Advances in Research and Praxis in Special Education in Africa, Caribbean, and the Middle East

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Advances in Research and Praxis in Special Education in Africa, Caribbean, and the Middle East

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INTRODUCTION

THE LIMITS OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

Critical issues in Inclusive Education in Selected Countries of Africa, Caribbean and the Middle East

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Persons with disabilities anywhere in the world constitute a social minority group that is by and large disenfranchised and marginalized in education, access to employment, and in their access to other socially valued rewards. Even in developed countries where various disability programs have existed for years, persons with disabilities still continue to have limited access to cultural capital. According to Katsillis and Rubinson (1990), cultural capital is the “vehicle through which background inequalities are translated into differential academic rewards and which in turn lead to unequal social and economic rewards, thereby maintaining and legitimizing the process” (p. 270). In this vein, therefore, cultural capital plays a fundamental role in the reproduction of the educational, social, and economic hierarchies.
that are evident in society. In no other area is lack of cultural capital as self-evident as in the area of disability. Because of their lack of access, in part due to their disabling conditions and in part due to attitudinal barriers stemming from the social perception of their disabilities, individuals with disabilities have limited access to ways of talking and acting, socializing, values, competencies, behavior and forms of knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986; McLaren, 1998) that place them in socially desirable positions. Applying the theory of cultural capital in the understanding of the socio-cultural location of disability in society and of individuals labeled as disabled, one becomes more acutely aware of the role that arbitrary culturally ascribed distinctions that differ in power and prestige play in defining the social positions of persons with disabilities and how disabled individuals are placed into particular lower social class positions.

This edited volume explores various issues pertaining to the education of children with disabilities in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. As a group, persons with disabilities have been subjected to social, cultural, and educational exclusions of various forms and for various socially scripted reasons. In education, for instance, individuals with disabilities have been altogether excluded from educational participation in many parts of the developing world, or they have been excluded from pursuing meaningfully beneficial higher levels of education in developed countries like the United States. One of the social responses/remedies to the widely acknowledged exclusionary practices experienced by learners with disabilities has been the widespread implementation of inclusive practices in the education of individuals with disabilities across countries, in the west and the developing regions of the world. A distinctive marker of difference in the way inclusive practices have been enacted in western countries versus those in the developing world has primarily stemmed from the fact that majority of western countries operate under funded mandates that also regulate the provision of education to persons with disabilities. While the ideal of inclusion has been highly desirable, many countries in the developing world have floundered in their implementation due to a lack of a sound legislative framework to guide implementation coupled with socio-cultural factors related to negative perceptions of disabilities and limited funding sources. Chapters in this volume explore inclusive education from various angles.

AFRICA

The impact of childhood disability is explored from the vantage point of inclusive education in a number of selected African countries ranging from Kenya and Nigeria to Tanzania and Botswana. Related issues explored in the various chapters all tie to the overarching theme of inclusive education
vis-à-vis national and, quite often, international policy and its implementation within countries. In many developing countries, particularly those of sub-Saharan Africa, disability issues have not taken firm root in large extent due to a lack of funded policy mandates on disability. In addition to a general paucity of meaningful and enforced disability policies in many of those contexts, there is also a silence in social discourse surrounding disability issues. This absence of disability in social discourse is sustained to a large extent by the absence of political will around the subject of disability and a cultural history that did not associate disability with full-fledged citizenship rights.

The first chapter in this section is John Charrema’s, which explores the role and implementation of early intervention programs for young children with or at risk for disabilities. Specifically, the chapter demonstrates the importance and centrality of parental participation through reinforcement of discreetly learned skills in natural contexts. In his chapter, Charrema argues that although the first wave of early intervention research has proven unequivocally that intervening early makes a positive difference in the outcomes that children achieve in later years, he nonetheless warns of the pitfalls of uncritically adopting Western ideas without evaluating their potential negative effects on families and children in different cultures. The chapter draws upon a study that demonstrates the centrality of parental involvement in the care and education of young children in Botswana. The study found that the magnitude of gains made by a child were proportional to the extent to which parents were involved in skill reinforcement in naturalistic contexts of home and community.

Obiakor, Eskay, and Ofolayan’s chapter examines special education in Nigeria from a policy to practice standpoint. They critique the absence of sound special education policy in Nigeria and attribute its absence to a lack of good leadership at the national governmental level. Arguing that the current condition of special education in Nigeria is attributable to the lack of policy mandates at the national level, the authors further assert that the absence of mandates is only one contributing factor to the current condition. That combination of factors, including inadequate teacher preparation, is also attributable to socio-cultural attitudinal barriers. The authors argue that recurrent political instability at the national level has contributed to the failure by the government to articulate a way forward regarding disability in Nigeria. Further, they maintain that the lack of progress in the area of disability in Nigeria is further complicated by socio-cultural attitudes that are evidenced in language that is used to describe disability in a select Nigerian language.

