the respondents. The following sub-themes emerged which include; inclusive education in schools, employment opportunities, sports and community projects. The findings showed that CBR gives PWD access to take part in community events. On the issue of projects, the results have also revealed that participation in CBR is one of the aspects where PWD do community projects. Again, findings revealed that participation in CBR improves access to community facilities and infrastructure to people with disabilities.

The above outcomes are similar to what Ebersson and Elof (2003) postulates in connection with CBR. They echoed that CBR relates to the indigenization of academic activities, sports, economic activities in the form of employment and projects and programmes that arise from reflecting local behaviour and culture interpreted from the framework of the indigenous context aimed at producing results that exhibit relevance. It means that enrolment in local schools, employment in all sectors of the economy, projects in farming, poultry and market gardening can be done in order to sustain lives of PWD while they live with their families.

In the context of the study, community based rehabilitation has proved to be a strategy that provides rehabilitation, poverty reduction, equalization of opportunities, social integration, improving the quality of life (QL) and social inclusion for people with disabilities as also propounded by FSCE (2000). CBR is designed predominantly for low and middle income countries like South Africa (Halender, 2007). It (CBR) aims to meet the needs of people with disabilities with respect to health, education, livelihood, social and empowerment issues (WHO 2010). CBR is delivered at the community level, primarily through local resources (O'Toole, 1991). Examples that suit the said aspect of CBR are: promotion of community projects through use of local resources, promoting inclusive education, teaching parents to provide treatment for their children or relative with disabilities where applicable and creating self-help groups.

Developing countries or Sub-Saharan nations such as South Africa have some recorded successes in their implementation of the community based rehabilitation programme (Miles, 2006). Community-based rehabilitation programme was developed as a way to find alternatives to traditional or conventional rehabilitation services (Rifkin and Kangere, 2002). Conventional rehabilitation tries to change or to normalize people with disabilities to fit into the society as it exists rather than trying to change society so that it accepts and accommodates the wider range of human differences (Werner, 2004 in Miles 2006). CBR has been espoused by research findings as a trajectory that confronts the social and structural stratification in the community through active participation and dismantles despotic and oppressive structures.

The case study of Mpumalanga province in South Africa was termed Community-based Rehabilitation Education and Training for Empowerment (CREATE). Approaches used in this programme include development of grassroots workers, Community Rehabilitation Facilitators (CRF) and community based rehabilitation (Miles, 2006). The CRF were either people with or without disabilities who were trained in disability issues, counselling and psychology (Miles, 2006). They embarked on awareness campaigns and identified barriers to an inclusive society. Financial and material resources were provided through the support from Disabled Persons of South Africa and the Provincial Department of Health and Districts which had CRF who had disabilities.

Empowerment of people with physical disabilities

Relative to the empowerment agenda, South African athletes with disabilities who dominated the world's Paralympics arena prior to the 2021 Tokyo Paralympics include: Natalie du Toit- Swimming; Ernst van Dyk- wheelchair racing (News24, 2021) and hand cycling and Kgothatso Montjane – wheelchair tennis (News24, 2016). These sport achievements at international level guarantee total self-reliant in all aspects of life thus financially, socially and holistic wellbeing which is an overall definition of empowerment as has been indicated before in the research implications.

As recorded on worldwide news platforms concerning the music industry are South Africa's flourishing celebrities living with disabilities (Savanna News, 2021). Hard work and commitment backed by supportive structures in the music fraternity have sustained these celebrities. Through continuous support these celebrities have worked hard to keep the entertainment industry and raise the nation's flag higher despite their disability. Themba Ntuli has been a popular one as indicated who was born with a growth hormone deficiency which stopped his growth at a tender age, and he acquired a Bachelor of Arts degree in directing writing and television programmes. Also DJ Blake Coffee real name Nkosinathi Maphumalo is undoubtedly one of the best and hardworking DJs in South Africa who sustained paralysis of the first hand after a car accident in 2005. Continuous support from families and sponsors in the music industry through CBR initiatives has made them famous and economically empowered.

Eradication of physical and attitudinal barriers

In Swaziland now Eswathini, good CBR practices were initiated by the Swaziland Ministry of Education (WHO, 2010). The Ministry of Education introduced a child-to-child methodological approach aimed at combating negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities and underline the need for inclusion. School children composed songs, performed plays and raised awareness of disability issues in the schools and communities and also performed hands-on work to build ramps, make toilets accessible and design accessible playgrounds (WHO, 2010, Sunday Times, Swaziland).

At both national and community levels, there are different efforts and initiatives that can be done to overcome stigma and discrimination which include among others such as the celebrations of persons with disabilities and their contributions to society. Such kinds of celebrations may include the International Day of Persons with Disabilities celebrated on 3 December 2022 or other related initiatives such as the International day of the African Child and the Day for International Albinism Awareness celebrated on 13 June 2023 under the Theme Inclusion is Strength (UN, 2023). In this regard, the Day for International Albinism Awareness was first celebrated internationally in 2015 and was given commemoration in a number of African countries in particular Kenya, Malawi and Tanzania (UN, 2015).

The findings match with Hoeman (2002) who contents that CBR is a community oriented approach which seeks to break down barriers to an inclusive society towards people with physical disabilities. Breaking down social barriers to an inclusive environment will enable PWD to participate in community events. In support of the same findings is Arora (2002) who elaborates on integration and inclusion. The elaboration goes further to say that through CBR communities work together as a united society of people with and without disabilities.

Challenges in implementing community based rehabilitation

The research question was covered by theme four which sort to find out the challenges that are encountered when implementing CBR. Impediments to CBR were discussed and include among others the following; accessibility and suitability of infrastructure, harmful beliefs relating to disability, lack of resources and inadequate funding, poverty and ignorance also contribute a lot in this aspect.

Globally, persons with disabilities face varied barriers which include the most common of all attitudinal barriers, including prejudice, low expectation, violence which results in fear, (Stone-MacDonald, 2014). Negative attitudes are very detrimental in affecting all aspects pertaining life experiences, including the ability to access education, to participate in non-exploitative work, to live where and with whom one chooses, to marry and start a family and to navigate about freely within the communities

The learners with disabilities reflected on how the inaccessible built infrastructure especially the local school environment, ablution facilities and other classrooms affected them. The learners encounter challenges using stairs and this indicates that the build environment at some point acts as a barrier to their learning and general efficacy towards themselves and their environment. Although learners have highlighted that all other learning support systems are going well except the structural designs on buildings, these aspects as highlighted may have a significant impact on their academic exposure and an undesirable bearing among themselves as persons with disabilities. In a similar study at the University of Lesotho on students' experiences and quality of education for university students with disabilities, it was revealed that most of the barriers to an inclusive environment were hampered by lack of access to buildings and attitudes from lecturers and other learners who ended up bullying other university students (Mosia and Pasha, 2020). In this regard, findings of the study revealed that students with disabilities are expected to adjust themselves to standards in place set for every one despite having a shortfall of their needs not being addressed as persons who have disabilities.

Conclusion

The findings from the study revealed that CBR is an empowerment tool socially, economically, autonomously and eradicates barriers which include among them; stigma, discrimination and intolerance towards PWDs. CBR improves accessibility to education, economic, political, health and social life.

Recommendations

Local municipalities should have PWDs in their leadership structures in housing amenities so that everyone is represented at all levels.

Government at all levels should embrace disability inclusion across all departments in terms of employment opportunities through well designed inclusive laws.

Economic growth should be inclusive of PWDs through financial aid from banks and financial institutions.

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