

Constituting disability in language: Locating inclusion in models of disability

Kagendo Mutua

Analyses of inclusion of marginalized groups have often tended to focus on constitutional, legislative and/or structural elements of those groups. Such analyses usually miss the agency of group members. Within the disability field, such analyses furthermore fail to explicitly engage disability theory. This paper will explore the socio-cultural construction and understandings of disability by examining ways in which language is used to construct disability. Specifically, I will draw upon examples of Swahili lexicon in Kenya and special education terminology in the US to illustrate how disability marginality is constituted in language. I will argue that understanding the culturally constructed meanings of disability only gives us insight into the marginality/exclusion that stems from disability. However, to locate inclusion, I will posit that one must understand the model upon which disability is culturally given its meaning. On one hand, I will demonstrate that the medical/personal tragedy model of disability that undergirds culturally-produced meanings of disability in Swahili and in special education terminology in the US threatens meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities. On the other hand, the social model of disability, whose emergence is illustrative of the agency of disabled persons, challenges dominant discourses on disability and allows for the emergence of an empowering disability lexicon in which inclusion is not only probable but indeed possible. Applying this argument to the classroom, I will demonstrate ways in which as an epistemological stance, the social model encourages a way of seeing disability in terms of societal rather than individual inadequacies. By doing so, it alerts teachers to the ways of resisting attempts at stifling the life chances of disabled people through advocating for and meaningfully enacting inclusion in classrooms.