"EDUCATION OF MARGINALIZED PEOPLE"- ACCOMMODATIONS FOR DISABLED/DIFFERENTLY

ABLED LEARNERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Elizabeth Patterson

South Africa: Education and Social Reform

INTRODUCTION

Background

South Africa was the last African state to gain independence from European colonial influence. The country developed and implemented its first democratic constitution in 1996. Of utmost importance in the founding principles of the constitution is acknowledgment of "human dignity and equality, and advancement of human rights and freedoms."(Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, No. 108 of 1996) Equal access to education for all persons is outlined in section 29 of the constitution. In 2006 the constitution was amended to include the rights of disabled individuals. This amendment is a first step to implement the policy of inclusion in all sectors, from education and the professional realm into the larger community. Cited below is the preamble for disabled individuals:

(c) There is an obligation on the part of the state and the community at large to take all necessary measures to ensure that the physical environment, housing and transportation, social and health services, educational and work opportunities, cultural and social life, including sports and recreational facilities, are completely accessible to all;

(d) The government has a duty to ensure that the benefits of reform and development programme in every field also reach disabled citizens.

(e) Special measures to effect this should be incorporated into the government's planning processes and administrative structures; and

(f) The social and economic conditions of disabled people are recognized as meriting special and urgent attention.

THE SOCIAL OR INSTITUTIONAL PROBLEM OR ISSUE UNDER INVESTIGATION

This research paper investigated and analyzed access to education for disabled/differently students in South Africa. Because of the country's history and legacy of racial segregation during the apartheid era, the research sought to learn whether apartheid racial segregation is analogous to the plight of the growing population of disabled/differently abled people. The researcher wanted to learn about the accommodations and resources available to disabled/differently abled students that aid in academic and professional success and subsequent positive participants in society. Using social identity theory as the basis for analysis the research was able to infer about the plight of disabled/differently abled students in South Africa.

PURPOSE OF PROJECT

Education is the most fundamental means of combating social ills and injustices. As the South African society progresses in the quest to safeguard the rights of all people, it is important for the country to address the needs of the growing population of disabled individuals. South Africa presently provides disability grants to physically and mentally disabled individuals. However, this grant doesn't extend to disabled students' access to education. "About 80 percent of South Africa's 51.8 million population is black." (Cohen, 2012) In studying education and social reform in South Africa it was observed that while there are special schools for disabled/differently abled students, dependent on a student's social class and income bracket, access to these schools and resource provision is inequitable. As such, this research analyzed access to resources for disabled/differently abled students through assessment of the intersections of race and class. This research sought to measure how disabled/differently abled students are perceived; the research additionally wanted to learn about the accommodations and resources available to disabled/differently students to facilitate higher education and professional success following K-12 education.

Through participatory activities such as classroom observations and primary insight, document review, and interviews (telephone and e- correspondence) the research studied if/how the South African education systems, from K-12 through higher education accommodates disabled (cognitive and intellectual)/ differently abled students to ensure accessibility to all members of the population. The research analyzed inclusion and mainstream forms of instruction to determine which enables disabled/differently abled students to be effective in the South African and global society.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s, social identity theory hypothesizes that a person's self-perception is often attributable to memberships in social groups. The social group and intergroup dynamics are foundational to self-esteem development, conceptions of social status, and perceived upward mobility. "A key assumption in social identity theory is that individuals are intrinsically motivated to achieve positive distinctiveness." (Wikipedia) Adopting this schema aligns that individuals inherently try to cultivate and maintain a positive social identity. This research analyzed inclusive vs. special schools and societal perceptions of disability/different ability to inform on the perceived higher education and professional potentials of disabled/differently abled students.

OVERARCHING QUESTION

The overarching question of this research is: *How is the education system from K-12 in South Africa accommodating disabled/differently abled students to make higher education accessible to them?*

SUB-QUESTIONS

·　　What is/are the perception(s) of disabled/differently abled students in society?

·   How does the intersection of race and class advance or impede a disabled/ differently abled individual's access to resources?

·   Is inclusive or segregated instruction in schools or "specialized" professions more conducive to the development of self-esteem of disabled/differently abled students?

