

PERCEPTION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES VIS-A-VIS SOCIAL INCLUSION: AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH

Farah Hashim

Research Scholar, Human Resources, Department of Business Administration, Faculty of
Management Studies and Research, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh,
hashim.farah92@gmail.com

Prof. Feza Tabassum Azmi

Professor, Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Management Studies and
Research, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, ftazmi@gmail.com

Abstract: Disability and the rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs) have been a growing concern, especially during the last few decades. Due to the social significance this matter holds, lately researches on the issue of disability and inclusion of persons with disabilities have increased. However, few researches have encompassed the viewpoint of the PWDs, especially in the Indian context. This research is an attempt to understand the perception of PWDs regarding their inclusion and equality in the workplaces and ultimately in the society as a whole. The study is based on an action research model that involves observation and post action taking interview as the data collection method. The findings will reveal the impact of inclusive work environments on the perception of persons with disabilities. The study will make three important contributions to the Disability and Inclusion literature: it will provide a base for formulating inclusive environments at smaller level, it will lay out a map to understand the requirements of PWDs from the society, it will also reflect on the perception of students with disabilities vis-à-vis social inclusion, inviting more researches on the topic.

Index Terms- Students with disability, Persons with Disability, Social Inclusion

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The existence of disability significantly impacts the day-to-day lives and social encounters of people with disabilities (PWDs), leading to a complex interplay of challenges that extend to their socio-economic well-being and emotional and psychological vulnerability. On a practical level, individuals with disabilities often face barriers in physical access, transportation, and communication, limiting their participation in various aspects of daily life (WHO, 2011). Socially, stigma and discrimination can result in exclusion from community activities and opportunities, contributing to a sense of isolation and emotional distress (Link & Phelan, 2001). These challenges extend to the economic sphere, with PWDs experiencing higher rates of unemployment and lower income levels, exacerbating their vulnerability (Banks & Polack, 2014). The cumulative impact of these factors can lead to heightened emotional and psychological stress among PWDs (Bogart &

Lund, 2017). Addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by PWDs requires comprehensive interventions that prioritize accessibility, inclusivity, and the promotion of mental well-being.

Persons with disabilities comprise between one-fifth to one-sixth of the total world population and are a significantly large minority group. In India, according to the planning commission's report 2008, 5% of the country's population are persons with disabilities (Government of India, Planning Commission, Vision 2020, 15 July 2008). Similar to the other minority groups, persons with disabilities also contribute to fostering diversity and inclusiveness for any business organizations and helps companies represent themselves better as an inclusive workplace. Yet, 74% of persons with physical disabilities and 94% of persons with mental retardation are unemployed (International Disability Rights Monitor, 'Regional Report of Asia', 2005, as Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information, November 2007).

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the researches concerning the societal attitude towards persons with disabilities. Many researches exist that have studied the prevailing attitude and the status of social integration of the PWDs. Numerous attempts are being made recently on the part of govt., non-governmental organizations and even private bodies to place PWDs in mainstream society and to make them socially integrated, thus, a new perspective has emerged, which looks at disability as a human rights issue.

But, to implement the mainstreaming, deinstitutionalization and normalization of PWDs and disability as a whole, it is a prerequisite that the non-disabled environment is welcoming and ready to absorb the persons with disabilities. Majority of researches in the area focus on including the PWDs in the mainstream society and attitude of others towards them and not on their equal integration at all platforms (Zhu et al., 2019). It is crucial to understand the requirements of including the persons with disabilities in work environments and in the society as a whole, this has also become a rehabilitation goal making organizations inclusive (Hagner et al., 2015)

The negative attitude of non-disabled people especially the significant others or the peer group, creates milieu where the living conditions in general and the self-image of the person with disability in particular are formed by the reactions of the environment. Theorists like Becker (1963), Scheff (1984) and Goffman (1963), have spoken about such theory of aberrant behaviour where the atypical attitude or response from an environment stimulus may affect the self-image of a person. Goffman (1963), have also discussed about stigma; a devaluation in the characteristics that creates negative reactions of others and also brings contradiction between the real and virtual identity of the one stigmatised. Keeping in mind these societal traits, disability is often seen as socially created due to the attitude of the non-disabled persons. Considering the gravity of societal attitude and its consequences on the receiver, disability awareness and inclusion can be deemed crucial for the betterment of lifestyle of PWDs, work environments and service providers and society as a whole.

This article examines the perception of social inclusion among PWDs by involving them in an inclusive event and analysing their response by means of action research approach.

1.1 Literature on inclusion of PWDs

The researchers of disability, inclusion and rehabilitation have insisted on the significance of the contextual and the environmental factors in the development of effective and efficacious psychosocial and work practices. Social inclusion of persons with disabilities in the current Indian environment is also involves various social, cultural, and economic factors. Despite legislative measures such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), challenges persist in achieving full social inclusion for people with disabilities in India.

