The Importance of Self-Advocacy Skills for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education for a Full Inclusion and a Glimpse of Ethiopian Case: A Review of Related Literature

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Abstract

The transition from high schools to higher education institutions can be especially difficult for students with disabilities as the impetus for securing necessary accommodations falls on students themselves rather than on parents or on the institution as it did in high schools. Students with disabilities are still facing issues in both their transition to higher education institutions and their retention to complete a degree or certificate. Educators and researchers suggest that self-advocacy skills would address the issue. A self-advocacy skill is an evidence-based predictor in secondary transition, having an impact on improved post-school outcomes in education and employment. Coming to Ethiopia, over the last few years, higher educational institutions in Ethiopia increased from 11 to 32. Universities and enrollment rate also reached to 100,000 per annum. However, the number of students with disabilities in the universities is still low. Those who joined the universities have experienced challenges of different types ranging from academic to social. Ethiopian institutions do not have any explicit policy for students with disabilities. Similarly, the available provision for students with disabilities, if any, is negligible. For example, in the university where I work in students with physical impairments are facing lack of educational materials, non-inclusive environment (inaccessibility of library, dormitory, toilet rooms, classrooms, roads, and the like) and lack of awareness by the university community. Hence, although making higher institutions to be inclusive for students with disabilities is the responsibility of higher education communities and other stakeholders, students with disabilities are also expected to play a role (by using self-advocacy skills) to get appropriate services and supports to complete their education with better academic and psycho-social achievement that enable them to be competitive in the world of job and social integration, which is the aim of this

review literature.

1. The Lack of Self-Advocacy Skills and Its Consequences

As an increasing number of students with disabilities enroll in Higher Education Institutions, discovering way to best meet these students' needs becomes more pressing. The transition from high schools to higher education institutions can be especially difficult for students with disabilities as the impetus for securing necessary accommodations falls on students themselves rather than on parents or on the institution as it did in high schools. Many higher education institutions have responded to students' needs by implementing program to teach self-advocacy skills. But, few of these programs have established assessment plans to evaluate their effectiveness [1] [2] [3] [4]. Unfortunately, all too often students with disabilities enter higher education institutions lacking understanding of how their disability affects their learning [5] [6] [7] [8]. As a result, these students are not able to effectively articulate the services and supports needed to meet the academic challenges in higher education institutions. Furthermore, students may never learn how to advocate for themselves when advocacy is done for them by others [9]. In addition to this, as [10] reported that teachers also indicated that, while more pressure was placed on academic achievement and assessments, there was less time to develop functional skills such as self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities that can help them advocate for their rights to receive better access to services and supports in schooling institutions.

Hence, students with disabilities are still facing issues in both their transition to higher education institutions and their retention to complete a degree or certificate [1]. Supporting this idea, [11] affirmed that for students with disabilities in higher institutions, communicating rights and requesting appropriate accommodations have been found as areas of weakness. And, therefore, researchers concluded that students with disabilities should be urged to recognize and advocate for their needs and wants in higher education institutions [12]. It is the fact that, students with disabilities face challenges from within (e.g. low self esteem, low self-efficacy, anxiety and stress and the like), as well as from the higher education institution settings they join (e.g. lack of facilities, resources and inaccessible environment). Students with disabilities oftentimes perceive themselves as unprepared for the increased rigor of higher education. This can lead to anxiety and difficulties with academic expectations which can all lead to decreased

retention rates [13] [14] and they suggested that self-advocacy skills would address the issue. Again they stated that self-advocacy includes having a concept of purpose, thorough goal setting, plan development, being able to articulate personal learning needs, and persistence despite challenges. These concepts are crucial for students with disabilities if they are to succeed in higher education institutions [15]. Self-advocacy skills need to be explicitly taught to students, preferably at a young age. Too often, students with disabilities are supported using a dependency model in elementary and high school and don't develop the skills to advocate for their own learning needs [5].

2. Educators Recommendation on Augmenting Self-Advocacy Skills of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Indeed, therefore, educators for example [1] stated that, special education researchers continue to examine the self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities that can advance our understanding of how best to meet the self-advocacy skills needs of students as they transition to higher education institutions that can serve as predictors of improved outcomes for higher education students with disabilities. Supporting this idea [16] clearly stated that among other factors, the attitude and self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities may be two of the most important factors in determining their success or failure in higher education or work related environment. They further suggested that, students with disabilities need to be prepared to work collaboratively with all interested parties and coordinators, to enable them to have an equal opportunity to participate in an institution's programs and activities.

In line with this, it is better to see those empirical evidences that show how much self-advocacy skills are important to students with disabilities in higher education institutions to better maximize their education as put in below.

3. The Importance of Self-Advocacy Skills for a Full Inclusion in Higher Education

[17] correlational research in the field of special education has identified self-advocacy skills as an evidence-based predictor in secondary transition, having an impact on improved post-school outcomes in education and employment. [18] in USA in their study to evaluate the efficacy of using a computer-mediated instructional strategy (the Self-Advocacy skills) to teach secondary students, identified as having an intellectual disability found out that the students learned a self-advocacy strategy and were able to demonstrate use of the strategy across settings. Furthermore, [19] and [20] in their research has found out that students with better self-advocacy skills to shape their own chosen outcomes have an easy employment after graduation. In addition to this, [21] they concluded in their study those students who were aware of and used self advocacy skills reported higher secondary graduation rates and higher education graduation rates. [22] in his study came out with an elaborated explanation to the case at hand. He clearly pointed out those factors known to support the likelihood of graduating from

higher education institutions for students with disabilities. These are; Active use of support services on campus (e.g. writing center, counseling center, student advisement, etc.); Forming strong relationships/mentorship with either a professional in the students office for disabilities or a faculty member on campus; Having family support throughout the entire academic experience; Being academically and socially involved on campus, especially in the case of social integration; Personal qualities within the student including self-awareness, perseverance, focus, and interpersonal skills; and Being able to self-advocate to obtain accommodations or other needs on campus.