PROJECT SETTING

The research setting was South Africa. The researcher observed classrooms in no-fee and fee-paying primary, secondary, high schools, and universities. The researcher visited a K-12 school for special needs students with developmental and acquired disabilities in the city. To contrast this setting she visited and observed three schools, ranging in resource availability and provision in the rural Garangua district. The researcher additionally visited and observed mainstream elementary, secondary, and higher education institutions in Western Cape and Pretoria. The research spanned five weeks; specific to the school visits, time spent at each site ranged from two hours to half day visits.

METHODS/QUALITATIVE INSTRUMENTS

The research benefitted from qualitative research methods such as document(s) review, in person meetings and telephone interviews, snowballing (whereby one contact was a lead to another) information source. The research utilized electronic communications such as e-mail correspondences and Skype calls.

DOCUMENT (S) REVIEW

Document(s) such as books, newspaper articles and scholarly articles have informed on the general history of South Africa and the progression of disability rights since independence in 1994 and adoption of the constitution in 1996.

PARTICIPATORY OBSERVATION

The research was enriched by primary observations and participation in classrooms at no fee and fee paying elementary, secondary, and high schools; observations were conducted in mainstream and special schools. Additionally the researcher partook in presentations from staff in higher education institutions.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews with principals, staff and a parent of special and mainstream schools provided key insights into resources available to all students and the accessibility of accommodation and resources for students in special schools depending on location of the school (city vs. rural). Interviews offered knowledge on the way(s) in which the K-12 South African education system differentiates curriculum for disabled/differently abled students. Interviews also answered questions on the manner in which students with cognitive learning differences are diagnosed and the referral (extreme cases) process or accommodations available upon completion of diagnosis.

Interviews additionally discussed the perceived stigma(s) or lack thereof associated with disabilities/different abilities in schools and the larger society. Questions regarding the intersection of race and class, whether these factors impede or advance accessibility to resources and accommodations were equally addressed. As the overarching question of the research sought to glean insight into how the K-12 system prepares disabled/ differently abled individuals for higher education and professional advancement, interviews offered discussions about this.

ELECTRONIC CORRESPONDENCE

Electronic correspondences such as email and Skype were afforded information exchange in a manner flexible to the researcher and interviewees.

KEY FINDINGS AND EXPERIENCES

South Africa's legacy of apartheid set precedent for the research. As such, the researcher hypothesized that the unequal access to resources and accommodations for disabled/differently abled students was a racial issue; under white segregationist rule, black South Africans were disadvantaged by poor education that confined many to unskilled, low-paying jobs. However the visits to the various schools informed otherwise. Access to accommodation and resources for disabled/differently appears to be more of a class than racial issue. While there is a growing middle and upper middle class of Black and Colored individuals, it is important to be cognizant of the disproportionate numbers of Black and Colored people who live in rural and urban areas. (For the purposes of the paper the apartheid era racial demarcations will be used.)

In a conversation with a professional from Higher Education Disabilities South Africa, (*HEDSA*) it was noted that overall in the K-12 and higher education systems students at more affluent schools are diagnosed early regardless of race and dependent on parents' financial ability to provide differentiated instruction for them, schools assisted in seeking extra help. Additionally, accommodations differ depending on the school. State funded schools rely on funding and resources from District offices of education. Depending on a school's location it may fall within a district with more resources to assist all students (mainstream students and disabled/differently abled). District departments are responsible to appoint educational psychologists to assess students' needs and appropriate recommendations to facilitate students in school. On average one psychologist is assigned to about 20 schools. (Cleophas, HEDSA interview, 2013) Following requests and recommendations by school teachers and administrators educational psychologists assess students' cognitive ability on the basis tests generated by the ministry of education. Based on the results of a student's assessment recommendation ranging from extra time for tests (time and half to double time, enlarged print, testing in separate venues to a scribe for physically impaired, speech/ language therapy, and physical and occupational therapy) as needed. While a district may

assign a speech and language therapist to help with language problems, speech/language therapists often assist in empowering teachers to aid students. Students can as well be referred by the Dept. of Social Development should there be a diagnosis to warrant home- based interventions.

