# Study Conditions and Behavioral Patterns of Students with Disabilities in German Universities

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## Abstract

*As part of a nation-wide research project, we analyzed behavioral patterns, study conditions, and educational achievements of students with disabilities by qualitative interviews. The main purpose of this project was to find out how students cope with their disability The study showed that all the students had common coping strategies entirely independent from whether their disability was physical, sensory, or both. The more students with disabilities had learned to accept and understand their disability as a normality and as part of their personality during childhood and schooling, the less they had trouble during their time at university and vice versa. In this article we discuss five types of coping strategies and present preliminary findings.*

As a result of the expansion of the educational system in the Federal Republic of Germany in the late 1960s and 1970s, the chances for individuals with disabilities to continue their education improved. In the early 1980s measures were taken to support and develop the preconditions and opportunities for students with disabilities in higher education. In this context, it should be mentioned that (a) an advisory office for students with disabilities was established at the "Deutsches Studentenwerk" (DSW) (German Student Welfare Service) in 1981, (b) the "Standige Konferenz der Kultusminister der Laender der Bundesrepublik Deutschland" (KMK) (Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Laender of the Federal Republic of Germany) recommended the appointment of an official coordinator responsible for students with disabilities at higher education institutions (Kultusministerkonferenz,1982), and (c) the "Hochschulrektorenkonferenz" (HRK) (Higher Education Institutions Rectors' Conference) made recommendations about the tasks of coordinators for students with disabilities in 1986. (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz, 1987.)

In the late 1980s the Bundesministerium fur Bildung, Wissenschaft, Forschung und Technologie (Federal Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Technology), in cooperation with the government of one of the federal states, supported some models. In the meantime, some of these models were established as regular institutions. Moreover,

self-help organizations of individuals with disabilities provide services for their disabled fellow students (e.g., to facilitate access to student literature). They see to it that technical equipment is provided or that higher education institutions tackle problems of infrastructure.

On behalf of the "Bundesministerium fur Bildung und Wissenschaft" (Federal Ministry of Education and Science) and of the Deutsches Studentenwerk, the "Bayerisches Staatsinstitut fur Hochschulforschung und Hochschulplanung" (Bavarian State Institute for Research and Planning into Higher Education) in Munich published the first study guide for students with disabilities (Bayerisches Staatsinstitut fur Hochschulforschung und Hochschulplanung, 1984). It contained valuable information about the accessibility of higher education institutions for people with disabilities, prerequisites for study courses questions of financing, general legal regulations, addresses and addressees at these institutions, and other selected information. The third edition of this study guide was published in 1993 (Deutsches Studentenwerk). In spite of these provisions, students with disabilities are still facing considerable obstacles that lead to poor study conditions and influence their attitude toward studying. Overcrowded colleges exacerbate this situation.

In Germany and abroad, behavioral patterns of students with disabilities and their coping strategies are unknown. There only exist some reports on study conditions often relating to students with one special kind of disability. These reports primarily discuss difficulties in financing and handling the technical aids, accessibility of buildings, and so forth. For the comparison of behavioral patterns of students without disabilities, we refer to a survey carried out in our institute by Schindler (1993), a longitudinal survey from the beginning of studying up to the first graduation. The data of this survey were collected by qualitative interviews and by a diary.

Against this background, questions were raised about disabled students' attitude toward studying, the way they organize their studies, disability-related difficulties in the course of studying and how students cope with their disability while studying. Primarily, we did not want to continue the above-mentioned reports though it was quite clear that the interviewees would comment on these problems. The mainstream of our interest was to find out how students with disabilities manage their everyday lives in higher education and which strategies they apply.

## Scientific Approach

Fully accurate incidence statistics are not possible because students are not required to indicate their disability during enrollment. Because of the insufficient data base, we had to reject an empirical-statistical survey. Little data exist concerning students with disabilities. In the "13th Enquiry on the Social Situation of Students" (Bundesministerium fur Bildung und Wissenschaft, 1992), 13% of all students indicated that they were disabled or chronically ill (p. 414). Among them, 22% had difficulties in coping with studying for reasons of their disabilities or disease and 25% mentioned that their disability only slightly limited their study activities (p. 416). Therefore, we decided on a

qualitative enquiry by interviewing students with disabilities. In these interviews, the students freely talked about the problems and difficulties they had in coping with their disabilities and about how they evaluated these problems.

