



A CRITICAL REFLECTION OF LIFE
SURPRISES: LEARNT INSIGHTS FROM
TESTIMONIES OF DEAF PEOPLE IN
ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

The study qualitatively collected testimonies from individuals who were purposively selected using point of saturation principles. The testimonies are meant to give insights to social development issues of deaf people, which literature considers as under-researched as compared to studies of deaf education. The insights portraying surprises were extracted from the testimonies. The study acknowledges that every person's life journey is full of surprises, but the impact of surprises of deaf people seems severe as depicted by the selected testimonies. The study was triggered by a deaf boy who was forced out of a moving bus because of misconceptions and misinterpretations. Patterns and themes emerging from the data showed that the hearing world was insensitive to social milestones deaf people ignorantly encountered such as understanding their conditions, non-manual futures to express grammatical events which hearing people mistook for rudeness and bulliness, courting and dating ignorance. The study concluded that deaf people had many examples of surprises which the scope of this study did not address. Indicators portray more grey areas on the topic. However, the study recommended that parents with deaf children needed a lot of support in parenting their children and policies could help enhance mandated support services with a view to improve relationships between deaf people, their parents and significant others.

KEYWORDS: Education, Deaf People, Maita, Hearing Loss and Speech, _____

BACKGROUND

Our life journey is full of surprises. While life surprises are encountered by everyone in life but for people who are deaf the impacts seems severe as portrayed by selected excerpts in this study. This is true in the light of a deaf young boy I incidentally witnessed his circumstances in a bus journey from Masvingo to Harare in 2006. After travelling for many kilometres the conductor checked tickets and found that this boy whom I shall anonymously call *Maita* did not have a ticket. *Maita* showed the conductor his letter which confirmed his condition. The conductor was not prepared to negotiate with the boy but he asked the driver to stop the bus and let him alight in a strategically bushy area without nearby homes or villages. The boy remained seated because he had not understood what the conductor wanted him to do. Due to passengers complains the driver drove off the bus.

The conductor then pulled *Maita* from his seat forced him out of a moving bus. Luckily enough it was not in speed. Before *Maita* was forced out he looked puzzled and confused by the conductor's action and showed passengers a look that demanded their intervention but nobody spoke with reference to his situation besides telling the driver that he was delaying them. As *Maita* tried to sign and at the same time produce meaningless sounds and showed a face expressing that he had done nothing wrong and has boarded several buses using that travelling pass. *Maita* further asked whether there was something wrong with the pass but all these expressions made the conductor angrier since he interpreted them to be rude signs. *Maita* was even more puzzled and surprised by the conductor's actions as I looked at him landing on the ground.

It is against this background that this study explores the testimonies/stories of deaf people in Zimbabwe with a view to identify experienced surprises and their impact to relationships with others. The study hopes to determine learnt insights from the incidents and voices of deaf people. The study aims to create a research base on deaf people about their education, social life and security needs.

RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

Lives of deaf people were equally viewed as a journey full of surprises by Sheridan (2001). Sheridan describes it as, *inner lives of deaf people*. This author further suggests that testimonies in this study, reflect deaf people in their own words which

gives insights to their uniqueness experiences and conditions. Sheridan (2001)'s narration of her experiences with a 10 year old deaf girl who visited her office crying complaining that her mother no longer loved her because of a note she had written which read, *"I couldn't love you more."* This girl interpreted that as, *mum no longer loves me*. The author Sheridan who is a teacher for deaf students professionally explained the girl's misconception and made her understand that it meant that her mother loved her so much. The girl was surprised and felt drawn closer to her mother. Understanding of the message brought peace and tranquillity between the mother and daughter. That also enhanced their relationships.

Studies reveal many tales where deaf people are surprised and disgusted by incidents and happenings in their lives. Helen Keller (1908) who was deaf-blind has an interesting quotation in Dennett (1991:227) which says:

Before my teacher came to me I did not know who I am. I lived in world that was a no-world. I cannot hope to describe adequately that unconscious yet, conscious time of nothingness. Since I had no power of thought I did not compare one mental state with another.

