Socheolas
Limerick Student Journal of Sociology

Volume 4, Issue 2

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December 2012

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Available at http://www.ul.ie/sociology/socheolas/vol4/2
ISSN 2009-3144

Socheolas: Limerick Student Journal of Sociology. Vol. 4(2), December 2012

How Inclusive is Third Level Education? An Investigation into the Social Experiences of Students with Disabilities at an Irish Third Level Institution

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MA in Sociology
(Youth, Community & Social Regeneration)

This paper aims to investigate the social experiences of students with disabilities at an Irish third level institution, to establish the extent to which these students are socially included. The paper examines the social construction of disability, perception and attitude towards disability, and an in-depth examination of social inclusion policy. The research adopted a qualitative research methodology. The key findings of the research identify major factors which influence social experiences of students with disabilities these include; social participation levels, perception and attitude as well as policy and services.

Introduction

In 2005 a National Disability Authority report indicated substantial differences in participation levels across a variety of fundamental aspects of everyday life and evidence of significant inequality between people with disabilities and others (NDA 2005, p.7). Notable differences were found in social and educational participation and people with disabilities were always at the lower end of the scale compared to others within their age group. In its widest interpretation participation in third level education has to encompass the richness and diversity of life which can accompany the academic focus. Many institutions have made attempts to create environments which enhance the central academic activities with social and civic interests for students (UCC

2012). In that context Skilbeck (2000, p.45) notes that social isolation is a common problem for students with disabilities, and identifies the development of a positive attitude towards students with disabilities as one of the key challenges facing third level institutions in ensuring social accessibility, to enable students with disabilities to engage fully in the student experience. This paper investigates the social experiences and participation of students with disabilities in an Irish third level institution as a case study.

Conceptualising Disability

The Medical Model

For the majority of people within society disability is something that is located in the medical sphere. Swain and French (2000) in their study on the affirmation model of disability see the medical model of disability as a concept that is infused in culture, policy and professional practice. The essence of the medical model of disability is that disability is a defect within the body. Simply put it "is about a body with functional limitations and it is caused by a health condition…" (Tossebro 2004, p.3). Finkelstein (2001) states that the medical model of disability focuses on the individual, and the disability or illness is seen as a 'personal tragedy'. Carol Thomas (2007, p.57) has developed this approach and has illustrated how, in the medical model, disability is identified as completely unique to the individual; no correlation is made between society and the individual's impairment.

The Social Model

For much of the last two decades the disability movement and governmental policy have begun to shift towards a more social model of disability, which has provided a platform for raising awareness of disability issues and has become the basis for equality training (Oliver 1996, p.31). The work of Michael Oliver is central and pivotal to the development of this model. Conceptualising disability within the social model means a positive progression in attitude and social and policy change. This is because the social model of disability induces changes in society rather than changes in the individual (Oliver 1996, p.34).

The Socio Medical Model

The socio-medical model presents another way in which disability can be conceptualised. This model treats disability "as the outcome of the interaction between individual and contextual factors - which includes impairment, individual attitudes, environment, policy and culture" (Shakespeare 2006, p.58). Conceptualising disability in this way takes into account the multidimensional nature of disability. Including attitude, policy and culture in a definition of disability facilitates our understanding of the way in which it impacts all aspects of life, including social life. In describing the way in which disability is a postmodern concept, Shakespeare and Watson explain that "it sits at the intersection of biology and society and of agency and structure" (Shakespeare and Watson 2001, p.19).

Attitudes

In 2004 Shevlin et al undertook a study of Irish Universities and identified negative attitude as a significant barrier to positive experience throughout college life. An earlier study (Taylor et al., 1993) clearly identified a link between negative attitudes towards disability and the way disability is conceptualised within society. Attitude plays a pivotal role in the social integration of people with disabilities in society (NDA 2006). Attitude can be defined as "…an idea charged with emotion which predisposes a class of actions in particular class of social situations" (Antonak 1988). The conceptualisation of disability and attitude towards disability are closely linked and the interpretation of disability is seen as a major contributing factor to negative attitudes towards disability. Attitude can often be perceived as an invisible barrier which plays a major role in the way people with disabilities experience social life. Shapiro (2000) indicates that negative perceptions which lead to negative attitudes can seriously hinder the participation of people with disabilities in social contexts.