With the disabled students' approval, we tape recorded each complete interview. Each interview took between three to five hours. Two interviewers conducted the interviews; one of them took notes about the student's behavior during the interview.

To plan the interviews, we first organized an expert hearing to get information about study organization and study conditions at different German universities. The participants of this hearing were university representatives and student counsellors for students with disabilities, some of them disabled themselves. Moreover, we contacted federal self-help organizations for students with disabilities. The results of this hearing as well as the author's experiences with his own blindness were condensed and put in the form of interviewers' manual.

We intentionally avoided formulating hypotheses on the basis of a certain psychological theory of disability in order to validate or respectively to disprove it. Our survey highlighted the problems that people with disabilities face in the day-to-day reality of student life.

We attempted to describe primarily behavioral patterns and their possible relationship to how the students coped with their disabilities in order to draw conclusions for problem-solving strategies. This process led to guidelines or theses such as the following:

1. The fundamental exposition of coping with disabilities takes place during childhood and schooltime. Handling and coping with a disability, at that time, appear to be molding behavioral patterns and attitudes toward studying and having a disability.

2. Persons with a disability make their own specific experiences with their disability, but to all of them there is an objective and common understanding of discrimination and preferential treatment. All the endeavors to compensate for a disability by various tangible or intangible measures cannot take away the "subjective" feeling and experience of discrimination. Those who are not experienced in disability matters may interpret this as preferential treatment.

3. Although study conditions are nearly quite the same, managing of study conditions of students with disabilities differ from those of nondisabled students. General problems of studying increase in severity for students with disabilities.

4. To get legal claims accepted which provide for the special needs of people with dis - abilities as well as compensation for disability-related disadvantages and access these services requires disproportionately great and time-consuming efforts. This has consequences for the total period of studying.

5. Students with a disability need special counseling and support without being restricted in their right to self-determination.

6. The degree of dependence on help from others differs among people with disabilities.

7. The question of accepting and coping with a disability is not only a question of personal confrontation of disabled persons with their disability but also a question of the social and human environment. Not only their disability but also their environment restrict persons with disabilities.

Finally we compiled more than 100 questions divided into eight sections: managing disabilities within the family, during schooltime, studying, leisure time, financial problems, vocational experiences and expectations as well as evaluation of the situation as a person with disabilities on the whole. This interviewers' manual helped the interviewers to supply stimulating key words in the interviews. We tested this manual in interviews with a blind, a hearing-impaired, and a physically impaired student.

In addition to the interviews we obtained "hard facts," through a questionnaire, such as data about the social background, school career, date of entrance into higher education, duration of study, and so forth. To get a more differentiated view of our interviewees' available time budget we asked them to keep a diary for one week each near the beginning and toward the end of an academic term.

The target groups for our investigation were students with severe physical or sensory impairments. We did not take psychologically or mentally disabled students into consideration because of their specific problems and the difficulty in contacting them. Thus, the scope of disabilities was limited to visually and hearing- impaired students as well as to persons who use wheelchairs.

In three kinds of universities, those with more than 30,000 students in big cities, those with 10,000 to 20,000 students in medium-sized towns, and those with special centers and long-term experience with disabled students, we looked for students with visual, hearing, and physical impairments. To ensure that each of the three types of disabilities was proportionately represented in each of the three groups of higher education institutions, we needed about 20 students according to the kind of disability. In total, we conducted 63 interviews, 13 of them with blind students, 6 with visually impaired students, 6 with deaf students and 7 with hearing- impaired students, 24 with physically impaired students-among them 7 through accident-and 7 with multiple disabilities.

## Types of Coping with Disabilities

For our survey, we visited the students at home. During and shortly after the interview we took corresponding notes. While examining these general impressions, we made an astonishing observation. The interviews revealed many common aspects as to attitudes toward acceptance of and the way to cope with disabilities. It was possible to discern five groups of students based on how they coped with their disabilities.

