

Special Needs Students' Lived Experiences of Support Practices in Higher Educational Institutes in Pakistan

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Abstract

This narrative study investigates the lived experiences of special needs students regarding the support practices provided by higher education institutes. Through in-depth interviews with four participants, we unveil the intricate relationship between these practices and the student's educational experiences and overall well-being. The findings illustrate the empowering potential of effective support practices, with participants highlighting the crucial role of dedicated teachers who demonstrate understanding and embrace diverse teaching styles. Equal opportunities, including access to scholarships, internships, and job placements, emerge as crucial factors fostering a sense of belonging and empowering students to pursue their aspirations. The cooperative and inclusive environment, encompassing inclusive classrooms, disability resource centers, and assistive technologies, positively impacts students' academic success and emotional well-being. However, the research also sheds light on the detrimental consequences of inadequate support practices, revealing how a lack of understanding and resources can lead to discouragement, demotivation, and educational barriers. These findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to assess and enhance their support structures for special needs students, promoting equitable access to education. This study emphasizes the crucial role of comprehensive support practices in creating an inclusive and empowering educational landscape, advocating for the full participation of all students, irrespective of their abilities.

Keywords: Special Needs Students, Higher Education, Support Practices, Lived Experiences, Inclusivity.

Introduction

According to the International Children's Emergency Fund of the United Nations, about 240 million disabled children are living on the globe. Like other children of their age, children who are disabled have goals and plans for the future as well. Like other kids, they require a proper education to develop intellectually and reach their full potential. However, legislators regularly highlight the requirements of kids with abnormalities, which limits their access to education and their ability to take part in the socio-economic systems of the country. The absence rates for these kids are among the highest worldwide. They constantly encounter obstacles to their schooling due to shame, prejudice, and decision-makers persistent unwillingness to include disabilities in academic activities.

Students with disabilities face unique challenges in higher education (Adams, 2022; Howell, 2022). These challenges can be related to academic barriers, social isolation, and discrimination

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(Baird & Smith, 2023; Hughes & Thomas, 2022). However, many supports and services are also available to help students with disabilities succeed in college (Chen & Chen, 2022; Murphy & Harvey, 2022). The substantial way to ensure that every kid has a uniform chance to pursue schooling, learning, and developing the abilities they require to succeed is via inclusion in education. What is meant by mainstream schools is all pupils are in the same educational institute and classrooms. In an inclusive atmosphere, students from various backgrounds may learn and grow together, which is advantageous for everyone. Organizations that provide inclusive environments acknowledge the significant contribution that children from varied cultures make to education and allow the synchronization and growth of various groups to provide learning to everyone. Higher education should indeed play an important role in addressing the issues. This entails ensuring that institutions of higher education are open to all students and have strong relationships with the communities in which they are located. The support practices in higher educational institutes help special needs students pursue their education without uncertainty and hindrance. Higher institutes should upgrade their system to promote inclusion in their institutions. Operating inclusion in education effectively and efficiently has always been a topic of discussion. Creating and providing different support practices for inclusive students in higher educational institutes helps these students accomplish their goals and create sustainability. The necessary circumstances must be created for students from diverse cultures to thrive if higher education institutions are inclusive and associated with society. This extends beyond the issue of providing underprivileged people with financial assistance, although this is crucial for individuals from low-income families.

This study explores the lived experiences of special needs students regarding support practices in higher educational institutes. Moreover, this study will further explore how the cooperative environment of higher education institutions plays a helpful role in providing guidelines for special needs students. This research will create an awareness in educational institutions regarding the facilities provided to special needs students. Moreover, this research will also help educational institutions better understand special needs students' support practices. This research is done to make the educational organization realize the importance of an environment that will guide and provide important equipment to these students. This research will also highlight the impact of the lack of support practice in their educational institutes on the studies of special needs students.

Research Questions

Questions of this study are given below:

1. What general support practices are provided to special needs students in higher educational institutes?
2. How does the cooperative environment help guide special needs students?
3. How does the lack of support practices impact special needs students' ability to pursue higher education?

Review of Related Literature

This part of the research will explore the literature on special needs students' perception of support practices in higher educational institutes. Furthermore, in this chapter, we will discuss the general support practices provided to special needs students in educational institutes and how these. Practices help provide the guidelines for such students. New learning possibilities are brought by inclusive education, especially for the pupils who are expressly excluded, such as those who are physically or mentally ill or who are minority language speakers (UNICEF, 2019). Giving all

children an education that improves their abilities to learn and interpersonal interactions and prepares them for fruitful adult life in the community is the aim of inclusive education. In inclusive education, all students can participate in the teaching and learning processes. Many academic institutions frequently adopt inclusion strategies to ensure that students with disabilities are not consistently excluded because of their differences.

