

Attitudinal Barriers faced by Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Mrs. Bhuvanewari.A, Ph.D. Scholar and
Dr.Swarnakumari. P, Associate Professor
PG & Research Department of Rehabilitation Science,
Holy Cross College (Autonomous),
Tiruchirappalli 620 002.

Abstract

An attitudinal barrier to college consists of a non-desire to go to college, or a non-desire to properly prepare for college. These barriers are very similar to social barriers, as social circumstances influence our own attitudes and views. Student attitudes are similarly influenced by family members. It is important to keep attitudinal barriers in mind since no other intervention to break down a barrier will work unless the student wants to attend college. Personal motivation is the first step in overcoming many of the other barriers. This research project focuses on exploring the common attitudinal barriers experienced by students with disabilities in higher education. The study objectively aims to explore the attitudes of the peers, teachers, society and the disabled themselves towards their disability. A sample of 120 respondents from the chosen cross sections was selected and using the two sets of attitude scales the responses were collected. The findings are summarized in the major study. The study concludes with recommendations for ushering in a positive attitudinal change to enhance the quality of life of persons with different abilities.

Key Words: Attitudinal Barrier, Students with Disabilities, Higher Education

Introduction

People with disabilities face many barriers every day—from physical obstacles in buildings to systemic barriers in employment and civic programs. Yet, often, the most difficult barriers to overcome are attitudes other people carry regarding people with disabilities. Whether born out of ignorance, fear, misunderstanding or hate, these attitudes prevent people from appreciating—and experiencing—the full potential a person with a disability can achieve. Higher education plays a vital role in the nation's development. Higher education means education above secondary school and that which starts from graduate level. The Indian higher education system is one of the largest such systems in the world. Educational programmes for students with disabilities have traditionally been built upon the assumption that a variety of service delivery options needs to be available. Disabled students pose particular challenges

to Higher Education (HE) not only in terms of gaining physical access to buildings, but also in relation to much wider access issues concerning the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. The important challenge is attitudinal barrier. This research focuses on identifying the attitudinal barriers that affect students with disabilities in Higher Education.

Disabled in Higher Education

'Disabled students' have long been denied the opportunities to pursue higher education around the world. However, they have increasingly participated in higher education in recent years. More students with documented disabilities are entering higher education than ever before. The proportion of students with disabilities entering colleges tripled from 1978 to 1998, rising from less than 3% to approximately 9% (HEALTH Resource Center, 1999). It should be noted that this number almost certainly underestimates the prevalence of students with disabilities in higher education, because many students do not choose to self-identify their disabilities. As the number of students with disabilities in higher education has increased in recent years, teaching them in compliance with public policy while maintaining academic standards has become a crucial issue.

Within this demanding context, pressure has also been applied to institutions to improve accessibility for students with disabilities. Anything can be considered a barrier if it impedes the path to a college degree. These can include both tangible things, like a shortage of financial resources, as well as intangible things, like lack of general motivation or encouragement. There are barriers that exist, that prevent students from making it to college, and there are barriers that prevent a student from graduating from college after they enroll. An attitudinal barrier is also an important one which needs to be considered as well and looked into with special attention.

Attitude towards Disability and Differently Able

Attitudes to disability are the major barrier to disabled peoples' full participation...From pity, awkwardness and fear, to low expectations about what disabled people can contribute, stereotypical and negative attitudes hold people back" (Massie, 2006). In his own fieldwork in England, Deal (2006) found that people with and without disabilities held similar attitudes towards other people with disabilities in general and with respect to different impairment groups. A hierarchy of impairment appears to exist with people with disabilities producing a rank ordering of the most accepted to the least accepted impairments. The rank ordering of most accepted to

least accepted impairments was Deafness, Arthritis, Epilepsy, Cerebral Palsy, HIV/AIDS, Down's syndrome and Schizophrenia. The ranking by respondents without disabilities was the same for 5 of the 7 impairment groups with only Cerebral Palsy and HIV/AIDS being placed in reverse order.

Studies exploring personal and societal attitudes and behaviours toward students with disabilities show that, in spite of the changing policies promoting equal opportunities for students with disabilities, peer attitudes and behaviours towards those with disabilities, still need to improve. Regular, non-disabled university students certainly need to be motivated into accepting peers who have special needs. This is possible with student awareness and understanding of disabilities, and also appropriate behaviours towards individuals with disabilities on the university campus. Just as Government and University policies and legislation on disability seek to bring about change, provide people equal opportunities to realize their individual capabilities and potentials, through full participation in social and university activities, the Government of India has also announced a plan to make education disabled friendly by 2020 and to make mainstream education not just available but accessible, affordable and appropriate for students with disabilities' (Singh, 2001). However, it is not just enough to give admission to students with disabilities. It is also important to provide necessary facilities for them in the colleges so that they are part of the mainstream in the true sense of the word. Recent reports show that the Government of India is providing scholarships to students with disabilities to pursue studies at post school level. But, of all these the most challenging is to create a favourable climate, free from prejudiced stereotypes and negative labels and thereby make the disabled accepted in the mainstream society.

