

The Lived Experiences of Students and Teachers with Disability in Keller's and Wright's Autobiographical Works

Mahendra Kumar Budhathoki, PhD*

Abstract

*The study explores the lived experiences of students and teachers with disabilities inside schools/colleges while pursuing their studies and working in Hellen Keller's *The Story of My Life* and Mary Herring Wright's *Sounds Like Home: Growing up Black and Deaf in the South*. This study inquires what they have experienced and how they have made meanings from the campus phenomena. This research has utilized the disability studies theory, specially based on Alice Hall and Tobin Siebers, to interpret the selected autobiographical texts, and note-taking technique has been used to collect the required information from the autobiographical texts. The findings of the study are that the school/college infrastructures, practices, the executives' attitudes are unfriendly, hostile and adverse to the students and teachers with disabilities while pursuing studies and working at schools/colleges. They suggest that the executives, administrators and other physically normal teachers and students can create the disabled-friendly physical, academic and social environment at the educational institutions if they slightly modify their attitudes and practices, and eliminate their conscious negligence to the needs of the disabled. The findings of the study can motivate the executives to enable physical and social (attitudes and practices) environment and service delivery, address the needs and demands of the disabled, and manage the required sources/materials and performance assessment system in schools/campuses.*

Key-words: Disability studies, lived experiences, social justice, students/teachers with disabilities

Introduction

This study discuss how the characters (students and teachers) with disabilities describe, feel, judge, remember, perceive and make sense of their experience gained in schools/colleges. Most books related to the theme of disability are written outside of the contexts of the educational institutions like schools, colleges. Schooling and education are rarely depicted in the literary works, and if they are portrayed, they are outside of the schools and colleges. For instance, Jhamak Ghimire recounts her lived experience of education and

* Assistant Professor of English,
Bishwa Bhasha Campus, TU, Exhibition Road, Kathmandu, Nepal
Email: mahendratunp@gmail.com

schooling outside the schools, but not inside the schools, and she learnt to read and write because of siblings and her strong self-determination at home. In fiction, adult students and college teachers with disabilities are seldom portrayed in the contexts of education and schooling inside the colleges and/or universities although some renown persons with disabilities have autobiographical books that talked a little about their education and schooling problems. This study explores the lived experience of characters (students and teachers) with disabilities regarding education only within schools or colleges. For this reason, this study discuss Hellen Keller's *The Story of My Life* and Mary Herring Wright's *Sounds Like Home: Growing up Black and Deaf in the South*.

The study exposes the lived experiences of the students and teacher with disabilities that are represented by Hellen Keller and Mary Herring Wright in their books: it presents their lived experience gained only inside the schools/campuses, but not outside the educational institutions. The research explores the lived experiences of Hellen and Mary as the students and teachers with disabilities. This study has exposed what the experiences undergone by the characters with disability inside the schools and campuses in the autobiographical works. This study has exploited the disability studies theory to interpret the selected autobiographical texts. Note-taking technique has been used to collect the required data from the autobiographical texts. The study explores why the structural phenomena are as they are, why they are disabled-unfriendly in the schools and colleges, and how the campus phenomena are understood by the students and teachers with disabilities in the teaching learning contexts.

Disability Studies

Disability and impairment are two words that are used to people who have lost by birth or accident and/or weak parts of body. Medical personnel also use the 'disability' to the impaired ones. Impairment means having defective mechanism of the body, and disability means the social behavior or attitude for restriction to the impaired people who are excluded from social activity. Hall mentions, "Disability is created through a social process: through the relationship between an individual with impairment and the society in which they live. [...] They are disabled by the lack of provision of ramps and appropriate access facilities" (21). The concept of disability is socially constructed; people with impairment are excluded by the society from different activities. Siebers says, "Disability is not a physical and mental defect but a cultural and minority identity" (4). No one can perform all things, and people with disability can service at least a work in life:

The [disability] field emerged in the 1980s, part of a cluster of politicized identity-based interdisciplinary fields of study that arose from rights-based, social-justice-influenced knowledge building and disseminating initiatives. Such fields theorized as well as actualized greater inclusion and equality in the academy. (Garland-Thomson 916)

Social attitudes, behaviours, policy and structures exclude people with disability from mainstream activities. The disability is not nowadays personal misfortune and medical problem but has been a rights-based issue and inclusion in public places. People with disability are the minority groups in Nepal and they are not addressed appropriately by societies and country. Universities in Nepal also ignore people with disability; they just recruit them because of constitutional and legislative framework obligation. Here is a question that does the university construct the disability-friendly sources for the faculty and students with disability?

