

Subhangi Herath

NEGOTIATION OF SELF-IDENTITY AND THE CONTINGENCY OF SELF-ACTUALIZATION AMONG THE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES STRIVING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

The article argues that in the context of the highly competitive state higher educational sector in Sri Lanka the contingency of identity construction and actualization among students with disabilities differs considerably from that of students who are considered as 'not disabled'. This is seen as due to highly contradictory social cues the former receive in the effort to reach higher educational goals in a locality where they experience significant socio-spatial discrimination and deprivation. The process of building self-identity is understood as occurring in three localities, namely, (1) the period prior to entering the higher educational institutions (home and schooling), (2) the period spent in the higher educational institution, and (3) the future world they attempt to actualize, all of which become transitional and reflexive during the process of identity construction. Self-actualization of the students with disabilities in this context is seen as a reflexive, locality specific, contingency which varies with the level of paradoxes they encounter in this process.

Key words: locality, reflexivity, capabilities, segregation.

Subhangi M. K. Herath is a senior lecturer in Sociology at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, and is currently a Visiting Professor at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her main research interests are in the fields of gender studies, culture, women and spirituality, ageing, crime and deviance, disability, suicide and environmental issues. She has been active in developing social work as an academic discipline at the University of Colombo. Contact: subhangherath40@yahoo.com.

RAVNANJE Z LASTNO IDENTITETO IN KONTINGENTNOST SAMOAKTUALIZACIJE MED ŠTUDENTKAMI IN ŠTUDENTI Z OVIRAMI V VISOKEM ŠOLSTVU NA ŠRILANKI

Visokošolsko izobraževanje na Šrilanki večinoma obsega državni sektor visokošolskih institucij; v njih je bilo brezplačno izobraževanje uvedeno leta 1945. Kljub izobraževalnim možnostim, ki so jih študenti z ovirami dobili že leta 1912, na visokošolskih ustanovah študira le zelo malo študentov z ovirami, in sicer zaradi izjemno tekmovalnih izpitnih in selekcijskih procedur ob vstopu na univerzo. Na Šrilanki, v državi, kjer izobrazba velja za pogoj za družbeno napredovanje, je visokošolsko izobraževanje ključno pri oblikovanju ambicij in iz njih izhajajočih identitet med študenti/študentkami. Članek prikazuje kontingenco konstrukcij identitete in njihovo realizacijo med študenti in študentkami z ovirami, ki se razlikuje od identitetnih konstrukcij nehendikepiranih vrstnikov, in sicer zaradi protislovnih družbenih sporočil, ki so jim izpostavljeni v izobraževalnem procesu v okoljih, ki jih zaznamujejo družbeno-prostorske diskriminacije in deprivacije. Konstruiranje lastne identitete prepoznavamo v treh fazah: 1) obdobje pred visokošolskim izobraževanjem (dom in prejšnje šolanje); 2) obdobje v visokošolskih institucijah; in 3) prihodnost, ki so si jo začrtali in ki postaja v obdobju konstruiranje identitete prehodna in refleksiivna. Samouresničevanje študentov z ovirami je v tem kontekstu videno kot refleksiivno, lokalno specifično, odvisno od stopnje paradoksov, s katerimi se v tem procesu srečujejo.

Ključne besede: oviranost, hendikep, lokalnost, refleksiivnost, sposobnosti, segregacija.

Subhangi M. K. Herath je docentka na področju sociologije na Univerzi v Kolombu, na Šrilanki. Zdaj je gostujoča profesorica na Fakulteti za socialno delo Univerze v Ljubljani. Njeni poglobljeni raziskovalni interesi so: študij spola, kulture, žensk in duhovnosti, procesov staranja, kriminalnosti in deviantnosti, oviranosti, samomora in okoljskih vprašanj. Aktivna je v razvoju socialnega dela kot akademske discipline na Univerzi v Kolombu. Kontakt: subhangherath40@yahoo.com.

Background

In spite of the armed conflict that ravaged the country for almost thirty years and having faced the devastating effects of the deadly Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, Sri Lanka has been able to maintain substantial levels in a number of socio-economic indicators, when compared with the regional and world standards. With its population of twenty million (Census 2011), the country maintains a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.715, placing the country in the high human development category, above the average for countries in the human development group and the average for South Asia (UNDP 2013, UNESCO 2013). The loss in the Human Development Index due to inequality for Sri Lanka is smaller than the average for high HDI countries and for countries in South Asia (UNDP 2013).

The country maintains an average life expectancy of 75 years and a literacy rate of 92.2 percent for the total population (SLLFS 2011). Primary school enrolment has reached 97.5 per cent and the literacy level of 15–24 year-olds has grown beyond 95 percent from 2003 to 2006/07 in all districts across all sectors and for both males and females (UNESCO 2013). Although the country had introduced a free education system in 1945, a system which is almost entirely free until the completion of the first degree at state universities, the introduction of the Compulsory Education ordinance in 1997 had a significant effect on children of school going age.

Gender Inequality Index (GII) is another significant area, which is 0.402 for Sri Lanka, compared to 0.601 for South Asia and 0.409 for countries with high human development¹. The low disparities between males and females with regard to many aspects are seen as mainly due to the equalities which prevail in education (UNDP 2013).