Group I included people with disabilities who, in their childhood and youth, had not only learned to accept and to get on more or less with their disability in their family and at school, but who had internalized their disability to such a degree they considered it as being normal for them. They were able to identify with their disability so that it was part of their individual characteristic and personality. In spite of all the physical and psychological burdens, they did not feel restricted, however. They acknowledged the limits set by the disability, but because of their self-confidence, independence and personality they did not feel the necessity to compensate or to veil their disability somehow.

A great number of parents tried to bring up their children to be independent: "It's you who is disabled and it's you who has to cope with the disability." In response to this attitude the student came to the conviction: "Indeed, I am really able myself to achieve it."

Regarding normal conflicts between parents and children, a student with paraplegia told us his parents were not easy on him because he was disabled. He knew that "in the end, I am responsible for myself."

On the other hand, there were parents who were very restrictive. They restrained their children from doing things that could do them harm. A student with a physical impairment said: "I often did not get the chance to try something out. Therefore, I often waited until I was alone at home . . ."

A blind student wanted to experience her limits and intended to provocate her parents at the same time in doing things that her parents thought to be too dangerous for her. She tried cooking by herself when she was alone at home, traveled alone by rail. We assigned 18 persons or 29 % of our interview partners to this group.

Group 2 included students with disabilities who had learned to accept and cope with their disability, but who had not really internalized it. As a compensation for accepting and getting on with their disability they confronted themselves with high expectations as to achievement and performance. These expectations could lead to excessive demand for performance in order to keep pace with nondisabled people. The ambition to compete with nondisabled people and to obtain the same achievements or even better ones characterized this attitude. Students of this group used performance as a vehicle to compensate for their disability.

On the one hand, parents tended to "overprotect" them and on the other hand, they demanded high performance and "absolute perfection." They had "to function" and felt that their parents "controlled" them continuously:

My parents always told me that I have to work hard in order to keep pace with the others... I internalized this attitude in such a way that I demand even nowadays more of myself than nondisabled persons demand of themselves.

Another student told us that she played a central role in the family:

They came to me with their problems. I was always the strongest one in my family.... On the one hand, this helped me to organize my life, on the other hand, I wished I could have been longer a child, I have learned very early to assume responsibility for myself, I came to decisions without asking [my parents].

We assigned 16 (25 %) of the 63 interview partners to this group.

Group 3 included all people who got on with their disability more or less and who could accept and manage their disability. However, their social and human environment was of fundamental importance for coping with their disability. They could fully rely and count on their family, partners, and a stable circle of friends who were always there if disability-related problems, discouragement, and doubts arose. As they made use of this opportunity, they could get on quite well with their disability. These human bonds provided advice, assistance, and support for them.

A student, for example, who has still been in close touch with her family admitted:

I am not at all independent ....my parents' fault. Particularly my mother gave me to understand that she is responsible that I am disabled that my disability is a family fault.

On the one hand, she understood her mother's sorrow-she used to comfort her-but on the other hand, her parents' attitude weighed on her mind. In our opinion, 10 (16 %) of our interview partners belonged to this group.

Group 4 contained persons with disabilities whose thinking and acting always proceeded from their disability. The disability determined their life. They saw their performance affected by it. They were, however, conscious of the fact that their disability always dominated their acting and reacting.

A good representative for this group seemed to be a student with a physical impairment who expressed his feelings as follows:

My disability is hanging over me like the sword of Damocles that can come down on me in some form of isolation; the less you have power to try hard, the sooner you are isolated from any form of communication with others; this makes me feel more depressed and leads to nonsensical strain.

We assigned 11 (17 %) of the interviewees to this group.

Group 5, the last group, was characterized by all those who consciously or unconsciously did not admit their disability, they repressed it as a matter of fact. They did not see the reason for study-related problems and difficulties, problems in communication and in other areas of life in their disability but in other characteristics and deficiencies:

My proudness did not allow me to admit that I am a person with a disability. I had mentally no problems with this disease. I always wanted to keep pace with the others and I did not want to admit that I am something special.