People with disability are described from mainly three models, namely, charity and welfare, medical, and social. In charity and welfare model, people with disability are considered as “a symbol of pity, handicapped and unable to function fully, [and] ... need assistance from other people and society” (Ojha 13). “The medical models defines disability as a property of the individual body that requires medical intervention” (Siebers 25). It indicates something lacking in bodies because of accidents, diseases and other impaired health conditions. The social model defines disability as a social attitude and treatment of concerning inclusion and exclusion in social activities. The social model emphasizes on “the material and structural causes of disabled people’s disadvantages. This has led to the introduction of numerous legislative measures and policy initiatives to address the various economic and social deprivations encountered by disabled people across the world” (Barnes 23). It discusses on “everyday experience of disablement” (24) in public places like universities and at homes. Here is the discussion of the social model, but not other two models.

The people with disability do not have access in educational infrastructure such as buildings, classroom, learning materials (books, library, labs, and audio-visuals) and curriculum in majority of educational institutions (CBS 2010/11). Banskota et al. report that people with disability have no easy access to the higher education institutions including Universities (as cited in Ojha 11). There is “the need for inclusive education rather than special education” (27). People with disability experience discriminatory behaviours every day. National Joint Committee on Learning Disability (NJCLD) reported that there should be friendly environments (institutional goals, policy, curriculum, awareness, accommodation, collaboration, and infrastructure, etc.) to students with learning/intellectual disabilities in educational institutions; academic efforts to students with intellectual disabilities of higher education advance the state of universities and societies. Corby, Taggart and Cousins explored the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities who once completed their studies in post-secondary and higher education; analyzed how the education transforms their views to their own lives. Oliver and Barnes analyzed disability studies and the meaningful inclusion for people with disability in works; “disability activism and the academy ... influence on mainstream sociology and social and educational policy nationally and internationally” (547). The exclusion and inclusion debate is not only in the recruitment policy but also in

access of infrastructure built in schools and campuses. Brabazon discusses that universities matter in inclusive environments for people with disabilities, and “the barriers that block the movement through online and offline spaces” and “universities have failed to create structural change to ensure that proportion of staff and students in the institution match the population more generally” (55, 58).

Studies have been conducted in the society that is outside the schools and campuses. This study only included the lived experiences of Keller and Wright as the students and teachers with disabilities inside the schools and campuses. This study focuses on the lived experiences of teachers and students with disabilities inside schools and colleges portrayed in the autobiographical works.

The Lived Experiences of Disabilities in the Hellen Keller’s *The Story of My Life*

Hellen Keller, who was blind and deaf, was taught at her home at the beginning by a teacher Anne Mansfield Sullivan from Perkins Institutions for the Blind in Boston outside the institutions. Hellen Keller was able to recognize and write letters and a few words/phrases with the help of a teacher Anne Mansfield Sullivan outside the educational institutions. Then Keller joined at Parkins Institution for the Blind in Boston where she enjoyed with other blind children, “What joy to talk with other children in my own language! ... [Other children] were so happy and contented that I lost all sense of pain in the pleasure of their companionship” (The Story of My Life, Chapter IX para 4). In Boston, Keller became delighted and got help from friends and teachers. Keller read with braille script and used sign language. As the hearing impaired students have experienced that other general students and teachers do not understand his sign language, Keller experienced almost the same, “Miss Fuller and Miss Sullivan could understand me, but most people would not have understood one word in a hundred” (Chapter XIII para. 6). Keller also read with lip-touch and throat-touch of her teachers:

All teachers of the deaf know what this means, and only they can at all appreciate the peculiar difficulties with which I had no content. In reading my teacher’s lips I was wholly dependent on my fingers: I had to use the sense of touch in catching the vibrations of the throat, the movements of the mouth and the expression of the face; and often this sense was at fault. ... My work was practice, practice, practice. (Chapter XIII para. 7)

Due to vision and hearing impairment, Keller learnt to understand the saying by touching teachers’ lips and through movements; Keller felt difficulty. As the blind students lack reading materials in higher education, Keller also experienced of lacking books on time at Gilman School, “Unfortunately, many of the books I needed had not been embossed in time for me to begin with the classes, and I lacked important apparatus for some of my studies” (Chapter XIX para. 1). As the disabled students experience in the general large classes in the University, Keller was also negatively affected in the large classes, “The classes I was

in were very large, and it was impossible for the teachers to give me special instruction.” She disclosed that she could not write on the blackboard in the class as the general teacher asked at the Gilman School.

