

Original Paper

Students with Disabilities: The Disconnect between Self Advocacy and Social Justice Practices of Teachers

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Abstract

This paper explored the perceptions of special education staff and college students with disabilities about self-advocacy instruction through the lens of social justice. Investigated were three public schools and one community college. Data revealed differing perceptions between educators and students regarding the level of self-advocacy instruction that students with disabilities received. The implications for this research and practice include that high school personnel understands and implements principles of social justice to teach students with disabilities to have self-advocacy skills.

Keywords

Self-Advocacy transition instruction, social justice teaching, special education programs

1. Introduction

Social justice for individuals with disabilities has become an issue due to an increase of people with disabilities in our society (Becker, 2005). As Ben-Porath (2012) revealed, the United States government has attempted to address these needs through laws including the *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act*, *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act*, and the *Americans with Disabilities Act*. This legislation provides a moral and legal grounding, as well as clear policies, that reflect the idea that all students have an equal right to an education and that people with disabilities should not face discrimination. Despite the federal government's attempts to create protection for people with disabilities, social justice still eludes many of these people (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). It is vital to the existence of social justice that addressed are unacceptably biased social arrangements, and all people were given individual rights, freedom, and equality (Barclay, 2010; Torres-Harding et al., 2014). Grant and Gibson (2013) concurred by stating, "protection and enactment of fundamental human rights

are at the core of these twenty-first-century calls for social justice...this remains as true in education as in other justice movements” (p. 81). The purpose of this study was to determine what transition services were provided to students with disabilities while they were in high school. The following overarching question guided this inquiry: *According to special education administrators, high school special education teachers and students with disabilities, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?*

1.1 Conceptual Framework

According to Lewis (2011), social justice theorists believe that living a good life is a right for all individuals. However, people with disabilities have discouraging postsecondary completion rates, which effect their ability to earn high levels of financial independence (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). These discouraging completion rates may be due to their inability to adequately self-advocate and challenge forms of oppression related to social justice (Gregg, 2009; Ivey & Collins, 2003; Sanford et al., 2011; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). When investigating social justice, it is difficult to find consensus upon a definition because social justice does not have one single meaning (Young, 1990). Rizvi (1998) concurred,

The immediate difficulty one confronts when examining the idea of social justice is the fact that it does not have one single meaning—it is embedded within discourses that are historically constituted and that are sites of conflicting and divergent political endeavors. (p. 47)

Agreeing was Novak (2000), who noted much of the literature about social justice does not ever offer a definition, but those authors that do offer a definition are similar in principles of equality and basic rights. First, Fondacaro and Weinberg (2002) defined a fundamental value of fairness and equity in rights, resources, and treatment of marginalized individuals. Zajda et al. (2006) expanded this definition by adding value to the dignity of every human being.

Conversely, Odegard and Vereen (2010) proposed a definition about the “process of acknowledging systemic societal inequities and oppression while acting responsibly to eliminate the systemic oppression in the forms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other biases” (p. 130). This definition differs from the others by recognizing that social justice is a process of acknowledging inequalities rather than just valuing fairness and equality. Rawls (2001) theory of justice articulated principles of justice are those mutually agreed upon by persons under fair conditions and benefit both the more and the less advantaged of society. Rawls theory differed the most from the others in that there is a concept of benefit for all members of society, rather than a value of fairness and equality that focuses on the rights of marginalized individuals (Rawls, 2001). While the definitions of social justice vary from author to author, most agree on the value of equality and basic human rights.

Despite the United States government’s attempts to create protection for people with disabilities, social justice still eludes many of these people (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). Addressing unacceptable bias, social arrangements are vital to the existence of social justice and all people given protected individual rights, freedom, and equality (Barclay, 2010; Torres-Harding et al., 2014). Grant and Gibson (2013)

concluded by stating human rights should be the primary focus of these twenty-first-century requests for social justice.