As many as eight (13 %) of the 63 interviewed students left this impression.

We should not see these groups as a static system. This scheme does not pin the disabled person down to a certain category forever. The confrontation and the way to manage with a disability is a dynamic process, which includes personal success and setbacks. In spite of the length of our interviews, these mirrored only an instant picture in the life of the interviewed students. At another time, the result, the personal impression which somebody leaves in a certain situation, can be different. In order to be able to structure and to condense the abundance of our material, we assigned our students to the dominating coping strategy at the time of the interview. This grouping should not be misunderstood as a labeling, but should be seen as an instrument for getting a better feeling for coping with a disability. Furthermore, this differentiation revealed an overall phenomenon behind the outward appearance of a disability. For that reason, persons with disabilities should no longer be grouped solely according to the *well known scheme of assigning, them to the kind of disability only.* In this way, these findings enabled a new approach toward assistance, advice, and support for persons with disabilities. Grouping like this may be found in a similar way in strategies and behavioral patterns of people without disabilities.

Though the analysis of the interviews was completely anonymous, it was surprising for us to find out that there were representatives of all the three kinds of disabilities in each of the five groups. The first interview transcripts we coded together, to determine the main aspects and criteria. Then we divided the interviews into two parts so that each of us had to code one half. We controlled our transcripts by coding one interview together. At the end of this step my colleague had to leave the project. It is not possible to give here a full account of our results, we can only present some few findings of group 1 and group 5.

## Selected Findings of the Survey

From the different areas of life addressed in our interviews, only the results of the areas "family" and "studying" can be presented here.

## Family Environment

The family is the environment where a disability is first experienced, where family members are confronted with a child's disability, and where the first tackling of the disability takes place. It is in the family that the child can first learn and train to accept and manage the disability and where independence can be tested. Our interview partners of the first group unanimously emphasized that especially their mothers had been in a constant conflict between reason and emotion. On the one hand, their feeling, heart, and maternal love for the disabled child drove them to specially protect and care for the child

and to remove all difficulties and confrontations with the environment. On the other hand, reason told them to treat the child like the other sisters and brothers and to involve him or her into duties at home according to his or her skills and abilities. Sometimes students mentioned that the mother had played a dominating role in the family, or that the mother had feelings of guilt at times because of the child's disability.

Contrary to this, the students with disabilities of the fifth group talked only little and vaguely about their family situation. The child's disability was not recognized as such and accepted; the reasons for difficulties and deficiencies of the disabled child were rather attributed to his or her intellectual ability. The family did not face the disability and dragged the child from one physician to another without getting other information than the well known diagnosis.

Students of the first group reported that their family accepted them as being as normal as the others and avoided exaggerated compassion for the disabled child. It is true that especially their anxious mothers restrained their desires for action, but they also required performance of them. Sometimes they had the impression of being treated unfairly compared to their brothers and sisters because parents did not allow them to do the same things as the others and limited their various duties at home. But they also looked for opportunities when they were alone at home to try out and test everything. They wanted to experience their limits. In this way they could achieve and train independence that made them fit for life.

In general, their families did not avoid the common generational conflicts; these were tackled with undiminished rigour. A student with a physical disability remarked that he had to assume responsibility when he had his way against his parents' will.

Contrary to this group, the students of group 5 experienced that it was embarrassing for their sisters and brothers to introduce their disabled sister or brother to their friends. Moreover, the whole family regarded them somehow as inferior. Again and again, they had to hear what they never would be able to do or achieve in their life. These students had difficulties in showing their disability in public (e.g., by using a white longstick for blind persons or when it came to ordering in a restaurant).

Furthermore, differences between group 1 and 5 existed in the parents' attitudes toward the educational or vocational qualifications. In group 1 the parents took a great interest in enabling their disabled child to enjoy the best possible education to make him or her fit for life. They strove for a rather high qualification and therefore recommended higher education but left to the disabled child the choice for the subject and course of study. These parents tried hard to ensure that the child could attend a regular kindergarten or a regular school not far from home. This does not mean that these parents automatically favored integrated schools. Moreover, some interviewees, especially in the last years of secondary education, left their family environment to attend a far away special educational institution for persons with disabilities to become more independent of their family and live a life of their own.