The objective of this paper is to see if this high level of socio-economic development and prevailing equalities have been able to equally include students with disabilities within the locality of higher educational institutions, creating equal socio-spatial contexts for them for the negotiation of self-identities and self-actualization.

Educating students with disabilities

The history of education for students with disabilities commences in colonial Sri Lanka with the opening of the 'School for Deaf and Blind' in 1912 by the Church of England, followed by other institutions that catered for students with visual and hearing impairments established by Christian, Catholic and Buddhist religious organizations. Later initiatives taken by the Sri Lankan government resulted in the establishment of 26 residential schools with approximately 1,900 students with disabilities by 1977 (UNICEF 2003). The number of students with disabilities enrolled in educational institutions had reached 58,223 by 2003 (Gunasinghe 2004). By 2006 the country had approximately 950 special classes in regular government schools. 'In addition, private schools also implemented educational programmes for children with special education needs' (Lakshman 2009).

Acceptance of inclusive education policies by the government of Sri Lanka over the years has resulted in maintaining the number of special schools at 25, with 114,659 students with disabilities in 2010. Inclusive education is increasingly growing in popularity and at present

totally private and English-medium international schools also have established special education units providing students with disabilities an opportunity to study in regular class rooms (Jayawardana 2010).

Despite many remarkable developments in mitigating the vulnerabilities of students with disabilities in the field of education, studies emphasize that persistent socio-economic disparities within communities and between individuals and groups continue to discriminate against and exclude children with disabilities with regard to educational achievements. Social class, gender and regional disparities in access to newly developed educational opportunities have been identified as the most pressing factors in disadvantaging these young children in education², and only 'less than half of all school-aged children with disabilities' (UNICEF 2003: 25) seem to benefit from these significant achievements in the educational sector regarding children with disabilities. According to the Government Census in 2001, only 31.7 percent of children with disabilities in the relevant age category had enrolled in the school system³ (Census 2001).

¹ For details please see UNDP 2013: Table 4: Gender Inequality Index; pp 156–159.

² 'The greatest barriers to inclusion are caused by society not by medical impairments' (UNESCO 2013).

³ The data on the same for the 2011 Government Census which was completed in March 2012 is still not available at the time of writing this paper. The educational situation could have changed due to the recent improvements taken place regarding the education of children with disabilities and the infrastructural development in the country.

A number of authors have pointed out the prevailing disadvantageous position of children with disabilities in access to education and the greater impediments encountered by female children with disabilities. The reasons include prevailing cultural ideologies on security, safety and protection of female children, especially those with disabilities, against their potential vulnerabilities, as well as the social factors such as distance to educational institutions and lack of transport, lack of family support etc. (Ahuja, Mendis 2002, Mendis 2004 a, Jayaweera, Gunawardena 2007). Nevertheless, 2011 Census data on the percentage distribution of population (10 years and over) according to literacy by age illustrates that for the age groups 10-14 and 15-19, literacy level has been increased from 92.2 and 52.6 respectively in 2001 (Census 2001) to 99.4 and 99.3 respectively in 2012 (Census 2012) which indicates that school attendance has increased significantly during the decade. This obviously would have included children with disabilities.

Place of the students with disabilities in the Higher Education Sector

University entrance in Sri Lanka has become highly competitive over the years despite the enhanced opportunities. Due to the increased numbers taking the state level examinations for university entrance, large numbers of students who seek admission to universities are denied access in the universities which provide free higher education, and other fee levying institutions approved by the UGC⁴ also cater to the higher education sector in the country (UGC 2011), despite the policy decision to provide opportunities for higher education for 'all' those seeking such education (NEC 2009: Policy 5). Only about 10% from the total number of students sitting the General Certificate of Education – Advanced Level (GCE – AL) examination, which is the national level competitive examination which qualifies students to enter the universities of Sri Lanka, secure admission to state universities. This percentage from the students who receive the minimum necessary qualifications to enter a university is approximately 16% (UGC 2012: 12).

Students with disabilities were never barred from entering the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, the lack of opportunities and the social barriers that prevent those students from equally participating in primary and secondary education, has kept these numbers at a minimal level. With an estimated 8 percent of the population aged over 5 years having some form of a disability in 2012, and 3.6 percent of them falling within the cohort of 20–30 years (Census 2012 – 5 percent sample data) which is the age cohort of the students in the tertiary education sector, higher education for students with disabilities becomes an issue that draws serious concern.

The admission policy of the University Grants Commission includes disability as a special category for admission, 'Blind and Differently abled candidates' that stands outside the general admission and other quotas, although there is no specific percentage allocated for this category (UGC 2012). Admission to a state university almost totally depends on the places available and the number qualifying each year, however, the number of admissions under this special category totally depends on the decision of each university on the numbers of students with disabilities each institution could accommodate each year. Students who sit the G.C.E (A/L) examination using the Braille system come under the category of 'blind' and the students with other forms of disabilities are considered as 'differently abled' who are expected to provide medical proof of their disability to apply for university admission under the special category. The 'blind' become eligible only for courses in the Arts (social sciences and humanities), while 'differently abled' have more options available in the Arts, Commerce, Biological Science and Physical Science streams. To gain entry to a state university under this special category, a student should have reached the

⁴ University Grants Commission (UGC) is the main body endowed with the responsibility of the management of the Higher education sector under the Ministry of Higher Education.

basic minimum qualifications and other special requirements laid out by the UGC for different study streams each year. As such, students with disabilities would not become eligible to enter a university merely because of their disability. However, out of the large numbers of students who receive the basic minimum qualifications mentioned above, the students with disabilities may stand a better chance to enter the university due to the availability of a special category.

