

“I am not Special, Let me Live Normal”: ‘Differently Abled’ Voice from higher Education Institutes of India

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ABSTRACT:

Despite highlighting the fact that the voice of disabled students in higher education has been considered as the best way to understand their needs, it remains as an inadequately heard one in the developing economies. In order to address this gap, we study the challenges and opportunities of students of higher education in India. We explored the lived experiences of a total of 11 differently abled students, pursuing higher education in India, using phenomenological methodology. Participants of the study have undergone semi-structured interviews to get a deep understanding about their needs in the institutional context, motivation to pursue higher education, problems they face to grow in academics, perceived restrictions in their career ahead, challenges and opportunities they have to deal with in grabbing their dreams, etc. We conducted a progressive analysis of the data using a system of coding and categorization. The results also describe differently abled students' understanding about their teachers' and classmates' approach towards them. The study brings in both theoretical as well as policy implications. Whereas identification of themes like perceived fear for career growth would add value to the literature in building up novel theoretical frameworks, themes like teaching pedagogy could be addressed by the policy makers to better the present scenario of higher education through more inclusiveness.

Keywords: Disability, differently abled, higher education, inclusion, phenomenology.

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Introduction

As outlined by the UN's governance of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), prioritizing the education of children and young people with disabilities is crucial, particularly in the global South (Taneja-Johansson, Singal, & Samson, 2023). Universities are pivotal in enhancing the quality of life by influencing economic and social decisions through education, thereby increasing employment opportunities and combating social exclusion (Lipka, Forkosh-Baruch, & Meer, 2019). Despite being a focus of sustainable development goals, education for disabled children and young people in the global South encounters significant obstacles. Research shows that these individuals face high levels of educational exclusion due to challenging social and physical environments (Gregorius, 2016). They are more likely to be illiterate compared to their non-disabled peers and encounter difficulties in accessing quality education (Singal et al., 2015). This exclusion hampers their chances for economic and social engagement in the future.

Interestingly, while education is recognized as crucial for improving life prospects and gaining employment, the reality often falls short for young people with disabilities. They continue to face difficulties due to physical and attitudinal barriers limiting their opportunities, even after receiving education (Singal et al., 2015). This highlights a contradiction between the perceived importance of education and its actual impact on employment outcomes for this group. Universities have a significant role to play in addressing these challenges. Higher education institutions can improve the quality of life and decision-making capabilities of people with disabilities, both economically and socially (Vlachou & Papananou, 2018).

To be genuinely impactful, universities must reevaluate and enhance their policies and practices concerning disability and education. This involves tackling issues such as physical accessibility, access to academic resources, the quality of support services, and interactions with instructors and peers (Vlachou & Papananou, 2018). By doing so, universities can help diminish the marginalization of individuals with disabilities from mainstream society and improve their chances for meaningful inclusion and participation. Despite efforts to establish regulations, disability offices, and training for inclusive education to

uphold the rights of people with disabilities, improvements have primarily benefited traditional groups. Retrospective studies indicate that there is still significant progress needed to support disabled individuals (Moriña, Sandoval, & Carnerero, 2020). This is evidenced by the notable rise in dropout rates among students with disabilities, even when access is granted to this group (Veitch, Strehlow, & Boyd, 2018).

Voices from various societal sectors have called for universities to be accessible to all student types, especially those traditionally considered underrepresented (Kendall, 2016). When fostering an inclusive environment for individuals not typically represented, it is important to consider several criteria that honour the values and attitudes of students from diverse backgrounds and with different learning needs (McKay & Devlin, 2016). Although there is a strong commitment to ensuring access for students with disabilities, the dropout rate among these students remains high (Veitch, Strehlow, & Boyd, 2018). Conversely, research, such as that by Cotton, Nash, and Kneale (2017), has identified variations in dropout rates across different countries and institutions. This suggests that educational policies and practices play a crucial role in determining whether students complete or abandon their degrees, and based on this, measures can be implemented to ensure the academic success of these students (Gibson, 2015).

In this context, we explore the challenges and opportunities of disabled students in developing economies through a qualitative inquiry among disabled students of HEIs in India. We conducted in-depth interviews of 11 students with disability, pursuing higher education in India. The major objectives of the study were to get a deep understanding about their needs in the institutional context, motivation to pursue higher education, problems they face to grow in academics, perceived restrictions in their career ahead, challenges and opportunities they have to deal with in grabbing their dreams, etc. On analysis of data, themes/ categories like motivation (self), motivation (family), teaching pedagogy, embarrassing special treatment, lack of confidence, perceived fear for career, career restrictions, professional demands, etc have evolved.