Drawing upon the narratives of pre-service teachers, Gareth Dart examines the broadly articulated inclusive policy in Botswana and how it is actually enacted on the ground. In the study upon which this chapter is based,
pre-service teachers’ perceptions and understandings of the challenges faced by children with special needs in general educational contexts were examined. Pre-service teachers identified contextual factors of home and school and the lack of parental participation as implicated in the low educational outcomes experienced by many children from poverty backgrounds. The chapter explores how the factors of teacher attitudes, limited knowledge and skills of working with children with special needs impact and are impacted by the broadly framed policy on inclusive education.

Inclusive education is explored from a different angle in Joan Jafthas’ chapter that focuses on a South African education district of Overberg in Western Cape. Starting with a critique of the apartheid-era education system in South Africa, Jafthas notes that during that era, education was oppressive and segregated by race and disability. This intersectionality of disability and race in apartheid South Africa, while blatant, is a discourse that is seldom highlighted in educational literature emerging from the region. Highlighting the important tenets of human rights—freedom, fairness and equality—that are espoused by the new South African constitution, Jafthas asserts that the new South African Ministry of Education must assure that practices in education cater to the needs of all learners regardless of their race or disability. She acknowledges the challenges inherent in the task of the new Ministry of Education in its quest to adopt and implement a curriculum that is rigorous, fair, and inclusive for all learners in South Africa and one that serves all of their interests. The chapter describes the new curriculum known as Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) that is intended to be liberating and inclusive of all learners.

Gathogo Mukuria’s chapter examines the challenges of meeting the special needs of learners with disabilities in Kenya in the absence of policy mandating and regulating how such an educational enterprise is to be enacted. Mukuria places the issue of the education of learners with special needs in the broader historical context of colonialism, which denied appropriate education to individuals who were deemed unfit for the exploitative impulses of the imperialist government. The chapter explores the ways in which the post-independence Kenyan government has sustained the colonial practices in education by carrying on with exclusionary education policies and practices that continue to downplay the need for an appropriate education of learners with disabilities. He notes that traditional societies were able to cater to and provide for youngsters with mild disabilities, but in the current educational system without specialized instruction, such learners are lost. The chapter details what is needed to effectively meet the needs of learners with special needs in terms of culturally relevant assessments, curricula, and pedagogy.

Focusing exclusively on the issue of inclusive education in Tanzania, Filiz Polat examines the role that income level plays in implementing inclusive
education within countries. Specifically, she examines how income as a critical factor impacting access to education by children in challenging conditions plays out in the Tanzanian context. In her chapter, Polat draws from a participatory action research project to contextualize inclusive education in Tanzania. Conclusions drawn from preliminary findings of her study suggest that whereas there has been significant progress towards including all, much remains to be done to fully realize inclusive education for all. Within this study, Polat found that the most pronounced barriers to inclusion included poor infrastructure, classroom learning environment, health, water and sanitation, and negative community/cultural practices and views towards disability.

The final chapter in this section on Africa is Bethsaida Nieves’ chapter. Nieves provides a critical analysis of the Continental Plan of Action for the African Decade for Persons with Disabilities—a document adopted by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to guide African countries in implementation of inclusive social practices in the OAU countries, including inclusive education. Nieves examines how disability is constructed in the economic policies of countries under the auspices of OAU and the level of participation in economic activities expected of those defined as disabled. Definition notwithstanding, the big question that her chapter grapples with is the extent to which the policy actually empowers persons with disabilities in the OAU member countries.

**CARIBBEAN**

In a similar vein, drawing upon research on inclusive education, authors of the Caribbean chapter draw upon research from selected Caribbean islands to extrapolate upon the overarching theme of inclusive education. Teachers’ attitudes toward the inclusion of students considered to have special needs have been found to be both positive and negative in the U.S. since passage of legislation decades ago via Public Law (PL) 94-142. Junnie Lynch, Clara Wolman, and Judy Harris-Looby examine the attitudes of teachers towards inclusion in Barbados, Cayman Islands, Granada, Jamaica, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent, where inclusion is much newer to teachers. These Caribbean nations share characteristics driven by geography, climate, and other factors but also differ due to economy and culture as well as other factors. The differences manifest in the authors’ findings with more positive results on a survey questionnaire found among teachers in Cayman Islands, Barbados, and to a lesser extent in St. Lucia. Teachers who taught smaller classes and those who had training in special education, or were teaching special education classes, had more positive attitudes than others. The authors note both Cayman Islands and Barbados have good
economies and evident political as well as economic stability. Such stability enables the missions and goals of their educational systems to be less compromised than in the other nations in the sample. Teachers in these systems, then, have more professional development and better access to services for special needs students, which results in more positive attitudes among teachers toward inclusion.

