Awareness and Attitude of Faculty Members towards Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

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Abstract: Over the last two decades, a notable transformation has occurred in Indian higher education landscape. Higher education institutions have been taking steps to ensure equal access to people from diverse economic and social backgrounds. Higher education for students with disabilities has long been an extreme reason of concern in India. A person with a disability faces many difficulties in navigating through the course of the Indian instructional system. Problems exist in many areas of curriculum, teaching and learning process, facilities, resources, as well as the educational and examination process. Emerging age of Technology has given various devices and software for people with disability to access and excel in education or even otherwise in coping up with day-to-day chores. In spite all these efforts, still, a lacuna exists in the enrollment and retention of students with disabilities in higher education. The present study focuses on uncovering the barriers that hinder inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education from the perspectives of teachers. A focus group discussion meet gave an overview of the teachers’ level of awareness about disabilities and knowledge about accommodations and instructional adaptations to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities. A sample of 67 teachers working in educational institutions in Tiruchirappalli was selected through random sampling method. The findings of the study revealed the pressing need for creating awareness and conduct of training programmes on disabilities, accessible instructional designs, and use of assistive devices for promoting effective inclusive higher education.

1. Introduction

Higher Education is recognized as one of the critical elements of growth in India’s national development. Indian higher education, currently, the third largest in the world, next to US and China is emerging as the largest system of higher education in the world (Times of India, 2014). During the last few decades, numerous changes have taken place in the educational systems of special need students in Tamilnadu. The CII-Deloitte report on "Annual Status of Higher Education of States and UTs in India 2015" (reported a total enrollment of 301.5 lakhs students (55.1% male and 44.9% female enrolments) in higher education institutes in India, of which Uttar Pradesh ranks first (46.7 lakhs), followed by Tamil Nadu (32.1 lakhs), Maharashtra (30.8 lakhs), Karnataka (18.6 lakhs) and West Bengal (16.6 lakhs, 5.5%). Among other states Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka itself account for more than one-fourth (28.9%) of the total enrolments across India.

Efforts are being made at all levels, to ensure inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWDs) and to provide opportunities available to their normal counterparts. Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act, 1995 provides for three per cent reservation for persons with disabilities in enrolment into higher educational institutions. Under the Act, the Government promises to provide financial support to universities, colleges, and professional institutions to establish Disability
Centre to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities. However practically speaking, still, a lacuna remains in the enrolment and retention of students with disabilities into higher education. National Centre for Promotion of Employment of Disabled People (NCPEDP) 2015 third survey on the Status of Disability in Higher Education found that only 0.56% students with disabilities enrollment are made in higher education, in spite of 3% reservation in public institutions, of this 74.08% is male and 22.70% female. The survey also found that over a 100 of the respondent institutions have a "disability unit" on campus and over 130 have a "disability policy." It is two decades since the Government mandated a three per cent quota for the physically challenged in the higher education institutes in the country but currently; only little over 0.5 percent differently-abled students are enrolled. A pan-India survey of higher education institutes including the IITs and IIMs shows that of the 15,21,438 students enrolled, only 8,449 were students with disabilities, which is just 0.56 percent of the total students compared to 0.63 percent in 2014.

2. Key Issues faced by students with disabilities in Higher Education

UNCRPD - Key Issues in India (2011) has highlighted the barriers that students with disabilities face in pursuing education on an equal basis with others. The education of a student with a disability in higher education relies heavily on the understanding between teacher and student. The success of the student/teacher relationship "includes consideration of the teacher's instructional modes, as well as the teacher's attitude" towards students with disabilities and the accommodations they require. The report says that students with disabilities struggle to get accessible instruction, sign language interpreters, and books in accessible format, inaccessible campuses, hostels, and so on. M. Walker in his observation for around 29 years ago found that, "Support services can make it possible for the handicapped student to enter the postsecondary setting physically but only faculty can provide access to knowledge and ways of knowing” (Walker, 1980, p. 54).

