

ERD 2016: Education, Reflection, Development, Fourth Edition

Attitudes towards Student with Disabilities in Higher Education, is there any Change?

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Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.12.79>

Successful implementation of any inclusive policy for students with disabilities is largely dependent on educators' attitudes. Ensuring equality and inclusion is a general goal of education and is also very important in the frames of higher education. This paper reviews the literature regarding attitudes toward students with disabilities and focuses especially on attitudes of teacher trainers in teaching colleges. The paper clears also the main concepts involved in the present approach, namely it presents definitions of the disability and also of the attitudes. These are all based on references to the actual legislation and rules, valid both in Israel and also in other countries. The paper offers evidence of more positive attitudes towards students with disabilities, including teacher college students, but no evidence of acceptance of comprehensive inclusion. This paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge and emphasizes the need for strategic interventions and policy in order to improve inclusion of students with disabilities in all aspects of life.

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Keywords: Environmental barriers; attitudes; higher education; teacher college; accommodations; universal design.

1. Faculty Attitudes toward Students with Disabilities

According to the *World Report on Disability* (2011) published by the World Health Organization, more than one billion people in the world live with disability, of whom nearly 200 million experience serious difficulties in functioning. Many of them experience exclusion, and are denied equal opportunities and access to education, employment, health care, and even to the disability-related

services that they need. The vision behind this publication was to gather missing information, and provide a scientific analysis that would open and improve equal human rights opportunities to people with disabilities in all major spheres of life. Unions of countries, such as the European Union and the Asian Union, as well as many countries, joined this endeavor.

Equality and inclusion in education, including higher education is one of the most troubling issues that concern young people with disabilities. Education is a critical to human rights, and to achieving satisfying and successful adulthood. Studying and removing the environmental, physical, and attitudinal barriers facing students with disability is a precondition to this important developmental goal. The literature reviews definitions and concepts related to disabilities and attitudes on disabilities, and proceeds to organize research findings in three sections: the situation of students with disabilities in higher education in Israel and other countries, faculty attitudes on accommodations to individuals with disabilities in higher education, and attitudes toward students with disabilities in teaching colleges.

2. Defining disability

Historically, the cultural representations and images of impairments were associated with distortion, ugliness, and a threat to humanness and selfhood. Its occurrence was explained in terms of divine punishment, karma or immorality (Shakespeare, 1997, 2006). According to Kreigel (1987), the disabled were conceptualized as "others" and "creatures" devoid of selfhood. People with disabilities represented a strange and dark world, and the society of the "normal" individuals lived in fear of "demonic cripples" (p. 33).

Only in the past century has the term disability become to be used to refer to a distinct class of people. Previously, "disability" was used either as a synonym for "inability" or as a reference to legally imposed limitations on rights and powers (Boorse, 2010). Until the 1970s, the medical model approach conceptualized disability in terms of biological deficit: The common definition of disability was a medical condition or individual tragedy caused by a physical or mental deficit, impairment or illness. Biological impairments were considered the sole factors that affect the individual's limitations and their personal and social consequences. Disabilities should be cured or corrected, mainly through medical and compensatory solutions, and should be excluded from involvement with the non-disabled community.

Feeling oppressed and excluded by the medical model's conceptions and attitudes, advocates of people with disabilities joined forces, and with the assistance of social and health sciences researchers, took action to change these oppressive conceptions of their disabilities. Their efforts resulted in the development of the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 1997). The philosophy underlying the social model was developed mainly by the disability movement. One of the most influential formulations of the social model of disability was produced in Britain in 1976 by a group of activists with disabilities known as the Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation - UPIAS (Campbell & Oliver, 1996). The social model emphasized the distinction between physical impairment and the social situation of people with such impairment. Under this model, impairment is defined as a lack of

part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body; while disability is defined as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization that takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities.. Therefore, these activists aimed were to eliminate social barriers such as negative attitudes, with opportunities to full inclusion and control over their own lives (Hasler, 1993; UPIAS 1974).

