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DISABILITY STUDIES: AN ALTERNATIVE FRAME FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Despite innovative ideas and unprecedented opportunities for students with disabilities in recent decades, there are still many flaws and shortcomings in the overall approach to educating them in general education settings. This paper aims to explore the new horizons of the inclusion of this historically marginalized body of students in mainstream educational institutions. The current review explores how disability studies can offer an alternative framework to cater to existing constraints to inclusion, including physical, social, political, and cultural, for students with disabilities. The purpose of this paper is to reinforce the argument that practitioners, educators, school administrators, and policymakers should view this vulnerable group through a disability studies-based lens in order to achieve the goal of inclusion by providing them with an equitable learning environment.

Keywords: Disability Studies; Inclusion; Students with disabilities

INTRODUCTION

The term inclusion was first used in the late 1980s; it is primarily employed in a school setting where "students with disabilities are enrolled in neighborhood schools and receive their primary instruction in general education classrooms" (Topor, Holbrook, & Koenig, 2000, p. 5). From a broader perspective, "inclusion refers to the opportunity for persons with a disability to participate fully in all the educational, employment, consumer, recreational, community, and domestic activities that typify everyday society" (Tilstone, Floriani, & Rose, 1998, p. 16). For this purpose, special educators join general educators to advance a broad program of adaptive education in mainstream education schools (Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987). Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a paradigm shift has occurred in the United States from special education to the general education setting called inclusion. Nonetheless, the desired outcomes of inclusion have yet to be achieved. The major contributing factor here is that the inclusion of students with disabilities is still viewed from a deficiency-oriented lens, and the label of "disabled" is seen as a source of oppression, and disability is still regarded as a low-status identity (Swain & French, 2000). In order to attend a general education school setting, these students may have to meet specific requirements.

Based on the topic presented, the primary purpose of this review is to explore how to accommodate students with disabilities in general education settings utilizing a disability studies framework. The paper essentially seeks to answer the question: how does the framework of disability studies help practitioners, educators, administrators, and policymakers to promote inclusion?

Theoretical Framework

Disability studies (DS) is an academic, activist, and artistic endeavor that aims to make us attend to and even rethink how we imagine, perceive and treat disability and disabled people (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). Disability studies does not treat disability as an individual biological matter but rather as a social phenomenon requiring critical inquiry (Finkelstein, 1998, p. 33). Disability studies scholars have, therefore, long attempted to challenge and overturn the arguments of critics of inclusion. For example, they argue that certain children with disabilities cannot learn through traditional teaching methods. This is because they need more individualized instruction from certified special education teachers, which is only possible in special education settings. Moreover, these critics claim that inclusion adversely impacts the academics of non-disabled students.

In contrast, disability studies scholars dispel this ubiquitous criticism of inclusion. They also reject the widespread assumption that regular classrooms are rightly the province of non-disabled students. Instead, they believe educational institutions can be inclusive regardless of special education needs. Pfeiffer and Yoshida (1995) assert, "Disability Studies has been developed to disentangle impairments from the myth, ideology, and stigma that influence social interaction and social policy (p. 480). . The scholarship challenges the idea that the economic and social status and the assigned roles of people with disabilities are inevitable outcomes of their condition.

Disability studies scholars have also attempted to raise awareness in mass society by reimagining disability as a wide-ranging continuum that encompasses all bodies and minds. Due to these efforts, people began viewing disability through a social model that sees it not as some individual problem or affliction needing a cure. In other words, it is essentially the product of environments, attitudes, and policies that fail to include the vast array of human particularities. The ultimate goal is not to try to adapt diverse bodies and minds to rigid structures but to radically reimagine these structures to fit diverse bodies and minds. Similarly, the classic social model of disability also recognizes the dependency of all individuals on external supports, technologies, and interventions to survive, flourish and make life easier.

FINDINGS

The current review reveals that the framework of disability studies has created an awareness of disability which can positively influence inclusion in the following ways.

