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Looking at Disability at Home

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Critical Disability Studies

Final Project

Disability at Home

This a world that is made and designed for the able-bodied community. That is a something that is evident to both the disabled community and the able-bodied community. Disability is not sadly something that was never really considered in the beginning of industrialization of cities. It is something that has slowly become more aware because people have called out the ignorance that exists in society. However, regardless of it becoming more aware, it has still been treated as an option or a detail instead of a priority or a necessity.

NYC is one of the most advanced, innovated cities in the country. Officials have even said that they aim to make the city “the most accessible city in the country.” It is also a city that takes pride in its diversity. It stands as the most populous city in United States with 8.6 million civilians. Among this 8.6 million people, 11.2%, about 1 million people, identify as living with a disability (“New York City” 2019).

I was born and raised in New York City and growing up in the very fast paced city, disability and disability access was not something that really ever came to mind. I, for a long time, treated accessibility as a detail because it never affected me directly. However, recently I have found myself thinking about it a lot more and what it is and whether a city so notorious such as New York City is really as accessible as one may think.

“We are New Yorkers. Proud citizens of the greatest city on earth. Thinking big isn't new to us. It is the very foundation of who we are.” – Bill De Blasio (“TOP 25 QUOTES BY BILL DE BLASIO” n.d.)

That was a quote that was said by Bill De Blasio, the current mayor of New York City, and as a fellow New Yorker, I am not a proud citizen. I have sat down and really reflected about myself and my identity as a New York citizen, and I have come to the following conclusions. I, and we, as New Yorkers are extremely selfish. We boast about our city being amazing, diverse, and revolutionized, but it is not completely so. The changes that we have made have not made our city more accessible and the we have simply made changes that will minimally impact the lives of the largely able-bodied community of New York City. In this paper, I aim to fully assess New York City and its lack of accessibility in four aspects: transportation, education, employment, and space.

**Transportation**

New York City, compared to the rest of the country, has the most rapid and extensive transit system. The New York City transit system has 472 subway stations. Surprisingly, only 87 of those stations are ADA accessible (smith and Darling 2018). This ADA accessibility is simply elevator access. However, these “accessible elevators” are small, claustrophobic cubicles. These cubicles are unsanitary and often reek of the stench of urine. To make matters worse, these elevators are highly unreliable and break sometimes break down. This often leave wheelchair using commuters stuck and unable to travel.

To alleviate this, I that New York City increases the number of ADA accessible stops and through proper sanitation of the ADA accessible spaces to make commuting both possible and more enjoyable for disabled straphangers. There is no excuse as a technologically advantage city, less than half of the subway stops available are accessible to wheelchair users.

**Education**

In a city with clear disparities in educational opportunities between students, that disparity is exasperated even further when looking at students that identify with a disability. In 1975, federal law guaranteed all U.S. children with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate public education. There are various programs available at hand for an opportunity of students with disabilities to receive an inclusive, equal education as their non-disabled peers, but those resources are not divided equally among the disabled community. There are differences in placement due to disability, neighborhood, income etc. In fact, students classified with autism, emotional disturbances, or intellectual disabilities are more often than not taught in. a non-inclusive setting. Demographically, boys that stem from a Latino or African American descent and low-income students across both genders are disproportionately instructed in a non-inclusive, special classroom. In all, 90% of students coming from a higher income background are taught in an inclusive classroom setting while only about half of students coming from a lower income background are taught in an inclusive setting (“What Percentage of NYC’s Students with Disabilities Are Served in Inclusive Settings? Exploring Equity and Changes over Time. |” n.d.).

This disparity worsens the relations between the disabled and non-disabled community and perpetuates the gap that exists between the two groups. I suggest that moving forward we try to lessen this gap by increasing the amount of lower income students in inclusive classroom setting through supplementing more money and resources in education programs; While New York City officials also doing a better job in making sure these resources are more evenly spread out across to city to increase the chances that every student, disability or not, are taught in an inclusive classroom environment.

**Employment**

To best understand this complicated aspect, the first thing I bring forth is. the official definition of unemployed. Unemployed individuals are those who did not have a job, were available for work, and were actively looking for a job. In 2018, the national unemployment rate was 3.7 percent, but the employment rate among the disabled community was 8 percent (“Special Employment - Wage and Hour Division (WHD) - U.S. Department of Labor” n.d.). Unfortunately, there are not statistics on the employment for disabled individuals that are available for New York City alone.

What these statistics also do not include are the conditions of these jobs and also the payment that disabled individuals are receiving for their labor and efforts. It is not unknown that the job opportunities for disabled persons are limited and scarce, limited to only the undesirable jobs being available to them. In addition to that, there is a law that is in affect that worsens their labor conditions: Subminimum Wage Employment. Since 1938 there has been a section of the Fair Labor Standards Act that allow employers to pay their workers less than the minimum wage, this includes disabled workers (“Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics Summary” n.d.). The reasoning behind this is that because a individual’s disability provide to hinder their productivity, their employers are allowed to lower their payment to reflect the productivity that they have been able to put forth. Not only are the disabled community left with the least desired jobs as the only opportunities of employment, but they do not always receive the full payment that their non-disabled counterparts would receive.

I ask that New York City does better than it has done up to this point. There are endless things that can be done to mitigate this issue. They can increase the wages for disabled individuals to match the wage that non-disabled individuals receive. Another option is to provide training and preparation into the work force as individual persons grow up, so they are not at a disadvantage. One last thing that can be done is a challenge to the employers and not the government. I ask that they stop viewing disabled applicants as “damaged” and “uncapable of working productively.” This last solution is not an easy fix. It is asking them to erase the thoughts and notions that they have held for disabled persons for majority of their life. However, at the same time, their views are outdated and inaccurate of the actual capabilities of the disabled community.

**Space**

In addition to transportation, education, and employment, when one analyzes the general space of New York City, that is how it is constructed and used by civilians, it quickly becomes clear that the space is made for the able-bodied community and there was only a minimal concern for making the space accessible for the disabled community.

Of the 1million New Yorkers who are disabled, most do not use wheelchairs. Therefore, the work that needs to be done is about much more than ramps and elevators. It is about navigating the whole space of New York City. For example, a store can have a ramp, but how is that helpful when the aisles are narrow, counters are too high, there are a lack of interpreters, and Braille unavailable at any public shopping area. There are definitely steps that have been made, but in all honestly, it has been the bare minimum and there is so much more that can be done

The steps that have been made are more centered as a way to maintain the comfort levels of the able-bodied so that their lives are not impacted by the changes while looking like we’re making some sort of effort for benefit of the disabled.

**Summary**

I do not believe that New York City is an evil city. At the same time, I do not believe that it is a great city, but it is a good one. It has the potential to become something greater and a more inclusive location for not just the 89% of the population that are able-bodied, but also for the 11% of the population that identifies with a disability. I would like to put forth another quote, again by the mayor of New York City, that I feel is a better representation of New York.

“Everything we’re doing to make this a fairer city, a city of opportunity, rests on the work we do to keep people safe.” – Bill De Blasio (Goodman and Craig 2017)

The city is not perfect, much like every other city in the country, but with two-sided conversation and dialogue between the able-bodied and the disabled communities, improvements can be made that can improve the lives of both parties. Employment, education, transportation, and space are just the tip of the iceberg; if you looked more closely at the dynamics in place in the city, more flaws present. There are definitely efforts that could be made so I ask that us, as New Yorkers, instead of boasting about our city, acknowledging the flaws that the city has and attempts to fix them.

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