Disabled Students at the Palestinian Universities: Birzeit University as a model

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• INTRODUCTION

University life is a crucial stage and almost a convert point in the lives of many people. College years are a period when people grow at the psychological and social levels. University atmosphere shapes the individual identity and contributes to his growth. College life is organised through societies and organizations which connect the student to his society, and gives the chance for students to live in a democratic climate. This environment encourages practicing word freedom, personal opinions' and the freedom of choice, consequently prepares students for the real life in the society. On the other hand, university life is an opportunity for people to make new friendships and social links. The various social, artistic, physical and cultural activities provide students with opportunities to practice their interests and hobbies. As well as increase their self-esteem and encourage them take their responsibilities (Alhabit, 2015).

However, students encounter several challenges during their college life. Some, for example, may live independent life far away from their families' houses. They start making new social relationships, they work seriously hard to achieve the optimal academic level and to overcome the challenges and difficulties which arise in their life. These conditions help their characters to grow and shape their identities (Khalifa, 2017).

• CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The Palestinian University of Birzeit is located on the hills of Birzeit near the city of Ramallah. Based on its official conventions, Birzeit has never refused the admission of students based on physical disability. According to the academic year 2017-2018 statistics, the University has 33 students with visual, hearing and physical impairments. On the contrary, the university supports them in various ways through providing Braille books or wheelchairs for the target groups. In addition, Birzeit provide volunteer students to help the students in need find their ways around, write their lectures or tests through coordination with the cooperative work program at the Deanship of Student Affairs.

The university has established the Institute of Speech and Speech Therapy, allowing students with disabilities to participate in sports activities and scientific competitions. It has also established a laboratory for people with disabilities, equipped with computers, printers and electronic devices suitable for them. (www.birzeit.edu).

Recently, the university has formed a special committee to follow up the issues of students with disabilities. The committee was announced by the university chancellor in the year 2016/2017. The
committee stuff includes specialized people from the departments of architecture, social science, psychology, curriculum and Instruction, college of Pharmacy and Medical Professions, students' affairs and registration office. The committee is in direct connection with the Office of the Vice President for the Academic Affairs, and also with the Resources reinforcement office at the University. The committee keeps providing suggestions and proposals to enhance the learning conditions of the disabled students. For example, the committee has recently submitted a proposal regarding preparing the library resources room with speaking machines to read for the target students.

2.1 Statement of the problem

Although Birzeit University believes in equal opportunities for all students in its regular learning program, it is necessary to examine the conditions of students with disabilities. The university needs to identify and analyze the types of challenges they face in order to analyze these problems to provide the suitable aid to these students, enable them adapt to their university environment. This study will explore how students with disabilities view their academic, social, personal and spatial life at Birzeit University. How do they see their relationship with others and with the community around them? How do people with disabilities face the difficulties they meet at the university? Specifically, the study questions were as follows:

- How do students with disabilities view their academic, social, personal and spatial life at Birzeit University? How do they look at their relationship with others and with the community around them?
- How do students with disabilities face the challenges they meet at Birzeit University?

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITREATURE REVIEW

Disability often negatively affects the lives of people born with it. This reflects in their attitudes and behaviors towards themselves, others (whether relatives or fellow students) who they meet and deal with. As well as, disability decides their attitude towards the environment with its all components (Alsayyid, 2010). Their negative attitude involves lots of problems that need to be studied, analyzed, reduced and treated if necessary. These steps are vital to enable students with disabilities adapt to their university environment, and prepare them academically, vocationally and professionally. Such intervention will help them become active and positive citizens who are consonant with their surrounding (Hadidi, 2003). The following are the most dominant problems disabled students face during university education at the global and local levels:
First: Social Problems

These problems refer to a disorder of making normal connections between students with disabilities, and all those who will have contact with them such as university employees, stakeholders, peers and colleagues of normal students, faculty members, administrators and others. The feeling of unease in relations with the surrounding creates psychological, emotional, behavioural and social problems which reflect in the student's poor adaptation to his environment (Oliver, 2013). The social challenges also include making friends which is one of the urgent needs for the disabled person, whether in the early stages of life or in the following age. In addition to problems related to spending leisure time and fun activities (Wahidi 2012).