The social inclusion of persons with disabilities is influenced by societal perceptions. According to the social model of disability, proposed by scholars like Oliver (1990), disability is not an inherent trait of an individual but rather a result of societal barriers and attitudes. This model emphasizes the need to address social and environmental factors to achieve true inclusion. Negative attitudes and stereotypes towards disability can lead to exclusion and discrimination (Mitra, 2006). In India, cultural beliefs and myths surrounding disability may contribute to stigmatization, hindering the social integration of individuals with disabilities (Mohan et al., 2015). Additionally, economic disparities and limited accessibility to education and employment opportunities further impede the social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

On the positive side, there has been a growing recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities in India, and various organizations and initiatives are working towards fostering inclusivity. The National Action Plan for Skill Training of Persons with Disabilities and the Accessible India Campaign are examples of efforts to enhance educational and infrastructural accessibility (Government of India, 2015; Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015).

The perception of social inclusion by persons with disabilities in India is diverse and context-dependent. While some individuals may experience acceptance and support, others may face social barriers and prejudice. Research by Khasnabis et al. (2015) emphasizes the need for comprehensive strategies that address both physical and attitudinal barriers to enhance social inclusion for persons with disabilities in India.

The perception of people with disabilities plays a crucial role in determining their social inclusion within a community. Negative attitudes and stereotypes can create barriers, limiting the full participation of individuals with disabilities in various aspects of society (Link & Phelan, 2001). These perceptions can contribute to social exclusion by fostering discrimination, stigmatization, and the denial of equal opportunities (Shakespeare, 2006). On the other hand, positive perceptions and attitudes toward disability are fundamental for fostering social inclusion. When society recognizes and values the unique contributions of individuals with disabilities, it paves the way for a more inclusive environment (United Nations, 2006). Efforts to enhance social inclusion should therefore not only focus on structural accessibility but also address attitudinal barriers to create a more inclusive and supportive society for people with disabilities.

One crucial aspect of the perception of people with disabilities is the physical environment. The accessibility of public spaces, transportation, and buildings significantly impacts the experiences of individuals with disabilities (Imrie, 1996). Inaccessible environments can contribute to feelings of exclusion and frustration, limiting their ability to participate fully in social activities (Shakespeare, 2006).

The literature underscores the importance of considering the subjective experiences of individuals with disabilities. For example, studies have explored the impact of societal attitudes on the self-esteem and well-being of persons with disabilities (Morris, 1991). Some studies emphasize the importance of social support networks and the role of inclusive practices in fostering a sense of belonging (Haller, Dorries, & Rahn, 2006). Positive experiences of social inclusion, such as meaningful employment and participation in community activities, contribute to a more positive perception of the non-disabled environment. On the other hand negative perceptions and stigmatization can lead to social isolation and hinder the development of a positive self-identity.

Literature also identifies the impact of inclusion on the perception of people with disabilities, majorly portraying positive results. When individuals with disabilities are included in various aspects of life, including education and workplaces, it often leads to an improvement in self-esteem and confidence. This positive change is attributed to the recognition of their capabilities and the affirmation of their worth (Lindsay, 2018). Inclusion promotes a sense of belonging and community. When individuals with disabilities are actively involved in various social and professional settings, they feel a greater connection to the broader community, leading to positive changes in their perception of societal acceptance (Shogren et al., 2018).

In education environment as well, inclusion has played a pivotal role, research in this area provides insights into how students with disabilities perceive themselves within educational settings, the challenges they face, and the factors that contribute to or hinder their sense of inclusion. The perception of students with disabilities is also influenced by various factors, including their interactions with peers, educators, and the overall school environment. Some students may develop a positive self-identity when they feel included and supported, while others may experience a negative self-concept due to stigmatization and exclusion (Lindsay, 2018).

This study is an attempt to examine the perception of students with disabilities regarding their inclusion in events and creation of inclusive environments. Unlike the studies being conducted to understand the attitude of significant others towards the PWDs, this study focuses on the attitude that the PWDs have towards working as the mainstream member of an inclusive environment. The thought behind the endeavours for this research is to apprehend how does the collaborative working in an inclusive environment and the sense of acceptance by the non-disabled peers impact the perception of the persons with disabilities. The study also strives to find out the barriers or reluctance in the perception of PWDs in communicating and working with the non-disabled peer group.

The findings of this research reveal the significance of creating more inclusive work environments for the person with disabilities and identifying them as a potential human resource. The findings

of the study will also help in creating more effective inclusive environments for the persons with disabilities. With the proper understanding of the requirements and expectations of the PWDs from their peers in the work environment more efficacious policies can be made in the workplaces. Such researches encourage promotion of inclusivity which is a dire need to provide the right of equality to the PWDs. Also future researchers can find a direction based on such researches for more extensive studies in this area.

Research Gaps, Problems and Research Objectives

There have been umpteen researches measuring the attitude of non-disabled people particularly employees towards working in inclusive environments with disabled peers. Studies have also explored the attitude of employers towards hiring of persons with disabilities and creating more inclusive atmosphere at work. Societal attitudes have also gained importance in previous studies and have been researched upon. But very few studies have been done particularly in Indian context that measure the relationship between the inclusion of the persons with disabilities and their perception of social inclusion when working as the mainstream part of an inclusive environment. There is a need to explore the perception of PWDs vis a vis their social inclusion, and how does their participation in an inclusive event changes this perception.

From the above research gaps following research problems were derived:

- What is the perception of students with disabilities regarding social inclusion?
- How does communication with disability sensitized peer group changes the perception of PWDs regarding social inclusion?

