Developing The Understanding And Practice Of Inclusion In Higher Education For

International Students With Disabilities/Additional Needs:

A Whole Schooling Approach

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Abstract

In this paper we present research on inclusion in higher education using a whole schooling philosophy. We seek insight into the perspectives of international students with disabilities/additional needs, three of whom from this particular research group are from non-English speaking backgrounds and attending the same university in Melbourne, Australia.

In this paper we used voice relational methodology to analyse these students' experiences of inclusive practice. These experiences provide the basis for our discussion of fundamental differences among various kinds of inclusive practice and cultures, resulting in a typology including support systems and experiences from staff and disability liaison personnel. In doing so, we aim to inform policy and models for best practice to maximise the educational experiences of international students with disabilities and additional needs, and indeed, of all students. Finally, we discuss the implications of the findings for lecturers, teachers, support staff and policy makers in implementing strategic and successful inclusion for international students with a disability/additional needs in a higher education context.

Introduction

International and Australian inclusive policy contexts are promoting access to university level education for local and international students with disabilities in Australia, yet often in these arenas the voice of the student is not heard. This study hopes to make those voices 'audible' by attempting an in-depth exploration of the experience of international students with a disability. This will be achieved by researching students' experience of policy effectiveness, resource deployment, support systems, and staff skill sets. In doing so, this research also hopes to give a new perspective to policy, attitudes, and good practice in inclusive education.

Conceptualising inclusion, disability and additional needs

In this paper we conceptualised inclusion as a systems approach that supports full participation of all students in education (Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2010). This conceptualisation implies that, at its most fundamental, all students have the chance to learn when organisational and teaching approaches reflect "individual strengths and learning needs" (Lindsay, 2003, in Agbenyega, 2007, p. 41), and promotes full student participation. For the purposes of this paper, we use the term 'disability/additional needs' as a guiding construct which has helped inform our selection of participants.

We see educational inclusion from a 'Whole Schooling Approach' (Figure 1 below) that considers policy, infrastructure, staff attitudes and practices, and their relationship to how these impact on international students who have identified themselves as needing additional support at one university in Melbourne. Considering a Whole School approach provides insight into how inclusion has the capacity to challenge: "political, epistemological, pedagogical and institutional" (Acedo, 2009, p. 8) boundaries, and prompt "a critique of social values, priorities and the structures and institutions which they support" (Barton, 2003, in Carrington & Saggers, 2008, p. 796).
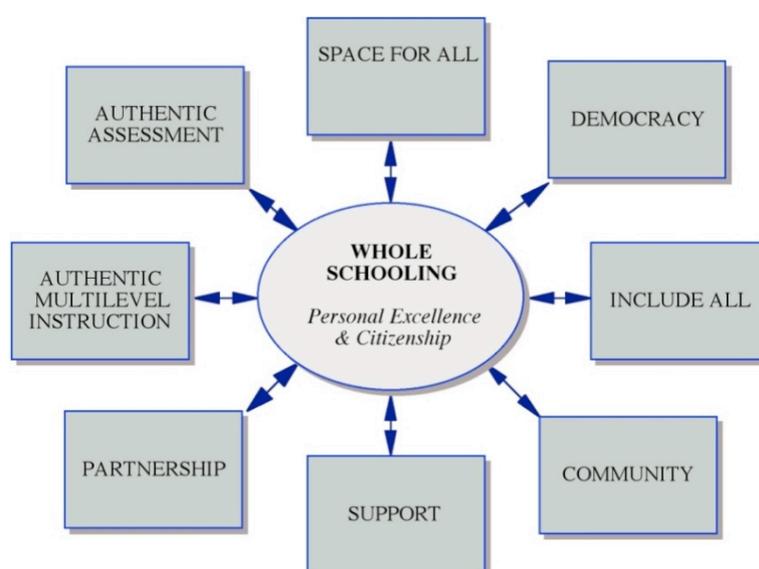