3. Definition of attitudes

Triandis, Adamopolous, & Bringberg (1984) argued that attitude has three components: a cognitive component, an emotion/affective component, and a behavioural component towards the object of the attitude. According to the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), attitudes are not innate: They are formed through social and cultural processes in which parents, teachers, peers, and significant others play an important role. Attitudes effectively link a person to his social world (Zimbardo, 1985; Zimbardo & Ebbessen, 1969). Negative attitudes are the most powerful barriers to inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of social belonging and functioning, including in higher education (Rao, 2004).

4. Students with disabilities in higher education

The Civil Rights legislations promoted the awareness of the human rights of people with disabilities and opened new options for inclusion in higher education (Leyser, Greenberger, Sharoni, and Vogel, 2011, p.163). In Israel, several factors came into play to promote this trend: growing public awareness, increasing high school achievements of students with disabilities, economic considerations of the institutions, and the expansion of the higher education system in Israel, specifically the number of private colleges.

New legislation significantly affected public awareness of disability issues in Israel as well as The Law of Equal Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities, enacted in 1988. In March 2016, new regulations were approved, requiring all institutions of higher education, including teaching colleges, to ensure physical access to individuals with disabilities as well as access to services. The new regulations effectively establish the functions of Commission for Equal Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Public awareness of the important role of education in employment also grew. Studies show that the number of years of education is one of the most important predictors of integration of people with disabilities in the labour market. Education has been found to promote diverse employment, and improves the quality of life of people with disabilities. For example, studies in Israel point to a 14.3% rise in the number of people with disabilities who acquire education in general, and higher education in particular, exceeding the rise of educational attainment in the general population, between 2005 and 2010. These studies also show that employment rate of people with disabilities between the ages of 25 and 64 who have post-secondary education is higher than people with disabilities who did not complete post-secondary education (77.1% and 55.1%, respectively).

The growing demand for higher education by students with disabilities was also the result of the recent development of support systems in elementary and high schools, which enabled more students with disabilities to successfully complete Matriculation exams and apply to higher education. Students with disabilities became to be considered as a new potential source of tuition fees (Leyser and Greenberger, 2008). In response, colleges and universities began develop support systems and learning technologies that help individuals with disabilities integrate. Additional legislation concerning rights of individuals with disabilities can be expected to encourage even greater numbers of individuals with disabilities to turn to higher education.

4.1. The success of students with disabilities in higher education

The success of students with disabilities in higher education does not depend only on their own efforts, on the ease of physical access to university facilities, or the support services available to them on campuses. Their success is also largely dependent on the faculty's attitudes toward people with disabilities and their place in higher education. Dvir (2015) argues that implementation of a policy to include students with disabilities depends on the professors themselves and their own experiences. Professors' life stories have a critical impact on their teaching methods and their attitudes. Salzberg, Peterson, Debrand, Blair, Carsey, & Johnson, (2002) studied attitudes of student support centres' directors and found that one of the factors that explain the success of students with disabilities is the faculties' knowledge about disabilities and attitudes toward students with disabilities. Leyser et al. (2011) found that students with disabilities face barriers in higher education stemming from misconceptions and lack of information. Both students and professors have very limited knowledge of the issue of accommodations for people with disabilities. They argued that it is important to inform the students and the professors about accommodations, so that students with disabilities will be able to realize their full potential. Barazandeh (2005) also argues that persistent barriers remain in the academic environment for students with disabilities despite current enforcement of regulations and statutes. As a result, students with disabilities are not always given equal opportunity to use the accommodations that are available to them. Rao (2004) also discusses the significance of positive attitudes toward students with disabilities for their successful integration. She states that academic institutions' awareness and attitudes play an important role in contributing to the success of their students, as well as institutions' preparedness and the significance they attribute to integration of students with disabilities. These attitudes can create a culture of acceptance or of exclusion.

