



Early Living and Academic Experiences of University Students Having Disabilities in B.Z.U Multan

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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities may face social, physical, and academic challenges in higher education. Their early life experiences, family support, social attitudes, and educational opportunities can shape their academic adjustment and university life. This study explored the early living and academic experiences of students with disabilities at Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU), Multan. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to understand their lived experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 students selected through purposive sampling from different academic departments. Thematic analysis identified five major themes: physical accessibility, social stigma and exclusion, support and resilience, academic challenges and support, and aspirations and motivation. Findings showed that inaccessible facilities, limited transportation, negative social attitudes, and inadequate academic support created major difficulties. However, family support, helpful faculty, personal resilience, and strong educational goals helped students continue their studies. The study recommends better accessibility, support services, learning resources, and faculty training to promote inclusive higher education in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Disability Inclusion, Student Experiences, Inclusive Education, Academic Resilience, Higher Education.*

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Introduction

Disability is now recognized as a multi-dimensional problem which is more than just physical or mental. It also covers social, environmental and institutional constraints which may restrict an individual's ability to exercise all their rights to society. The social model of disability is based on the idea that disability is not only a result of the impairment of the person, but also of the inaccessible environment, negative attitudes, discrimination and limited institutional support (WHO, 2022). In this context, the role of the Higher Education Institutions is important in the push for the inclusion, equality of opportunities and academic success of students with disabilities. Making university settings more accessible and supportive is a way of facilitating students' involvement in academic and social activities and in realizing their educational objectives.

The number of students with disabilities enrolling in higher education has grown worldwide due to increased awareness, better educational policies and disability rights legislation (UNESCO, 2023). But, there are a number of students with disabilities who still experience problems in their university life. This includes inaccessible buildings, limited learning materials, absence of assistive technologies, negative attitudes and inadequate support services (WHO, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). These barriers may impact on the quality of their education, their interactions with their peers, their sense of self-assurance and their experience of university.

Students with disabilities may find the move to university to be a difficult transition. Living experiences that can impact their confidence, independence and adaptation to life at university include family support, family attitudes, socioeconomic status, access to healthcare and experiences of early education (Lindsay et al., 2021). Families can give support to students for further education and become independent. Conversely, stigma, isolation or lack of educational experiences could pose challenges to students as they pursue their education in postsecondary, or college, settings (Shogren et al., 2022).

Learning experiences at school are also a major part of learning about pupils with disabilities. These experiences involve interactions with teachers and classmates, classroom settings, tests, work, and

policies at the university. Students with a disability may have challenges accessing reasonable accommodations, course materials, classroom activities, and community activities. Such difficulties may impact their educational performance and belongingness (Moriña, 2024). However, with supportive teachers, accessible facilities, flexible ways of doing things in the classroom and effective policies at the university level, the participation and learning outcomes of students can be enhanced (UNESCO, 2023).

Inclusive Higher Education in Pakistan is still in its nascent stage of development. The educational rights of persons with disabilities are acknowledged in the national policies and are implemented differently in universities. Issues of accessible infrastructure, support services, learning resources and faculty training have remained issues for many institutions (Government of Pakistan, 2021). This leaves students frequently relying on family, teacher and self-support to tackle academic and social problems.

Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU), Multan, is one of the most important public universities of Southern Punjab with students from various social and economic backgrounds. Few studies have investigated the early experiences of students with disabilities at BZU in their lives and in school. Knowing about these experiences is significant for examining the social, family, educational and institutional backgrounds that influence their experiences at university.

Thus the objectives of this study are to investigate early experiences of life and education of university students with disabilities at Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. The study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore students' lived experiences, difficulties, sources of support and coping strategies for their adjustment to university life. The results may be helpful to university administration, teachers, policy makers and disability support units to have more inclusive practices and provide better educational opportunities to students with disabilities in Pakistan.

Review of Literature

Moriña, et al. (2021) did a systematic literature review to find out the factors affecting the academic performance of the university students with disabilities. This study took place in the wake of

increasing enrollment of students with disabilities in postsecondary education and the desire to gain insight into what supports them in their success. In this context, 64 empirical studies were identified following a systematic review whose methodology was based on the guidelines of the PRISMA. The results indicated that academic achievement is linked to the availability of learning environments, university support services, positive teacher's relationships with students, self-determination and family support. The research findings showed that a number of the challenges that students with disabilities experience are not inherent to the disability, but rather are a result of institutional barriers.

