

INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

INCLUSIÓN DE ESTUDIANTES CON DISCAPACIDAD EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR EN LA INDIA: IMPLICACIONES PARA LOS DOCENTES

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ABSTRACT: Introduction: The present study surveyed the students with disabilities (SWD) in higher education to seek answers to the questions: What are the profiles of the SWD in higher education in India, and what academic problems are affecting their higher education? **Method:** We surveyed a total of 188 SWD enrolled in the 9 general universities of Gujarat using a three-part survey questionnaire, which included items related to enrolment, academic and family backgrounds, and academic problems in higher education. **Results:** The data analysis revealed very low enrolment of SWD in the universities compared to the 3 % reservation rule of government. Most of them had orthopedic impairments, were pursuing postgraduate courses, and came from middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds. The major academic problems affecting their higher education were the inability to select courses, the

lengthy and inaccessible curriculum, the stress of successfully completing their studies, the presence of disabilities in their academic work, and the inaccessibility of library services. **Conclusion and Discussion:** Based on their academic profiles and problems, the study discusses the results and suggests implications for teachers to improve the higher education experience of SWD.

KEYWORDS: Inclusion; Students with disabilities; Higher education; India; Implications; Teachers.

RESUMEN: Introducción: El presente estudio encuestó a estudiantes con discapacidades (ECD) en educación superior para buscar respuestas a las preguntas: ¿Cuáles son los perfiles de los ECD en la educación superior en la India y qué problemas académicos están afectando su educación superior? **Método:** Encuestamos a un total de 188 ECD matriculados en las 9 universidades generales de Gujarat utilizando un cuestionario de tres partes, que incluía elementos relacionados con la matrícula, antecedentes académicos y familiares, y problemas académicos en la educación superior. **Resultados:** El análisis de los datos reveló una inscripción muy baja de ECD en las universidades en comparación con la regla de reserva del 3 % del gobierno. La mayoría de ellos tenían discapacidades ortopédicas, estaban cursando cursos de posgrado y provenían de entornos socioeconómicos de clase media. Los principales problemas académicos que afectaron su educación superior fueron la imposibilidad de seleccionar cursos, el plan de estudios extenso e inaccesible, el estrés de completar exitosamente sus estudios, la presencia de discapacidades en su trabajo académico y la inaccesibilidad a los servicios bibliotecarios. **Conclusión y discusión:** Con base en sus perfiles y problemas académicos, el estudio discute los resultados y sugiere implicaciones para que los docentes mejoren la experiencia de educación superior de los ECD.

PALABRAS CLAVE: inclusión; estudiantes con discapacidad; educación superior; India; implicaciones; docentes.

1. INTRODUCTION

India, as the second-most populous country, is home to 26 million people with disabilities, constituting 2.21 percent of its total population (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011). Among these, nearly 12 million (45 %) are illiterate. Of the 14 million (55 %) literate disabled population, only 13 percent have completed secondary education, and merely 5 percent have achieved graduate or higher education (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011). The Indian government has undertaken several initiatives to educate children with disabilities (CWD). The government has made noteworthy strides in establishing a strong legal structure and executing initiatives to enhance the school participation of CWD students since the ratification of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, UNESCO, 2019). However, the current enrollment rate of Students With Disabilities (SWD) in Indian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) stands at only about 0.5 percent (National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People, NCPEDP, 2015; as cited in *Indian*

Express, July 30, 2015), suggesting no significant improvement in higher education. This article attempts to examine the status and profile of SWD in the universities in Gujarat.

In 1966, the Education Commission proposed the integration of CWD into mainstream education, marking the beginning of inclusive education in India (Ministry of Human Resource Development-MHRD, 1966). In 1974, the central government launched the Integrated Education of Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme in selected blocks as an experimental approach. The National Policy for Children (1974) provided guidelines for a more integrated approach to child development (Department of Social Welfare, 1974). The success of the IEDC scheme led to its prioritization in the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-1985).

In 1986, the National Policy on Education (NPE) emphasized removing disparities and ensuring equal educational opportunities at all levels for CWD (MHRD, 1986). The main objective of NPE was to integrate the individuals with physical and intellectual handicaps into mainstream society, enabling them to grow and face life with courage and confidence. The adoption of the Program of Action (POA) in 1992 further facilitated this goal (MHRD, 1992). The successful implementation of Project Integrated Education for the Disabled (PIED) led to increased receptiveness among regular school teachers and students toward integrating SWD (Azad, 1996).