Second: Educational Problems

Some of these problems are related to the educational institutions in general including universities. Others are connected with the educational programs for people with disabilities or the attitudes of peers and colleagues, faculty members or administrators at all levels inside the University and so on (Alhibit, 2015).

Third: Financial problems

Disability brings financial burdens upon the student himself, his family and the society where he lives. Having a member of disability may have multi effects which threatens the stability of the family and their ability to continue the journey of life and endure the costs and burdens of living. The financial challenges are clearer in the low-income families, especially when the disabled is unable to work or contribute the family's income or his learning costs (Suhail and Awad, 2005).

Fourth: Service oriented problems

Students with disabilities face several problems with services provided either at the campus or outside. These problems include transportation, lifts, stairs, equipment and tools to be used by students with disabilities, as well as the university laws and regulations. The students' needs vary according to the nature of the disability they face and its degree. Students with a hearing impairment may require a sign language interpreter, visually impaired students need visual aids, Braille materials and special computers to empower their learning, and finally paralysed students need specific preparations in buildings such as the availability of lifts.

One of the studies which examined the problems faced by students with disabilities in universities is the study of Alhabit (2015). The study aimed at identifying the problems of integrating students with visual impairment in the university, from their point of view. The sample of the study consisted of 19 female students with visual disabilities at Al Qaseem University. The study used a questionnaire to
identify the problems of the visually impaired students. Results showed that among the various problems these students face, achievement problems came on the top. These were followed by financial problems, Psychological problems, social problems, and administrative problems, respectively.

The study of Khoja (2006) aimed at identifying the types of the environmental difficulties which obstruct students with visual impairments in the institutions of higher education, providing visual impaired with as much information as possible about their surrounding in order to improve their self-confidence and to reduce their fear while moving around. The study also aimed at enhancing these students’ interactive skills within their social environment. The study was conducted at King Abdulaziz University and consisted of 40 female students aged 19-25, who all have visual impairments. The questionnaire was used to identify types of difficulties these students face. Results revealed that environmental and spatial challenges are on the top, such as the distance between colleges’ buildings, crowded paths, insufficient time allowance between lectures, crashing with different staff piled in the roads and the lack of movement skills, and the lack of vehicles to move from one place to another inside the campus. Other difficulties were: not recognising directions, facing academic difficulties such as difficulty to keep focus during lectures due to long time, difficulties to read textbooks, the official procedures they go through during their study period, the length of the curriculum, lecturers’ low voice in wide classrooms. In addition, these students suffer while using the writing machine with its disturbing noise. They also complain about the unavailability of the printers and the computers. They suffer the process of transcribing tapes and time constrains and the lack of sufficient educational aids.

Regarding the psychological difficulties, the symptoms were tendency to isolation, lack of interaction with others, the sense of inferiority, passive perception of self-image and the difficulty of psychological and social adaption.

The study of Ibrahim (2011) aimed to identify the problems of students with visual impairments in Jordanian universities. The sample consisted of (68) students from different universities in Jordan. The results showed that students with visual impairment the in Jordanian universities face moderate problems. The study results revealed a significant difference in the problems of reading and doing tests attributed to the variable of disability degree. For example, totally blind students face higher challenges in reading and writing tests than those who have relative visual impairments. No statistically significant differences were found that attribute to gender, specialization or educational level variables.

4. METHODOLOGY
The current study followed the qualitative approach. The number of students with disabilities was 33 students of the 2017-2018 academic years, five of them were interviewed in a focus group. Three males, two girls with visual disabilities and one physical disability, aged 18 and 23 years, and their academic specialties are: Psychology, German language, English language and literature, Arabic language. All participants have had disabilities since birth. The Director of the Office of the Disabled at the University and the Coordinator of the Special Committee for the Disabled, were also interviewed for one hour each.

The following is a description of each participant if the study sample, using nicknames:

Huda is a 20 year English language student with visual impairment. She decided on Birzeit University because of the type of services the university offers to the disabled. Her passion for the English language encouraged her to choose it at university. Huda is a member of a family of nine, and has visual disability since birth. She lost her eyesight as a result of a malpractice due to increased oxygen in her prematurity care, as reported.

