

Assessing Attitudes of Undergraduate College Students Towards Differently Abled Students

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Abstract

3rd December is a United Nations sanctioned day which aims to promote an understanding of people with disability and encourage support for their dignity, rights and well-being. Nowadays differently abled students are increasing in numbers in higher education. The prevailing characteristics of the environment (climate), particularly in the classroom, affect students' success, especially for students with disabilities. To better understand the role of attitude and its impact on the capacity of persons with disabilities to fully participate in community life, it is necessary to assess attitudes. The present investigation is based on assessing the attitude of undergraduate college students towards individuals with disability and how they recognize fellow students with disability. The primary aim is to learn more about the way undergraduate students generally view individuals with disabilities and feel about interactions with this population. Socio-demographic data about gender, age, type of residential area and college disciplines was also collected to measure the possible impact of these characteristics on student attitudes. Most students reported positive attitudes and interactions with students with disabilities.

Keywords: Attitude, recognition of disability, differently abled, undergraduate college students.

1. Introduction

The International Day of Persons with Disabilities is marked around the world annually on December 3, to promote awareness and mobilize support for critical issues pertaining to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society and development. 3rd December is a United Nations sanctioned day which aims to promote an understanding of people with disability and encourage support for their dignity, rights and well-being. The theme for 2015 International Day of Persons with Disabilities was: **Inclusion matters: access and empowerment for people of all abilities.** Inclusion means the removal of all types of barriers; including those

relating to the physical environment, information and communications technology (ICT), or attitudinal barriers.

2. Attitudinal barriers and disability

The biggest challenge for those who have disabilities is typically not the disability itself, but rather the attitudinal barriers imposed by others. “Attitudinal barriers” are ways of thinking or feeling of other people who do not have the disability resulting in behavior that limit the potential of people with disabilities to be independent individuals. The attitudes of students toward disability are important, because, young people, and, in his context, the students represent the future of the country and their attitudes toward disability affect the process of social integration of disabled people.¹

The stigma of having a disability often leads to lack of opportunities in areas of employment, socialization, and community integration. Academic success for students with disabilities is therefore significantly affected by the attitudes of non disabled students and their willingness to provide accommodations.² In order to better understand the role of attitude and its impact on the capacity of persons with disabilities to fully participate in community life, it is necessary to assess attitudes. Literature offers a wide choice of words to describe attitudes such as, values, judgements, opinions, perceptions, dispositions and perspectives.^{3, 4} Attitudes refer to beliefs that are directed towards a person, object or event, and may facilitate positive or negative reactions among the persons with disability.^{5, 6} College students are in a formative stage of their lives and research has demonstrated that higher education influences egalitarian attitudes.⁷

3. The importance of attitudes among students towards disability

College and university settings are the primary ways for students to gain access to knowledge. Differently abled students are increasing in numbers in higher education. Across the world, people with disabilities have poorer health outcomes, lower education achievements, less economic participation and higher rates of poverty than people without disabilities. This is partly because people with disabilities experience barriers in accessing services that many of us have long taken for granted, including health, education, employment, and transport as well as information. These difficulties are exacerbated in less advantaged communities.

Attitudes of people with and without disabilities can function to encourage or discourage persons with disabilities in their pursuit of participation in communities. To better understand the role of attitude and its impact on the capacity of persons with disabilities to fully participate in community life, it is necessary to assess attitudes. Researchers have emphasized that it is important to study attitudes toward individuals with disabilities because societal attitudes influence their help-seeking behaviors, and their ability to mainstream into society.¹ Research has long established that changing attitudes towards people with disabilities requires, both, information about these disabilities and experience with people with

disabilities.^{8, 9, 10, 11} A positive attitude toward persons with disabilities is the key to successful integration.