Figure 1 – Whole Schooling diagram (adapted from the International Journal of Whole Schooling site, http://education.wayne.edu/wholeschooling/Journal_of_Whole_Schooling/IJWSIndex.html)

The diagram above shows the reciprocal relationship between "The Eight Principles" (support, partnership, authentic multi-level instruction and so on) in building effective practices in inclusion. Indeed, the main principles of Whole Schooling can be found within recent university initiatives in involving stronger links with the community and engaging in partnerships outside universities with the aim of creating graduates with a stronger and deeper knowledge economy - an example of which can be seen in the value statement from Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia:

> We value: knowledge and skills, and critical and imaginative inquiry for their capacity to transform individuals and the community; equality of opportunity for students and staff; diversity for its contribution to creativity and the enrichment of our lives; cooperation as the basis of engagement with local and international communities; integrity, respect and transparency in personal, collaborative and institutional action; sound environmental stewardship for future generations; and the pursuit of excellence in everything that we do (Victoria University, 2008).

The importance of inclusion in higher education

Policy-makers in both developed and developing countries are aware of the links between inclusive education and economic development and how education empowers populations to make contributions on both social and economic levels (Artiles & Dyson, 2005; Mittler, 2005).

In today's economic climate, there are many reasons which 'push' students away from their own country and to a foreign country in order to study. Some of these reasons are related to a lack of educational opportunities in home countries caused by over-crowding or competition, a lack of specialist courses in the home country, the desire to become more competitive through gaining qualifications overseas, political, racial, and religious or economic factors (Altbach, 2004). Other reasons relate to prestige which can influence the decision, particularly in recognition of the domination of 'the West' in "the curriculum and of scientific discourse" (Altbach, 2004, p. 2). In this way, "industrialized countries are recognizing the need to provide their students with a global consciousness and with experience in other countries in order for them to compete in the global economy" (Altbach, 2004, p. 1). Negative attitudes of staff and society in home countries also compel students with disabilities to move and study abroad (Lambe, 2007).

In our roles as educators in the university sector we have experienced how higher education institutions in Australia are seeking to capitalise on this ever increasing universal drive for social and cultural capital, particularly in relation to the evolving global status of English as the lingua franca. As a result, universities in Australia are now marketing themselves in increasingly competitive environments where education is valued as a commodity and hence sold as a commodity. In this way, at its most fundamental, purely economic reasons may also dictate the extent to which universities market themselves as places of inclusion in order to attract more students both with and without disabilities. This is of particular relevance within the context of a dramatic drop in international student numbers to Australia over the period of 2008 – 2010 and continuing into 2011. Figures from the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2011) highlight the extent of the decrease. The Department of Immigration reports that 183 441 student visas were granted in the 2010-11 academic year to the end of March 2011 - an 11.1% decrease compared to the same period in 2009-10 (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011, p. 7). Market forces created

by the global financial crisis and the strong Australian dollar, changes to the visa system and increased concern for the welfare of overseas students (as perpetuated by media reports surrounding attacks on Indian students) have all added to the decline in numbers (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2010, p. 7). As a result, the competition for attracting international student is high, particularly as these students are required to pay much higher fees than local students to attend university in Australia.

Literature: current trends and controversies of inclusion - power, politics and people

Much of the literature which exists about students with a disability generally fails insofar as representing the context of multi-lingual adults in higher education, and literature suggests the importance of contributing to this area (Forlin, 2007; Watson, Kearns, Grant & Cameron, 2000). A significant amount of research has focussed on multi-lingual children in schools (such as Nguyen, Larson & Hollister, 2010; Daudji, Eby, Foo, Ladak, Sinclair, Landry, Moody, Gibson, 2011) native English speaking students with a disability at university (Borland & James, 1999; Dutta, Kundu, & Schiro-Geist, 2009) or adults from refugee backgrounds with a disability learning in community settings (Kashdan, 2002). However, there is little information regarding current practices for including multilingual adult tertiary students with a disability/additional learning needs in higher education.

