Understanding Disability and Culture while Enhancing Advocacy

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Abstract

In Canada's increasingly multicultural society, a common understanding of the basic rights of individuals with disabilities in educational and workplace settings is essential for educators to provide appropriate programs and inclusive opportunities. This paper will describe a three-year project that the Faculty of Education at Brock University has begun with six other international post-secondary institutions in an attempt to cross cultural barriers in the field of advocacy for persons with disabilities. Over the course of two years, 40 Canadian students and 30 European students will be involved in an international course and internship experience. This is intended to be an experientially-based, intensive immersion experience in disabilities instruction. It is expected that the participants will begin to view disability from a human rights perspective and to return home with the cultural knowledge and understanding of disability needed to promote a more inclusive society.

Introduction

We live in a global society where the experience of disability is culturally bound and determined. Interestingly, the term, *disability*, does not directly translate into many languages (Haranandani, 2005). Yet, an individual cannot be exempt from being disabled because *disability* as a distinct category does not exist in their language—disabilities are not linguistically discriminatory. Societies have explanations for why some individuals and not others are disabled, how individuals with disabilities are to be treated, what roles are appropriate and inappropriate and what rights and responsibilities individuals with disabilities are either entitled to or denied (Bogdan & Taylor, 1994). Worldwide, these vast cultural differences are reflected in the hundreds of differing definitions and viewpoints of disability. The lack of a universal definition accompanied by differentiated service delivery, limited employment opportunities, diverse socioeconomic factors, and attitudinal and belief systems that are deep rooted, make the development of programs to support the needs of individuals with disabilities a complex task. In Canada's increasingly multicultural society, a common understanding of the basic rights of individuals with disabilities in educational and workplace settings is essential for educators to provide appropriate programs and inclusive opportunities.

Given that disability is not a unitary concept (Hiranandani, 2005), an international agreement on meaning can be virtually impossible, however, a universal appreciation for rights of individuals with disabilities is critical. This paper will describe a three-year project that the Faculty of Education at Brock University has begun with six other Canadian and international post-secondary institutions in an attempt to cross cultural barriers in the field of advocacy for persons with disabilities. An objective of this project is to prepare post-secondary level students (those with disabilities and those studying education and human services) to enhance their

leadership and advocacy skills in the field of disability and to provide institutional and community improvements.

Viewpoints on Disability and Culture

Western society has traditionally adopted a medical or clinical view of disability in which disability is a condition to be fixed or cured. In other cultures, disability may be viewed as punishment for a previous generation, the result of committing a sin or offence against the spirits, something that can be contracted or, in religious practice, as a gift. Since disability is a socio-cultural concept, socially constructed barriers prevent individuals with disabilities from participating fully in their communities (Albert, 2005). Moreover, the opportunities that are made available to individuals with disabilities are influenced by cultural factors such as physical and intellectual strength, type and cause of disability, age, gender and community (Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association, 2005).

Much of the literature on disability and culture describes the creation of a disability culture (Gill, 1995; Nelson, 1999), where individuals with disabilities share a common history of oppression, have forged a group identity and a bond of resilience (Independent Living Institute, 2001). There is little research on how the lives of individuals with disabilities are influenced by their culture, race, ethnicity, religion or language – simply, it is recommended that service providers offer culturally appropriate services (Stienstra, 2002).

Over the past few decades, within Canada, the traditional view of fixing a person with disability has been challenged (Snow, 1999). Individuals with disabilities are seen as an equal and powerful voice in their own self-determination. Within the workplace, federal and provincial legislations protect and promote the hiring of and accommodation for individuals with disabilities. Within school settings, the inclusion of students with disabilities as fully participating in the educational community has become commonplace (McPhail & Freeman, 2005). Despite these affirmative actions, it remains abundantly clear that advocacy, as an essential component of any educational or work environment needs to continue to be an important focus as individuals with disabilities remain underemployed in comparison to their able-bodied peers (Statistics Canada, 2003).