Need for the Study

Attitudes towards disabilities as a topic is widely researched when it comes to published studies concerned with disability issues. 'Attitudinal barriers' is recognized widely as an impediment to success of students with disabilities. However, this also happens to be the least researched variable in studies done with attitudinal barriers of students with disabilities in higher education. This research focused to identify the various attitudinal barriers such as attitude of staff, peers and social attitude towards students with disabilities in Higher Education. This research also helps to identify the impact of attitudinal barriers towards students with disabilities in Higher Education.

Statement of the Research Problem

Education is important for all. Higher education promises a prosperous future. In the present competitive world it is not so easy to give equal and quality education to all, particularly students with disabilities. Students with disabilities should be able to feel comfortable in classrooms, without having others stereotype them and without worrying that their confidentiality will be breached. So the researcher intends to study the "**Attitudinal barriers towards students with Disabilities in Higher Education**".

Objectives

- To identify the attitude of students with disabilities towards higher education
- To identify the attitude of peers and teacher's towards students with disabilities in higher education
- To identify the attitude of the society towards students with disabilities in higher education

Research Methodology

The research design adopted by the researcher was the descriptive survey method. The researcher undertook a descriptive study to identify the attitudinal barriers towards persons with disabilities in higher education. The universe for the present study on attitudinal barriers towards students with disabilities in Higher Education was confined to the limits of Trichy district. The Government and Private Arts and Science Colleges of Trichy district collectively was constituted as the universe for the study.

In line with these objectives of the study, the variables chosen were Gender and Type of disability. To ascertain data for this study, the tool used was a questionnaire. This questionnaire comprised of close ended questions and contained five areas. The first area pertained to collecting demographic details about the sample. The remaining four areas included question on attitudinal barriers relating to self, peers, teachers and society. The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics namely percentage and graphical illustrations through pie chart and bar graphs.

Findings relating to Attitudinal Barriers

- **Attitude of Peers**

The findings relating to peers attitude among both the male and female respondents reveal, the fact that an average of 70% - 90%, expressed that they

never felt inferior, and were never ignored or teased / bullied by their peers. Positively more than half the percentage of respondents expressed that their friends liked them, invited them to their homes, accompanied them for picnics, rendered voluntary help and even expressed their feelings and advised them to overcome barriers. Thus, the findings revealed that students with disability were enjoying a congenial and a friendly climate with their abled peers in Higher Educational Institutions.

The findings relating to peers attitude towards physically handicapped among both the male and female respondents reveal, that 75% to 95% on an average expressed that they never felt inferior, and were never ignored or teased / bullied by their peers. Positively 60% to 90% of respondents expressed that their friends liked them, invited them to their homes, accompanied them for picnics, rendered voluntary help and even expressed their feeling and advised them to overcome barriers. However the same feeling was expressed by 60% - 100% of Visually Impaired and 75% of the Hearing Impaired Students.

- **Attitude of Self**

The findings relating to self attitude of the physically handicapped show that an average of 75% to 90% of male and female respondents expressed that they never considered themselves ever ugly or expected sympathy from others. Among the disabled 55% to 70% of respondents, were positive about their future and were not depressed or never regretted on being disabled. An average of 65%- 76% believed in their talents, and 60% to 65% of the female respondents expressed that they were motivated and 65% of the female respondents felt guilty as compared to 41% of the male respondents who expressed the same feeling. Contrastingly 82% of the male respondents pitied themselves as against only 57% of the female respondents who expressed feelings of self pity 40% - 48% of the both male and female respondents expressed the need for counseling. The findings relating to self attitude of visually impaired show that 65% to 100% of male and female respondents expressed that they never felt or expected sympathy from others. An average of 15% to 40% of respondents were positive about their future and were not depressed or regretted being visually impaired. The findings relating to self attitude of the hearing impaired depicted an average of 100% respondents expressed that they never felt ugly or expected sympathy. 60% to 80% of respondents were positive about their future and were not depressed nor regretted being disabled. 40% of the respondents expressed that motivation helped them a lot.

Contrastingly 40% of respondents felt self-pity and expressed the need for counselling.

- **Attitude of Society**

The findings relating to societal attitudes experienced by the male and female respondents revealed, that positively an average of (ie) 52% to 88% of them expressed that they were never uncomfortable nor were called using derogatory terms or nick names. Among the respondents 15% to 57% of both male and female expressed that they were excluded from college functions like sports and cultural. 35% to 40% of both male and female respondents felt bad asking for help from others. The findings relating to societal attitude experienced by visually impaired revealed an average of 35% to 100% of them expressed that they were never called using derogatory terms or nick names. 65% of the male respondents participated in college functions and sports themselves, 40% of female respondents were privileged to participate in sports and college functions. The finding relating to societal attitude experienced by the respondents revealed that positively an average of 25% to 100% of them expressed that they were never uncomfortable or called by nick names. They also stated that the society understood their problem and never considered them as sinister. Around 50% of them expressed that they were excluded from college functions like sports and cultural. An average of 50% of the respondents felt bad asking for help from others.