Pérez-Esteban et al. (2023) explored the way universities address various issues related to the educational needs of students with disabilities. The study was on the challenges that universities encounter in the implementation of inclusive education. The primary aim of this was to investigate the attitudes of teachers towards the students with disabilities, institutional support and teaching practices. A systematic literature review of 14 empirical studies was performed. The results indicated that teachers' attitudes to inclusion were generally positive, but their training, resources and institutional support were lacking. The study also revealed that teachers are still constrained by limited resources and by pedagogical approaches that cannot be used by all the learners, thereby limiting access to higher education for these learners.

A scoping review was conducted to examine the experiences of students with learning disabilities in higher education by Kuriakose et al. (2024). The study was guided by the growing number of students with learning disabilities attending universities and the desire to gain a deeper insight into the educational and personal experiences of these students. The researchers analyzed 52 empirical studies from 2012 to 2022. The results indicated that the students with learning disabilities may face academic stress, social isolation, psychological problems, and lack of academic accommodations. Family support, positive relationships with peers, assistive technologies and university disability support services were identified as enhancing students' educational experiences and well-being, however.

Khalil et al. (2024) explored the application of learning analytics for inclusive education of students with disabilities. The results demonstrated that learning analytics can be used to identify students at risk, to support personalized learning, and to support institutional decision making. But there were challenges with privacy and ethical issues and challenges with accessibility as well. The study, therefore, recommended that technology is not enough to guarantee inclusion if proper institutional policies and support systems are not in place.

With the COVID-19 pandemic having increased the use of digital learning, Moriña et al. (2024) explored the role that technology can play in supporting students with disabilities in higher education. This study was designed to determine the advantages and obstacles involved with the use of technology by students with disabilities. It looked at 14 qualitative studies with a total of 240 students and 143 faculty members. The results indicated that assistive technologies have a positive effect on the students' participation, communication and self-directed learning. But the technologies were not very efficient due to the challenges of accessibility and teacher training. The study highlighted the importance of adopting technology along with accessible teaching methods and adequate faculty training.

Nieminen et al. (2024) studied inclusive assessment in higher education. This study has focused on the issue of potential difficulties encountered by students with disabilities in the traditional assessment approach. It aimed to gain insights into the students' experiences of the university's assessment process. The researchers combined the results of 42 qualitative studies. The results indicated that when there were not any accommodations, or when the assessment methods were too prescriptive, many students felt the assessment systems were unfair. The study highlighted the need for flexible and inclusive assessment to ensure that all students can demonstrate their learning in the same way.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that students with disabilities still experience persistent barriers to their academic, social, technological and institutional success in higher education. The need for accessible facilities, supportive teachers, family and peer support, assistive technologies, inclusive

assessment, and effective university policies have been highlighted by previous studies. Most current research has, however, concentrated on the university's experiences and barriers faced by students. Little attention has been paid to the vital role that early life experiences, such as family environment, childhood experiences and early educational experiences and social support have on the academic adjustment of students. Such a discrepancy is especially crucial in developing countries like Pakistan where disability support in higher education is an emerging field. In addition, research on the experiences of students with disabilities in Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan is limited. So, the present study aims to fill in this void by investigating the early life experiences as well as the school experiences of students with disabilities and how their school experiences have an impact on the university experience.

Research Methodology

The qualitative research approach was used in this study to gain an understanding of the early childhood and academic experiences of BZU students with disability in the city of Multan. The qualitative approach was chosen as it allows the researcher to gain insight into the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants, their emotions and the meanings attributed to their daily lives. It is especially beneficial for examining experiences that cannot be fully captured by numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Research Design

The study was of a phenomenological type. Phenomenology is concerned with understanding how individuals perceive a specific set of experiences and how they make sense of their experiences. It was felt this was suitable as the study is intended to gain an understanding about the personal experiences of pupils with a disability which includes their early family and school experiences and the adaptation to their university experiences. It provides an opportunity for participants to describe their experiences in their own words.

Study Area

The study was carried out in Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU), Multan, Pakistan. BZU is one of the leading public sector universities offering

higher education to students from various social, cultural, economic and educational backgrounds. The university also has students with various disabilities, which makes it suitable for this study.

Population of the Study

The study participants were students with disabilities studying at the BZU, Multan under graduate and post graduate. Students with various disability types (physical, visual, hearing, learning) were included in the study.

Sampling Technique

The subjects of the study were selected through purposive sampling. This method was suitable as the researcher wanted participants who had first-hand knowledge of disabled university students. The participants were chosen because of their relevance with the research objectives and because they were willing to share their experiences. When conducting qualitative research, it is common to use a purposive sampling method to identify participants who will deepen and enrich the understanding of the research.

