

Dilemmas in Accommodating Candidates with Special Needs

Lucy Mkhonta¹, Clement Dlamini

¹Education, Examinations Council of Swaziland, Swaziland

Accommodating candidates with special needs has taken a new turn in Swaziland. With the advent of Free Primary Education, an increasing population with special access needs is emerging. This means the Examinations Council of Swaziland is challenged to cater to these candidates and this has come with certain pressures that seek to compromise the integrity of the Council as an Examining Board. Some of these are political pressures to pass the candidates with special needs. This paper reports on the dilemma faced by the Council to balance between adhering to the principles governing access arrangements for special candidates and responding to the demands to pass these candidates despite their performance in the examination. An analysis of a case of deaf students is presented to show differentiated levels of achievement when all other issues of accommodation have been considered. The analysis indicates that these special candidates fall far below set standards for certification at Junior Secondary level. It appears that the problem does not lie with assessment but with the education system as a whole. More research is necessary to shed light on acceptable accommodations for special populations.

Key words: Candidates with special needs, accommodation, access arrangement

Introduction

Accommodations in assessment of candidates have been a long standing practice at the Examinations Council of Swaziland (ECOS). In the past two years when the first cohort of deaf and hard of hearing candidates entered for the Junior Examinations (JC), which is Swaziland's end of junior secondary external examinations, ECOS has been challenged to review its Access Arrangements Policy following a disastrous performance of the candidates. Access arrangements are special considerations which are meant to allow candidates with special needs and long-term disabilities to access ECOS examinations and display their abilities. Apart from this specific incident, the introduction of the Free Primary Education (FPE) initiative by the Swaziland government has brought with it the dimension of inclusive education, which has challenged ECOS to extend its operations to consider other forms of disabilities that they were unacquainted to before.

Following the zero percent pass rate in the JC examinations in 2011, ECOS was accused by the media and the public for being insensitive to have "failed" candidates with disabilities. A series of meetings with stakeholders for special education were held where it transpired that ECOS was expected to allow examinations practices, which ECOS felt would compromise its integrity as a reputable examination body and thereby renege from its principles of providing examination conditions where candidates compete equally. One of the principles which was challenged in these stakeholder meetings was following examination procedures that were effective in assessing such candidates whilst ensuring that academic and assessment standards were maintained.

This paper attempts to present a brief background of the Examinations Council of Swaziland, its mandate and how it attempts to cater for the needs of learners with disabilities, including deaf and hard of hearing candidates. It gives an outline of Access Arrangements regulations and how these deal with issues affecting deaf candidates. The five dilemmas that are seen to be putting ECOS in a predicament in balancing between complying with resolutions agreed upon with stakeholders and maintaining international standards, and at the same time protecting her integrity are presented. A discussion of literature, specifically on the notion of learning disabilities and memory skills of deaf learners is presented for insight into what natural deficits deaf learners might have. Finally, analysis of the interviews is presented to show how teachers justified the further modifications they required ECOS to make in the Access Arrangements regulations.

Background

The Examinations Council of Swaziland is a semi-autonomous department of the Ministry of Education and Training that is mandated to administer examinations and issue certificates to primary, secondary and high school graduates. The organisation is responsible for examinations at the end of primary (Grade 7) where candidates write the Swaziland Primary Certificate (SPC), end of junior secondary (Grade 10) where the Junior Certificate (JC) examination is offered, and the school leaving certificate, which is the Swaziland General Certificate of Secondary Education (SGCSE). The SGCSE is accredited by the University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) and is equivalent to the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE).

In all its examinations, ECOS caters for candidates with disabilities by doing customised modifications on question papers according to the candidate's specific need. The process for modifications begins with registration of candidates where Heads of Centres fill in a requisition form in which they provide information for each candidate with a special examination need. This information is then used to do certain modifications as required by the candidate. While doing modifications, the organisation adheres to its principles of ensuring that its integrity remains intact, standards are maintained and there is no undue advantage over other candidates. Modifications are guided by Access Arrangements regulations which are contained in a handbook that is updated regularly, on a two-year interval.

