Who is Disabled? Who is Not? Teachers Perceptions of Disability in

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on educational research conducted in Lesotho, Southern Africa. Mixed

methods of research were used to elicit and describe teachers’ attitudes toward children they

perceived as disabled. The study took place in a country where discussions on ‘the continuum’ of

services, specialist diagnoses, and Western notions of assistive technology are largely irrelevant.

Over-arching themes are compared to themes that have emerged from special education and

Disability Studies literature over the past decade.

**Key Words**: disability, Africa, special education

Introduction

The fields of Disability Studies and special education have often been at odds with one another.

Disability Studies scholars, situated in cultural frameworks, often ask “what” and “why” questions

related to the meanings of disability in society. By contrast, much of special education research is

concerned with “how to” questions, attempting to understand how to best remediate perceived

shortcomings possessed by students with disabilities.

This tenuous relationship is cause for heated political debates and attempts by scholars of one

persuasion to call to question the other. Brantlinger (1997) noted that the present paradigm in

special education research (positivism) is a political mechanism to maintain medical models of

disability. By embracing positivistic models of research without recognizing their political

ramifications, Brantlinger asserts that researchers (either through willful or negligent acts) have

discredited important social victories for people with disabilities, such as inclusion in public schools.

Danforth (1997) also criticized modern special education models that focus too heavily on

intervention and deficit models of disability. Organizational scientist and special education scholar

Skrtic (1995) theorized that the very existence of special (separate) systems for special education

implies that students with disabilities are not intended to be part of the regular education system, and

that separate provisions, funding streams, and physical environments all act to ensure separate

education.

Although the outlook for Disability Studies informing professions like special education appears

bleak, there is evidence of improving relations. In the 1990s, discussions about a “merger” of

special and regular education (Stainback & Stainback, 1990) and “schooling without labels” (Biklen,

1992) led many professional organizations to embrace the notion of inclusion. Inclusion in theory

and practice has been supported by a better understanding of the lived experience of people with

disabilities themselves (Ferguson, Ferguson & Taylor, 1992).

Such an understanding is intended to promote better attitudes toward people with disabilities and

empower disabled populations. Although empowerment of students with disabilities in K-12

education is still a relatively ignored issue in public schools (Ware, 2001; Ware, Solis, Echeverria, &

Stoltz, 2004), research has demonstrated that attitudes toward students with disabilities matter, both

for social and academic outcomes (Jordan & Stanovich, 2001).

The attitudes of “regular education” teachers toward students with disabilities can be seen in the

post-industrial world as a special education issue, a regular education issue, and a Disability Studies

issue. These fields of study, however, are blurred in societies less apt (by choice or necessity) to be

as specialized as countries with high levels of wealth, education, and privilege.

The remainder of this paper will focus on attitudes of regular education teachers toward students

with disabilities. The focus of the research will be on teachers in Lesotho, a small country in

Southern Africa. Lesotho is considered one of the least economically developed countries in the

world (World Bank, 2001) and will be used as an example of countries in the “Majority World,” or

countries that are less economically stable, have less physical infrastructure, and are more

subsistence-oriented than their neighbors in Europe, North America, and the Pacific Rim. Majority

World countries are located all over the world, but are mainly found in South America, Africa, and

Asia.

Peters (1993) investigated the notion of special education in Majority World countries and found

most countries did not have the “luxury of specialization” that their Minority World counterparts

did. For example, disability services were often delivered by family members and lay community

members. The concept of domination by the professions (Foucault, 1965) is, according to Peters

(1993), not even a choice many nations in the Majority World can make.

This being said, special education in the Majority World is often less “special.” Miles and

Miles (1993), for example, found that Pakistani youths were often integrated into schools casually.

Because of constraints in local schools, there were no serious efforts to actually include and make

accommodations for students with disabilities. However, doors were open to any student that came

to school, and teachers managed diversity as best they could.

Most attitudes about disability, in circumstances such as those described above, are culturally-

generated. Experiences of disability are often based on a combination of religious or other

supernatural beliefs coupled with day-to-day experiences with people with disabilities (Ingstad,

1995). Situations arise, however, when small or large-scale efforts are made to change attitudes of

people toward their disabled community members.

