Attitudes of Students towards Peers with Disabilities

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Abstract: One of the obstacles to the realization of inclusive education can be attitudinal barriers. Attitudes can determine a person’s interactions and behavior towards another person with disability. Hence, positive attitude are essential for the successful interpretation of an inclusive educational system. The current study investigated the kind of attitudes that students hold towards other students with disabilities. One hundred students in the age group of 13 to 15 years from Guwahati, Assam, participated in the study. Fifty participants were from English medium schools and the other fifty participants were from Vernacular medium schools. Semantic Differential Scale was used to gauge their attitudes, on positive and negative attributes, towards peers with disabilities. Results revealed that students held a more positive attitude towards their peers with disabilities than a negative attitude. This was true irrespective of gender and the type of school that the participants belonged to.

Keywords: attitude, peers, disability, students, English medium school, vernacular medium school.

Introduction

With the recent changes in the educational scenario and the increasing move towards inclusive education, the focus of the educational system has shifted to the development and learning of children with special needs and normal children under the same roof. This education system does not differentiate between learners on the basis of any condition. In an inclusive education system the diverse learning needs of all children are given equal attention, especially those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion (Sanjeev & Kumar, 2007). Children with disabilities are not separated from their peers in order to avoid marginalization and exclusion. However, there still remains a long way to fully realize this goal and unfortunately, this by itself will not ensure acceptance and equal opportunities for all. One of the obstacles to this can be attitudinal barriers.

Attitude is an important determinant of behavior and can be defined as “a disposition to act which is built up by the integration of numerous specific responses of a similar type, but which exists as a general neural ‘set’, and when activated by a specific stimulus results in behavior that is more obviously a function of the disposition than of the activating stimulus” (Allport, 1929, p. 221). Classrooms can act as an important medium to develop new attitudes, as well as, unlearn or strengthen old ones (Henry, 1957). Positive attitudes towards students with disabilities is a necessary antecedent to the realization of social and educational inclusion. For positive interactions to happen among students with and without disabilities, a positive attitude towards students with disabilities is of utmost necessity. Attitudes can influence beliefs about and behavior towards people with disabilities and as such, positive attitude of students towards peers with disabilities can largely determine the successful implementation and effectiveness of inclusive education (Roberts & Smith, 1999). On the other hand, negative attitude can act as a barrier to inclusion (McDougall et al., 2004). It can lead the students with disabilities to feel lonely and isolate and experience bullying and teasing in schools.
According to Woodward (1995) it is easier for children to understand and recognize a physical disability which may be accompanied by the usage of a special equipment. Disabilities which are not that apparent are more difficult for them to comprehend. Physical disabilities are often associated with the accompaniment of specialized equipment (such as wheelchair, crutches and so on) and that makes their identification much more apparent. As such it may make the people dealing with children with disabilities more uncomfortable. This may in turn influence their attitude towards them.

The present study looks into the kind of attitude that children have towards their peers with disabilities. In an inclusive educational system attitudinal beliefs which are not favorable towards the peers with disabilities may lead to segregation. Other adverse effects of such attitudes may include a decline in the self-esteem of the children with disabilities. Hence, through this study we tried to analyze the attitudes held by children towards their peers with disabilities in terms of positive and negative attributes. It is very important to identify how children would rate these children with disabilities with regard to a few positive and negative attributes. Positive attributes viz. happy, clean, beautiful, fresh, strong, heavy, delicate, fast, active and negative attributes viz. sad, dirty, ugly, stale, weak, light, rugged, slow, passive, tense will be considered in the present study to rate children with disabilities. Osgood, Suci and Tannenvaum (1971) conducted a series of studies to see the association related to positives and negatives in various concepts. The scale from those studies will be used to check and differentiate between positive and negative attributes of attitude held by male and female students from English and Vernacular medium schools towards other students with disabilities.

**Method**

**Participants**

The study consisted of 100 participants in the age group of 13 to 15 years. Five vernacular medium schools and five English medium schools were selected for the study. Fifty participants were students of the vernacular medium schools and the other fifty were students of the English medium schools. Ten students were selected from each school. It was a purposive random sample.