Disability: A Form of Perception

In general, stakeholders perceive students with disabilities through a deficit-oriented approach. This perception thus overshadows their natural potential. Educators tend to perceive this population as vulnerable. Their emphasis is more likely to be placed on a student's deficits rather than their strengths (Tomlinson et al., 2003). These negative attitudes from stakeholders can result in differential treatment. As a result of deficit orientation and educators' low expectations, these students are less likely to be included in their peers' groups (McDermott, 1996).

Notably, disability is socially constructed, and words or language affect human feelings and their active responses. In particular, metaphors play an important role in language construction because disability metaphors have a "cumulative impact on cultural attitudes towards disabled people" (Vidali, 2010, p. 35). Metaphors structure how we perceive, think and do (Brune, 2013). Disability History witnessed much violence committed in the name of

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metaphors used to label disabilities. Thus, Metaphors could negatively impact the identity of students with disabilities, adversely affecting the inclusion process.

The disability studies framework helps us to understand that the difference may not be socially constructed. However, labels are socially and culturally constructed. Although the labels applied to learners may change over time, exclusion and lack of equity may be perpetuated through labeling practice (Bishop, 2015). This embodied difference and deficiency philosophy is based on the prejudicial attitude that those whose performance deviates from the majority lack some critical attribute, ability, or potential (Burns & Dudley-Marling, 2014). Disability studies scholars have long argued about the representations of disability in language and literature that ultimately portrays a particular view of disability in society. As a result, people with a positive social image are more likely to receive opportunities, expectations, and other life conditions to enhance their abilities. People with competencies are also more likely to be seen positively by others (Osburn, 2006).

Further, Disability Studies scholarship reminds educators, practitioners, administrators, and policymakers to use metaphors carefully. The educators must know which metaphors they can use in an inclusive classroom for all learners. There is no doubt that this is an ongoing conundrum and could be resolved through mutual understanding. Because of prevailing misperceptions about students with disabilities, they remain an underserved population in mainstream education. They are less likely to be provided with an appropriate learning environment in an inclusive classroom setting. Their special needs are often neglected. I believe that it is not the disability of these students but rather the disability stigma and its false perceptions that inhibit their integration into an inclusive classroom environment. As Titchkosky (2011) rightly notes that disability is a form of perception that typically devalues an embodied difference (p. 5).

Redefining access

Previously, access referred to the general education curriculum and physical space of an inclusive classroom setting. Practitioners, educators, and policymakers assumed that ample funds were required to make learning accessible for learners with varied needs. In addition, they assumed it requires modifying the entire infrastructure, including the architectural designs of educational institutions. Students cannot learn the material because of accessibility barriers, and stakeholders most likely perceive the problem to lie with the individual student rather than focusing on social, discursive, political, or structural contexts (Lambert et al., 2018). Because of this narrow concept of accessibility, students with disabilities were confined to segregation in so-called special-education classrooms.

Thus, more emphasis is placed on the sociohistorical model of disability in educational institutions, threatening to disable some students while enabling others (Bartlett, 2007). Educational institutions thereby reproduce particular notions of ability and disability (Minich, 2016). Disability studies scholars have created awareness about valuing the different accessibility needs of diverse populations. They have raised awareness of how to make the social environment more accessible to people with disabilities. They emphasize reimagining the definition of accessibility in a broader context to remove barriers to inclusion for students with disabilities. They think critically about access to space that allows for flexibility, which is one of the core principles of universal design. Access is a captivating endeavor that needs to be understood — as a complex form of perception that organizes socio-political relations between people in social space (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 4). In this sense, architects can play a critical role in creating a physically accessible environment for students with disabilities. The

physical framework determines who is socially acceptable and who is confined and contained (Hamraie,2013).