A study conducted in Israel (Greenberger & Leyser 2010) on students with learning disabilities and physical disabilities in a technological institute of higher education, explored whether professors contribute to these students' success. The study examined faculty attitudes and willingness to grant accommodations. Findings indicate that professors are willing to give accommodations but in practice, students must ask for accommodations and they are not offered by the professors. Several professors also prefer to plan their teaching methods in advance to obviate any need for special accommodations. Professors also expressed positive attitudes toward students with disabilities. Most of them expressed the belief that students with disabilities can be as good professionals as their peers after graduation. Despite these positive attitudes, more than a few respondents were skeptical about these students' chances to succeed.

Examining the attitudes of university professors in Jordan on the issue of integration of students with disabilities in higher education, Abu-Hamour (2013) found that most university faculty support the integration of people with disabilities in higher education, despite the fact that no academic regulations on such integration exist. Female professors expressed stronger support toward students with disabilities than did male professors. He also found that the majority of the professors are unaware of existing Jordanian legislation and had not received any training on how to teach individuals with disabilities in higher education. Some professors were highly motivated to promote integration of students with disabilities in view of their positive own experiences. In contrast, two professors were extremely doubtful about the ability of students with disabilities to meet all course requirements, and they expressed concerns about making the appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities.

Leyser, Vogel, Brulle and Wyland (1998) reached similar findings in a study in the United States, where two-thirds of the faculty reported having a limited connection to people with disabilities. Most lecturers had little or no experience in teaching students with disabilities, and such experience did not include teaching students with physical impairments such as blindness, deafness, or various orthopedic impairments, psychological issues, and chronic disease. In most university departments, faculty expressed willingness to grant accommodations to individuals with disabilities, and they also noted that they had given such accommodations with respect to teaching methods. The study also found that professors' backgrounds are significant for their attitude toward people with disabilities. Professors who had previous familiarity with people with disabilities in a family or work setting also expressed greater willingness to grant accommodations, and more positive attitudes.

Factors such as training opportunities affect faculty attitudes toward disability and inclusive instruction based on the principles of Universal Design (Lombardi, Murray & Dallas, 2013). Despite the positive benefits associated with faculty training in UD principles, recent findings indicate that most postsecondary institutions devote limited resources to faculty training in this area (Raue & Lewis, 2011). A study by Bruder and Mogro-Wilson (2010) examined professors' attitudes toward students with disabilities as well as the attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs of student peers of students with disabilities. Their findings are extremely interesting. Although they report positive relationships between these disabled and non-disabled students on campus, the extent of these interactions is limited and awkward. Issues related to disabilities are not discussed in class lectures and many of the students with disabilities are not aware of available support services or accommodations.

Burgstahler (1994) found that professors' attitudes are strongly influenced by their personal connection to the topic of people with disabilities. Campuses on which professors report that they have no interactions with people with disabilities outside the classroom should create more opportunities for students to collaborate with other students with disabilities so that the latter feel comfortable. Similar findings were reported by McCarthy and Campbell (1993), who also stated that attitudes toward people with disabilities are influenced by the extent of their unmediated connections with people with disabilities. Their findings stress that everyone benefits from more social interactions. Events such as these can significantly improve the climate on campus.

4.2. *Students with disabilities in teacher colleges*

Inclusion of students with disabilities and impairments in higher education in many countries is on the rise, teaching training faculties appear to have both official and unofficial policies of excluding students with learning and other disabilities. A small number of studies explored attitudes toward students in teaching colleges.

A study by Leyser and Greenberger (2008) conducted in Israel examined professors' willingness to grant accommodations to students with learning disabilities and sensory physical impairments. Most professors reported having the necessary knowledge and aptitudes and were willing to make adjustments for students. They stated that they were familiar with the support services available at the institution, but 60% never received any training in the area of impairments and disabilities. They reported that students do not come to them to discuss accommodations because students think that the professors do not know how to help them. Students are also concerned about their privacy. Professors are willing to grant technological accommodations that do not require them to make any change in their teaching or evaluation methods, and such accommodations are more commonly available. Several professors explained that they are concerned that accommodations will lower the academic standards.