The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), launched in 1994-95, emphasized integrating children with mild and moderate disabilities in line with global trends. The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights, and Full Participation) Act of 1995 mandated that all states ensure that CWDs have access to educational opportunities and basic human rights (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment-MSJE, 1995). The act emphasized the significance of educating SWD in mainstream educational environments whenever possible. The Indian government established the Ramamurthy Committee in 1992 to enhance special and general education pedagogies and provide recommendations for the early detection and integrated education of CWD (MHRD, 1992).

Since the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act in 1995, significant initiatives have taken place. Initiated in 2001, the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (Education for All) movement established a policy of «zero rejection», ensuring that no CWD remains excluded (MSJE, 1995). The legal frameworks have influenced the National Action Plan for Inclusion in the Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IECYD) (MHRD, 2005). The objective of the plan was to guarantee that no child experiences exclusion from mainstream education and that institutions cultivate educators proficient in inclusion principles. The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2006) acknowledged the potential of individuals with disabilities (MSJE, 2006). The Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009 was a key milestone in ensuring quality basic education for all students, including those with disabilities (MHRD, 2009; Soni, 2013).

Higher education is crucial for employability and national development, and thus HEIs must cater to a diverse student population, ensuring social justice that improves the quality of their lives (Azad, 2008, p. 19). The Warnock Committee Report (1978) underscored the need to reassess the requirements of SWD before their entry into higher education. The University Grants Commission (UGC) supports universities and colleges in engaging in special education initiatives. The UGC initiated the Higher Education for Persons with Special

Needs (HEPSN) scheme during the Ninth Five-Year Plan to enhance the learning experiences of SWD. Assistance categories in the HEPSN include improving accessibility, acquiring necessary equipment, and the formation of disability cells in HEIs (Planning Commission, 2011, p. 132).

People with disabilities have a right to higher education; failing to provide adequate provisions is a form of discrimination (Press Trust of India-PTI, December 15, 2017). It is essential to ensure that quality education is accessible to SWD, enabling them to lead independent and economically self-sufficient lives. Without inclusive measures at the higher education level, opportunities for professional growth and suitable employment for these individuals are severely limited (Tata Institute of Social Sciences-TISS, 2015, p. 46). The government has directed HEIs receiving funding to adhere to the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 provisions (PTI, December 15, 2017). The RPWD Act emphasizes access to education at all levels, promoting initiatives to improve higher education for persons with disabilities. The National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) recognizes the priorities of the RPWD Act 2016 and makes sure that all children and young people with disabilities have the same chances at all levels of education. This includes not discriminating against them, having accessible infrastructure, reasonable accommodations, individualized supports, and using braille and sign language in teaching and monitoring, among other things (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2016; MHRD, 2020).

Despite these efforts, the progress of education for CWD remained slow, with significant dropping out rates at successive schooling levels (Singal, 2016; UNESCO, 2019). Only 85,877 SWD could reach higher education against an estimated total enrollment of 37.4 million (Ministry of Education, 2020). Thus, only 0.23 % of the total enrolment of 3,73,99,388 students in HEIs in India highlights the urgent need to explore the profiles and academic problems faced by the SWD in higher education, particularly in Gujarat, which is considered the most developed state in India.

2. METHOD

2.1. DESIGN

This study utilized a two-part survey design, reporting data from a cross-sectional survey. It investigates the enrollment of SWD in universities across Gujarat, India, focusing on their demographic profile and the courses pursued. Recruitment occurred at nine general universities in Gujarat, which offer all types of courses on a single campus. We have not identified the universities to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

2.2. PARTICIPANTS

The study included 188 SWDs enrolled at all levels (diploma, undergraduate, postgraduate, and research) at the nine universities in Gujarat. Despite reaching out to all 188 SWD, 45 of them declined to participate, leaving a final sample size of 143 SWD and a response rate of 76%. We collected data using a survey questionnaire, primarily in paper and pencil format. We obtained informed written consent from both university authorities and the participating SWD.

2.3. RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

A three-part survey instrument was employed.