In addition, whilst some of the literature reviewed has taken place within the context of higher education institutions in the UK, USA and Canada, little research could be found regarding an Australian study context. Moreover, whilst some studies (such as Orsini-Jones, Courtney & Dickinson, 2005; Orsini-Jones, 2009) have considered the experiences of students with a disability learning foreign languages, there is an apparent lack of focus on students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

However, both the qualitative and quantitative research in the contexts referred to above have reached some very similar conclusions and suggest that there are controversies regarding the concept of inclusive education and its successful implementation for student with disabilities. We have identified these controversies of inclusion as being underpinned by overlapping and interconnected notions of *power and* how power is manifested within *politics* and is represented by *people.* In doing so, we illustrate how inclusion is often understood as a "contentious term" (Lambe, 2007, p. 60).

Power relates to inherent tensions on a number of levels within the context of this study. The first is related to the notion of disability being equated to disadvantage and deficit as a result of being embedded in a historical backdrop of oppression (Barnes, 1997).

Power is apparent in university inclusive policy documentation. Engaging in open and rigorous interrogation of policy documents and asking "are the policies accessible?", "who is the intended audience of these policy documents?" and "are the voices of the students evident?" reveals insight into how power discourses may be revealed. Indeed, "every written policy document deploys a particular discourse as both tactic and theory in a web of power relations" (Fulcher 1999 in Peters, 2007, Para. 13).

Power is also evident in the tensions between 'western' and other cultural settings, something which, as previously alluded to, many universities in Australia openly seek to capitalise on in attracting students from overseas to study. The resulting manifestations of these issues are many, particularly within the context of the delicate interplay of factors in working with students with a disability from a country other than Australia. For example, staff may exhibit, either implicitly or explicitly, negative attitudes regarding students with a particular disability. They may harbour a negative perception of students from a particular cultural background. Indeed, they may engender both, creating in effect, a 'double-negative'

against a student. Staff attitudes are one of the most fundamental factors for a student with a disability succeeding in their studies (Donato, 2008). Thus, it is of real importance that teachers are positive and flexible in their teaching approaches, and that they reconcile issues of power by not 'blaming the victim' (Donato, 2008). Perceived power differences can be ameliorated through the establishment of a good rapport with students, having patience, good communication skills, a flexible and empathetic approach, an understanding of nature of different disabilities and the different needs of students (Donato, 2008).

There are parallels between faculty and student knowledge; knowledge from faculty works to inform the student and vice-versa, (Donato, 2008). Models for inclusion can be largely guided by the existing socio-cultural norms of a particular country (Forlin, 2007) and embedded in the value of an individual (Loreman, et al., 2010). The majority of foreign students with a disability/additional needs entering into higher education in Australia come from Asia (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011) where the concept of inclusive education is one that is relatively new, and where the values embedded in Confucian philosophy are also a likely contributor to the willingness to thoroughly embrace inclusion (Forlin, 2007). However, the fact that "our values can change" (Loreman, et al., 2010, p. 40) is highly significant within the context of this study as will be shown.

This is why a Whole School approach becomes fundamental to our understanding of inclusion within this context. As a guiding construct, the tenets of whole schooling work to eradicate barriers at a number of different levels and seek to overcome issues of power and deficit by embracing approaches such as democracy, community, support, partnership and authentic multi-level instruction as shown in Figure 1.

The research problem

From global and local perspectives accessibility to higher education for students with a disability/additional needs seems fragmented and inconsistent (Inclusion International, 2009). The aim of this research was to identify obstacles which can be changed, such as accessibility, quality of service and faculty awareness (Dutta et al 2009).

Furthermore, although participation in higher education is a matter of equal opportunity and empowerment, within the research itself the voices of people with disabilities themselves are rarely heard and much of the research thus far has proven to be both inadequate and inequitable (Dutta, et al., 2009; Fuller, et al., 2004). We also aim to create awareness of the barriers that students from a number of different cultural backgrounds face (in this case from Hong Kong) in undertaking study as an international student with a disability in Australia. Finally, we aim to also raise awareness of all students as empowered individuals whose perspectives can inform policy development and marketing initiatives in universities, demonstrating how "universities need to listen to students, prospective students and those on the ground in countries around the world to ensure that what is offered continues to meet emerging needs" (Dalglish & Chan 2005, Para. 42).