Literature Review

Given that India experiences the concepts of equality, diversity, and inclusion quite differently

from Western countries (Haq, Klarsfeld, Kornau, & Ngunjiri, 2020), it serves as an ideal population for studies on topics such as inclusiveness and diversity. The majority of published data to date highlights the prevalence of exclusionary practices in universities, indicating that students with disabilities often encounter obstacles that impede their ability to remain there (Love et al., 2015; Vlachou & Papananou, 2018). Furthermore, these students perceive that they must work harder than their peers, as they need to overcome their disabilities while advancing in their studies (Seale, Geogerson, Mamas, & Swain, 2015). Faculty members have also been identified as barriers for these students (Love et al., 2015). Students with disabilities report that faculty members become obstacles when they exhibit negative attitudes or are unwilling to accommodate them. This issue arises because these professionals often feel inadequately trained and knowledgeable to address the educational needs of students with disabilities (Zhang, Rosen, Cheng, & Li, 2018).

The higher education sector rarely employs pedagogical approaches that not only enhance the learning potential of students with disabilities but also encourage faculty members to provide opportunities to all students, regardless of disabilities (Bunbury, 2018; Veitch et al., 2018). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a pedagogical approach that has been underutilized in higher education, despite its potential to improve learning for all students, including those with disabilities. This approach seeks to create inclusive educational environments by designing instructional materials and activities that are accessible to individuals with diverse abilities and backgrounds (Wilson, 2017).

Interestingly, while UDL is not widely adopted in higher education, other pedagogical approaches like playful pedagogy have shown promise in generating student engagement, motivation, and quality learning experiences. However, playful pedagogy is also underutilized and often devalued in higher education settings (Forbes, 2021). This contradiction highlights the need for more diverse and inclusive teaching methods in higher education. In conclusion, implementing UDL principles in higher education has the potential to radically transform the concept of inclusive education and disability itself (Wilson, 2017). By focusing on creating accessible learning environments rather than viewing students with disabilities as the "problem," UDL can help

remove barriers to learning and promote academic success for all students.

Moreover, the integration of evidence-based practices and technology, such as self-monitoring interventions (Clemons et al., 2015) and virtual-representational-abstract instructional sequences (Park et al., 2020), can significantly improve the educational experience for students with disabilities in higher education environments. This is particularly pertinent in the current context where higher education provides opportunities for students to grasp the processes of educational and social inclusion. Universities can facilitate the empowerment of students with disabilities, thereby serving as a means to enhance their quality of life within the higher education sector (Järkestig Berggren, Rowan, Bergbäck, & Blomberg, 2016).

In Western contexts, a substantial body of scholarly work has explored the transition experiences from school to further and higher education (Gibson, 2012), participation in extracurricular activities (Soorenian, 2013), and academic engagement (Kendall, 2016; Osborne, 2019). Other studies have offered valuable insights into the accommodations provided by higher education institutions (HEIs) for disabled students (Goode, 2007; Vickerman and Blundell, 2010) and have made recommendations for developing policy guidelines to better address their specific learning and social needs (Hill and Roger, 2016; Campbell 2018; Hewett et al. 2018).

Including Children with Disabilities in India

India's education system is well-known for its diverse structure. Primary education typically includes classes 1 to 5, while classes 6 to 8 are referred to as upper primary education. Secondary education encompasses classes 9 and 10, and classes 11 and 12 fall under Higher Secondary Education (Eleventh Five-Year Plan 2008). Higher Education generally starts after class 12 (Palan, 2021). International directives and policy declarations have played a significant role in driving changes at the national level in India.

Over the past 25 years, laws and policies have had a substantial impact on the education of individuals with disabilities. Notably, the Right to Education Act (Ministry of Law and Justice [MLJ], 2009) is a key legal framework, and a 2012 amendment classified children with disabilities as part of the 'disadvantaged group.' Furthermore, The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (Ministry of Law and Justice [MLJ], 2016) emphasized the government's

dedication to inclusive education, stating: 'Students with and without disability learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities' (Section 18 of 23). These laws have been implemented through various national programs, prioritizing primary (years 1 to 8) and/or secondary (years 9–12) education.