4. A Glimpse of Ethiopian Case

THE EXPANSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ETHIOPIA: Coming to Ethiopia, over the last few years, higher educational institutions in Ethiopia increased from 11 to 32 Universities and enrollment rate also reached to 100,000 per annum. However, the number of students with disabilities in the universities is still low. Those who joined the universities have experienced challenges of different type ranging from academic to social. To be more specific, physical barriers, absence of assistive technologies and devices, rigid curricular issues, absence of diversity management strategies, limitations of services provisions and unequal opportunities are expected to be challenges students with disabilities experience in higher institutions of Ethiopia [23].

THE CHALLENGE OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ETHIOPIA: There are findings that support the above fact. For example, [24] in his study found out that Ethiopian institutions do not have any explicit policy for students with disabilities. Similarly, the available provision for students with disabilities, if any, is negligible. The prevalence of students with disabilities also remains extremely low in public institutions and almost non-existent in private institutions. [25] in her study in Ethiopia found out that Ethiopian College students have negative attitude towards student with visible disabilities. Furthermore, [26] in his study of three experienced Universities (Addis Ababa University, Haramaya University and Adama Science and Technology University) Ethiopia found out that the following challenges of students with disabilities: lack of knowledge about disabilities, instructors and students misconceptions, negative attitudes, and insufficiency of effective learning materials.

As noted in Putnam (2003) as cited in [23] although access of persons with disabilities to higher education is slowly gaining momentum from time to time and from place to place, equality with regard to access has remained unattainable in most countries of the world including Ethiopia. For example, [23] in their studies found out though there are visible and encouraging trends in higher education institutions regarding provision of special support services to students with disabilities; the existing policies and guidelines of the universities of Ethiopia are not effectively communicated disseminated to students with disabilities; Students with disabilities in higher education experience serious challenges asso-

ciated with lack of awareness and negative attitudes among university communities including instructors, the leadership, supportive staff and the peers; students with disabilities are suffering in their education to learn well; higher education instructors do little or no modifications to accommodate students with disabilities in their instructional activities; and physical and attitudinal barriers have strong negative impact on students' learning and achievement in higher education institutions and finally the researchers recommended that the situation is urgent and requires attention of the leadership. Besides, not only in higher education institutions students with disabilities are facing various challenges but also in the world of employment too [27].

Specifically speaking, to narrate the case the area where I am working in, studies conducted in the University of Gondar in Maraki Campus by [28] and Atse Tewodros Campus by [29] on challenges of students with physical impairments found out the students are facing lack of educational materials, non inclusive environment (inaccessibility of library, dormitory, toilet rooms, classrooms, roads, and the like) and lack of awareness by the university community. This fact seems to be working fact for other higher education institutions of Ethiopia too, as evidenced by studies for example, see [25] [26] and [23].

LACK OF STUDIES ON SELF-ADVOCACY SKILLS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN ETHIOPIA: However, although we mentioned the above and there may be some others that I did not mention, studies that focus on students with disabilities in higher education are very much limited in the country. Even, we may not have several studies that focus on quality education for all students in higher education in general. Supporting this idea, [30] for his PhD degree fulfillment studied quality education in higher education institutions in Ethiopia and found out among the 92 articles published in the Ethiopian Journal of Education over the 2000-2009 periods, only 15 were related to higher education topics, all other than quality assurance. Similarly, only 2 out of the 21 articles published in the Journal of Education for Development over a period of three years (2006-2008) focus on higher education themes, yet, none of them had relation to quality assurance. Also, out of the 38 articles published in the Ethiopian Journal of Higher Education (2004-2007), only 3 of them dealt with aspects of quality in higher education. Some of the articles published on aspects of quality in higher education had no focus on quality assurance practices related to student learning. Finally, he concluded that there is a research gap in the topic of quality and quality assurance in the context of the Ethiopian higher education. Besides, there seems no study that focus on self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities in higher education institutions of Ethiopia that makes the present study worth of undertaking.

ETHIOPIA'S FUTURE GOAL TO HAVE AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY: Nevertheless, Ethiopia in the future is aspiring and is determined to have an inclusive society in all its growth and development spheres. This we can understand from the National Plan of Action (2012-2021) of [31] that reads as follows:

The National Plan of Action is based on a vision of a fully inclusive Ethiopian

society, where children, youth and adults with disabilities, regardless of gender or kind of disability, as well as their parents and families, enjoy the same rights to participate in the same civil, political, economic, social, and cultural spheres and to access the same medical, educational, social services, training, work and leisure opportunities enjoyed by other citizens. In such an inclusive society, people with disabilities are accepted, their abilities are valued, their diversity and independence are recognized, their human rights are protected, and they participate actively in the life and development of their communities and the nation (*Ministry of Labor and Social Affair*, *p.IV.*)

5. Conclusion/Implication

Finally, though making higher institutions to be inclusive for students with disabilities is the responsibility of higher education communities and other stakeholders, students with disabilities are also expected to play a role (by using self-advocacy skills) to get appropriate services and supports to complete their education with better academic and psycho-social achievement that enable them to be competitive in the world of job and social integration. Supporting this idea, for example, [32] clearly stated that in higher education institution settings, it is the responsibility of all students to advocate for themselves and their won specific needs. However, oftentimes students with disabilities have difficulties in this regards or they may try to have the skills after the students have already come up against many potential obstacles such as difficulty interacting with peers, instructors and administrators who may not be aware of the students' needs [32].

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