According to Pazy and Cole (2012), “social justice and education have been inextricably linked since the court decided the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case” (p. 259). Both Ben-Porath (2012) and Smith (2012) contended one of the fundamental determinations of education should be increasing engagement and learning for students with disadvantages such as language, poverty, and special needs. Social justice has evolved from issues around race, socioeconomic status, and gender to issues around disabilities (Polat, 2011; Theoharis, 2010). However, Pazy and Cole (2012) emphasized while the concept of social justice in our education system evolved, students with disabilities continued to fight against inequities within our schools. Reynolds and Brown (2010) noted our education system had allowed marginalization of students with disabilities. Thus, according to Ben-Porath (2012), to correct this marginalization, schools must recognize that both the distribution of educational resources and equal access to education fall under the basic principles of social justice. These basic principles of social justice include distribution, recognition, and opportunities (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).

Distribution involves the equitable allocation of resources and rewards (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). While all men should have an equal claim to an equal share of all advantages in our society, certain groups in our society have received an unequal distribution of resources (Ben-Porath, 2012; Odegard & Vereen, 2010; Smith, 2012). The principle of distribution encourages the investigation of equitable allocation of resources and rewards to ensure that all men are getting an equal claim.

Another principle of social justice, recognition, refers to the acknowledgment that all cultural ways of being are valued (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Social justice addresses the marginalization of groups of people, and with that, marginalization comes a devaluing of their culture within our society and the education system as well. According to Zajda et al. (2006), this devaluation of culture is likely to make it more difficult for educators to address differences and oppression in schools. Fraser (2001) contended people with disabilities have greater inequality in the areas of economics, social, and political processes than others in society, thus devaluing their culture. According to Bankston (2010), addressed should be any inequalities in rights that exist in a manner to ensure that all members have some advantage. Barclay (2010) concurred and noted while some may see this as disrespectful, it is not necessarily so if the distribution of rights is based upon overcoming disadvantages posted by a person’s impairments. Distributing rights based upon overcoming disadvantages ensure all members of society have equitable advantages and social justice will prevail (Bankston, 2010; Crethar & Winderowd, 2011). It is through the equal distribution of rights, thus the valuation of culture, which the social justice principle of recognition will become evident.

According to Hyttén and Bettez (2011), the social justice principle of opportunities means ensuring a level playing field for all people. Many people with disabilities face unequal opportunities because of the limitations of their disability imposes. While some may see this as an act of compassion, it is a matter of rights for the disadvantaged (Bankston, 2010). These rights lead to more opportunities for the

disadvantaged. It is with the increase of opportunities and the leveling of the playing field that social justice can exist (Bankston, 2010; Hytten & Bettez, 2011).

The examination of self-advocacy for individuals with disabilities through the lens of social justice theory involves equity in rights, resources, and treatment of marginalized individuals as well as finding value in the dignity of every human being (Zajda et al., 2006). According to Pazez and Cole (2012), within the education system, social justice has evolved to include students with disabilities, and it is through this evolution that social justice has embraced the inclusion of people with disabilities.

During the transition from high school to college, it is important that students with disabilities develop self-advocacy skills so that they can advocate for themselves on college campuses (Gil, 2007; Foley, 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Schriener, 2007). According to Astramovich and Harris (2007), when founded on the principles of social justice, self-advocacy can be a powerful tool to help minorities succeed in educational settings. The social justice paradigm uses self-advocacy to address conditions that impede the academic, career, and personal development of individuals (Lewis, 2011). Dowden (2009) expanded upon this paradigm by adding that in education, teaching self-advocacy skills by helping individuals challenge social barriers that impede their development.

Social justice promotes self-advocacy as a means for personal and societal liberation from these barriers (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). Moreover, social justice theory focuses on the equity in rights of marginalized populations (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002), while the self-advocacy movement is a form of resilience and resistance to oppression that marginalized populations face (Caldwell, 2010). Additionally, the ability to self-advocate leads to better post-school outcomes and higher levels of financial independence (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). This increase in post-school outcomes and greater financial independence reflects social justice's focus of equity of resources for marginalized people (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002), resulting in its use as the conceptual framework for this inquiry.