In her message to the community, Huda emphasized that despite her disability, she is moving forward. She has learned and challenged the difficulties, and still willing to achieve more successes in her life.

Mahmoud: 18-year old from Gaza was born with visual impairment, first-year psychology student, from Gaza, with visual disability. Mahmoud chose to join Birzeit because it is an internationally recognized university. Since he was 13, he studied at the School for the Blind in AlBireh city.

Ghadir: first-year English literature student, a member of a family of six people and visually impaired. Ghadir thinks Birzeit was a successful choice for her because she believes studying increases her chance of better job opportunities, on the one hand. On the other, she mentions Birzeit has a special office for the disabled, which provides people of disability with required services, sets, or aids of several types. Regarding her study field, Ghadir chose English literature in particular because this is her desire and passion since young age and because she enjoys learning English.

Salah: a 23-year old German language student in his fifth year at the university. He reported that he had studied two years at the department of geography at first, then, had to change his study field due to a lack of a system which enables blind people study the geographical maps. Salah decided to study at Birzeit as it is close to where he lives.

Haya: member of a family of three suffers physical disability and studies Arabic language in her third year. She joined Birzeit because she loves the university since childhood and because the university offers scholarships to students with disabilities.

The focused group interview continued for two hours, and the individual interview with Mahmud lasted for an hour. The focused and individual interviews were conducted over two days. All the interviews were
recorded, and then verbally written down, using the interviewee’s own words and dialects. In addition, each interview was transcribed twice for each, to make sure that everything was transcribed accurately.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Results related to the first question:

How do students with disabilities conceive their daily academic, social, personal and spatial life at Birzeit University? How do they analyse their relationship with others and with the community around them?

After conducting in-depth interviews with students of disabilities at Birzeit University, and following the content analysis methodology for the focused group interviews, the study answered the first question with two key contents: The first is related the self-perception as disabled student, the other is about how others at Birzeit university perceive them through the daily interactions as students.

5.1.1 Theme one: self-perception as disabled student

People with disabilities interpret their daily life at the university as similar to other students’ lives. They perceive their routines and interactions with others around them such as teachers, employees and students, as the same course of life for normal people, with feeling a difference. This perception helps them build a positive perception about themselves. The positive self-image push these people to continue their life, face the challenges and burdens the society place on them. The disability here does not represent the total and comprehensive entity of the people with disabilities. These students don’t look at themselves through their disabilities, and they refuse to be identified through their abilities. This is what the subjects referred to through the interviews.

This is what a visual impaired German language student Salah confirmed. "I hope all my colleagues and friends here treat me like a normal person. I want them to try to change their view to me in general. They may treat me like this because they help me move between places. Yet, if you come to my house, my surrounding you will notice that people in my social circle treat me very normally .they don’t even remember I am blind”. He also said “it doesn’t mean to be blind to keep doing nothing. On the contrary, I can do everything, I don’t feel different, and no one in my circles makes me feel so. I want this perception about me to reach to all students, professors, everyone. We want everybody to feel we are same to them. We are capable to do what they can do; even we can do missions they can’t do. You may feel I’m exaggerating, but I am talking at least about myself”.

Throughout these words, Salah communicates a message to his colleagues that he hopes to be treated as other normal people. He wants people to see him not his disability. He wants people to be judged to what is able to do not what he lacks. Salah is also challenging the pity look in the eye of people “we are similar to them”, “we can also work- as people of disability, not only me as Salah”. The united
identity of the disabled appears clearly through using the plural pronoun “we”. At the same time, Salah refers to the sighted people as an opposing party, using the pronoun “them”, which indicates also a way of protecting self through seeking united identity with the group of visually disabled.