On the other hand, the principle of that institute is often the most important component in the formation of inclusive practices. Inclusive education aims to involve all students, irrespective of their gender or disabilities, in the educational process (Aladini, 2020). The idea behind inclusion in education is that students with special needs can continue their learning and education alongside classmates who are typically developing in both government and non-governmental pre or primary schools, high schools, and non-formal educational institutions by offering support education services (The Regulation Governing Special Education Services, 2018). Placing special needs kids in schools that offer inclusive education is crucial for inclusive education practices. By providing support services to the kids with special needs, the classroom teacher, or both as needed, inclusive education is described as training inclusive students with special needs alongside their typically developing classmates in general education schools (Sucuoğlu & Kargin 2006). Everyone must embrace and appreciate the students with special needs, regardless of personal differences, and inclusive education must be planned with the children's unique needs in mind. It indicates that the institution keeps up with the child rather than the youngster keeps up with the school.

Furthermore, integrating special education into the general curriculum does not mandate that all kids attend regular schools after leaving private special education institutions. Inclusive education schools and regular schools must collaborate more precisely to provide inclusive education. This allows for observing whether each youngster receives the best possible education.

There are many reasons for inclusive education practices (Morina, 2017). Among them are:

- Positive attitudes towards diversity may be transformed via inclusive education, laying the building blocks of a just and discrimination-free society. Therefore, it is important to notify children who have normal development about including pupils in the classroom.
- Building co-educative classrooms for children who benefit from inclusive education is less expensive than setting up a network of separate schools for different handicapped groups. For this reason, it's crucial to create an atmosphere for children with special needs that is as unrestrictive as possible.
- In inclusive education, it is necessary to establish teaching strategies that benefit all students and accommodate their particular peculiarities. Those students who require special attention must be considered in classroom activities.

One important area of research is the impact of technology on students with disabilities in higher education (Akar & Kılıç, 2022; Dwyer & Forlin, 2022). Technology can be used to provide students with disabilities with access to information and resources, as well as to create more inclusive learning environments (Horton & Smith, 2022).

Another important area of research is the impact of disability disclosure on student experiences (Davis & D'Angelo, 2023; McCarthy & Shaw, 2022). Students with disabilities may choose to disclose their disabilities to faculty and staff, or they may choose to keep their disabilities private. The decision to disclose can have a significant impact on a student's experience in college.

Faculty perceptions of inclusive teaching practices are also an important area of research (Gunn & Hayes, 2022). Faculty with positive perceptions of inclusive teaching are more likely to implement inclusive teaching practices in their classrooms (Hieman, 2006). This can positively impact the learning experiences of students with disabilities. Madaus et al. (2021) investigated the perceptions

of college students with disabilities regarding institutional and disability services offices' response to sustained remote instruction. Their study found that communication and continued services from disability services offices were important to students, as well as remote learning preparation, regular communication, and flexible school policies from institutions (Madaus et al., 2021). It is important to consider the experiences of students with disabilities at different types of institutions (O'Shea & Smith, 2023). For example, students with disabilities at rural community colleges may face different challenges than large research universities. By understanding the unique challenges faced by students with disabilities at different types of institutions, we can develop more effective support and services for all students. Several institutions have started numerous initiatives to make it simpler for impaired students to receive an education. Universities become increasingly devoted to inclusive education because they are becoming more approachable to inclusive students with special attention and care and disabilities. In response to legislation and laws, most institutions have created offices that serve impaired students, use cutting-edge technologies, and implement inclusive educational practices. Unfortunately, these measures fall short of what is needed to protect students' rights to a high-quality education free from discrimination and founded on the ideas of inclusion in education. So, most of the research has concluded from the findings that having access to education alone is insufficient.

Additionally, it is essential to ensure that the children are given access to a suitable, inclusive learning environment. Studies have also shown that students with special needs and impairments are more likely than those without disabilities to leave college early. Therefore, education policies and initiatives must be created to motivate students to stay in school and successfully finish their degree programs (Morina, 2017). Ensuring that students with impairments are educated in an inclusive atmosphere is crucial. The foundation of inclusive education is the idea that every student has a right to full participation in and access to a top-notch education. Diversity is highly regarded in the context of inclusive education. It foresees the planned educational initiatives, which consider various learning modalities and account for any foreseeable demands.