Research methodology

In view of the above, we attempted to shed light on the following questions through our research:
- What contributes to an international student with a disability feeling supported or unsupported at university?
- What were staff perceptions and reflections of working with an international student with a disability?

- What are some socio-cultural norms of disability and how do these impact on student experience?

In view of these questions the study was designed as a voice relational qualitative interpretive case study of one higher education institution. As a voice relational case study we are interested in presenting our findings as forms of quotes from the participants in order to reflect their real, lived experiences and relationships with staff, their learning environment and support systems. In order to ensure validity and reliability we engaged in rigorous reflexivity as insiders and in this way allowed insight into "how our own beliefs, interests, experiences political commitments and social identities might have impacted on our research" (Swart & Agbenyega, 2010, p. 3). We engaged a third party to transcribe some of the audio recordings which the two researchers then cross-referenced and established an audit trail by sending transcripts to the participants for validation, editing and final approval.
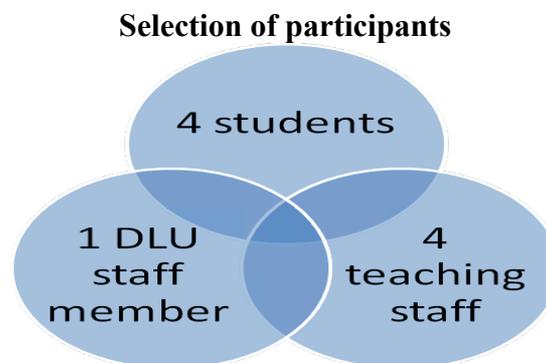
Selection of participants

Figure 2 – Participants in the study

Figure 2 shows the nine research participants: four students, four teachers, and one support staff each of whom have an important role in building successful inclusive practices. As the figure shows, there are areas where the experiences may converge (overlapping in the diagram) or diverge. The details of the research participants are as follows:

Students: Jane (Sri Lanka, 23) with an arm injury sustained as the result of an on-campus car accident in Australia; Anna (Hong Kong, 21) experiences depression and anxiety; Mary (China, 20) a student with vision impairment. These three students speak English as their second language. The final student interviewed was James (US, 25) who is a native English speaker with attention deficit disorder. The four teaching staff: Jenny, Veronica , Lauren and Monica . Terry is a DLU staff member. To protect the anonymity of participants, all the names that feature in this paper are pseudonyms. Author one worked in the same capacity as the teaching staff but now works at a different institution. Author two is currently academic advisor for this project.

Criterion-based sampling was implemented in the recruiting of staff who had experience in working with students with a disability/additional needs, and of the students themselves who were from a cohort of international students with a disability/additional needs. In order to meet ethical requirements however, all participants were invited via adherence to formal protocol. We sent an initial email with some background information and an invitation to participate in an interview. Once we received replies from those interested in participating we sent a follow-up email as a confirmation which included information such as the explanatory statement, consent form and interview questions which were all sent as attachments.

Students were contacted through the Disability Liaison Unit (DLU). It is understood that currently the procedure at the university at the centre of this study is for students to self-disclose any additional needs for support on the university enrolment form. An email was sent to the DLU which outlined the background to the research and provided the contact details of the first researcher (a student email address). The information about the research was sent to relevant students, with the students asked to make contact via email to show their interest in participating. Utilising this method for recruitment was important in maintaining and respecting privacy and confidentiality as neither researcher was in direct contact with the students until they confirmed their participation in the study. All interviews took place on the university campus in various locations such as the library, cafe and group study areas.

