Effect of disability training on Bolivian teachers’, administrators’ and parents’ attitudes toward people with disabilities

Julie Williams, Psy. D., ABPP (RP), Jennifer Stoyell, Psy. M., & Jared A. Embree, MA
Wright State University, School of Professional Psychology

I. Abstract

Since 2013, volunteer educators have been hosting a conference in collaboration with The Walter Henry School in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, and faculty from the School of Professional Psychology at Wright State University. The purpose of the conference is to provide Bolivian Methodist and public school, Methodist churches, social services agencies, and families, to help Bolivian schools better accommodate students with disabilities. Children with disabilities in Bolivia are sometimes referred to as the "second patio children" in other words defective and not to be seen, and therefore, largely hidden from society. The pervasive impact of these beliefs are seen in the gross inequities and injustices experienced by these children. Specific to education, one study reported that only 1.3% of children with disabilities in Bolivia ever receive an education. As part of the conference and associated trainings, researchers have administered assessments of participants’ attitudes toward people with disabilities. The ATPD was given at the beginning and end of each conference for approximately 50 attenders per year. Measured attitudinal change in teachers, administrators and parents following disability training. No significant change occurred among teachers and parents with a trend towards improved attitudes. However, a significant decline was demonstrated among administrators in 2014. There were also differences according to gender and education. Results from three years of ATPD data will be discussed.

II. Statement of the Problem/Purpose of Study

Disability justice, particularly for children with disabilities (CWD), has become an international priority per article 7 of the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Bolivia has ratified the CRPD but data suggests the quality of life for people with disabilities in Bolivia is poor. It is estimated that 95% of the population aged 6 to 11 years are in school, while only 38% of children with disabilities are http://www.campaignforeducation.org/en.Focus areas educate and disability, leaving most to live out their lives abandoned in institutions largely hidden from society.

Negative disability attitudes have been identified as the source of pervasive disability inequities and abuses experienced by CWD (Antonik & Livneh, 2009). The disability literature suggests that society tends to hold attitudes of pity, burden, helplessness, weakness, asexuality and shame towards the disabled, (Pruett, Lee, Chan, Wang & Lane, 2008).

III. Methods

Attitude change was measured using the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons Scale (ATDP). Participants were administered Form II of the ATPD (Yucer, Block, & Campbell, 1996), which is a 20-item questionnaire designed to assess general attitudes toward people with disabilities. (For ATPD scale revisions, see Yucer, Block, & Young, 1966; Yucer & Block, 1986). The ATDP was administered twice, once prior to the conference and once at the end of the conference. Satisfaction surveys were distributed after each session to each participant and a large town hall focus session was done at the conclusion of the conference to obtain feedback and suggestions for future trainings.

IV. Results (Demographics)

Conference participants were predominantly female teachers from Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, with an average age of 37.48 years (Range 24-62) in 2013, 33.03 years (Range 18-57) in 2014, and 33.50 years (Range 20-50) in 2015.

V. Results (Continued)

Conference participants were asked to provide feedback on each session and were also asked at the end of the conference in a large town hall format to provide additional feedback as well as to comment on their future needs.

Comments received included the following themes:

- Many reported feeling deeply impacted by learning about disability laws and abuses experienced by people with disabilities.
- Need and desire more specific teaching strategies for specific disability groups
- Need and desire more information on how to implement teaching strategies that better consider contextual barriers confronting teachers (e.g. limited resources, supplies and large classrooms)
- Given high rates of sexual abuse of CWD, participants stated they needed more information on sex education/teaching of abode and how to educate parents, teachers and children
- Many of the participants acknowledged having no awareness of disability laws in Bolivia and wanted more specific information on disability laws in Bolivia and more importantly guidance on how to implement them as reflected by one participant who said... “the laws are great but we don’t know how to implement them.”

VI. Discussion/Limitations/Strengths/Future Directions

Disability justice has only recently received international attention as evidenced by the UN’s Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Once ratified, parties are mandated to promote, protect, and fulfill the human rights and dignity of persons with disabilities and show evidence of their efforts. This treaty is a powerful change agent that is moving the disability paradigm from one of charity, and medicalization to a social minority perspective that promotes empowerment and capacity building among people with disabilities, (UNCRPD, 2006).

Bolivia is committed to full inclusion and access to education, employment, transportation, health care, and most importantly freedom from abuse and exploitation.

As of January 2015, there were 160 signatories and 159 parties in support of CRPD. Bolivia ratified the CRPD on November 16, 2009 while the United States to date has failed to ratify the CRPD. Article 7 of this treaty speaks specifically to children with disabilities and rights to education.

This study had several strengths in that, consistent with CRPD, it specifically, addressed efforts to promote inclusive education for children with disabilities in a country where reportedly only 1-3% of it’s children with disabilities are receiving educational opportunities. Second, this study included a reflective awareness component aimed at addressing attitudinal beliefs about disability which is believed to be critical to successful and long lasting change. The study also included the presence of two individuals with disabilities as facilitators of disability awareness and dissemination of images of empowerment. In keeping with the social minority paradigm, this study also included a powerful inclusive education component as demonstrated in the participation of a Bolivian NGO worker who provided much needed education around disability laws in existence in Bolivia. Many of the participants were unaware of any disability laws in their own country and verbalized a need and desire for more disability law related information. Next, this study offered a skills component via a team of educational trainers who work with children with disabilities in the United States and were able to provide specific disability inclusive classroom instruction strategies to Bolivian teachers, parents, and administrators. Teachers in particular relayed appreciation and gratitude for these strategies and again conveyed a desire and need for more. Finally, this was a unique experience in that the compilation of team members consisted of those driven by a Methodist Mission paradigm with those driven by an academic social justice paradigm. This promoted a diversity of perspectives with an opportunity to engage in further dialogue around how religion and disability justice can come together and promote social change.

This study had unavoidable weaknesses in that generalizability of results is limited due to small sample sizes and no comparative data between those who received this training and those who did not. Another significant limitation is the low number of parental involvement. Despite efforts made to invite parents of children with disabilities to this conference it was apparent that this was unsuccessful in the low numbers of parents who attended. This is an important absence, given social change historically benefits from participation from members of the oppressed groups. Finally, feedback from participants clearly suggested more attention to contextual and cultural variables is needed in order to make the relevance and utility of the training impactful and useful.

VII. Conclusions/Future Direction

Clearly, more work is needed in the promotion of inclusive education. Promoting educational opportunities is a critical step towards improving quality of life and economic opportunities for individuals with disabilities given research suggests that education is highly related to poverty and quality of life. Research also suggests that contact, education, information, acknowledgment of disability and service learning projects are important agents of change in negative attitude (Spader, 2007). Moreover, the key to attitudinal change appears to be when training includes the presence of people with disabilities as experts, and when attitudinal information is provided in conjunction with knowledge and skills. Therefore, any training involving disability inclusion must consider attitudinal awareness as a component of the training. Finally, the allowance of adequate time to dialogue and practice what one is learning has been found to promote long lasting attitudinal change and action therefore, the plan is to return to Bolivia and continue training efforts. Finally, consistent with participatory action research inclusion of members of the Bolivian community in the planning of future trainings and research is also needed in order to promote and empower culturally congruent change from within.

VIII. Acknowledgments

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