Attitude towards disability can also be linked to lack of awareness of disability. The NDA (2006) identified increased awareness of disability as a method of tackling the attitudinal barriers that are faced by people with disabilities. Increasing awareness and promoting positive attitudes towards disability is something which cannot always be implemented through policy. While policy can provide a framework for change, it cannot always change behaviour. Policy can often influence structural change, however, cultural change such as changing perception and attitudes can often be more rooted and embedded. Changes such as this can take time (Goode 2007, p.38).

Legislation and Policy

Relevant European Policy

The preamble of the *Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities* outlines recognition by both the UN and the EU of the issues surrounding the full participation of people with disabilities in social life. Article 1 of the convention clearly states that the full participation of people with disabilities is a key factor in social inclusion policy (UN 2006, Article 1). Article 24 (UN 2006) outlines policy regarding education, with parties to the convention being encouraged to promote "academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion" and "shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community".

In addition to the Convention On The Rights of Persons with Disabilities, much of the European policy[1], legislation and strategy plans within Europe are based around the same fundamental concepts, specifically anti-discrimination, equal opportunities and active participation (Europa 2007).

Relevant Irish Policy

The Equal Status Act was introduced in 2000 and was subsequently amended by the Equality Act 2004. The overall aim of the act is "to promote equality and prohibit types of discrimination, harassment and related behaviour in connection with the provision of services, property and other opportunities to which the public generally…has access" (Equality Act 2004). Additionally, the Disability Act 2005 is part of government legislative measures intended to promote the social inclusion of people with disability (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform 2005). Under the Act all educational establishments are obligated by law not to discriminate against people with disabilities (Smith 2010, p.90). The act is clear and concise in outlining educational and access provisions but it falls short when it comes to addressing specific policy regarding the promotion of full participation of people with disabilities in society, raising awareness and the removal of attitudinal barriers, all of which are extremely prominent in the UN Convention. The National Disability Strategy was launched in 2004, which was intended to build on a raft of previous legislation[2] (Department of Justice

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[1] Including the Malaga Ministerial Declaration on People with Disabilities: Progressing Towards Full Participation As Citizens, The Disability Action Plan 2006-2015 and the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: A Renewal Commitment to a Barrier Free Europe.

[2] Including the Employment Equality Act 1998, the Equal Status Act 2000, The Equality Act 2004 and The Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004.

and Equality 2011). The aim of the strategy was to support the equal participation of people with disabilities within society.

The Education Act of 1998 provides the framework for an examination of social inclusion policy within education. The aim of this legislation is to "make provision for the education of every person in the state including any person with a disability". The Act states that the government should promote access to and participation in education (Education Act 1998). Moreover, the University Act 1997 states that the object of a university should include the promotion of "learning in its student body and in society generally" whilst at the same time promoting "cultural and social life of society, while fostering and respecting the diversity of the university's traditions" (University Act 1997). The University Act clearly identifies social aspects of university as being a key element to full participation. Social inclusion policy within the institution of interest follows a philosophy of inclusion and diversity and states that the institution is dedicated to ensuring equality of entry, participation and outcome for student groups significantly under-represented at the institution.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative research methodology. To offer a context through which to understand and compare the social experience of students with disabilities it was decided that two groups of students would be interviewed. One group consisted of nine students with disabilities while the other group consisted of nine non-disabled students. The range of disabilities, gender and age of participants varied in order to provide a diverse group from which to gather data. One member of staff from the services which support students with a disability in the college and the Students' Union also participated in order to provide information on policy and procedure within the university. This meant that ten per cent of those interviewed provided an administrative view on the issues influencing social participation and inclusion of students with disabilities.

Data analysis was carried out by means of thematic analysis. The research questions coupled with the literature examined provided a guide for coding the data and ensuing analysis which was helpful in reducing data and focusing the initial coding process (Marshall and Rossman 1999, p.152). A mix of deductive codes and inductive codes were identified. As deductive codes originate mainly from topics in literature or within the interview guide, these codes were recognised first. Inductive codes came directly as a result of reading the data and extracting issues raised by the participants themselves and so a majority of themes emerged from inductive codes (Hennick et al 2011, p.218). The combination of deductive and inductive codes provides a better level of validity, as inductive codes reveal the issues that are essential to the participants themselves and allows the "data to speak for itself" rather than focusing on what is anticipated from the researcher (Hennick et al 2011, p.218). The effect of this process was that this research entered the analytic process with data and concluded with an account of student experiences.

