



CHAPTER 4

FAMILY, CULTURE, AND THE EDUCATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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The treatment of Persons with Disabilities (hereinafter also referred to as PWD) is increasingly gaining attention in global academic and policy discourses. Persons with disability have largely been consigned to the margins of society but, recently, they have been gaining attention and are increasingly making their voices heard. Apart from the individual efforts of a few of them who have worked hard to break barriers, civil society and transnational organizations like the United Nations has also played tremendous roles in making its concerns known to the world. While it is heart-warming to note that governments and policymakers are beginning to factor in the concerns of PWD in discussions and policies, it must be acknowledged that a lot more still needs to be done.

The challenges faced by PWD cut across all sectors of human endeavour; from politics through the economy to social life and many more. The broad aim of advocacy for PWD is in order that there may be deliberate efforts to include them in society thereby giving them the opportunity to make their unique contributions to society. While actors in various sectors of society seek to comply with extant laws and policies especially with regard to affirmative action policies regarding PWD, a key ingredient in the ability of PWD to participate effectively in society is their education. This essay is concerned with the role of the intersection of family and culture in the education of PWD. The essay posits that the motivation of families to educate their PWD wards is largely conditioned by the dominant culture in which their families find themselves. Since education is the primary ingredient that prepares PWD for a more effective participation in society, the essay argues that greater attention should be given to the socio-cultural and economic contexts that either incentivize or disincentivize their education in the first place. Meanwhile, before expatiating on the argument of the essay, we now operationalize the usage of three key concepts on which this essay is built but whose meaning and coverage could be broad and fluid.

Culture: Culture is generally defined as the way of life of a people. It is “a set of values, views of reality, and codes of behavior held more or less in common by people who share a distinctive way of life” (Smelser, 1995, p. 20). Ferraro and Andreatta (2010), defined culture as “everything that people have, think, and do as members of a society” (p. 28). For Perry and Perry (2009), it is “everything that humans make, use, learn, know, and believe. It is how they behave and what they



share with each other and transmit to each new generation” (p. 55). By these definitions, culture is understood to be a combination of what people have (material possession), think (ideas and values), and do (behavioural pattern). It is the way people conceptualize, organize and live concretely in society. Culture is, however, a product of human creation but it can also constrain human action as argued by Giddens (1984) in his structuration theory. Nevertheless, it has two broad components; material and the non-material cultures. While material culture comprises of the physical tools such as houses, working implements, technology with which people conduct their daily lives, non-material culture consists of cognitive and normative components which are expressed in beliefs, customs, myths, norms, values that inform and govern action in a society. In this essay, we are more concerned with the non-material culture because it is the driver of human actions in a society. Non-material culture informs people’s worldviews and shapes the choices they make in life. The choice of educating PWD is, therefore, highly contingent on the dominant cultural pattern in a society. As such, this essay examines how certain elements of non-material culture such as beliefs, myths, values, and systems of social organization influence the decision of families of PWD to either invest in or not invest in the education of their PWD wards.

Education: Education is a process of socialization by which members of a society are taught socially acceptable ways of thinking and behaving. It is the holistic formation of a person through formal and informal means. We could, therefore, define it as “a social institution which enables and promotes the acquisition of skills, knowledge and the broadening of personal horizons” (Giddens, 2009, p. 834). Education preserves cultural values but, at the same time, it contributes to social change by inventing new technology and questioning existing knowledge (Smelser, 1995, p. 286). While education can take place in both formal and informal contexts, this essay is concerned with the formal education of PWD and, by it, we refer to the instruction of PWD in formal classroom settings. The essay emphasizes the functional role of education as an agent of upward mobility, inclusion and equality in society (Aghion, Boustan, Hoxby, & Vandenbussche, 2009; Omoniyi, 2013).

Persons with Disability: Persons with disabilities is a complex and capacious concept that is largely contextual. This is because the definition of PWD varies from one culture to another as persons that are considered to be disabled in one culture may not be considered so in another. Moreso, some people might not consider themselves disabled even when society defines them so (Department of Work & Pensions, 2002). However, we define PWD as persons with “a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect upon their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities” (Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), 1995). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) corroborates this definition by stating that “Persons with disabilities



include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD), 2006, art. 1). It is, therefore, necessary to delineate the category of PWD we are concerned with in this essay. PWD refers primarily to persons who were born with either physical or mental impairments or both or those who developed such conditions as children from zero to ten years. *Simpliciter*, the concern is on the education of children with congenital disabilities or disabilities they developed as children. Focusing on infants and children is because the value attributed by families to the formal education of PWD is more evident at this stage of their lives than if they developed such conditions later in life. As such, this essay is principally concerned with the influence of culture on the decision of families to invest in the formal education of children with disabilities.