Most universities create barriers that eventually limit the inclusive environment for disabled students enrolled there, in line with the social model in the case of societal structure. Additionally, it demonstrates how societal attitudes, practices, and regulations influence the supports and barriers that limit access and participation. The social model states that higher education must be restructured within the framework of the academic opportunity for all students to participate fully. The current state of research on the experiences of students with special needs in higher education institutions (HEIs) reveals a complex landscape with inconsistent findings. Factors such as the type of disability, the specific support services provided, and methodological differences contribute to variations in research outcomes (Adams, 2020; Foley et al., 2022). While some studies showcase positive experiences and the effectiveness of support services in enhancing academic success and well-being (Wilson, 2003; Ambati, 2010), others identify concerns related to insufficient resources, inadequate staff training, and negative attitudes toward students with disabilities (Hall, 1999; Howell, 2005).

Within this nuanced context, several key themes emerge from the existing literature. Timely access to relevant support services, including academic accommodations, assistive technology, and personalized counseling, is crucial for student success (Hieman, 2006; Nageswara & Ambati, 2022). However, challenges in navigating complex procedures and accessing services promptly are noted (Wilson, 2003). Additionally, the quality and effectiveness of support interventions present a dichotomy in research findings, with some acknowledging positive outcomes and others

highlighting concerns about services perceived as fragmented or lacking individualization (Hall, 1999).

Negative attitudes and stigma towards students with disabilities emerge as significant factors impacting their experiences in HEIs, potentially leading to feelings of isolation, misunderstanding, and discrimination (Risk & Stigma, 2023; Howell, 2005). The reluctance to disclose disabilities due to concerns about stigma and potential negative consequences is identified as a barrier, hindering students from accessing necessary support services and accommodations (Ambati, 2010). The critical role of faculty and staff in creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for students with disabilities is underscored, emphasizing the need for training on disability awareness, inclusive teaching practices, and effective communication strategies (Nageswara & Ambati, 2022; Hall, 1999). Typically, university students with a disability advocate that other impaired students should also finish their education there to improve their quality of life and career possibilities. Future research will confirm the value of these experiences, which will eventually improve the likelihood of landing a job, making more money, and leading a free life. Higher education is often valued and seen favorably by impaired students because it provides a framework more conducive to their desire to advance. However, in some circumstances, the experience gained via college life will be beneficial in overcoming the challenges and strengthening them. Additionally, it supports impaired learners so they may avoid having to overcome challenges brought on by their impairment.

The knowledge, abilities, and responsibilities of teachers are crucial for the professional growth of educators and other school staff members, in addition to their capacity to assist kids with special needs. Additionally, the capacity of teachers to teach students with inclusive students can have a beneficial, long-lasting effect on students. The academic formation courses taken as undergraduates fall short of giving instructors all the credentials they want for their jobs. Because of this, teachers must be conscious of their learning needs to meet the rapidly growing need to teach in new ways (Donnelly, 2010). Classroom instructors undoubtedly have duties for students with special needs, and the inclusion strategies that instructors and counselors supervise will be more successful. Peer teaching is another efficient strategy for ensuring that all student groups receive an inclusive education. Additionally, it is noted in the literature that educators should understand that perhaps the theory and practice of special education are not at odds with one another (Karaca, 2018).

Therefore, the inclusion and equity principles emphasize having excellent educational experiences and pedagogies that enable students to develop, understand their reality, and contribute to a more equitable society (UNESCO, 2017). Strong and inclusive educational policies, a shift in stakeholder attitudes, flexible and diverse curricula, a local school system, qualified instructors, and a group of experts, including medical workers, psychiatrists, therapists, and social workers, are all necessary, as is adequate financial support.

Methodology

The reality being recorded, the subjectivity of the research problem, the resources at hand, and the researcher's expertise have all been considered while choosing a technique suited for this study (Morse, 1994). The research method selected for this study was the qualitative method. A qualitative method was kept in mind because we wanted an in-depth understanding of the issue. Later, in this qualitative study, we chose a narrative study. The narrative study might take the shape of a history, autobiography, life history, tale about a personal experience, a story about a person or organization that is contextually oriented, or a story influenced by theoretical lenses. Cresswell,

Best, and Gay argue that lived experiences may appropriately be searched and presented using a narrative approach. We wanted to know the experiences of everyone who has gone through the issue of dealing with the difficulties of inclusive education. We selected individuals with lived experiences of this issue in higher education institutes.