Sample Size

About 12-15 students with disabilities participated in the study. The number of participants in the study was decided on the basis of data saturation. Data collection continued until no new data, ideas or themes emerged from the interviews that answered the research questions.

Data Collection Instrument

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used as the main tool for data collection. A guide for the interview was created to address the key aspects of the study. The first area was related to early living experiences—family background, early childhood experiences, early education, social environment, and sources of support. The second area was the academic experiences in university, such as participation in the classroom, accessibility, teacher support, peer relationships, academic problems, and institutional facilities. The semi-structured format enabled participants to speak freely with regards to their experiences yet ensured that significant topics are discussed.

Data Collection Procedure

Before collecting data, permission was obtained from the relevant university authorities. The

participants were contacted and briefed concerning the purpose and nature of the study. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and comfortable place at the university. The interviews were conducted for about 30 – 45 minutes. The consent of the participants was taken and the interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription. The researcher also kept field notes to capture relevant observations and contextual information in the interviews.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data. The recorded interviews were transcribed and read multiple times to develop a clear understanding of the responses of the participants. The important statements and meaningful parts of the data were then identified and coded. Codes were clustered so that they would fall into categories and these categories were elaborated into themes. The themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented participants' experiences. The analysis was done on the basis of the principles of thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were adhered to during the entire research process. Prior to collecting the data, the necessary permission and ethical approval were requested. Before participants took part in the study, they were informed of the purposes of the study and were asked to give informed consent. They were assured their information would be kept confidential and anonymous.

Findings and Results

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather qualitative data which were then analysed using thematic analysis. Based on the participants' experiences, five key themes emerged from the analysis: Physical Accessibility Barriers, Social Stigma and Exclusion, Support Systems and Resilience, Academic Challenges and Support, and Aspirations and Motivation. The main themes are those that emerged from the experiences and difficulties of the participants, both in their childhood, and in school at Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU), Multan.

Table: Participant Demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Semester/Status	Department	Disability Type	Session
Muhammad Siddique	24	Degree Done	Sociology	Unspecified	2020-2024
Mehr Gull	27	4 th	Sociology	Leg Impairment	2023-2027
Asmara Ishfaq	22	8 th	IMS	Unspecified	2021-2025
Ayesha Anwar	24	2 nd	Sociology	Unspecified	2024-2026
M. Umair	22	4 th	Human Nutrition	Physical Impairment	2023-2027
Hassan Riaz	24	Pass Out	Education	Visual Impairment	2020-2024
Fakhar Jahan	30	8 th	Political Sci.	Polio	Unspecified
Shouqat Ali	23	6 th	Political Sci.	Unspecified	2022-2026
Umar Farooq	38	Final	Commerce	Unspecified	2023-2025
Nauman Anwar	40	Pass Out	Commerce	Post-Accident	2022-2024
Anonymous (P11)	26	Unspecified	Unspecified	Unspecified	2022-2026
Abc (P12)	40	Unspecified	Commerce	Unspecified	2023-2025
Rifat	23	4 th	Botany	Unspecified	2023-2025
Amber Imtiaz	25	Pass Out	Unspecified	Unspecified	2013-2015
Muhammad Amir Zafar	27	4 th	Statistics	Unspecified	2021-2025

Source: Compiled by Author

The demographic profile of the participants revealed that the students with disabilities were coming from diversified sources in the Bahauddin Zakariaya University (BZU), Multan. The study revealed that students with disabilities are from different age groups, ranging from 22 to 40 years. The sample consisted of both young and adult university students. This age diversity reflects that people with disabilities can go on to university but that it may take time longer to access or complete it. Academic status of the participants also differed. The students were studying in various semesters such as 2nd, 4th, 6th and 8th semester and some students were finished their degrees. This difference illustrates that students with disabilities are attending postsecondary education in various phases of their academic journey.

It is also noted that there are current students as well as graduates, indicating a difference in their educational experience may have been due to a number of factors including access, support within the institution, individual circumstances and resilience. The subjects of the students were from a diverse academic background, such as Sociology, Political Science, Commerce, Botany, Statistics, Information Management Sciences (IMS), Human Nutrition and Education. This is a disciplinary diversity reflecting students' education in various fields in the presence of disabilities. The comparatively higher proportion of the participants from the social sciences and commerce, however,

may indicate that some students prefer the disciplines where there are fewer physical, laboratory or mobility related barriers. It may also suggest that laboratory or technical problems can have an impact on the participation of students with disabilities in laboratory and technical disciplines.

