Assessment and Certification in a Changing Educational, Economic and Social Context

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Challenges of Assessment and Certification on Access to Higher Education with Reference on Physically Challenged People, Especially The Visually Impaired

Presented by Willy Mathys

Director, WE-SHOP Employment Project for the Visually Impaired

Sarepta Cape Town South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will propose concrete ways in which we could address the challenges faced by physically challenged people, with special reference to visually impaired people, within the context of assessment and certification in higher education. It should also be emphasised that the objective of this document is not only to look at the negative effects of these changes and developments, but to sincerely seek to find solutions.

2. PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

It is clear that we cannot employ the same philosophical assumptions that we have about people who are not physically challenged and not visually impaired as we have about those who are visually impaired.

It is important to underscore that in a society which is struggling to develop a national identity and to effect socio-economic transformation, that all segments of society marshal their resources for the collective enhancement and building of the society. The physically challenged, including the visually impaired, are an integral component of the society and the transformation process and are active, not passive, actors in this transformation who bring their own distinctive hidden potential, talents, skills and, very importantly, worldviews to the movement for social and economic change.

It is imperative that we discard our ingrained prejudices against the physically challenged and the visually impaired so that we as educators are also practitioners of justice.

3. PRACTICAL STEPS IN ASSESSMENT AND CERTIFICATION IN EDUCATION INVOLVING PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED PERSONS

3.1. The philosophical foundations that undergird educational services for students who are physically challenged or visually impaired must be understood by educators involved in assessment and certification.

3.2. Educators must recognize that education for students with blindness or visual impairments is a continual transition process, and should therefore, provide appropriate transition support at critical times. For example, adequate availability of Braille, audio, and large print (12 point or above) materials for study as well as assessment purposes such as for exams and tests. Vital elements of the curriculum must be accessible in these mediums to ensure that students are not discriminated against and deprived of the mentioned resources for certification.

3.3. The importance of an equal partnership between parents of disabled or visually impaired students, educators, and assessors in regard to the educational process cannot be overemphasised. In this regard, educators need to meet with parents of physically challenged and visually impaired students and with professional support services, (psychologists, optometrists and clinical low vision specialists, general and special education teachers, certified orientation and mobility specialists, teachers of the visually impaired, and others, as needed.

3.4. Speech therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, adapted physical education teachers and assistive technology specialists may jointly assess the character of the disability and to constructively propose an Individual Educational Plan (IEP).(Pough, G. S., & Erin, J. (Eds.). (1999). Blind and Visually Impaired Students: Education Service Guidelines. Watertown, MA: Perkins School for the Blind USA.)

3.5. The IEP describes the specific disability and then lists achievable goals to be met within a specific time framework as well as the amount of time the educators and professional resource staff will spend with the students to meet these goals. Progress reports are written on a quarterly, or even a bi-quarterly, basis and given to the parents and placed in the student's on-going personal file.

3.6. The parents of a disabled or visually impaired student are uniquely positioned to assess their student's social/self-help skills thus they should receive on-going guidance or training in strengthening the social/self-help skills of their learner.

4. Governmental structures and educational authorities / agencies should ensure that each student will receive ongoing and appropriate assessment in order for the education team, including parents, to develop and implement an appropriate individualized education plan

(IEP). State Education Agencies must ensure that the assessment and certification policies implemented for students, be maintained.

5 In the preparation of assessment materials the Exam Assessment Authorities should be aware that:

5.1 Assessments for visually impaired people must be administered differently than those for non-impaired people.

5.2 . **Non-impaired** people have better access to study and research material since they can scout around to support their preparation for certification.

5.3 . **Non sighted** learners are dependent and have access to only the bare minimum in reading, study opportunities, and have limited career choices because of peoples' misconceptions & prejudice towards them.

5.4 Since it is expected of the business world to collaborate as partners in preparing the levelling of the playing field for meaningful employment, it is imperative that they be better informed to enable them to create a user-friendly environment for this segment of society. In abstaining from doing so, it may happen so that others will decide what the visually impaired can and/or cannot do instead of engaging them as partners thereby meaningfully contribute towards the development of a receptive and sensitive society.

6. It is imperative that disabled or visually impaired students, as well as beginning teachers of these students, have the opportunity to learn from teachers/mentors who are themselves disabled or visually impaired.

REDRESSING INEQUITIES :

Since society has changed dramatically in terms of the economy, technological and social development over the last 10-15 years, life has become more demanding for people without

disabilities and even more so (even severely so) for people with disabilities. Technology and the advert of the information age in its many forms has overtaken life as we knew it in all spheres: education, economics and society. Life has moved from a more mechanical to a more technological and information age.

Computers and technological systems have become part of our daily life but most people in developing countries, including Africa, are not part of it because very often most them do not own computers. Professor Julian Kunnie of the University Of Arizona is of the opinion that, only 5% of the people of the world have computers and only 8% of people of the world have bank accounts thereby, making modern technology largely the province of a privileged elitist minority.

It is safe to say that this statistic applies to the non-impaired – those with impairments fare far worse. On a positive note with an increasingly technological environment, new options and many possibilities that have not existed have now been created, that can expand the scope of opportunity for visually impaired people such as advanced Braille printing, audio and sound assisted devices, and computer screen readers that have become available.