In order to carry out an incisive discussion of this topic, the essay is divided into two broad parts. This introduction is followed by stating the arguments of the essay and also discussing the issues related to them. This forms the main body of the work and the first part of the essay. In the second part of the essay, the implications of the study are discussed, conclusions drawn from the entire discourse and then a few suggestions are made for future research and policy. Meanwhile, suffice it to say that the entire discourse is aimed at improving the education of PWD so that they can participate more effectively in the polity.

Presentation and discussion of theses

Among other variables such as age, gender, wealth differential and other demographic characteristics, culture plays a key role in the education of PWD. As has been operationalized above, culture implies the entire worldview (*weltanschauung*) of a given group of people. This worldview is expressed in symbolic elements such as beliefs, custom, norm, myth, value system, etc. This essay posits that there is a strong relationship between cultural systems and the education of PWD. In other words, it argues that culture is a significant predictor of the propensity of families to invest in the education of children with disabilities. However, this relationship is neither deterministic nor path-dependent in the sense that a PWD born in a given society will necessarily be treated in a predetermined way. Rather, the essay asserts that there is a high likelihood that PWD born into a certain value system will be treated in a manner that is highly socio-culturally conditioned. It is therefore pertinent to understand that we do not aver that ALL PWD living in a given cultural context will be treated in the same manner with regard to their education. Conversely, the essay postulates that PWD in a given society are most likely to be treated in a particular way because of the cultural system they find themselves. Since human beings are rational beings and free moral agents (Elster, 1994), this position acknowledges human agency, especially of the families of PWD even when their values can be located on the extremes of the traditional versus secular-rational value spectrum (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).



The thesis also takes into cognizance the level of social analysis involved in the motivations of families to educate their children with disabilities. Generally, social analysis can be carried out at two levels: micro and macro levels (Smelser, 1995, p. 7; Giddens, 2009, pp. 27-28; Perry & Perry, 2009, p. 76). While macro level analyses deal with large social units such as the state, government or global organizations, micro level analyses are concerned with small social units such as individuals and families. This essay is built on a micro level analysis of the role of the family in the education of PWD. What is meant by this is that the decision for the education of PWD is mostly taken in the family and that it is also largely dependent on the value orientation of the PWD's family or guardians. Suffice it to say that, at the micro level, decisions are most often based on rational choice (Bishop, 2007; Simpson, 2011). While civil society organizations might advocate for a greater inclusion of PWD in the polity and states may respond by making policies that favour the education and eventual inclusion of PWD in public life, the essay notes that the ultimate decision to educate PWD lies with the family. Making such decisions involves a process of rational calculation through which the family determines the value it accords to the education a member with disabilities and then makes a decision on whether it is worth investing in the person's education. Even in well-developed modern states with laws and policies of compulsory education up to, at least, primary school level, the effective education of PWD is largely dependent on the cooperation of the family with such laws or policies. We also note that such a decision is highly contingent on the predominant culture in which the family was enculturated or in which it lives.

This naturally brings to the fore the question of the type of society in which the family of a person with disability is enculturated or in which it lives. It is postulated that families of PWD either enculturated in or living in traditional societies have a greater tendency to treat a child with disability with less value compared to families in modern societies where human rights are emphasized. It is also postulate that families in traditional societies have a greater tendency to be influenced by popular beliefs and myths about PWD than families in modern secular societies where scientific evidence is emphasized. In a similar vein, it is also postulated that families in societies with predominant conservative values that emphasize order and the maintenance of the status quo may be slower in sending their wards with disabilities to formal schools than those in societies with liberal values characterized by emphasis on individual autonomy, human rights and equality. Another postulation is that families in societies with well-developed systems of child and family support have a greater tendency to accept and educate children with disabilities in formal schools than those in which such systems are weak or absent.

In sum, the argument of this essay is that at the centre of any successful programme for the education of PWD is the family. As would have been observed from the essays in this volume, a lot has been published on curriculum design, teaching aid, methodology for the effective teaching of PWD in formal schools, and



the training of teachers for students with special needs but not much attention has been given to the role of families in the education of PWD. This is a research gap which this essay seeks to contribute to filling. Therefore, an important message of this essay is that a poor understanding of what happens at the home front or at the pre-formal education setting is the weak link in the whole project of the education of PWD and their subsequent inclusion and effective participation in society. Consequently, the study calls on policymakers to pay as much attention to the dynamics in the families of PWD as they do about the design of curriculum, teaching aid, teaching methodology or the formation of teachers for students with special needs.

Nevertheless, examination of the nexus between family, culture and the formal education of PWD will be based on a juxtaposition of traditional versus modern/post-modern societies and the analysis of some important non-material cultural patterns associated with them. In order to facilitate an easy understanding of the issues, a summary of the key variables is presented on the table below.

