The values of inclusive education: A political debate

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Abstract: The ontology of lived experiences of young people with physical and sensorial disabilities was used to understand the experience of inclusive education (IE) within further education (FE) and higher education (HE) institutions in Malta. The inquiry problematised the environmental, social and educational disabling and enabling factors. Underlying values of inclusion and exclusion that promoted social cohesion or social conflict emerged from the discourse. This research paper focuses on the accounts of four disabled young people. Seven semi-structured interviews were carried out per participant over two years while they were attending a course at FE and HE level. Narrative analysis was utilised to understand the underlying themes of the stories. The analysis indicates that successful stories of inclusion are influenced by the extent to which disabled and non-disabled persons practise values that promote social cohesion within a community. Virtues of social cohesion affect the extent to which environmental and educational disabling barriers are challenged and changed. The evidence from this study contributes to the debate that active participation of disabled young people, valuing the voice of others, embracing values of inclusion, and the appreciation of individual's variations inculcate growth in the quality of IE. Social transformation affects the environmental and educational milieu within FE and HE institutions.

Keywords: Inclusive education, disability, further and higher education, values of inclusion

Introduction

Borg, Cardona and Caruana (2009) endorse "the moral conviction that education is inherently political" (p. 1). The politics of inclusive education (IE) are contentious as according to Corbett (2001), it exposes a structural and an ideological debate and

"it is often the case that these practical and political elements are kept separate in debates on inclusion" (p. 29). This discourse applies to the local scene as although Malta has been implementing an IE policy in state schools since 1995 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, 2005), these political discourses are relatively new as the number of disabled students at further education (FE) and higher education (HE) levels is still less than 1% of the student population (CRPD, 2010, p. 18).

This paper discusses evidence from research that stemmed from Dewey's theory of experience (1930) who claims that "the very process of living together educates" (1938, p. 7). However, it is argued that the political direction driving the experience of living together is as important since the experience of living together through IE could promote social cohesion or social conflict. In fact, Allan and Slee (2008a, 2008b) argue that IE is considered a troubling field that encloses a series of emotive and highly charged contexts.

Shakespeare (2006) proposes that disability studies should present rich empirical research "of how disabled people experience barriers, and how they experience their impairments" (p. 198). To fill this epistemological gap, the experience of lived experiences of young people with physical and sensorial disabilities was used to problematise the environmental, social and educational disabling and enabling factors within FE and HE institutions. By utilising students' accounts, this paper aims to discuss the extent to which political discourses that are permeated with values that promote democracy, social justice and human rights could influence practices within FE and HE institutions. The analysis indicates that successful stories of inclusion are highly influenced by the application of values that promote social cohesion. Virtues of social cohesion that are implemented by stakeholders affect the extent to which environmental, social and educational disabling barriers are challenged and changed. However, the journey towards IE is multifaceted and intricate and necessitates praxis at all levels of the education system and society (French and Swain, 2004).

The evidence contributes to the debate that active participation of disabled young people is politically important as their participation and advocacy inculcate "growth" in the quality of IE (Dewey, 1930, p. 357). The promotion of an inclusive culture that shares values of social cohesion can transform the structures within the educational milieu whereby the political dualism between the needs of disabled young people and educational institutions is advocated on the basis of human rights, democracy and social justice.

Theoretical Framework

Jerome and McCallum (2012) maintain that a rights-based approach in education entails that students are voiced and listened to. Thus, it could be argued that the voices of the silenced can contribute to a cultural praxis where our society

develops a proactive approach in providing quality learning and assessment measurements that are equitable, respect student diversity and reflect the integrity of educational institutions and examination Boards. Adams and Brown (2006) report that most HE institutions "require a significant cultural shift from seeing disabled students as 'outsiders coming in', to an institution which openly embraces 'all comers'" (p. 4). Similarly, Hurst (2009) argues, that there are various challenges in educational institutions in having inclusive routine policies, procedures and practices where disabiltiy services are considered as "value-added" rather than "an additional institutional expense" (p. 95).