As the vision impaired students complain about the helpers who wrote in the examinations for the blind students, Keller also stated that the college administrators did not allow her familiar hand Miss Sullivan into her examination hall, and the stranger could not solve her reading problems:

The college authorities did not allow Miss Sullivan to read the examination papers to me; so Mr. Eugene C. Vining, one of the instructors at the Perkins Institution for the Blind, was employed to copy the papers for me in American braille. Mr. Vining was a stranger to me, and could not communicate with me, except by writing braille. The proctor was also a stranger, and did not attempt to communicate with me in any way. (Chapter XIX para. 12)

Keller said that the typewriter given in the examination was different from her used typewriter; so the typewriter created difficulty to do examination well. It means the college administrators usually focus on maintaining the standard of the examination rather addressing the needs and demands of students with specific disabilities in the examination hall. Keller exposed how the head of the college negatively behaved to her. “The administrative board of Radcliffe did not realize how difficult they were making my examinations, nor did they understand the peculiar difficulties I had to surmount. But if they unintentionally placed obstacles in my way, I have the consolation of knowing that I overcome them all” (Chapter XIX para. Last).

In the name of fair examinations, the executives did not understand the specific needs for an unsighted deaf student Keller. The administrators never understood the specific needs of the disabled students in classrooms, libraries or exam halls. The Keller interprets that the executives followed unconscious disability bias in the school and university, and unintentionally posed obstacles for disabled persons in the school and university.

Keller got admission at Radcliffe College with her strong self-determination to perform better than the general students who can see and write:

The struggle for admission to college was ended. . . . I entered college. . . . I remember my first day at Radcliffe. It was a day full of interest for me. I had looked forward to it for years. A potent force within me, stronger than the persuasion of my friends, stronger even than the pleadings of my heart, had impelled me to try my strength by the standards of those who see and hear. (Chapter XX para. 1-2)

The general persons underrate the disabled persons for the performance, therefore Keller aimed to show strength for better performance than the general students. She knew the possible obstacles in the way. She even had to walk on the passages at the college; “I knew

that in college there were many bypaths where I could touch hands with girls who were thinking, loving and struggling like me” (Chapter XX Para. 2). The passages at the college were not friendly for Keller-likes who could not see and hear. She thought the college was full of joys and wisdom, but she was frustrated within a few days:

Its people, scenery, manners, joys, tragedies should be living, tangible interpreters of the real world. The lecture-halls seemed filled with the spirit of the great and the wise, and I thought the professors were the embodiment of wisdom.

I soon discovered that college was not quite the romantic lyceum I had imagined. Many of the dreams that had delighted my young inexperience became beautifully less and “faded into the light of common day.” Gradually I began to find that there were disadvantages in going to school. (Chapter XX Para. 3 -4)

Keller did not receive what she had thought and expected from the college; she did not find “the spirit of the great and the wise” and professors embodied with “wisdom” in the college. It means that the professors and other students were unfriendly to the disabled students like Keller. Though the professors and other general students are educated, they unconsciously ignore and discriminate the disabled students and teachers in the University. The structures of the campuses and the negative attitudes of the executives, general teachers and students discourage the disabled students to attend the classes.

As the deaf students do not regularly attend the classes because they are unable to communicate either with general teachers or students in the campuses, Keller also did not find colleagues and teachers to discuss the lessons in the college; “in college there is no time to commune with one’s thoughts. One goes to college to learn, it seems, not to think” (Chapter XX para. 6). That frustrated Keller attending the college; Keller mentioned how she had overcome the peculiar conditions in the college:

In the classroom I am of course practically alone. The professor is as remote as if he were speaking through a telephone. The lectures are spelled into my hand as rapidly as possible, and much of the individuality of the lecturer is lost to me in the effort to keep the race. The words rush through my hand like hounds in pursuit of a hare which they often miss. But in this respect I do not think I am much worse off than the girls who take notes. If the mind is occupied with the mechanical process of hearing and putting words on paper at pell-mell speed, I should not think one could pay much attention to the subject under consideration or the manner in which it is presented. I cannot make notes during the lectures, because my hands are busy listening. Usually I jot down what I can remember of them when I get home. (Chapter XX para. 7)

