

Difference, Disability and Development: Agency and Advocacy in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania (0107)

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The World Bank estimates that twenty percent of the world's poorest people have a disability (Braithwaite and Mont, 2008). Global policy architecture is emerging *e.g.* the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). However, research findings from the project 'Widening Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania: Developing an Equity Scorecard' (Morley *et al.*, 2010) suggest that disability is a disqualified discourse in equity interventions in higher education, and that students with disabilities enter and achieve via their agency and self-advocacy.

Data sources included:

- ✚ 200 student life history interviews (119 students from public universities, 81 from private universities);
- ✚ 200 interviews with 172 academic staff, and 28 policymakers:
- ✚ 100 Equity Scorecards on admission/access, retention, completion and achievement, for four programmes of study in relation to gender, socio-economic status (SES) and age

Eleven students with disabilities were interviewed. One hundred and two academic staff and ten policymakers discussed disability.

Agency and Self-Advocacy

Madriaga (2007) found that without information to make informed choices, disabled students in his UK study experienced stress and anxiety, and difficulty preparing for higher education. Lack

of information and support were reported in Ghana and Tanzania. Voids were often filled by student agency:

First of all I was given accommodation from first year to fourth year as a physically handicapped student and I used to be with my fellows there to help me but to some extent, for instance, to fetch some water there it was a problem. So I used to get support through my fellow student... my room mate.... the warden does not provide that. ... The warden is there just to give us accommodation (Male, mature student, public university, Tanzania).

Self-advocacy suggested that disabled students needed to be resourceful and resilient:

What I think myself that people with disabilities have to fight they to have to fight for their own rights and that is what we were doing (Male, low SES student, public university, Tanzania).

Powerlessness and frustration meant that students were forced into individual grievance procedures and complaints, rather than supported by predictive institutional measures:

When I was first year, hall two was upstairs. It was difficult for me...I wrote a letter to complain. I exchanged the room with the lower stairs with a certain student who was living at the lower stairs (Male, mature student, public university, Tanzania).

Tinklin and Hall (1999) found that students' experiences in higher education--whether good or bad--depended largely on the level of awareness of the members of staff they came into contact with. Support in Ghana and Tanzania also seemed precarious:

I joined the University ...I stayed for 3 months without getting the assisting devices ... the typing machine, tape recorder so I was attending class without any assisting device/ learning device in my first year class and what I decided was just to struggle and see those top management of University- by that time it was the Prof of Undergraduate Studies... He was good and he called upon those top officials ... A month later they ordered and facilities were brought but it was among the saddest time of my life because I was thinking now it is the end of my programme (Male student, public university, Tanzania).

Myths and Taboos

Prejudice was often associated with poor, rural communities who were isolated from modernising influences:

In my society where I come from -the Maasai- still we see people like me as bad omen and to get an opportunity to study, to get education, is difficult. (Male student, public university, Tanzania).

Fears about personal safety meant that some people with disabilities felt that they had to hide from the public gaze, including educational opportunities:

There were also some traditions where they think if you have a handicapped child there is a curse or something like that. So they don't even want to put that child into public let alone to encourage him or her to go to education... (Female academic staff, public university, Tanzania).

Higher education was seen as empowering graduates to work with socio-economically disadvantaged communities to liberalise their thinking:

If many of us decide to do something in a certain society, after sometime we'll find that we've managed to change the negative mindset into positive which for sure shows one group is better than the other which is not good as in the Maasai society which sees a physically challenged person as a bad omen...so what they do is to kill or to leave him/her in the forest to be eaten by wild animals and from they believe they have cleaned the bad omen and they go to celebrate (Female mature, low SES student, private university, Tanzania).

Slikker (2009) reported that disability awareness in her Ghanaian study was highest among respondents with a high level of education and members of disability organisations.

Matshedisho (2007) indicated that disability in sub-Saharan Africa is often associated with benevolence, pity and philanthropy, and lack of capacity and efficacy. Students could analyse and understand, though not accept discriminatory values in educationally disadvantaged communities; they found it unacceptable to witness similar views in lecturers who were assumed to be knowledgeable about inclusive education:

We met with lecturers here, who have negative attitude towards us. ... They didn't even know that people with disabilities can even manage to study. They thought that we can't do anything. They discouraged us very much because if you need some assistance or any assistance from your lecturer, if you approach him/her, they put their hands in their pocket to take some thing to give you, maybe money. Some of them, they told us especially me 'today I don't have anything please would you come tomorrow?' Or 'would you come later?' So, this shows that, people with disabilities can't join the university. They can't study and they can't perform... (Male, low SES student, public university, Tanzania).

Disability was associated with constraints, misrecognition, frustration and exclusion. Disabled students had to rely on their agency to educate others about their needs and identities. They were persistently acting to counter misinformation, misrecognition and structural and attitudinal disempowerment. Ultimately, disability is about power- to define, participate and make decisions.

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