2.3.1. *Part One: Enrollment Information*

This section gathered data on course-wise SWD enrollment based on the reservation quota available, including information about the type and category of disability, courses selected, and education levels.

2.3.2. *Part Two: Profiles of Students with Disabilities*

A self-made questionnaire compiled the personal profiles of the SWD, focusing on demographics, nature of disabilities, academic background, and family circumstances. The SWD participants provided information about their gender, age, place of residence, marital status, type and category of disability, the onset of their disability, their engagement with disability organizations, their awareness of disability laws, their academic achievements, the scholarships they had received, their living arrangements, their vocational training, and their family backgrounds.

2.3.3. *Part Three: Academic Problems of Students with Disabilities*

This section included both closed-ended and open-ended items about the academic problems of the SWD. The items included course selection, suitability of the department timetables, syllabus, contents, library facilities, peer supports, co-curricular participation, examination, teachers' teaching methods, and other difficulties impacting academic performance.

2.4. DATA ANALYSIS

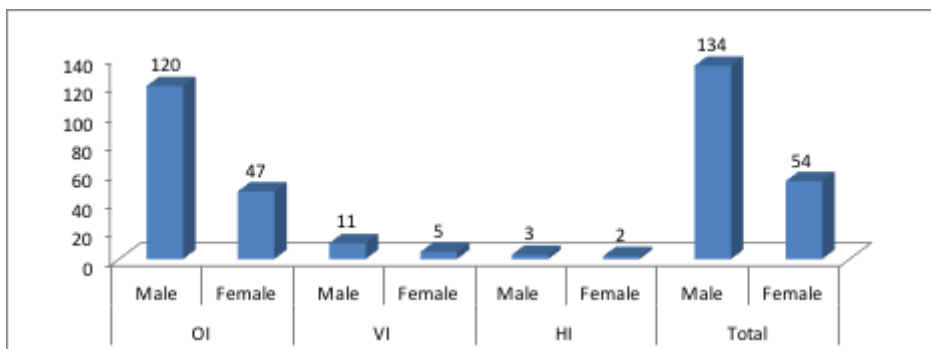
We used descriptive statistics, such as frequency and percentage, and content analysis to summarize the data from the SWD.

3. RESULTS

3.1. ENROLLMENT OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Among the 188 students identified with disabilities, they comprised only 0.4 % of the total enrollment (48,521 students) in the nine general universities. Based on the 3 % reservation quota, the expected figure (1,455 SWD) was nowhere close to the actual enrollment (188 SWD), indicating a significant difference of 99.06 %. The male-to-female ratio in the sample was 71:29 (male = 134, female = 54), with the majority (N = 167, 89 %) having orthopaedic impairments. A small number had visual (N = 16, 9 %) or hearing (N = 5, 2 %) impairments, and no students reported intellectual disabilities.

Figure 1. Enrolment of students with disabilities in universities of Gujarat



3.2. PERSONAL PROFILE

The demographics of the SWD are summarized in Table 1. The majority were male (N = 102, 71 %) and aged 21-25 years (N = 98, 68 %). Nearly two-thirds were from urban areas (N = 94, 66 %), and most were unmarried (N = 137, 94 %).

Table 1. Personal profile of students with disabilities

VARIABLES	N	%
Gender		
Male	102	71
Female	41	29
Age group		
Less than 20 years	23	16
20 to 25 years	98	68
25 to 29 years	18	12
30 years and above	6	4
Habitat		
Urban	94	66
Rural	49	34
Marital status		
Married	6	4
Unmarried	137	94

3.3. DISABILITY PROFILE

Table 2 shows that most participants had orthoapedic impairments (N = 126, 88 %), with a majority categorized as having mild disability (N = 95, 66 %). The onset of disability was fairly evenly distributed between birth (N = 54, 38 %) and infancy (N = 62, 43 %). Only 15 % were engaged with disability organizations, and 31 % were unaware of the PWD Act of 1995.