However, for the physically challenged and specifically the visually impaired, there is the compounding of marginalisation from technology. Such marginalisation places these groups of people in an extremely vulnerable situation for it implies that they will not be able to acquire all of the modern and sophisticated technological know-how needed to fulfil their roles in commerce and industry. Thus, everyone has a social responsibility to make existing technology more accessible in order to make the workplace more user friendly to workers who are physically challenged and especially to those who are visually impaired. Commerce and industry will benefit from investing in the development of intellectual resources of this segment of our society.

Higher education authorities in post apartheid South Africa, and throughout the continent, are seriously concerned about gearing citizens in using modern technology and producing graduates with skills to function effectively in a high tech society. The result may be a positive socioeconomic development provided partnerships are formed between education and business, to ensure that persons with disabilities are adequately equipped to acquire the same high tech skills. This partnership should be extend to both the assessment and certification process in our education institutions

To my mind this exercise will alleviate the pressure on Assessment and Certification Authorities to be the sole developer of mechanisms by which assessments can be efficaciously implemented (that is, examinations and tests ought to reflect the content areas of essential knowledge of the subject matter and the knowledge to pursue their particular careers).

Having said all this, we need to reiterate that physically challenged people do not need pity or charity, but rather our solidarity which is what empowers them to develop their potential on their own terms in ways that accord them self determination and the right to carve out their destiny.

Against the background of the aforementioned educators of the visually impaired must receive specialized training in order to be knowledgeable and proficient in Braille reading and writing and the use of all other assistive devices for the visually impaired student. Assessment staff should ideally include women, who generally may be more sensitive towards the issues surrounding disabilities. This is especially important because women are often the sole sources of family income and the primary caretakers of visually impaired persons.

Women must be involved not only in the educational sphere (teaching and training) but in the assessment process when it comes to the physically disabled or visually impaired. This issue

becomes particularly important when we are talking about women who are themselves physically challenged or visually impaired. We recall the age old slogan, "Educate a Woman, Educate a Nation!" This is particularly relevant to the situation of women who are physically disabled or visually impaired.

Prof Leila Patel, in a paper entitled **REFLECTIONS ON EQUITY, OPPORTUNITY AND ACCESS: THE CASE OF WITS (2000)**, found that students with disabilities do qualify for financial aid but an extended curriculum may be necessary. An extended curriculum requires that existing budgetary allocations be increased to accommodate the specific needs of such students. Governmental structures and educational authorities / agencies will have to take the challenges into account when educational budgets are compiled and financial aid grants are awarded.

This is precisely what is implied when we propose an investment in the intellectual resource development and capacity of the young and needy persons of our nation, who in the long-run, will demonstrate that they can make tangible contributions toward the socio-economic upliftment of our nation. The investment value attached to education ultimately bears fruit in the attainment of the development of the full potential of all students, including those who are marginalized, since they have been historically devalued and neglected by a non-disabled society.

Disable learners resultantly view themselves differently by attaching more value to themselves and their abilities, and skills and reflect enhanced self-esteem. In the higher education system, opportunities are limited for students with disabilities.

Assessment and Certification of the physically challenged is an extremely neglected area and needs much greater consideration. To my mind educational professionals, involved in administering assessments to students who are visually impaired:

(a) must be knowledgeable about the **effects of a visual impairment on learning,**

(b) should work closely with staff who are proficient in the student's reading and writing medium (Braille, large print, or print with low vision devices),

(c) should assure appropriate and meaningful assessment criteria and assessment tools.

(d) should identify and acquire the most suitable equipment like Braille printers that can do short and fast production runs.

(e) should report student results in accurate and useful ways since the probability of incorrectly reporting data and/or results of students can occur. (Pough, G. S., & Erin, J. (Eds.). (1999). Blind and Visually Impaired Students: Education Service Guidelines. Watertown, MA: Perkins School for the Blind USA.)

Assessment therefore remains an extremely sensitive and complex issue since students who are physically challenged and who are visually impaired may be subjected to a range of other obstacles such as historical neglect, very often living in a hostile environment with consistent disregard as a consequence of social prejudice by non-physically challenged people, familial dislocation, functional vision, and any other related disabilities. For this reason, there needs to be an on-going assessment of physically challenged learners and students so that symptoms of such obstacles are identified early in the educational journey, monitored, and addressed accordingly.

The point here is that assessment in the education of physically challenged persons is particularly and necessarily time-consuming because it is a dynamic and gradual process, as opposed to the kind of decisive end-of-the-term examinations that are generally required in other segments of higher education.

Assessment in the context of education for physically challenged and visually impaired persons is clearly a gradualist process, which may include end-of–the- term or end-of–the-year examinations, but ought certainly to be characterized by an ongoing series of tests or assessments in which both monitoring and even counselling occurs as part of the evaluative process.

I trust that this contribution would stimulate a range of interest, research and realistic and practical transformation on how we perceive and interact with physically challenged/visually impaired people.

THANK YOU

William James Mathys
26 Von Braun Street
Sarepta
Cape Town
South Africa
Tel: +27 (0) 21 9034211
Fax: +27 (0) 21 903 4203
Email: willy.batho@xsinet.co.za
Website: www.i-weshop.com
www.batho.co.za

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