Access Arrangements

Access arrangements are arrangements that ECOS makes on behalf of the candidate to provide a conducive examination environment that enables candidates with special needs to perform to the best of their abilities. The purpose of these arrangements is to remove any unnecessary barriers which may hinder normal assessment without compromising the standards being tested (ECOS, 2013). Some of the principles governing access arrangements are stated in ECOS regulations as follows:

- Candidates are assessed according to the same marking criteria, so that grades and certificates have the same validity and do not mislead users of the qualification about the candidate's attainment
- Access arrangements must not give the candidate unfair advantage over other candidates
- Access arrangements must not compromise the competence standards being assessed
- English not being the candidate's first language is not a valid reason for application for access arrangements

Deaf students and hard of hearing candidates have specific considerations as follows:

- Up to 25 percent extra time is allowed
- Candidates with severe hearing impairment are exempted from oral tests. Invigilators may use sign language to help candidates read questions, but not explain what the question is asking. Candidates must not use sign language to convey answers to written questions

Although the inclusive education policy¹ envisages a situation where all learners are integrated with non-disabled children, some learners with disabilities are accommodated in special schools. Deaf children go to special schools at primary and secondary school levels. In as far as accommodating deaf learners in examinations is concerned, the Access Arrangements regulations stated above have always been implemented. These Access

¹ Education and Training Sector Policy goal (EDSEC): The provision of an equitable and inclusive education system that affords all learners access to free and compulsory basic education and Senior Secondary education of real quality, followed by the opportunity to continue with life-long learning and training, so enhancing their personal development and contributing to Swaziland's cultural development, socio-economic growth and global competitiveness (EDSEC, 2012: p. 9).

Arrangements have been benchmarked with those of CIE to maintain international standards. In ensuring that modifications are effected, ECOS has been working closely with specialists in different areas of disability. For example, with regard to the blind, specialists have been engaged to convert normal text to braille.

The school has exerted a lot pressure to coerce ECOS to be seen to be sensitive to deaf candidates, an act that ECOS views will compromise standards. ECOS has been working with deaf candidates on the premise that:

- Deaf students can compete equally with hearing students provided all resources to facilitate their learning are in place
- Modifications should be made where appropriate while at the same time maintaining examination standards
- Once fluent in the local sign language deaf candidates are capable of acquiring a written language (native or foreign) for easier communication with hearing people
- Language used in examinations taken by deaf candidates should be modified without losing any of its meaning
- Education is meant to prepare deaf learners for the world of work, therefore, the acquisition of a written language should be paramount in their learning

Some of these assumptions are principles guiding some educational institutions. In some institutions one of the principles for assessment arrangements for students with disabilities states that students who are disabled should undertake the same assessments as others undertaking the same course (University of Dublin, 2013; Open University, 2006; University of Wolverhampton, 2005). Based on the above assumptions, the resolutions of the meetings ECOS had with stakeholders on the way forward entailed certain dilemmas for the institution. Some of the dilemmas are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Outline of ECOS dilemmas

Dilemma	Resolution	Principle
1. Compromise of academic standards.	Higher order questions should be removed as deaf learners can only deal with items measuring recall of information.	Candidates should sit the same examination for the same qualification.
2. Flouting of Passing Conditions.	Deaf candidates be exempted from English Literature, a syllabus that is compulsory for all candidates.	Omission of a compulsory syllabus in an examination results in a fail.
3. Flouting of ECOS Guidelines.	Deaf school subject teachers should be involved in modifications.	Classroom teachers should not be engaged in ECOS assessment activities.
4. Contravention of Language-in-school policy.	Swazi sign language (SSL) be used in examinations.	English is the language of assessment
5. Flouting Access Arrangements Regulations.	Examination time be extended by 40 percent.	Not aligned with international benchmarks.

