ENVIRONMENTAL ADJUSTMENT, ACADEMIC INVOLVEMENT AND DIFFICULTIES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN ECUADOR

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RESUMEN

El estudio examina el estado de la education para estudiantes descapacitados en Ecuador, e incluye informacion obtenida mediante entrevistas con ciertos estudiantes descapacitados a nivel universitario. El autor provee recomendaciones para que las instituciones academicas e individuos puedan apoyar mejor a estudiantes descapacitados.

Palabras claves: Educacion Inclusiva, Estudiantes Descapacitados, Ecuador

ABSTRACT

This study examines the state of education for disabled students in Ecuador, and includes information obtained through interviews with select disabled undergraduate students. The author provides recommendations for how educational institutions and individuals can better support disabled students.
Keywords: Inclusive Education, Disabled Students, Ecuador

Inclusive education has been present in Ecuador since 1940 initially through private organizations and formally from 1945 with the expedition of the Organic Law of Education which mandate the access and attention of children with any kind of biological or mental disability. Many people may have a wrongly limited view of what constitute a disability. Conceiving what really constitute disability has been an epic journey. Traditionally people believe that disabilities are physical or mental and that can be visually determined. However, most students' disabilities are hidden. These might involve processing disabilities such as learning difficulties, attention deficit disorders, physiological problems, or brain injuries; or chronic systemic disorders such as severe allergies or diabetes (Katz, 2007). Implications of hidden disabilities are self-disclosure in order to accommodate students need.

The rights of students with disabilities are protected in the United States of America under Section 504 of Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and under the Americans with Disabilities Acts (ADA) of 1990. Comparative legislation in Ecuador can be found in the Constitution which granted access to education to all citizens with no discrimination of any type. Also the Law of Disabilities passed in 1992 and recently amended in 2012 protects people with disabilities, including students from an integral perspective.

Disability is very broadly defined in the legislation and covers physical, sensory, intellectual, psychiatric, neurological and learning disabilities. It also covers physical

disfigurement as well as serious illnesses. A disability may be temporary or permanent, total or partial, lifelong or acquired. (Organic Law of Disabilities, Ecuador 2012; Americans with Disabilities Acts, United States of America 1992)

Recent developments regarding this issue have been achieved with nearly 80 countries that signed the United Nations Convention enshrining the rights of the world's 650 million disabled. Ecuador's has stayed left behind and has developed and mature profoundly regarding people with disabilities, but at the same time suffer from lack of preparation to attend all the needs this group demands. According to a Ministry of Education study (2005), 13.2% of Ecuadorians have some kind of incapacity representing nearly 1,800,000 million people. 76.2% of them do not assist to any educational institution. From the population that have accessed to education, 58.8% attend regular institutions instead of special needs institutions. These statistically insignificant numbers are worsened when retention is added to the equation leaving a minimum percentage of the population graduating particularly from higher education institutions.

According to the survey of the American Council on Education, found that in the last 10 years people with disabilities are increasing their desire to attend college and actually are attending in higher percentages than ever before. However, they have to experience a variety of difficulties such as academic adjustment, retention barriers that contrasted with a legal frame that in theory facilitates access to colleges and universities but practical restrictions such as economic, social, technical, informative and political limit admissions in higher proportions (Hall & Belch, 2000; Henderson, 1999; Hodgkinson, 1985; Wiseman, Emry, & Morgan, 1988)

Purpose

The purpose of this mini study is to examine the experience of undergraduate students with disabilities at Espiritu Santo Institute of Technology in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Specifically, it will examine the factors that enhance their environmental adjustments in the first place, academic involvement, difficulties accessing higher education and the factors they believe contribute to their retention and professional success. A review of relevant research on the factors of academic success and difficulties will be presented along with comparative research in the United States. Next, the method will be presented with a description of the students interviewed and the questions applied, followed by the findings that emerged from the interviews and a discussion of major themes and their relationship to the research in addition to conclusions for further reviews.

Literature Review

Access of Students with Disabilities

A study conducted on 11 universities from Guayas Province in Ecuador, exposes the access of students with disabilities in Ecuadorian higher education (Espinosa, 2012). The study reveals that people with disabilities have special characteristics such as perseverance, effort and merit. However, inequality showed by different groups in special people or students with

disabilities introduces the debate on what kind of policies are needed to be implemented in order to bring equal opportunity to this group.

University access, retention and sense of belonging have to include different environment and levels such as economic, academic, cultural, racial, gender, technological among others. Disabilities exist when special deficiencies weather visible or not affect a human being, in this study. Some need special arrangements including physical like infrastructure and academic like curriculum. Inclusive education allows professors and students to feel comfortable against diversity and not perceive it as a problem but an opportunity to enrich the learning environment. According to Rodriguez (2004), only 1.8% of the population with disabilities access to higher education and that critical barrier restrained students from education even though special legislation was approved. Findings indicate that there are no inclusion strategies in place from most of the universities. The majority of the system tries to fulfill the law and stick with the minimum requirements. Use of technology focused for students with disabilities is scarce. The most common strategy for inclusion is financial, in the form of aid, scholarships or discounts. Absence of areas of support such as Students advisors or students affairs contribute to high rate of attrition.