3. Challenges to Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Despite changes in legislation and the development of educational programs for students with disabilities, low enrolment and high first-year dropout have been found (Dutta et al., 2009; Mpofu & Wilson, 2004). Low enrolment and high dropout can be understood as the result of inadequate accessibility of higher education institutions, lack of support, adverse social attitudes and social isolation, as well as low financial capacity (Foreman et al., 2001; Jung, 2003; Johnson, 2006; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Mpofu & Wilson, 2004). Among the supporting factors, studies have shown the importance of faculty's attitudes toward students with disabilities, their awareness of these students' needs, and their knowledge of the reasonable accommodations available. These attitudes influence success or failure of students with disabilities and affect inclusion in higher education (Rao, 2004).

Negative attitudes of faculty and administrative staff prevent students, especially students with invisible disabilities, from disclosing their disabilities and from requesting accommodations they are entitled to (Jung, 2003; Johnson, 2006). In a survey, 50% of students with disabilities indicated that faculty members understood their needs, but only 25% of faculty members were willing to change the material covered in their courses to suit these students' learning needs. Most (82%) of the students indicated that faculty members needed to learn more about disabilities (Barazandeh, 2005; Kraska, 2003). The emphasis, however, is upon the student to fit the system rather than the system to adapt to meet the educational needs of a student.

In India, "integrated education" has been provided mainly to students with mild disabilities who are considered "easy" to include into regular school programs. Students with severe disabilities, in a majority of cases, do not attend a school, or in rare cases, attend a special school. This has not
translated in the entry of students to higher education because of various reasons. Infrastructural facilities within institutions, attitudes towards persons with disabilities, transportation facilities, and lack of support services are a few areas, which hinder the entry of students with disabilities into higher education. Interest in inclusive development is growing within governments, civil society, and the development community, but efforts in these areas are hamstrung by the lack of research exploring the link between disability and poverty and evaluations of good practices. This lack results directly from the scarcity of quality data. Today, Technological innovation has made it feasible for persons with disabilities to peruse and work freely. A few institutions of higher learning around the nation, as Centre for differently Abled Persons, Bharathidasan University, St Xavier's College, Mumbai, Delhi University, and Loyola College in Chennai have effectively set up ICT-based learning and training centers to cater to the higher education needs of students with disabilities.

Presently, in India, very little research has been carried out to study the attitudes of teachers towards the education of children with disabilities (Jangria & Mukhopadya, 1991; Jangria & Srinivasan, 1991). Taking into consideration that, for the success of inclusive education, it is important to understand teachers’ attitudes, the purpose of this study is to investigate the attitudes of faculty members working in various colleges in Tiruchirappalli, India towards people with disabilities and towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in general higher education classrooms.

This article focuses on examining the three broad areas: Faculty’s knowledge about disabilities, accommodations needed for including students with disabilities, instructional adaptations for teaching students with disabilities and their attitude towards including students with disabilities in their classrooms.

4. Method

Investigation of the knowledge of educators concerning disabilities, assistive devices and inclusive educational classrooms was accomplished by using the Questionnaire and focus group discussion. The sample consists of 64 teachers working in various colleges in Tiruchirappalli, Tamilnadu. Randomized sampling technique was used in the selection of the sample. The questionnaire was first administered to the participants. The questionnaire had items related to disability concerning academic aspects, socialization aspects, and legal right issues of including students with disabilities in the general education classrooms.

5. Methodology

This study is a combination of a quantitative and qualitative method to assess the attitude and level of awareness towards disabilities among teachers in higher education. A questionnaire comprising of dimensions related to knowledge of disabilities, attitude towards students with disabilities and knowledge about accessible instructional accommodations was administered to the faculty from various colleges. A focus group discussion was held with the help of experts to ascertain the findings from the tool and find out the needs of the faculty in accommodating students with disabilities in their classrooms.