In group 5, statements of parents about educational career and the achievement of educational and vocational qualifications were rather meagre.

## Higher Education Environment

As shown at the beginning of this article, our main concern was to study behavioral patterns and study organization of students with disabilities. Therefore, our interviews focused primarily on this field. Experiences in the family and school environment prior to this period of life were interesting because in this phase, basic attitudes were shaped that dominated all their activities in future life, especially their coping during study time. Apart from individual difficulties, positive personal experiences, as well as self-assessment of personal development, we were, of course, also interested in the experiences our students made with the university as a whole and with the department of their study.

Almost all of the interview partners of group 1 emphasized that interaction with other students and the social contacts had the strongest effect on their overall well-being. In addition, a few pointed out that it was easier to interact with nondisabled students when they tried to get along on the campus without an attendant. Although an attendant may be helpful and necessary for a blind person or a wheelchair user, it can be a great barrier for communication with others.

In group 5 students rarely talked about this opportunity; they laid greater stress on the fact that social communication was rather difficult at university in view of the high student numbers. They regarded it rather as positive to get into contact with other students who had the same disability.

It is true, the university with high student numbers ("mass-university") was also "getting on the nerves" of the students of group 1, and they complained about the anonymity of these masses, but at the same time they mentioned many positive experiences with the teaching and other staff and with other students. On the other hand, some students of group 5 found it worth mentioning that nobody opened doors for them or took notice of seat reservations in lecture halls.

For the students of group 1, it was a positive experience to be able to organize themselves, to be independent, and to experience the teaching staff's and students' readiness to help them, such as to copy lecture notes. A student of this group remarked:

It's good that you can organize yourself, that you can manage your time yourself you have to realize and to find out what to do and where to go.

Studying with a disability highly stimulated these students to challenge themselves as well as the teaching staff and the nondisabled students. From this multiple challenge they derived pleasure, on the one hand, in showing to nondisabled students that a student with disabilities is also academically able and appropriately qualified for higher education and, on the other hand, in encouraging other people with a disability. Independant living was,

for them, a further meaning of this multiple challenge. They stated that it was necessary, however, to express their needs and ask for help themselves, instead of awaiting things passively.

The interview partners of group 5 were "surprised" about the services offered for students with disabilities. In general, the students liked studying. One stated: "Partly, the study course is fun." Some were pleased that the study course was carried out in a routine manner according to a fixed timetable and that there was little left to organize for themselves. Some also pointed out that studying gives them the opportunity to cut the umbilical cord, thus giving them a fresh stimulus.

Apart from the topic of the "mass-university," which, not without reason, nowadays many students deplore, groups 1 and 5 had a different approach to negative and disappointing experiences at university. The students of group I mentioned that their study course was very time-consuming and that there was not much time left for other activities, especially for the commitment to other persons with disabilities. In this context they also deplored the fact that only few students with disabilities were engaged in disabled students' affairs.

Furthermore, the students of group 1 pointed out the general conditions of studying, deficiencies in the didactical qualities of the professors, in the professional quality of other teaching staff, a lack or deficiency in practice-related matters of the study subject, and deficiencies in the knowledge of examination rules and regulations for persons with disabilities. Sporadically, they reported that the teaching staff's helplessness and lack of experience were the reason why staff could not meet disabled students' needs in a more appropriate manner.

The students of group 5 laid special stress on the well known disability-related disadvantages and negative experiences at higher education institutions: bad acoustics and illumination in the lecture halls, insufficient facilities for orientation on campus and in buildings, deficiency of elevators, restrooms, and provision of technical aids, literature, and so forth.