According to the UGC policy statement, 'For the purpose of this section, physical disability shall mean a permanent physical impairment, which has affected *normal life*'⁵ (UGC 2012/13: 54). The definitions and the nomenclature adopted by the UGC raises a serious issue on how the students with disabilities are officially perceived in the higher education system in the country. Classifying students with disabilities as blind and differently abled⁶ segregates the student community with disabilities into further categories, one as belonging to a specific form of disability and the other group as having abilities which are different. The latter category includes people with all disabilities other than the blind. This highly confusing nomenclature which serves the official purpose of assigning the students with visual impairments and students with other forms of disabilities to the recommended study courses⁷ provides an inaccurate image of the students with disabilities.⁸ Similarly, the much criticized concept of 'normalcy' as an inherent quality of human nature has been uncritically adopted in classifying the students with disabilities as standing out of this normalcy. Such an approach does not provide an opportunity to discard ideological biases existing in the society against total inclusion of people with disabilities, but reinforces differences and therefore inequalities rather than respecting diversity (Zaviršek 2007: 2). According to the UGC Year book for 2011, the total number of admissions under the category of 'Blind and Differently Abled' for the year 2011 was 20 and 44 respectively in the whole state university sector (UGC 2011). It is not apprehensible if the above numbers include all the students with disabilities who seek admission to universities and/or have reached the basic minimum qualifications necessary for admission.

It is against this backdrop that locality and contingency (Battaglia 2009) of students with disability in the higher educational sector in Sri Lanka have been addressed here. It starts with the premise that the subjectivities and identities of being disabled, and the transformations that occur in those subjectivities within the higher educational setting as expressed by the students, are not 'given' to them by their biological constructions, yet, to a considerable extent, would be locality specific contingencies. 'Locality' in this context is the physical, social and cultural location in which the individual person with disabilities is situated. I would argue here that the prime measure of the capabilities (Sen 2000) of the students with disabilities entering higher educational institutions in Sri Lanka would be the title of the degree they obtain (apart from language, communication or artistic skills they would have acquired before) which would become more or less the main marketable resource for them. Faring well at the degree opens for them the opportunity to get included in the 3 percent quota allocated by the Public Administration Circular (1988, No. 27/88) for people with disabilities in the state sector employment which non-graduates with disabilities or graduates without disabilities would not have. However, due to the nature of the locality and unequal opportunities they encounter within the higher educational institution, for the students with disabilities, their level of achievement would

⁵ Italics are my emphasis.

⁶ 'Differently abled' is a commonly used term in the country that tends to view people with disabilities as having abilities that are different from others or 'unique' to them. This usage not only is endowed with a sympathetic notion but also places the people with disabilities in comparison to those who are considered as 'abled' emphasizing that people with disabilities do not retain the same abilities which 'abled' people may have. (People with disabilities in local language Sinhalese, are called 'Abadhitha' meaning a person with some effect on ability; while in Tamil, the other local language, the term 'angaweenar', is used bearing the meaning disabled).

⁷ For this purpose, a more appropriate nomenclature would be 'students with certain disabilities – visually impaired and other'.

⁸ Historically, blindness has been seen as different from other disabilities in many cultures.

necessarily be a locality specific contingency that would produce 'shifting identities of self', 'multiple selves' or 'shifting selves' (Ewing 1990: 253, Bataglia 2009) among them, promoting or jeopardizing their goals in life⁹.

In such a context, a degree from a recognized institution becomes an invaluable resource for people with disabilities which would certainly enhance their capability profile at the level of employment. Setting up a higher educational goal by no means becomes an easy target for any student facing highly competitive exams and selection procedures prevailing in the country, nevertheless, for the students with disabilities it becomes an additional exertion given the socio-spatial context within which they live (as exemplified by the low rate of students entering education). The differential experiences of the students with disabilities differently influence the reflexive process upon which they create their self-identities positioning them at different levels within the same locality.

The following analysis is based on my in depth interviews or rather personal dialogues (in which the researcher had very little to contribute) carried out during a three year period (2011–2014) in one university faculty in Sri Lanka where there is a population of students with mixed disabilities. The faculty intake of students with disabilities for each year ranged between 10 and 15 students¹⁰. Statistics available from 2006 to 2012 showed that a total of 73 students have been admitted to the faculty out of which 39 are female students.

The interviews were carried out informally allowing the respondents to speak at their leisure during free hours when both parties could 'enjoy a break' from their work schedules. The dialogues were carried out with students with different disabilities, their parents, academics and student activists who are emerging out of the still faint discourse of disability they attempt to establish in the university system.

Disability, higher education and negotiation of self-identity

As explained earlier, entering state higher educational institutions is considered luck or destiny rather than an achievement by Sri Lankan students and their families due to prevailing limitations concerning university admission. It becomes so even for the students with disabilities, which cannot merely be attributable to admission related limitations but also to severe social and cultural constraints they encounter throughout their lives.