In Southern Africa, attitudes toward people with disabilities have been questioned through large-

scale “awareness campaigns” (Ingstad, 2001), conscientization praxis (Peters & Chimedza, 2000),

and through training professionals (like teachers) who will interact with students with disabilities

(Mariga & Phachaka, 1993). Disability awareness and an understanding of what disability means

were selected as major themes for teacher training in Lesotho. Rationale for such training was based

on a feasibility study of inclusive education. Mariga and Phachaka found that upward of 15% of

students in regular schools had some disability and that teachers lacked awareness. The authors

concluded that students were being underserved because teachers could or did not recognize the

diversity of learners in their classroom.

Lesotho’s journey into inclusive education began in 1987 when an external consultant concluded

the needs of Lesotho’s students with disabilities were best met inclusively (Csapo, 1987). The

justification for this recommendation was that inclusion was both more cost-effective and more

aligned with Lesotho’s culture of extended family and communal caretaking. A feasibility study

performed by Mariga and Phachaka in 1993 determined that schools were at varying levels of

“readiness” for inclusion. Some schools appeared to have adequate resources and understanding

while others had no idea what disability was and seemed unwilling to accept students with

disabilities. The authors pointed out that enrollment of students with disabilities was actually a non-

issue, as schools in Lesotho had always admitted students with disabilities. Because Lesotho had so

little infrastructure in place for institutionally based rehabilitation and education, most people with

disabilities lived in communities where they grew up. Mariga and Phachaka (1993) reported that

lifestyles of community members with disabilities were not always idyllic, but that integration

occurred by fiat because no other choices were available.

Inclusive education began in full swing in 1993. During this year the Ministry of Education’s

Special Education Unit began training at ten “pilot schools.” Training was focused on technical

skills related to teaching students with disabilities (informal evaluation, learning adaptations, and

physical accessibility). A major focus, however, was on conscientizing teachers about disability

itself. Trainers believed that Lesotho was rife with superstitions about disability (Ministry of

Education, 1994) and that scientific explanations (read: medical model) were necessary to prepare

teachers to better educate students with disabilities.

Since 1993 the Ministry of Education has trained over eighty schools using the original

curriculum. Peter Mittler, a special education professor in the United Kingdom, evaluated the

training program in 1996. Mittler’s recommendations were that Lesotho continue training more

schools every year and that training programs were successful, especially in the area of attitudes

toward students with disabilities.

Lesotho has also currently added a pre- and in-service special education training program at its

College of Education. An interesting feature of the Lesotho program is the lack of specialization.

From the early days of policy passage, the Ministry of Education has neither budgeted for, nor

funded, special education teachers. All teachers of students with disabilities are regular education

teachers. Schools in Lesotho, then, have aspired to the aims of inclusion researchers in the Minority

World that advocate for a blurring of special and regular education. Rather than a highly technical

merger between two highly bureaucratic systems (Skrtic, 1995), however, Lesotho’s streamlined

approach is need based, i.e., there is no money for anything other than a unitary system.

The remainder of this paper will focus on field research of this system conducted in Lesotho from

January 2004-April 2004. The overall research focused on special educational issues, but a subset of

the research examined teachers’ understandings of disability. An analysis of teachers’ responses is

provided followed by concluding comments on the implications of disability awareness training for

teachers.

Methods

Data were collected and analyzed using qualitative research methods. Two main instruments were

used: structured questions (found in a questionnaire) and semi-structured interviews. The advantage

of using two different methods was an opportunity to reach a large number of teachers while

discussing issues, in-depth, with a smaller sample.

The first instrument used was a questionnaire. Twenty schools were visited to examine how

special education was being implemented. In those twenty schools, 140 teachers participated in a

short questionnaire. The first question on the questionnaire was, “Tell me what it means when a

student has a disability.”