This scenario ignites the necessity for reimagining the structures of institutions to fit this diverse array of bodies and minds. In doing so, school administration should provide their educators with the appropriate tools and adequate resources to design, schedule, and execute every lesson plan to include every student, despite their physical abilities or disabilities. Where appropriate, the school administration can also seek the contributions and opinions of other professionals, including assistive technology developers, curriculum designers, educational researchers, occupational therapists, practitioners, behavior specialists, school psychologists, career counselors, social workers, and disability studies scholars. In a nutshell, adequate professional teacher training, recognition of the uniqueness of each differently-abled student, implementation of suitable assistive tools, and alternative means of communication could be significant precursors to inclusion.

Social Justice in Education:

People with disabilities were stigmatized and marginalized in the past because disability was equated with inaccessibility. In a nutshell, the deficit-oriented perspective on disability and built environments serve as a litmus test of the broader social exclusion of students with disabilities from mainstream educational institutions. Based on these disparities, this is seen as a necessary site for scholarly inquiry. As Linton (1998) points out, disability is viewed beyond the health science perspective. It is considered a civil and human rights issue, a minority identity, a sociological formation, a historical community, a diversity group, and a category of critical analysis in culture and the arts.

Minich (2016) also notes that the goal of disability studies is to produce knowledge and develop attitudes that could provide justice for those with stigmatized bodies and minds. Thus, she names disability studies as a methodology rather than a subject that may accomplish the goal of social justice work, including social justice in education. She continues to say that this social justice is not limited to those with disabilities but also "other movements for the liberation of people with bodies and minds that are devalued or pathologized" (Minich, 2016, p. 5).

Further, disability studies scholars also brought up the idea that what counts as a disability and who counts as disabled varies over time and place. This is because the definition of critical disability studies is not stable. Disability studies scholars and practitioners are constantly re-evaluating this definition. In her book "Beasts of Burden," Sunaura Taylor (2011) suggests novel ways of valuing human life that are not limited by specific physical or mental capabilities. She argues that it is not precisely our intelligence, rationality, ability, physical independence, or bipedal nature that gives us dignity and value. She argues that life is, and should be presumed to be, worth living, whether it is for an individual with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, quadriplegia, or autism. Taylor (2011) further asserts that if the framework of disability studies protects the rights of those who are disabled or lack certain highly valued abilities, for instance, rationality and physical independence, then how can disability studies scholarship legitimately exclude animals for these reasons without contradiction? Thus, she claims that the framework of disability studies ensures justice for all species.

Disability studies Scholars claim that people who are physically dependent experience stigma as a result of their dependency. The more impaired someone is, the more of a burden they become. The only thing that makes many people (perceived) burdens on their families and

friends is that they have limited options. Based on these disparities, disability studies scholars reinforce their argument that impairment alone is not the reason for dependence but our inefficient social service system. Over time, disability studies have emerged as a topic of inquiry that includes not only profound cultural aspects but also material objects. In addition, this approach takes human variations into account as they have helped shape and build social environments, just as those environments have, in turn, shaped bodies (Linton, 1998, p. 917).

Nevertheless, disability studies offer a new perspective on our society by embracing human values and diversity and accommodating our diverse needs. I argue, therefore, that disability studies should be employed to examine students with disabilities. In order to create an inclusive community, the school's administration must aim to foster a climate of understanding and mutual respect for the dignity and worth of all students. It is noteworthy that practitioners, educators, school administrators, and policymakers must acknowledge the vast array of human differences to promote inclusion.

CONCLUSION

The framework of disability studies provides a new lens for the stakeholders to look at human variation and deepens their understanding. Hence practitioners, educators, school administrators, and policymakers are required to understand that inclusion is an ideological commitment and a political struggle against exclusive attitudes, values, beliefs, approaches, and structures of the overall educational system (Ballard, 1995; Barton, 1995; Corbett, 2001; Lipsky & Gartner, 1999). Importantly, educational institutions can be inclusive only when all stakeholders view inclusion as a process, not as a state (Ainscow, 1997; Booth, 1996; Levin, 1997). Therefore, they should work collaboratively to eliminate or minimize the adverse effects of physical, environmental, attitudinal, and technological barriers that may prevent students with disabilities from mainstream education.

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