Table 2. Disability profile of students with disabilities

VARIABLES	N	%
Type of disability		
Orthoapedic	126	88
Visual	12	8
Hearing	5	4
Category of disability		
Mild (40-60 %)	95	66
Moderate (60-80 %)	34	24
Severe (more than 80 %)	14	10
Onset of disability		
By birth	54	38

VARIABLES	N	%
By infancy	62	43
By childhood	27	19
<i>Engagement with disability organization</i>		
Yes	22	15
No	121	85
<i>Aware about Persons with Disabilities Act-1995</i>		
Yes	99	69
No	44	31

3.4. ACADEMIC PROFILE

The majority of SWD were enrolled in postgraduate courses (N = 91, 64 %), predominantly in arts (N = 52, 37 %) and other disciplines such as engineering, pharmacy, fine arts, and performing arts (N = 66, 48 %). Academic performance indicated that 62 (43 %) achieved second-class while 63 (44 %) obtained first class in last examination. Over 40 % received scholarships (N = 60, 42 %). Many lived either in university hostels (N = 45, 31 %) or private accommodations (N = 24, 17 %). Less than 20 % had received vocational training (N = 22, 15 %) and nearly 60 % expressed a desired to pursue further studies (N = 84, 59 %).

Table 3. Academic profile of students with disabilities

VARIABLES	N	%
<i>Level of education</i>		
Diploma	21	15
Graduation	22	15
Post-graduation	91	64
M.Phil./Ph.D.	9	6
<i>Discipline of study</i>		
Arts	52	37
Commerce	13	9
Science	12	8
Other	66	46
<i>Achievement in last year exam</i>		
Pass class (less than 45 % of marks)	18	13
Second class (45 to 60 % of marks)	62	43
First class and above (more than 60 % of marks)	63	44

VARIABLES	N	%
<i>Scholarship</i>		
Yes	60	42
No	83	58
<i>Staying place during study</i>		
Own home	74	52
University hostel	45	31
Paying guest/private hostel	24	17
<i>Vocational training</i>		
Yes	22	15
No	121	85
<i>Wish for further study</i>		
Yes	84	59
No	59	41

3.5. ACADEMIC PROBLEMS

The analysis of the academic problems reported by the SWD revealed several problems affecting their academic lives. As shown in Table 4, 26.57 % of the SWD were unable to select courses due to their limitations, lack of guidance and awareness. Furthermore, 34.26 % found the curriculum too lengthy, and the same percentage struggled to follow lectures in English due to their prior schooling in their mother tongue. More than half (53.14 %) felt anxious about completing their studies citing inadequate facilities and financial constraints. Disability affected the academic performance of 38.46 % SWD due to a lack of timely help and mobility issues. Additionally, 25.17 % reported inadequate library facilities.

Table 4. Academic problems of students with disabilities

PROBLEMS	N	%
Course selection	38	26.57
Lengthy curriculum	49	34.26
Inability to follow lectures in English	49	34.26
Tension of study completion	76	53.14
Affection of disability in study	55	38.46
Inaccessible library facilities	36	25.17

In addition to these problems, SWD reported difficulties in obtaining academic support and adjustments in assessment. They also expressed difficulties due to lack of resources,

counselling services, awareness and support systems. Since this study was produced from the PhD thesis of the Mistry (2013), the thesis can be examined for more detailed information about the academic problems of SWD.

4. DISCUSSION

The low enrollment of SWD in higher education raises significant concerns about the implementation of the RPWD Act (2016). Despite the twenty years since the inception of the PWD Act, only 0.4 % of seats are occupied by SWD, which is far below the mandated 3 % (now increased to 5 % under the RPWD Act, 2016). The gap in accessibility within the higher education system is alarming. Supporting this finding, a survey by the NCPEDP (2015) revealed that only 0.56 % of seats go to disabled candidates in public universities, indicating a systematic failure to provide adequate opportunities for this demographic. The reasons for such low enrollment are multifaceted. One main reason is the lack of proper monitoring mechanisms to enforce the provisions outlined in the RPWD Act. Without stringent monitoring, HEIs may neglect their responsibilities to create an inclusive environment, despite the compulsion of the RPWD Act (Ministry of Law and Social Justice, 2016).