Approach to data collection

We used semi-structured interviews to gather data (Barnes, 1992; Yin, 2003). This style of in-depth interviewing known as "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess, 1984, as cited in Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 5) is appropriate for this study as it enabled us to glean in-depth insight into the perspectives of the participants. We formulated questions under various headings such as 'general background information', 'pedagogical and practical knowledge', 'policy and legislation' and 'culture, values and beliefs' across the three different interviewee cohorts and changed the wording to suit the context of the participants. Prior to the interviews we provided consent forms which allowed research participants to choose whether or not to be audio-recorded. It was important to give this choice as it was anticipated that some of the participants may not have felt comfortable in having their voice recorded. Each participant was provided with a written transcript of their interview and invited to make any changes they deemed necessary. We did not correct any linguistic errors in the transcripts in order to maintain the authentic voice of the participants.

Data analysis

Prior to analysis the first researcher transcribed around 200 minutes of the recordings; the remaining 400 minutes were completed by a paid transcription service. Voice Relational Methodology (VRM) was chosen as the approach for data analysis as we were mindful of using a method which maintained the authentic voices of the participants, and which was able to take into account the interplay between various relationships, cultures, contexts and outside factors as seen in the Whole School framework. VRM allows a space for the researcher to ask reflective questions such as: "Who precisely is speaking, and under what concrete circumstances?...Who is listening and what is the nature of her relationship with the speaker - especially with respect to power?" (Brown, 1997, p. 686, in Millar, Canavan & Byrne, 2004, p. 21). In VRM, the delicate overlapping of discourses of power, politics and people, public and private domains can be displayed and explored in a meaningful way.

In using VRM, we read the transcripts a number of times, (in alignment with Brown & Gilligan's "Guide to Listening", 1991, p. 45) in doing so, asking ourselves questions of the data in relation to the narrative, stories of relationships, embodiment, identity and the self. We asked ourselves these questions set against a backdrop of trying to uncover societal and cultural frameworks in underscoring power discourses, whilst involved in our own parallel processes of reflexivity.

To engage in these processes, we formatted the transcripts within a table, which created space on the page for detailed comments. We each undertook the process of multiple

readings and annotating of the transcripts independently and then met to cross-reference ideas and identified any common themes. We used hard copies of the transcripts and worked together to highlight our notes for possible themes in different colours with highlighter pens, and made notes about these possible themes in the margins while maintaining an awareness of the Whole Schooling Approach framework in guiding these themes. We then created a spreadsheet of colour 'codes' (for example, purple for 'systems', pink for 'attitudes' and so on). We used the colour-coded hard copies as a point of reference and copied and pasted chunks of text from the soft-copy to a spreadsheet. In doing so, and in alignment with the principles of VRM, we were careful to maintain the original utterance of the participant and avoid moving too quickly towards strict classification (and a loss of true meaning). We organised the data on the spreadsheet into separate pages which were organised according to final themes for discussion.

Findings and discussion

The three key themes to be highlighted in this paper in view of its guiding research questions, literature review and framework provided by the Whole Schooling Approach are: 1. Flexible practices, 2. Knowledge barriers, 3. Values and beliefs.

Flexible practices

Flexibility is vital in supporting individual needs (Donato, 2008). Teachers mentioned a number of ways in which they had been flexible in their teaching practice such as being more verbal in giving clear instructions (Jenny), giving more explicitly teacher-led direction in engaging in activities such as role-plays (Veronica, Monica), and learning how to best utilise the skills of a note-taker in the class (Jenny, Veronica).

In addition, a positive approach and understanding of the students' needs is pivotal in creating a wholly inclusive classroom (Donato, 2008; Jordan, Schwartz & McGhie-Richmond, 2009) as evidenced in the experiences of these students:

> The lecturers and all are very nice. They gave me extensions for my assignments and I deferred some exams.... I never knew there were people like that, who go out of their way... Even in the tute [tutorial], if I can't copy the stuff or whatever, my tutor would give me the notes so that I can take my own time (Mary).

> I got extra time and rest time for the exams which was really good. Then I was able to defer the final exams last semester because the accident happened one week before the finals (Jane).