For students who attend private school an educational psychologist is typically based on site. Private school students also receive assessments at the recommendation of teachers or staff. Students cited as developmentally or cognitively disabled/differently abled are tested and diagnosed by an education psychologist. Private school students are apt to have greater access within and outside of school for supplementary services such as psychiatrists, occupational therapy, and other specialists dependent on a parent's ability to pay. For example, a visually impaired student in a private school can access financial resources to offer needed assistive technologies, which will more, easily mainstream and then better prepare them for university. Additionally this exchange informed that there is a lack of use of sign language in schools; as there are few schools equipped to utilize sign language as an instruction delivery method, a small percentage of hearing impaired students reach university levels in their education.

Students taught in special schools are often taught technical/ practical pedagogy. This (these) kind(s) of curriculum doesn't enable access to universities, rather preparing students for employment as laundry operators, jewelry makers, and culinary professionals. It is important to note that of the four special schools (Meerhoff, Reinotswe, Medicos, and Filadelphia) only Filadelphia reported on students' advancement to university or graduate studies.

As mentioned, the researcher visited one racially, socio-economically diverse special school in the city and three in the Garangua district, all predominantly comprised of Black and Colored students. It was found that the level of access to accommodations and resources was disparate in comparison. At the Meerhofskool students benefitted from amenities such as regular physical, cognitive, and occupational therapies, adaptive services for visual and hearing impaired as well as boarding facilities for students in need. The school functions on the vision that "Learners are led to develop to their full potential to become independent and productive members of society, despite physical challenges." (Staff, Meerhoff interview 2013)

The need for funds for infrastructure development and resource provision was a commonality among the special schools. While staff of Meerhoff expressed the need for increased fundraising to provide expansive services it was obvious they were well funded in comparison to the Garangua schools. Parents of Meerhoff students are middle to upper middle class professionals who often spearhead fundraising efforts for the school. The staff and administrators of Reinotswe Special School, Medicos, and Filadelphia of Garangua collectively expressed the urgent need for more facilities and accommodations for students. Although catering to geographically and racial/ethnically similar populations, it was apparent that facilities varied. The Reinotswe was the most deprived of the three schools. The school had relocated because of the growing population; however it was deficient in finances, physical infrastructure (for physically disabled) and human resources and capital. Principals and staff of Medicos and Filadelphia also commented on the need for more facilities to help students however they were more progressive. Similar to Meerhoff, Medicos and Filadephia students receive wide-ranging subjects and could board at the schools should there be the need.

At the secondary level Meerhoff, Medicos, and Filadephia provide classes and enrichment facilities for students. There was disparity in accommodations delivered as well as the end outcomes of the curriculum as expressed by school(s) staff. A striking observation was one made by a teacher at Meerhoff who alluded to students' inability to adequately perform on standardized tests and as a result often teachers assisted students on examinations. Notwithstanding, all the institutions including Reinotswe provide technical training courses i.e. laundering, gardening, craftsmanship, and culinary training to students with the hope that they may contribute to society upon graduation.

Regarding higher education aspirations and future development, all schools commented on the bleak perceptions for their students. Filadelphia school was the only institution from which it was expressed that students have advanced to higher education i.e. university and furthering to hold a position in the ministry of education. Meerhoff, Medicos, and Reinotswe all highlighted that while they strive to ensure inclusion of students in schools and the society at large, higher education, graduate, and post graduate studies weren't expected for the majority of students.

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Concerning accommodations in higher education institutions, Jagoe writes "the general principle of making institutions accessible to and conducive for all people to participate equally and fully in terms of gender and race is now part of the fabric of our society. However, there has not yet been a firm commitment in South Africa to creating equality in our society for people with disabilities". (Jagoe K. 1995.) The university of Cape Town theoretically prescribes to offering mainstream education rather than accommodating on the basis of the welfare model. "The Disability Unit at the University of Cape Town, South Africa aims to 'mainstream' rather than follow the 'welfare model' and to dismantle the many barriers that inhibit students and staff who have disabilities or chronic illnesses, from participating equally and fully in all aspects of the University". (Jagoe, 1995)

In a conversation with a parent and university administrator of an Asperger student in Stellenbosch it was remarked that students of poorer backgrounds are less apt to access resources and have slimmer chances of "making it" to a university as these groups are less likely to be encouraged to take let alone pass the entrance qualification at the end of grade 12. Success in high school and likelihood of enrolling and succeeding in university are dependent on stakeholders involved in the process i.e. students, teachers, parents, community. She concluded saying, "Individual differences in students must also never be underestimated – many students succeed against the odds!"