**Measurement Tool**

Semantic Diffential Scale which is psychological rating scale on attitude on several factors developed by Osgood et al. (1957) was administered for the systematic collection of data.

**Procedure**

Ten schools were selected for this study from Guwahati, Assam. Five of them were vernacular medium schools and the other five were English medium school. This was done to ensure that the sample was representative of the educational system of the city. Ten students from each school were selected for the study. A demographic information schedule was constructed to obtain the demographic information of the participants. Each participant was asked to fill the schedule as well as the Semantic Differentiation Scale. Statistical analysis (independent sample t test and paired sample t test) was then done to gauge the attitude of the participants towards students with disabilities.

**Results**

The purpose of this study was to find out the attitude of school going students about their peers with disabilities with regard to positive and negative attributes, which the children with disabilities may
possess. For this, we had used the Sematic Differentiation Scale to measure how much these school going children feel positively about disabled peers and how much negatively they perceive them. In other words, this scale would test the positive and negative attitude towards children with disabilities with regard to a few contrasting attributes viz. happy-sad, clean-dirty, beautiful-ugly, fresh-stale, strong-weak, heavy-light, delicate-rugged, fast-slow, active-passive and relaxed-tensed. Statistical analyses (independent sample t test and paired sample t test) were adopted to calculate the differences in the scores obtained with regard to attitude of students on the positive and negative attributes of their peers with disabilities. Differences among the two genders and the type of schools (English medium schools and Vernacular medium schools) were also assessed.

Independent sample t test results show that with regard to positive attributes, both male and female students had similar scores ($M_{male}= 6.81, SE_{male} = 0.43; M_{female}= 6.73, SE_{female} = 0.39$). There was no significant differences among the two genders for positive attributes ($t = 0.448, p = 0.660$). A similar trend was observed for negative attributes as well. Male and female students did not differ in their scores on negative attributes of their peers with disabilities ($M_{male}= 3.22, SE_{male} = 0.43; M_{female}= 3.23, SE_{female} = 0.42$). The difference between their scores was not significant ($t = -.255, p = 0.801$).

Students from English medium schools and Vernacular medium schools gave similar ratings to their peers with disabilities on positive attributes ($M_{english}= 6.79, SE_{english} = 0.507; M_{vernacular}= 6.80, SE_{vernacular} = 0.45$). No significant difference was found between these two groups on positive attributes ($t = -0.043, p = 0.966$). For negative attributes too, similar results were obtained ($M_{english}= 3.21, SE_{english} = 0.48; M_{vernacular}= 3.28, SE_{vernacular} = 0.34$). No significant difference was observed between English and Vernacular medium schools on negative attributes ($t = -0.387, p = 0.703$).

Paired sample t test was also conducted to further analyse the differences (if any) between these groups. For the total scores on positive attributes and negative attributes of the whole sample, students ratings on positive attributes was higher than the negative attributes ($M_{positive}= 6.77, SE_{positive} = 0.39; M_{negative}= 3.24, SE_{negative} = 0.39$). There was a significant difference between scores on positive attributes and negative attributes of the students ($t = 14.264, p = 0.00$). A significant difference was also observed on the attitudes of male students on positive attributes and the attitudes of male students on negative attributes ($M_{positive}= 6.80, SE_{positive} = 0.43; M_{negative}= 3.22, SE_{negative} = 0.42, t = 13.395, p = 0.00$). Female students also rated their peers with disabilities higher on positive attributes than on negative attributes ($M_{positive}= 6.72, SE_{positive} = 0.39; M_{negative}= 3.27, SE_{negative} = 0.42$). This difference was also significant ($t = 13.591, p = 0.00$). The attitudes of English medium students on positive attributes was also found to be higher than the attitudes of English medium students on negative attributes($M_{positive}= 6.729, SE_{positive} = 0.507; M_{negative}= 3.21, SE_{negative} = 0.48$). The difference between them was significant ($t = 11.5, p = 0.00$). Students from Vernacular medium schools also rated their peers with disabilities higher on positive attributes than on negative attributes ($M_{positive}= 6.80, SE_{positive} = 0.452; M_{negative}= 3.28, SE_{negative} = 0.339$). Further, this was also a significant difference ($t = 14.462, p = 0.00$).