2. Method

A qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process to build an understanding of either a social or human problem based upon a holistic picture that is created using words (Creswell, 2015). Qualitative research finds a basis in a phenomenological approach, which attempts to emphasize the subjective aspects of behavior. In viewing human behavior, qualitative researchers examine interactions, as a way to determine understands through interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This qualitative inquiry examined the perceptions of special education administrators, teachers, and students regarding the amount of self-advocacy instruction students with disabilities received while they were in high school. The three school districts chosen had varying sizes of special education child count since it is important to select participants from different sites to illustrate the issue from a variety of perspectives (Creswell, 2015). Randomly chosen from the 2014 child count were three districts from one Midwest state. One was a school district with a child count of fewer than 500 students, another with a child count between 501 and 1,000 students, and a third with a child count over 1,000 students.

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study each had extensive involvement with teaching students with disabilities or students with disabilities who received services while in high school. Additionally, they each had experience with the instruction that students with disabilities receive at the high school level. This study's participants included three special education administrators who supervised transition programming for students with disabilities and had over three years' experience in the district. The selected fifteen special education teachers had experience with transition planning for students with disabilities and had been in their current role for three years. The six college students with documented disabilities had graduated from one of these three districts.

As in any investigation that involves human subjects, the following ethical guidelines was essential to protect the participants. These protections included safeguarding the participants from harm, assuring confidentiality, and avoiding any deception for the participants involved in the research (Creswell, 2015). Gathered were data from interviews of special education administrators, focus groups of teachers, and a focus group of college students.

2.1.1 Instrumentation Protocol

Ethics in qualitative research extend beyond prescriptive guidelines into a thorough explanation of the ethical consequences of collecting personal experiences and opening those experiences to public scrutiny (Kuper et al., 2008). Collected through the process of interviews and focus groups was the data (Fossey et al., 2002). Each of the special education administrators (n=3) were interviewed, and there were four focus groups, three were composed of special education teachers (n=15), and one made up of the students (n=6). The interviews and teacher focus groups occurred in the high school setting. Held at a community college where they were in their second year was the student focus group.

The researchers interviewed each of the three special education directors once and followed up with a telephone interview with each audio-recorded. After the interviews, transcription occurred, followed by member checking to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and confirm for each participant that their stories were portrayed as intended (Creswell, 2015). Additionally, the researchers took field notes during the interview process to record information not reflected during the transcription.

The director of special education selected the five teachers from their district that would be involved in the focus group. The researchers facilitated one teacher focus group at each study site (n=15). Conducted were the structured focus groups with researchers using a fifteen-question protocol. The focus groups were held at the perspective schools and lasted approximately one hour. The focus groups' conversations were audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers later. The researchers allowed participants to review their transcripts of the focus groups to assure the researchers had accurately captured their words and what they intended to convey.

To gather further data, the researchers conducted a focus group of six students. Two from each of the three sites and had graduated from the school within two years. This focus group occurred at the

community college site. Triangulation of the data occurred using rich, thick descriptions provided from the interviews and focus groups (Creswell, 2015).

2.1.2 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves the organization and interrogating of data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories (Hatch, 2002). According to Kitziinger (1995), this analysis of the data ends as the researchers compare similar themes and examine how these relate to the variables within the sample population. This understanding of the data requires conceptual level processes of exploring the meanings, patterns, or connections among the data (Fossey et al., 2002).

After the collection of data, the transcription of the interviews was conducted, and field notes were completed. Coding of the transcripts was conducted in a systematic manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Employed was a two-part coding process to label the segments of data to identify themes (Fossey et al., 2002). First, open coding involving the researchers examining the units of analysis and formulating basic, noninferential descriptions of the studied phenomena, then grouping them into general categories that described the participants' experiences (Nelson & Quintana, 2010). Next, the researchers employed an axial coding method that created inferential descriptions of the processes and giving them meaning that was relevant to the research questions (Nelson & Quintana, 2010). Coding included meanings, patterns, and connections among data, thus giving an understanding of the data about the research questions (Fossey et al., 2002). As an additional level of data triangulation (Creswell, 2015), field notes were interpreted about the findings in the transcriptions.

3. Settings

Located within one Midwest state chose were three districts of differing student populations. One school site had a special education child count of fewer than 500 students, one had a special education child count between 501 and 1,000 students, and the last school site had a special education child count over 1,000 students. All of these schools offered programs for students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade.