- **Attitude of Teacher**

Teacher attitude and aptitude affects the intelligence and performance of every student. The results relating to teacher attitude show that in general the students with disabilities in higher education enjoyed an amicable relationship with their teachers. Among both the male and female respondents, more than (70% -85%) of them felt the teachers respected them and were ever willing to clear their doubts and help them in their academics. The same findings were expressed by Students with Disability irrespective of the type of disability. In general students of all types of disabilities had good understanding and relationship with their teachers.

Recommendations & Conclusion

Changing societal attitudes to people with disabilities, even among students with disabilities themselves at times, presents many challenges. However, a basic starting point is facts. The leprosy campaign and its impact are a clear demonstration that part of the stigma attaching to disability is driven by ignorance. It will thus be critical that various public health, educational, and other general awareness

campaigns of Government and Non-Governmental sectors drive home the causes of disability, and that disability is not a pre-ordained event. Changing attitudes to disability is likely to be the priority area where it is particularly important for governments to work with students with disabilities, NGO / DPOs, and communities.

However, governments at all levels can work to identify effective change agents in their communities, and allocate explicit funding to support their activities. They can also contribute to raising the profile of people with disabilities through awards and other forms of recognition such as the National Awards for Persons with Disabilities, which are given to outstanding employers and persons with disabilities each year on International Day of Disabled Persons. Finally, the potential of cultural performance and of the arts for both transformations of self-perceptions among Persons with Disabilities (PWD) and of the general community of their capacities is significant.

A second important step where media, persons with disabilities, social activists, and NGOs are likely to have comparative advantage is putting the experience and success stories of persons with disabilities into the public arena. This is increasingly being done, but at times in ways that characterize disabled people as objects of pity or super human in dealing with their disabilities. However, this is not always the case, as the powerful work of activists such as Harsh Mander demonstrates. Equally, the disability movement is becoming more effective in disseminating insights into the lives of persons with disabilities through vehicles such as the Success and Ability quarterly of the Ability Foundation in Chennai. The most powerful impacts, however, are likely to be felt at the individual level. An important step in this regard is following the guidance offered by people with disabilities in India on interactions with disabled people.

Their simple tips are as follows :

- Listen to the person with the disability. Do not make assumptions about what the person can or cannot do.
- When speaking with a person with a disability, communicate directly to that person, not through her companion.
- Extend common courtesies to people with disabilities as you would to anyone else. Shake hands or hand over business cards. If the person cannot shake your hand or grasp your card, they will tell you. Do not be ashamed of the attempt however.

- Offer assistance to a person with a disability, but wait until your offer is accepted before you help.
- It is fine to feel nervous or uncomfortable with people with disabilities, and better to admit it. When you encounter these situations, think of the person first instead of the disability and you will eventually relax.
- When meeting a person who is visually impaired, always identify yourself and others who may be with you.

Attitudes towards people with disabilities, like many other aspects of culturally-defined attitudes, can change. Evidence of this is witnessed in the landmark international United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2006. According to the UNCRPD, there has been a recent shift in expressed attitudes towards persons with disabilities. This attitudinal shift is expressed in a move from the view where Persons with disabilities are not viewed as "objects" of charity, medical treatment and social protection; rather as "subjects" with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as well as being active members of society (UNCRPD 2006). Furthermore, the Convention gives universal recognition to the dignity of persons with disabilities. As such, culturally based attitudes of patronization and professionals as the only "experts" are no longer acceptable.

References

1. Biswas, M. (2002). University students' acceptance of peers with disabilities. Unpublished masters thesis. Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia.
2. Bogdan, R., Biklen, D. (1977) Handicapism Social Policy, 7, 14-19
3. Bogdan, R., Taylor, S. J. (1987) Toward a sociology of acceptance: The other side of the study of deviance. Social Policy, Fall 1987, 34-39.
4. Bogdan, R., Taylor, S. J. (1992) The Social Construction of Humanness: Relationships with Severely Disabled People. In Ferguson, P. M., Ferguson, D. L., & Taylor, S. J. (Eds.) Interpreting Disability (pp. 275 - 294). New York : Teachers College Press.
5. Brodwin, M.G., Orange, L.M. (2002) Attitudes toward disability. In J.D. Andrew & C.W. Faubion (Eds.), Rehabilitation services : An introduction for the human
6. Brostrand, H.L. (2006) Tilting at Windmills: Changing Attitudes towards People with

