

# **International Association of Special Education**

## **12<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference**

### **Windhoek, Namibia**

#### **Keynote Address: Edward Khanya Ndopu**

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests:

It is awe-inspiring to be back in the country of my birth! The first decade of my life was lived here. And it was during that time that my consciousness was jolted by the social implications of living with a disability. My enrollment into a mainstream primary school at the age of seven – a right for which my mother fought so hard for me to enjoy – radically challenged the status quo. (Mainstream education resulted in a paradigm shift of self perception, altering the lens through which I saw myself in relation to society). The United Nations estimates that between ninety and ninety eight percent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school. These figures do not reflect the hardships faced by students who have access to ill-equipped and ill-prepared educational facilities. Despite the basic and inarguable importance of this issue, it has yet to cause anything but the least audible echo in the hallways of power.

Each and every day this gravely shameful shortfall is overlooked and swept under the rug of global policy discussion. Children with disabilities in the global south are being deprived of their right to basic education because policy makers have failed to institutionalize inclusion. Notwithstanding a myriad of policy frameworks which recognize, amongst others, the educational rights of persons with disabilities – including children with disabilities into the regular education system remains a negligible or ignored factor to achieving the millennium development goal of universal education. If we, as a global community, allow this to continue, we would have colluded with possibly the greatest injustice of the twenty-first

century. That meager remaining percentage which does have access of some sort is deliberately segregated and sequestered into “specialized” programs which demarcate possibilities for interactive and cohesive learning.

Now, I must add that I do not regard the position from which I speak as “fortunate,” because to regard it as such is to negate the fact that it ought to be so for children with disabilities, particularly within the African continent. Indeed, our global society has institutionalized (and continues to institutionalize) the bare minimum as the yardstick of inclusion and dignity for this disenfranchised segment of society. As I see it, “we sit on negative ten and celebrate zero.” In view of that, I ask myself. How many visionaries have already been left behind? How many tremendous creative geniuses have been left by the wayside? How many inventors? How many presidents? Thinking about this question, as rhetorical as it may seem, it is evident that educationalists and policymakers have failed to invest in the human capital of people with disabilities. However, the failure to which I refer is indicative of a more systemic problem. I believe that the problem is not a lack of investment in the human capital of people with disabilities; the problem is our conceptual understanding of human capital.

In order to deconstruct the definitional framework of human capital one needs to know what that definitional framework is. American economist and Nobel laureate, Gary Becker wrote that *“tangible forms of capital are not the only type of capital. Schooling, a computer training course, expenditures on medical care, and lectures on the virtues of punctuality and honesty are also capital. That is because they raise earnings, improve health, or add to a person’s good habits over much of his lifetime. Therefore, economists regard expenditures on education, training, medical care, and so on as investments in human capital. They are called human capital because people cannot be separated from their knowledge, skills, health, or values in the way they can be separated from their financial and physical assets.”*

In view of Professor Becker’s definitional framework of human capital, the problem with our conceptual understanding of this socioeconomic phenomenon is that economists, and society at large, have completely disregarded people with



disabilities in terms of what constitutes competence and value. Paul Abberley, a disability theorist, put it best when he said that people with disabilities *“have inhabited a culture, political and intellectual world from whose making [we] have been excluded and in which [we] have been relevant only as problems.”*

The economic value with which human beings are accorded is inextricably linked to capitalism. This has culminated in the social, cultural, economic and political devaluation of people with disabilities. How so? You may ask. Author, Marta Russell writes that *“capitalism is characterized by certain disadvantages. One by product is that large numbers of people remain unemployed and in poverty. While capitalism held the premise of expanding the base of people benefiting from it, it is inherently exclusionary. Some segments would fall harder to the bottom of the market-driven society, like the disabled and the elderly. The effects on disabled people can be explained by tracing how work got shaped by industrial capitalism.”*

In essence, the advent of industrialization gave rise to the structural devaluation of people with disabilities because our bodies were non-exploitable, and thus we were of no economic value. As Rod Michalko put it, a *“healthy natural body” is posited as a prerequisite for a good life and thus as one worth living.* Which begs the question, was the socioeconomic status of people with disabilities any different before the advent of industrialized capitalism? The answer is, yes. According to Russell, *“under the feudal system, disabled people were seen as subhuman but survived by doing what work they could in the fields or kitchen. Some became skilled artisans, exerting control over a trade that, importantly, allowed one to work at one’s own pace. If one could not work at all, the fact that one lived on a manor was some assurance that food would be available. With the means of production removed from the worker and seated in the hands of capitalists, people who were capital-less were thrown at the mercy of being hired by others looking to profit from their labor. While one may have previously worked to produce for the landowner’s use, capitalism meant that one was expected to produce for another’s profit.”* In view of that, the mechanization of the human body became the framework around which the industrializing world constructed society which, in effect, created disability. Indeed, *“the phenomenon of “disability” itself came to be defined in relation to a capitalist labor market. For*

*instance, under workers' compensation statutes, a laborer's body is rated according to its functioning parts. One is rated "10" if one has all one's fingers, arms, legs, but one's value is significantly altered to a 7.5 or less if any parts do not "work" by capitalist production standards. In social Security law, disabled means unable to "engage in substantial work activity," that is, unable to perform work to a standard required to earn a living in a capitalist economy. This is to say that physicalism is perpetuated through social policy built to serve the market economy instead of all members of the society.* Physicalism or Ableism is a political term that was constructed in the later stages of the disability rights movement in the U.S. and refers to the socio-historical, cultural and institutional discrimination of people with disabilities. Yet, it is a term that has failed to permeate through our collective consciousness. Indeed, calling someone an ableist doesn't carry with it the same potency as when one calls someone a racist or misogynist. This is because, as purported by Michalko, *"unlike race and gender, the interpretation of disability as misfortune allows for the understanding that inaccessibility too is a misfortune and not an injustice."* Everyone belongs to a race and gender, but not everyone belongs to the societal category of "disabled." Injustice on the basis of disability prevails unabated, normalized by way of systemic discrimination. Thus, to reiterate, ableism has failed to permeate through our collective consciousness.