For the purpose of analysis, I would see the total process of higher education of students with disabilities through three contingent stages, (1) the period prior to entering the higher educational institutions (home and schooling), (2) the period spent in the higher educational institution, and (3) on the future world they attempt to actualize which is reflexive upon both the previous stages. The construction of self-identity of the individual student and the collective identity of the students with disabilities is seen as a process that is reflexive upon these changing localities 'forming a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future' (Giddens 1991: 75) creating shifting contexts of socially constructed selfhood (Ewing 1997).

For the students interviewed, home and school provided entirely contrasting experiences. Almost all of them had a very special place at home, and had become the center of attention. It is a common factor that one parent or an extended family member had been totally dedicating

⁹ Bataglia (2009) and Ewing (1990, 2005) use the terms 'Multiple selves', 'shifting selves' or 'shifting identities' to explain the changing self-identity of people with the change of interaction/experience in the same or different localities which make them 'non-locatable' in anthropological studies. My argument here is that, in the context of 'otherness' constructed with regard to the students with disabilities this produces highly inconsistent interactions and contradictory experiences making them become excessively reflexive on different localities in relation to which they construct their self-identities. This in turn could create complex ambiguities of self-identity among them.

¹⁰ Average intake of the faculty approximately is 500 students per year. Nevertheless, this number cannot be compared with the intake of the number of students with disabilities since the latter intake is based on a special admission criterion.

his or her time to caring for the child with the disability¹¹. The students with disabilities generally saw this as positive family support. Thushari, a visually impaired female student expressed her displeasure concerning the negative impact she experienced due to such attitudes held by her family members.

I had my parents, my maternal grandmother, my aunt and my sister at home, all of whom cared for me very much. It is true that I have a visual impairment, but they treated me like my whole body was numb. When I entered the university, it took about two years for me to get to know the surroundings and become independent. (Interview, December 2013.)

As explained in this quote by Thushari, such caring cultural practices could have a differential impact on the development of children, and could result in infantilizing them (Scheidegger *et al.* 2010: 292) and preventing the opportunity for them to become 'political subjects' (Zaviršek 2006: 5). Over protection of female Sri Lankan children with disabilities in order to avoid possible abuses is seen as hindering their opportunities for schooling and social life (Mendis 2004 b).

Schooling did not seem to be a pleasant experience for many students, at least at the initial stages, which was a drastic home to school transition. These experiences changed with the type of school and the level of support received from the school and home to continue their studies. Nimali, a student with a physical disability, reminisced on her school days.

From those of us who studied together I was the only one who entered university. Others dropped out at different levels, either because of their own disinterest or financial difficulties or due to discouragement from their families. Some parents are highly reluctant to send their children to universities. They worry over their children's safety and ability to live without them. (Interview, October 2013.)

Despite the propagation of inclusive education in the country over the years, the challenges and confusions faced by children who were attending special schools reportedly were comparatively lesser than those encountered by children who received inclusive education. The most highlighted issue was the feeling of 'difference' and 'segregation' within the inclusive school environment. At the special schools, even with the physical segregation, students experienced a sense of belonging. Lack of teachers trained for special education, poor knowledge among the majority of teachers of special needs, low coping ability with the work load and the pace of study seem to be the crucial factors that caused the feeling of difference within the inclusive educational setting. The recollections however, were not always negative. Sisira who had a visual impairment stated,

I always had problems with the exam paper on science, with graphics etc. But I had one teacher who drew the sketches on my palm to make me understand the shapes.

Entering a tertiary educational institute surpassing physical, social and psychological barriers, contradictions and paradoxes they encounter due to their disability was a reality beyond conception for many students with disabilities. All of them however, had built high aspirations about their future when they entered the university. The high reputation of the university and its highly urban location which they thought would provide them with higher access to resources, further contributed to the enhancement of these aspirations. Kumara said:

I could not believe my ears when I heard that I got selected to the university. I was overjoyed and I could not control my tears. Still..... I was scared too. Arriving at an unknown city and living there all by myself made me worried. (Interview, September 2011.)

¹¹ Stories of negligence, cruelty, discrimination and harassment of children with disability do get reported in Sri Lanka, however, the students who enter university indicated that they often came from supporting and caring backgrounds which made it possible for them to overcome many social and cultural impediments. Scheidegger *et al.* (2010) state that the same situation prevailed in Tibet where a child with disabilities was much loved and received the best treatment in the family, with the best food etc. yet, often families did not have high expectations of the child.

They had come to the university with mixed feelings. This uncertainty could be part of the trajectory of development of self which would be reflexive upon the experiences they receive at the new locality (Giddens 1991: 75). From that point on, his narration was entirely reflexive, moving back and forth, to and from different localities, home, school and the university. He continued:

I thought I never again will have to face as many problems as I experienced during my primary and secondary education....Professors are often kind, not like some of the teachers who bluntly told me 'with your disability, you should not be here in this school'. I was angry with my parents when they persuaded me to continue schooling. Nevertheless, at school teachers paid attention to our needs, even with reluctance and complaints. Here there are no complaints but no consideration either. (Interview, September 2011.)

Their self-identity was clearly shifting from one location to the other, moving between paradoxes, from an image of being wanted and loved, to an image of not belonging and being problematic, from the feeling of being accepted to the feeling of being denied and excluded from the same system and from a sense of capability to incapability, all of which were parts of the continuous process of reflexivity contributing to making them what they are (Giddens 1991: 75–76).

