

ATTITUDES OF SPEECH – LANGUAGE PATHOLOGY STUDENTS TOWARDS PERSONS WITH DISABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Negative attitudes of health care professionals towards persons with disability are considered to be an invisible barrier towards rehabilitation and integration. In contrast, positive attitudes are a key to successful rehabilitation and integration. The attitudes of the professionals are influenced by education, knowledge about disabilities, years of experience working with individuals with disability, and the level and nature of staff training. The purpose of the study was to measure the attitudes of speech language pathology students towards persons with disability and to measure the favorable change, if any, in the attitude of these students towards persons with disability in the course of professional education. A sample of fifty-nine undergraduate and twenty postgraduate students was investigated using a Scale of Attitude Towards Disabled Persons (SADP). It was found that speech-language pathology students displayed a positive attitude towards persons with disability. The attitudes were formed by the time of entry into the educational programme and did not change significantly according to the academic years.

INTRODUCTION

In most health care environments where speech pathologists work, they are engaged with persons with disabilities. The disabilities may be physical, for example: cleft lip and palate, cerebral palsy; sensory such as hearing and visual impairment; cognitive as in downs syndrome or commonly a complex mixture of disorders.

Professionals are first of all people. As a result, they are exposed to the same social influences as others in society. From the time they are young, they see uncomplimentary images of the persons with disability on television, or read uncomplimentary accounts in books, they hear

unfavorable epithets, such as “retard” or “crippled” and most have little informal, direct social contact with individuals with disability. Negative attitudes towards disabilities and towards persons with disability in general may have an indirect but considerable impact on the therapeutic relationship and the quality of intervention outcomes.

Attitudes are seen as comprised of 3 major components: belief, affect, and behaviour. There have been studies of attitudes exhibited by professional personnel in relation to disability in a number of health care settings such as medicine, dentistry, occupational therapy and physiotherapy.

Bebout and Arthur (1) studied the attitudes of Chinese Americans and non-Chinese Americans towards four speech disorders (dysfluency, cleft palate, speech of the deaf and misarticulation) and found that non-Chinese Americans were more negativistic in their views concerning persons with speech disorders.

Studies on attitudes of health care professionals towards disabilities have been already done in various developed countries and few studies have even emphasised the attitudes of speech language pathologists towards people with disabilities. Donnell and McPherson (2) surveyed the attitudes of speech pathology students in Hong Kong towards persons with disability, using a Scale of Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons (SADP). It was found that speech pathology students, in general, displayed very positive attitudes regarding persons with disability. However, less attention has been paid in this area in the developing countries like India. In rehabilitation fields like speech-language pathology where attitudes are a key to successful rehabilitation and integration, it becomes essential for students from this field to have a positive attitude towards persons with disabilities. This will not only help in building up a good clinician-client relationship and in the successful integration of the client, but also will help them in becoming a successful professional. Hence, the purpose of the present study was to measure the attitudes of speech-language pathology students towards persons with disability and to measure the changes in attitude of these students towards persons with disability in the course of professional education.

METHODOLOGY

Fifty-nine under-graduate students (grouped in to Fresher, Second year, Third year and Interns) and twenty post-graduate students (First year, Second year) from the field of speech language

pathology were included in the study. The students were given “The Scale of Attitude Towards Disabled Persons” (SADP) and asked to give their opinions regarding the statements written in the questionnaire by marking the appropriate response.

Scale of Attitude Towards Disabled Persons (SADP)

The SADP is a 24 statement self-administered Likert type scale. The statements of the SADP are culturally non-specific and framed in simple English language. These represent opinions regarding persons with disability to whom the respondent is required to give a weighted reply. There are six response categories: e.g.

“The disabled should not be provided with free public education.”

- Strongly agree
- Quite agree
- Agree a little
- Disagree a little
- Quite disagree
- Strongly disagree

Out of the 24 statements, 12 are worded so that to strongly agree indicates a favorable attitude to the statement and 12 are worded so that to strongly agree indicates an unfavorable attitude to the statement. Each response category is given a numerical value i.e.

- Strongly agree +3
- Quite agree +2
- Agree a little +1
- Disagree a little -1
- Quite disagree -2
- Strongly disagree -3

The respondents’ scores were calculated individually and the mean and standard deviation for each group were calculated separately.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scores were analysed using one-way Analysis Of Variance. Results are presented in the following tables.