3.1 Site 1: Valley View School District

The first site for this qualitative case study was a suburban school district, referred to as the Valley View School District (pseudonym). Valley View School District (pseudonym) serves approximately 220 students through special education services in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth. The school district has a graduation rate for students with disabilities of 85%, while they show a dropout rate for students with disabilities of 1.5%. Additional data show that 53.8% of special needs students enroll in higher education after graduation.

At Valley View High School (pseudonym), approximately 97.2% of the overall school population graduates, with an overall dropout rate of .3%. Upon graduation, approximately 40% of students enter a four-year postsecondary institution, while approximately 32% of student enter a two-year postsecondary

institution.

3.2 Site 2: Washington School District

The second site was a suburban school district, referred to as Washington School District (pseudonym). Washington School District (pseudonym) serves approximately 650 students with disabilities in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth. It has a graduation rate for students with disabilities of 78.6% and a dropout rate for students with disabilities of 1.6%. Additionally, 35.6% of students with disabilities enroll in higher education. Overall, approximately 82.2% of the Washington High School (pseudonym) population graduates, with an overall dropout rate of 4.7%. Upon graduation, approximately 28% pursue a degree at a four-year postsecondary institution while approximately 32% pursue a degree at a two-year postsecondary institution.

3.3 Site 3: Franklin School District

The final site for this case study was another suburban school district, referred to as Franklin School District (pseudonym). Franklin School District (pseudonym) serves approximately 1,560 students with disabilities in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth. It has a graduation rate for students with disabilities of 81.6% and a dropout rate for students with disabilities of 1.2%. Approximately 55.7% of students with disabilities enrolled in higher education. Across three high schools, approximately 93.6% of the overall population graduates high school, while approximately 1% of the overall population drops out of high school. Approximately 53.7% of their graduates attended a four-year postsecondary institution, while approximately 26.9% of their graduates attended a two-year postsecondary institution.

4. Results

The social justice principle of distribution involves the equitable allocation of resources and rewards (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). According to these public school special education administrators, distribution of resources and rewards typically takes the form of course offerings within the education setting. As one administrator expressed, “We have social development classes... but between [that class and] our Trans Lab [they] help them transition into different things”. Besides, she expressed an effort to determine the best courses for students by doing a “... service inventory. We do two or three different kinds of inventories for our students”.

Another principle of social justice, recognition, refers to the acknowledgment that all cultural ways of being are valued (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). These public school special education administrators expressed that students with disabilities are accepted into the school culture. As one stated, “They’re just invited to do everything”. However, another administrator acknowledged they do not include students with disabilities in any education about the political processes that influence students with disabilities and “...do not do [any instruction about] laws as a group”.

According to Hyttén and Bettez (2011), the social justice principle of opportunities refers to ensuring a level playing field for all people. It is through the leveling of the playing field that social justice can be achieved (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). One administrator said her school district “...always involved them

in [deciding accommodations]” which allowed students opportunities to share what they need to access their education equitably. While another expressed that in his district, students share their needs “...in IEP meetings”. All of these experiences provide opportunities for students with disabilities to have access to the same resources and rewards that other students have.

According to Hytten and Bettez (2011), recognition as a social justice principle acknowledges that all cultural ways of being are valued. A teacher perceived that the student body involved students with disabilities “There are a lot of kids being asked to dances and such”. Additionally, a teacher shared that course offerings have helped the valuation of all cultures, “Co-teaching has made a big difference for the kids as far as social justice goes because their peers see them as their peers”.

However, the instruction college students received while in high school about knowledge of self-was limited to specific events of their high school career. One student said, “The only time we got to talk about our learning disability was when we were in our IEP meetings”. Another student said that he would “...get excited when it comes to my IEP because I want to show that I’m an individual, and I’m an advocate for myself...”