The major objective of this study is, ***‘to highlight the perception of students with disabilities vis-a-vis social inclusion.’*** In the light of this objective these sub-objectives were identified:

- To investigate the perception of students with disabilities regarding social inclusion by involving them in an inclusive event.
- To apprehend the reluctance, barriers and challenges that students with disabilities face in social inclusion by pre and post action taking discussions.
- To reflect the perception prevailing among the PWDs regarding the concept of disability amidst non-disabled people.

Methodology

The focus of this research has been on obtaining results that are expected to differ from previous studies and gaining a more practical viewpoint on the subject. The study is constructed with an action research technique and follows a qualitative pattern. It is based on a descriptive research design. It differs from other types of applied research in that it places a clear emphasis on the action to be performed and the desired outcome. With the complexities of disability and inclusion research, as well as the sensitivity of such themes, it becomes challenging for the researcher to get the true picture. Regardless of what they feel, respondents frequently give answers that the researcher wants to hear or that which are perfect from a social standpoint. The goal of the action

research approach is to reduce bias (Edward, 1953) by acting within a mutually acceptable ethical framework, it helps in addressing both the practical challenges and the goals of social science research (Rapoport, 1970).

Phenomenological approach is used for data collection under action research as, when a researcher wants to describe an event or activity to elicit a detailed personal account of a phenomenon's lived experience, the phenomenological study is an appropriate qualitative method (Patton, 2015; Manen, 1990; Manen, 2016). The sampling technique used for the study is purposive in the beginning and eventually moving onto snowball sampling. Qualitative samples are purposive, that is, selected by virtue of their capacity to provide richly-textured information, relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995).

Since the study is based on action research model a focus group of 12 students was taken up for the research. In qualitative research, samples are often smaller to allow the depth of analysis required for this type of investigation (Sandelowski, 1996). A homogenous group of male students were identified with similar educational qualification (graduation), similar type disability, who were suitable for the research and were approached to participate in the activity for the study. The researcher was able to correspond with visually impaired students enrolled in courses of graduation and above. The major obstacle before the researcher was to invite the students with disabilities and attempting to gain their interest for participation and sparing time for the duration of the event.

Data Collection Approach

An action plan was prepared, with the idea of involving the students with disabilities in a major event of a leading public University. It was the first of its kind initiative, which included setting up a water bottle selling stall managed by a group of disabled students with a supporting team of non-disabled volunteers in an annual university event. The event was a three day affair with around 35 other stalls set up by other students and had a footfall of approximately 2500 per day. The participant students were divided into three groups comprising of four students each, involving one set for each day of the event for comparison and cross examination of the data collected. The volunteer non-disabled students were kept constant for all three days.

The data collection process included three following steps which are further explained in exhibit 1 (See exhibit 1)

- i) Pre-action taking discussion: A short discussion with the participating students with disabilities as to why they were or weren't motivated to participate in the event. The participants were made comfortable and were encouraged to discuss on their participation in similar events. They were told that what they say is important, and were helped to comprehend the idea behind the stall and the awareness purpose it was supposed to serve by means of distribution of awareness pamphlets and informatory bookmarks along with the water bottles (Greenbaum, 1998)
- ii) Observation/Field Notes: The researcher wrote reflections on the study as a whole, impressions about what was said that day, ideas for future investigations, and

preliminary thoughts about the themes emerging from the data at the end of each day of interaction. These field notes were produced to aid in the analysis so that the investigators could conceptually return to the setting (Sari & Bogdan, 1992).

- iii) Post action taking discussion: To understand what changes were there in the pre-action taking and post-action taking point of views of SWDs after being involved and included in the event.

The participants were first acquainted with the proximity of their stall to make them comfortable and to bring autonomy in their operation. The data was collected over the period of three days and from three homogenous participant groups, on the basis of observation and field note taking by the researcher and discussion with the participants who were the visually impaired students in this case.

Process of action research

Agreeing with Huang (2000), researchers' active participation in practice is critical for achieving research goals comparable to those of this study, and close observation is only accomplished via action, and hence genuine understanding can also only be gained through action. Action research method is operationalized as a cyclical process where Thornhill et al. (2000) proposed that this cyclical procedure be expanded into an action research spiral, in which the cycle is recursive and has no end point, but may be restarted. As a result, the findings of this study are not derived from a single activity, but rather from three steps of activities (as mentioned in exhibit 1) with homogenous but different sets of participants.

This study's action plan included a three-day execution period and was operationalized using an alternating flow chart and an adoption of Thornhill et al.'s (2000) action research spiral. The Exhibit 2 (see Exhibit 2) given in the study, symbolizes the adoption of Thornhill's et al. (2000) action research spiral and how it has been utilized in this study. According to Thornhill et al. (2000), action research is viewed as a cyclical process with typically five phases in each spiral viz.

1. *Diagnosing*
2. *Action Planning*
3. *Action Taking*
4. *Evaluating*
5. *Specifying Learning*

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The action research spiral of this study (See exhibit 2) begins with a focus group discussion with the participant students with disabilities to comprehend their level of perception and eagerness to participate in such events to compare with the results after participation. The spiral continues to the first step which is the day 1 with the first set of participants following the process of action research and ultimately taking notes of observation and learning from the same. The second and third spirals are taken forth similarly with second and third sets of students, eventually deriving a

learning of the results of participation in the events on the perception of students with disabilities. Furthermore, the spiral was concluded with the post action taking focus group discussion with Students with disability after day three of the event.