Responding to the sub question about the perception(s) of disabled/differently abled students in society, Cleophas says discussions are a "mixed bag". She categorized disabilities as a class issue; proponents of empowerment and inclusion tend to belong to higher and affluent classes. She contrasted by affirming that the larger South African society holds traditional and conservatives of disabilities/different abilities. "More educated individuals are more attuned to the needs of disabled individuals." Citing a discrimination claim by a blind student she confirmed the view of many disabled/differently abled students to be ostracized. Students who face prejudice are guarded in communication with staff. Moreover, discussing inclusion policies for academic and overall development, she says, the world is full of inequalities thus advocates of special schools reinforce apartheid. Regardless she notes that implementation of inclusive education is tricky as

universal access and differentiated curriculum design isn't universal. Also, inclusion is exclusive to those who can afford it. Jagoe adds, "Our role is to help University structures to understand how to provide those same services that they ordinarily provide, rather than to provide equal and/or parallel services, separate from the mainstream for those University staff and students with disabilities" (Jagoe, 1995).

Transferring the discussion from academia to society at large, while South African society isn't equipped to accommodate disabled/differently abled individuals, physically challenged individuals benefit from assistive services such as dial-a-ride transportation whereby individuals pay a fee. Nevertheless it was found that this service is less accommodating in rural areas. To be more progressive the South African government has a quota policy requiring 2% target for companies to employ disabled individuals (Cleophas, HEDSA 2013).

Limitations of Research

The research spanned four weeks of participatory observations and interviews with individuals in the government and non-profit sectors. Although the researched acquired expansive knowledge on the topic, the researcher encountered limitations with time and limited schools to serve as reference and comparison. More time in South Africa would have permitted visits to other schools and provinces for comparable and/or contrasting views and practices to those in Garangua and Cape Town.

DISCUSSION/ CONCLUSION

Education is a human right which all persons should access regardless of race, gender, socio-economic status or disability/different ability. While South Africa has constitutional and policy concessions to enable equal access and accommodations to education for all, there ought to be more equal means of accessing education and accommodations for all students. South African society and consequently the education system emphasize the medical and welfare contexts, which calls for medical and therapeutic solutions rather than adequately accommodating and empowering individuals to meet individual and societal needs. Linking to social identity theory, disabled/ differently abled individuals who develop their identity in these frameworks are likely to see themselves as incapable, as they are likely to receive "special" education instead of inclusive education in a mainstream setting. Educating students in geographically "special" schools is conducive to the atmosphere of disabled/differently individuals as the other, a group of people requiring special attention separate resources, accommodations, and institutions. South Africa's education system and society will benefit from offering inclusive, mainstream education to all with accommodations provided on a needs basis; disabled/differently abled students need to be taught early that they can function independently in their education and society. Education should serve as a pipeline to professional opportunities for disabled/differently able people rather than perpetuate the prevailing notion of ineptitude.

Appendix I- Interview Questions

1. How is the education system from K-12 in South Africa accommodating disabled/differently abled students to make higher education accessible to them?

2. What forms of accommodations are available to students at each level of education?

3. How are learning issues diagnosed in school?

4. What is/are the perception(s) of disabled/differently able students in the education system?

5. What is/are the perception(s) of disabled/differently able students in society?

6. How does the intersection of race and class advance or impede a disabled/ differently able individual's access to resources?

7. Are there professional opportunities available to disabled/differently abled graduates?

8. Is inclusive or segregated instruction in schools or "specialized" professions more conducive to the development of self-esteem of disabled/differently abled students?

9. What professional development is provided for disabled/differently abled individuals?

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