Ethical issues surrounding the research were given considerable thought throughout this research project. Ethical approval was received and the ethical code outlined by the Sociological Association of Ireland was followed at all times during the research. Guidelines provided by the National Disability Authority in relation to carrying out research which includes people with disabilities was also followed and seen as a core aspect of the ethical considerations. All participants in the study were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Research Findings

Social Participation

The data demonstrated that levels of social participation were very different between students with disabilities and non-disabled students. Students with disabilities were less likely to engage socially with their peers throughout their college life. Seven of the nine students with disabilities participating indicated that they did not socialise very often with other students during their time at the college.

> "*No I wouldn't have gone out at all… it's all girls in my class. I don't really mix with any of them… I don't know what it is. I find it hard to mix with people anyway. More so now because I have the brain injury. I analyse everything - maybe a bit of OCD which comes with the brain injury. Every day I'm down doing my classes and I come up every day and go … for my dinner by myself. I don't know if it's because the students don't go for dinners every day or is it that I'm just not friends with them. I just accept it; it's the way it is. At the start I used to analyse it you know like what's wrong with me?... Academically I'm nearly on a first class honours but as I said I don't have any friends in the college I just tip away by myself…*" (Kevin – Student with a disability- Neurological)

In contrast eight of the nine non-disabled student participants indicated that they engaged socially in a very significant manner with their peers, throughout their time in college. It was clear that non-disabled students also had higher participation levels in relation to organised social events and clubs and societies. Six of the nine non-disabled student respondents indicated that they were involved in clubs and societies. In contrast, just two students with a disability belonged to a club or society.

Social Experience

Another interesting finding from the research involves social experience. The data analysis of the student's responses to questions about social engagement, participation and experiences yielded three major factors that influence their decisions in this regard.

Personal Factors

Personal factors are associated with specific needs or limitations which are manifestations of a disability and which greatly impact social experience and participation. Six student respondents with disabilities indicated that their disability impacted their social experience in this way.

> "*…I find college very taxing so I just don't go out cause it takes too much out of me I get fatigued very easily*" (Tara- Student with a disability- neurological)
>
> "*Nightclubs are a bit of a no-no cause if I may say so a bit am… there's a bit too much of an obvious movement ah not so much a stigma but more of a realisation of your own inability to utilize the function of a nightclub. For example like dancing you know I can't dance so why would I… I've been in nightclubs before and it was a bit dreary you know as I said you can't really use the thing you know*" (Trevor –Student with a disability- physical)

Infrastructural Factors

Infrastructural features of the physical environment were a persistent concern in the interviews with participants. These concerns can be classified under the headings accessibility and familiarity.

Accessibility

An accessible physical environment, transportation system and other goods and services are central to social participation and were identified as key issues in relation to the social experiences of students with disabilities. Issues around accessibility were evident specifically for students whose disability impacted their physical ability.

> "*I am stuck in the centre. I wouldn't venture to .... for food or the shop or .... cause there are uneven surfaces and it's just not suitable for a person with a physical disability… in [name of class room removed] there is a place in the middle for a wheelchair but you are excluded from mingling with anyone*". (Tara- Student with disability- Neurological/physical)

> "*…we had students before who were in wheelchairs. They had issues going to clubs and society events around accessible transport. Some of them had issues going out at night so they may not have had as many friends as they would like in college. They kind of got isolated.*" (Staff member from Services for Disabled Students[3])

In terms of accessibility, problems also arose for some students when they experienced large crowds of people at social events.

> "*Pubs and cinema I would go to. Nightclubs no because its crowded and you know some people will be nice to you but girls would stand on top of you.*" (Elaine, Student with a disability- physical)

Familiarity

Being familiar with the physical environment and surroundings was also a key theme emerging from the data. My respondents felt that being familiar with your surroundings is key to social engagement and impacts social experience in a positive way.

> *"If I'm not in an environment that I know, if I didn't know the people, I wouldn't participate.*" (Peter, Student with a disability- neurological)

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[3] This is a pseudonym given to the organisation to protect its identity.

> "*It kind of ended up a situation where I'd walk down to the night club, the bouncers would know me they would pull out a bar stool from behind the counter, sit me in my usual spot for the evening …I'd have to be familiar like every new thing was a serious stress if there was talk of going into town I'd be planning out ok we're getting a taxi to here? Don't leave me somewhere! It was quite stressful. You know if you went into a place a couple of times and there was a routine then I'd be comfortable.*" (Anne – Student with a disability- physical)

Intellective factors

Probably the most significant of all the research findings was the intellective factors that influence social experiences of students with disabilities. Intellective factors were those factors which arose from the perceptions, attitudes and level of awareness that people have in relation to disability.