Ghadeer, the English literature student says she is treated like all other students when she needs to meet her professors at the university. If she has any questions, she goes to the lecturer’s office during the office hours and wait like other students “like other colleagues, I go in the office hours, asks the lecturer and he answers. I don’t underestimate my abilities by asking him to come to me. To the contrary, sometimes I wait for the professors among many others in a crowded office, but if the professor is kind he asks me to proceed and says: you ..Come in. They don’t want to let me wait long”

Mahmoud, a first year psychology student describes the interaction between him and other students within the learning groups as positive interaction. He thinks he is free to express himself and share his views freely in the discussion groups, skipping his disability an impeding factor. This positive self-perception reflects a totally different image from the society’s typical passivestereotypes about the social interaction of the disabled people “it is always nice participation, I always engage in the groups, I express my opinions freely and often I am the spokesperson in the group. The group members often tend to adapt my opinions because when I speak I give persuasive argument and evidences which confirm my point of view”.

It is obvious that Mahmoud holds a very positive perception of himself. He also considers himself equal to the others, he understands his disability, and that he is able, as a result of this understanding, to overcome the obstacles he faces in the society. What’s also important is his understanding that every human being has some sides of weakness or deficiency. This philosophy helps Mahmoud face and overcome the obstacles in his life journey. "I am satisfied with myself, I consider myself a very normal human being who is different from anyone else. It easier to cope with your problem when it is clear like mine. It is clear that my problem is lack of ability to see; however, most people have problems that are not diagnosed and not plain. Every person has a deficiency of some kind; there is no perfect human being”.

He also speaks about his achievements in life as the achievements of any person in his society. “My achievements are like the achievements of any other student who works to succeed, I feel proud and happy for what I achieve.”

Huda, a visually impaired student who studies English language, describes her achievements in life (such as joining the university) as an average achievement that is similar to what all other succeed to do. She adds that like others, success motivates her to continue working hard and makes her more
satisfied with herself “I feel that everything I do is normal. What I achieve is a requirement to continue life. I mean I don’t consider I’ve done super thing when I succeed. I do things and work hard for myself. When I succeed I feel more satisfied about myself”

Concerning her awareness about her rights and duties, says Huda who suffers a physical disability: "sure I consider myself as all others. I have rights and must do my duties." This awareness of her rights and duties helps Huda to claim her rights. She believes that she has not lost these rights because of the existence of the disability, but enjoys these rights as other members of society.

Huda also talks about the treatment of her teachers to her as equal as others, and mentions the positive impact of this equality on building her self-esteem. Same treatment to her makes her feel she is equal to her colleagues"they give me the sense that they understand my case, they refuse to treat me as if I am different from other students. This boosts my self-esteem and encourages me to participate more confidently”.

Salah expresses his satisfaction with the way “some” educators treat him like other students. He says: "professors vary in their treatment. Some don’t discriminate, they treat me as other normal students and I love this. Others, I feel pity in their voice”. In fact, there are educators who treat disabled students as helpless.

He also expresses his independence his self-dependency in the lectures and does all the tasks by himself using his laptop (provided by the university). "look! I have done all my work on my laptop! The single thing I need others help in is writing down the test’s answers. It is a trifle! It is very normal. When someone is arm broken, they bring some to write for him”. The positive identity is very clear throughout his words and he shows complete ability and readiness to commit to duties and complete his tasks during his college life without the help of anyone. Even when he needs assistance of others in order to write the exam, he does not feel that as moment of weakness as a result of loss of vision. He feels very normal about it; it doesn’t make him feel disabled or weak. He resembles the case to someone with broken hand who wants help to write.As a result, this perception helps him to achieve success in his life and his educational journey, boosts a strong will and a positive identity.

Haya, a student with physical impairment, says about using the lifts: "Normal, like others. If I am going to the top floors I use it. If the floor is low, I don’t“

Salah demands the society to treat people of disability with what they really deserve based on their abilities and potentials. He requires the society to deal with the person of disability as a person not as a handicap. "We must be treated on the basis of our competence and our ability, not on the basis that we need pity and sympathy, we are not people you need to feel sorry about. No, treat us normally as any
other person, not in a special way and not with sympathy. Finally we are normal people. That is what I want you and everybody to understand. I very much like to change the society look to us.”

