



# Rethinking Educational Research Involving Students with Disabilities

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** This paper investigates the decolonisation of educational research concerning students with disabilities.

**Aims:** The primary aim was to validate and interpret these students' lived experiences, challenging established dominant epistemologies in disability studies.

**Methods:** A radical near-experience methodology, which emphasises participant-driven storytelling within their contextual realities, was employed as a qualitative research design. Twenty youths, aged 16 to 24, with either physical or learning disabilities, enrolled at five TVET Colleges, or Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges, in Gauteng, South Africa, engaged in storytelling exercises tailored to their abilities.

**Results:** The storytelling exercises revealed key themes, including identity affirmation, systemic challenges, and agency. Findings indicate that conventional disability research often marginalises students' voices, perpetuating stereotypes and failing to enact meaningful policy changes. For instance, participants expressed feelings of empowerment and recognition through their narratives.

**Conclusion:** This research holds significant implications for policymakers, highlighting the need for inclusive education studies that genuinely reflect the experiences of students with disabilities. Disability advocates can utilise these narratives to promote redefined identities and rights. Scholars can incorporate decolonial methodologies into their work, fostering a nuanced understanding of disability relevant to the global South. Additionally, practitioners in human services can leverage these insights to design supportive programs that encourage self-advocacy and positive identity formation. By prioritising the voices and experiences of individuals with disabilities, this study underscores the transformative potential of inclusive educational practices.

**Keywords:** *Disability research; Radical-near experience methodology; Qualitative study; Inclusive education; Disability culture.*

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## 1. Introduction

Conducting research alongside youths with disabilities is a challenging endeavour. Researchers, both experienced and new to the field, often agree that critical disability research requires significant time and effort, frequently involving what is referred to as a "pedagogy of discomfort" during the planning and implementation stages (Oliver, 2002; Goodley and Moore, 2000). This complexity pressures researchers to develop methodologies that challenge the entrenched dominant epistemologies within Inclusive Education. The central problem this paper addresses is how to authentically capture and amplify the lived experiences of students with disabilities in South Africa's TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) colleges.

To guide this inquiry, the study poses specific research questions: What are the lived experiences of students with disabilities in South African TVET colleges? How does the radical near-experience methodology facilitate the expression of these experiences? What implications do these narratives have for inclusive educational practices and policy?

This paper focuses on the radical near-experience methodology, which has been recognised by scholars like Gustavsson (2004) for its potential to transform critical disability research by questioning the dominance of Western epistemologies. This methodology was chosen specifically for its alignment with the study's aim of foregrounding the lived experiences and narratives of students with disabilities, offering a counter-narrative to the often-reductive portrayals found in existing literature.

The global South has frequently been characterised as a "zone of non-being" (Fanon, 1952; 1961), where its people are depicted as existing in a state of ongoing hardship due to colonisation and coloniality (Paur, 2009). However, African storytellers such as Achebe (1965) and Adichie (2005) caution against creating singular narratives that normalise suffering. They advocate for recognising the diversity of experiences and collective memories that emerge from the global South.

This radical near-experience methodology serves as a bridge to these alternative narratives, moving away from the tragic framing of disability. It promotes a positive understanding of disability and impairment, focusing on social identities rooted in the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities (Swain & French, 2008; Gustavsson, 2004). Embracing this positivity does not imply an unrealistic utopia, as some critics might argue (Swain & French, 2008); rather, it reflects an acknowledgement of diversity and the challenges that come with living with disability, emphasising what makes us human together (Menkiti, 2005; Harrell, 2018).

This paper aims to fill a significant gap in the literature by addressing the specific needs and experiences of students with disabilities within the context of South African TVET institutions. It will detail the methodological considerations intertwined with a decolonial theoretical framework in Disability Studies. The paper begins by providing a historical and contemporary overview of disability methodologies used in both the global North and South, laying the groundwork for the radical near-experience approach. Finally, the methodologies employed, including sampling techniques, data analysis methods, and the ethical considerations observed throughout the study, will be outlined. The following section will delve into the historical and contemporary research frameworks in disability studies.