Professors also expressed support for granting accommodations when evaluating applicants' background and during students' practical experiences, but they expressed the need to balance between the demand to meet teaching qualifications and the desire to offer equal opportunities to students with disabilities. In fact, most faculty members indicated that they invested less than 30 minutes a week on average in making accommodations. Findings also indicate that the professors themselves are fearful of the stigma that may affect students with disabilities when they apply for a job, Instructors' experience and knowledge in the field are also contributing factors: Professors from the field of special education are more knowledgeable about disabilities and their potential impact on students' success.

4.3. *Policy statements and suggestions for more accommodations and greater inclusion*

Current legislation is in line with the approach presented by Brulle on students with disabilities who are admitted into teacher training programs: "Whatever the reason for choosing education as a career, however, each candidate with a disability clearly has the right to at least attempt to meet the demands of the profession with appropriate accommodations made whenever necessary" (2006, p.4).

Even students who complete teacher training programs successfully might encounter barriers as novice teachers. In Israel, the Ministry of Education has created a special program called "Teachers with no boundaries" this new program (2015) helps novice teachers with disabilities to find schools where they can work as interns during the first year after their graduation.

5. **Conclusions and Discussion**

More students with disabilities joined higher education in the last years due to several reasons: (a) legislation and the implementation of the laws for equal rights for people with disabilities in all aspects of life including higher education; (b) economic situation considerations of the institutions, universities and colleges that forced higher education institutions to embrace groups that had previously been excluded from higher education; (c) growing public awareness of the important role of education in

employment; (d) increasing high school achievements of students with disabilities; (e) the expansion of the higher education system in Israel and other places in the world, specifically the number of private colleges; and (f) colleges and universities began develop support systems and learning technologies that help individuals with disabilities integrate. Additional legislation concerning rights of individuals with disabilities can be expected to encourage even greater numbers of individuals with disabilities to turn to higher education. The success of students with disabilities in higher education is mostly influence by the attitudes of the faculties and their willingness to grant accommodations. Most studies indicate that professors think positively about integrating people with disabilities in higher education, although most professors have never received any training in how to teach students with disabilities and remain sceptical about these students' prospects for successfully finding a job after graduation. Many studies report that professors limited experience or interactions with people with disabilities affected their willingness to give accommodations.

Researchers have proposed several steps to improve faculty attitudes toward students with disabilities as well as attitudes of other students. They urge institutions to create joint interactions on campus, and make available formations on various disabilities, relevant legislature, accommodations in teaching, teaching methods, and institutional policy to professors. It is important that this information is disseminated in print form, and uses visual materials such as video clips, dramatic presentations, guest lectures. Students support centres should also maintain contact with professors and initiate surveys to check the attitudes of the faculty and the students.

Very few studies examined the inclusion of students with disabilities in teaching colleges, and research on this topic in Israel is also in its infancy. Future studies might therefore begin by examining whether the findings of the past two decades, mainly in the US, also apply to Israel, and then proceed to design studies with the unique features of Israeli society in mind. In addition to examining the attitudes of professors and peers, researchers should also listen to the voices of students with disabilities facing the challenges of training programs and employment as novice teachers as inputs into a model that combines the medical model and the social model.

Some questions for further study:

- * How much attention and resources do teaching colleges devote to think about the factors that affect inclusion of students with disabilities, and to develop training programs that ease inclusion?
- How can teaching colleges develop positive faculty attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities?
- How can we develop a model that creates a continuous training experience from the teaching college to employment as teachers?
- How can institutions of higher education contribute to growing awareness of the issues related to inclusion of students with disabilities?

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