1. This resolution suggests that Deaf candidates will be assessed on the lower level of assessment objectives, which means their examination would be of a lower standard and this would compromise the standard of the examination.
2. According to the conditions of awarding a pass or fail result, one of the conditions for passing a candidate is that they should have sat for all compulsory syllabuses. English Literature is one of the compulsory syllabuses. Failure to satisfy this condition results in a fail. ECOS' view is that the type of disability deaf candidates have does not warrant an exemption.
3. One of ECOS regulations states that subject teachers, especially those teaching the school level being assessed, should not be involved in setting or moderating ECOS examinations. This condition is meant to protect teachers from committing acts of malpractice.
4. Using sign language in examinations is perceived by ECOS to contravene the language-in-school policy, which states that English is the medium of instruction and hence the language of assessment at JC. The resolution entailed the use of an interpreter. Dynamics of the extent of what the interpreter would do in the examination room is still not clear. ECOS' view is that this resolution would give an unfair advantage over other candidates as Swazi sign language is like the first language of deaf candidates. Furthermore, the interpreter comes in as an added advantage as the exam paper has already been modified.
5. ECOS regulations state that up to 25 percent extra time can be allowed. This extension factor was benchmarked with international examination bodies. Again the additional time of 40 percent would give an unfair advantage over other candidates.

Literature on disabilities and memory skills

Reviewed literature seemed to agree with some of the positions ECOS had taken with regard to assessment of deaf candidates. The literature illuminated some conceptions that ECOS had about the deaf and hard of hearing.

Learning Disabilities

Literature reviewed by Sparks and Javorsky (2000), suggests that everybody suffers from some form of disability. Sparks and Javorsky's (2000) literature espouses the notion that, among normal students, there are students classified as learning disabled (LD) simply on the basis of a discrepancy between certain aptitude and achievement scores in the United States of America (USA). They lament the absence of a clear definition of LDs as they have found, in their studies, that there was no consistent definition due to lack of a uniform criteria of assessing and classifying students. Disability in the context of some settings in the USA was measured in terms of what they refer to as the discrepancy model, that is, observed significant differences between the student aptitude (IQ) and academic achievement scores. This, in the USA, constitutes a disability and eligibility for exemption in a foreign language classroom. In the Swaziland context, disability is not necessarily viewed in terms of aptitude and academic achievement, but in physical or medical conditions that result in a handicap.

The Deaf are generally assumed to be people with severe hearing impairment (University of Leicester, 2013). They state that deafness can be classified into four categories namely; mild, moderate, severe and profound. It appears from their description of these

categories that only one uses non-oral mode of communication. Other terms and their definitions according to Turner, Windfuhr and Kapur (2007) include:

Hard of hearing – people who were born hearing but have lost their hearing gradually.

Deafened – people who were born hearing but became severely or profoundly deaf after learning to speak.

Deaf (with an upper case ‘D’) – those who were born deaf who use sign language and those with hearing loss who use oral means of communication.

Apparently, learners in the School for the Deaf in Swaziland would fall under the profoundly deaf including hard of hearing, deafened and the Deaf. The extent of their deafness has not been ascertained by ECOS.

Memory skills

Studies on how the deaf learn have focussed more on the acquisition of English or a second language and an analysis of their memory skills. Literature reviewed by Hamilton (2011) has attested to the revelation that children with disabilities have been found with deficit memory processes. Among disabilities related to this deficit are difficulties in retrieving speech-based codes and monitoring attentional processes in children with reading disabilities. It has also been noted that deaf children have greater difficulty with processing tasks involving sequential memory than hearing children (Bebko, 1984). In a study that examined whether a deficiency in the use of a spontaneous strategy accounted for verbal short-term memory in deaf children, Bebko (1984) found that spontaneous rehearsal of deaf children from oral and total communication settings seemed to emerge later than the hearing children in tasks where various colours were presented for 3 seconds and followed by a 15 seconds recall delay. He observed that it was both inefficiently implemented and less effective in mediating recall than hearing children. Hamilton’s literature also revealed that deaf children when compared with hearing children of the same age, deficits were found with regard to immediate sequential recall of lists of things like; digits, printed words, pictures, America Sign Language (ASL) signs for the deaf versus English words for the hearing, and finger-spelled words for the deaf versus English words for the hearing.

Hamilton states that researchers have given explanations for these deficits and their hypothesis included longer articulation of length of signs in comparison to speech, which was the shorter decay rate of visual or sign memory compared to what they referred to as echoic speech-based memory and the complexity in the way signs are formed versus speech. Hamilton concludes that regardless of these theoretical viewpoints, the deaf’s sequentially based working memory seems to be limited compared to hearing individuals. However, a study he cited, which was conducted by Marschark and Wauters (2008), has suggested that the deaf are less likely to use sequential memory processing strategies than the hearing. He, therefore, concludes that this may account for some of the deaf’s linguistic working memory deficit and difficulties in comprehending language.