Recently, there have also been challenges to the medical or clinical views of disability and *disability studies* has evolved as a dedicated academic discipline. Disability studies examines the nature and significance of the differences between disabilities and how these differences are interpreted (Bogdan & Taylor, 1994). The challenges that individuals with disabilities face are a function of society and disability studies examines solutions to break down the barriers that limit individuals' full participation in the community.

Advocacy and Cultural Reciprocity

The ability of an individual to successfully enter a workplace is largely dependent on his/her opportunity for quality education culminating in post-secondary instruction. Once in a workplace environment, the ability of an individual with a disability to remain and thrive, can be closely linked to the philosophy and orientation of the workplace with regard to disability, and the ability of the individual with the disability to be aware of their rights and exercise advocacy for their position.

One key way to begin breaking down barriers is through the enhancement of an individual's ability to articulate and advocate for their rights within multiple contexts. While inroads have been made at local and community levels, there is a need for the expansion of this type of advocacy beyond the typical borders of community. International student travel and

exchange programs, particularly for students with disabilities, can be an extremely valuable way to explore and enhance the development of advocacy for individuals with disabilities. International travel exposes students to different cultural points of view and affords an opportunity to share information and understanding. This two-way process, known as, *cultural reciprocity* (Wagner, 2007), operates on the premise that service providers must develop their own cultural self-awareness in order to recognize the cultural underpinnings of their professional practice. Essentially, cultural reciprocity facilitates the exchange of information and encourages the identification of values and beliefs that underlie different cultural points of view. International student travel may help mediate both a better understanding and appreciation of one's own culture, as well as foster understanding of and respect for the cultural identity of all people. Additionally, for those students who may ultimately find a vocation as an educator or service provider, understanding the contrast between one's own view of disability and the many other cultural orientations to disability, can only improve the intersection between these individuals and the other professionals with whom they will interact. For some student participants, the exchange experience may be the impetus to view disability from a human rights perspective and to return home with the cultural knowledge and understanding of disability needed to promote a more inclusive society.

Enhancing Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

The Faculty of Education at Brock University is the lead on a project entitled, "Advocacy and Leadership: Enhancing Educational and Employment Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities." This project is one of only eleven funded by Human Resources Development Canada. As a function of this project, Brock University is partnered with Nova Scotia Community College, College of the North Atlantic, University of Prince Edward Island, Gent University (Belgium), Kemi-Tornio University of Applied Sciences (Finland), and Bedford College of Further Education (England). The overarching goal of this project is to prepare post-secondary level students to enhance their leadership and advocacy skills in the field of disability and to provide institutional and community improvements.

Over the course of two years, 40 Canadian students and 30 European students will be involved in an international course and internship experience. This is intended to be an experientially-based, intensive immersion experience in disabilities instruction. Student participants will include both those with disabilities, as well as those who will be working in education and the human services field. The course component will include directed studies of international laws related to disabilities, provision of support services, program evaluation and cultural and language instruction. This course is designed to develop the skills, knowledge and expertise of participants through discussion and debate on advocacy and student leadership. Supplementary to the course are on-site lectures, a speaker series, a mentoring program, academic advising services, and focused retreats. In addition to this, student participants will complete an internship placement in an international community agency or institution. Student participants will demonstrate through reflective activities an understanding of employment-related international knowledge, and skills and expertise in advocacy and leadership in the field of disability.

Projected Results and Final Outcomes

Ultimately, this project will focus on preparing participants to have influence on advocacy in education and disability studies. This project pushes the boundaries commonly experienced by persons with disabilities as it strives to prepare participants for leadership in their communities,

workplaces, and college or university environments. With its international focus, individuals with disabilities will gain a much broader definition and set of skills to assist them to cope with the academic world as well as the workplace. These individuals will be future professionals who will be in positions to advocate and serve as role models for the inclusion rights of individuals with disabilities. Additionally, these individuals will be able to support an explicit connection between culturally different conceptions of disability in their respective workplaces.