The data was cross examined analyzed based on the commonly occurring notion among them that were frequent in the field notes from all three sets of participants and were also confirmed in the post action taking interview. The majorly occurring ideas in the data collection in all three stages are summarized in the form of a table for better comprehension (See Table 1). The data was analyzed based on thematic interpretation, as suggested by Attride-Stirling (2001). Thematic network application is the way of organizing the gathered data to extract meaningful results from it (Muposhi,2015; Muposhi, Dhurup & Surujlal,2015).

Thematic studies strive to discover the prominent themes in a text at various levels, whereas thematic networks aim to make collecting and depicting these themes easier. Thematic network analysis systematized the summarization of major ideas from the gathered text and furthermore the extraction of:

- i) Basic Themes/Local Themes (Lowest-order premises evident in the text that is closest to the notes and responses)
- ii) Organizing Themes (Categories of basic themes grouped together to summarize more abstract principles and identifying the codes that help in identifying condensed meaningful units)
- iii) Global Themes (Super-ordinate themes encapsulating the principal metaphors in the text as a whole).

A table was prepared to specify the ideas extracted from the actions undertaken in the study and from the thematic analysis of the same (see Table 2). Table 2 showcases the themes that were identified from the major ideas that came forth after analysis of the data collected. It was further summarized in the form of a model (see Exhibit 3) for better comprehension of the identified themes. The model encapsulates and propounds how the organizing themes are derived from the local themes and ultimately recognizing the global theme from the activities undertaken.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion in this study is organized around the themes that emerged from the previous literature. Numerous studies have looked into the impact of involvement in inclusion programs on the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Waldron and McLeskey (1998), in their study have indicated that in comparison to their counterparts who received resource room services, students with learning disabilities who were trained in the inclusion program demonstrated much larger increases in reading ability. Similarly, this research yielded results that showed positive impact on the response of the participant students' with disabilities supporting the idea that contact and interactions have shown to influence positive attitude (Amsel & Fichten, 1988). It was seen that the hesitance to communicate among SWDs started to vanish after the first few visitors, when a positive and encouraging atmosphere was created.

Researches have shown that friendly, personable, and cooperative contacts with a person who is disabled in a scenario that emphasizes the individual's similarity and normalcy, contribute to a more favorable attitude toward them (Weinberg, 1978). The findings of this study unites with this idea as it was witnessed that visitors of the event were more willing to buy water bottles from the stall of SWDs rather than other 12 stalls that were also selling the same. The footfall included the professors and the students of the university who also came to interact with the SWDs, trying to fathom their challenges and struggles in day to day life. After the three day event the action research spiral terminates with the post-action taking discussion with the students to apprehend their perception of social inclusion after participation.

The responses from the three day event were cross examined to substantiate the observation and support behavioral responses of each set of students and gain concrete results. Furthermore, they were organized based on the major ideas that were commonly and frequently occurring in all three sets of students varying over the period of three days to make sure they corroborate and are repeated and were further assimilated into themes. The notions were grouped together based on a shared concept, and local themes were developed to encapsulate and summarizes the essence of all the significant reoccurring ideas. These local themes were then encapsulated and organized into organizing themes, which are also supported by literature, as discussed in the literature review section. These organizational themes eventually lead to the global theme of identifying the results of inclusion on PWDs.

The primary themes found in the data sources are represented in the framework of this research. Each organizational theme is handled separately, with supporting excerpts drawn from participant answers. In addition, the interpreted data is compared to previous researches

Theme 1 : Better Communication

The thematic network integrated from the focus group discussions and the observation of the students received as an outcome of this action research, states clearly the positivity that emerged among the students with disabilities after their participation in the event congruent with previous study with a sample of high school students (Peck et al., 1990). Peck et al (1990) have also suggested in their study that integration experiences for students with and without disabilities can have a variety of beneficial effects, depending on the situation and the individual.

Being an integral part of a major university event, realizing the ability to manage the stall on their own and the welcoming and warm attitude of the peer group and the visitors brought forth their participative instincts. Themes like improvements in communication after first few visitors were apparent. Students with disability appeared to be more open to communicate and share their personal experiences and challenges with the visitors. It was observed that the participants were willing to interact and engage the visitors in conversations, as well as share the awareness pamphlets and bookmarks.

Studies have also shown that inclusive environments lead to more positive attitudes towards each other leading to better interaction (Anthony, 1972; Donaldson, 1980; Marston & Leslie, 1983),

which can only be achieved in a shared environment that nurtures both people with and without disabilities (Anthony, 1972; Donaldson, 1980; Marston & Leslie, 1983). In this research as well the students with disabilities who were earlier doubtful of whether they will be able to talk to the visitors of the event as confidently as a participant should later said, “it is not that difficult to communicate with non-disabled people, if they have positive attitude”. The participants were not as interested in sharing their experiences in the first half of the event but later they started striking conversations. They also added that “It is good to see people are willing to learn about our challenges” and it was evident in the latter half of each day that participants were more interested in engaging into conversations than the first half of the day.