Table 1. Age of respondents

GROUPS	MEAN AGE (yrs)	STANDARD DEVIATION	N
F.Y undergraduates	17.83	0.87	24
S.Y undergraduates	19.91	1.27	17
T.Y undergraduates	20.91	1.10	11
Interns	22.43	1.67	8
F.Y postgraduates	23.41	3.30	8
S.Y postgraduates	24.4	4.22	12

As table 1 shows, the mean age of the groups ranged from 17.83 years to 24.4 years.

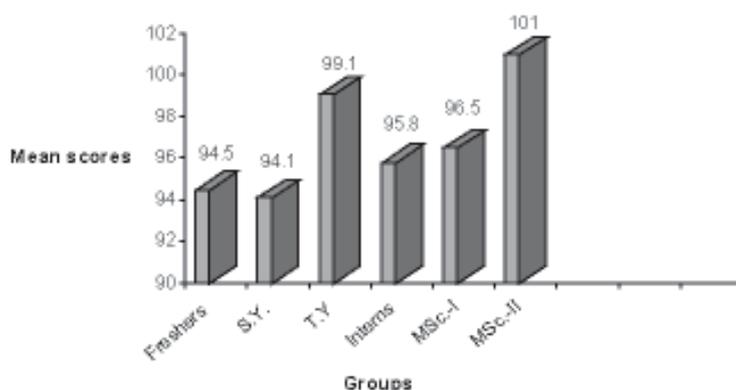
Table 2. Mean SADP score

GROUPS	MEAN SADP SCORES	STANDARD DEVIATION	N
F.Y undergraduates	94.5	13.47	24
S.Y undergraduates	94.1	22.09	17
T.Y undergraduates	99.1	4.06	11
Interns	95.8	15.97	8
F.Y postgraduates	96.5	11.60	8
S.Y postgraduates	101	14.84	12

As shown in Table 2, the mean SADP scores for each year ranged from 94.1 to 101.

Analysis Of Variance showed that there was no significant difference between mean score of each year ($F(6, 72) = 2.25; p = 0.05$).

Fig. 1. Mean SADP scores of each group



The distribution of the mean SADP scores versus the groups is shown in figure 1. The mean SADP scores of Third year Undergraduate group and Second Year Postgraduate group are significantly higher than the other groups.

The factors which could have contributed to the overall positive scores of the speech-language pathology students are:

- The students are exposed to the concept of disability and their social status very early in their school years.
- The science background from which they have come enables them to understand the causative factors behind the disabilities.
- Students with an understanding of, and empathy for, persons with disability are selectively attracted to professional programmes such as speech language pathology.
- Audio-visual and print media may be playing a very important role in creating awareness programmes about the disabilities, which might be influencing students' attitudes towards persons with disabilities.
- Society as a whole also encourages us to help the persons with disabilities, which in turn might be influencing the positive attitudes of students' towards persons with disability.

The reasons for the high scores of the Third Year Undergraduate student and Second year Postgraduate students is limited sample size and the wide range of the responses which have been obtained within the groups.

Scores obtained by speech-language pathology students in the present study were slightly lower than those obtained in the study by Donnell and McPherson (2). However, the students were found to have positive attitude towards persons with disability since the scores obtained were significantly higher than the minimum possible score on the scale i.e. 72. On entry into the professional undergraduate programme, students demonstrated positive attitude towards persons with disability. The attitudes did not change significantly according to the academic years.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitations were, the small sample size, inclusion of only students from one particular institution and the fact that the study was done only on students enrolled in the field of speech-language pathology; professionals from the same field were not included for the study.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE INDICATIONS

The study has implication for students' educational programme. The students entering the professional programme come with a positive attitude which needs to be reinforced by the teaching faculty. However, further research may be required to identify the inputs that may be leading to the positive attitude to ensure that this attitude is maintained so that this area, which is so vital to rehabilitation, is not at some point lost. A similar study can be conducted on professionals from the same field to measure the changes in attitude with respect to professional experience. Similar studies can also be conducted on speech language pathology students from different institutions to see if there is any difference in the attitudes of students, so that emphasis could be given accordingly in this area during the educational programme.

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