Another aspect of memory skill is that of process speed. Hamilton (2011) defines process speed as the speed with which an individual can perform a cognitive task, such as word or sign recognition or understanding a sentence. His literature review suggests that deaf children have processing speed deficits. He says that process speed has been found to inhibit

oral and written language and the ability to perform mathematical tasks among hearing children. He further states that children with deficits in speed processing that affects word recognition has also affected fluency and comprehension.

Attention is defined as the cognitive process of focussing on the aspect of immediate environment (Hamilton, 2011). Eagle (2002) cited in Hamilton (2011), asserts that attention is of great importance to the function of working memory. The literature points to a finding that suggests that more deaf children of hearing parents than deaf parents would be considered to have attention deficits, an indication that early acquisition of sign language may have a greater effect on attention skills of deaf children.

The final aspect of memory skills discussed in this section is memory load, which is defined by Hamilton (2011) as the cognitive complexity a task presents to an individual. It is said that the memory load for decoding longer text is bigger than that of decoding a shorter text. When processing sign language, Hamilton (2011) states that deaf adults have been shown to code texts based on what is termed cherological or sign-based formational features of items. The literature suggests that some memory skill deficits in deaf children can be attributed to their inherent physical condition.

Eliciting teacher explanations with regard to resolutions

In order to fully understand the positions of subject teachers with regard to the justifications for the demands the school was making on ECOS. The authors interviewed two teachers; a science teacher and an English and Sign Language teacher. The teachers were reminded about the meeting where the resolutions were made and the dilemma that ECOS was experiencing in complying with the resolutions was explained to them. Each of the five resolutions was presented and a dilemma relating to it was explained. Teachers were asked to discuss the basis of each demand (as in the resolution), whether it emanated from their studies or from empirical research. It transpired that all the reasons they had provided as a school during the meeting with ECOS was not premised on a scientific rationale, but were anecdotes of their experiences with deaf learners. It also emerged from the interview that only 20% of the teachers had undergone formal training to capacitate them to deal with deaf learners. The majority have been recruited straight from college and taken through crash courses on sign language and deaf culture. The English and Sign Language teacher interviewed was one of the teachers who had gone through formal training.

Asked why higher order questions should be removed from deaf candidates examination papers, one of the teachers responded as follows:

What I can say is that the way children are brought up from a younger age...hearing children are brought up in a different manner...hearing children in most cases have conversations with their parents, which include warnings of what not do and why. So as the child grows up they get used to stating reasons and yet a deaf child of a hearing parent is not exposed to discourses that include justifications. Therefore, the child grows up without reasoning mentality.

The teachers went on to say that their analysis based on the experiences of working with deaf children was that they failed to handle higher order questions because they lacked the language of justification, which according to them is the language associated with higher order questions. The other reason was that most teachers were not fluent in sign language.

The teachers were hypothesising on aspects of cognition – that deaf learners have cognitive related deficits. Literature attests to the existence of a relationship between early social and sensory experiences and development of spoken language and fundamental cognitive skills (Burkholder & Pisoni, 2004). They explain that developments of audition in infants suggests that hearing could be the dominant sensory modality that contributes to early development of language and communication which may enhance the development of cognitive abilities that include multimodal processing, attention, learning and memory. However, Vernon (2005) has spotlighted certain biases in the assessment of IQ of deaf children that have resulted from improper testing methods. He states that there has been what he calls “unfortunate but rather common misconceptions of many lay persons that deafness is associated with lack of intelligence” (p. 225). It has also been observed that deafness does not affect the academic work of learners (University of Leicester, 2013). However, they assert that deaf learners need more time to assimilate language of their disciplines.