Theme 2: Self-actualization

The importance of competitive employment and other meaningful activities for anyone's well-being and self-actualization, whether disabled or not, is indisputable (Dutta et al., 2008). In this research as well, self-actualization emerged as an important notion and various subthemes identified in the data collected, led to it. Disability self-efficacy and self-actualization revolves around the notion that one can handle one's disability's tasks in order to attain desired outcomes (Amtmann et al., 2012). Disability self-actualization influences the types of goals a person sets, the actions they take, how long they persist, and consequently whether or not they succeed in achieving those goals (Amtmann et.al., 2012). This research and its findings denoted how inclusion plays an important role and helps in improving the self-actualization among people with disabilities. Various notions when compared in the pre-action taking and post action taking discussion and also were apparent in the field notes taken by the researcher indicated better self-confidence and better self-perception.

It was seen that the participant students with disabilities added as a response in post action-taking discussion that they were happy being a part of a major event and felt complacent after participation. Their participation provided them with self-actualization and gave them a feeling of being an equal part of the society. Quoting one of the participant, “We felt much encouraged when the volunteers said we can do it on our own and won't require their help”, this showed that the inclusion at an equal level made them realise their competencies and appreciate them better.

Social Identification Theory, which asserts that people strive for a positive self-concept, which in turn improves their well-being, is an often cited theory in ethnic identity research (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The boost in self-actualization was cross-examined in the set of activities, for instance in the pre-action taking discussion the participants were quoted saying, “I don't want others to laugh at me”, “We can't do it, we haven't done anything like this before”, denoting doubtfulness of competence. Whereas, after few hours into the activity, and seeing the positive attitude of the visitors the participant students started to show more positive signs such as, smiling and engaging in conversations, they acted more energetically and greeted people visiting. In the post-action taking discussion the participants mentioned they were proud of their abilities when being praised for recognizing the currency notes and giving the right change every time.

Theme 3: Improved participation spirit

The research highlighted that earlier, when invited for participation, majority of students were hesitant, only 2 out of 12 students showed interest in participation. They expressed concerns about how they will reach the location, and how will they go about in the proximity of the event etc. Scholars in the field of disability studies also contend that the negative features of disability are mostly socially produced, owing to societal stigma and a lack of accommodations (Olkin, 2001) due to which persons with disabilities often are uncertain in their participation.

As a result of participation in the event in an equal capacity with the non-disabled peers, the students with disabilities showed improved participation spirit. Not only were they willing to stay for the whole event, they were suggesting ideas for similar future activities that can be organized for them to participate in. One of the ideas that was generated from the data collected was, 'If places and events are consciously made inclusive, then there are equal opportunities for all'

Theme 4: Change in perception regarding societal attitude

A very interesting idea was generated from the observation and discussions with the students that underlines the concept that the visitors focused on highlighting the capabilities of the students with disabilities they showed empathy and encouragement rather than sympathizing with them. This negates the expression of sympathy that has been confirmed in various studies conducted in different countries (Weir, 1981; McConkey & McCormack, 1983). The SWDs also appreciated this idea and had a feeling of self-actualization and being capable, rather than being looked at with pity and sorrow.

As MacMillan, Gresham, and Fomess (1996) have claimed that simply encounter with students with disabilities does not lead to more positive attitudes about and acceptance of people with disabilities. They found that the nature and quality of contacts had an impact on views toward disabled students. In this research as well it was seen that the nature of encounter was an important factor, as the students with disabilities were participating in a capacity that highlighted their non-dependence and abilities, therefore, the non-disabled peers also retained a positive impression.

Theme 5: Sense of belongingness and equality

Participation of students with disabilities, or the persons with disabilities in inclusive events and programs will help obliterate the deterrence in their minds regarding the attitude of their peer group towards them. It has come to discernment that sensitizing about the issue of disability is as significant as creating inclusive environments, for the non-disabled people form a significant part of the environment that PWDs bloom in therefore, aware peer group may be able to focus better on the abilities of the PWDs and assist them realize those abilities. As per previous researches the lack of awareness about disability results into negative attitude among individuals (Myers, Ager, Kerr, & Myles, 1998). In this research also it was witnessed that a more sensitized population when came across the SWDs was able to boost their morale, made them feel an equal part of the environment or the event creating a positive impact on their perception of social inclusion.

Supportive interactions with non-disabled classmates and other visitors, including teachers, resulted in a sense of belonging. The participant students who were hesitant in the beginning, later

said they didn't feel like they were any different from the other people. One of the students also said, "We felt proud of being an equal part of a major event, which we generally aren't, it felt like we can perform better in future situations as well". Goodwin & Watkinson (2000) have also discussed about this sense of belongingness that emerges from equal participation and when SWDs are encouraged by peer group.

The participant students with disabilities recognized that there is a visible change in the attitude of the non-disabled people and the society as a whole. The visitors as well as the organizers of the event were welcoming and did not treat them as uncommon or with abnormal behavior, this enhanced the feeling of belongingness among SWDs. It was evident that participation in inclusive event gives hope for future and symbolizes the availability of equal opportunities and inclusive education and workplaces for PWDs.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Disability has more or less always been a taboo in the society, this presumption should be contradicted by spreading awareness and speaking up about disabilities without any hesitation or interdiction. It is substantial to plummet the prevailing negative attitude towards PWDs and for that, disability should be cultivated about, starting at school level. Involvement of disabilities as mainstream part in every platform is significant for their growth and to improve their confidence. There is a vast treasure of talent hidden in potential PWDs, be it student or an employee, there is a need to identify them as competent human resources. The feeling of sympathy may not be enough, instead may have adverse effect on the morale of PWDs, they are confident and self-sufficient, all they need is a sense of acceptance and equal opportunities with provisions to assist them defy their disability.

