

SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS and STANDARDS BASED ASSESSMENT

Wendy Thompson

New Jersey City University

Special needs students are being underserved in many poorer countries in educational settings around the world according to a report by the Human Rights Watch (Anderson, 2015) in the Guardian identifying this as a global trend which has been left underrepresented in the media. The treatment of students with disabilities in the United States of America (U.S.A.) and other nations varies between developed and underdeveloped areas. The assessment of Special Needs Students (SNS) who are being served in public or private educational settings has been mandated on a global, national, and local level. The U.S.A. with the adoption of *the Every Child Achieves Act 2015* (Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, 2015) addresses the change that may affect the national view of the assessment of disabled students.

With the passage of the bill the decisions related to testing students with disabilities within the

“TITLE I – Lets states develop accountability systems – The bill ends the federal test-based accountability system of No Child Left Behind, restoring to states the responsibility for determining how to use federally required tests for accountability purposes. States must include these tests in their accountability systems, but will be able to determine the weight of those tests in their systems.”

U.S.A. has been returned to the control of states. Wong (2015) writing for The Atlantic alludes to this shift away from federal control as coming on the heels of years of protest from teachers unions and the push back from parental advocacy groups opposing the adoption of the common core based standardized testing measure, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). These opponents propose that the forced inclusion of all disabled students in standardized testing, that was a requirement of the “NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ” era of accountability, failed to take into account the emotional and social harm that such test had

on the disabled learner. They also refute the test's ability to provide a true picture of disabled students growth or potential for learning.

The U.S.A. is not the only country struggling with this issue. Hadjipanaytou (2015) in *Education News*, reporting on the proposal for a national testing plan by the First Minister of Scotland, acknowledges similar issues with teacher unions and advocacy groups in Scotland. These unions finding fault with First Minister Sturgeon's call for a national test, like those in the U.S.A., voiced concern for the test's ability to produce a true picture of any student not only the disabled student advancement and educational achievement. In a similar report in *Education News, Report: China Fails to Educate Students with Disabilities* (Wassell, 2013), the author references the Human Rights Watch report *As Long as They Let US Stay in Class*, which refutes the Chinese governments claims of having met *The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) international agreement of 2008*, in which the signing parties agree to providing inclusive practices within educational systems for all students. The report calls into question the discrepancy in the number of special needs students who are actually enrolled in any educational program public or private in China.

South Africa with 500,000 special needs students not enrolled in any formal education program fails to address the education of many of its disabled students as accounted by Human Rights Watch in *The Guardian* (Anderson, 2015). This failure maybe due in part to social issues ranging from widespread discrimination, underprepared educators and educational settings and a pervasive stigma against those with disabilities. A need for accountability in regards to the special needs student cannot be disputed. *The National*, in a review of Abu Dhabi schools, related that 45 percent were in need of 'significant' improvement (Hunt, 2015).

The questions that are the unifying threads throughout these articles all center around which controlling entity has the rights and responsibilities of providing an appropriate education for all students disabled and non-disabled, and the identification and design of quality instruments of assessment. Results from standards based measures such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (Timss) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that a slowing down in progress during the early grades continues to be of concern in Abu Dhabi. The Millennium Development Goal states within the same article that within a study completed by (UNICEF 2013), only 51 per cent of boys and 42 per cent of girls with disabilities in a study of 51 develop and developing countries complete primary school. The study made suggestions as to what nations would be required to do to foster change. Advised improvements to the development of supports, improvements in training of staff and instructors, and an improvement in the awareness and understanding of special education needs were recommended.

Berwick (2015) states that the change in the U.S.A. No Child Left behind Law would not change the 95-percent rule. This rule mandates that all students except those of the severest disabilities must be assessed based on a comparable standards based educational program provided in an appropriately least restricted environment. The concern for many is with the loss of federal oversight, many students with special needs will once again be left out of the mainstream learning environment and counseled away from testing. Failing to assess all students the advocates for standard based testing ascertain will lead to exclusion practices returning to the U.S.A. prompted by a failure to set high expectations for students with disabilities on the part of educators.