Based on the mentioned above, people with disabilities have same feelings and reactions like other people in the society. Therefore, they demand to be treated like other person various levels: within the university environment, when they need teachers during office hours, when they participate and work in groups in the class. They also need to be same as others in terms of what they achieve or succeed in, in their rights and duties, in the way educators treat them, in doing their tasks and on depending on themselves.

5.1.2 Theme two: Relationship with the other and society

The idea in this term is resisting the society’s stereo type about the people with disabilities, which implies they are incapable and helpless. Disabled subjects of this study want to demonstrate to their community that they are able to provide help and can help and can be active in their study or work filed.

Mahmoud expresses that one of the goals he set for life is to help others "I work to help people, as well as myself”. He clarifies that he offers help in areas limited to his knowledge. "I mean, I am trying to help anyone who asks me in things I master”, “I mean, I don’t like to boast that I know and offer my help in things I don’t even understand”, “I offer help within limits of my knowledge”. Mentioning a situation when he helped a disabled fellow to use the speaker on his mobile device, he says: “this young man got a mobile phone a year ago or less. I tried to help him how to use the device and the speaker I mean I tried to teach him because I’ve been using similar one before”, “not only this, I mean I can help fellows in the same field of study, I help in things I really have knowledge in. I make my best efforts to have an active role in my society”.

Salah spoke about his relationship to the staff in the college. “My relationship with them is limited to helping other students. I don’t ask for help for myself. I talk to them about my colleagues’ issues, not mine”. Considering the difficulties and obstacles that the community throws in the way of the disabled people, Huda suggests how to face these challenges, maintaining self-confidence and keeping to the life’s goal. "Before I joined the University of Birzeit, nobody encouraged me to apply for this university. They said it is a demanding college with lots of hard work, but I loved to be here since it is close to my home and I mean we have to challenge life difficulties. If people tell you something, it is unnecessary to believe everything, if it is hard, let it be hard. This university meant lots to me and have to make efforts, work hard and get a job”. Here the negative image the society holds towards visual disabilities manifests. The society warned her she won’t succeed and won’t make it, discouraged her and warned her about the
challenge of college study. The sighted society only offered her frustration to assassinate one of her basic rights: to study at Birzeit. However, Huda didn’t let these discouraging comments to stop her from continuing her university study or abandoning her dream. She has a vision and understanding of the elements that make success in the university study. She understands that she can make through dedication, continuous efforts and hard work. This in turn is also a challenge to achieve success. Despite talking about herself, she speaks using the plural pronouns “we need to work hard, we have to face challenges” in a strong indication to shared identity of the visually impaired people.

The subjects here present a different picture from the stereotype that the society holds for people with disabilities who always need help, and in return, unable to offer it to others.

5.2 Results related to the second question

How do students with disabilities face the difficulties they may suffer at Birzeit University?

Achievement for people with disabilities is represented in having the determination and the ‘will’ which motivate them to follow their aims and achieve success. After all, achievement is summarised in exceeding the difficulties and obstacles the society place on them. This is what the interviewees stated throughout the interviews. Mahmoud expressed his techniques in overcoming the life challenges: "I love to encourage myself no matter how hard what I face, I don’t even think about giving up, for example, I pursue my aim until I achieve it, I want to trace the goals I draw in my mind, I expect to have a certain difficulty at one stage in life". The speaker is clarifying his relation to himself and to the society. He is a kind of person who refuses to surrender to the pressures. He has a strong will to make him trace his goal despite all the difficulties and challenges. He also believes that the university is the entry into the future and considers facing the obstacles and difficulties as an achievement for him as a visually impaired student "definitely, I have long way to walk, Iam still in my first year, I haven’t achieved much, I did not have any academic or administrative problems at the university". He explains “as for the visually disabled, registration for the university, for the courses is facilitated by a group of friend of the disabled at the university”. He also describes his determination to achieve his goals as ‘unnatural’ one. He says: "I have unusual desire to reach any goal that I wish in life. The most serious problem I encountered in the Faculty of Arts that I was supposed to graduate in 4 years’ time not five. We are not able to join any college we wish, because the possibilities and facilities of the university are very limited even here at the college of Arts. I was first registered in the department of history was history, but I did not like the specialization. I changed my field of study into geography, but the university refused and forced me change that also because they say geography study requires visual skills. This was not fair in my opinion because accepting any student in the department implicates that they must provide him with what he needs to continue such as Braille maps”. He continues explaining the record of the challenges based on him by the
educational system “these problems aren’t limited to the university, it was since I was at school, I wasn’t allowed to join the scientific stream, math is basic subject and it is not available in braille form....why? These obstacles prevented me from my scientific rights, I mean when I don’t join the scientific stream, im not allowed to study engineering for example. However, in other parts of the world you can find mathematic scientists who are blind. as long as I am not scientific if I specialize in engineering, although in the world possible The one being a mathematician and he is blind”. Ahmad goes on to say “if I was allowed to join the scientific stream, things would have been different now. Even when we join the literary stream, the Ministry of Education cancels math form our tests. However, I’m sure there is mathematics using Braille somewhere. "