It was clear from all of my student respondents that the way in which disability is perceived impacted on their participation and inclusion. Students with disabilities, specifically those who felt their disability was visible, indicated clearly that if their disability was perceived negatively by others their social experiences were impacted.

> "*They see the wheelchair and they assume a lot of stuff they see the wheelchair but they don't actually see the person in the wheelchair*". (Elaine Student with a disability-physical)
>
> "*I mean if someone sees a wheelchair they are gonna think yeah there's something wrong with him…Socially it makes it a bit difficult. I mean I often find when I'm in conversation with people… some people just totally and utterly fail to move beyond the wheelchair. I mean that's all they can see. I mean I just think it's more of a societal thing then any personal opinion they may have. Some people I have come across can just breeze straight through the fact that I'm in a wheelchair and it makes no*

> *difference to them and we just talk about normal things like everybody else talks about. With some people it's like there's an elephant in the room and that elephant is what I'm sitting in.*" (Trevor Student with a disability-physical)

Lack of awareness towards disability was also seen as a primary factor impacting social experience. Participants felt that low levels of awareness were very evident.

> "*It's kinda frustrating people aren't aware you know … The way I would approach the issue (of disability) is crack a joke. Of course the problem with that then you know… that because you are cracking a joke you know you're making light of it. You're making it easier for other people but then it does become a bit of a joke and it's you know slagging you, not in a cruel way, but just any discussion of it is in joke format, but then when it comes to actually needing help people are actually still totally unaware of that unless they are good close friends*". (Anne- Student with a disability)
>
> "*I mean until I pointed out to them the fact, the cleaning ladies were giving out that the lifts weren't working and I was thinking shouldn't you be more worried about the people who are in wheelchairs. The students aren't aware of anything about disabilities or anything like that.*" (Peter -Student with a disability- Neurological)

Seventeen of the twenty participants responded that awareness in relation to disability needed to be raised throughout the college.

> "*They are probably aware in certain aspects but in other aspects not at all. They need to educate people more like… Maybe more awareness training so that people when they see a wheelchair they don't get scared and go off the wall.*" (Elaine- Student with a disability- physical)

Policy and Services

The final element of this research was designed to investigate the role played by the institution in the social aspects of college life. During the interviews aspects of policy and services such as the Students' Union emerged as key themes.

Students' Union

The Students' Union was seen as key to many social aspects of college because of its role as an organiser of events and its involvement in the clubs and societies within the institution. However, the majority of my respondents felt that the Students' Union did not understand or meet the needs of students with disabilities and therefore did not facilitate their social participation very well.

> "*I think with the Students' Union they should be coming to us asking what they might require, what they could do what a student with disability might require especially during rag week making sure things are accessible, like toilets, making sure things are accessible. If they brought it to our attention then we may be able to help them with things even we haven't experienced and maybe we could give them more feedback and think more about it*" (Staff member from Services for Disabled Students).

Furthermore a number of participants indicated that the Students' Union didn't provide sufficient information regarding the accessibility of events which meant students did not attend.

> "*I don't think they provide enough services for people like that. I don't think they promote what they can do for people.*"(Nicole- non disabled student)

> "*Maybe making it wheelchair accessible and having it out there so people know that , Yeah vocalise it maybe. Yeah*

> *maybe putting it on the posters that it is accessible."*
> (Ciara- Member of Students' Union[4])

Discussion:

The research data shows that the campus of the case study institution provided a prime environment for social engagement with social events being organised on campus for students. The campus also provided an environment where peer interaction was more than adequately supported. Thus, being in third level education should have allowed for increased social participation for all students. It is clear from the findings that my respondents with disabilities did not experience the campus as a hub of social activity to the same extent as other students. Ninety per cent of non-disabled student respondents viewed being in a third level institution as something that provided them with various outlets for social participation and engagement. In contrast, respondents with disabilities were not experiencing the same levels of social participation or engagement. This finding is consistent with the National Disability Authority (2005) report which showed that people with disabilities participate to a lesser extent than their non-disabled counterparts in social activities.

Significantly, my findings are at odds with the stated objectives of the University Act (1997). The text of the Act is careful to establish that the main purpose of a university is to provide an environment for learning but it also specifically sets out the role of universities in promoting the 'culture and social life of society' for all students. Using Room's (cited in Tsakloglou et al, 2001) identification of lower levels of social participation as a marker for social exclusion the data would support the conclusion that students with disabilities are experiencing social exclusion.