In a contrasting statement (Walker, 2015) the NEA Today columnist questions the validity of only using test scores to define student outcomes. The NEA has asked the federal government for the development of a procedure that identifies what factors lead to students learning and include them in the Education and Secondary Education Act. A secondary, theme found within the media is the rising issue of corporate inclusion and the privatization of education and its effect on the global education market. The rise of charter schools and vouchers which provide parents with the option of school placement has come under fire from unions and some in communities. A fear that the monies funding these new charter schools and being paid to private schools in vouchers is being taken away from needy public community based schools. This along with a lack of oversight in the development and instructional practices have been called into question. The acceptance rate of students with moderate and severe disabilities has also been deficient in many areas for reasons ranging from underprepared and inadequate staffing and instructional support to lack of building accessibility.

An underlying issue within the preparedness of all students to be productive and supportive members of society includes preparing them to be work place ready. The issue of accountability which arises from the assumed failures of students who are unable to score proficient on national or international testing measures such as PARCC and PISA have seen a global out cry for reform and inclusion. Disabilities don't disappear at the end of a student's primary and secondary school journey. Discounting the need for a quality educational program that is held accountable for their preparedness as contributing members of society is as important as it is with the call for the non-disabled. The media is reflective of the continued battle happening throughout the educational community.

A call for research that identifies best practices for the inclusion and education of all students would greatly benefit a global outreach targeted to the disabled student. Media focus on the failing efforts by many nations and school systems should be offset with coverage of positive steps that are being made in the development of programs and assessments designed to include students with disabilities. Recognition of the problem and a constructive plan to solve it which encompasses the need for better trained teaching staff and continuous professional development, with delivered not just promised financial and legislative support will be necessary to bring about effective long lasting positive changes. This will require focused research designed to provide leadership to develop, administer, and initiate these changes on a local, state, national and global level.

## References

- Anderson, M. (2015, August 18). *Many disabled children in poorer countries left out of primary education*. Retrieved September 08, 2015, from The Guardian:  
<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/aug/18/disabled-children-poorer-countries-out-of-primary-education-south-africa-human-rights-watch-report>
- Berwick. (2015, July 23). *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from No child left behind's one big achievement?: [http:// www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/07/no-child-left-behind-one-big-achievement/399455/](http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/07/no-child-left-behind-one-big-achievement/399455/)
- Hadjipanayiotou, P. (2015, September 3). *Scotland's first minister announces national testing plan*. Retrieved from Education News: <http://www.educationnews.org/international-uk/scotlands-first-minister-announces-national-testing-plan/>
- Hanif, N. (2015, September 08). *The National*. Retrieved from Despite progress 45 percent of Abu Dhabi schools need 'significant' improvement: <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/despite-progress-45-per-cent-of-abu-dhabi-schools-need-significant-improvement>
- Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. (2015, July 16). *The every child achieve acts 2015*. Retrieved from Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions:  
[http://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/The\\_Every\\_Child\\_Achieves\\_Act\\_of\\_2015--summary.pdf](http://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/The_Every_Child_Achieves_Act_of_2015--summary.pdf)

Walker, T. (2015, April 08). *Accountability after NCLB: Let's measure more important things than test scores*. Retrieved from NEA Today:

<http://neatoday.org/2015/04/08/accountability-after-nclb-lets-measure-more-important-things-than-test-scores/>

Wassell, J. (2013, July 25). *Report: China fails to educate students with disabilities*. Retrieved from Education News: <http://www.educationnews.org/international-uk/report-china-fails-to-educate-students-with-disabilities/>

Watch, H. R. (2013). *As long as they let us stay in class*. New York: Humans Right Watch.

Wong, A. (2015, July 16). *One step closer to life after no child left behind*. Retrieved September 23, 2015, from The Atlantic: <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/07/one-step-closer-to-life-after-no-child-left-behind/398801/>