The global economy has since shifted from the labor intensive manufacturing sector to a service-oriented and information age. Be that as it may, the fundamental premise of my argument is that the socioeconomic phenomenon of "human capital" is still predicated on that outdated capitalist framework to which I referred earlier, resulting in the perennial hardship of people with disabilities. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] says that *"today, the value of skilled, complex and creative work is growing fast. As a result, economic success for countries and for individuals relies increasingly on human capital - our knowledge, skills learning, talents and abilities."* What the OECD fails to underscore is that these new "skilled, complex and creative work" are structurally inequitable. The labor market caters to the economic needs of the able-bodied population whilst systematically disenfranchising people with



disabilities. I can't help but think of Rod Michalko's profound observation that *"this world privileges difference sometimes and equality at other times, but never both at the same time. Difference, as expressed in social categories such as disability, gender, race, is hidden in the world of the normal through constructing the equality/difference dichotomy and thus reducing the social difference to individual difference."*

Michalko's words resonate with me because the unfortunate reality is that, as a person with a disability, to be treated equitably means to camouflage my difference by accepting the environment into which I must assimilate. This is also called "mainstreaming." This a manifestation of the biomedical interpretation of disability in which we are regarded as objects of diagnoses and prognoses, rather than, the subjects of human diversity. From my perspective, able-bodied folks interact with people with disabilities as though we are able-bodied people in wheelchairs or able-bodied people who cannot hear, etcetera. I find this disturbing. In fact, I am permanently perturbed by the fact that people with disabilities are conspicuously absent in the lecture halls, around the discussion tables, and on the podiums of conferences and gatherings which pertain to our own socio-political liberation. In the same way that it is unacceptable for men to decide what is best for women or for the West to determine the trajectory of Africa's economic development, so too is it unacceptable for able-bodied people to conceptualize and spearhead the agenda of people with disabilities' socio-political liberation. To echo the mantra chanted by grassroots advocacy groups around the world, "nothing about us, without us!" Our role is not to showcase disability by way of performing for able-bodied people. Our role is to deconstruct the socio-historical constructs which culminate in our systemic oppression.

Notwithstanding the fact that my endowment of human capital has been augmented by a good education and access to quality healthcare, I refuse to assimilate into an environment where "human capital" starts at 9am and leaves at 5pm. Conventional wisdom dictates that human capital is not just a determining factor in the success of an organization, but that human capital is also the source of competitive advantage for an organization. Again, when folks in organizations speak of "human capital," they neither refer to nor think of people with

disabilities in their conceptual understanding of “human capital.” In line with such thinking, it means that ten percent of the world’s total population is of no socioeconomic value whatsoever. Indeed, Russell put it, “in capitalist jargon we [people with disabilities] became part of that immoral concept, the surplus population, in company with the elderly, the unskilled, those injured on the job, the unemployed who would never get a job (because there were not enough jobs for all).”

Creativity expert and educational theorist, Sir Ken Robinson once said that *“human resources are like natural resources – you have to dig deep. They are not just lying on the surface.”* Policymakers think that by making people with disabilities the primary beneficiaries of social welfare spending that somehow that, in and of itself, will meaningfully improve our socioeconomic status. The truth is that social welfare spending targeted at us is simply ineffective and will always be inadequate because it is not preceded by government spending on structural reform. How do policymakers expect us to become economically active members of society if the social and political constructions in which we live are predisposed to nondisabled dynamics or able-bodiedness? Policymakers shoehorn the needs of people with disabilities into the built environment as opposed to adapting the built environment to the needs of people with disabilities. My point is this, to spur the tremendous expansion and utilization of our collective global human resources *“we need to dig deep.”*

It is becoming an organizational trend for human resource functions to make the transition *“from describing good HR practice to proving it.”* As far as I am concerned, *“good”* HR practice is the same as no HR practice, the latter being, human rights.

Allow me refer to data assembled by UN Enable – a subsidiary of the United Nations mandated to protect the dignity and advance the rights of all people with disabilities.

*“In Asia and the Pacific, there are 370 million persons with disabilities, 238 million of them of working age. Their unemployment rate is usually double that of the general population and often as high as 80% or more. In the European Union,*



*there are approximately 40 million persons with disabilities, and of these 43% to 54% were of working age in 1998. Persons with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be unemployed than others. In Latin America and the Caribbean, about 80-90% of persons with disabilities are unemployed or outside the work force. Most of those who have jobs receive little or no monetary remuneration. In the United States, a 2004 survey found that only 35% of working-age persons with disabilities are in fact employed, compared to an employment rate of 78% in the rest of the population. Two-thirds of unemployed respondents with disabilities said they would like to work but could not find jobs. The global picture leaves much to be desired. In developing countries, 80% to 90% of persons with disabilities of working age are unemployed, whereas in industrialized countries the figure is between 50% and 70%. In most developed countries the official unemployment rate for persons with disabilities of working age is at least twice that for those who have no disability.”*

As I see it, deconstructing the human capital framework is central to human rights. In fact, the socioeconomic devaluation of people with disabilities is the gravest human rights issue of this century. Investments in housing, health, decent work and education for people with disabilities must be guided by a robust discourse analysis of social economics and a human rights imperative to broaden the definitional framework of human capital in order to redress the civil, political, social, cultural and economic plight of the world’s largest minority group. The human rights discourse in the context of disability remains superficial. We must radically refuse to make peace with the status quo.

Thank you!

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