Neela who is a partially blind student stated:

This partial blindness was such a nuisance for me. At school I was accused of lying. Here, at the university, they don't accuse me, nor do they ask me why I keep on staring at them. I am just non-existent.

Although with frustration, she laughed saying:

sometimes it is better to be blind than partially blind. When you 'peck' on the braille writing pad with a big sound, it draws their attention. (Interview, January 2014.)

Students with disabilities were of the view that the facilities they receive at the faculty have improved over the years and more opportunities are provided to discuss their issues with authorities. Increased accessibility to the facilities including the library, buildings and lecture rooms, special events organized for them, flexibility in exam schedules with extended hours provided, options provided to them in mid-semester exams by some professors, facilities to use Braille systems and hearing aids were appreciated by the students although these were inadequate in meeting even the bare minimum requirements of equal access. The problems, however, they claimed to lie with individual views and perceptions on disability prevailing among the university community as well as in the system. Students were of the view that they receive much support from many fellow students, and academic and support staff, but also apparent were the lack of will, understanding or empathy in changing the conditions.

Students had faced manifest forms of exclusion in certain instances as in the selection of students into different study streams. Many of them experienced a status of 'liminality', or facing rituals of status change (Reid-Cunningham 2009), a change which arise from shifting localities of disabled bodies. Aziz uttered in an offensive and sarcastic tone:

Some departments brusquely tell that it is a problem for them if we were taken for those study programs ... I can understand the fact that some courses which involve specific physical abilities such as hearing or seeing or movement cannot accommodate some disabilities, but this is a baseless rejection.

Many class room activities often seem to overlook the students with disabilities. He added:

Only a few academics in the university at least try to understand us and see us as human beings. What we receive here most is the sympathy which we do not want. (Interview, October 2013.)

Lack of understanding or concern on the disability issue creates numerous problems for these students both within and outside the university. The following narratives demonstrate the gravity of the issues.

Professors distribute hand outs and use power point presentations in class as if we are not there.

During the exams they make us move several times according to their convenience.

Some supervisors and invigilators do not like the additional time given to the students with disabilities. But some are highly supportive and tell us to take our own time.

We spend a lot of money on telephone bills just to coordinate with the students who offer to help us to go to exam halls etc.

Crossing the road several times a day to go to administrative buildings and lecture halls, going to various offices, banks etc. and getting the needful done are not easy tasks. Often the drivers are not concerned. People see us with disabilities as an unnecessary nuisance. (Focus group interview, January 2014.)

It was apparent that the intellectual environment within the university has not been able to surpass these cultural conservatisms prevailing in the society. The university and the city life was seen by the students with disabilities as a locality that constructs an image of 'inability' in them. Nimali stated:

I asked a group of students if they could help my friend with a visual disability to cross the road and go to the next lecture held upstairs. One of them immediately offered help but said to the others, 'Can you wait for me until I drop him off and come back? Poor him.'¹² (Interview, October 2013.)

A student activist mentioned:

Once a group of students had a large bag of veralu (a local fruit) with them and shared them with everyone who was passing by. One who noticed some students with disabilities seated nearby said, 'it is very bad we eat these alone. Let's give them some too.' Although it apparently was a gesture of kindness, I could not resist asking them why there was this difference, to consider all those who pass by as 'we' and the students with disabilities as 'them'. They looked at each other with a scornful look on their faces as if I was out of my mind. (Informal discussion, January 2014.)

When Nilani told the lecturer that she did not follow the long explanation given on the power point presentation due to her hearing impairment the answer she got was:

I am sorry. You need to understand that I cannot write down everything I said just for you. I have to teach a whole class and I don't have time for this. You may get help from a teaching assistant. (Interview, February 2011.)

Nilani added that the lecturer went on blaming the administration for making it difficult for both the lecturer and the students with disabilities by giving admission to universities without adequate facilities. Nilani further stated:

I went to the hostel and cried. What am I doing here? I asked myself. I started feeling that I don't belong here.

Such situations, which I call 'benevolent derelictions', could emerge out of contexts where power dynamics (bio-power in the case of disability; see Foucault 1981) becomes a decisive factor in negotiating identity which is expressed through overt and/or covert communication. Ewing (2005) describing identity negotiations that occur based on power dynamics in the anthropological interview process says that people experience many ambiguities in their daily lives due to these power dynamics and identity negotiations which go beyond the 'overt context of communication'. She refers to the colonial subjects or subordination of women in the communicative process as examples of such situations. The university community,

¹² It is not possible to give the exact translation of the term she used, 'pawne' which I translated as 'poor him'. 'Paw' in the local language these students used, Sinhala, has the literal meaning of 'sins'. Direct translation of the term means, 'Sin, isn't it?' In colloquial speech it is used to connote, 'I feel sorry for the person'.

despite its claim for knowledge and equality, has not been able to overcome the traditional image of 'otherness' towards the members with disabilities in their own community, and both explicitly and implicitly separate them from people 'who are not considered to have disabilities' (Reid-Cunningham 2009: 100). Such communicative actions create an ambiguous locality in which the identity negotiation takes place on the basis of power that is grounded on 'ability or lack of it'. Such contexts of social interactions which are entirely based on 'bio-power' place students with disabilities at the mercy of those who are not considered to have disabilities. Students with disabilities are often not seen as 'capable and complete human beings' who could live independently with 'little assistance', yet, often regarded as 'outsiders' (Becker 1983) who deviate and exhibit 'undesired differentness' from social expectations, and therefore, become stigmatized (Goffman 1963). This delimits the social relations of these students within and outside the university simply to those relations with fellow students with disabilities, thus highly restricting their world of social interactions. This situation converts the bio-medical disabilities into social and cultural experiences producing 'social disabilities' which have nothing or little to do with their bio-medical situation producing a 'culture of disability' (Reid-Cunningham 2009: 107) among these students.

