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Perception and Attitude of Educators towards Students with Disabilities: A Narrative Literature Review

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Abstract. People living with disability are seen as the population vulnerable to various social ills, in academic it is not an exception. In most instance, people living with disability receive negative attitude from their educator and thus derail their progress. As such, this paper was aimed at highlighting the perceptions and attitude of educators towards students with disability. The researchers used a narrative literature review as a research design in order to provide the synthesis evidence on the perceptions and attitude of educators towards students with disability. In order to have a user friendly information, the researcher had to limit their search and use documents that are peer reviewed. On that score, the researcher used purposive sampling techniques in order to select peer reviewed published articles from 2008 to 2020 from different platforms such as Google Scholar, Ebscohost, Jastor and ScienceDirect. As part of the inclusion-exclusion criteria, the researchers carefully selected articles which were within the delimited number of years and excluded those documents which were not peer reviewed and fall out of the selected years. Then the data were analysed thematically. The study found that educators have limited information of how to deal with students living with disabilities.

Keywords. attitude, educators, disability, perception, students

Introduction

People living with disability are seen as the population vulnerable to various social ills, in academic it is not an exception. According to Statistics South Africa (2013), 7.5 % of South African population are people living with disabilities, 80% of people with disabilities are between the age of 20 and 24 who are potential students with disabilities not attending in institution of higher learning. Earlier report by Moses (2016) indicated that across South Africa about 5067 students with disabilities were pursuing their studies in institutions of higher learning. However, this figure is quite low as students do not always disclose disabilities and categorisation system across the higher education sector is not uniform. Furthermore, Department of Education (2011a) averred that during apartheid era, students with disabilities were excluded from the education system. For instance, more than 80 percent (80%) of students with disabilities were not in school (Department of Education, 2011a). However, those who were privileged to enrol in school, most of them were segregated and enrolled in schools termed 'special school' and prevented to coming into contact with non-disabled students (Ferrante, 2012).

This exclusionary schooling system did not prepare students with disabilities to enter higher education, and for most, there was no progression after school. Be that as it may, traditional attitudes and stereotyping of the abilities of learners with disabilities still lead to exclusion and reinforcement of the idea that these learners do not have a future in higher education. According to Gezahegne and Yinebeb (2010), one of the major arguments that have often been used in the debate about inclusion of students with special needs has been the attitudes of teachers toward the inclusion with special needs. It further pointed out that teachers attitude have been considered as one of the major factors guaranteeing the success of inclusion of students with special needs. These studies also suggested that attitudes towards inclusion are strongly influenced by the nature of the disabilities and educational problems being presented and, to a lesser extent, by the professional background. It is for this reason that this paper aims to highlight the perceptions and attitude of educators towards students with disability.

Problem formulation

The perception and attitude of educator towards students living with disabilities can either be positive or negative. Evidently, Graham and English (2012) have identified two primary attitudes that students and faculty hold toward accommodation requests: negative and positive. In their study, they also reported that the better informed students and faculty are about student disabilities, the more likely it is that such students will maximize their educational potential, faculty who have solid information about disabilities have more positive attitudes toward students with disabilities. However, the opposite is right especially when educator lack information about disability. In most instance, educators' lack of information about disability comes as result of the inability of the university to educate educators about disability or even orientate them on available facilities to support students living with disabilities. This is supported by the work conducted by Healey (2014) where it is was reported that educators had a poor understanding of what disability, and in particular, learning disability means. What could be drown from the aforesaid is that, some universities do not invest in the staff development which would ultimately lead to broaden their staff members' wealth of knowledge.

Not taking away lack of knowledge on disability, other educators who poses knowledge about disability provide enormous support to their students. Vogel, Holt, Sligar, and Leake (2008) enunciated that educators who poses knowledge about disability allowed student to record the lectures, allowed an extended exam time and to take proctored exams in another location (such as an Office of Disability Services). This shows that even though it might be time consuming to arrange special accommodation, educators who poses knowledge about disability go to extreme length to provide special accommodations as they feel like there is no equality at all amongst their students. On that note, Gezahegne and Yinebeb (2010) found that some educators believe that having special arrangement makes student living with disability to develop the element of dependency. On the other hand, other educators at times they feel like they have to carry a burden on their shoulders of teaching students with disability, since they have to look for appropriate venues, resources and also make sure they apply correct teaching methods for accommodating their students. Furthermore these educators feel the university just dropped the whole burden to them and it does not even give them enough support and training (Gezahegne & Yinebeb, 2010).