Recent literature in India also highlights the importance of teachers in integrating children with disabilities. These studies are divided into two categories: teacher attitudes and perceived barriers. Despite trainee teachers generally having a positive attitude, a lack of classroom resources remains a concern, as shown in studies on trainee teachers' attitudes and concerns regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities (Sharma, Moore, & Sonawane, 2009). Additionally, several studies using attitude surveys and qualitative interviews have observed a shift from negative to neutral and moderate attitudes towards inclusive education (Kalita, 2017; Srivastava, De Boer, & Pijl, 2017). However, the implementation of inclusive education has also highlighted significant challenges (Bhatnagar & Das, 2013; Shah, Das, Desai, & Tiwari, 2016), particularly due to large class sizes, insufficient support staff, inadequate infrastructure, and limited knowledge and teaching methods to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities (Shah et al., 2016).

Research Gap and Objectives

While the perspectives of disabled students in higher education have been extensively studied in the global North, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding their experiences in the global South (Palan, 2020). Consequently, this research is set in India, a nation known for its rich and forward-thinking policy framework, where there has been a significant rise in the enrollment of children with disabilities in regular schools (Taneja-Johansson, Singal, & Samson, 2023).

We keep the objectives of the study as exploration of disabled students' deep understanding about their needs in the institutional context, motivation to pursue higher education, problems they face to grow in academics, perceived restrictions in their career ahead, challenges and opportunities they have to deal with in grabbing their dreams, etc.

Research Methodology

To carry out this research, we employed phenomenology, a well-regarded method of qualitative inquiry. The central idea in phenomenological research is the individual, shaped by various paradigms and fields (Dowling, 2007). This approach seeks to comprehend, describe, and interpret human behavior and the meanings people derive from their experiences, focusing on both what was experienced and how it was experienced (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Phenomenology explores perceptions, meanings, attitudes, beliefs, as well as emotions and feelings. The focus is on lived experiences and the interpretations individuals make of them. Since the primary data source is the experiences of the individuals being studied, in-depth interviews are the most frequently used method for data collection (Dowling, 2007).

Methods

The respondents were taken from Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) of India with any disability. However, in order to address the challenges and opportunities of such students at a deep level, the respondents were not selected from colleges or universities which are exclusively meant for differently abled children. Accordingly, a total of 11 respondents were identified (students with some sort of physical disability, pursuing higher education from normal colleges/universities) through snowball sampling technique and they have undergone semi-structured interviews (three respondents were deaf who gave their responses in written format). The interview schedule is appended below.

1. Can you please share a bit about yourself and your academic background?
2. How would you describe your experience in education so far?
3. Did you feel any difference in college education experience while comparing it with lower school education experience?
4. Any three biggest challenges you faced in higher education due to your disability
5. Have you faced any social barriers or stigma related to your disability?
6. Who is your biggest support in life
7. Who is your biggest support in education
8. In a world where only a few students take up their higher education, despite having

this disability, what motivates you to travel all this way in education?

9. What is your dream/vision in life? How would this disability support/restrict you for that?
10. Any special privileges you have as a differently abled student
11. How was/is your experience with Campus/ Classroom facilities in college education
12. How was/is your experience with Admin/ Office support in college education
13. How was/is the approach of your teachers towards you?
14. How was/is the approach of your classmates towards you?
15. Are there any support systems at your college in place that have helped you feel more included?
16. Can you share your experiences with conventional teaching methods and materials?
17. How do you find the accessibility of course content, textbooks, and online resources?
18. Have you encountered any challenges in participating in class discussions or group activities?
19. How do you perceive the inclusivity of career services and job placement assistance for you in your college?
20. Have you faced any challenges or discrimination in pursuing internships or employment opportunities?
21. Have you been involved in any disability advocacy groups or initiatives on or off the campus?
22. How do you think the university could improve awareness and support for differently abled students?
23. Can you share your experiences with the emotional and mental aspects of being a differently abled student in college/university?
24. What suggestions do you have for improving the overall experience of differently abled students in higher education?
25. Is there anything else you would like to share about your journey as a differently abled student in higher education, which you believe that the people concerned should know it?

Of these 11 respondents, seven were boys and four were girls. The average age of the respondents was 21.4 yrs. The interviews were conducted in Malayalam, Hindi, or English. The authors then translated the content of the interview into English. Further, coding, theming, and categorization of data has been performed.