Retention and students with disabilities

Students with disabilities have participated in higher education for more than a century. Nonetheless, their retention has remained a central concern over time. Efforts have been directed to their successful adjustment to college life (McGrath & Braunstein, 1997; Tinto, 1993). Significant or essential elements related to retention and persistence include the importance of setting goals both educational and occupational, the degree of social integration and the commitment to individual goals (Boulter, 2002; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 1993).
A study found that after five years post-high school graduation only 37% of participants with disabilities had enrolled in higher education, compared to 78% of their non-disable counterparts (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996).

A sense of belonging, the level of involvement and a sense of purpose are essential elements for success (Hartman, 1993). Environmental conditions such as safety and inclusion, taken in a sense of security and belonging, serve as the foundation for retention success (Strange & Banning, 2001). These notions of safety and inclusion involve not only the physical aspects of the environment, but also a sense of mattering and validation (Scholossberg, 1989; Rendon, 1994).

Students with disabilities are at risk because they do not always share similar characteristics with the dominant group, further limiting the sense of welcome they experience on campus (Jones, 1996). When a sense of belonging and inclusion are accomplished, a student believes there is a place for him or her.

Managing a disability

Students manage their disability from kindergarten through college, however they experience labeling, stigmatization and gatekeeping throughout their school years. Students,

employ a variety of positive and negatives techniques in an effort to successfully manage their disability in school. Positive techniques include relying on benefactors, implementing self-improvement techniques and utilizing particular strategies and management skills to assist with academics. Negative techniques include passing techniques to avoid disclosure of their disability when possible. (Barga, 1996)

Methodology

The study was conducted at Espiritu Santo Institute of Technology in Guayaquil-Ecuador, a selective and private institute established in 1988. Inclusion of minority groups such as students with disabilities is part of a diversity policy of the institution. Students with disabilities represent approximately 1% of the student population. Nearly 33% of students with disabilities were selected, taking into consideration each type of disability in order to select different kind of disabilities and have a better understanding of the group as a whole.

Participants in this study were three senior male students, born and raised in Ecuador. Each of these participants has a different disability, officially recognized by government authorities, and had struggle from it since they were children. Each participant was interviewed for a period of approximately 60 minutes. Interviewee #1 had a stroke at 5 years of age, causing a paralysis of his left side of his body. Interviewee #2 had very limited vision of 30% to 35% caused at age 2 by lack of development of visual nerves. Interviewee #3 had a type of paralytic polio at age 4 approximately, impairing him to walk and grow appropriately.

Limitations

Three different students were selected with different disabilities, however, types of disabilities are many more than the ones selected in this study. No two students even with the same disability are the same (Cerise Roth-Vinson, 2007). Because the different impact and implications of each kind of disability the results may not be generalizable to all students in this group.

Findings

These results focus mainly on the participant's personal experiences, considering their point of views of their environmental adjustment, academic involvement and difficulties accessing higher education.

Environmental adjustment: Physical, social, academic

Interviewees had different types of disabilities; however all of them showed similarities such as positive attitude towards its environmental adjustment, regardless the difficulties presented in each case. Economic support has been a difference in their adjustment and inclusion. Interviewee #2 used technology as his main tool of involvement and development, while interviewee #3 never had the opportunity to access or use technology off campus. Even with this difference, results are similar and have not affected their adjustment significantly. Interviewee #1 mentioned that his transition to college was normal. "I have never felt marginalized. I went to high school as a regular student, sometimes they were some classmates that made fun of me. Once a student hold my right arm and ask me to fight, I have no idea how I

did it but I punch him with my left arm so hard that I knocked him out" Socially speaking he mentioned that he lived as a normal student "going out on Fridays and Saturdays with friends, going to parties, sometimes play soccer". In the overall he expressed that his experience in terms of environmental adjustment was positive, he was always treated as a regular student.

Interviewee #2 mentioned that his transition to college was also normal. "First day of school I came with my mother so she can take to my classes. She accompanied me for a few days until I got familiar with the facilities and schedule. Knowing my classmates and professors help me a lot, if I have to move to one class to another someone always help me". When ask if he needed any special accommodations, he responded: "No, I have never needed any special accommodations, any special seat or computer connections. When I need to use my laptop I just need to plug it".

Interviewee #3 mentioned also that his transition to college was smooth however his daily live has been very difficult. "Since I was in high school I had to work to survive… I always go from one place to another in my chair. Sometimes it is difficult because of the distance but mainly for the weather, in rainy season I just stop studying. I first started at University of Guayaquil (public university), however I lost my brother who was always with me and dropped out of school" There were no academic or environmental issues, however personal issues. Hi recognizes that if it wasn't for people that helped him throughout his live he wouldn't have been able to study and pursue a career. "My biggest struggle was always money not my disability". In terms of social adjustment, he mentioned that it was a barrier to have his disability; however he was able to find a girlfriend and even have a child.