Be that as it may, some educators have different assumptions about students with disabilities. Graham and English (2012), have reported that people without disabilities (or even some with disabilities) judge the severity of a disability by the individual's functional limitations or the adaptive equipment that the individual with a disability must use. If a person with a disability detects another person's prejudice, that person will inherently adopt those

feelings into a self-identity. However, shortfall is that those adopted feelings can diminish the student's self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth, and negatively affect the student's level of self-advocacy and communication skills. Thus erroneous perceptions can make it even harder for a person to discuss the nature of a disability and the need for accommodations with faculty members or college administration personnel (Graham & English, 2012).

Research methodology

Data can be collected in various ways, amongst those included is through interviews and literature review. Some researchers opt for literature review because they aim to summarise the abundance of information around the specific research question. In support of this, Hart (2011) postulates that reviewing literature aid in discovering important variables relevant to the topic, synthesising and gaining a new perspective. In this study, the authors of this paper adopted a narrative literature review as a research design. Accordingly, Noble and Smith (2018:40) see narrative literature review as a way to "synthesise information into a user-friendly and present a broad perspective on a subject, its development and management". In relation to the view of the latter author, the researchers opted for this design in order to provide the synthesis evidence on the perceptions and attitude of educators towards students with disability. In order to have a user friendly information, the researcher had to limit their search and use documents that are peer reviewed. On that score, the researcher used purposive sampling techniques in order to select peer reviewed published articles from 2008 to 2020 from different platforms such as Google Scholar, Ebscohost, Jstor and ScienceDirect. As part of the inclusion-exclusion criteria, the researchers carefully selected articles which were within the delimited number of years and excluded those documents which were not peer reviewed and fall out of the selected years. Then the data were analysed thematically.

Attitude of educators towards student with disability

Students living with disabilities often receive different attitude from different personnel, be it, educators and their fellow peers. For instance, Rodkin, Farmer, Van Acker, Pearl, Thompson, and Fedora (2006) reported that students with disability have tended to be less accepted than the non-disabled peers. This might due to the prejudice that they receive from their peers. This was equally noted by Ahmedani (2011), Scior and Werner (2015) and Bridger (2020) who indicated that attitude towards disability are the major barrier to the full participation of disabled people, from pity, awkwardness and fear to expectations about what disabled people can do contribute, stereotypical and negative attitudes hold them back. Be that as it may, in this paper, the researchers' zoom on the attitude that educators have towards student with disability. Other researchers such as Wilson and Scior (2015) and Wilson (2017) found that educators possess somewhat negative attitudes towards students with disabilities or they view them as different from and inferior to them. As a result, some student with disability might even dropout of school or even not consider post-secondary school. Mamboleo, Meyer, Georgieva, Curtis, Dong, and Stender (2015) and Fleming, Oertle, and Plotner, (2017) advance the view and stated that the primary reason for the low retention rates of postsecondary students with disabilities is negative attitudes expressed by faculty members. In light of that, it can be stated that discriminatory faculty attitudes and assumptions about students with disabilities are a major barrier to student persistence and retention in four-year colleges and universities.

Moreover, students living with disability in other instances receive sympathy from educators. According to Healy (2014), educators most of the time they feel pity for the students with disability which end to them giving them special and depriving them of the equal opportunities to learn like non-disabled students. At times these educators they feel compelled

to give extra time and extra marks to students with disability even when they do not deserve it, only because they sympathise their conditions. However, that is not the general feeling (to sympathise), some educators are unwilling to teach students with disability as they express that they face a lot of challenges when educating them as compared to non-disabled students (Barazandeh, 2009; Moges, 2015).

Experiences of Educators and students with disability in Institutions of Higher Learning

When coming to offer a lecture, educators have to ensure that all students understand the content so as to meet their learning outcomes. In order to attain their lesson outcomes, other educators goes to extreme length to ensure that students get resources and feel accommodated to learn like their counterparts. This upholds the view of Lombardi (2010) who enunciated that some educators have showed concerns in areas of accommodating students with disabilities in their normal classes and the educators also shows concerns that the disability unit and the university does not provide enough support to them. The educators concerns are that they should at least be given enough resources and the communication channels should be improved so that they can be able to assist students with disability (Lombardi, 2010). In other instance, other educators stated that they have difficulties with their office environment because it does not accommodate students with disabilities because they do not have lifts and also they are not accessible and they have sometimes have to use lecture venues for consultations and sometimes the students cannot consult because of the barriers.

