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EXPLORING THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF WHEELCHAIR USER STUDENTS IN ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY: A GROUNDED THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study was aimed at investigating the life experiences of wheelchair user students in Addis Ababa University and to generate a theoretical model about their life experiences in a university. Wheelchair users have unique problems among students with disabilities due to the presence of physical barriers in university environments and some negative attitudinal barriers. In this study, the university life experience of four students with disabilities, who used a wheelchair to attend university education, was explored using semi-structured interviews. The interview sessions were analyzed in stages as suggested for grounded theory research. Accordingly, the study identified the core category or phenomenon (whole experience in the university) interacting with five major categories (1) Motivating factors for university education; (2) Knowledge level of university community; (3) Responsibility of the university; (4) Accessibility features of the university; and (5) Personal support systems. It is indicated that most places in the university are inaccessible for the wheelchair user students. Thus, much attention should be given by Addis Ababa University to alleviate the inaccessibility nature of its campuses. This is possible by making some modifications to the older buildings and designing the new ones in such a way that they can accommodate the need of the wheelchair users. Further research is also needed to better understand the factors in a university environment that prevent wheelchair user students from succeeding.

Key Words: Wheelchair users, Grounded theory research

1. INTRODUCTION

Estimates of the incidence of disability in Ethiopia vary widely. According to the report of the Housing and Population Census of the Ethiopian Government (CSA, 1998), the number of persons with disabilities constitutes 1.9% of the total population. On the other hand, a baseline survey in 1995 gave a higher estimate of 2.95% (Tirussew et al., 1995). Japan International Cooperation Agency (2002) and ILO (2003) also estimated that 7.6%, or five million people were disabled. Moreover, Federal HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Office (2010) estimated that there are 7 million people living with some kind of disability in Ethiopia, 10% of the total population. Yet, it is believed that the number of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia is likely to be underestimated due to inadequate definitions or what constitutes disability and which disabilities should be included in the count. It is also likely that parents are not willing to disclose that they have a child or family member with a disability because of stigma (Tirussew, 2005). The actual number of people with disabilities in Ethiopia is, therefore, likely to be much higher. It is obvious that disabled people in developing countries live below the poverty line, and often lack access to key areas of development, including health, education, training and employment. Thus, their problems can be alleviated only if there is a commitment from the highest levels in promoting equality of opportunity and inclusion (ILO, 2011). According to ILO's report, this can be evidenced by the number of disabled undergraduate students in AAU which has reached 450. This figure reveals that in Ethiopia the number of students with disabilities enrolled in higher institution is increasing. An increase in enrolment is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient condition for disabled people to be successful in higher institution. They must also make some kinds of adjustments. In this regard, Allison (1994) pointed out that on entering college, students with disabilities must make two major adjustments: first, adapting those things every student faces, such as leaving the comfort of home, living on their own, managing their finances and having to compete with other students; and second, dealing with the disability in a college environment. Research on disabled students in general and that of wheel chair users in particular is scanty in Ethiopia. Thus, this study was aimed at investigating the life experiences of wheelchair users in Addis Ababa University and to generate a theoretical model about their life experiences in a university.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

There were nine students with physical disabilities requiring them to use a wheelchair in Addis Ababa University in the year 2014/15; of this total population four students were participated in the study. The data gathered related directly to students' real life experience. Participants were selected based on the criteria that they all were wheelchair users for daily activities and attending university education.

Data Collection

The following interview guides with open-ended questions were used for data collection: Could you please describe what it means to attend university in a wheelchair? ; Being a wheelchair user, what would you consider a challenging experience in university? ; Being a wheelchair user, what would you consider a satisfactory experience in a university? These were the major questions explored by the researcher. Other questions also discussed the following issues: accessibility features of their university; disability services; knowledge level of the university community about wheelchair users; their interactions with different people in the university; and their personal support systems.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken in stages as Creswell (2007) suggested for grounded theory research. The stages include: (1) open coding, in which categories of information were formed; (2) axial coding, in which one open coding category was selected and placed at the center as a core category or phenomenon and then relates all other categories to it; and (3) selective coding, in which a theory was written based on the interrelationship of the categories from axial coding.

3. RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the life experience of wheelchair users in Addis Ababa University and to generate a theoretical model about their life experiences in a university. Consequently, five major categories and one core category or phenomenon were emerged from the data analysis, which finally resulted in the development of the model for wheelchair users in the university. The major categories include: (1) motivating factors for university education; (2) knowledge level of university community; (3) responsibility of the university; (4) accessibility features of the university; and (5) personal support systems. 'Whole experience in the university' is the core category or phenomenon connecting all the five major categories describing students' experiences in the university.