Implications of the Study

This study has manifold implications.

- i) **Academic Implications:** this study lays down the grounds for future researches based on the persons with disabilities. It invites new ideas and theories that encircle the attitude as well as requirements of the persons with disabilities, instead of their non-disabled peer groups. There have been a number of quantitative researches conducted earlier on disability and inclusion, but this approach is comparatively new and underutilized. It will encourage more researches applying the methodology of action research, which ultimately leads to a more practical response towards the cause.

With the growing attention being given to this area of research, this study also throws light on the other aspect of it, that is 'how effective are the inclusive environments for the PWDs?', this comes up as a whole new avenue of research. This research also brings forth the idea, how the future potential employee generation of PWDs studying in a central university look at their prospective future before and after participations in inclusive events.

ii) Managerial Implications: this research has a significant implication for the practitioners especially managers, and administration of institutions who nowadays are striving to make more inclusive environment. This research highlights how inclusion and acceptance as a mainstream part of the society positively affects the morale and perception of the persons with disabilities regarding the non-disabled environment. The research also lays down the expectations of the PWDs from their peer group and the work environment. The students enrolled in courses in a central university are the potential workforce for future, the managers can make use of the findings of this study to comprehend the fact that PWDs may be able to perform better if given a positive environment and sense of inclusion and equal opportunities.

As past researches have indicated domination of pity and sympathy in the attitudes of employers towards persons with disabilities instead of recognition of their capacity and productivity (Wilgosh and Skaret, 1987), the managers in particular can utilise a potential workforce that has been neglected for so long, if they understand that it may be the environment that is disabling the PWDs and not the lack of potential.

iii) Social Implications: the policy makers play an important role in assisting the PWDs in getting equal opportunities particularly in India, where 2.13% of the country's population are persons with disabilities (The Economic Times, 2005). Government has been focusing on the right of PWDs for a long time now, PWD Act was passed in 1995 and yet the condition hasn't improved greatly. By means of this research the policy makers can also use the findings for further introduction of small policies in favour of PWDs.

Previous researches advised educational institutions to understate the label of disability and adopt a more non-categorical approach towards the students with disability (Rizzo and Vispoel, 1992). These implications have been highlighted in this research as well, with both the disabled and non-disabled participants of this research indicating an affirmative views on equal opportunities for all. Instead of deflecting focus towards creating a separate special education schools or work environment for persons with disabilities, they should be provided with opportunities to work in the same environment with provisions to assist their respective disability. The policy makers should also keep a check on the implementations of the policies after their formulation.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This research has certain limitations which can be the ground for future researches on similar topics:

- This research follows the action research approach for the study and has taken a sample of 12 students which cannot be generalized. For future researches a more extensive sample size can be taken and action research can be combined with a quantitative approach.

- The research has geographical limitations as it was conducted in a single educational institution based in north India. Future researches can have a more vast geographical exploration covering more institutes.
- The research only had students with disabilities as participants, similar research can be conducted on a younger or older persons with disabilities or with a more varied population to examine the impact of inclusion on them.
- Due to the social significance of the research the reactions of the visitors who were the stimuli for the action research may be prejudiced for social recognition. For future researches more precautionary measures may be taken to avoid such bias.