It is apparent here that disability prevented Salah from joining the scientific stream and deprived him from studying the specialty he wants at the university because of the lack of the necessary facilities and equipment. Regarding their participation in the extracurricular activities such as seminars, competitions, contests and elections.

Ghadir said: “I don’t participate, these activities waste my time, even I don’t elect in the student council’s elections”.

Huda adds: "I love to participate in the college activities but I only come two days a week. If the university has more clubs that fit us ... but I don’t hear about something like that".

Salah also mentions “majority of students here are passive, unfortunately they don’t have enough awareness and morals. However, there is still a group who offers help”. It seems that people with disabilities do not participate in the minimal amount of extracurricular activities, either because they aren’t informed about them or because of the limited days scheduled for them. Salah continues: "For example, In the lectures, I sometimes asks for summaries of the material, but students refuse to give me....why don’t they cooperate?"

Ghadir resumes ” it would be great if the university provide us with more Braille books (references) to help in help in preparing researches, not only  the courses’ books”

Salah: Dr. Azim Assaf (visually impaired professor and head of the English department) helps us with Braille devices and hearing aids.

Explaining how he moves out, to and from the university and between the university buildings, says Mahmoud: “when I arrive and leave to Ramallah city, I always find someone who offers help. When I get off the car, I find someone who offers to pick me up (thanks God I can walk). It is great to depend on yourself, but it is also nice to find people around you offering help”
Salah confirms: “People with physical disabilities may face difficulties when moving around, but visual disabilities always find help”.

Ghadir: “I wish there is awareness campaign for ordinary students which raise awareness about dealing with us and tell them there is nothing to fear if they help us”.

It is clear that the physical disability students face greater challenges than those visually impaired and they need bigger support in this term.

Answering the question concerning their residence and the distance between their accommodation and the university, they reported: Salah: in Birzeit with my family.

Mahmoud: My family lives in Gaza. I stay in a hotel here. Ghadir: With my family. Huda: With my family. Haya: with my family. All the subjects stay with their family homes, except Mahmoud who stays in a hotel at AlBireh city and uses the university taxis to arrive to his college. Therefore, the achievement for people of disability is challenging their difficulties and overcoming them.

6. CONCLUSION

People with disabilities believe that their everyday life is same as other normal people. This perception helps them to be positive towards themselves and helps them to survive and overcome the challenges they may face. It was noted that the majority of their speech during the interviews was focused on trying to change the stereotype that the society burdens them with as helpless and in need of assistance. The most important achievement made by the disabled is ‘the desire’ which drives them move forward to achieve their goals.

The study does not reveal any academic, administrative or economic difficulties for these students. Birzeit University awards them full scholarships. The Office of the Disabled facilitates their life with the necessary devices and aids available and helps them register for their courses. In terms of social difficulties, the subjects sometimes encountered difficulties by other students. For example, they sometimes didn’t receive help to photocopy what was written in the lectures or in other occasions, others tried to lead them to the way, but grabbed them uncomfortably. However, these were a few cases. The majority confirmed that their teachers, other students and university staff respect and help them.

Finally the study recommended increasing the financial and learning support for disabled students and raising the awareness about their potentials among Birzeit University students.

REFERENCES


