

Inclusion of Students with Learning Disabilities in Higher Education: A Perspective on Challenges and Accommodations

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ABSTRACT

The present paper basically discusses in its prelude about the factors that affect effective and meaningful participation of students with disabilities, especially students with learning disabilities in higher education. It intends to explore the need of inclusive environment in higher education for persons with disabilities with special reference to individuals with learning disabilities through intensive support from literature. The paper has presented a detailed conceptualized understanding on the term "Learning Disability" and it has also talked about varied forms of learning disabilities with critical and comprehensive outlook. The paper has discussed in detail about the multiple challenges that are experienced by the students with learning disabilities (SWLDs) in higher education and lastly it ends up with highlighting the factors involved in the success of SWLDs in higher education and by proposing suggestions for reasonable accommodation to create an inclusive and enabling environment competent enough to ensure access of SWLDs to higher education.

1. Introduction

Disability is one of many factors that lead persons towards marginalization and exclusion in almost all the aspects of life, especially in education. Access to higher education (HE) for all people with disabilities presents opportunities as well as challenges. Since the move towards inclusion after the introduction of the Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education (UNESCO, 1994), HE has had to deal with a range of new developments on national and local levels to meet the increasing influx of students continuing into the tertiary education sector. Higher education endeavors to promote inclusion and the participation of a diverse student group, but faces several challenges. The onset of the global human rights discourse during the latter part of the 20th century has brought about new impulse of having to address marginalized communities including diverse group of peoples with disabilities. In addition to this, in the twenty first century which is regarded as an era of inclusion and knowledge one of the most important goals of higher educational institutes is to impart quality education among one and all regardless any discrimination on the grounds of age, caste, creed, socio-economic background, gender, **disability**, ethnicity, religion or other belief in order to envisage the path of building a completely just and inclusive society. Government of India, in this regard, has undertaken numbers of initiatives by framing various acts and legislations, and launching schemes, and starting programmes to ensure quality, equity and accessibility in HE for all types of students with disabilities (SWDs) including students with learning disabilities (SWLDs). However, these initiatives mostly have overlooked or failed or remained flimsy to address the specific challenges that the SWDs and more specifically SWLDs face in accessing higher education. Thus, it becomes necessary to throw light on the need of higher education for SWLDs, the conceptual framework of learning disability (LD) including its types and nature of difficulties and challenges that are being faced by SWLDs in accessing higher

education and propose the best possible accommodations to address the same.

2. Need of HE for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) Including SWLDs

Research shows that education is a major determinant of an individual's societal status and social mobility and that higher education is considered a gateway to a better future (Chataika, 2010). However, for social mobility to be realized, society and its range of systems need to be galvanized to think and act inclusively. Education in general and post-secondary education in particular, is a predictor of gainful employment in meaningful occupations, opening opportunities for career development, hence for quality of life (Duta, Scguri-Geist, & Kundu, 2009). This finding is even more significant for people with disabilities including SWLDs whose range of employment is limited to some specific jobs which match with their skills. Therefore, accessibility to higher education is especially important for people with disabilities including SWLDs (Drake, Gray, Yoder, Pramuka & Llewellyn, 2000; Dorwick, Anderson, Heyer & Acosta, 2005; Inbar, 2003; Getzel et al., 2001; Rimmerman & Araten-Bergman, 2005).

3. Conceptualizing Learning Disability

The meaning of learning disability keeps on changing over time. In general, the term learning disabilities refer to a number of conditions that might affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. It affects learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, and remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to language processing, phonological processing, visual spatial processing, processing speed, memory, attention and executive

functions (e.g., planning and decision making). Learning disabilities vary in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of oral language (e.g., listening, speaking, understanding), reading (e.g., decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension), written language (e.g., spelling and written expression), mathematics (e.g., computation, problem solving). Learning disabilities may also involve difficulties with organizational skills, social perception, social interaction and perspective taking. Learning disabilities are life-long. The way in which they are expressed may vary over an individual's lifetime, depending on the interaction between the demands of the environment and the individual's strengths and needs. Learning disabilities are suggested by unexpected academic under-achievement or achievement that is maintained only by unusually high levels of effort and support.