This is quite a pregnant excerpt depicting various angles of surprises in the lives of people with disabilities (PWDs) in general. Another good example of surprises expressed by deaf people is narrated by Leonard, Duren and Reiman (n.d) who admitted that deaf people experienced several surprises. One of which the authors found interesting was about a deaf woman who had submitted her forms to a certain organisation but was later on asked to phone back despite the fact that she had detailed her condition of profound deafness. The company continued to request Susan to speak to them. Susan was surprised by the questions can you speak on the telephone ... As if that was not enough she was further asked whether she took medication for her hearing loss and speech. An indication that despite exposure people have had with deaf people their mindsets is still influenced by the traditional medical model which sees deafness as people surviving on medication interventions only.

The study is guided by the principles of ubuntu. The emphasis is mainly on not letting deaf people meet their life challenges on their own. The

study therefore encourages African parents and their supportive institutions to help deaf people find their ways in life, through the, *I am what I am spirit because you are and you are because I am*, as emphasised by Mbiti (1996) and equally supported by Rukuni (2007). Ubuntu embraces the notion of group solidarity, which literature describe as the '*unhu/munhu*' humanness ideology which saw '*a man as a man through other*' (Mbigi and Maree, 1995). According to the spirit of African management, they say, 'Chara chimwe hachitswanyi inda' meaning in English, '*a person is person through others.*' Thus, in this study deaf people as significant others in the community should not be left to experience the highlighted experiences of surprises and many others not addressed by this study when the humanness ideology is part of the socialisation process of every African child. The study therefore emphasises that the people accountable to that, should see to it that deaf people and the hearing world understand and help each other as much as possible, with a view to establish acceptable relations between them.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

It is centuries since the majority of hearing people got exposed to deaf people and their challenges but the way they relate with the hearing world continues to reflect a lot of misconceptions despite the paradigm shifts to inclusive practices. Thus, the study questions, "To what extent do testimonies of deaf people give insights to their life experiences?"

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How does society treat deaf people?
- 2) What are the different forms of surprises experienced by deaf people in their day to day lives?
- 3) How do deaf people respond to unusual surprises in their day to day lives?
- 4) What can be done to mitigate the surprises faced by deaf people in Zimbabwe?

To get to know answers to these questions, deaf people need to be allowed to tell their stories, perceptions, feelings and thoughts in their own words without my or other people's impositions. Deaf people's voices are used in this study to give insights to their lived experiences to life world surprises.

RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

The study employed the qualitative approach. A phenomenological design was adopted in this study to collect data. The qualitative principles applied to this study are also supported by Patton (2009) and

Creswell (1990). The approach focuses on few participants or informants with a view to understand the subtleties of the phenomena such as, surprises of deaf people which are the focus of this study. That made participants with the required expertise, take part in the study. Point of saturation determined the number of participants who were purposively selected if they had related testimonies. Anonymous names and places in the study were used to disguise identities of participants. It also made participants maintain their individuality. That is, how the reality of being deaf impacted on their lives and interactions. The phenomenological approach was used to generate patterns, commonalities and explanations using actual words from participants as supported by Patton (2009) and Creswell (1990). The study identified how surprises experienced by deaf people impacted on their relationships. Faced challenges as a result of these surprises, communication skills and the extent to which cited surprises were triggered by the condition were explained and discussed.

Qualitative research has many variations but all include in-depth interviews and searches for naturalistic settings of the topic or phenomena under study (Patton, 2009; Creswell, 1994). The study identified emerging patterns that is similarities across participants as well as patterns of individual variations. This study is a groundbreaking tool where ubuntu principles guide the study through consideration of compassion and solidarity in meeting the social, educational and health needs of people who are deaf. The emphasis is on treating every individual with or without hearing loss as an equal being despite his/her hearing conditions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study findings and also supported by related literature in the above section demonstrate that the majority of deaf people experienced lives full of surprises due to their hearing and communication conditions.