The interviews made it highly evident that the existing human and physical resources in the faculty are grossly inadequate to offer equal or even 'nearly equal' opportunities to the students with disability facilitating their studies. Aziz became vociferous in this regard.

Our ... is really concerned and takes all our demands and complaints into consideration and also takes a lot of trouble to improve the situation, but he receives no support at all from higher ups in this endeavor. Ultimately lack of funds is the main hindrance. What I feel when I see the things that are happening here is that it is the lack of interest rather than the lack of funds. (Interview, October 2013.)

Almost all the interviewees were very critical about the physical space and the lack of proper infrastructure facilities which severely hinder their achievements. Absence of many basic facilities including wheelchair accessible buildings, elevators for upper floors where many classes are conducted, accessible sanitation facilities, braille reading facilities, uneven roads inside the faculty making it inaccessible for wheelchairs, trained support staff or social workers, facilities during examinations such as braille question papers, vehicle facilities providing easier access to distant examination centers or braille translators to ensure that answer scripts are duly translated for examiners, were the most pressing concerns raised by the students. The university was evidently catering for 'societal standards for normative bodies, behaviors, and role fulfillment' (Ingstad, White 1995: 107) and the students with disabilities were expected to negotiate their identities through a process of acculturation of disabilities within this unequal social and physical milieu.

Kasnitz and Shuttleworth (2001: 2) explain that 'disability exists when people experience discrimination on the basis of perceived functional limitations'. When functional limitations are caused by the physical and technological construction of living spaces preventing the optimal utilization of abilities, the situation is seen as a consequence of disability rather than an architectural failure. The 'architectural apartheid' view towards disability adopted in city development, which is replicated in most of the state and commercial buildings and education institutions across the country, together with the demeaning social attitudes, construct 'socio-spatial patterns' that produce stigma and shame culminating in 'devaluation of the disable body' (Imrie 2001: 232). The feeling of inability caused within devalued bodies constructs powerful negative self-images of devalued selves in transforming and shifting self-identities in the locality of the city. Friedner and Osborne (2012) argue that studies emphasizing the 'plight of the disabled' represent them as marginalized and peripheral subjects, neglecting their everyday experiences. Suneetha, who has a physical disability, had to be physically carried by her mother to participate in lectures held in the upper floors of the building. The mother had to leave another young girl

in the distant village and reside in the city to care for her daughter with a disability. She was obviously embarrassed when other students offered to carry her up. Her whole intention was to finish the degree as soon as possible and go home. Even within the university, among hundreds of young people of her age, her mother remained her main companion. Social withdrawal was her primary reaction to the process that infantilized her by the physical space in the university.

Discussions with authorities on the physical structure of the university always ended up at the same juncture, as Aziz mentioned, lack of funds. This is the same reason given for the constant postponement of the repairs of the horribly demeaning space allotted for the students with disabilities. A smelly, damp room with mildew growing on the walls was justified on the issue of priority. Disability did not seem to come within the purview of the cost benefit analysis in construction and renovation activities.

Despite many scientific discoveries leading to the production of equipment and devices supporting people with disabilities to counteract certain physical barriers, scientific and technological advancements have not been productive in adequately including diverse populations among their beneficiaries. The quest for the truth in science, which is based on the presumption that 'knowledge precedes social construction' (Seelman 2001: 688), has led scientists to act on the basis of standards of normalcy adversely affecting disabled people, thus placing the social construction of disability out of the scientific discourse. Exclusion of socio-spatial location from the analysis of disability undoubtedly hinders the chances of liberating those individuals with disabilities from their peripheral identity and calling for changed spaces where they could be transformed into political subjects.

The process of building aspirations and their actualization among the students with disabilities occur in this distinct social-spatial context which constructs highly inconsistent and shifting self-identities for them. Neither the examination procedures in the university nor the exceptionally competitive employment market which searches for the most skillful young men and women, makes a distinction between these young people with and without disabilities despite the vastly diverse social and physical spaces that are constructed for them. They are posed with numerous polarized contradictions created by the life worlds they encounter in different localities, from home, school, and higher educational institution to the employment market. The contradictions of acceptance and rejection, care and negligence and dignity and humiliation construct ambiguous, shifting and transformative self-identities influencing the development of aspirations and their actualization. The university community had juxtaposing views on this. A senior academic stated:

There is no guarantee for any student who enters the university that they will definitely secure a job. Disabled students will also have to face this reality. If they do well, they will have more chances, just like the rest of the students. There is nothing we can do about it.