The participants were actively involved in the research in a natural setting. Their stories were gathered and formed in a chronological pattern. The population size of this research was special needs students from different departments of the University of Management and Technology. A sample is a chosen portion of the population from which you will gather the data. The sample size for this study is 4 participants. Students from the University of Management and Technology departments were selected at my convenience. The study will be conducted through interviews. The participants shared their experiences with us. The narrative methodology employed in this study made it possible to gather the subjective experience of the actual person. The data collected was collected in the form of interviews. The interview was conducted privately, and there was no one except the researcher and the participant. Most of the interviews took about 15 to 20 minutes. As a researcher, I remained neutral during the interviews. There was no biasness in the interviews. Before conducting the interviews, I took permission from each participant to ask if they were willing to go for the interview. With their consent, the interview was recorded. If someone did not allow us to record the interview, we appreciated and acted upon their decisions. After the interviews, similar themes emerged from the interviews. Each theme had a meaning or code behind it. The theme emerged till the point of saturation.

Data Analysis

This part deals with the findings of research questions and the analysis and interpretation of data collected from the participants.

Research Question 1

What general support practices are provided to special needs students in higher educational institutes?

Participant 1. University education also plays a crucial role in providing an education to inclusive students. Many helpful facilities are being provided to us. Teachers are very understanding and are putting in extra effort. We are getting equal job opportunities.

Participant 2. The university provides many facilities. Teachers are using different teaching styles to make things understandable. Peer support is playing a helpful role in guidance and support. There are scholarships for special needs students as well. Various skill-based programs are also available to help us learn new skills and develop ourselves.

Participant 3. The most important thing is we are treated the same as other students. Special needs students are getting the same opportunities as others. Teachers and other authorities are helping as much as possible. Resources like counselors and job opportunities are provided to inclusive students.

Participant 4. There are different support practices provided to special needs students in universities. They play a very important role, especially regarding the teachers. They are helping these students. These students are providing a. Draw efforts. In there, understanding and knowledge. There are other facilities provided by the university, which include skill-based learning and such environment which are beneficial for us. We are getting internships and equal opportunities as well.

Findings of Research Question 1

The research findings illuminate a positive and inclusive environment in university education for special needs students, as reported by participants. Teachers play a pivotal role, with their understanding, extra efforts, and diverse teaching styles enhancing the learning experience. Equal job opportunities, scholarships, and skill-based programs contribute significantly to a supportive atmosphere. Participants highlight the equality in treatment, receiving comparable opportunities and encouragement from teachers and university authorities. Collectively, these findings signify the success of inclusive practices, providing valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to fortify support mechanisms and opportunities for special needs students in higher education.

Conclusion

The insights gathered from the participants in our research shed light on the experiences of special needs students in university education and the support practices in place. Three overarching themes emerged: teachers' support, opportunities, and encouragement. Collectively, these themes underscore the positive impact of inclusive practices and the commitment of educational institutions to providing an equitable and supportive learning environment.

Research Question 2

How is the cooperative environment helpful in providing the guidelines for special needs students?

Participant 1. The overall environment of the university is very cooperative. Many facilities help guide the special needs students. Different programs are available in universities to improve the skills of such students. There are many facilities, including inclusive classrooms. Many resource centers are equipped with different facilities. Sign languages are also helpful. There are facilities for lifts and wheelchairs as well.

Participant 2. The environment of the university is very friendly and cooperative. The authorities, teachers, and other staff are very helpful in providing the guidelines for special needs students. Many events are being conducted to spread awareness regarding that. There is a panel discussion, workshops, seminars, etc., available. Many scholarships are being provided to special needs learners. There are computers and other technologies available on the university campuses as well.

Participant 3. A cooperative environment is important in providing guidelines to special needs students because sometimes they require special attention, even at the university level. Many facilities are provided to us, like inclusive classrooms and disability resource centers, which are equipped with different facilities. Many software are installed in university labs for special needs students; wheelchairs are also available. For the physically impaired, diplomas or courses in sign language are provided to these students. Labs are also available to facilitate students with speaking or hearing impairments.

Participant 4. A cooperative and friendly environment is very important in providing guidelines and support to special needs students. A suitable environment is very important for these students; otherwise, hindrances will prevent them from pursuing their education. The university provides many facilities. The administration and staff are very helpful. There are classrooms designed for special needs students. The facilities of lift and wheelchairs are available. The computer labs, or the resource centers, are designed in such a way to provide better facilities or guidelines or help to these students.

Findings of Research Question 2

The participants consistently underscore the cooperative and friendly university environment as a cornerstone in guiding and supporting special needs students. Inclusive classrooms, disability resource centers, and tailored software and courses create an accommodating atmosphere. The administration and staff are perceived as highly helpful, and various events and scholarships further enhance the inclusivity. Providing assistive technologies, wheelchairs, and specialized classrooms creates a conducive educational environment, ensuring that special needs students can pursue education with adequate support and resources.