## 2. A historical and contemporary framework of disability research

Anthropological approaches to disability have revealed the genealogy of disability theory as emanating from social movements. In turn, its methodological approaches have been galvanised by theory. It is easy to see how the historical and contemporary development of disability research is a close resemblance to social theory in terms of having an incredibly strong Western influence and its progression from largely positivist approaches. These later morphed into interpretive and emancipatory approaches as a result of social and political pressures.

There have been immense pressures from global South scholars to have decolonised disability research methodologies that speak with all colonised subjects; the same way Smith (1999) critically argued for a decolonised methodology that is in sync with indigenous epistemologies used in Critical Race theories, Critical Feminism, and Education. The relationship between academic research, disability movements, and activism around the globe is problematic (Goodley & Moore, 2000). The troublesome engagement can be traced as far

back as neolithic Europe with the gruesome practice of trephining; that is, the ancient practice of drilling skulls of patients with mental disabilities in the name of research and exorcism of evil spirits.

There has since been a radical transformation in Disability Studies with the turn to Critical Theory, with it shifting from a largely rehabilitative entity to social discourse. This carved a way forward in disability politics by shifting the gaze from the impairment itself to socially constructed disabling norms that acted to marginalise people living with disabilities. However, the inconsistencies in social research in disability studies have increasingly come under a lot of criticism once again from activists. The problem with social research is that it sounds great, on paper, whilst still implementing otherwise positivist and interpretive methodologies that have done very little in improving the lives of millions of people living with disabilities (Oliver, 2002). Social researchers and academics alike have been accused of being self-absorbed in pushing their agendas when undertaking disability research, such that their narcissism and pseudo-scientific methodologies have been accused of causing more harm than good to the lives of people living with disabilities. A case in point is the gross manipulation and distortions in research that came out of social research that was tasked with the living conditions for people living with disabilities in the Le Court Cheshire Home in the United Kingdom in the 1960s. The disgruntled residents felt so cheated and grossly misrepresented in the findings and recommendations that came out of the study that it led to a nationwide protest (Barnes & Mercer, 1996).

South Africa, a former colony of British imperialism, inherited this flaw in disability and social research. Practitioners, academics, and policymakers are still deeply influenced by the medical and social models of research that legislation and national strategies have exposed as sometimes diverging in interests from those of people living with disabilities. A case in point is the infamous Life Esidimeni tragedy, where over a hundred people suffering from mental disabilities died due to hunger and negligence in 2017. This happened after state-sanctioned research recommended that the patients be moved to unlicensed mental health institutions after the contract at Life Esidimeni mental health hospital (a licensed institute) had expired. How was such an incident allowed to occur under the nose of decades-long calls by disability activists (both international and local) to have the rights of people living with disabilities recognised? Oliver (2002) attributes the discrimination of people living with disabilities to the uneven ableist power dynamics in society that normalise the disablement of people living with impairments.

Far from being insane and ludicrous, such disabling norms have a rational basis emanating from a pervasive fear of fragility that able-bodied people carry (Swain & French, 2008). The fear is of 'becoming disabled' and therefore any relic of that fragility should be disposed of and locked away for good. These normativities are so pervasive that even experienced disability researchers are not spared, as shown by the Le Court Cheshire Home in the United Kingdom and the Life Esidimeni tragedy in South Africa. The result is that people living with disabilities become alienated from strategies, policies, and social research that were meant to be for them (Oliver 2002; Charlton, 1996).