The questionnaire format was carefully considered because of potential bias created when

researchers (author) and participants (teachers) are from different cultural and linguistic

backgrounds. All teachers were fluent in English, but two precautions were taken to ensure

participants understood questions. First, norm-referenced instruments were avoided. While pre-

packaged attitude measurements are available that may have been adapted for this purpose, most

normed instruments found in clearinghouses such as the Mental Measurements Yearbook are normed

on cultural groups in the Minority World. Such norming may introduce cultural or linguistic bias

(Wolcott, 1999).

Rather, the questionnaire used was developed and pilot tested in Lesotho by the researcher himself.

Statistical information was not tabulated for this paper, but the information gathered from the

questionnaire was used for descriptive purposes. Therefore, the focus of pilot testing was to ensure

teachers in Lesotho could understand what was being asked of them.

Second, rather than distributing questionnaires by mail, the researcher visited schools himself. In

total, twenty schools were visited. Ten of these schools were the original pilot schools described

above. The other ten were recent additions to the list of schools “registered” and having received

training in special education. Schools were located in nine out of Lesotho’s ten districts (Thaba

Tseka District was omitted because there was no original pilot school in this district). Therefore,

urban, rural, and remote mountainous areas were represented in the sample.

Questionnaires were completed face-to-face to ensure the questions were understood. The

researcher read all of the items to participants and clarified any misunderstandings. Print was large

so all participants could easily read items and language was consistent with plain language

guidelines. The entire questionnaire followed the elements of Universal Design of Assessments

(Thompson, Johnstone & Thurlow, 2002).

In the tradition of qualitative research, questionnaire responses were read, sorted, and gathered into

over-riding themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Data that emerged from responses were categorized

into codes.

The second instrument used was semi-structured interviews. In these interviews teachers were

asked to talk about their experiences with students with disabilities and special education. Specific

questions were asked, but the format allowed for flexibility so teachers could comment freely and

about a variety of topics (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Twenty teachers were interviewed using this

format; each interview lasted 20-30 minutes. Teachers were interviewed during school breaks and

after school.

Interviews took place in English, although Sesotho phrases were used to illustrate points. The

author of this paper was proficient enough in Sesotho to translate the phrases into English, but

checked with teachers to ensure translations were correct. All participants listened to tape

recordings of their interview and approved of its use in research before the results were analyzed.

The researcher transcribed all tapes himself (this was done to ensure data was not lost due to

insertion of Sesotho phrases or the accents of the teachers, which may be unfamiliar to Minority

World transcriptionists). Data was then carefully read and coded with one and two word codes that

described the content. These codes were then clumped into themes that described teachers’

responses (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Unlike quantitative research, data was not plugged into a

formula to arrive at an instant “answer.” Rather, data was reviewed slowly, themes were considered

carefully, then double-checked again to ensure accuracy.

Results

Five major themes emerged from the data concerning teachers’ understanding of disability. These

themes were:

1. Disability as deficit;

2. Protectiveness of students with disabilities;

3. Inability to participate in lessons;

4. Empathy, and

5. Uniformity of response.

Each of the major themes is presented with quotations that illustrate the theme itself. Sesotho

words are translated with English words appearing in parentheses immediately after the Sesotho

word.

Disability as Deficit

Similar to deficit models found in the field of education worldwide, teachers in Lesotho saw

disability as a deficit. In virtually every questionnaire, the words “cannot cope” were used in

questionnaires, describing children with disabilities as those unable to perform under certain

circumstances or unable to manage particular life challenges. Examples of teacher responses were:

“It (disability) means that the student, somehow, cannot cope. Maybe they cannot

walk or cannot listen. Maybe they cannot hear properly.”

“A disability means you cannot cope. It means you cannot do certain things that

another can do.”

Open-ended interviews yielded similar responses. Often teachers would use specific examples of

students they had in class to illustrate what disability meant to them. Responses centered around

four major types of impairment: hearing, vision, physical, and learning. Psychological disabilities

and/or “emotional disturbances” common in the Minority World were not often given the status of

disability by teachers. Likewise, HIV/AIDS was not considered a disability, despite recent Special

Education Unit efforts to associate HIV/AIDS issues with disability:

“This one, she can’t hear well. I will say things and sometimes she will just look at

me. I have to repeat myself many times because of her disability.”