The students of group 5 also complained that the content of studies were hardly practice oriented, but moreover, they mentioned that they were more stressed by the degree of difficulty of the tasks, the problem of time at examinations, students without disabilities lacking a solidary attitude toward them, and an inadequate and inconvenient organization related to the schedule of lectures. They said that it also bothered them that others did not take notice of their disability, that they treated them like nondisabled people, and that they expected a degree of self-discipline from them that they were not yet able to develop.

In addition to the diverse contacts with groups, persons, institutions or fellow students, it should be mentioned that the existence of a coordinator responsible for students with disabilities was well-known to students of group 1, but was rarely called on or needed. If difficulties or problems arose, they turned straight to the persons directly in charge, the

teaching staff, student advisers, or to the coordinator installed for students with disabilities. It was also relatively easy for them to address fellow students in order to get lecture notes but we must discuss the details for this procedure in depth. It was more difficult to get help for reading on tape recording. Students of group 1 thought it was more or less a kind of uneasiness, anxiety, or embarrassment that made them unable to give spontaneously the assistance needed.

The students of group 5 called upon the coordinator for students with disabilities far more often but were by no means always content with the offered services, or they did not call on them at all because they had heard negative news about them. If they did establish close contacts with the coordinator, it was only because they did not want "to create troubles" for them because of their problems in higher education. A blind student said: "If I have problems with studying, the coordinator is of no assistance to me. It's up to me to solve them by myself. I am in good private contact with him, but nevertheless I do not talk to him about my problems."

The students of this group also stated that it was difficult to get lecture notes from their fellow students because they did not offer help voluntarily. Moreover, the quality of lecture notes caused problems for them; they needed several sets of notes to pick out the best.

The importance of studying was, of course, a special focus of our survey of study-related attitudes. It was of special interest how students with disabilities made use of their time during this period of life what was of special importance to them, and what they expected from higher education in general and from their study courses in particular. One female student of group 1 remarked that studying was the center of her actual phase of life and that she could not do much apart from that. As a rule, however, the students of this group agreed that studying was not the focal point of their present period of life. In this regard, they did not differ from students without disabilities. Schindler (1994) contends that change in value takes place as well with students with disabilities and with students without disabilities. The disabled students enjoyed being concerned with other topics and things in life. They stated that it was great to acquire knowledge but that it was also important to always have time for friends. To assist other persons with disabilities and to show them that one did not have to live in isolation because of the disability was of greater importance to them. Even if studying meant a special stress for persons with disabilities, they had to set priorities. Such priorities may include social communication or a hobby and leisure time that were considered as important as studying.

Considering the disabled students' time budget, free time seemed to be the major problem of all. The diaries we asked the students to write revealed that the time budget for studying hardly differed from that of nondisabled students. However, a shift of focus could be observed from passive or receptive learning in lectures at university to active self-study. Data showed that students with disabilities attended lectures less frequently than nondisabled students, but they studied more at home. Their time budget for leisure activities was, however, much smaller than that of nondisabled students. The students' subjective impression of their time budget was quite different. Many of them believed

that they spent much more time studying than nondisabled people. The estimation of the study was partially in contradiction with the time spent for studying, on the one hand, and for leisure, on the other, as shown in figure 1. This contradiction can be explained by the fact that quantitatively the time spent for studying was more than for leisure but qualitatively disabled students experienced the different activities during leisure much more intensively than nondisabled students did. Moreover, it seemed necessary to distinguish between the different groups to analyze the established average more exactly, especially if students of group 1 had more free time than those of group 5.

In contrast to group 1, the interview partners of group 5 almost unanimously stated that studying was the real focus of their present period of life and that they had to be careful not to neglect other areas of life completely. Studying required so much time that there was no time left for many other things, or because it would have been terrible not to be successful. With a view to the lack of opportunities on the labor market later on, one student resignedly remarked that this was the reason why, for him, studying was no longer the most important thing in life.

The expectations of the interview partners of group 1 toward studying differed in certain ways from those of group 5. The students of group 1 expected more than the procurement of useful knowledge. For them, the university was like a "supermarket" with a broad scope of offerings from which one can choose things of interest. They also talked about university as an institution to support the development of an autonomous personality. In their opinion, however, higher education no longer came up to these demands and expectations. They thought that university produced too many "specialized idiots" who were unable to judge and decide independently.

