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ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE CHANCES OF SUCCESS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Edna Zafrir (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a) Babeș-Bolyai University, 7 Sindicatelor Str., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, ednazafrir1@gmail.com

Abstract

The theoretical framework of this research is the general systems approach, which posit that all organizational systems have mutual effects on themselves, and organizational climate theories, which posit that the climate of an organization can affect individuals' attitudes to accessibility and towards students with disabilities. The purpose of the study is to investigate students' attitudes toward the chances of success of students with a range of disabilities in their academic studies in general and in a teaching program specifically, as well as in work in general and specifically in the teaching profession. Participants were 106 students attending a college in Israel, who responded to a questionnaire. Findings showed differences in the estimated chances of success of students with disabilities in contrast to students without disabilities on all the measures tested. Participants expressed a high degree of willingness to assist students with disabilities in the classroom. Accessibility and a supportive organizational climate in the academic institution were moderate, confirming a need to develop a college-wide program to improve accessibility and awareness.

Keywords: General system theory, attitude, students with disabilities, accessibility of academic institutions, organizational climate, self-concept.

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1. Introduction

In Israel, as in the rest of the world, the general public's awareness of the need to guarantee equal rights to minority groups, including individuals with disabilities, and the ambition to realize the principle of optimal inclusion in all sectors of life in society, including education and higher education, has resulted in broad legislation on human rights and accessibility. (Israel's Government's laws for equal rights for persons with disabilities n.d.) and led to a significant increase in the number of students with disabilities in academic institutions (Tabakman, 2008; Leyser, 2011) which are students' gateway to knowledge acquisition and preparedness for employment. As a result, success in academic studies has far-reaching implications to students' futures. The success of students with disabilities is influenced both by personal factors such as self-concept, which includes self-esteem, and self-efficacy, and by the atmosphere on campus (Schein, 2010) and the attitudes of faculty and fellow students, which might strengthen or sabotage their efforts to succeed, both in their studies and in future employment.

2. Problem Statement

This research forms the second part of a three-part study that was conducted at a teacher education college in Israel to examine how students (with and without disabilities) assessed the chances of success of students with disabilities to succeed in academic studies and teaching training as well as to integrate into work in general and work as teachers. The study also examined the college's accessibility-supporting climate and its role in promoting the success of students with disabilities.

The premise of this research is that attitudes, expressed here as assessing the chances of success of students with disabilities together with the actual support services and accommodations awarded to students with disabilities, produce a general atmosphere that we term "organizational accessibility climate," which promotes or undermines the efforts of students with disabilities to succeed in their studies and their future career as teachers.

3. Research Questions

(a) What are the attitudes of students with and without disabilities regarding the chances of success of students with disabilities in their studies in general, and specifically in teaching?

(b) What are the attitudes of students with and without disabilities regarding the chances of success of students with disabilities to integrate into employment in general, and specifically into teaching?

(c) How do students, judge the accessibility climate at the college and their willingness to assist a student with disabilities?

(d) Is there a correlation between students' characteristics and attitudes regarding chances of success. The characteristics that will be examined are diagnosed with a disability, previous acquaintance with a person with disabilities, exposure to activities related to accessibility?

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4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate students' attitudes toward the chances of success of students with a range of disabilities in their academic studies in general and in a teaching program specifically, as well as in work in general and specifically in the teaching profession

5. Research Methods

The research was conducted using a correlational quantitative approach, by examining the phenomenon as it exists in its natural reality, with no intervention. The design includes a comparison of two groups of student teachers studying at the same college of education in southern Israel: One group comprises students diagnosed with a disability, and the second group comprises students who were not diagnosed with a disability.