A student disability activist expressed:

The students who are considered 'able' come from many social backgrounds and some come from considerably disadvantaged situations. Yet, within the university, they are equal and enjoy equal opportunities. Their dis/advantageous social position could have some bearing on their achievement (eg. food, living environment, ability in English, and computer facilities etc.), yet, they would have ample opportunities to overcome them. However, the students with disabilities face serious inequalities within the university. These are in addition to other common problems we face as students. Ultimately, all of us face the same exams and the same competitive job market. (Informal discussions, October 2013.)

The student population with disabilities however, is not a homogenous group except for the fact that they all have some form of disability. Other than the differences based on the nature of the disability and therefore the abilities, the social class factor could be seen as having a significant power on deciding the effects of locality, self-identity and self-actualization. Gender could not be seen as playing a noteworthy role in the identity construction, perhaps due to

the larger female population in the faculty and among the students with disabilities. Despite the claim that female participation in education is low in all disability groups across all ages (UNICEF 2003, Mendis 2004 b), there was no noticeable gender difference in the enrollment of students with disabilities, although a slight increase of female student enrollment can be observed in recent years. Being a female in the Sri Lankan context has a significant impact on the identity formation; however, the university as a specific locality did not seem to have substantial disadvantages for female students with disabilities. Sunila posited:

I think female students have more support as the majority are female students here. I do not feel that I am deprived within the faculty because I am a female, but I felt and still feel this when I am outside the university. Some of us have experienced unwanted touching etc. in buses and this creates much inconvenience for us. We know that many female students with no disabilities also experience such dirty encounters in public transport. (Interviewed in January 2014.)

An overall impact of the social-spatial conditions prevailing within the city and the higher educational institution on all of the students with disabilities could be identified; however, the process of self-identity formation and self-actualization was highly contingent on the social class factor, thus influencing the level of capability deprivation. Sen (2000: 4–5) writes:

[...] Adam Smith's¹³ focus on the deprivation involved in not 'being able to appear in public without shame' is a good example of a capability deprivation that takes the form of social exclusion. This relates to the importance of taking part in the life of the community, and ultimately to the Aristotelian understanding that the individual lives an inescapably 'social' life. Smith's general point that the inability to interact freely with others is an important deprivation in itself (like being undernourished or homeless).

This idea can obviously be extended to people with disabilities in general and the students with disabilities in Sri Lankan higher educational institutions in particular. Aziz, who comes from a considerably affluent social background, was obviously different from many others, exhibiting a highly outgoing personality. He proclaimed:

From childhood I never felt different, although I went to a special school for the blind. My parents liked the idea of arranging special attention for my special needs. However, when I came to the university I did not have the feeling that it would be an unknown space for me. I had the opportunity at home to attend many different events, meet people, and express my views without facing any social barriers. I always had someone to support me when I needed it but I was rather independent. I acquired many skills which many students with disabilities have no opportunity to acquire. Despite all this I felt severely restricted in the university. As my father always says, the university premises have been constructed with no sense of the independent living of the students with disability. I often had to enter into confrontations with people to ensure my own simple day to day rights.¹⁴ (Interview, October 2013.)

His capacity to 'appear in public without shame' is apparently what he has gained from his social class background that undermined his physical disability in his social life.

Locality and contingency of self-actualization in the case of disability

The students with disabilities who enter the higher educational institutions enjoy a rare chance of acquiring knowledge and skills which would enhance their capabilities that may position them at a relatively higher level in the social hierarchy. The process of improving capabilities however, would not become a linear scheme for all the students with disabilities alike. Ca-

¹³ Sen (2000) hereby refers to: Adam Smith (1776), *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations* (republished, edited by R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

¹⁴ This particular student was described by some academics as aggressive, and being a 'nuisance' at times.

pability development to a considerable extent is contingent on the location. In other words, capabilities are contingencies that vary according to how each student with disabilities fits into the location, interprets the location and utilizes the location to reach a preconceived goal.

The utilization and interpretation of the locality varied among students with different disabilities coming from different backgrounds; however, the overarching argument was the insensitivity and unfriendliness of the locality in serving their needs. Nevertheless, it was clearly obvious that construction of aspirations for the future was a unique reflexive process for each of them which depended on their negotiated self-identities that shifted between periods, moments and between his/her own self and that of others, according to their differential experience they receive in these localities, as exemplified by the following quotes:

The problems I have are related to the institutional setting and not to my personal life. Neither do I face any financial or technological constraints, nor any lack of physical support since I am generally accompanied by someone, making these not so difficult to overcome. My friends who do not have the financial or family support face numerous difficulties. (Interview with Aziz, October 2013.)

I am good with the braille system. None of the readings prescribed in the classes are available in braille. We depend on what we hear, but when the lectures are combined with visual aids such as movies, slides, diagrams etc. we hear only part of the story. I don't know what I will have to write for the exam. (Interview with Sisira, February 2011.)

I cannot participate in classes that are held upstairs. Sometimes my friends help me. Some lecturers make an extra effort to help us by providing notes and opting to have separate discussions etc., but not all. Now I have realized that I cannot do much. I will be happy if I can just merely pass the final exam and obtain the degree. (Interview with Nimali, October 2013.)