“I had this one student with mental retardation. He could not do anything. All day he

would sit and I would have to find some stones for him to count or some other

material because he could not learn properly.”

“Sometimes the students can’t see. You can see them looking like this (squinting)

when they look at the page or at the board. We say they have a visual disability.”

Teachers did not mention words like “cursed” or “punishment” often associated with disability in

the Majority World (Ingstad & Whyte, 1995). Rather, teachers viewed disability as an impairment

and in terms of the activities of daily life. Teachers associated the etiology of disability with natural

or biological events, understanding that disability is often “caused” by explainable events, such as

malnutrition or accidents. This type of understanding appeared to normalize disability for teachers,

and create a sympathetic response toward students with disabilities.

Protectiveness of Students with Disabilities

Teachers in Lesotho, despite their penchant for teaching with a disciplinary stick in hand, proclaim

a deep love for their students and a protective nature for them. Students, especially in pre-school

and younger grades are called linkuaneana (little lambs). Teachers in primary schools, who are 85%

female (UNESCO, 2002) appear to take on the role of guardian of their students, and want to shield

them from harm. This is especially true for students with disabilities:

“We love them (students with disabilities). They are a part of us. We must look after

them and help them to be free and be part of everyone.”

“I take them close and speak with them gently. When they are sad I hug them and

say to them, ‘don’t cry’.”

The protectiveness of teachers has led to a system with differential expectations. When students

have disabilities they are automatically expected to do less than others. Promotion and grading

decisions are made on an individual basis by teachers, and students with disabilities are often

exempted from challenging tasks. Protectiveness, then, has mixed results for students with

disabilities. In some ways, such students are able to participate in regular school and be part of their

peer group without the burden of inappropriate materials. These same students, however, are often

pitied and expected to be in child-like roles even as they grow older. What appears as a good-

natured relaxation of challenging activities may actually act as a barrier as students with disabilities

grow into adults with disabilities (Shapiro, 1994).

Inability to Participate in Lessons

As would be expected, disability seemed to impact teachers most according to their daily

interactions with students. Many teachers defined disability in terms of school-based outcomes,

many of which may be completely irrelevant in community life. Regardless, the focus on disability

as a barrier to the curriculum demonstrates the converse - many teachers were unable or unwilling to

modify their teaching to empower students with disabilities in their classes. The pattern of teacher

talks, teacher writes on board, students copy information, students engage in an independent activity,

and teacher checks students work was a common finding in observed lessons. Obvious implications

for students with a variety of disabilities were present. Nonetheless, teachers saw disability as the

inhibiting factor, not the structure of the lesson itself:

“Sometimes they cannot even write. I write things on the board for them to copy into

their exercise books and they just sit there. They cannot hold a pencil properly and

they cannot make proper letters because they have a disability.”

“This one does not talk. When I ask a question of the class she does not say anything.

Sometimes I ask her again, but she says nothing. I think when I am teaching she is

not understanding. She can’t get it.”

Miles (1999) theorized that inclusive education could be a catalyst to change all education, because

the child-centered pedagogy associated with inclusive education has the potential to revolutionize

teaching for all students. This revolution, however, has yet to occur in Lesotho. Promising new

literacy programs have helped teachers to monitor student progress and prepare individualized and

small-group activities based on student need, but lecturing and copying notes from the chalkboard

was still the predominant mode of teaching found in twenty classroom observations. Students who

cannot participate in this type of learning, then, will be considered “disabled” by teachers, even

when other factors, such as the curriculum and pedagogy of the classroom itself, may be more

disabling than the student’s impairment.