Type of society/ Variables	Traditional	Modern/Post-modern
Religious observance	Highly religious	More secularized
Dominant economic activity	Agriculture	Manufacturing/service sectors
Right regime	Community-centred	Person-centred
Welfare system	Under-developed	Well-developed
Value system	Conservative/Survival values	Liberal/self-expression values

The sociological classification of societies, especially with regard to the evolution of society, differentiates between hunter/gatherer society, pre-industrial (traditional) society, industrial (modern) society and more recently post-industrial (post-modern) society (Bell, 1973; Giddens, 2009, pp. 110-120). In this analysis, we concentrate on the differences we expect in the attitudes of families either enculturated in or living in a traditional society and those enculturated in or living in modern/post-modern society with respect to the education of children with disabilities.

Religion: With regard to the influence of religious beliefs on the education of PWD, traditional societies are characterized by high religiosity and low penetration of scientific knowledge. As such, social phenomena are largely viewed through the prism of religion and explanations to them are based on religious beliefs and myths. In such a society, it is common to find spurious beliefs and superstitions about children born with some form of impairment (Pritchard, 1963, pp.15-30). It is therefore, avered that families in societies that have a dominant religious



worldview have a high tendency to see PWD as a source of misfortune thereby finding no value in their education. On the contrary, families in modern secular-rational societies may find rational scientific explanations for congenital impairments more plausible than moral or spiritual explanations that may impute guilt either on parents or on PWD. In modern secular-rational societies, a child with disabilities has more chances of survival and getting a formal education.

Economic activity: The dominant mode of production in a society could also influence the value families attribute to children with congenital disabilities. In agrarian societies, children are largely desired for the labour they offer to the family; to work in the farms. Hence, children are seen as economic assets and not economic burdens (Kayongo-Male & Oyango, 1984). As such, a child with a major impairment may not be desired or valued in such a culture because he/she is a burden rather than an asset to the family. For this reason, investing in the education of such a child might be viewed negatively. On the other hand, modern/post-modern societies that are characterized by manufacturing and service sectors do not have immediate need of a child's labour. Hence, there is a greater tendency to invest in a child with disabilities as she/he may eventually find a job in the manufacturing or service sectors, depending on the type and degree of impairment the child has.

Rights regime: On the issue of rights, studies have shown considerable differences between societies with regard to their emphasis on individual and collective rights (Hofstede, 2001; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Schwartz, 2006, 2013; Triandis, 2018). Traditional societies are community-centred on their rights regime. That is to say that emphasis is placed on group order and cohesion rather than on the individual. Hence, group cohesion is more important than individual rights. Schwartz finds that "Embedded cultures emphasize maintaining the status quo and restraining actions that might disrupt in-group solidarity or the traditional order" (Schwartz, 2006, p. 140). In such a situation, human persons are at the mercy social structures. Such systems have the tendency to overlook human rights issues and, by extension, accord less value to the weak in society. If the value system does not give high regard to the autonomy of PWD, their rights to care and education might not be respected. Conversely, in modern/post-modern societies where human rights are paramount and, sometimes, supersede group rights, individual rights, especially the rights of the weak and vulnerable, are taken seriously. It is, therefore, logical to expect that in such societies the rights of PWD to education and care will be upheld. As such, there is a higher likelihood for families to educate and care for PWD in post-modern societies because of both the legal and value expectations of society.

Welfare system: Another variable is the development of welfare systems. Traditional societies do not have the institutions of the modern state such as the



welfare system. Even where they exist, they are very weak. As such, it is natural that the social welfare system will be underdeveloped and, as a result, there could be high social inequality in the polity. In such situations, studies show that the cost of caring for PWD will largely be on their families and this could be too high for families to bear thus leading to poorer acceptance and treatment of PWD (Kayongo-Male & Oyango, 1984, pp. 75-92). On the other hand, in modern/post-modern societies characterized by well-developed welfare systems, caring for PWD will be less costly for families because of the various welfare packages available to them. Based on these institutional differences, it is, therefore, expected that PWD in high income societies will be better cared for compared to those in low income societies with under-developed welfare systems.

Value system: There is a relationship between the dominant value system in a society and the propensity of families of children with disabilities to give them a formal education. However, it is important to note that income level is also an important predictor of a society's general value orientation. Studies show that income level has a relationship with the general value system of a society. Low income is highly associated with the prevalence of survival values while high income associates strongly with the development of liberal self-expression values (Inglehart, 2018). Survival values also associate with traditional societies while liberal values associate with modern/post-modern societies (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). As such, families in wealthy modern/post-modern societies with dominant liberal values have a greater propensity to educate their children with disabilities in formal schools than families in poor traditional societies with dominant survival values.