Data Analysis

Table 1. Sample distribution

Sl No.	Age	Sex	Disability	Course
1	24	Male	Locomotor	PG
2	30	Male	Blind	UG
3	30	Male	Ortho	UG
4	26	Female	Hearing impaired	PhD
5	28	Male	Left arm locomotion	PhD
6	29	Female	Hearing Impaired	PhD
7	23	Male	Hands and legs disabled	PG
8	23	Male	Hands and legs disabled	PG
9	22	Female	Right leg disabled	PG
10	19	Male	Blind	UG
11	22	Male	Bone issues	PG

The total breakdown of all the participants in this research is as follows. The analysis of information gathered through semi-structured interviews was literally rich and through this, many issues, touching various aspects of a disabled student have evolved. Some major categories and themes are as follows.

1. Challenges of Disabled Students

During the interviews conducted with the respondents, it has come to notice that many challenges still exist in higher education institutes of India

1.1 Embarrassing Special Treatment

Respondent 3 says “Often we are given special care by teachers and office staff for many activities which we can do alone. Receiving such special

take care would attract public attention, for me that is very much humiliating”.

Respondent 9 also made a similar statement to similar experience “I am very much irritated when I get special care, it takes my confidence to overcome my disability”.

1.2 Lack of Self-confidence

Respondent 1 says “Many a time I wish to make a PPT presentation on the stage like my classmates, But I am afraid of my body language, though I believe that I can do it better than many others in terms of content”.

Respondent 5 says “I was about to take engineering subject; I am fond of Electrical engineering. But I was not sure about my physic supporting the demand of an Electrical engineer’s job”.

Respondent 5 also said “I was very much fond of learning guitar, even I started going to classes for this. But people in my society started objecting to my parents, becoming very much ambitious about a physically challenged child. Then, I stopped it

1.3 Official Restrictions

Respondent 10 says “I would like to participate in small sports activities, I just want to try, can I do it or not. But the college authorities were always reluctant to allow me to participate in such events, because they were afraid it would bring in some complications, which may in turn damage the institution’s image. I wish, if I could do this”.

Respondent 8 says “I wish to travel a lot, many a time for some official activities like conferences and workshops, I wanted to go, but my teachers didn’t want to take any risk”.

1.4 Teaching Pedagogy

Respondent 4 says “For some reasons, our college library is placed on the fourth floor. For a physically challenged person like, it becomes too difficult to access it. I am not blaming the college that I would have been inside the library otherwise, but my humble suggestion is to keep all such general offices/ departments on the ground floor so that people like us can also access it easily”

Respondent 7 also says the same thing “If the IT cell was on the ground floor, it would have much easier for people like me to optimally utilize it”

It is acknowledged that the methods of teaching and learning employed in a course affect the educational experience of students with disabilities (Powell, 2003; Vickerman and Blundell, 2010). This study also confirmed that the pedagogical approach impacts the ability of visually impaired students to pursue their chosen course.

1.5 Career Challenges

Respondent 6 says “I was interested to take marketing as specialization in my MBA, however, my physical condition won’t be conducive for such a career in marketing”.

Respondent 10 says “I know it for sure that I had performed much better than many of my classmates, but, when the selection results came for our internship, the HR of the company was reluctant to go ahead with my selection. It was an HR role basically, I believe I could do it, but I was sweetly neglected.”

1.6 De-motivation (Self)

Respondent 10 says “Often our friends are teachers will say: you won’t be able to do this, why are you taking this much of risks in life, etc. It makes me feel that I am really incapable of doing many things, whatever motivation I have will get loose through these de-motivating statements... Anyways, they are reminding me that I am disabled”.

1.7 De-motivation (Family)

Respondent 2 says “When I look back to the negative comments or de-motivating statements I have faced in my higher education life, it is very much negligible in comparison with the lower-level classes. Probably, because more matured people with a wider perspective to look at world and people around us. But, when it comes to the demotivating statements received by my parents, this is much higher than the earlier classes. Because the society was very much irritated with my parents on the fact that why my parents are sending me again for education, why not they stopped my education after primary level classes”.

1.8. Emotional Affection

Respondent 5 says "While I see the level of affection that I do maintain with my mother, my friends are not having such a strong bond. Since I am a disabled child of my mother, I myself felt it many a time that she is very much caring for me. If I was 'abled' like my siblings, I would not have given this much care, and I would not have developed such a strong emotional bond with my mother". He further said that "My mom is my world; she is the greatest blessing I have had in my life. I strongly believe that she has been added to my life by God to compensate with my disability".