Social research involving people living with disabilities is problematic, according to Oliver (2002), in three main ways. Firstly, it has been fixated on positivist research methodologies that are deeply entrenched in the medical discourse that has for decades sidelined the people living with disabilities from their research. Instead, it has mainly relied on the opinions of professionals, practitioners, teachers, and policymakers; a point in the case raised by disability activists and Charlton (1996) in his 'Nothing about us Without Us' critique. Secondly, disability research has also failed dismally to enact policy change, a change that is imperative for any significant differences to be made in the way people living with a disability are treated around the globe. Matshediso (2018) likened current disability research to 'empty vessels which make the loudest of noise' as it fails to bring about meaningful change in policymaking in the Southern African context. Instead, it chooses to focus on benevolence rhetoric that has often proved to be largely ineffective. The third point raised by Oliver is linked to the first and second in that, since contemporary disability research has mainly focused on positivism and benevolence rhetoric, it has meant that the movement has ultimately failed to shift disability activism from a social movement to a political one. This has led disability research to be far from being emancipatory, as even research grants and governments prefer to fund research that is still embodied in the old disabling narratives (Oliver, 2002). The next section will look at the methodological considerations involved in the study.

### 3. Methods

#### *Data Preparation*

Five chosen case studies of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges and campuses in Johannesburg were the focus of this study, which used a phenomenological research approach (Muzite & Gasa, 2024). Twenty young people with a variety of disabilities, including learning and physical disabilities, from five TVET colleges in the Gauteng Province of South Africa participated in semi-structured interviews. Twenty youths were the chosen sample, as this sufficed given the limited time for data collection (2 months). Having twenty youths participating also meant that the same sample could be invited to take part in an innovative 'story' exercise, which was meant to unravel the experiences of the students at the TVET colleges in depth. This study used convenient sample methods, including snowball sampling and referencing from the five biggest TVET colleges in Johannesburg. This is because there are not a lot of students with disabilities at TVET colleges in South Africa, and the declaration of such disabilities by the students and the capturing of such information by the student support units has not always been as efficient. Snowballing allowed the researchers' access to otherwise hard-to-reach research participants in the study. Furthermore, five focus groups were arranged with a range of stakeholders from the TVET colleges, including government representatives from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), lecturers, campus managers, students with various physical and learning disabilities, and staff from the Student Support Units.

The phenomenological method gave students with disabilities co-researcher status and prioritised their voices. The significance of co-creating knowledge with participants who have disabilities throughout the study process is a topic that is now being discussed in Disability Studies (Chappell & De Beer, 2019; Charlton, 1998). The methods used were individual interviews, the 'story exercise' and a focus group.

Firstly, 1-hour-long semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with the twenty youths with physical or learning disabilities at the five TVET colleges in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The idea of having the individual interviews at the beginning was to establish rapport and for the researchers to get a general understanding of the inclusion dynamics around the TVET centres in the study. In the interviews, the youths were invited to take part in the 'story exercise, which shall be unpacked in the following sections. The idea was to involve every participant as a co-researcher and give them the urgency to tailor-make their format of the 'story exercise'.

The second method used, which was pivotal in this study, was the 'story exercise'. The 'story exercise', jointly created by the researchers and the participating students, was an important component of the phenomenological methodology in this study. The exercise is a Rooth's (2000) adaptation of the Participant Rural Appraisal (PRA) methodologies, which were initially created as part of a social justice program to empower underrepresented groups, such as agricultural workers in the UK, inspired by this exercise. Twenty students with disabilities had the opportunity to take part in a storytelling exercise in which they were asked to describe their everyday experiences using a variety of media, such as voice notes, written narratives, and image stories. These students were given blank journals in which they were to artistically convey their experiences at TVET colleges using a variety of media, including images from magazines, newspapers, and social media, as well as pictures, anecdotes, and memes. Participants were encouraged to write their narratives in formats that best matched their skills, such as writing brief narratives in Braille or handwriting, pasting images, voice notes, drawings, poems, or visual arts. A rich and varied portrayal of the students' actual experiences inside the TVET system was made possible by this adaptable method.

