

Uniting To Resist: How Students Work to Transform Institutional Cultures for Disability Inclusion in Nigerian Universities

Abass Isiaka

University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

This paper returns to the micro by mapping the experience of students with disabilities (SWDs) as they “work” to transform an ableist institutional culture. Using institutional ethnography (IE) this study explores how student unionism is organised at a Nigerian university and why this social organisation is linked to students’ “everyday resistance” (Scott, 1985) to policies and practices that invisibilise them within and outside the curriculum. It uses examples of “fixing work” that SWDs do at the university in connection with textually mediated efforts of their unions to transform a post-colonial university. The study, based on ethnographic interviews with SWDs and other policy “actors”, such as disability unit staff, lecturers, counselling support services, and principal officers of the universities, reveals that student associations unite to fix the university for people coming behind them and challenge the dominant institutional logic that SWDs need to be “fixed” to participate in institutional life.

Full paper

Background to the Study

Against the backdrop of the expansion of higher education in a postcolonial context, this study seeks to develop an understanding of the work that goes into enacting disability inclusion policies in higher education institutions. It argues that, whether institutional policies and frameworks are implemented or not, there is “policy work” that students with disabilities (SWDs) undertake as they pursue access and participation in universities that are not designed for them. The study employs institutional ethnography (IE) as a materialist method to explicate the daily experiences of SWDs as they interact with policy texts and strategies for inclusion. Conducted over six months of fieldwork in three Nigerian universities, the study involved interviews with approximately 68 informants, observation of lectures, shadowing of daily and nightly campus activities, and document analysis of the universities' strategic plans and reports for disability inclusion. The research was based on two levels of informants, starting from the position of SWDs and relating their experience with other policy “actors”, such as disability unit staff, lecturers, counselling support services, volunteers, and principal officers of the universities. By unravelling how discourses, institutional policies, and support services are being deployed to “contain” the experience of SWDs in higher education institutions, this study maps the ongoing “ruling relation” that is embedded in the *access, participation and transformation* work that SWDs undertake, within the context of Nigerian HE policy.

This paper reports on the transformation element of the work that students do in the process of policy enactment. It sutures the coordination of this work by drawing on Dorothy Smith's ruling relations (Smith, 2005) and Alain Touraine's sociological intervention (SI) (Touraine, 1981). This paper illustrates three samples of the work: addressing institutional mislabelling by sponsoring a legislative bill, demanding reasonable adjustments for university admissions, and requesting a resource person for the university's resource room. I also reflect on my role as a sociologist midwifing a transformative dialogue between student leaders and the "powers that be" in the university. This study develops a new understanding of how IE and SI can help make sense of the emerging transformation work being done by disabled students and empower them with knowledge of how disability inclusion policies situate them.

Students Unionism and Disability Inclusion in Nigeria

Through decolonial institutional ethnography, this study connects the current understanding of ruling relations from being an extra-local consciousness of domination (Smith, 2005) with the colonial matrix of power relations (Quijano, 2007) which operate across and within social organisations and units. It argues that the locus of enunciation (Grosfoguel, 2011) of disability inclusion policies and the idea of university education is still Eurocentric, thereby dictating thinking, saying, doing and being of inclusive education in the periphery. Student associations' work to transform the university in Nigeria connects with the global call for the decolonisation of the universities in Africa. Three associations at a university in Nigeria represent the interests of students with hearing, visual, and physical impairments: the National Association of Nigerian Deaf Students (NANDS), the Association of Visually Impaired Students (AVIS), and the Association for Students with Physical Impairment (ASPI). Student leaders of these associations, through "everyday resistance" (Scott, 1985) to ableism, engage in some textually mediated work to transform the university for people coming behind them and create more enabling spaces to participate. I frame this interaction as 'fixing' work, which involved students writing to and meeting with university stakeholders to address their demands. Three examples are the demand to pass a legislative bill to address mislabelling at the senate, introduce reasonable admissions adjustments, and provide a resource person for the resource room. The analysis of letters and correspondences of the students' associations with the university leaders reveal constant reference to "sighted counterparts" or "hearing counterparts", which illustrates Smith's (1987) concept of "bifurcation of consciousness". Smith uses this term to refer to the separation or split between the world as an individual experiences it and the dominant view that an individual must adapt to (e.g., a masculine or ableist point of view). The notion of bifurcation of consciousness underscores that subordinate groups are conditioned to view the world from the perspective of the dominant group since the perspective of the latter is embedded in the institutions and practices of that world; the dominant group, on the other hand, enjoys the privilege of remaining oblivious to the worldview of the Other.

References

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