How deaf people are treated by hearing people:-

One can easily deduce from the following excerpts how the hearing world treats deaf people:

Hearing people see us as insensitive beings because they share jokes and laugh without including us. Maybe they think it is unnecessary yet we greatly feel hurt and excluded [Case 1].

When going on a family trip hearing siblings are prepared for it and they show their excitement about it while we are just asked to bath and wear clean clothes without explanations. We just join the family trip without knowing where we are going

[Case 2].

I am a street vendor. One day when New Start Centre people perched their tent and for days I saw people going in and out of the tent without an idea what they were doing their. Fortunately one of my hard of hearing friends, who could not hear but could sign and talk, passed by and asked me whether I had my HIV and AIDs status tested. He explained to me and I got interested to carry out the exercise too. But that made me think that health services are done without deaf people in mind [Case 3].

While writing exams a PA system was used to correct errors to an examination but I was never alerted of the corrections and changes made but I struggled to answer a wrongly structured question. I was surprised when one of my hearing peers who could sign told me what had happened and she asked me whether I was aware of the changes announced to the question during the exam session. I was surprised to realise that I was excluded from the instructions and it pained me greatly and had no way of launching my query [Case 4].

The other two participants, Cases 5 and 6 revealed insights similar to Cases 1 and 2 respectively. These excerpts demonstrate that deaf people are surprised and they feel excluded by family, school systems and societal events. The excerpts seem to suggest that hearing people take for granted the relevance of information or instructions they would be disseminating to be of necessity to deaf people. It may also be suggested that hearing people are not conscious of the existence of deaf people. Sheridan (2001) supports the need for such a study and that it is hoped to contribute to knowledge base in the field of deaf education. Why? The author further proposes that many researches focus on the educational development of deaf children while few studies have been devoted to studying their social and self concepts.

Various forms of surprises experienced by deaf people:-

Some of the surprises that came from this study were:

- ✘ uncommunicated deprivation due to ignorance
- ✘ formidable communication barriers
- ✘ unfair inequality in favour of hearing peers
- ✘ taken for granted issues
- ✘ hearing people never consider preferences of deaf people
- ✘ generally all plans are done without deaf people in mind

According to Hiskey (2010) there are many forms of surprises because one deaf person differs from the other. In addition to that, the pre-lingual differ from post-lingual deaf person and even in levels of understand and thinking in sign language or oral language or both. Helen Keller's quote is a good example. Art one Wireless Necklook (n.d) proposes that dating presents unique challenges to both the hard of hearing and Deaf individuals. Why? Because communication is the main ingredient for a success relationship yet it is a key challenge in the lives of d/ Deaf people.

How deaf people respond to these unusual surprises:-

The study shows that the majority of deaf people feel rejected and forgotten by the hearing world in life matters. Exemplary cases echoed:

I learnt without support services at the neighbourhood conventional school. I experienced failure, could not tell what I learnt and did even understand what number last meant in my termly reports. Like other siblings I always took the report with failed subjects happily to my parents. I only got surprised when my siblings were given gifts and only realised that it was for their performance after joining the special school. It was here where I understood the meaning of passing and failing and its importance in adult life [Case 5].

I was puzzled by the behaviour of my classmates who sometimes laughed without telling me their reasons for that. This was worse when some of them laughed facing me. It made me think, that they were laughing at me. Without taking cognisance of the

teacher I sometimes fought some of them. Due to that some peers described me as very emotional and bully [Case 6].

I was always number last in class. As a result my parents described me as a very playful child. However, I transferred to a special school where I learnt in sign language I improved greatly and started to enjoy my learning. This change in my performance established close relations with my parents. It was here where I realised that my parents loved me too but for the past years at the conventional school they had failed to communicate or encourage me to put more effort in my school work and they did not know that I was not aware of their expectations due to differences in communication [Case 2].