6. Findings and Interpretation

Percentage analysis of the faculty’s responses was done to assess knowledge of disabilities, and their willingness to make accommodations in their classrooms. Focus group discussion gave an overall insight into the perception of faculties’ knowledge and attitude towards accommodating students with disabilities in their classrooms.

a) Responses to knowledge based questions related to disabilities

A substantial number of faculty members (64.2%) reported limited personal contact with
students who have disabilities. Even more (83.5%) reported limited exposure to teaching students with disabilities in higher education. About 28% of the respondents reported having personal contact with students with visual impairments (52.1%), hearing impairments (54.1%), and students with orthopedic impairments (46.4%). Less than 1% of the faculty had knowledge about having students with learning disabilities, students with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, students with psychiatric disabilities, and students with chronic health illnesses in their classes. A large number of faculties (72%) reported having limited or no training in the area of disabilities. Many indicated that they had no familiarity (66.7%) or very limited familiarity with laws related to disability related laws.

b) Responses received during focus group discussion

In the response to the questions posed during focus group discussion, the team of experts got some different findings, which gave a clear picture. In the responses for knowledge, based questions following findings came out.

Forty percent, of the teacher who answered positively about having a clear concept of disability mainly mentioned about physical disability like visual impairment, hearing impairment, etc. for questions posed related to types of disability.60% teachers responded that they had little knowledge about disability and they required more training about different types of disability and teaching students with disabilities.

c). Responses to attitude based questions related to education of students with disabilities

The responses to attitude-based questions gave a different perception. For questions like:

Teachers have a vital role to change the negative attitude of peers towards their special classmates

Educating students with disabilities with normal students will hamper the quality of education

Teachers should provide extra support to students with disabilities

Interaction of special and normal students with disabilities will benefit both

Collaborating with disability unit will help in providing appropriate services for students with disabilities

82% of the teachers supported the view that students with disabilities should be educated along with the normal peers. A majority of the participants felt that they are not equipped with techniques/methods to handle such students in their classrooms. Ninety-eight percent of teachers accepted the importance of extra support needed to educate students with disabilities. Lack of student’s motivation was also mentioned as a plausible response.

Teachers responded positively about the extra support but most of them could not provide support due to lack of time and lack of students’ motivation. Very few teachers were able to help the students with disabilities for completing their class works during their lunch hours. 52% responded that parents did not help them due to lack of awareness.

d). Response to statements based on knowledge about accommodations and Instructional adaptations for teaching students with disabilities.

For the statements: I accommodate the seating arrangement of the class according to the need of students with disabilities

I modify the teaching method considering the demands of students with disabilities

I am able to make the evaluation process flexible by considering the demands of students with disabilities

For the questions related to the skill required for educating students with disabilities, 58% agreed and 2 % strongly agreed that they provide appropriate space for the students with disabilities. The researcher observed that 18 % teachers rearrange their seating arrangement considering the presence of students with disabilities and rest of them did not. In response, 18% agreed that they can modify their teaching method. 62% disagreed and 20% strongly
disagreed with that. In the interview, only 10% responded positively about flexibility in the evaluation and they were flexible in assessment and class work. 90% teachers responded negatively because they thought they have no authority to make changes in the evaluation process.

More than 70% of faculty indicated that they had limited knowledge and skills for making requested accommodations, and two-thirds reported spending a little time in making accommodations. A majority of faculty (88%), however, expressed a willingness to provide accommodations if such requests were made. Interestingly, many faculties (74.6%) were unfamiliar with resources and services on campus serving students with disabilities. Sixty-two percent reported that they had no contact with the disability unit officers and an additional 24% said they had very limited contact.

Findings showed a wide gap between the teacher’s knowledge and performance.

8. Faculty Suggestions/Needs addressed during the focus group discussion

Faculty members were asked to identify areas in which they would like to receive additional training and information and to provide input regarding strategies to assist them in working with students with disabilities. The areas were the faculty desired to receive more training was: information about disabilities (71%), legal issues (62%), classroom accommodations (82.6%), programs and services on campus (54.3%), and test accommodations (61.7%).