Lastly, a focus group involving staff, management and Student Support workers at the five TVET colleges was conducted. The focus group involved a total of 25 staff members, and it was conducted in person at one central TVET college campus. The idea was for the researchers to get an understanding of the Inclusive practices, legislation and policies already in place at these five TVET colleges.

### ***Data analysis***

The individual interviews and focus groups were transcribed, and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. With the 'story exercise, the in proceeded to do a follow-up interview with the twenty participants, focusing on the self-interpretation of each participant of their individual stories. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the p] participants, transcribed, and the data analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was appropriate for this study because it managed to capture the themes that were weighed out critically using a decolonial lens of Disability Studies, explained in the 'theoretical section'.

### ***Theoretical lens***

The decolonial lens to Disability Inclusion is used for this study. According to decolonial theoretical perspectives, the construction of hegemonic institutions in the global south exists on three main pillars; That is, coloniality of power, coloniality of thinking and coloniality of being (Mignolo, 2010). Social Sciences in the global south have invested a lot of research in the first two, that is, coloniality of power and thinking, particularly in the fields of critical race theory (Mignolo, 2010; Maldonado-Torres, 2007) and education (de Sousa Santos, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Mbembe, 2016; Mbembe, 2019). This study explores the coloniality of being axis through posing critical questions about the politics of ontology and what it means to be human.

### ***Ethical Clearance***

The College of Education Ethics Review Committee of University of South Africa, granted ethical clearance for this study (No. 2023/05/10/90525558/19/AM). Every participant in the focus groups, interviews, story and picture exercises, and formal approval letters to conduct research, all of which were acquired from the college campuses that participated in the study, was asked to sign an informed consent form. Additionally, pseudonyms were used to safeguard participants' privacy. The literature review of current research approaches in the field of disability inclusion in education will be the main topic of the next section.

## **4. Literature Review**

A Scopus systematic literature review was carried out in the study. The Scopus review was used because of its expansive coverage and user-friendly interface, facilitating efficient literature exploration and research impact assessment (Verma & Sharma, 2022). The Scopus review also bridged different methodologies that have been used in the inclusion of articles globally, tracking citations, and aiding academic evaluations. The review revealed that qualitative research that includes students with disabilities has historically been limited because of perceived power dynamics between researcher and participant, alongside concerns about the authenticity of students' voices represented in the outcomes (Montreuil et al., 2021). Very few studies have also used novel participatory research methodologies involving the participants as co-researchers. Exceptions are studies carried out by Chappelle and de Beers (2019) on the sexuality of youths with disability in the KwaZulu-Natal province. In that study, the youths who participated in the study were given co-researcher status and a greater degree of agency in the research process. Another study was carried out by Hunt, Swartz, Braathen, Carew, Chiwaula & Rohleder (2019), which used photo-voice as a participatory methodology that can be used by people with physical disabilities in the global South to challenge dominant representations of their sexuality. There is very little research that has incorporated such participatory methodologies in the context of disability inclusion in the education context.

## 5. Results

### *Towards a social justice representation*

The story exercise provided ample creative freedom, allowing participants to express themselves through pasted pictures, voice notes, drawings, poems, visual arts, or written narratives in either standard handwriting or Braille. Below, we outline the demographics of the youths who participated in the story exercise.

This exercise integrates symbolic interpretation methodologies of disability highlighted by Narian (2008) in the UK. Through storytelling and visual illustration, students with disabilities can articulate their everyday experiences in school settings. Similarly, Hunt et al. (2019) employed a photovoice methodology in South Africa to challenge conventional representations of the sexuality and bodies of people with physical disabilities (PWPD).

Unlike traditional textbooks and scholarly journals, these exercises acknowledge that everyday interactions and media representations—such as newspapers, magazines, social media, and television—shape perceptions of inclusion, exclusion, and disclusion for people with disabilities. The individual stories documented regular encounters in lecture halls across various TVET institutions, providing richer, more nuanced portrayals of the experiences of students with disabilities in educational environments. Before delving into the story exercise, it is crucial to consider the unequal power dynamics reflected in global images of disability.