This transatlantic collaboration also allows participants to develop an awareness of cross-cultural disability issues. Through interactions with peers in a global context, cross-cultural communication on disability will be developed. Participants are likely to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills through their internship placements. As a function of being immersed in these authentic contexts, participants will have the opportunity to acquire diverse linguistic and cultural understandings.

Given a common passion for advancing the work done in the field of disabilities, each institution is supported from its highest administrative level to develop this collaborative international project. The project will help to break down the pre-existing barriers between colleges and universities by providing students from both types of institutions to be integrated into courses and internship placements. The recognition of course credit both internationally as well as across college and university boundaries, provides challenges that all partners are enthusiastic to take on. With respect to sustainability, there will be a validated course of study and collaboration that will serve as a vehicle for future participants, thus extending the life of the project. Student work will serve as a basis for the development of the project monograph as well as presentation and journal artifacts that will be disseminated at the local, national and international level.

Implications for Educators

The outcomes of this project are potentially beneficial for both students and educators. The fear of the unknown has hampered some educators from realizing that inclusion is possible (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Access to students with disabilities and interaction with them as equal participants will provide an inclusion experience for participants in the program. Through the project's activities and reflections, participants will have the opportunity to learn with fellow students with disabilities, and see that there is much for them to gain from these relationships. Each student will bring their own set of experiences and beliefs to the group, and build skills by focusing on their strengths and expanding their knowledge in unfamiliar areas. The development of skills and attitudes for implementing inclusive education in schools relies not only on knowledge about disabilities and strategies for teaching students with disabilities, but also on educators' self-efficacy, experience, and cultural awareness (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Romi & Leyser, 2006). This project will provide these opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students in education and disability studies.

It is also likely that these students will develop as a community of learners as they gain knowledge about new cultures and dissolve their differences as they approach this new learning task together. All students will learn new linguistic and cultural norms and be able to critically analyze the similarities and differences between the constructs of inclusion in their homeland, and abroad. As well, this experience will force participants to face the social and cultural biases they hold and to acknowledge the influence of biases in supporting individuals with disabilities. This will be an important outcome as it has been noted that cultural differences among educators can affect their overall attitudes toward inclusion (Romi & Leyser, 2006).

Educators benefit from the opportunity to see how inclusion is practiced and to get involved directly through experience (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). For example, it has been found (Turner, 2003) that teacher candidates' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities change through interaction and direct experience with individuals with disabilities in addition to professor-directed instruction. Educators who have experience with an individual with a disability accept this individual as a full person, rather than a person with a disability (Tait & Purdie, 2000). These educators understand the rights of individuals with disabilities to a full education, envision inclusive education as doable, and see the future potential in students with disabilities.

This project may also afford graduate students who are practicing educators to critically analyze how inclusion can be improved through professional learning. Professional learning opportunities that are successful at promoting inclusive practices are those that include meaningful site-based initiatives and collaborative relationships among educators (Van Kraayenoord, 2003). For educators to develop as leaders, they require this kind of person-centred experience in addition to coursework. During this project both participants with and without disabilities will be learning together about inclusion in action. Specifically, individuals with disabilities will be encouraged to share their lived experiences and encourage others with disabilities to reach for their own goals and advocate for inclusion in their own countries. Individuals without disabilities will likely be enriched by the legitimacy of this collaboration. After completion of the project and internship experiences, the participants will be in a position to share their collective knowledge with others and assume leadership roles in their schools and workplaces.

By deliberate design, this project's bricolage of participants both with and without disabilities, is likely to contribute to the enhanced development of these educators and service providers. This expansion of the concept of educator or human services provider to include those with disabilities, has a powerful message for putting inclusion into action among professionals as well as the school student population. This is a relatively new area of research and as such has not been described in the literature. It will be exciting to chronicle educators' personal and shared journeys through the project and share these in future publications.

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