In response to the open-ended question, faculties suggested the need for more intense training with more practical exposure, written information about disabilities and services in the form of brochures, pamphlets, faculty handbook. They also suggested having inclusive pedagogy and accessible instruction as a part of orientation and refresher courses. Some suggested measures to create awareness among the needy students and encourage them to contact their instructors before the course and share their needs for accommodations or modifications.

9. Discussion

The main goals of this investigation were to examine knowledge, attitudes, and practices of university faculty regarding students with disabilities. Findings revealed that about two-thirds of faculty reported having limited contacts with students with disabilities. A large majority also noted that they had no or little contact or experience in teaching students with disabilities. Those who had teaching experience with students with disabilities reported having more experience with students with visual, hearing, and orthopedic impairments (Barbara S. S. Hong and Joy Himmel 2009). Faculty had the least amount of experience with students with learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities and chronic illnesses. Such findings are supported by data reported by Scott (2000) which showed an increase in the percent of students with learning disabilities in higher education. A multitude of studies have identified faculty attitudes as the key contributor to the success of students with disabilities (e.g., Rao, 2004; Scott & Gregg, 2000; Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, & Brulle, 1999; Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Rao (2002) found that as faculty became more familiar with information related to disabilities, their negative stereotyping attitudes began to decrease, and their perceptions of people with disabilities started to be more positive.

More than one-half had limited knowledge of university support services for students with disabilities, and a large majority reported having no or little contact with service providers. In addition, most faculties responded that they had no or very limited training in the area of disabilities, and almost half indicated that they had limited knowledge and skills for making requested educational accommodations for students with disabilities. Interestingly, despite the limited knowledge base, a large majority of faculty expressed a supportive attitude toward students with disabilities by indicating their overall willingness to make needed instructional accommodations in their courses. Other researchers have found that faculty members hold positive
attitudes by expressing their willingness to teach and make course-related accommodations for students with disabilities. Studies have shown that faculty members rely on their institution’s disability services staff for information about their legal responsibilities regarding students who have disabilities (Bourke et al., 2000; Burgstahler et al., 2000). More than 160 faculty and staff members who were surveyed stressed the importance of the support that the disability services staff provided in increasing faculty knowledge regarding the provision of accommodations (Jung et al., 2006).

The intent of this study should not be undervalued because there is general consensus that typical faculty in higher education are untrained as teachers and/or lack a repertoire of techniques in teaching traditional or non-traditional learners (Banta, 2007).

Faculty in this study reported a variety of teaching accommodations they were willing to make or have made and indicated their availability for students who need more personal assistance and support. However, the accommodations reported did not seem to require a substantive amount of time, effort, or major modifications of the traditional teaching procedures (Matthews et al., 1987). Almost two-fourths of the faculty indicated that the average time they spent in making accommodations was less than 20 minutes per week. It might be argued, however, that the limited time spent in making accommodations was all that was necessary to meet the needs of students who requested such adaptations. Future studies are needed to determine if the amount of time provided by faculty is sufficient to make the accommodations requested by students. Classroom observations and student input on questionnaires and interviews may offer answers to this question.

10. Conclusions

Results from this study have a number of implications for practice and for future research. Considering the fact that many faculties reported limited training in disabilities, limited knowledge, and skills for making accommodations, and lack of knowledge about college resources, there is a major need for training and development activities to be implemented to the faculty members. Almost all faculty were supportive of the integration of students with disabilities and, despite their limited knowledge, have implemented various accommodations in their classrooms for these students. Busy schedules, time constraints, and the perceptions by faculty that they have made accommodations may have resulted in the finding that only about one-third expressed a desire to participate in training or workshops on topics such as testing, instructional accommodations, and services and programs. Faculty comments, however, provided input suggesting that they are interested in receiving information through print materials, i.e., newsletters, pamphlets, handbooks, one-page outlines, or booklets (possibly through campus e-mail and the internet).

The present research deepens knowledge and perception about faculties’ participation for the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. Recognizing the different needs or training and in-service by faculty, short ongoing workshops on these topics and on others as requested by faculty could be offered at the department level and across experiences and strategies.

11. References

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