As long as negative attitudes persist, the full rightful acceptance of people with disabilities is unlikely.^{12, 13} Students may question the need to disclose their disability in order to receive accommodations if the classroom climate is not viewed as a favorable one.¹⁴

4. Methodology

Sampling and procedures

This study incorporates a non-experimental, descriptive research design involving undergraduate college level students of Gurudas College, Kolkata 54, West Bengal, India. Questionnaires were given to 50 (sixty five) undergraduate college level students of Gurudas College, Kolkata 54 with 47 students responding. The current study focused on the attitudes of undergraduate students who are the pre-professionals of the society, in towards differently abled persons.

All forms use a Likert response scale where participants indicate their agreement with each item on a continuum from 'strongly agree' through to 'strongly disagree'. There is one option for a neutral choice. Socio-demographic data about gender, age, type of residential area and college disciplines was also collected to measure the possible impact of these characteristics on student attitudes. Students were told their participation was voluntary; their responses were confidential and anonymous.

5. Research Questions

This research represents an initial step in identifying the attitudes of undergraduate students towards differently abled fellow students. To this end the research questions examined were the following:

Question 1. How do students without disability usually understand which fellow students are disabled?

Question 2. To what extent will nondisabled students accept accommodations/support systems in the classroom environment for other differently abled students?

Question 3. What are the probable factors that have shaped the attitude of nondisabled students towards the differently abled fellow student population?

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

Sl. No.	Criteria		Number of participants (N=47)	Percentage of the total sample (%)
1	Gender	Male	18	38.29%
		Female	29	61.702%
2	Discipline in college	Humanities	19	40.426%
		Science	20	42.553%
		Commerce	08	17.021%
3	Place of Residence	Urban	38	80.851%
		Semi- Urban	08	17.021%
		Rural	01	02.128%
4	Year in college	1 st year	09	19.149%
		2 nd Year	15	31.195%
		3 rd Year	23	48.936%
5	Having any relative with disability	No	45	95.745%
		Yes	02	04.255%

6. Instrumentation

The campus survey comprised of three parts. Part A dealt awareness and recognition of fellow students with disability. A set of 15 multiple choice questions were given to each student. The questions were designed in such a way as to gain information how the nondisabled students recognize disabled students. Part B dealt with the attitude of nondisabled students towards disability in general and accommodations and support systems available for the differently abled fellow students in the campus. The questionnaire was a modified version of the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons Scale-Form B (ATDP-b) which was based on Yuker and Block's (1986) procedures¹⁵ with additional questions on the respondents' age, sex, ethnic background, and extent and type of contact they have had with persons with disabilities. The ATDP scale Form B consists of 30 statements to which respondents choose from strongly agree to strongly disagree, using a five-point Likert scale. Respondents must choose a level of

agreement or disagreement with the statement, with no neutral response available. Examples of statements include ‘Disabled persons can have a normal social life’ and ‘Most disabled persons expect special treatment’. In accordance with Yuker and Block’s (1986) procedures¹⁵, Form B of the ATDP scale was modified to incorporate sensitive terminology for this study. For example, the term ‘disabled persons’ was changed to ‘persons with disability’ or ‘differently abled’. The instrument used in this study was also adapted from one developed by J. D. Berryman and W. R. Neal, Jr. (1980)¹⁶ in some parts. The second part of the survey also contained 10 items on their beliefs about students with disabilities that were rated on a strongly agree to strongly disagree scale. Examples of items in this section included, “I think that all students with disabilities have learning problems” and “All students with disabilities receive accommodations to meet their needs in the classroom.” In Part C there were a set of 15 multiple choice questions which assessed how nondisabled students gained information about disability which in turn contributed to the formation of their attitude towards disability in general.