Academic involvement

Disabilities in each of the interviewees have affected somehow their academic involvement; however it is similar among them that they have found a way to compensate their weakness in participating in some activities. They all mentioned their peers as a valuable support for his involvement. There was no noticeable difference in their academic involvement regarding their different disabilities.

Interviewee #1 mentioned that he was always one more in the class. "Academically I have never been different than my peers, I have been helped sometimes in physical activities such as sports, by doing less work than other but I have always done everything". Interviewee #2 said that technology has been the most important tool for his involvement and success. "I use a software, a screen reader that allows me to understand class material, do my assignments and projects". He attributes 97% of his success in college to technology, 2% to digital recording and 1% to braille system". For interviewee #3, academic involvement hasn't been an issue for pursuing his dream of graduating. "Since the first day everybody was very warm and nice with me, from the reception to the Dean…I have dropped out for periods because of economic issues and not for any academic reason, although I have to admit that sometimes I am so tire and don't want to come to school, as I work full time, but I fight everyday with that and here I am"

All three interviewees have had some kind of restrictions doing extracurricular activities such as attending and working on community projects outside of campus. Interviewee #2

mentioned that he needs to first know where the project will be conducted and then determine if he will be able to attend...sometimes it's complicated and unknown". Interviewee #1 mentioned that he has never had any inconvenience attending and working with extracurricular activities. Interviewee #3 mentioned that he always find the way to accomplish it. "My friends and peers always support me".

Difficulties: access and retention

For all three selected interviewees accessing to higher education *per se* was not a problem; however they have needed to adapt accordingly to their disability. They all rely and highlight the importance of their peers in their programs. In terms of retention, there is no relevance to academic concerns; however economic issues affect more on retention of this student's group. Another important similarity is that none of them rated psychological assistance as important and mentioned that neither of them has ever had any assistance at all.

There are some difficulties to point out as they may be a good reason for dropping out or even never attend to school in some cases. Transportation seems to be an issue to focus on. For instance, interviewee #1 mentioned: "I never take public transportation for fear of falling down, I always take a cap". Interviewee #2 takes the institution bus that picks him up and drop him of after classes, he does it be himself. For interviewee #3 transportation it is a real problem as he uses his chair to move from home to work and to school. "I have to do it, I know it is dangerous and I have fear especially at night…it takes me 35 minutes from school to home"

Discussion and Conclusion

All the interviewees highlighted the importance of peer support in their completion of their program and graduation, however none of them mentioned any special assistance given by the institution other than financial support. Universities and colleges use as their most common strategy for inclusion financial aid, given as scholarships or discounts (Espinosa, 2012)

Persistence and determination is the most relevant characteristic of all three interviewees. Their own desire to succeed leads them to start and accomplish their degree, sacrificing day to day through constant effort beyond the dominant group. Influence and support from family and peers are also a very important factor to highlight. As stated by Astin (1999), students learn by becoming involved; however having a disability refrain students to become involved in all kind of activities. From the study, it can be stated that even though students with disabilities are not always able to perform all kind of activities, their desire shown in a form of involvement made them capable of managing or compensate those activities in different forms.

The level of academic and social integration or engagement leads to success and perseverance (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's theory of integration was particularly common among all three interviewees. They all pointed out that their social integration had been one of the main keys to success not only academically but contributing towards completing their degree.
Researchers have proffered models to explain the complexity of the influence on students exerted by others such as family, peers, faculty, the institution and the level of involvement and

quality of effort students expend in an attempt to explicate reasons for their retention (Astin, 1984; Pascarella, 1985; Tinto, 1975).

Sense of belonging, level of involvement and a sense of purpose are indeed essential elements for success. However, integration and involvement have to be carefully considered when applying to students with disabilities. Despite the benefits associated with campus involvement, few students with disabilities are involved with co-curricular activities (Johnson el al, 1998). Interviewees #1, 2 and 3 showed the same characteristic of being willing to participate in extracurricular activities, but they all have to first determine if they will be able to perform those activities. Peer support was of especial help in this theme.

They all share the desire to graduate and find a job, even though interviewee #3 already works full time. With the 2012 Amendment to the Law of Disabilities people with disabilities have an opportunity to find a job as 4% of the workforce have to be officially disable. However, students with disabilities remain at a disadvantage when compared to college graduates without disabilities.

They all aspire to have a family in the future and live as any other regular human being. Top two difficulties are safety and financial support. Environmental condition such as safety was of relevance to all interviewees, noting that for instance transportation was a retention issue that has to be taken into consideration for this group. Financial support showed a highly rate of retention strategy.

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