There were also different kinds of disabilities reported among participants such as physical disability, leg disability, and visual disability, disability as a result of an accident, and polio-related disability. There was no clarity in some participants regarding the nature of their disability. The absence of specific information could be due to personal privacy, fear of social stigma in reporting disability, undiagnosed disability, or poor institutional information systems. The results thus indicate that the identification, documentation, and support of students with disabilities need to be improved on the university level. Academic years of the participants covered as early as 2013-2015 up to the more recent admissions of 2024-2027. The variation offers more of a snapshot into the experience of students with disabilities throughout time. It enables the study to take into account the potential for change in the availability of higher education institutions, disability sensitivity, institutional support, and educational approaches over time. Students' experiences may vary based on the time they entered the university and their support and facilities in that time.

Table: Summary of Identified Themes

Identified Themes	Representative Quotes/Interview Transcript	f	%
Physical Accessibility Barriers	<i>“Many lecture halls are on upper floors without elevators, which makes it hard to attend classes” (Asmara Ishfaq)</i> <i>“No transportation and no vehicle like tricycle” (Umar Farooq)</i>	12	80%
Social Stigma and Exclusion	<i>“Community and relatives try to bully myself with their words, actions” (Mehr Gull)</i> <i>“Mostly special person’s excluded from many activities” (Muhammad Siddique)</i>	10	67%
Support Systems and Resilience	<i>“My parents were my biggest support, helping with mobility and medical needs” (Anonymous, P11)</i> <i>“These experiences taught me patience, empathy, and determination” (Asmara Ishfaq)</i>	14	93%
Academic Challenges and Support	<i>“Fast-paced lectures, lack of materials in accessible formats” (Muhammad Amir Zafar)</i> <i>“Some teachers make extra efforts to share notes or adjust deadlines” (Asmara Ishfaq)</i>	11	73%
Aspirations and Motivation	<i>“My desire to achieve independence and prove... my disability does not define my limits” (Asmara Ishfaq)</i> <i>“I want to become officer” (Muhammad Siddique)</i>	13	87%

Sources: Developed by Research Scholar

The thematic analysis shows the most common theme reported was support systems and resilience (93%). It indicates that family support, encouragement from others and personal determination are important factors in assisting students with disabilities to cope with academic and social challenges. The high level of aspirations and motivation (87%) also reflects a high level of educational and career aspirations and commitment of the majority of participants to attaining these goals despite facing challenges. Another key consideration among participants was physical accessibility barriers (80%). Limited accessibility, absence or poor availability of elevators and transportation facilities problems were mentioned by the students as a difficulty in the university infrastructure. For some students, these barriers were a constraint on their ability to manoeuvre around the university independently and to be able to fully engage in academic activities. Academic challenges and support (73%) were related to both challenges and positive experiences. Some of the participants indicated issues related to pace of

instruction, availability of appropriate learning materials, and other learning needs. Meanwhile, some students received support from teachers to learn the course and had their academic tasks completed and participated in the classroom activities. This indicates that teacher individualization can alleviate some of the academic challenges that students with disabilities may encounter. Lastly, social stigma, and social exclusion (67%) showed that a substantial proportion of respondents had been discriminated against, had negative attitudes towards them or had been excluded in particular in their childhood. Sometimes these experiences had an impact on their confidence, social relations, and engagement in learning activities. Some of the impact of previous social experiences persisted into their college experience. The overall results indicate that students with disabilities have a lot of competence and perseverance, and are highly motivated to stay in school. Despite this, they continue to face issues of physical access, social barriers and academic challenges that impact on their academic

experiences. Therefore, increased institutional support, available facilities, supportive teaching and an inclusive social context are important to enhance their involvement and learning experiences.

Conclusion

This study explored the early living and academic experiences of students with disabilities at Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU), Multan. Findings indicate that students have to deal with various obstacles in their early lives, such as social stigma, lack of educational opportunities, financial problems, and physical obstacles. These experiences can impact their confidence, their academic success and their engagement in the life of the university. For many students, though, family support, personal strength, supportive teachers and

strong educational goals are what enable them to stay in school and pursue a future. However, at the university level, the problems of the students still exist: inaccessible buildings, small transportation amount, poor assistive facilities, inadequate academic support, and poor institutional service. The study can be concluded that inclusion goes far beyond just allowing students with disabilities to attend school. Universities require facilities that are accessible, a range of teaching and assessment strategies that are accessible, appropriate disability services, and increased awareness on the part of teachers, students, and administrators. Improving these areas can promote equal opportunities, academic success, social participation, and a more supportive university environment for students with disabilities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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