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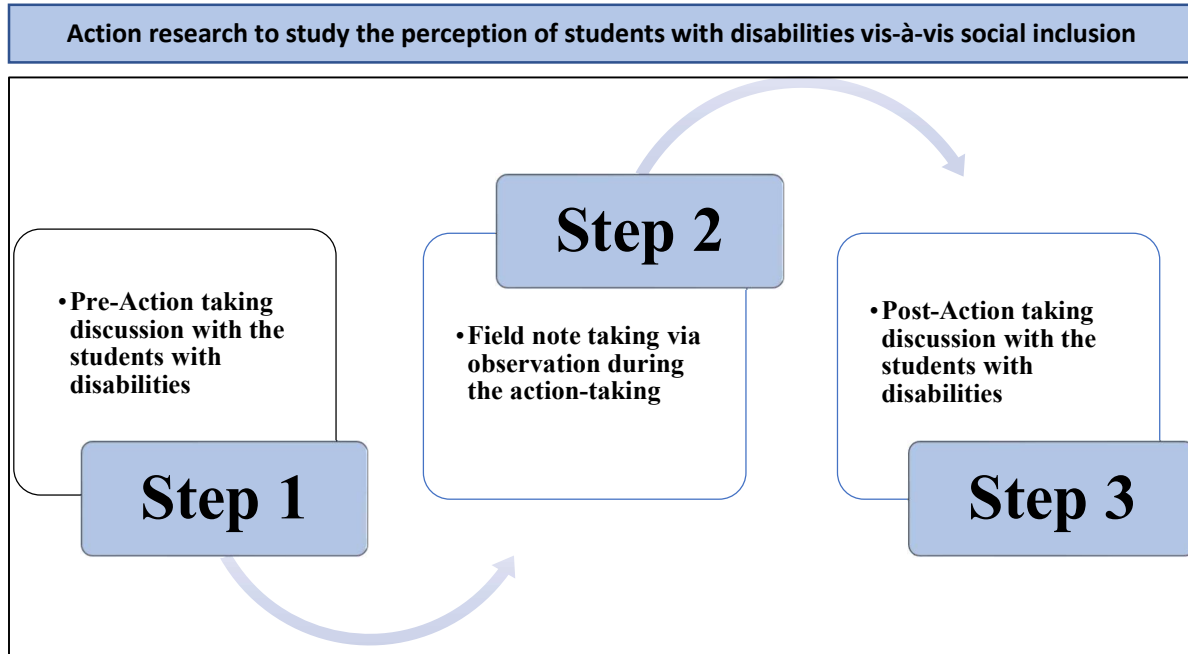
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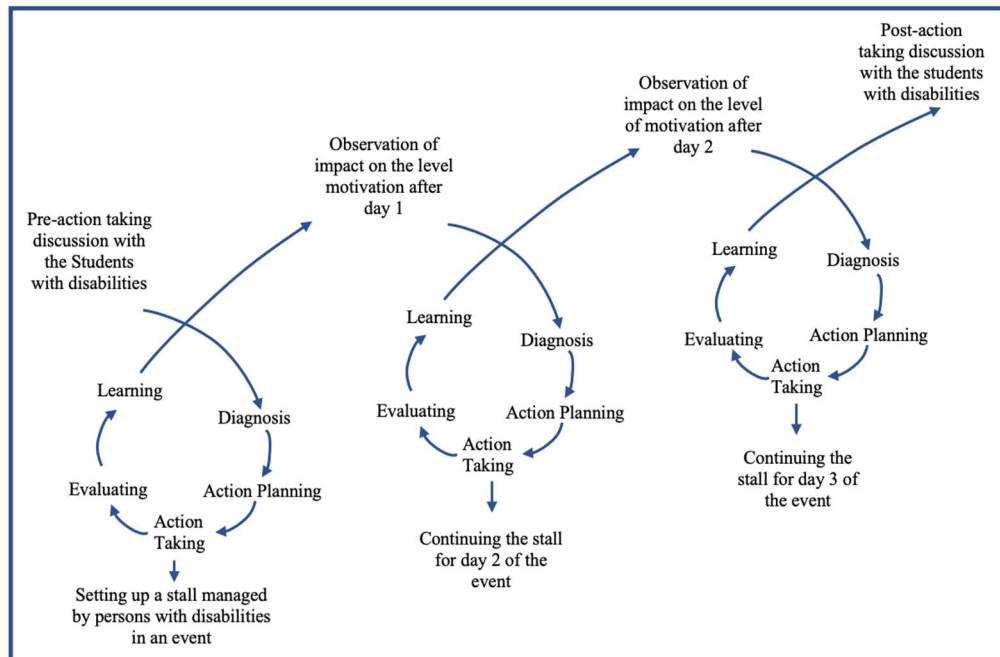
List of Exhibits and Tables:

Exhibit 1. Flow chart of the data collection process



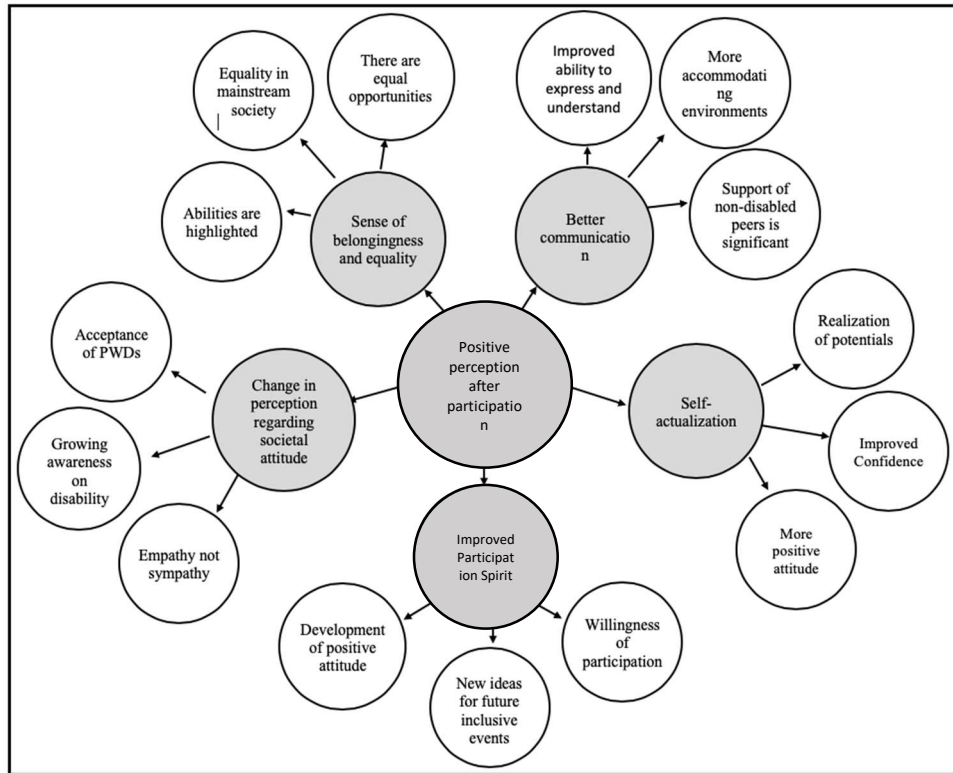
Source: Prepared by researcher

Exhibit 2. Action Research Spiral- to understand the perception of students with disabilities vis-à-vis social inclusion