Ballard (1999) argues that the inclusion of voices that were previously excluded and who then present their realities could stimulate "a radical revision of thought and practice" (p. 172). Gramsci (1916) (in Forgacs (1988, p.57)) explains that culture is "the attainment of a higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and obligations". By bringing to consciousness concrete and immediate experiences which are parts of the whole of IE, the dialectic political tensions in the implementation of IE on a pragmatic and ideological level could be utilised to inform each other to nurture a culture of inclusion. In other words, by developing spaces of ongoing consultation and dialogue between service users and service providers, stakeholders would be empowered to voice the political and practical standpoints that are enabling or disabling the implementation of IE from a rights-based perspective.

Lack of consultation could be interpreted as subversion, as a means to promote manipulation and oppression. As Freire (1993) argues, by "attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building" (p. 47). To achieve a praxis, "it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason" (Freire, 1993, p. 48). Unless there is a collective transformation of an inclusive culture rather than cosmetic reviews amongst those who construct structures, decision-makers and policy-makers, there is not much hope for empowerment and emancipation of disabled persons in education. In fact, Gramsci (1929-1935) (in Forgacs (1988), p. 199) sustains that, "ideology is identified as distinct from the structure, and it is asserted that it is not ideology that changes the structure but vice versa". The human impact is crucial because, as Dewey (1930) debates, humanity should realise that "the ultimate value of every institution is its distinctively human effect – its effect upon conscious experience" (p. 8). Therefore, educational institutions need to create systems that promulgate inclusive experiences that support social cohesion.

Joseph (2003) sustains that cohesion means "the way in which a group, bloc, order or system is able to maintain itself" (p. 3). Thus, cohesion promotes sustainability as each member would be responsible to maintain the whole educational system on a structural and political level. Conversely, conflict is viewed "as a failing of the

system that needs correcting in order to return to equilibrium" (Joseph, 2003, p. 4). Dialogue, collaboration and the inculcation of values of inclusion could shift conflicts to be regarded as opportunities for social transformation to foster democracy and social justice. Dewey (1930) argues that "society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication" (p. 5).

Shuayb (2012a, 2012b) argues that education for social cohesion embraces equity, equality, inclusion, a democratic school environment, participation and empowerment of all individuals to address and promote social cohesion. To prevent oppression and discrimination, the value of equity needs to be enforced as it is through equity that social justice in education can be achieved. Slee (1993) sustains that equity in schools requires "a multi-level approach" that addresses "organisation, governance and administration, curriculum and the construction of worthwhile knowledge, and pedagogy" (p. 3).

Riddell and Weedon (2009) maintain that "changes in institutions tend to take place as a result of bottom-up, as well as top-down pressures" (p. 27). Thus, it could be argued that each education sector is in a continuum and as such, each educational entity needs to work in synergy with another to provide quality IE that implements the right of education and safeguards the principles of democracy and social justice for all students. An attitude that cherishes values of inclusion and a disposition towards collaboration amongst all stakeholders, both as service providers and users, are essential attributes so that disabling factors are reduced while enabling factors are promulgated and celebrated.

Methodology

This paper focuses on data generated by a narrative inquiry carried out as part of a research project that used a mixed-methods approach. The aim was to listen, gather information and understand how service users feel or think about their experiences of the phenomenon under study (Cousin, 2009). In line with the 'social model' of disability (UPIAS, 1976), my standpoint as the researcher was partisan to disabled persons. Plummer (2001) explains that narratology is a field "which takes as its central task the analysis of stories and narratives" (p. 186) while Cousin (2009) suggests that "narrative inquiry is particularly useful if you want to know something about how people make sense of their lives through the selective stories they tell about noteworthy episodes" (p. 93). Data collection occurred between 2011 and 2014. Over two years, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with four disabled women. Plummer's (2001) method of analysis was adopted to extract and understand the underlying themes of the stories. The transcripts as 'field texts' were used to identify the "moments" of environmental, educational and social disabling and enabling experiences, and to understand the context, space and time of the whole story (Clandinin, 2013, p. 173. See also Van Manen (2014) and Jeong-Hee (2016)).