5.1. Participants

The sample comprised 106 students (90 female; 34 students diagnosed with a disability), studying at a teacher training college. Participant characteristics examined: Year in the program (1-4), program (BA MEd, special education); acquaintance with a person with disabilities; exposure to information on accessibility in higher education

5.2. Procedure

The research employed a questionnaire that examines college students' attitudes and assessments of various aspects regarding accessibility. One section of the questionnaire was adapted from a questionnaire developed by Hess, Mark-Zigdon, and Gilat (2014) of the Levinsky College in Israel. A second section was adapted from a questionnaire developed by Baker, Boland and Nowik (2012).

The questionnaire includes the following sections:

1. Assessing students with disabilities' chances of success in four situations: academic studies, teacher training education, employment in general, and working as a teacher. The questionnaire presented a list of nine disabilities. Respondents were asked to assess the chances of success of students with each of these disabilities in each of the four situations on a 6-point scale from 1 (very low) to 6 (very high). The disabilities are: learning disability, attention disorder, physical disability, autism spectrum, mental disability, chronic illness, hearing impairment or deafness, visual impairment or blindness, cognitive development disability.

2. Students' willingness to help peers with disabilities. This section contained four items.

A sample item is: "To what extent would you want to help a student with disabilities integrate into society?" Answers were given on a scale from 1 to 6.

3. Students' perception of the accessibility climate at the college. This section comprised 11 items referring to covert and overt indications of accessibility and basic assumptions. An example of an overt indication is: "The college building is accessible and is suitable for students with disabilities." An example of a covert indication is: "The teaching faculty is aware of the students' diverse needs." An example of a basic assumption is: "Integrating students with disabilities enhances the College's prestige."

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We calculated reliability using Cronbach's alpha, which was found to be high (0.86). To assess whether a general climate of accessibility index could be constructed from all the items on the questionnaire, we calculated the reliability of each measure, and were found to be high. Therefore, we calculated a climate of accessibility index comprising the average of the scores of the six sections of the questionnaire.

6. Findings

A significant effect was found in type of measurement ($F(3.309) = 4.41$, $p < .005$). Further Bonferroni tests showed, at a significance level of 0.05, that chances of success in general studies were assessed to be higher than those in teacher training, and chances of success in general employment were assessed to be higher than chances of success integrating into teaching. There was no significant interaction effect between measurement type and group. These differences were obtained in both groups: students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Comparisons were conducted between the two groups of students on their assessment of chances of success in studies and employment for each disability group separately. In all the cases in which differences were found between the assessments of students with and without disabilities, the direction of these differences was uniform and matched the research hypotheses: students with disabilities assess chances of success as higher than students without disabilities. Assessing chances of success in general studies: A significant difference was found at a level of significance of 0.05 for the chances of success of students with attention disorders: Students with disabilities attributed a greater chance of success to students with attention disorders ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.24$) than did students without disabilities ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.52$). The two groups did not differ in the assessment of the chances of success in general studies of all other disability groups.

6.1. Assessing changes of success in teacher training studies

Significant differences at a 0.05 level of significance of were found with respect to two disability groups: Students with disabilities attributed a greater chance of success in teacher training studies to students with a learning disability ($M = 4.73$, standard deviation = 1.30) than did students without disabilities ($M= 4.13$, standard deviation = 1.53). Students with disabilities attributed a greater chance of success in teacher training studies to students with an attention disorder ($M = 4.94$, standard deviation = 1.17) than did students without disabilities ($M = 4.0$, standard deviation = 1.59). The two groups did not differ in the assessment of the chances of success in teacher training of all other disability groups.

6.2. Assessing the changes of success in teaching

Significant differences at a 0.05 level of significant were found regarding three disabilities: learning disabilities, attention disorders, and mental disabilities. Students with disabilities attributed a greater chance of success in teacher training studies to students with a learning disability ($M = 4.91$, standard deviation = 1.42) than did students without disabilities ($M = 4.36$, standard deviation 1.45); Students with disabilities attributed a greater chance of success in teacher training studies to students with an attention disorder with students with disabilities ($M = 5.0$, standard deviation = 1.27) than did students without disabilities ($M = 4.38$, standard deviation = 1.41); Students with disabilities attributed a greater