It was my mother who persuaded me to enter higher education despite my hearing impairment. I read lips and try to follow the lectures. Sometimes, I get fed up because it is very rarely a lecturer would pay attention to the difficulties I am facing. Blind students get more support as everybody can see them. But as my mother always tells me it is a big achievement that I got selected to the university and I have to use this opportunity to the best of my ability. (Interview with Sepali, February 2012.)

Giddens (1991: 54) writes, 'a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going'. The individual's biography must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self. The above narratives are stories of self that demonstrate how the process of self-actualization becomes a contingency in a deprived locality creating 'shifting contexts of selfhood'¹⁵ (Ewing 1997) or 'transformative self-identities' (De Lauretis 1986)¹⁶ among students with disabilities. The locality was not always conducive for improving or even utilizing the skills they had achieved prior to entering the university, which prevent these skills from transforming into capabilities required by the employment market. The individual student negotiates his/her self-identity through a highly reflexive process of different stages of their lives which accorded them with or deprived them of those capabilities. As the contradictions of each stage or each moment increase, the process of reflexivity becomes more complex, creating highly ambiguous self-identities among them. William James (1981: 279) says 'self' is the

sum of all that [a man] can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes, and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and work, his lands and houses, and yacht and bank account. All these things give him the same emotions.

¹⁵ 'Reflexive, critical consciousness that has usually been associated with the modern subjects' (Ewing 1997).

¹⁶ De Lauretis (1986) says that people are 'transformative' subjects. As evident in the narratives, this 'transformative' nature of self-identity links to the capabilities of the individual which is contingent on the social spatial location. See Giddens (1991) for his views on the 'structuration of identity' and the 'contingent subject'.

In the present context of Sri Lankan society, where conflicting values emerging from a complex of traditional, modern and postmodern social trends influence the interpretation and assessment of 'self', students with disabilities are faced with the dilemma of choosing among the aspects of life within limited opportunities opened for them which they give priority in the construction of self-identity and its actualization. What the students with disabilities can call 'theirs' in this context would be highly limited and contingent upon the socio-spatial conditions imposed upon them.

It was at least half a century ago that Margaret Mead (1965) emphasized the need to include people with disabilities within the realm of 'normal' Americans, stressing the inclusion of human diversity as a prerequisite for understanding human nature. Five decades later, Sri Lankan higher educational institutions still have not been able to produce the social-spatial localities that are conducive for the total inclusion of the students with disabilities. Instead, the existing localities within the higher education institutions reinforce an image of 'other' influencing the identity construction and self-actualization among the students with disabilities.

This does not mean that the process of negotiation of identities or contingency of self-actualization is unique to the students with disabilities. Nevertheless, due to the highly paradoxical experiences that the students with disabilities obtain from one locality to the other and within the locality in differing moments ['shifting from a given value to a contingent value of locatability / (non locatability)', Bataglia 2009: 117], the process of reflexivity and negotiation of self-identities among students with disabilities become a process which they have very little or no control over. It is a highly complex process that produces multiple, conflicting and ambiguous self-identities depending on their varying interpretations of the locality¹⁷, transmitting that same ambiguity to the process of self-actualization. It creates a locality where students with disabilities are deprived of capabilities while their achieved capabilities could remain unutilized or underutilized making their self-actualization process a contingency, rather than a possibility or a reality¹⁸.

Conclusion

Individuals with disabilities have been deprived of equal educational opportunities either due to lack of educational facilities, a situation caused by the identification of the 'disabled body' as divested of capabilities or owing to the exclusion embedded in the inclusive environments laden with cultural norms of stigma, segregation and devaluation. Socio-cultural constructions of disability seem to have an obvious impact on policies and practices adopted by the higher educational sector of Sri Lanka, as exemplified by the disability nomenclature used for the provision of opportunities. For the students with disabilities, achievement in the higher educational sector or self-actualization becomes a locality specific contingency, which depends upon the specific life experiences that influence the reflexive self-identity within a traditional/ modern/ post-modern social complexity. Given the nature of the locality, which is comprised of spatial, material and attitudinal constraints that creates multiple, shifting and ambiguous identities for them, the aspirations they make and their actualization is contingent on their self-identity, which compels them either to become contented with minimum achievement or to strive even harder for higher goals and face yet another competition in the

¹⁷ Ewing (1990) states that, multiple selves and shifting identities cater to reconcile conflicting and ambiguous self-identities. She further adds, 'Each self-concept is experienced as whole and continuous, with its own history and memories that emerge in a specific context, to be replaced by another self-representation when the context changes' (Ewing 1990: 253). Yet, when the process of identity formation is too complex, conflict and ambiguity seem to be shifting across these multiple selves.

¹⁸ When his philosophical theology is set aside, the Leibnizian concept of 'non-actualized possibilities' becomes highly relevant here. For Leibniz, non-actualized possibilities are the possibilities that become true in some possible world. However, as such, it becomes a contingency and not a possibility, which, given the proper locality, would become actualized, yet, will not become true in another locality (Leibniz's Modal Metaphysics, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz-modal>).

unfavourable employment market. Unless and until the higher educational sector makes a significant departure from the paradox of inclusion/exclusion that creates contradictions in the existence of the students with disabilities within the sector, self-actualization for them will be a contingency, the conversion of which into a reality is conditional upon external factors such as economic and social power, family support or encountering a new locality where actualization of their aspirations would become possible.

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