> I didn't even start seeking assistance until I was referred by a faculty member… [The DLU] said, how much [extra] time do you think you need. They go, you need 50% more time? I was like whoa – 50% more time, that's pretty extreme. I was surprised about this (James).

Knowledge barriers

Lack of knowledge as a barrier, reflected in the literature, (Agbenyega, 2007; Donato, 2008; Ainscow & Miles, 2008; McGhie-Richmond, Barber, Lupart & Loreman, 2009) was consistent with the findings from the interviews by both staff and students. Literature suggests that staff often talk about their perceived knowledge gaps in teaching students with a disability/additional needs in their classes, and having a general lack of confidence in their

related practice (Kashdan, 2002). Jenny's comments that "I had no formal training at all, no knowledge of her disability....we were given some briefing, and then I read up how would you help...on the website, but other than that I had very little knowledge of how to deal with a blind student, we had to learn as we went along" was also reflected in interviews with Veronica and Lauren.

> I didn't even know anyone with this disability.....we had to work [the teaching] out ourselves...and that was hard (Lauren).

> I wasn't ever offered the chance to go on any kind of training course... I discovered a lot of useful information later on the uni website...but by the time I discovered it, I was too snowed under with the demands of the course (Veronica).

Even Monica, who had the most experience in working with students with a disability/additional needs noted; "I also feel like more resources and possibly even PD's [professional development sessions] could have been run." We can see the results of this as manifested in the student experience:

> They [the tutors] don't know me, they don't know what the problem actually is so I just told them my eyes are not good or something, but they can't understand how bad it is (Mary).

> When I first trying [sic] to see a doctor and having new medication which is very difficult, because psychological pills are not a cold or something and I may have difficulties in class which the teacher himself thought it was a way that I tried to get higher marks (Anna).

Values and beliefs

As the literature suggests, there are a number of personal characteristics related to how well-equipped a teacher is for working in an environment which requires flexibility. For example, interventionists take the responsibility as a practitioner in educating all students and making adjustments and modifications as necessary (McGhie-Richmond et al., 2009). Jenny's thoughts on the subject were that perhaps there were certain personal experiences within the teachers' own personal lives which made them more likely to embrace the challenges that they saw as part of working with a student with a disability, as opposed to other staff who, as Jenny suggested, may have been "frightened" by the experience

> My background pre-disposes me to have the views I do. And I think that's the same with Lauren and I don't know, I think it's because of my background that I have that attitude. Because I have people on the fringe of my family with mental illness and I was married to an alcoholic......what else you want to pick up [laughs] ...so, you know, I'm pre-disposed to want to pick up the underdogs (Jenny).

The teachers interviewed certainly displayed the attitude of seeing their experience as positive and being open and willing to learn from it and as Veronica suggested "I was pulled out of my comfort zone, and I was forced... to be resourceful and creative", as Veronica's 'experiment' shows:

I actually did an experiment myself one day at home where I blindfolded myself for a couple of hours just to try and get some kind of insight into how it must feel, and it was very disempowering and frustrating. I realised the fact that we use and rely on the printed word so much. So in my classes for example I had to slow down when I was making any powerpoint presentations, and make sure I repeated things. I also worked off feedback from her, and she would show the way in terms of her needs in the class (Veronica).

While the staff interviewed seemed to display a positive set of values and beliefs, one of the students interviewed was a victim of ignorance. Anna elaborated on her experience with the lecturer who accused her of wanting higher marks: "I told him [the lecturer] I was sick and he said it's a way that you try to get higher marks and he said my English couldn't be good because I'm Chinese". When prompted by the interviewer ["So you almost experienced a double-discrimination there?], Anna's response was "yes, from being ill and from being Chinese" – a clear example as alluded to earlier regarding the existence of a 'double-negative' attitude which international students with additional needs may be particularly vulnerable to.

The results also indicated that cultural background is inextricably linked with how supported a student may feel here in Australia, within the context of what they are 'leaving behind:'

Thinking about Arabic backgrounds, education is huge, it means a lot and family networks are very strong and families are very committed to one another and in this context very committed to the disability, but it's a relationship of reciprocity (Monica).