MIDDLE EASTERN

Special education programs in the Middle Eastern nations described in this book have developed gradually over time. They demonstrate interest in trends in special education often originating in North America, which were driven initially by the passage of Public Law (PL) 94-142 in the U.S. Within a global framework, nations such as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the Arabian Gulf State of Qatar have evolved gradually to address emergent needs within their nation, not solely international trends. The history of that development and the current position and structure of special education within the larger educational system differ because of the focus on national emergent needs, although similarities also exist.

Literature on the inclusion of learners with disabilities in the general education classroom has tended to center around the inclusion of those with more significant and visibly disabling conditions. While indeed this population, because of the visibility of its disabling conditions, has tended to be the one most likely to be excluded or marginalized in educational discourses and educational access, researchers have begun to be more attentive to the deleterious effects of the other disabling conditions such as ADHD/ADD on teaching and learning and have begun to respond to that largely unmet need. In her chapter, Selda Ozdemir chronicles the history of inclusive practices in the education of children with ADHD in Turkey, paying particular attention to the growth and development of Turkish understanding of ADHD within the context of inclusive educational reform in Turkey. Similar to Polat and Nieves’ findings, Ozdemir found that the construction of disability in Turkey, and hence the funding mechanism for supporting inclusive education, favored learners with more significant disabilities. Consequently, learners with ADHD tended not to be among those who received government financial support for accessing inclusion.

Mohammad Al Jabery, Jamal Al Khateeb, and Marshall Zumberg describe the history of special education services in Jordan since such services became a major educational concern in the 1960s. They discuss the influence of research findings as a driver for special education programs practical implementation and further development. In the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, different authorities led the organization, monitoring,
and improvement of special education programs. Differentiated leadership and oversight have resulted in economic, practical and instructional, informational, and public awareness challenges to the provision of effective services. Existing services often are disconnected. The authors conclude that these challenges could be overcome through joint efforts to introduce comprehensive and research-based effective special education programs.

A brief history of special education and of the context for education in Qatar is provided by Asma Al Attiyah and Brenda Belson Lazarus. The authors review numerous special education research studies conducted in Qatar, grouping them in the categories of teachers of children with special needs, inclusion of children with special needs, the diagnostic and evaluation process, counseling needs for children with special needs and their families, and the quality of services being provided to children with special needs. The authors further describe studies specific to certain categorical areas of special education such as children with intellectual disabilities. While the chapter on special education in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has an emphasis on research but also an equal emphasis on practice and instruction, this chapter’s strongest emphasis is on advancing research in special education in Qatar. A key issue noted by the authors is the very limited or complete lack of opportunities for undergraduate and graduate training in special education and allied service fields, such as occupational therapy, within the nation, necessitating out-of-country study. To partially address the limited number of researchers with advanced graduate training, the nation is working to develop teachers as researchers to solve challenges faced in their classrooms. To conduct more effective research, there is a need for development of valid assessment tools and instruments to be used in research and practice, as existing ones often are translated from English and so may have both language and cultural limitations, a problem shared by many of the world’s nations. The authors also address the widespread problem of access to and dissemination of research within Qatar, which also applies to many other nations. They suggest the establishment of an electronic database of researchers, research projects, and research results that could be accessed in Arabic and English to more effectively bring together both the national and the global research communities.

The final chapter in this section focuses on early intervention services in Saudi Arabia. Haniah Merza’s chapter lays out the issues and complications in the provision of early education to young children with disabling conditions in Saudi Arabia. The issues explored in the chapter include the role of Islamic religion that is closely interwoven within the social fabric; gender issues pertaining to the role of women (mothers) in the early education of children; and the complications arising from the paradoxical socio-cultural expectation of mothers being the early educators, yet having limited access to information about specific disabling conditions. Similar to Polat and
Ozdemir in Tanzania and Turkey, respectively, Merza brings up the issue of how funding is coupled with the perception of severity of disability. In Saudi Arabia, funding is made available to support children with more severely disabling conditions in separate settings, thereby limiting their inclusion in the family unit. The chapter provides a detailed descriptive analysis of the cascade categorical services provided young children with disabilities while simultaneously offering critical assessment of the shortcomings of the service models employed in the Kingdom.

The chapters in this volume, though drawing upon studies in relatively diverse regions of the world, bring to the fore experiential commonalities of individuals with disabilities in the context of education. That individuals with disabilities are marginalized or altogether excluded from education in those regions is undoubtedly true. That individuals with disabilities are arbitrarily placed in positions where they enjoy little to no cultural capital because of socially constructed notions of their functional limitations is a common experience in all of those contexts. And while inclusive education-al practices have been adopted with relatively little success in most of the countries in those regions, a positive outcome of the attempt is a growing public acknowledgement of the need for social and educational inclusivity.

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