7. Data analysis

Part A: Awareness and recognition of students with disability

93% of the students mentioned that they primarily depend on the presence of large and highly visible support systems to recognize disability viz. wheel chair, prosthetic limbs, walking stick (for the visually impaired) and crutches. Smaller support systems like hearing aids, implants (viz. artificial eye) often do not qualify as support systems for about 23% of the sample. Phenotypic markers (viz. unusual gait, use of large prosthetics etc) in disabled students also help in the recognition of disability among 84% of the sample. So most nondisabled students understood that a fellow student was disabled by perceiving the support system that the disabled student used. Only a mere 4% of the sample population recognized a student who was mentally challenged (with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), with attention deficit hypersensitivity disorder ADHD) or had other learning disabilities. As these disorders do not have any phenotypic markers it becomes difficult for the nondisabled population to comprehend. Many of these disorders may be associated with behavioral outbursts/manifestations which were perceived as short temper by 69%, lack of interest in the curriculum by 27% and only as characteristics of disability by only 4% of the sample.

Part B: Attitudes of nondisabled students towards disability in general and accommodations and support systems available for the differently abled fellow students in the campus.

Participants in this study demonstrated a motivation to help individuals with disabilities. About 89% students were aware about the support system (viz. wheel chair, writer facilities, Braille texts) for ‘visible disabilities’ like locomotor, vision impairments). Very few students (1%) reported that they only had slight knowledge about the support systems for the ‘invisible disability’ like Autism spectrum Disorder (ASD), dyslexia and other Learning disabilities,. About 85% students did not mind if the teachers spent more time for accommodating the differently abled students during class hours. However around 38% of the sample population

resented the accommodations made for the differently abled group during examinations for example providing additional time to complete examinations.

Part C: Source of information on disability

Most of the students (78%) revealed that they gained information about disability primarily from movies, electronic media channels, advertisements and newspapers (in this order). Indian movies like 'Khamoshi', 'Nache Mayuri', 'Tare Zameen Par', 'My name is Khan', 'Barfi', have contributed to the awareness of disability among this student sample. Special government messages in local newspapers on days associated with disability have created a slight impact on the awareness among undergraduate students. Most students could not recall special days of the year associated internationally with disability.

8. Discussion

Every year an increasing number of students with disabilities are passing out from higher secondary schools and entering into undergraduate education. In an effort to assess the campus climate for students with disabilities this sample survey was conducted. The survey focused on the attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of students on disability-related issues. Most students and faculty report positive attitudes and interactions with students with disabilities, however these interactions are often limited and awkward.

The social model of disability has broadened in recent years to include a human rights component, which includes the right to health care, education and social participation. The culmination of this new approach has been the landmark UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which came into force in 2008. The social model was created by disabled people themselves. It was primarily a result of society's response to them but also of their experience of the health and welfare system which made them feel socially isolated and oppressed.

Cultural awareness and competence requires more than motivation and good intentions. This is particularly difficult when someone is visibly "outside of the norm" and may arouse uncomfortable feelings. Stigma against people with disabilities often includes stereotyping based on misconceptions and perceptions. Attitudes ranged from a desire to avoid others labeled as people with disabilities for fear of further stigmatization through association, to proclamations of strength and pride through association.

9. Conclusion

This study is one step in objectively measuring the attitudes of undergraduate students who are who are the pre-professionals of the society. The attitudes that they harbor today will be important in the implementation of disability laws. The mainstreaming and rehabilitation of the differently abled group in the future has its foundation in the attitudes of college students of today. Clearly, to gain a wider and more representative view of the attitudes of undergraduate students towards persons with disabilities, the scope needs to be expanded to

include different disciplines in college several colleges of the West Bengal, and subsequently, more students. This study is one step in objectively measuring the attitudes of undergraduate students who are the pre-professionals of our society. This study used a convenience sample of college students and faculty of one college who volunteered to participate. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized beyond the parameters of the self-selected sample. Also, a survey based on self-report measures, despite being tested for content validity, may not have been sensitive enough to capture all of the perceptions among the respondents. Additional research should include the perception and attitude of academic faculty support and other college non teaching staff towards the differently abled group. With increased study of this student population, more positive steps can be taken to create a supportive campus climate for those students with disabilities.

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