This is of particular importance when considering that students from overseas "find themselves in 'relational deficit,' if not social isolation, at a time when they need more than the usual support" (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008, p. 149). This is compounded by having a disability or additional need. Veronica talks about a student she taught who was a female from an Arabic speaking country. In alignment with Monica's experience of this culture, Veronica also alludes to this student's extremely committed and supportive family network who she left behind in order to study in Australia:

I think it was significant that this student was from a country where women are not empowered. I think that this, in addition to her disability, made her quite defiant at times...she could often come across as rather obnoxious.... She seemed to push herself a lot, and there also seemed to be a lot of showing off to others in wanting to be able to cope and wanting to be right all the time (Veronica).

As well as the fact that different values and beliefs affect the ways that students with disabilities are perceived, this also affects how they perceive themselves outside their own cultural context. This is consistent with the literature alluded to previously by Forlin (2007), particularly in relation to these comments by Anna who is from Hong Kong and Mary who is from China:

My country, they don't recognise people as mentally disabled. They just think that we're crazy and you should be locked up in a mental hospital (Anna).

When I graduated from middle school I think a lot about my life at that time and my father asked me if I want to go to a normal life or just disability life. I can apply for disability in China, but it's different situation [sic]. You apply for disability, you can have some support, but they will think you're not a good person, I mean, physical, good person.... They think you have disability so you're actually not a normal person (Mary).

Because the students come from different cultural groups where the beliefs about disability are negative, the students felt disempowered in their own countries, as articulated by Anna and Mary in the above quotes. Conversely, coming from a culture where students had not previously had any assistance with their studies could also mean that these students do not want to 'stand out' in an Australian university for being 'special'. James explained this in reference to his sometimes having difficulty producing legible handwriting in exam conditions. When I asked him about having the option to type his response was:

It might have been an option. It might have been. But I didn't feel comfortable if they're not typing, why should I be typing? (James)

Nevertheless, , in Australia these students seem to identify with a different set of values and beliefs , thus reflecting the ability for values to change as posited by Loreman, et al.,(2010).

I just adapted [to life in Australia] and it makes me feel very happy every day. I can talk to everyone about my eye problems now. I don't feel very confused or very stressed about my eye problems (Mary).

At home, if you can afford it, you can have servants, so that's the way you've been brought up and here it's a totally different thing. You have to do everything on your own [here] with no parents. It's difficult. But then it's good (Jane).

I wasn't raised in Australia but I think Australians are more easy-going which I love... Americans are far less sympathetic than Australians... if somebody [in America] says, I have a problem, or whatever, outside the university, [they are] far less accommodating than Australia, because we're not a liberal country (James).

Students also spoke a great deal about learning to become independent in Australia, for both study and living purposes.

I feel it's very different from China than here. [In Australia] we should learn a subject by ourselves, reading or do some assignment only by yourself [sic]...I think this is good (Mary).

I never knew I could achieve something that I really wanted so I'm really happy. It's like having real power... It's a big exposure coming to a country like this. You gain a lot of life experiences (Jane).

As a result, students stated that they felt more supported here than they would have in their own countries, despite being away from support networks:

I think the universities [in Australia] are more accommodating and more helpful to their students... I consider myself extremely lucky that I came to this university and that I had such a helpful faculty and administration because let's be honest, in a lot of universities, I probably wouldn't have received the same level of assistance (James).

No...[in China at my university] we don't have something like DLU or a group to support your studying. I just can tell the teacher [about my needs] and the teacher maybe - actually they do nothing (Mary).

I don't think if I was in Sri Lanka that I would get all this help. People there are really nice but in terms of uni and all that, I don't think they'd go to such an extent, like giving you a scribe, etc (Jane).

Discussion

Contextual factors

As the literature and Whole School conceptual framework in Figure 1 shows, the extent to which inclusion is realised can be dependent on contextual factors such as democracy, partnership and multilevel instruction, and that for these to work there must be a high level of staff commitment and knowledge. The results from the interviews reflect not only the ramifications of when all of these elements are not cohesively integrated, but also the positives of when these elements are aligned.