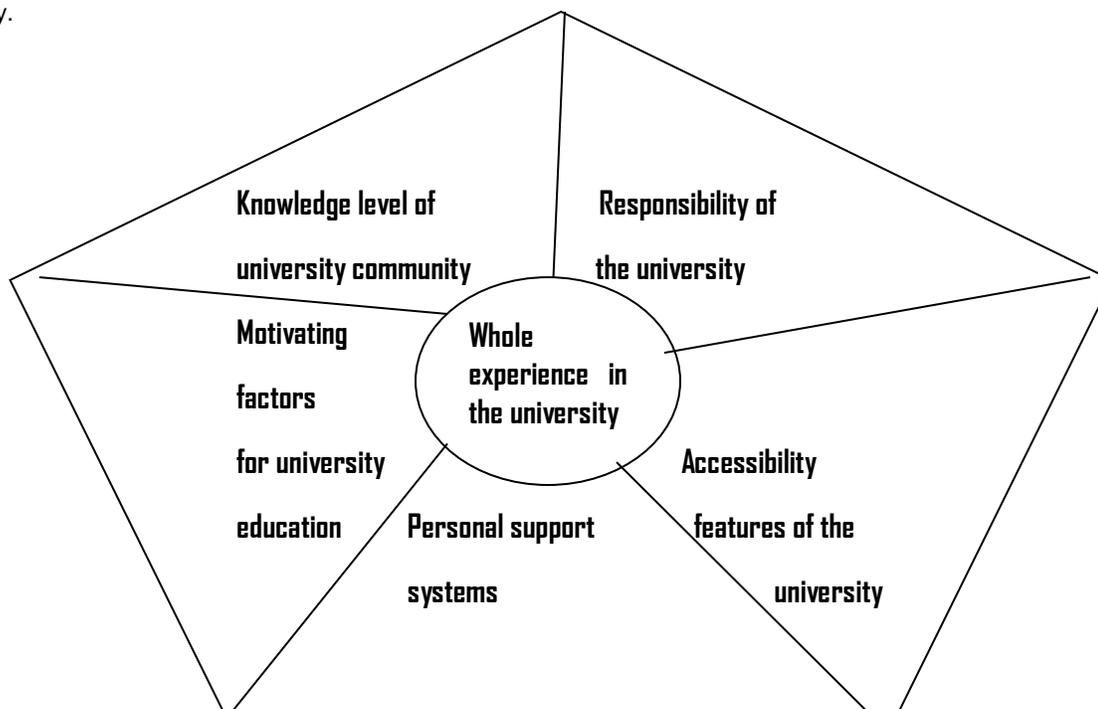


Fig 1: Theoretical model for wheelchair users in AAU

Motivating Factors for University Education

The participants described what motivates them to join the university as follows: (1) family pressure; (2) perception of university education as a means to get recognition and respect from the society; (3) to get the job and to ensure self supporting; (4) to break the traditional belief of the society that people with disability can't contribute anything to the society and to show that individuals with disabilities in general and wheelchair users in particular have the capabilities to do as much as non-disabled people can do and that physical disabilities need not be a limiting factor in their contribution to society; and (5) to get public view and to make their voice heard. Regarding the fifth motivating factor one participant described:

In Ethiopia wheelchair users start to get the chance for university education only recently than people with visual impairment. Thus, people with visual impairment have better access to media and the better their voice is heard by the government bodies than do the wheelchair users.

These participants believe that still the society underestimates people with disabilities, specially the wheelchair users, which motivated them to set their goals on personal achievement. To be successful and contribute something to their society, they want to get university education and become an expert in a particular field. In general, the participants believed that a university education would take them wherever they want to go in life, towards a better job, economic success, proving their accomplishments, reducing misconceptions about individuals with disabilities, and ultimately, self-achievement.

Knowledge Level of University Community

The university community identified by the participants include: (1) teaching staff; (2) students; and (3) administration workers. Participants described that there is individual differences among the teaching staff in understanding and helping the wheelchair users; some were sensitive and some were uncaring or irresponsible. Regarding the irresponsible teaching staff one participant who is only recently disabled and start to use the wheelchair described:

I was a student without disability when I joined this university. I encountered the problem here in the university. It is strange for me to be on a wheelchair and I am also on medication. Thus, sometimes I miss classes and tests; other times I am going to class being late. Some teachers are unfriendly and do not show any willingness to understand me and to help me.

Participants believe that interaction with the teaching staff with positive attitude towards them increases their satisfaction with the university and strengthen their student life experiences.

Moreover, participants described their interactions with administration workers (cafe workers, security personals, proctors, library workers) were generally friendly. Their interactions with non-disabled students were open and friendly. But when coming to the help they were getting from the non-disabled students to push their wheelchair, they said it 'is situational'. The help the non-disabled students were rendering to the wheelchair users is situational in the sense that during the seasons of tests and exams everybody is running for his/her own personal achievement without considering the wheelchair users. At this time, asking for and receiving help is more problematic.

Participants considered interaction among the university community is an integral part of their university life. Although there were varying degrees of awareness and social integrations, their interaction with the university community was found to be positive. They were ready to cope with the challenges and to do whatever it takes to complete their education and move on in to the broader society.