Profile of sample

The choice of young persons with physical and sensorial disabilities was based on the premise that the selective examination system in Malta limits the opportunities for persons with intellectual disability to be enrolled in academic FE and HE institutions and "physical and sensory impairments are in many senses the easiest to accommodate" (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 201). A 'criterion scheme' which entailed "choosing settings, groups, and/or individuals because they represent one or more criteria" was used to select the participants of the narratives (Collins, 2010, p. 359). For ethical purposes, administrators of FE institutions forwarded my invitation letter to potential participants. Two participants had a physical disability while the other two had a sensory disability. Three participants shared their experiences while attending a two-year course at FE level. The other participant narrated her experiences during the second year at FE level and first year at HE level. For ethical purposes, the participants were given a pseudonym.

Findings

The findings shed light on how inclusive values affect the wellbeing and the quality of experiences disabled students have and the type of culture being nurtured in the school community. Conversely, values of exclusion create social conflict and limit the extent to which disabled people can have access to FE and HE at par to any other student. Although the stories shared common themes, in this text the narratives which were originally told in Maltese and English are used to support specific themes.

Equality and equity. The participants recognised that the principles of equality and equity are being recognised at the respective FE and HE institution, but there is still more work to be done. They felt disabled from being given the chance to do mundane activities independently as their peers due to lack of environmental access either because of individuals who do not prioritise this issue in the agenda, lack of funds or incorrect budgeting. The participants valued the importance of being given an equal opportunity to learn that brings them at par with their non-disabled peers. The way others treated them also had to reflect equity as they wanted to conform with their peers. The participants claimed that during adolescence, matters are even more complex as the person would become more self-conscious and society expects individuals to portray the image of an able and independent person. Disabling barriers can therefore affect the social and psychological development of an adolescent. Socially, conformity facilitated the propensity that participants were accepted by their peers and felt equal to others.

On an educational level, the participants indicated that equitable opportunities to learning such as distance learning and access arrangements in examinations enabled them to receive what is theirs by right and demonstrate their abilities in

the mode that is accessible to them. Attitudes that reflect flexibility and creativity in addressing problems motivated participants to persevere to reach their full learning potential and develop self-efficacy to improve the quality of their life and society.

On the other hand, experiencing a struggle due to lack of standardised procedures at FE and HE institutions made the participants feel disempowered and oppressed. Participants acknowledged that to avoid embarrassment in being dependent on their friends, for instance to provide them with notes, they pretended that they were coping. This approach had negative academic consequences. The experience of a struggle reflects the fact that disabled persons are being suppressed by those who are in authority or institutional directives which were created by individuals. Standardisation and conformity in the quality of educational services are essential so that students would receive what they are entitled to and the integrity of the institution would be strengthened. Equity affects the extent to which disabled students would feel that they belong to the respective institution and can exercise their independence, freedom and privacy. Equity empowered participants to participate in activities without feeling that they were privileged. The participants argued:

> If you have something different, it doesn't mean that you have something bad. Society makes you disabled as it won't see you in the same way as someone else. … You are equal to other students. … I wished to be like others. No one has an LSA [Learning Support Assistant] and why should I be different, not having my liberty, independence and privacy. … For a lecturer to ask and try to help you, well and good, but not making preferences because you have different needs. (Melanie)

> Inclusive education, is that every person would receive the same education as another person. I am a person who doesn't want someone to treat me at a lower value because I am normal like others. … Most of the outings I won't be able to go as they are not accessible for me. Outings are not recorded, let alone a lecture. Sometimes it is lack of thought as when you are a normal person in inverted commas, certain thoughts won't cross your mind. (Alessia)

> By inclusive education, everyone has the right to learn equally. If you have a problem, you won't go through hell to get what you need. … There should be collaboration in everything. If a school doesn't give you the opportunity to enter the normal class, you're already not included. To segregate them, and when they'll grow up, they'll come here, it won't be normal for them. They would not have habituated. (Elena)

> The word disability doesn't have to be a negative. People make it a negative. The person becomes defined by society. Basically, your status is according to

how society decides it, not according to how you are as a person. A lot of progress is going on, but we still have a lot to achieve. We are different, but our differences should not result into discrimination. (Marie)