Keller’s difficulties in the classroom match with the difficulties of the students with blindness and hearing impairment in the schools/campuses. The blind students are with the general

students in the classes and the teachers write some points on the boards but the unsighted students cannot see the letters. The blind students attempted to take notes in braille script but could not run with the mouth of the teachers. They attempt to carefully listen lectures but they are disturbed by the sound of the general students; they made notes what they remembered the lectures at home. The Keller felt alone in the classrooms because no one had to commune with him; she just saw the words rarely written on the boards. Therefore she took supports from her friends to make notes of lectures.

As the students with vision impairment complain of lacks of the books and other reading materials for blind students, Keller also mentioned the same, “Very few of the books required in the various courses are printed for the blind, and I am obliged to have them spelled into my hand” (Chapter XX para. 10). The students and teachers with disabilities must generally spend more time on study rather than the normal persons; in general for the blind and deaf students, it takes more time to read and write. But the executives assume that they have provided extra exam times without any reasonable reasons and the teachers ignore their peculiar conditions in the classrooms.

Keller was assisted by few teachers, “Mr. William Wade and Mr. E. E. Allen, Principal of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind, get for me many of the books I need in raised print. Their thoughtfulness has been more of a help and encouragement to me than they can ever know” (para. 12). There was no use of general library for Keller as for the blind students in the school/University. The disabled students must take help from the teachers.

More contents and books are prescribed for the students in the Bachelor/Master level courses; the final exam papers are set from all the contents and books. For the exam preparations, it took much more times for Keller than other general students, and for the knowledge and information that general students can get through their eyes and ears, Keller must depend on the raised print books; some topics may remain to be revised. That creates problems for the disabled students in the examination halls. They need more times to write in the examinations, too. Keller could not remember about Huss and his work in the examination hall, and she was frustrated, “then the proctor informed [her] that the time [was] up.” She went home with a feeling of disgust to the professors who had rights to ask questions without considering the class lectures at the colleges. She described the possible reaction addressing the readers, “a feeling of intense disgust you kick the mass of rubbish into a corner and go home, your head full of revolutionary schemes to abolish the divine right of professors to ask questions without the consent of the questioned” (Chapter XX para. 15). Such reaction had also occurred to the students with disabilities: one teacher teach them in the classroom, an author may not include all the topics and sub-topics in the books, and next teacher set the exam paper, then they could not sometimes solve the unfamiliar topics in the examination hall. This peculiar situations irritated them.

Sometimes professors set questions with pictures and graphs also to the blind students, and the junior, from different discipline, helpers cannot describe the pictures and graphs in the intended sense to them in the exam hall: then how they can answer the questions. Such questions mock them, “My physical limitations are forgotten” and “Let them mock on.” This situation occurs as an unintentional bias of the professors to the disabled students. The students with disabilities show the dissatisfaction with the higher education practices and mechanisms for performance evaluation. The executives, general teachers and students should consider the value of humanity upon the students and teachers with disabilities inside the University; “if one does not feel in these pulsations a heavenward striving, one must indeed be deaf to the harmonies of life.”

The general people feel strange if the deaf and blind people have great knowledge and wisdom about something; it is due to the general people’s unconscious bias and mental mechanism earned from the traditional backward concepts. Keller’s friends felt surprise seeing her in the Institution Library and enriching with more vocabulary, “my friends wondered at the richness of my vocabulary.” The sampled informant students and teachers with disabilities also stated that the general students, teachers and administrators showed their feeling of strange to them if they perform something better. It means that the general teachers and students unintentionally downgrade about the ability of the persons with disabilities in the University.