Responsibility of the University

Participants believed that their university should do many things for them to accommodate their specific disability-related needs. They indicated that their university had a lot of limitations. To mention few, among the many buildings in AAU only the NCR first floor is accessible, no recreation facilities for the wheelchair users, no playing fields for the wheelchair users to engage in different kinds of games, no laboratories and libraries accessible for them. One participant described:

I was a natural science student. I was assigned to Arat kilo campus to the department of mathematics. But one of the professors in the department advised me to join Sidist kilo for the buildings in Arat kilo are not accessible. Accordingly, I joined Sidist kilo and assigned to the department of Amharic. But for I had no interest and competence in social sciences, I scored a low grade (1.50 GPA)

There is a computer facility for all the disabled students at the ground floor of Mandela building. Besides, the female participant said that she has accessible dormitory which has facilities like TV. Generally, the participants were optimistic about the future of the AAU for wheelchair users. They expect that by taking adequate actions to accommodate their specific disability needs, the university could help integrate more wheelchair users in to its system.

Accessibility Features of the University

The major problem of the wheelchair users is mobility. Mobility is an issue of whether a student is physically able to climb stairs or walk across campus. Buildings in the university whether old or the newly built are inaccessible, for there is no lifts and elevators. Thus, there are inaccessible classrooms, laboratories, libraries, etc. Concerning this one participant said:

Our question is not political question but it is the question of human right. We have been given the right to learn but the environment is not made conducive to us to realize our potential to the maximum. The old buildings need to be slightly modified to be accessible for us and the new ones should be built so that wheelchair users can get access.

The distance between buildings and the amount of time it would take to travel between classes and dormitories is another challenge to the wheelchair users. One participant described:

It is difficult to access in the campus. I can't use my time as I have planned. For example, if I want to go to library, I have to wait for someone who pushes my wheelchair. Therefore, I am forced to do what I should do only when it is convenient for other students.

Generally, considering the inaccessibility nature of the university minimize the challenges and the time and energy the wheelchair users' wastes. This is possible by making some modifications to the older buildings and designing the new ones in such a way that they can accommodate the need of the wheelchair users.

Personal Support System

Among the four participants, three of them had a family as a personal support network assisting them with their school-related needs and academic goals. All participants had a support network from the university. They are earning 120 birr as a pocket money every month. Besides the financial support, three participants are receiving emotional support from their family. Even one participant is living in the university with her younger brother who is serving her as personal care attendant for specific physical (assistance with self care) and school related needs (caring books, photocopying). Family emerged as the foremost support network for the three participants. But one participant said:

I do not have a family. My father and my mother were died, and also two of my brothers. I have attended secondary school by being assisted by the school teachers. Now, I don't have any personal support network except for 120 birr I am earning from the university as a pocket money.

The support the wheelchair users used to obtain from their friends include: academic (note taking, photocopying, and informational), social and emotional help. They also obtained physical support from their friends to access in the campus.

Whole Experience in the University

Whole experience in the university is a core category or phenomenon, which appears central to the study, interweaving all the major categories in the study. All the participants described that a satisfactory university life experience goes beyond the academics. They consider this experience in the university to be a process and their degree to be output. According to these participants, GPA is not the only indicator of success in the university. One participant described:

Grade is very important. But it is not indicating your all success in the university. It is only part of your success. To be satisfied in the university requires being involved in all activities in the university.

Involvement in disability services, teacher-student interactions, peer interactions, and social life in the university have all been mentioned by these students to be important for their success in the university

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study showed that wheelchair users still face physical and attitudinal barriers in the university. While accessibility to different facilities is equally important to wheelchair user students in the same way it is important to their counterparts, physical inaccessibility to most buildings and facilities of the university were among the most difficult challenges they face in the university. Supporting this view, Bowman and Marzouk (1990) revealed that factors such as social life in college, adjustment to disability, services available to students with disabilities, teacher-student interactions and peer interactions were all considered extremely important to satisfactory university life. Similarly, Low (1996) explained that achieving academic success, making friends, expressing their sexuality, developing romantic relationships, etc., are the same concerns which occupy students without disabilities.

Participants believed that the relationship with the university is not limited to education but also to preparation for life beyond the classroom. Building confidence and the necessary social skills of students with disabilities is of equal priority to the necessary academic skills that prepare people to meet feature challenges (Collins, 1995). The result of the present study support this claim, as the participants did not consider grade to be the sole predictor of their success and satisfaction in the university.

Generally, earlier studies revealed that there is a direct relationship between school facilities and student satisfaction and student adjustment. The better the facilities and accommodation, the more satisfied the students (Allison, 1994). The result of this study indicated that physical accessibility to most buildings and facilities of the university are difficult to overcome, which inevitably made wheelchair users to feel dissatisfied in university life.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the life experience of wheelchair users in Addis Ababa University, and to generate a theoretical model about their life experiences in a university. Hence, the study identified the core category or phenomenon (whole experience in the university) interacting with five major categories (1) Motivating factors for university education; (2) Knowledge level of university community; (3) Responsibility of the university; (4) Accessibility features of the university; and (5) Personal support systems.

The data obtained describe university life from the view of the participants. The findings of the study revealed that all wheelchair users perceive life in the university as very difficult for it involves interactions with various human and non-human elements. Physical inaccessibility to most buildings and facilities of the university were among the most difficult challenges the wheelchair users face in the university, which they described as barriers to their satisfaction. Hence, wheelchair users did not consider grade to be the sole predictor of their success and satisfaction in the university.

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