Sensitivity towards oneself and others. Being realistic about one's limitations and strengths and the possibilities and restrictions within the educational system are essential to balance the politics between the self and the structures within the educational system. The accounts showed that finding practical solutions that lead to positive consequences are attributed to personal commitment, nurturing positive thinking, and being courageous, persuasive and self-determined to accomplish goals. Good interpersonal skills, the drive to take initiatives and being creative to establish a role within a team facilitate social acceptance and cohesion. A social network consisting of people of good will is essential to support disabled people to overcome the limitations caused by an impairment and to act as a pressure group on people who are in authority to remove disabling barriers. Attitudes of individuals who assume that disabled persons are sick or second-class citizens instil frustration, antagonism, anger and helplessness among disabled people that could develop social conflict.

During adolescence, there is the need for an acute sensitivity towards the personal and psychological needs of disabled persons from a trans-disciplinary team consisting of both professional and non-professional individuals. Through collaboration that reflects inclusive values, these individuals could empower disabled young people to gain confidence to explore how they could be catalysts within the school community and develop an identity of activists. Only individuals who believe in the benefits of IE work for disabled people to be given a chance to exploit their unique potential. They also strive for the emancipation and independence of disabled persons from a rights-based principle. The provision of access from a charitable standpoint is oppressive as it undresses a person from one's dignity. Disability activism on a personal, social and institutional level in promoting IE, challenges the structures and politics of the status quo.

The accounts indicated that when lecturers, administrators and examination boards consult students to seek possible alternatives about how the environment and educational activities could be accessed, disabled students would be empowered to develop agency. On the other hand, when people in authority make assumptions about what is best for disabled persons without direct consultation, paternalism and presumptuousness ensue, which force disabled people to be submissive. The more disabling factors are removed by means of communication and action that spring from inclusive values, the more disabled persons are nurtured to a culture of independence and achieve an independent identity. Developing positive relationships between lecturers, administrators and students facilitates the transmission of constructive feedback with openmindedness free from hierarchical political pressures.

The experience of being considerate of others instils stakeholders to listen, think and value each other's position, limitations and abilities. Being considerate of others inspires stakeholders to communicate, collaborate, show courtesy, appreciate and reciprocate support. It also instils courage to overcome taken for granted everyday challenges and develop positive relationships. This approach is socially and educationally beneficial in community building. The participants maintained:

> My friends give me advice and help me to be positive towards life. … Friends give you the notes. … They have to come with me as I can't go to the stationer's on my own. By force you have to depend on others. … There are youths who speak with arrogance and although you try not to pay attention, it's not easy. Now either you're going to let it break you or you're going to adopt a positive approach towards others. (Melanie)

> My disability, even if I don't pay much attention to it, it creates limitations for me. … The students amongst themselves, it's one thing seeing a person and seeing the wheelchair only and another seeing the abilities of the person. (Alessia)

> I don't talk a lot about the disability with people. You'll be afraid that maybe they'll treat you differently. … You have to put effort too. You need to start thinking positively. You need to fend for yourself. (Elena)

> You could have a student who can cope alone, but if he doesn't have accessibility, you've stopped everything. I am not expecting that the school should adapt for everything I need. But I am not saying that nothing should be done. …Your presence within the school is creating awareness by itself. (Marie)

Living together is educational. Living in a community that is a microcosm of society is educational as it enables different others to interpret difference with inclusive values of acceptance, altruism, generosity, solidarity, tolerance and respect to one's dignity. Participants claimed that sharing experiences enables community members to see beyond the physical body. Unless interdependence is valued, the experience of living together would remain at a plateau level where people exist together. Conflicts could arise due to unwillingness and lack of understanding of how others see and live their world. Sharing experiences is educationally and socially enabling as disabled persons, who are suppressed by overprotection for instance from parents, would have the opportunity to get out of their cocoon. Members who belong to a group tend to support each other to break barriers and overcome limitations. When lecturers cherish inclusive values and organise inclusive learning environments, the chance for inclusive group dynamics to be developed is increased as students learn through observation and role modelling.