As a way of incarnating the arguments, we take the case of Nigeria. Nigeria is a developing country that is still making a difficult transition from a traditional society to a modern one. However, the characteristics of a traditional society are still dominant in the polity. Religious explanations to social phenomena are still prevalent and religiously motivated negative stereotypes and prejudices about PWD are still common in the society. It is still common among Nigerian families to view children with disabilities as a curse, a punishment from the gods and, generally, as harbingers of misfortune because of the religious beliefs and myths society developed around people with such impairments. Such families may even feel ashamed of having such children and may either seek actively to eliminate them or, at best, to neglect them (Ozaji, 1991; Omiegbe, 2001; Etieyibo & Omiegbe, 2016). To a large extent, children are still desired in Nigeria for their contribution to family income. Their contribution to family income may be expected to commence immediately as children or later as adults who would take care of their parents in their old age. Hence, children are expected to be an asset to the family and not a burden on it. Consequently, children with disabilities do not normally enjoy much attention. In addition, rights regimes are still community centred rather



than person-centred. Hence, there is a high tendency to protect family pride and social status to the detriment of the rights of a family member with a major disability. This also contributes to explaining why some Nigerian families hide members of their families with disabilities from public knowledge and the general hostility towards PWD in Nigeria (Uzochukwu, Akpala, & Onwujekwu, 2004). However, the under-developed welfare system in the country complicates further the plight of PWD as their families are left alone to bear the emotional, psychological, and material cost of caring for them. This may account for the anxiety, anger, frustration, helplessness, exhaustion and even abandonment that are sometimes expressed by families of PWD. More so, when there is widespread material lack and survival values are predominant in a society, PWD become a huge burden and are undesirable to families. All these contribute, not only, to the poor perception and acceptance of PWD in the Nigerian society but also to the value their families attribute to them and to investing in their formal education (Omonijo, 2012).

Implications of the study

This study has some implications for both the public and policymakers.

1. The family is at the centre of the entire project of the education of children with disabilities and, without their cooperation, the entire project of seeking to giving PWD formal education so that they can participate more actively in society will fail. The family is a rational actor and an independent variable in the dynamics around the education of children with disabilities. Hence, adequate attention must be given to what happens in the family even before children with disabilities appear in the classrooms.
2. The public and policymakers must also pay attention to the factors that either incentivize or disincentivize the families of children with disabilities to send them to formal schools. The essay demonstrates that the cultural context in which PWD find themselves has a huge impact on their chances of survival and, subsequently, education. Hence, due attention should be given to the socio-cultural conditions that shape family values and choices because they play a key role in the importance families attach to the education of children with disabilities.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to demonstrate that there is a nexus between the family, culture and the education of PWD. While it is the primary responsibility of families to care for and to educate their children with disabilities, the overarching cultural conditions play an important role in either incentivizing or disincentivizing such decisions. By this, the essay identifies culture as an important intervening variable in the decision of families to educate their children with disabilities. The argument we developed shows that: societies with prevalently



religious views that inculcate PWD; societies that are predominantly agrarian in which the labour of children are valued and needed for economic activities or to augment family income; societies that emphasize order, conformity and community-centred rights regimes; societies that have under-developed welfare systems or in which survival values are predominant are less favourable to the formal education of PWD compared to societies that are characterized by secular-rational values and the scientific explanations of social phenomena; societies in which the manufacturing and service sectors are dominant in the economy; societies in which rights regimes are person-centred; societies that have well-developed state organized welfare systems and societies with an overarching liberal self-expression values. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the formal education of children with disabilities is expensive - even when there is a strong support from the state in the forms of free tuition and other incentives - and the families of these children would embark on such an enterprise only if they judge it to be valuable for both the child and the family. It is in this regard that we make some suggestions in an effort to improve the education of children with disabilities, especially in Nigeria where the attributes of a traditional society are still dominant in the polity.

Suggestions

1. More attention should be given to the families of children with disabilities and the socio-cultural conditions that influence the value they attribute to the children. We therefore recommend that a strong advocacy programme targeted at the families of children with disabilities be designed and implemented so as to raise their awareness on the dignity of PWD and the need to invest in their education.
2. In traditional societies such as Nigeria, the number of children with disabilities that enroll in school is often significantly lower than their actual number in the population. As such, we recommend that robust systems should be designed and deployed to monitor the pre-school development of children with disabilities.
3. Caring for PWD is costly; economically, emotionally, and psychologically. Hence, we recommend that strong social support systems should be designed to support the families of children with disabilities to cope with the burden of caring for them.
4. Current research on the intersection of culture and the decision of families with children with disabilities to educate them is still exploratory. We, therefore, recommend the commissioning of a wider empirical research that employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in order to acquire a deeper knowledge of the issues for the purpose of policymaking.



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