4. Definition of Learning Disability

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004) a learning disability, is a disorder in one or more of the basic cognitive abilities involved in understanding or using spoken or written language. This could lead to an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, reading disabilities, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps; mental retardation; emotional disturbance; or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. Learning disabilities cannot be cured, but children with learning disabilities grow up with learning differences and with persistence of proper instructions and assistive tools, they could greatly improve and attain their potentials (Raskind, 2000).

5. Types of Learning Disabilities and Difficulties Faced

There are several types of learning disabilities with distinct features. Some of the most common types of learning disabilities are explained below.

- a. **Dyslexia:** This term is associated with specific learning disabilities in reading. The features of learning disabilities in reading vary from person to person. However, the common characteristics of Dyslexia include difficulty with- phonemic awareness (the ability to notice, think about and work with individual sounds in words), phonological processing (detecting and discriminating differences in phonemes or speech sounds), word decoding, fluency, rate of reading, rhyming, spelling, vocabulary, comprehension and written expression. Dyslexia is the most prevalent and well-recognized of the subtypes of learning disabilities.
- b. **Dyscalculia:** This term is associated with specific learning disabilities in math. Although features of learning disabilities in math differ from person to person, common characteristics include: difficulty with counting, learning number facts, doing math calculations and difficulty with measurement, telling time, counting money, estimating number quantities,

trouble with mental math and problem-solving strategies.

- c. **Dysgraphia:** Dysgraphia means difficulty with handwriting. There are several different kinds of dysgraphia. Some people with dysgraphia have handwriting that is often illegible and shows irregular and inconsistent letter formations. Others write legibly, but very slowly and/or very small. When these individuals revert to printing, as they often do, their writing is often a random mixture of upper and lowercase letters. Dysgraphia can interfere with a student's ability to express ideas. Expressive writing requires a student to synchronize many mental functions at once: organization, memory, attention, motor skill, and various aspects of language ability. Automatic accurate handwriting is the foundation for this juggling act. In the complexity of remembering where to put the pencil and how to form each letter, a dysgraphic student forgets what he or she meant to express. Dysgraphia can cause low classroom productivity, incomplete homework assignments, and difficulty in focusing attention. Emotional factors arising from dysgraphia often exacerbate matters. Dysgraphic students' failure to produce acceptable work is blamed on laziness or carelessness. This results in anger and frustration which can prevent their ever reaching true potential.

5.1 Associated Deficits and Disorders

There are a number of areas of information processing that are commonly associated with learning disabilities apart from the specific subtypes of learning disabilities. Such as-

- a. **Auditory Processing Deficit:** The term is used to describe a weakness in the ability to understand and use auditory information. Individuals with these types of difficulties often have trouble with- auditory discrimination (the ability to notice, compare and distinguish the distinct and separate sounds in words-a skill that is vital for reading), auditory figure-ground discrimination (the ability to pick out important sounds from a noisy background), auditory memory (short-term and long-term abilities to recall information presented orally), auditory sequencing (the ability to understand and recall the order of sounds and words), spelling, reading and written expression.
- b. **Visual Processing Disorder:** It involves difficulty making sense of what is seen, even though vision is intact. A student with visual processing disorder might find difficulty in recalling and using visual information (e.g. remembering the order or meaning of symbols, words or pictures), differentiating colours, letters or numbers that are similar, recognizing objects or parts of an object, noting and comparing features of different items, distinguishing a particular shape from its background and/or understanding how objects are positioned in relation to one another, and accurately identifying information from books, pictures, charts, graphs and maps.

c. Sensory Integration (or Processing) Disorder:

Sensory processing refers to the way the nervous system receives messages from the senses and turns them into appropriate motor and behavioral responses. Whether one is biting into a sandwich, riding a bicycle, or reading a book, your successful completion of the activity requires accurate processing of sensation. Sensory processing disorder exists when sensory signals are either not detected or don't get organized into appropriate responses. A person with sensory integration (or processing) disorder finds it difficult to process and act upon information received through the senses, which creates challenges in performing countless everyday tasks. Motor clumsiness, behavioral problems, anxiety, depression, school failure, and many other problems may impact those who do not have effective treatment.

d. Organizational Learning Disorder: An organizational learning disorder is a type of learning disability related to challenges with executive functions and frequently accompanies other learning disabilities. Students with organizational learning disorder may face difficulties in handling too much stimuli or information at one time, thinking in an orderly and logical way, distinguishing direction, or organizing materials and time.

e. Social Cue Disorder: Individuals with social cue disorder have difficulty behaving in an automatic way. Picking up on spoken and unspoken cues is a complex process. Information must be detected, processed, have meaning extracted; then a response must be formulated.

f. Dyspraxia: Dyspraxia is a disorder which is characterized by difficulty in muscle control, which causes problems with movement and coordination, language and speech, and can affect learning. Although dyspraxia is not a learning disability, it often exists along with dyslexia, dyscalculia or ADHD.

g. Non-Verbal Learning Disabilities (NVLD): It is usually characterized by a significant discrepancy between higher verbal skills and weaker motor, visual-spatial and social skills. Typically, an individual with NVLD has trouble interpreting nonverbal cues like facial expressions or body language, and may have poor coordination.

h. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): This disorder includes difficulty staying focused and paying attention, difficulty controlling behavior and hyperactivity. Although ADHD is not considered a learning disability, research indicates that from 30-50 percent of children with ADHD also have a specific learning disability, and that the two conditions can interact to make learning extremely challenging.

6. Challenges Faced by SWDs Including SWLDs in Higher Education

Irrespective of many changes in country's educational acts, policies, schemes, approaches and the development of programs for SWDs including LDs, in recognition of the importance of higher education for individuals, families, and society at large, low enrolment and high dropout have been found. 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; Johnson, 2006; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Mpofo & Wilson, 2004). Among the supporting factors, studies have shown the importance of faculty's attitudes toward SWDs including SWLDs, their awareness of these students' needs, and their knowledge of the reasonable accommodations available. These attitudes influence success or failure of SWDs including SWLDs and affect inclusion in higher education (Rao, 2004). Negative attitudes of faculty and administrative staff may prevent students, especially students with invisible disabilities, from disclosing their disabilities and from requesting accommodations they are entitled to (Johnson, 2006). Infrastructural barrier is another challenge which limits the SWLDs from accessing higher education. Research also claims that very few faculty members can understand the individual need of SWDs and show their willingness to change the material covered in the course to suit these students' learning needs. A majority of the SWDs including LDs indicated that faculty members needed to learn more about disabilities (Barazandeh, 2005; Kraska, 2003). In regard to academic achievements, studies have shown conflicting results. Some found the average grades among students with disabilities significantly is lower and the percentage of course drop-out or failures in courses is higher (Foreman, Dempsey, Robinson & Manning, 2001). Students with disabilities including LDs reported a subjective feeling that they were not succeeding like other students, as well as they face difficulty in coping with the required investment during the study period (Foreman et al., 2001; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001), and feel a sense of social isolation (Shevlin, Kenny & McNeela, 2004).

7. Factors Involved in the Success of SWLDs in Higher Education

There are numbers of factors that can play very crucial role to promote successful higher education. These are as follows-

- Adequate emotional support by teachers parents and peers.
- Provision of technology access in higher educational institutes.
- Competency of faculties in addressing the special needs of SWLDs.
- Acceptance of the disability by teachers, peers and community people.
- Sound social support network between SWLDs and non-disabled peers.
- Positive behaviour of the teachers and non-disabled peers with SWLDs.
- Adequate support services or accommodations for SWLDs in educational institutes.
- Higher educational institutes' mission towards including and ensuring quality education for SWLDs.