Both disabled and non-disabled persons require inner strength to face challenges and demonstrate a welcoming approach towards others. However, unless there are opportunities for social inclusion and social cohesion to develop, disabled students would be systematically put at a disadvantage and could experience loneliness, rejection and social conflict. For example, in Malta, due to the small cohort of students, Deaf people can experience loneliness. The number of sign language interpreters is small and Deaf persons experience difficulties to keep the momentum in class. Respect for the Deaf culture needs to be instilled so that the way communication is conveyed would be accessible to Deaf persons and persons with hearing impairment. Habituation and adaptability to student diversity contributes to the development of personal and group resilience and by being receptive to difference, one's notion of what is normal could be extended. Thus living in a community with inclusive values makes a difference in being nurtured to internalise habits of good citizenship. The participants argued:

> Inclusive education is beneficial as you won't feel different. I experience the culture of inclusivity. … When I told them, and they made accommodations for me, I felt included. … The fact that you'll be in society, you'll be living with them, that makes the difference. The mentality is a bit backward, we are still something different. (Melanie)

> They are accepting me, but it is step by step. It is dependent upon the disabled person's approach towards others. (Alessia)

> They [friends] help you in everything. You'll appreciate those things as otherwise you'll need to ask the teacher, and you'll get annoyed in front of others. … People who know me, they start thinking a bit before they speak. … Previous students with disability sort of pave the way for someone else. Inclusivity is a culture, sort of the habits of people. (Elena)

> As benefits of inclusive education, they are socialising amongst each other, persons with disability are getting to know the real world. Many of them would be sheltered by parents. … There are going to be alterations, but those alterations could be for the benefit of the school and the students. … Many teachers told me, "I've never had a special student in my class," "Listen what do I need to do?" They are learning different ways of teaching to accommodate different students. (Marie)

Mutual understanding and effective communication. IE requires flexibility and creativity to accommodate the diverse needs of all stakeholders. Mutual understanding of the pressures that each stakeholder is experiencing is a prerequisite to create an equilibrium between what is available at present and what is possible. By understanding the position of disabled persons through direct consultation and evaluation of the services and facilities, disabled persons would

be in a position to access learning and assessment without additional stress than their peers. Investment in having accountable and qualified persons to assist disabled persons would contribute to strengthening the integrity of an entity.

In experiencing understanding, parties are encouraged to dialogue and listen to each other's challenges and possibilities and, in a collaborative way, put effort to make the implementation of IE on a structural and political level a reality. The creation of a positive, ethical climate about the benefits of disclosing and dissemination of information could encourage stakeholders to be prepared for change, and celebrate diversity and difference as an opportunity for growth. A negative culture about disclosure could permeate a deficit mentality and discrimination as difference and disability would have a negative connotation and define a person's identity.

Mutual understanding and effective communication entail stakeholders to value the need for becoming adaptable and pliable to get used to new systems and practices that are more universally accessible that can benefit all students. The power of social capital can be utilised to ease transition periods and to plan inclusive paths between educational sectors. Intermediaries would be in a position to empower disabled persons to voice themselves and enforce anti-discrimination legislation in entities that limit access. These factors position individuals working within FE and HE institutions and other related entities in a state of becoming as they are continously deconstructing their ideologies and practices to reconstruct a culture that exhibits inclusive principles. The participants maintained:

> Someone who hasn't ever spoken to a wheelchair user, won't know, won't even realise the difficulties that you'll find in everyday life. My friends that's what they tell me, "Before we didn't see life like this, now we are more conscious." … If you place a person in a school, the students around her are going to be different. That's how you'll become included and their values would be strengthened. To make my voice heard, apart from being a right, I think that it's my duty. (Melanie)

> It is team work because if you won't have a good relationship with the teacher, you'll have a hard time. … The major challenge was communication. (Alessia)

> I think you always need to tell as if you'll need something at the middle of the year, maybe it will be more difficult. But then it shouldn't define you. … If there are steps only, I'll have to ask for the help of others. You'll be creating more disability as you are forcing someone to beg for help. … No one knew that I had to stay at the front. There wasn't much communication. If there are two or three students who have additional needs, the teachers need to know about them. (Elena)