Group 5 students mostly expected most of all procurement of knowledge, professional education, social prestige, appropriate income, and a tendency to study courses designed according to a determined scheme.

With a view toward an "ideal" university, all groups, especially the students of group 1 took a negative attitude toward universities or departments in which the whole study was arranged and organized in an optimal way primarily around one kind of disability. Those institutions seemed to them to be ghettos that did not correspond to reality of life. They wanted to decide themselves where to study, and they had the desire for social and educational communication with students without disabilities. Although about a third of all interview partners of group 5 were studying at a university or department that specialized in one kind of disability, only two students of this group favored such a university or department.

Let us finally take a short look at the question of how our students regarded their personal development during the period of studying and their self-assessment. The students of group 1 self-confidently stated that they had achieved everything that was necessary and therefore did not tend to overstrain themselves. They did have demands on themselves, but they also knew that they could not achieve everything and that they were not willing to strive for this at the cost of their health. They did not want to ask too much of

themselves and liked to be free for other things. They had learned to admit their weaknesses to themselves and toward others. They were prepared to accept the challenge offered by higher education. As a matter of fact, they wanted to be challenged, but they were no longer willing to "compete" with nondisabled persons. They were quite content to be able and to be allowed to do something. Their capacity for intellectual performance capacity had nothing to do with their disability. They had enough self-confidence and had developed a realistic view of the further course of their study and their life perspectives. They were aware of their individual power and failings, and they had also learned how to organize their studying in respect of their disability because it was absolutely necessary for them to precisely analyze their special problems, to efficiently organize their work, and to carefully set priorities.

In group 5, the students quite obviously realized that they had to learn especially to be able to talk about their disability, to believe in themselves, and to loosen the ties to their parents, a process that considerably affected them physically as well as psychologically. On the other hand, they were always tempted to go back to their parents to enjoy the security, the care, and the overprotection because they felt dependent on them. They often tended to withdraw from the world and did not let anything or anybody get near them. Some students of this group frankly admitted their opinions that they had not changed since the times of youth and that they were quite the same person as ever. They also mentioned that they were hesitant and did not know what they really wanted to do. They viewed themselves as ambitious, asked too much of themselves, and were then discontent with themselves if they did not achieve the set aim. They realized that they had an incorrect assessment of their limits and often found themselves in conflict between the required performance and the limits set by their disability.

## Conclusions

In this report we could only present a short extract of the abundant material. The publication of the complete study is in preparation. First of all, we wished to explain how our interviews were analyzed. The approach was to break down the material according to a general structural principle.

For this reason we identified five groups and strategies of coping with disabilities that are not to be regarded as value judgements but as a means to get away from a classification exclusively based on the kinds of disability, to get a better understanding of the difficulties and problems of students with disabilities, and to develop new approaches for well-aimed support and assistance on this basis. In our report, we have presented the two extremes of this scale only.

Disability is no longer seen as a state of being different, but merely as a different kind of human existence. Our study should be regarded in the light of the words of the former president of the Republic of Germany, R. von Weizsacker: "What we have to learn is so difficult and nevertheless so simple and clear: it is normal to be dissimilar" (Weizsacker, 1993, p. 10).

Proceeding from this perspective, we developed some recommendations to provide better opportunities for students with disabilities and to improve their situation. It is not sufficient to focus on optimizing external conditions for disabled students (for example to take the necessary steps to make constructional, technical and organizational infrastructure available according to their kind of disability). Such measures are of little use if the students have to struggle with difficulties in managing and accepting their disability. This problem does not only require external support but also assistance to enable students with disabilities to help themselves.

The first recommendation refers to the above-cited quotation of the former president. The university as a community of teachers and students and as a reflection of society must learn that it is normal to be disabled and that it is the task of all members of this community to integrate people with disabilities into this community.