In respect of the above, Skinner (2011) indicated that some educators struggle to accommodate students with disabilities in normal classes as some universities do not have special program for students with disability. Skinner further alluded that educators feel that students with disabilities have a lot of expectations which are very unclear and they fail to understand them. Studies further shows that the expectations they have are always changing and this makes it hard for the educators to cater for the needs of these students and they also feel that these students manipulate them to treat them special somehow. As such, in 2012, Rao advance that some educators find it time consuming to always have to prepare special notes and classes for students with disability. It is also difficult to have to give these students extra time for writing tests. Some educators also indicated that it takes a lot of time to make preparations for test if ever they have to accommodate students with disabilities, such as that they have to find an appropriate venue and they have to communicate with Disability Centre in advance for resources and sometimes the resources are not even available on time and they end up having to give those students special tests (Rao, 2012). On that note, Mutanga and Walker (2017) alluded that students with disabilities blame lectures for their failure to advance their needs. The authors do not take away the fact that most students tend to blame their lecturer when they do bad in their assessment. In this case, one can deduce that students with disabilities blame educators as they do not find their needs well catered for.

Experiences of student with disability

Many students with disabilities experience frustration with their tertiary education experiences, this frustration arises from peers and lecturers negative attitudes, physical barriers on campus and lack of appropriate services and support (Seale, Draffan & Wald, 2008)., However, Swart and Greyling (2011) found that students with disability in Humanities were more positive about the support they receive from lecturers than students in the Natural, Economics and Business Sciences. One can deduce that those in Humanities receive support as their curriculum is centred on the principle of Ubuntu and/or human behaviour. This goes to

show that although contemporary schooling systems in South Africa have the potential to support greater participation by persons with disabilities in higher education, barriers still remain which are intensified by inequalities inherent in the Higher Education System (Healey, 2011). As such, the inequalities arise as Students with disabilities are still being excluded from higher education and being channelled into work such as supervised practical work (Mushome & Monobe, 2013).

Challenges of students with disability and Educators in Institutions of Higher Learning

After 1994, tertiary education campuses tried to make their buildings user-friendly or accessible for disabled persons (Healey et al., 2011). However, although institutions have worked at improving access for the disabled many constraints exist for instance, budgetary and or architectural problems. Maotoana (2014) suggests that students with disabilities often encounter physical barriers in the tertiary education environment which remain an unaddressed concern by these institutions. Students report their concerns about physical barriers within the university environment which are not readily identified by non-disabled student however, little gets changed. This may add an additional stress level for students with disabilities not experienced. Singh (2003) reports that students with disabilities are treated differently by lecturers or teachers and thus receive a different level of education which may be positive or negative but is perceived by the students with disabilities as different thus as not acceptable. Students with disabilities expect the same level of interaction and teaching as able-bodied students.

Students at institutions of Higher Learning come across challenges that affect their academic achievement adversely. They also experience health-related factors affecting academic achievement. Examples include stress, sleep difficulties, concern for a troubled friend or family member, relationship difficulties, depression, anxiety, death of a friend or family member, alcohol and drug use and divorce (Healey et al., 2011). Given the potential negative impact of the critical health issues affecting academic success, retention, persistence and graduation, it is essential that institutions of higher learning create comprehensive services and programmes that advance the health of students as they foster the learning and personal growth of students (Makololo, 2010).

Singh (2003) reports that only seven per cent (7%) of institutions provide full accessibility to students with disabilities. It was also concluded that only a small minority of sample institutions offer structural, academic, and dormitory accessibility as well as recreational opportunities for students with disabilities. Information regarding physical access for students with disabilities at tertiary institutions in South Africa is not available but it is unlikely that all tertiary facilities are completely user-friendly for students with disabilities.

Challenges faced by Educators when lecturing students with disability

According to Mushome and Monobe (2013), lecturers indicated that to teach visually impaired students is a problem, because they were never trained on how to teach the visually impaired students. Moreover, they hold the view that the visually impaired students should be provided with counselling and that their problems should be solved as quickly as possible. Again, educators lack of support and point out that there is a need for education system to support lecturers for the inclusive agenda to be realized. An argument is made for a more comprehensive approach towards a national disability policy in higher education involving many stakeholders. Without a broader understanding of disability, it will be difficult to engage

with the complex ways in which inequalities emerge and are sustained (Smitha, & Jaya, 2015, Mutanga & Walker, 2017).