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[4] The student was speaking in relation to the physical inaccessibility of organised events and what needed to be done to combat this

As the findings show, infrastructural deficiencies ranked as one of the key issues for student respondents with a disability. The physical environment and accessible transportation were obstacles to social participation, especially for students whose disability had a physical impact. Again, this finding is in line with the National Disability Authority (2005) report which highlighted lack of access as a major barrier to participation and inclusion. The finding is inconsistent with the requirements of Part Three of the Equal Status Act which states that all goods and services provided by a public body should be accessible (Government of Ireland 2005). In addition, the University Act (1997) sets out clear guidelines to promote equality for all students in all activities at universities. The research findings show that instead of experiencing a sense of equality and inclusion students with disabilities in my sample felt marginalised because of physical barriers.

Personal factors associated with having a disability also impacted on the social lives of students with disabilities. Sally French (1993) has argued that the presence of an impairment will impose social restrictions regardless of how inclusive or accessible the environment may be. Participant responses - especially those who felt their disability impacted their physical ability or health - tended to agree with this assertion.

Barriers were also noted in relation to perception and attitude. The data suggests that the general perception of disability is located in the medical model. As Oliver (1996) has noted, the construction of disability plays a significant role in the way in which people with disability interact socially. The evidence obtained from my respondents suggests that having a disability is seen as outside the norm and for the most part a disability is categorised as something visible such as a physical problem with the body.

Link and Phelan (2001) have documented a link between the medical conceptualisation of disability and the incidence of stigma and stereotyping. My research findings provide clear support for this link. Likewise, Olkin et al (2004) have identified negative attitude as a barrier that promotes "social rejection" and how stereotypical perceptions or attitudes that are perceived as negative impact on how people with disabilities experience social life at third level institutions. The findings of my research are very much in line with this literature.

It is clear that lack of awareness was a defining factor in the social experiences of students with disability at the institution of interest. A low level of awareness in relation to disability is a contributing factor to low levels of participation (Hanafin et al 2007). The findings also indicate that raising awareness is the key to ensuring that students with disabilities experienced a positive social experience.

The final objective of this research was to establish the role of institutional frameworks in facilitating social participation and inclusion of students with disabilities. It was clear from the findings that participants saw the Students' Union and the policy of the case study institution as playing a role in ensuring the social inclusion of students with disability. The policy and legislative documents clearly set out the role of the case study institution in ensuring that students with disabilities are socially included in all aspects of college life.

In that context, inclusion in social events on campus should have been a priority for the organisers of these events. Yet my data suggests that for the most part events were not seen as very accessible to students with physical disabilities and participants held that provisions were not in place to meet the needs of any student who may need other facilities, such as an interpreter. This approach is inconsistent with the Disability Act 2005 which sets out how all educational institutions are obliged to provide access for all students to any “benefit provided by the establishment”.

In addition, the policy under which the Students’ Union operates clearly states that the institution of interest is dedicated to equality of participation for marginalised groups at the university. While it was felt by most respondents that the Students’ Union had an obligation to facilitate students with disabilities almost all participants felt that it did not meet the requirements of students with disabilities and so was not fulfilling this role. It should be noted that the stated "dedication" of the institution of interest to promoting and facilitating participation for all was not evident in my data. Overall Irish governmental policy seemed to play an insignificant role in the social inclusion of students with disabilities in my sample.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident from this research that students with disabilities did not participate socially to the same extent as their peers. While it is hard to pin point an exact definition of social exclusion it is evident from the definitions provided in the literature that being unable to participate fully in society is a key element. There were a number of factors which influenced the lack of engagement and these included personal factors, physical barriers and attitudinal barriers. While policy is in place to promote social inclusion and participation of students with disabilities it is clear from my findings that this policy does not translate very well into practice and the implementation of policies was not very evident from my findings.

In conclusion, overall recommendations for improving the social participation and experiences of students with disabilities relate closely to improving policy. Adopting policy that is used throughout Europe and which focuses on attitudinal change would be of great benefit to students with disability in enabling them to enjoy the social aspects of the college experience to the same extent as their non-disabled counterparts. Implementing European policy would focus on changing negative cultural perceptions and reducing stereotyping of people with disability. This would allow real social inclusion to happen.

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