Empathy

Teachers reported that, as a result of training, they had a better understanding of how they were

disabled themselves. Similar to the findings presented above, Ministry of Education training appears

to have normalized disability for many teachers. Most teachers even “claimed disability” (see

Linton, 1998). From the use of glasses to mild hearing impairments to left-handedness, teachers

claimed they too had disabilities and all of humanity at one time or other will encounter disability:

“I too have a disability. I use this molamo (walking stick) to walk because my legs

have fluid in them. It is a result of sugar diabetes. This is my disability. “

“I cannot be angry at students for having a disability. I use glasses and sometimes

have trouble reading their exercise books myself. Without my glasses I do not see

very well. I also am using my left hand to write like you Ntate Chris (Mr. Chris – the

researcher). We were told when we were younger that this was very bad but now I

understand that it is normal and my students should be comfortable writing with

either hand, or if they are in a wheelchair, or if they use glasses.”

“I cannot hear out of this ear. Therefore, I have disability.”

These empathic responses demonstrate that teachers abide by the principles, found in disability

literature, that state nobody is immune from disability. Researchers like Davis (1998) note that

ability and disability are not binary, but are more relative terms. Teachers in Lesotho appear to

understand that disability is a lifelong and pervasive experience, one experienced by most everyone.

These empathic responses did not appear to overhaul the dominant pedagogy in Lesotho, but

affected how teachers approached students with disabilities. Interactions with students were often

peppered with teachers noting their own “disabilities” and challenges in life. Such interactions

appeared to create a more welcoming environment for students with disabilities in the regular

classroom.

Uniformity of Response

The final theme that arose from the data was that responses were homogeneous. The themes noted

above were described in every school and by practically every teacher interviewed. Teachers

appeared to take pride in their new consciousness about disability, deriding their community

members for knowing less than they did:

“These Basotho (Basotho is the plural of Mosotho, or a person in the Sotho ethnic

group) in the villages, they hide their children with disabilities. They don’t know that

they can learn.”

Teachers heavily praised Ministry trainers for helping them to understand what disability is. In

truth, there are words in Sesotho for disability, but these words are often viewed as derogatory or

demeaning. The English word “disability” appeared to have provided a sense of legitimacy to the

teachers about the experiences of their students Such legitimizing seems to have appealed to

teachers, as responses were similar across schools found in nine different districts and three different

geographical areas (urban, rural, and remote). Implications of these findings are useful for both

understanding what disability means across cultures and professions, and how disability-related

training can be used to conscientize educators or other service providers.

Implications

The Lesotho model of teacher training, which focuses on attitudes toward students with

disabilities, demonstrates how a professional field can incorporate a philosophy, or outlook, into

training programs. Critiques of current special education practice assert that special education is

mired in a paradigm of intervention, focused on fixing the problems of students with disabilities

(Danforth, 1997). Fields like special education, according to Danforth (1997) and Brantlinger

(1997) too infrequently consider the perspectives, rights, and experiences of people with disabilities.

Lesotho’s Ministry of Education has not provided a model for changing this paradigm (disability-

related training still is centered in a deficit/medical model), but originally provided opportunities for

understanding issues like marginalization and exclusion. These themes all open a space for

exploring the place of perspective in teacher training. Mariga and Phachaka (1993) set out to change

(or develop) teachers’ attitudes about disability and apparently have succeeded. Teachers in Lesotho

(who have received special education training) have remarkably similar attitudes about disability.

Although partially based on a much-criticized discrepancy model (Danforth, 1997), teachers do

show empathic reactions and inclusive behaviors toward students with disabilities. Such attitudes

guide day-to-day interactions with students with disabilities.

These data demonstrate that, despite ongoing pedagogical weaknesses in Lesotho, attitudes

towards students with disabilities can be shaped by training. This being said, possibilities open up

for missing empowerment models to be included in teacher training. Peters and Lubeski (2002)

noted one method of evaluating education is through a Disability Rights Model. One aspect of this

model is conscientization at the local level. Such conscientization could easily include teacher

training about attitudes toward students with disabilities. Furthermore, as countries in the Majority

World develop inclusive and special education programs, Lesotho’s example demonstrates that

attitudes can make a difference. A model of disability rights, inclusion, and perspective would

include an interaction between disability awareness and pedagogical considerations. Lesotho has

provided a first step for Disability Studies approaches, disability advocacy and special education to

proactively co-exist in the Majority World.

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