Source: Researchers adoption of Thornhill’s et al. (2000) action research spiral

Exhibit 3: Model of themes analyzed and identified



Source: Prepared by researcher

Table 1: Summary of major occurring ideas from the pre and post action taking discussion and observation

Major Ideas from pre-action taking discussion	Major Ideas from observation during the activity	Major Ideas from post-action taking discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of interest in participating • Only 2 out of the 12 participant students were interested and excited to be a part of the event • The interested participants said, “I will learn something new” and “I will get some new experience so it will be interesting to participate” • Participants were skeptical about why they are being invited to such an event, 4 of them denied at first, 6 were ready to participate but very apprehensively • Said, “I don’t want others to laugh at me” • Skeptical regarding reaching the location and easy accessibility of the event proximity • Said, “We can’t do it, we haven’t done anything like this before”, denoting doubtful of competence • Said, “We will not be able to talk to the visitors as confidently as we should being participants of the event” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaction of the non-disabled peer and visitors was positive and encouraging • The participants were not as interested in sharing their experiences in the first half of the event • Easily managed the stalls without any assistance from the volunteers • 2 out of the three sets of participant students were not as willing to stay for the whole • The interest among the visitors to know further about daily experiences of PWDs stimulated better communication • After a few visitors portrayal of improved confidence could be seen • Students with disability started initiating communication after a while which they were hesitating earlier • Complacency when praised by visitors for flawlessly identifying the currency notes given as payments for water bottles (being visually impaired) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better motivation to participate in future events • Said, “it is not that difficult to communicate with non-disabled people, if they have positive attitude” • Said, “It is good to see people are willing to learn about our challenges” • Said, “We felt much encouraged when the volunteers said we can do it on our own and won’t require their help” • Said, “It didn’t feel like we are any different” • Said, “It would be good to participate in more such events where we can express ourselves” • Said, “We felt proud of being an equal part of a major event, which we generally aren’t, it felt like we can perform better in future situations as well” • Said, “The kind of praise we received for recognizing the currency notes, made us feel we have other abilities” • Suggested few more such events where they can

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doubtful about how visitors will react • Assumed nobody would want to learn about their experiences and challenges • Said, “We don’t want sympathy for being visually impaired” • Said, “What if visitors will just look at us and leave, we won’t even know” • Said, “these events aren’t for us, they are for people who are lucky to not be different from others” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved ability to express and understand • Encouragement of non-disabled peers was significant • Suggesting ideas for more future events and few disability-focused activities to the organizers of the event. • Laughing and engaging in conversations • Visitors were more inclined towards their stall rather than any other. • Some people only stopped to encourage the participants and know more about their challenges 	<p>exhibit their disability as an ability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Said, “We were more encouraged than sympathized” • Said, “We were not expecting a better response than other stalls” • More willing to share experiences after the event and create awareness about their challenges for the administration • Said, “If places and events are consciously made inclusive, then there are equal opportunities for all” • A sense of pride for the exceptional abilities • Belongingness
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Table 2: Thematic analysis of the responses of students with disabilities received from the actions undertaken

Major ideas derived from collected data	Basic Themes	Organizing themes	Global theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hesitation of communicating with the visitors melted away after the first few. • Visitors of the stall were polite and motivating • People were willing to learn more about the challenges facing PWDs. • Encouragement and support of volunteers was stimulating • There was openness to communication and interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved ability to express and understand • Positive interactions lead to more accommodating environment • Support of non-disabled peers is significant 	<p>Better communication</p>	<p>Positive perception after participation in inclusive event</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was easy and manageable without any external support, unlike what was thought • It boosted confidence and invigorated for future goals and ambitions as well • Did not feel embarrassed of the disability instead felt proud of being an equal part of a major event • Recognizing the capabilities within 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realization of potentials that are socially recognizable • More confidence develops • More positive attitude 	<p>Self-actualization</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being an equal part of a big event, symbolized similar success in other endeavors • More positive vibes were present around the stall • A feeling of realization that nothing is difficult if we focus on the abilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willingness of participation • Ideas for future events • Development of positive attitude 	<p>Improved motivation</p>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sports events should also involve the persons with disabilities • Eagerness to participate in similar future events 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People weren't sympathizing rather, they were supportive and encouraging. • Sense of acceptance was witnessed among the volunteers, organizers as well as the visitors • Comparatively more positive response was received by the stall • People are aware and are willing to learn more and work towards inclusion • A sense of responsibility in every individual. • Willingness to conduct disability awareness campaigns among people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance of PWDs • Growing awareness on disability is visible • Empathy not sympathy 	<p>Change in perception regarding societal attitude</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The abilities were highlighted and appreciated rather than the disability • The visitors as well as the volunteers were all friendly and integrating • There are equal opportunities for all in environments that are inclusive and among people who are aware • Capabilities were trusted giving the assurance of equality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking beyond disability towards ability. • Equal part of the mainstream society • Equal opportunities exist 	<p>Sense of belongingness and equality</p>	

Note. PWDs= Persons with Disabilities, Source: Prepared by researcher