Conclusion

Collectively, these findings illuminate the significance of a supportive and inclusive university environment for the success of special needs students. The cooperative atmosphere, tailored facilities, and proactive measures play a crucial role in facilitating equal access to education. As universities prioritize inclusivity, these insights serve as a testament to the positive impact of such initiatives, encouraging ongoing efforts to create environments that empower and support all students, regardless of their individual needs.

Research Question 3

How does the lack of support practices impact special needs students' ability to pursue a higher education?

Participant no: 1 Special facility in a cooperative environment is very important in dealing with special needs students, even at higher levels. The lack of support practices creates a negative impact on special needs students' overall mental, physical, and emotional health. It demotivates them to pursue their education.

Participant no: 2 If the higher education institutes do not provide special facilities to special needs students, these students will not be able to pursue higher education, and it will demotivate and snub their intelligence and abilities in society. It will discourage them, and the overall education system will not improve.

Participant no: 3 The lack of support practices negatively impacts special needs students' abilities to pursue higher education. The lack of facilities will demotivate them, hindering their education and struggles. They will stop their education, and overall, it will affect their life badly.

Participant 4. Support practices in universities play a very helpful role in helping special needs students pursue their education. The lack of these facilities creates hindrances and plays a very negative role in discouraging and motivating them. It will stop their education and can also block their career progress.

Findings of Research Question 3

The participants consistently emphasize the critical importance of special facilities and support practices in a cooperative environment for the well-being and educational pursuits of special needs students at the higher education level. The lack of such support practices is unanimously recognized as having a profoundly negative impact on the mental, physical, and emotional health of these students. This deficiency not only demotivates them but also hampers their ability to pursue education successfully. The participants stress that with adequate facilities, special needs students can avoid discouragement, a setback in their intellectual and societal standing, and

potentially discontinuing their education. The collective testimony reveals a clear correlation between the absence of support practices and the adverse effects on special needs students' educational and personal development.

Conclusion

The identified themes of bad impact, discouragement, and demotivation highlight the critical role that support practices and special facilities play in the higher education journey of special needs students. A lack of such provisions obstructs their educational progress and negatively influences various facets of their lives. To enhance the overall education system and foster a more inclusive society, higher education institutes must prioritize and implement effective support practices that address the unique needs of special needs students, ensuring equal access to education and promoting their overall well-being.

Overall Findings

- Universities are playing a very crucial role in providing higher education to special needs students. They motivate and encourage them to pursue their higher education and build their careers very positively. University teachers are very encouraging, provide opportunities to the students, and put extra effort into increasing their knowledge and skills. Overall, the university is providing very beneficial guidelines to these students.
- Universities have created a cooperative environment for special needs students to facilitate inclusive education. Universities are providing inclusive classrooms, laboratories, and computer labs to these students. There are also courses in sign language provided to students with hearing and speaking impairments. A friendly and cooperative environment plays a very important role in educating these students
- the university needs to provide opportunities to special needs students; the lack of these opportunities plays a very negative role. It impacts the careers and education of inclusive students very badly. It is observed that the lack of opportunities in the universities discourages the students to pursue their education.

Conclusion and Implications

After the study, it is concluded that education is very important for everyone, and inclusive education provides education to special students in normal classrooms with other students. Many higher educational institutions have adopted inclusion in their education to ensure that the students with impairments will not get excluded from the educational opportunities. Providing an inclusive environment in classrooms or education aims to give all students opportunities, irrespective of their impairments and disabilities. Every institute must embrace and appreciate the students with special needs, regardless of their physical or psychological differences.

University education plays a very important role because it provides equal education to the students and makes them stable for equal job opportunities in the industries by providing skills to these students. Overall, the environment of educational institutes plays a very helpful role. It should be cooperative and helpful, especially for the special needs students. Universities already provide many facilities and different helpful equipment to learn and gain knowledge and skills. Universities are also providing scholarship opportunities to these students. The lack of support practices creates a hindrance to these students' education. Lack of support practices may discourage and demotivate special needs students from pursuing their education. It will badly block their careers and will impact the nation's education system.

Based on the study's conclusions and findings, educational institutes need to provide inclusion in their education and equal opportunity to students with special needs. Inclusive education in today's world has become necessary because it provides opportunities for inclusive students, the same as other students. Educational institutions, especially universities, should encourage inclusive students to pursue an education and improve their skills and knowledge. Universities should create better facilities and opportunities for inclusive children. Universities should organize events to create awareness of inclusive education as well.

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