The themes of inclusion, exclusion, and disclusion emerged prominently in the exercises. While "inclusion" and "exclusion" refer to clear actions of including or excluding specific groups from activities, "disclusion" introduces a more complex state of precarity, where individuals exist on the periphery—neither fully included nor excluded—and are expected to remain silent (Moonsamy & Walton, 2015). These dynamics manifest in everyday interactions and media portrayals, highlighting the subtleties often overlooked in academic discourse.

The story exercise methodology was employed as a means of affirmation, self-preservation, and positive representation of disability. This approach aligns with disability art and photography, aiming to reframe both physical and intellectual disabilities as beautiful and worthy of celebration (Abbot, 2003; Watermeyer, Swartz & Rohleder, 2019). The focus was not to filter out loss, frustration, or painful experiences but to celebrate the richness of the disability experience. It serves as an active resistance against dominant visual narratives of disability, promoting a positive disability identity and challenging the notion of the "freak" (Garland-Thomson, 1996).

## 6. Discussion

Firstly, this research contributes new insights into the field of Disability Inclusion in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), particularly regarding the existing scholarly literature on the South African TVET sector. Notably, few studies in this area have employed a unique methodology like the picture story approach used here, which emphasises co-creating knowledge with students through visual narratives. The following section will explore how decolonising methodologies in Disability Studies can transform both global and localised representations of disability.

### *Global Representations of Disability*

Challenging Western methodologies in Disability Studies, especially those involving students living with disabilities in the global South, has the potential to reshape global representations of disability. For centuries, the societal portrayal of disability has predominantly originated from the global North (Grech, 2016; Shuttleworth & Meekosha, 2017; Shakespeare, 2017; Swartz, 2018). Efforts by individuals with disabilities to articulate their self-presentation through stories, television programs, and social media have often been undermined by interventions from high-income countries. While funding politics is significant, this section aims to critically examine how global power dynamics influence the representation of disability and the implications for daily research in the global South.

Western representations of disability have often been fixated on the "freak show" narrative (Garland-Thomson, 2017). The medical gaze, as discussed in previous chapters, has historically depicted disabilities as abnormalities requiring concealment, silencing, and stigma (Butler, 1990; De Beers et al., 2022). Much like gender

performativity, disability is viewed as a corporeal act, shaped by ideologies and discourses that precede the lived experience (Butler, 1990). The image of the “domesticated freak” presented a range of physical and cultural anomalies, reinforcing norms centred around whiteness and able-bodiedness. The case of Sarah Bartman serves as a poignant example of colonial exploitation and racism, illustrating how marginalised bodies were ridiculed and commodified. The freak show thus did more than showcase diversity; it delineated whose lives were deemed expendable, ultimately justifying social policies that enabled the conquest of indigenous peoples worldwide.

### ***Representation of Disability in the Global South***

In the global South, representations often depict countries as “basket cases,” where human lives are considered expendable. This region has faced social and political turmoil, including poverty, violence, and inadequate access to health and rehabilitation services. The portrayal of individuals with disabilities within this context is equally fraught, reinforcing negative stereotypes that oscillate between extreme violence, such as the brutal attacks on people with albinism, and the romanticisation of disability experiences framed within themes of Ubuntu and shared humanity (Swartz & Marchetti-Mercer, 2017). Both extremes warrant careful examination, as they may carry ulterior motives that perpetuate harmful narratives.

### ***Relevance of Findings to Key Stakeholders***

Policymakers, disability activists, researchers, and human services professionals are among the groups for whom the study's conclusions have important ramifications. Through elevating the perspectives of students with impairments, this study draws attention to important problems that affect these fields.