Case 5 even failed to interpret the behaviours of parents towards her failure thus they both ignorantly misjudged or misinterpreted each other's behaviours. Passing and failing did not have meanings to Case 2 until he joined the special school for the deaf. Above excerpts were supported by Sheridan (2001) who reported:

Gallaudet was a major gateway for me. It was the pot of gold at the end of my search for self and represented the beginning of the rest of my life (pp. 7-8).

As expressed by above excerpts Sheridan equally only discovered who she was and what it meant to be deaf only when she joined a special institution for the deaf. It made her immerse into the Deaf Community and learn to develop her self-esteem. The findings hope readers shall see insights from the lived-experiences and learn lessons from them. Art one Wireless Necklook (n.d) suggests that most deaf people are not aware of the conditions in early childhood.

Other interesting surprises were:

We are surprised and suspicious of people who approach us without warning. As a result we suspiciously welcome such people with look unfriendly body language. Even friends who make surprising advances towards us we feel insecure about such behaviours, thus we only feel comfortable with the intruder when sure of his/her friendliness or purpose

of visiting us. But after knowing that your actions do not intend to harm us we will be-friend you. Many people have misunderstood our varied social non-manual features and eye movements and hands movements, facial expressions to be scolding or rude yet they are the grammatical means we use to express events and incidents [Case 3].

I was not educated on menstruation and what it was or what to expect. So when I had my first menstruation I got so worried, cried and wondered what had happened to me. I realised how misinformed I was after my mother taught me what she had taken for granted that I would learn such milestones of growing up through friends and peers. Again my mother did not explain about courting and how to behave. Unfortunately in adult life when I became pregnant I named several boys who had tried to court ignorantly as responsible. I only learnt of what I was supposed to do later in life after several teachings. I suggest that parent get extra support in parenting deaf children [Case 4].

Art one Wireless Necklook (n.d) and Leonard, Duren and Reiman (n.d) also give an example of how hearing people are equally surprised by the way deaf people manually communicate with their hands leading to knocking down things in front of them. The other cited surprise experienced by hearing people was that they questioned why the majority of deaf people ate noisily which probably the deaf people themselves are not aware of because of their condition. These are indicators that both hearing and deaf people experience surprises at each other's mannerisms and behaviours.

How the conditions could be mitigated:-

The study revealed that every individual had a different story to tell about how he/she interacted with the hearing world in different foras. The focus of this study is to create awareness to those parenting deaf people to take measures to educate them, especially, the taken for granted issues and the hidden curriculum. The study also emphasises the important of exposing a deaf person to a language which he/she is most comfortable with, which according to the majority of participants was sign language. Thus, it

may be deduced from the findings that it was important for care-givers and parents of the deaf to be able to communicate with their deaf children in the most appropriate language. Additionally, they also needed to be aware of the meanings of non-manual signs [usually misinterpreted] that are combined with sign language to add meaning to their communication.

CONCLUSION

The selected excerpts from the testimonies of deaf people revealed that their lives were full of surprises. To learn from these excerpts one needs to read the testimonies/stories with understanding of their hidden meanings and to also read them emphatically. The study also revealed puzzling events in the lives of deaf people. Discriminative practices were also highlighted where deaf people questioned why they were subjected to unequal treatment as compared to hearing counterparts. Findings from this study are hoped to increase the relationships of deaf people and their parents, teachers and the society at large. This study is therefore aware that besides the major surprises highlighted in this paper there are many more unsighted surprises that deaf people are likely to experience in their lives. Thus, there are likely many more research gaps on the topic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings recommended that:

- ✓ There is need for advocacy and campaigns on deaf children's social development, self concepts, educational developments and issues that needs teaching with a view to improve relationships between the world of the deaf and hearing
- ✓ There is need to skill care-givers, parents, health personnel and educationists with sign language and related non-manual futures to enhance understanding of communication between them and deaf people

- ✓ That parents with deaf children get introduced to Deaf Culture through groups or clubs for the Deaf so as to understand their behaviours and areas that need teaching and learning for the benefit of both groups
- ✓ That deaf people get education on life expectations and good behaviour
- ✓ That government develops policies that support parents and care-givers of deaf people on deaf education and where to get extra support.

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