On the exemption of English Literature, which is a compulsory subject, it emerged from the interview that deaf learners were perceived by the teacher to have language problems, since their sign language was not fully developed for the teaching of English Literature. This appeared to be more of a language teaching issue, which had more to do with the administration of the school than an assessment problem. ECOS believes that with proper teaching of what teachers in this school refer to as *signed exact English*, learners can be taught how to write and read English. After all, this is the skill they need for the world of work, which they will use for communicating with hearing employers who may not communicate in basic sign language. Asked to provide a justification for the English Literature exemption, the English Language teacher responded as follows:

We still don't have a scientific justification for this one, but if we look at the level of their language...if you give the child a test to read, like in Form 1[Grade 8]...the books they read are not at the Form 1 level... because if you give the child to read on her or his own, it may happen that they would not understand at all or they would fail to attend to some of the questions. You then need to substitute some key words which you think they may not understand...so literature is a normal book, which means the learners should have the language to understand what the literature is about and yet our language is very low...it is not only the issue the low level of English Language on their side but also the sign language in the country is not fully developed so there are concepts that you cannot explain in literature as we don't have the signs. Even if you can take this to the Deaf Association, like in poetry, say you were teaching the concept of metaphor, they will not tell you because they do not know what a metaphor is.

It appears that the learners do not take the compulsory subject on the basis of their low level of English Language. The interview revealed that teachers were not enforcing the discipline that would compel learners to learn English language, e.g. discouraging the use of Swazi sign language in English language lessons. Teachers seemed intimidated by the learners and wanted to impress them that they were fluent in sign language to the detriment of their English language proficiency. On this issue the teacher said,

Students tend to use sign language when they should be signing English. The challenge is that I, as the English teacher will spend an hour teaching them English but they will spend 22 hours communicating in sign language... when you use signed English, to the students it's like you can't use sign language because you don't know it.

The teachers seem to be too sensitive to the disability of the learners and thus condone acts that are against principles of school discourse. Part of the reasons could be that the deaf have a low self-esteem because of their handicap. Studies elsewhere (Turner, Windfuhr & Kapur (2007) have reported higher levels of depression and higher levels of risk among deaf people compared to hearing individuals and that the deaf suffer higher rates of mental health problems than hearing people. Although there are inherent physical conditions that make deaf learners slow at assimilating information, ECOS does not consider low level of language an excuse for exemption. In a recent correspondence between ECOS and CIE on modification of language papers, CIE stated in no uncertain terms that they “do not provide modified carrier language papers for language syllabus/components” (Correspondence e-mail from CIE, June 19, 2013) and that they had omitted language papers from the list of modified papers they will be proving for candidates for which the request was made.

However, ECOS acknowledges that learning a language is problematic for the deaf as their language learning needs are similar to those who are second language learners (Brolop & Persall, 2010). It is said that some of the things that can significantly affect reading fluency among the deaf are vocabulary assimilation and lack of ‘inner voice’ when reading (University of Leicester, 2013). ECOS is also aware that for learners who are profoundly deaf, this condition may have significant effect on their use of English (Mole & Peacock, 2005).

Other justifications that emerged from the interview on the 3rd, 4th and 5th dilemmas are stated in the table below.

- On engaging classroom teachers in modification of papers:

T2: *I would say if there were teachers out there who qualify to teach deaf students, I would have no problem. For I know that there is a difference in teaching deaf students.*

T1: *The problem would be that someone else would not be aware that we at Deaf High would have changed a certain concept to mean something else other than what it's known to be. So I think we should be the ones to do the moderation to make sure that it's what the students know and can do.*

- On Swazi sign language used in examinations:

T 2: *The interpreter would help the students understand instructions and questions because when the text is written it presents challenges to deaf candidates.*

- On examination time be extended by 40 percent:

T 1: *I don't recall how we got to request 40% except that deaf students first turn the text to sign language to understand it before they can attempt to answer the question. This takes much longer than just reading.*

Conclusion

Deaf learners have an inherent physical ability that does not afford them access opportunities in the same way hearing candidates do. ECOS recognises this disability and has provided regulations that are benchmarked with international standards so that her examinations retain their integrity and credibility. The literature reviewed has provided insights on the deficits that deaf learners have due to their natural condition, but there has not been studies that might be persuasive for ECOS to comply with the resolutions agreed upon with the stakeholders.

The interviews conducted with teachers of the school have only helped to confirm that ECOS' initial stand of sticking to the Access Arrangement regulations is justifiable as the reasons provided lacked scientific justification but were based on teachers' anecdotes of their experiences. The authors have come to the conclusion that the high failure rate of the candidates was due to administrative and teaching practises of the school and not assessment deficiencies.

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