The most important recommendation concerns the support and assistance for students with disabilities that require qualified staff to encourage independence and to enable students with disabilities to gain the maximum benefit from their time at the university. For each student the requirements are an individual matter. Our grouping of students according to the kind of coping strategies and to the degree of accepting their disability could be a great help to staff working with disabled students. Their main task is to help and conduct students with disabilities, to find out and develop their understanding of disability as part of their identity and personality, and to enable them to accept that it is normal to be disabled. Experts, like social scientists, should develop instruments for the staff to identify the students according to the groups mentioned. In Germany such an approach is unknown. Universities should consider running disability training workshops for staff. Special training is needed to recognize the real difficulties, problems, and particular needs of disabled students, to be able to provide qualified advice and to assign them to the "right" experts. These experts should discuss individual needs and options with the students, plan the necessary steps, and should finally help with their realization.

The strong desire for self-determination and integration into the nondisabled students' world necessitates empathy with and understanding of the needs and experiences of disabled students to assist them when requested in order to achieve educational equality, but also to respect the fact that students with disabilities want to make decisions for themselves as do students without disabilities.

Another recommendation, which results from the idea of integration, is the necessity to centralize the multitude of student services like careers, counseling, financial advice, and disabled student services. This way, specialized services for students with disabilities would be integrated in a corresponding general student services department. The idea is to create a network that provides advice and support to students with disabilities as early as in the transitional phase from secondary to higher education, at the beginning of studying, and at the end of higher education in the transitional phase to the labor market and career. The staff of student services should be available for students with disabilities to assist in these matters, at any time and without major problems, This would also make it easier to assign a person with a disability from the special service for students with

disabilities to the general information and counseling service as soon as he or she acquires independence, according to our types of coping strategies. Only such a network provides quick and comprehensive advice and assistance by which the student with a disability saves additional and unnecessary time, energy, and costs.

Regional pools for technical aids should be established. Students with disabilities should have the same right to free choice of the university as nondisabled students. This assumes that building regulations taking the needs of students with disabilities into consideration will be strictly carried out and consequently supervised. As there will not be at every time students with disabilities at university, regional pools for mobile technical aids (e.g., specific computer equipment and applications, special measuring devices, drawing instruments), for students with disabilities should be established. There these technical aids could be lent out to each university in this region if needed. Such a region should be smaller than one of the "Laender" of the Federal Republic of Germany. Such a pool could be located at one of the student welfare services within the pool region or as required above within a network center for information, counseling and support at a university. There also could be the maintenance of such aids.

The last recommendation relates to the financing of disability-related compensation for disadvantages. We cannot present here all the findings of our investigation. Analysis revealed that the social authorities giving financial support treat the students in a discriminatory way. Students with disabilities are confronted with a multitude of different, powerful and great authorities that involve them in a complex conflict about competence right across borders of the "Laender." Primarily, the authorities of the federal state where there is the disabled student's and the parents' domicil are responsible for legal payment, not the authorities of the federal state where the student is studying. The social authorities, who primarily responsible for payment, try to refuse the students' legal right and refer to the appropriate authorities in the other federal state. The long and wearing legal disputes require enormous efforts in energy by the individual against superior administration authorities and are very time-consuming, enervating, and frustrating. The students reported that it often takes one or two years to obtain financial or technical aid. This stressful situation and the financial pressure impede disabled students in studying. As a result some of them are at risk of academic failure. Others are even discouraged in such a way that they give up studying.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for higher education institutions to relieve the students with disabilities from this unequal position and to take over the students' legitimate rights against the above-mentioned authorities. Disabled students should have the possibility to begin their study under almost the same conditions as nondisabled students, right from the start. This would be an important step to integrate students with disabilities into the academic world and contribute to equality of opportunity.

Finally it should be mentioned that the experiences the students had made with their disability in early childhood and during school-time, had, as our research project indicated a strong of advice services in the areas of family affairs, not least, a general reorientation of society toward individuals with disabilities. We hope that this report

provided an insight into the life of German disabled students we presented in this paper can be a basis to give the students more effective and more individual human help for self-orientation and for coping with their disability.

*Figure 1. Time-budget for studying and leisure of disabled and nondisabled students in comparison.*

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