From the above results it is clear that there has been a similar trend in both positive and negative attributes whereby irrespective of being different genders (male and female) and types of schools (English medium and Vernacular medium) scores on positive attributes (happy, clean, beautiful, fresh, strong, heavy, delicate, fast, active and relaxed) were found to be higher as compared to negative attributes (sad, dirty, ugly, stale, weak, light, rugged, slow, passive and tensed.).
Discussion
This study was conducted with the objective of measuring the attitude of school-going children, aged between 13 to 15 years, towards their peers with disabilities. Results of the study show that students have rated children with disabilities higher on positive attributes as compared to negative attributes. The independent sample t-test results revealed that with regard to positive and negative attributes, both male and female students had similar scores. This was also true for vernacular and English medium school students. Thus, we can conclude that students perceive their peers with disabilities with a more positive attitude rather than a negative attitude. Earlier findings have found both positive and negative attitudes towards children with disabilities (Kalyva & Agaliotis, 2009). These contradictory results may be because of different factors. Tervo and Palmer (2004) reported that Health professional students hold less positive attitudes than Scale of Attitude Toward Disabled Persons norms. Tripp, French, and Sherrill (1995) found that girls hold a more positive attitude towards other students with disabilities. Findings by Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, and Widaman (2007) indicated that students perceive students with Intellectual Disability as moderately impaired rather than mildly impaired; believe that students with Intellectual Disability can participate in non-academic classes, but not in academic classes; and do not want to interact socially with a peer with Intellectual Disability, particularly outside school.
This study clearly shows that children show positive attitude towards other students with disabilities, which is clearly contradictory to the above-cited studies conducted by other researchers. This could be because of the selection in items to test their attitude. The children who participated in this test had to rate on those attributes in which they did not have to interact or put in deep thoughts to assess such disabled children. Moreover, in this study covert attitude were assessed which the children might not have perceived negatively.
Studies have revealed that unless people hold very strong attitude towards anything there may not be consistency between their attitude and behavior. Children are very innocent and their attitudes can be molded by adults. So unless there is interaction among normal students and students with disabilities, their attitude-behavior discrepancy cannot be assessed. Even though results from this study clearly reveals positive attitude of children from all genders and types of schools, it is contrary to few studies cited above.
The success of inclusive education will be highly dependent on the attitude that students carry towards their peers with disabilities. If negative attitude is strongly prevalent, it will definitely have adverse effects on not only the educational system, but also on the well-being of students with any kind of disability. The findings of this study give hope that inclusive education need not be ruled out totally. However, attitude behavior relationship need to be studied in greater depth to determine the efficacy of inclusive education, as rejection of children with disability may lead to psychological disturbances in the minds of children with disability which is a sensitive issue and need to be further taken into consideration.
Conclusion
In summary, the current study investigated the kind of attitude that students held towards other students with disabilities. Results indicated that student’s attitude irrespective of gender and type of schools was more favorable than unfavorable. This study points out that their attitude is more positive than negative. For the students with disabilities to grow to their full potential, it is very
important that they feel accepted in schools, experience positive interaction with peers, develop meaningful friendship and enjoy greater participation in all types of school activities (McDougall et al., 2004). As an antecedent to that, other students need to have a positive attitude towards them, otherwise such outcomes will never be achieved. These outcomes also need an inclusive setting. The present study extends support to an inclusive setting. A departure from a special education model may prove to be beneficial to all. This study gives us preliminary insight to the fact that if adults guide children with positive inputs about disability and inclusive education, their attitude and behavior towards others with disability will definitely prove to be more accepting leading to a more inclusive society at large.

References