I should tell them that I am visually impaired. They'll be alerted so that they'll be able to prepare from beforehand, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. … Communication amongst the students and the lecturer is very important. … You should understand to be understood. There would be students who are afraid of talking to me, of saying something wrong and I'll be offended. I'll turn and smile to them, then they'll come and talk to me. (Marie)

Discussion

The significance of these findings is to contribute to the growing body of research exploring the daily lives and experiences of non-traditional students within FE and HE institutions that could be the contexts that reproduce or reduce existing social disparities (Riddell, Tinklin & Wilson, 2009). The results show that there are multi-layer social, educational and environmental relationships between disabled students and diverse stakeholders within FE and HE institutions in the provision of IE. The present culture is that disabled people form part of a minority group with a disability identity. This reflects that disability is a social construct and, as such, it could be challenged and changed (Siebers, 2011). The evidence supports the argument put forward by Shakespeare (2006) where the quality of experience is dependent upon intrinsic factors to the self, such as effects of the impairment, personal attitudes, personality and abilities. Experiences are also affected by extrinsic factors present in the context the individual finds him/herself such as disabling barriers in the built environment and negative attitudinal barriers from others. Generally, the participants had positive experiences of IE, but they lived a continuous struggle to overcome environmental, social and educational disabling barriers which are created by a majority consisting of non-disabled persons. This strengthens the "context of identity politics" for which the social model was developed (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 33).

Evidence shows that the experience of living with different others makes others recognise that difference does not have to signify a negative. Living in an inclusive context nurtures values such as collaboration, interdependence, solidarity and moral responsibility towards others that promote social cohesion and community development. Shevlin (2010) argues that consultation embeds democratic practices within the nuclei of classrooms and institutions that are basic in an inclusive agenda while Kadlec (2007) concludes that to reduce unnecessary competition and antagonism, our education system needs to stem from values that reflect an inclusive culture. Moreover, Ainscow et al. (2006) remark that values of an inclusive culture are "concerned with equity, participation, community, compassion, respect for diversity, sustainability and entitlement" (p. 23).

The participants agreed that the participation of disabled persons at FE and HE levels is beneficial for the school community and society. FE and HE institutions need to strive for community building and social cohesion where every person is empowered and valued to have a meaningful function for the school community to

become a whole (Shuayb, 2012b). Ngwana (2009) argues that, "creating and supporting sustainable development requires individual and collection positive action" (p. 43). However, the creation of sustainable inclusive contexts calls for a political debate on how to transmit policy into practice.

Implications of study

The participants' voices on experiences did not remain a mere summary of the participants' life, but were embodied with reflection in transforming meanings of IE as a fertile terrain for possible suggestions (Dewey in Boydston, 2008). Regarding policy-making, the accounts put pressure on having an updated FE and HE Act that regularises the philosophical and pragmatic ideology of IE in the local milieu. Fuller, Riddell and Wilson (2009) claim that changes in the legislation transformed institutional practices as it requires universities to make "'reasonable anticipatory adjustments' to their provision rather than making reactive accommodation which require students to declare an impairment before adjustments are made to teaching and assessment practices, as was formerly the case" (p. 8). Healey, Bradley, Fuller and Hall (2006) claim that in the long-term, "the main beneficiaries of disability legislation and the need to make suitable adjustments in advance are the non-disabled students" as good teaching and learning practices benefit all students (p. 41).

Sharing and understanding experiences of inclusion/exclusion are essential from a class-based context to policy-making for the benefit of all (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2014; Rose, 2010). Thus, direct consultation with individuals at grassroots level needs to be an integral part during the training of diverse stakeholders, development and implementation of policies and during research about any minority group. Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010) sustain that for inclusive practices to progress there should be "leadership that values and supports inclusion" (p. 110). Fernie and Henning (2006) purport that strong leadership and collaboration among the teaching staff are contributory factors to optimal inclusion. Howevour, the implementation of inclusive teaching and learning does not have "clear-cut solutions that 'work' for all school or class situations" as the school culture or shared value systems and the educational policies or infrastructure need to be considered (Watkins and Meijer, 2010, p. 241). These reflections imply that social transformations embedded with inclusive values affect the quality of IE that propagates social justice, democracy and human rights.

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