#### ***Policymakers***

The study highlights the pressing need for policymakers to create inclusive educational frameworks that accurately represent the experiences of students with disabilities. The complexity of these experiences is frequently ignored by traditional policies, which results in discriminatory and ineffectual practices. The stories gathered here are effective lobbying tools that highlight the need for specialised support systems and the obstacles students encounter. The terrible Life Esidimeni tragedy, for instance, serves as an example of the grave repercussions that result from excluding the opinions of people with disabilities in the formulation of public policy (Oliver, 2002). Policymakers may create more humane and successful policies that prioritise diversity and accessibility by interacting with these narratives.

#### ***Disability Activists***

Disability advocates can use these results to refute popular perceptions of disability. The diversity within the disability community and the depth of the participants' personal experiences are demonstrated by their stories. To promote a reinterpretation of disability that prioritises empowerment over victimisation, activists can employ these narratives. The "Look at Me" initiative by Lucie Pavlovich, for example, demonstrates how positive representations can combat negative prejudices (Pavlovich, 2008). To promote a more inclusive society perception of disability, activists can use comparable strategies to elevate the voices of innovation and resiliency.

#### ***Academics***

This study challenges conventional epistemologies in Disability Studies and encourages scholars to adopt decolonial approaches. To foster a more complex knowledge of disability, the radical-near experience methodology used here invites academics to interact directly with the lived reality of people with disabilities. According to Gustavsson (2004), this strategy has the potential to transform scholarly discourse and stimulate interdisciplinary collaborations that take into account the complexity of disability experiences. Researchers may add to a more thorough and equitable body of knowledge that speaks to the realities of the global South by embracing these views.

### ***Practitioners in Human Services***

Human services professionals can use the knowledge gathered from this study to guide their treatments and practices. Practitioners can create supportive environments for students with disabilities by acknowledging disability culture and emphasising positive social identities. For instance, putting in place initiatives that support empowerment and self-advocacy might help students feel like they belong. This study's story exercise methodology is a perfect example of how educators may inspire students' creativity and provide a safe space for them to share their struggles and experiences. Such actions foster an inclusive and respectful society in addition to validating their identities.

## **7. Conclusion**

With a focus on identity, empowerment, structural issues, and the value of community support, this study offers insightful information about the experiences of students with disabilities in South African TVET colleges. This study challenges traditional narratives that frequently marginalize these students' experiences while also elevating their voices through the use of a novel picture story methodology. The results show that students with disabilities actively participate in the co-creation of knowledge about their lives and have a strong feeling of identity and agency. Their educational experiences are hampered by major structural impediments, yet they show resiliency and inventiveness in overcoming these obstacles. The gathered narratives highlight the necessity of inclusive approaches that accurately represent the varied realities faced by students with impairments.

It is difficult for legislators to enact inclusive education laws that give students with disabilities' perspectives and experiences top priority. This involves developing specialized support networks that cater to the particular requirements mentioned in the participant narratives. Teachers are also urged to adopt inclusive teaching strategies that create a friendly atmosphere for students with impairments. Understanding different learning needs and encouraging student participation should be the main goals of training programs. Scholars are urged to keep investigating and using decolonial approaches in Disability Studies, promoting more interaction with the real-life experiences of people with disabilities. This involves broadening the scope and sample size of upcoming research to incorporate a greater range of viewpoints.

Future studies ought to focus more on certain topics, like how a handicap intersects with other identities like gender, color, and socioeconomic position. Furthermore, research on how inclusive practices affect students with disabilities' academic and social outcomes over the long run will be essential for guiding educational and legislative initiatives. In the end, this study adds to the worldwide conversation about educational fairness and decolonial disability studies. It challenges dominant narratives produced by Western viewpoints and promotes a more nuanced understanding of disability by elevating the voices of students with disabilities from the global South. This work highlights the value of inclusivity in educational methods around the world while also advancing the area of disability studies. We may strive toward a more just and equal society for everyone, regardless of ability, by cultivating a culture that honors a range of experiences.

### **Conflict of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest.

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