Additionally, the research indicates that more than 30 % of the SWD were unaware of their rights under the PWD Act, which is likely to contribute to their reluctance or inability to apply for higher education. Studies on school education have shown that a majority of school teachers were unprepared to support inclusive education due to insufficient training and experience (Shah, Das, Desai & Tiwari, 2013; Das, Gichuru & Singh, 2013). This lack of awareness and preparedness among teachers directly impacts the transition of SWD from school to higher education. To improve enrollment and retention rates, it is crucial for the government to ensure strict adherence to the RPWD Act (2016) across all HEIs. This includes maintaining comprehensive data on SWD, including their application, admission, and graduation rates. Establishing partnerships between HEIs and special/inclusive schools can also facilitate smoother transitions for SWD into higher education settings.

The study further revealed that a substantial proportion of SWD enrolled in higher education were primarily those with orthopaedic impairment, constituting 89 % of the total. In contrast, the representation of students with visual (9 %) and hearing (2 %) disabilities was significantly low, with no representation of students with intellectual disabilities. This disparity raises critical questions about the inclusivity of the Indian higher education system and highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach that addresses the diverse needs of all students with disabilities.

Moreover, only 28 % of the surveyed universities found that efforts to promote education for girls with disabilities had the desired impact. Mobility issues often force students with orthopedic impairments to stay in hostels or as paying guests, which increases their financial burden. Approximately half of the students reported residing in university hostels, private accommodations, or with paying guests. Most of these living arrangements incur costs, which, combined with educational expenses, create significant financial pressure. The results indicate

that many students receive minimal scholarship support, often less than Rs. 3000 per year, which is inadequate to cover the comprehensive costs of higher education. This financial insecurity may deter students from pursuing or completing their studies, particularly when they express concerns about job prospects after graduation.

Despite the challenges, students indicated that they face relatively few academic difficulties, primarily using self-directed learning strategies to overcome barriers. However, common challenges such as limited participation in co-curricular activities, lengthy syllabi, inability to follow lectures in English, and a lack of resources can hinder their educational experiences. The absence of strict implementation of the RPWD Act (2016) emphasizes the need for a robust monitoring system to ensure the availability of necessary support and facilities in HEIs.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHERS

Based on the results of this study, the following important implications for the teachers in higher education can be drawn regarding the higher education experience of SWD:

- **Inclusive attitudes:** Teachers must enhance and include SWD in classroom activities. Developing a mindset that values diversity and inclusivity is crucial for creating a welcoming environment where all students can thrive.
- **Policy awareness:** Teachers should familiarize themselves with the policies, reservations, provisions, legislation, and schemes available for the students with disabilities to make the inclusion of SWD successful in higher education. Understanding these will enable teachers to effectively advocate for and support the inclusion of the SWD in higher education.
- **Motivation and encouragement:** Teachers should actively encourage and motivate SWD to pursue higher education. Recognizing their potential and providing positive reinforcement can enhance their confidence and willingness to engage in academic pursuits.
- **Collaboration:** Teachers should work collaboratively with resource or special teachers and support staff to provide the necessary accommodations and support services for SWD. Building a network of support will facilitate a more inclusive learning environment.
- **Creating a supportive environment:** Teachers should foster a positive classroom climate that encourages respect, understanding, and empathy among all students. Developing positive attitudes and values will contribute to a more conducive environment for teaching and learning.
- **Curriculum adaptation:** Teachers should be prepared to adapt the curriculum to meet the learning needs of SWD. This may involve modifying assignments, providing alternative assessment methods, and employing varied teaching strategies to accommodate different learning styles.

- **Encourage peer support:** Teachers can promote peer support among students by creating mentorship programs that connect SWDs to their peers, leading to a sense of belonging and community. This is vital for the overall well-being of SWD.
- **Professional development:** Continuous professional development is essential for teachers to remain informed about best practices in inclusive education. Attending training programmes on inclusive pedagogy will enhance their skills and enable them to implement effective teaching strategies.

6. CONCLUSION

Reviewing the profiles of SWD in higher education and their lower enrolment rates highlights the inadequate implementation of many policies and recommendations related to SWD education. Substantial efforts are required to enhance the status of higher education for SWD. The main responsibility lies with the teachers to translate inclusion policies into effective classroom practices, ensuring that their classrooms are inclusive for all, including those with disabilities. In addition to stringent policy implementation, the positive attitudes, encouragement, and guidance of teachers will play a crucial role in improving the higher education landscape for SWD in India. By fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment, teachers can help SWD become productive, successful citizens who lead independent, economically self-sufficient, and participatory lives.

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