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chance of success in teacher training studies to students with mental disabilities (M = 3.26, standard deviation = 1.71) than did students without disabilities (M = 2.68, standard deviation = 1.20). Similarly, a difference approaching significance (0.08) was found regarding the perceived chances of success of students with a cognitive developmental disability: Students with disabilities attributed a greater chance of success in teaching to students in this disability group (M = 2.82, standard deviation = 1.62) than did students without disabilities (M = 2.31, standard deviation = 1.34). The two groups did not significantly differ in the assessment of the chances of success in teaching of all other disability groups.

6.3. Assessing the chances of success in general employment: The two groups did not significantly differ in the assessment of the chances of success in employment in general of all other disability groups.

6.4. Willingness to help a student with disability:

A t-test was conducted comparing the two study groups regarding the general measurement of willingness to help a disabled student, and for each of the four items separately. In the analysis of the general measurement, a difference approaching significance (t (103) = 1.37, p < 0.08) was found. Students with disabilities expressed a greater willingness to help (M = 4.97, standard deviation = 1.23) than did students without disabilities (M = 4.97, standard deviation = 1.27). When analysing specific items, one significant difference at a 0.05 level was found: Students with disabilities expressed a greater willingness to be a social mentor (M = 4.91, standard deviation = 1.54) than did students without disabilities (M = 4.28, standard deviation).

6.5. Perception of the accessibility climate at the college:

A t-test was conducted to compare the two study groups regarding the general measurement of perceived accessibility and separately for each of the ten items reflecting the elements comprising a climate of accessibility. An analysis of the general measurement found a significant difference (t (103) = 2.17, p < .03): students with disabilities view the accessibility climate as more accommodating (M = 4.01, standard deviation 1.09) than did students without disabilities (M = 3.54, standard deviation = 1.00). Significant differences were found in perceptions regarding two specific elements: (a) students with disabilities rated guidance on the topic of accessibility at the college as higher (M = 3.32, standard deviation = 1.77) than students without disabilities (M = 2.62, standard deviation = 1.61), and; (b) students with disabilities reported greater knowledge of the sources of support available at the college (M = 3.67, standard deviation = 1.71) than did students without disabilities (M = 2.73, standard deviation = 1.52).

6.6. Accessibility climate at the college:

A t-test comparing the two study groups was performed regarding the general measurement of the accessibility climate. A significant difference was found (t (103) = 1.65, p <.05) ratings of the accessibility climate by students with disabilities (M = 4.05, standard deviation = 0.89) and students without disabilities (M = 3.74, standard deviation = 0.91).

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7. Conclusion

The research findings are significant for our understanding of the chances of success of students with disabilities who are studying to be future teachers, and the different perceptions held by students with and without disabilities regarding the accessibility climate at the college, willingness to help students with disabilities, and awareness of the topic. Findings shed light on the factors that affect the success of students with disabilities in higher education and their integration into employment. Students without disabilities also constitute a sub-group within the general system, specifically students without disabilities are the majority group while students with disabilities constitute a minority group. According to system theory, all groups in the system maintain reciprocal relationships and their attitudes and behaviours affect each other. Therefore, granting accommodations to students with disabilities is not sufficient to ensure that they integrate well into studies, feel good about themselves as students, and feel an integral part of the system: It is also important that their peers believe in their abilities to integrate and are willing to help them do so. Therefore, education efforts are needed to raise awareness among students without disabilities of disability issues and promote direct ties between students without and with disabilities. Students who feel integrated will feel more confident and will be more motivated to persevere in their studies rather than drop out. In addition, students with disabilities, on their part, must be more proactive regarding their efforts to integrate into in all areas of study and society. One potential method is to establish a group of students with disabilities on campus as an advocacy group that raises awareness among of disability issues in all sub-systems on campus, including teaching staff, administrative staff and students. Such activity will also promote positive group identity and positive self-perception.

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