2. Opportunities

Though there are many challenges faced by the disabled students in the higher education sector of India, during our in-depth interaction with the respondents, it is also noted that certain opportunities are also been felt by such students. Some of such opportunities are mentioned below.

2.1. Special motivation

Respondent 9 says "One of my teachers had motivated me so much outside the class that I started developing confidence in my studies and life. She was so empathetic to me that she used to tell me that where you have reached today (post-graduation) is not that easy to attain by many 'abled' students in this world. You are especially blessed, go ahead in life. She taught me the actual meaning of the term: differently abled. Her influence in my life made me realize that I have travelled from a disabled to differently abled person". She is currently pursuing a PhD in Cancer Biology. She is also active in sports.

2.2. Excuses for mistakes

Respondent 1 says "Many a time when our classmates are punished for some common mistakes, I am excused. Sometimes, even some strict professors, who don't accept late coming at all, also give certain amount of relaxation to us".

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted experiences of differently abled students in Indian higher education institutions. While India has a progressive policy landscape

regarding the rights of persons with disabilities (Ministry of Law and Justice [MLJ], 2016), the actual lived experiences of students reveal a persistent disconnect between policy intent and on-ground implementation. A key theme that emerged is the sense of embarrassment or discomfort arising from "special treatment." While well-intentioned, such treatment often results in feelings of alienation and undermines students' confidence, echoing Vickerman and Blundell's (2010) assertion that inclusive policies must be matched with socially inclusive practices.

The lack of self-confidence, fuelled by negative societal attitudes and inadequate support systems, is consistent with previous studies highlighting how students with disabilities internalize perceived limitations imposed by their surroundings (Seale et al., 2015). Importantly, the role of teachers and institutional staff—both as barriers and as catalysts—was strongly emphasized. When empathetic and inclusive, educators empowered students and fostered resilience. Conversely, instances of exclusion from co-curricular activities or reluctance to allow travel for academic exposure reflect institutional risk aversion rather than empowerment (Bunbury, 2018).

Another critical dimension revealed is the pedagogical and infrastructural inaccessibility, such as library locations or IT cell placement, reinforcing earlier findings by Gibson (2015) and Powell (2003) that stress the importance of universal design in academic settings. The emotional narratives, particularly those involving family support and societal resistance, highlight the cultural underpinnings of disability experiences in the Indian context (Haq et al., 2020).

Despite the challenges, participants also spoke of meaningful opportunities—especially the powerful influence of mentors, the drive to overcome stigma, and the pride in academic accomplishments. This reflects Moriña, Sandoval, and Carnerero's (2020) view that disability, when met with the right support structures, can enrich higher education environments. These findings underline the urgent need to transition from tokenistic inclusivity to deeply embedded inclusive cultures within Indian higher education.

Limitations of the Study

While this research provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of differently abled students in Indian HEIs, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's sample size was relatively small (n=11), which, while appropriate for phenomenological research, limits the generalizability of the findings across the diverse Indian higher education landscape. The use of snowball sampling may have introduced sampling bias, as participants with similar experiences or networks were more likely to be included.

Second, the diversity within disability categories was not fully explored. Although physical and sensory disabilities were represented, students with cognitive, learning, or psychological disabilities were absent, thereby narrowing the scope of insights. Additionally, the study primarily relied on self-reported experiences which may be subject to memory bias or social desirability effects.

Third, while the interviews were conducted in multiple languages (Malayalam, Hindi, and English) and later translated into English, the process of translation may have led to the loss of nuance or emotional expression inherent in the original responses. Moreover, the study did not triangulate data with institutional documents, policy reviews, or staff perspectives, which could have enriched the understanding of systemic gaps. Finally, the socio-cultural diversity across Indian states means that the regional and institutional context of respondents could have significantly influenced their experiences, making it difficult to claim a uniform experience across the country.

Conclusion

Our study highlights the experiences, challenges, and opportunities of students with disability in enrolling and continuing different courses in higher education institutes. In-depth interviews conducted with differently abled students of Indian HEIs show that such students do face many challenges despite the efforts put in by the Government and organizations to make their experiences good. The challenges and opportunities are documented in the form of themes and categories in separation. Some of the themes evolved out of the study show that novel theoretical perspectives are required for further

exploration of this topic. Also, the research strongly recommends that HEI authorities must recognize the ability of disabled students and practice user-friendly measures in higher education so as ensure their optimal utilization in a mutually benefiting manner.

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