The Lived Experiences of Students/Teachers with Disabilities in Wright’s *Sounds Like Home*

Mary Herring Wright in *Sounds Like Home: Growing Up Black and Deaf in the South* is an autobiographical story by and about African American deaf Child; Wright recounts her experiences growing up as a deaf person. This research study has explored the experiences of the student and teacher with hearing impairment only at North Carolina School for Black deaf and blind students; this study excluded the description and experience of a deaf child gained outside the school. A child who had completely become deaf at 8 years old joined at North Carolina School for Black Deaf and Blind students. Her physically general teacher Mrs Edmondson taught her at school and attracted her attention with signs, “Mrs. Edmondson was rapping on her desk with a ruler to get my attention. When I looked around, she wanted to know where I’d been and told me to copy the assignment from the board” (44). She was unable to hear but to see, and therefore the teacher signalled with some objects to write something on the copy. The food, at first, was not good enough for the disabled students but later:

The food at the school had also improved. Mr. Lineberry decided that the teaching staff should eat at the same time we did and the same food. The teachers were

horrified. All these years they had been served special food cooked just for them. They also had their own waitress assisted by two older girls from the deaf department whose duty assignments rotated each week. (45)

The students with disability and teachers had the same food at the school. She sometimes was (un)intentionally mistreated at the campus; one of Mary's friend Leon misbehaved her at the school, "Leon always glared at me every time I passed him. He hated being deaf and hated to see me doing anything he considered deaf-oriented. He wrote notes scolding me for acting like the rest of those "ninnies" as he called them. I just laughed at him", and "you all are dumb" (78). Other students sang in the graduation programme and played on the ground of the school but Mary had time to visit library. "I found time to read and visit the library and infirmary. One day Mr. Lineberry came in my classroom grinning and holding a book out for me to take. It was *The Swiss Family Robinson*. I'd seen it on the shelf in the library but hadn't read it yet. He told me to read it" (102). As other disabled share, Mary got support from her teacher like Mr. Lineberry at the school. Her teachers made her participated into the theatre programme. It shows that the deaf students also got opportunity to participate in the extracurricular programmes. The deaf students can learn the dance and acting but the blind students can learn singing and public speaking for extracurricular activities in the school. "The deaf students were very apt at learning dance steps just by watching someone else, and they kept up with all the latest moves even though they couldn't hear the music. When some of the blind students who had partial sight started dancing" (105). Brandy gave a nice speech in the programme. "A blind girl was the valedictorian and the blind choir did several songs while we signed. Thelma Freeman sang "Ave Maria," and those who could hear said she was great." The faculty and administrators encouraged the deaf and blind students for participation in the extracurricular programmes and picnic programmes. The students with vision, hearing and motor impairment do not get chance for the participation in different extracurricular activities in the campuses. After the school education was over, Mary went to join the campus but there were no interpreter for her in the class. She felt more difficulty in higher education; she couldn't afford an interpreter for her study but her friends helped her.

Mary visited Raleigh School as a teacher, and she taught many deaf and blind-deaf students at the school. "The ones who were born deaf had to be taught the meaning of sound and what talking meant. This we did by taking a child's hand and placing it on our throats, then making a noise so she could feel the vibrations" (147). She truly understood the problems and needs of the deaf and blind students in learning processes, and successfully taught them. The teachers with disabilities were provided free rooms, transports and medical service, "We had free room and board and medical care, so our money could be spent on whatever we wanted" (148). Many schools/universities do not provide any allowance and facilities to them except the monthly salary, and they felt difficulty for professional development. Mary as a disabled teacher underwent many problems at the school like

teachers' quarters, hostels for disabled students, library, structure, pedagogical equipment, executives' rules, etc. Mary also discussed about the outer world from the viewpoints of a disabled teacher.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of Helen and Mary are found almost the same with the students and teachers with disabilities inside the schools and universities. The school provided a teacher even at home, and the college provided hostels for the disabled students and a typewriter to Helen in the examinations, but many schools/campuses ignore to manage the teachers and hostels for the disabled students and give only question papers and answer sheets in the examinations even to the unsighted students. The teachers and students with disabilities in the autobiographical characters Helen and Mary underwent through infrastructure barriers, policy and manner barriers, the executives' attitude barriers and academic and social barriers at the schools/campuses. Although the autobiographical characters experienced the difficulties inside the educational institutions, they continued their studies and professions in the schools and universities.

Their lived experiences suggested that the school/university executives consciously segregate and isolate the disabled students and teachers from other students and teachers, and intentionally ignore the needs of the disabled students and teachers inside the school/university; even the executives do not pay attention to modify the school/university policy, practices, infrastructures and their attitude for the disabled at university. The school/university can implement the inclusive disability policy and disability education for social justice; for that, they can build infrastructures, practices and attitude disability-friendly at the school/university. Keller and Mary deduced that the problems were the infrastructures, practices and the executives' attitude at the school/university but not the disabilities for pursuing studies and academic and intellectual developments.

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