Overall, students did not believe schools prepared them with the necessary knowledge of rights they needed to understand what to ask for regarding accommodations. One student said that he “Basically...I taught myself those laws”. When asked what schools could do to work with students with disabilities to prepare for college he responded, “Tell us more about the laws...what we’re allowed to have outside of our IEP when we leave for college...” Therefore, while the educators thought self-advocacy instruction leveled the playing field, the students acknowledged a need for more instruction.

When students were asked about how teachers enhanced the ethos of the school, allowing for inclusionary practices, again, the student’s responses were mixed. Some students referred to being part of the student leadership. “I ran for student officer, and I won, the first kid with learning disabilities to be on the slate of officers”, noted one student. Other students said they just got by in high school and did not participate in anything other than classes. As one expressed, “My teachers were nice, but everyone knew who like some kids and who did not”. Another student relied on his mother to help him prepare to communicate, “If we needed a new accommodation, [mom] would talk to them about it”.

Overall, the perceptions of college students with disabilities regarding their experiences of self-advocacy varied depending on the school and the teacher. Students expressed they had a sufficient level of knowledge about their needs about their disability, but they did not know the rights that are afforded to people with disabilities and also did not have the opportunity to develop leadership skills, both of which are important for self-advocacy. From the data, there appears to be a disconnection between what educators thought they were doing and what occurred to the students.

4.1 Discussion

The responses of the research subjects indicated that some of the principles of social justice, distribution, recognition, and opportunities (Hytten & Bettez, 2011), are reflected in the practices of high schools in educating students with disabilities. However, there is a need to ensure that both staff

and the student body equally value all principles.

The equitable allocation of resources and rewards or distribution (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011), has not always been guaranteed for all members of society. According to the participants in this study, schools offered a variety of resources and rewards for students with disabilities. However, one could argue the need for more resources to level the playing field for students with disabilities. As noted from these findings, teachers struggle to meet the needs of students because resources are scarce.

Within the literature review, both Ben-Porath (2012) and Smith (2012) contended that one of the crucial purposes of education should be increasing opportunities for participation and learning among students, especially those with disadvantages. Opportunities as a principle of social justice refer to ensuring a level playing field for all people (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Within an ethos context, teachers expressed that students with disabilities are involved in the school; conversely, the findings revealed these opportunities were situational depending on the district. The investigation of the principles of social justice for high school students with disabilities offered that high school special education staff perceived that students have access to many different courses and social opportunities through the school. However, some educators expressed those opportunities be expanded to include more students, especially through offering more academic and social offerings, along with leadership opportunities.

5. Conclusions

One conclusion for the findings is staff and students find self-advocacy to be a valuable skill, and giving students with disabilities opportunities to self-advocate is essential. While both staff and students expressed the importance, but there were differing opinions about the opportunities students provided. Both administrators and teachers felt they had delivered a myriad of social justice opportunities, while students felt they had to do things on their own or through their parents. Specifically, it became evident through the data that students with disabilities self-advocated while in high school; however, this happened more on case-specific instances. Needed is an ethos of social justice principles that permeate the culture of a school.

Finally, the findings of this study revealed that social justice theory supports not only the study of people with disabilities but also the study of transition, specifically within the self-advocacy framework. As Astramovich and Harris (2007), postulated self-advocacy is founded on the principles of social justice and can be a powerful tool to help minorities in the school setting. Unfortunately, as revealed in this study, students with disabilities did not always understand or display skills of self-advocacy because their teachers did not follow all of the principles of social justice in their teaching. It is only through this direct relationship between social justice, disabilities, and self-advocacy that removal of these students' barriers can happen.

6. Implications

The findings indicate self-advocacy instruction for high school students with disabilities occurs primarily on a situational basis. Thus, staff must meet with students one-on-one to work through issues regarding self-advocacy at least by-annually. Teachers also need training in how to enhance their social justice skills and understanding, so individuals with disabilities are afforded their rights. High school leadership needs to support students' efforts by allowing them the opportunity to self-advocate and holding staff accountable to demonstrate social justice skills. This study also has implications for post-secondary institutions. Since the provision of accommodations is a mandated activity, post-secondary institutions should evaluate how they are disseminating information to students and staff. Additionally, it is necessary that post-secondary staff know how to access information regarding students with disabilities and the resultant social justice issues.

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