Students with disability expect their learning environment to meet clear benchmarks across four areas: instrumental (computers and physical spaces); organisational (timetabling and course structure); interpersonal (staff support and engagement); and academic (lecturers' knowledge and attitude towards students). The students with disability also expect to be treated equally with non-disabled students and also receive same support from their educators (Sindile, Ngubane, & Khoza, 2015). Students with disability also expect face-to-face and one-on-one interaction for learning and support from their educators (Department of Education, 2010). Moreover, students also expect an improved and efficient communication between staff and students with disabilities through measures, converting all relevant information, including academic, into an appropriate format for educating students with disability (Department of Education, 2011b). Furthermore, student with disability expect reading material (including the list of textbooks and other reading materials) should be available well before the material is dealt with in class – if possible, before the commencement of the course. Where possible, the material should be made available to the student in electronic format, which reduces the amount of time required to adapt the material for student use (Tugli, Zungu, Ramakuela, Goon, & Anyanwu, 2013). Students who are partially sighted may well derive maximum benefit from the use of visual aids by the lecturer if they are able to sit as close as possible to the board or screen employed for such purpose. The front row of all lecture venues should therefore be reserved for the use of such students (Tugli et al., 2013). Again, students with a visual disability should be given permission to tape lecturers in order to address a need for note taking accommodation.

Legislation and Policy framework in Institutions of Higher Learning

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996), states that everyone has the right to further education, which the state through reasonable measures must make progressively available and accessible. On the other hand, Department of Education (2010) avow that the transformation of the Higher Education System recognizes both the need to prevent unfair discrimination and to implement strategies and practice which are designed to overcome inequalities generated in the past. This is important as it sets the framework for how the needs of students with disabilities must be responded to by the system as a whole and by the individual institution while the Department of Education (2011b) identifies students with disabilities as a target group for inclusion into the Higher Education System. According to Abrahams (2011), the university should provide students with disability reasonable accommodations in the form of teaching strategies, alternative assessments, and support assistance for students with disabilities in all respects of the academic area and extracurricular programmes.

Role of social worker in school setting

It is one of the major roles of social workers to advocate on behalf of the vulnerable groups in our society, of which persons with disabilities is forms part in the vulnerable groups. Persons with disabilities are basically discriminated against and socially excluded. Accordingly, Zheng, et al. (2016) social workers need to make sure that the rights of students with disabilities are advocated for and the university community need to be made aware of the needs for persons with disabilities and ways on how they can interact with them also need to explored so that the university environment can become user friendly to even persons with disabilities and they can also finish their studies and feel included. The White Paper also state a lot on the rights and

inclusion of the persons with disabilities in all spheres of society and this study basically focuses on the education sphere (Department of Social Development, 1997). The Department of Social Development took action to create a White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in South Africa.

The White Paper is a call of action for government, civil society and the private sector to work together to ensure the social inclusion of persons with disabilities .It therefore seek to create a caring and inclusive society that protects and develops the human potential of its children, a society for all where persons with disabilities enjoy the same rights as their fellow citizens, and where all citizens and institutions share equal responsibility for building such a society. It is important to state upfront that the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (WPRPD) does not introduce a policy shift. Nor does it replace any sector specific policies on disability. It reiterates that the primary responsibility for disability equity lies with national, provincial and local government; and other sectors of society but also allocates responsibilities to persons with disabilities and their families. The vision of the WPRPD is the creation of free and just society inclusive of all persons with disabilities as equal citizens (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2016)).

According to RSA (2016), resources will be equitably distributed and should address racial, gender, geographic, urban/rural and sectoral disparities. Equality of opportunity and the social mobility of groups of people with special needs will also be fostered. In terms of accessibility, RSA (1996), states that organisations and institutions will be easily accessible and responsive to all those in need. All barriers will be removed which have made it difficult or impossible for some people to participate equally in all spheres of life. Special training programmes will be provided to facilitate the development of accessible services.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the perceptions, attitudes, experiences, expectations as well as challenges of both students with disabilities and the educators towards disability and also the legislation and policy framework is included. The chapter also focused on disability in higher education institutions and also the factors that lead to failure to accommodate students with disabilities in South African institutions and the chapter further shows that no measures are being taken to address these issues in the South African Institutions of Higher Learning. The researchers thus recommends universities should orientate all their educators on ways to accommodate students with disabilities.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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