- Awareness and knowledge faculties, peers and non-teaching staff about disability, in particular about SWLDs.
- Strong commitment from the side of government to address and eradicate any form of discrimination in education among SWDs including SWLDs.

8. Accommodations

To create an inclusive and enabling environment capable to accommodate and ensure SWLDs to access to higher education the following suggestions can be made:

- It is crucial to have sound written policies that ensure that student with learning disabilities receive the same high quality education in a comprehensive setting as their peers. These policies should address the issues of admission, documentation of a learning disability, accommodations, and curriculum modifications.
- Pragmatic policy statements with proper executive plan regarding services for SWLDs are to be framed and it is to be ensured that all the higher educational institutions are following it in its true spirit.
- Establishment of mechanisms for dissemination of information about learning disabilities to students, administration, faculty, and service professionals.
- Sensitization of faculty, staff, administration, and students with laws governing accommodations for SWLDs.
- Clearly designating the individuals who make the decisions regarding accommodations to for students with disabilities including LDs to avoid intrafaculty or staff disputes.
- Establishment of a team of service providers and faculty members for decision making with regard to admission, documentation, academic adjustments and program accommodations for SWLDs.
- Teachers should be encouraged to take part in workshops, seminars, conferences, short-term training programmes on disability related issues and work more with SWLDs and other groups to enhance their teaching competence and learn about learning needs and aspirations of SWLDs.
- Teachers should be alert and attentive to student behaviors in classrooms- comments, giggles, questions, facial expressions. This could be a sign of some social/ learning problems or disability. These have to be addressed immediately after class in an interpersonal and respectful manner.
- Promoting good collaboration between higher educational institutes and various other relevant support service providers, e.g. hospital, therapy centers, rehabilitation service centers, counselors etc.
- Giving fund to the higher educational institutes so that they can provide cost effective, reasonable accommodations for students with learning disabilities.
- Structuring or designing teaching learning process innovatively to anticipate needs of students with disabilities.
- Ensuring the education of students with learning disability community together for shared decision making requires disabilities, an understanding of the legal requirements for a structuring of service delivery that is compatible with the planning will allow students, faculty, and administration to higher education for students with learning disabilities.
- Structuring or designing teaching learning process innovatively to anticipate needs of students with learning disabilities.
- Academic adjustments or accommodations should be provided in many forms as needed by a particular learning disability. Some common academic accommodations include, but are not limited to: readers, note takers, interpreters, assistive technology and devices, disabled friendly lab or library, trained (in disability) assistants at lab or library, course or program modifications, need based and flexible syllabus with multiple options, document conversion (digitalization of text), exam modifications (e.g., extended time, alternative test formats and exams, quiet space for testing), ensuring universal design of learning (multiple means or ways of presentation, expression and engagement), using audio-visual materials and resources in the classroom- projectors, slides, videos, films, posters, etc.
- Providing special support for students with learning disabilities who were not diagnosed before.
- Promoting social acceptance for SWLDs among teachers and students without disabilities. Students without disabilities must be encouraged to work co-operatively with students with disabilities. In this context peer group teaching can be given due importance.
- Establishing equity and equal opportunity cell in every university with standard and obligatory guidelines for students with disabilities with special focus on SWLDs. Issues related to invisible disabilities should be given due importance here

9. Conclusion

The significance of higher education in providing SWLDs decent employment opportunities and social status is well documented. At a time of legislative endorsement of access to higher education, and of changes in attitudes resulting from the struggle for equal rights for PWDs including LDs, it is crucial to broaden knowledge and understanding of the broad perspective of needs, difficulties and challenges of this group of students in higher education. Keeping these in mind, in the present paper, the author has given a conceptual framework of 'learning disabilities' and described its type with varied nature of difficulties. The author has also highlighted the need of promoting higher education among SWLDs, diverse challenges faced by SWLDs in accessing higher education and proposed suggestions for addressing the same with the intension to ensure greater participation, equity, equality and emancipation for all SWLDs in accessing higher education.

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