The significance of culture

What is interesting to note for the purposes of this paper is the significant role of a country's values and belief systems in perpetuating perceptions of disability while at the same time acting as a catalyst in driving the extent to which both staff and students feel supported. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the student comments regarding their perceived level of support in Australia against their own notions of disability/additional needs driven by culture, clearly results in what we see as a positive reflection of their experiences as a student in Australia. In other words, the students interviewed all came to Australia with minimal expectations of how their particular needs would be met (in alignment with?) their respective home-country experiences. Moreover, they expressed a lack of knowledge of the support systems which existed in Australia before they arrived. Of course, these students did also give some examples of where they might have felt unsatisfied with a particular situation, but in general the insights gleaned from the interviews were different to what we as researchers had anticipated.

Indeed, this is perhaps also why staff felt unsupported – we might ask ourselves if this is the level of support we are as educators expecting to see our students get, then how can we also feel supported as teachers? We might conclude from the comments made by staff that they continue to 'do the best that they can' without adequate training. Perhaps also that if students tend to be talking about their experiences as positive, that this is considered as satisfactory on the part of managers and supervisors, particularly in a cultural context where students are being viewed more and more as the 'consumer' or 'customer'.

However, these four teachers spoke of burnout, excessive workload and alluded to feelings of resentment over the fact that they were the ones 'targeted' to have a student with a disability/additional needs in their class. As Jenny suggested, perhaps she and the others were

'chosen' and could cope because of certain pre-dispositions as opposed to other teachers within the same context who were simply unable to cope. The suggestions were that this negativity from staff could be avoided by perpetuating a culture where all staff receive training and provided with comprehensive resources for support.

Conclusion

Limitations of this research

Regarding students, we may need to question the authenticity of the overall positivity of their experiences and ask ourselves whether only those students who had a positive experience volunteered for the research, for whatever reason that may be. Perhaps as researchers we also need to ask to what extent the culture of the interviewer (author one, as an English educator from an Irish – Australian background) played a role in influencing these students to tell us what they thought we wanted to hear. Further, comparing the experiences of international students with a disability with local students with a disability would have enabled us to test our quasi-hypothesis regarding the driving force of cultural notions of disability and the self.

Implications

The major implications gleaned from this study are in relation to the importance of professional development of staff. There also seems to be a real and apparent lack of collaborative support practices for teachers and thus the need to foster a culture of inclusion amongst educators which, according to the Whole Schooling framework, is important in creating a sense of community and thus a wholly inclusive environment. This can perhaps be achieved by the implementation of compulsory training for all staff in resources, strategies and procedures for accessing support as teachers. Key aspects of this training would ideally give staff the opportunity to be made aware of the support systems which exist for them as teachers, such as being able to access the expertise of the DLU support workers more directly as well as learning how and where to access online materials and resources. Most importantly, students themselves could be consulted as part of the training process so that staff can be made aware of the diversity of student needs, particularly in relation to 'hidden' disabilities.

Furthermore in light of the recent drop in international student numbers as mentioned, this research could be seen as highly significant for marketers of Australian education to prospective overseas cohorts with or without disabilities. One of the most important reflections made by students was the fact that they were unaware of the existing supports at available at this university until well after they arrived in Australia. Perhaps the most surprising aspect is the fact that the parents of these students, who were all funding the education of their children, also did not know about the support mechanisms in place. Mary's response to the question regarding her parents feelings about being in Australia was, "they are very happy for me to come here to get a very good support...they didn't know this existed". Indeed, as Terry, a support staff member said "if you've got international students doing well, then going home they may talk about their positive experiences and thereby promote a very positive image of the university." Finally, as Monica suggested "producing graduates who do suffer from various disabilities/additional needs is probably an important signal to the wider community that these people certainly have competencies and specialist knowledge and abilities"; perhaps even more so when these students are from cultures which perpetuate the deficit view of students.

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