

School Environment Of The Visually Impaired Students

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Abstract

Education is not simply about making schools available for those who are not able to access them. It is about being proactive in identifying the barriers and obstacles of learners' encounter in attempting to access opportunities for quality education, as well as, in removing those barriers and obstacles that lead to exclusion. The child with poor vision not only faces many personal hardships through his early developing years but also presents numerous problems and challenges to the responsible adults in his life. All who are in contact with the visually impaired child are affected, with those who are the closest sharing the greatest concern and bearing the heaviest burden. The present study is conducted to explore and analyse the School Environment of the Visually Impaired Students from different Blind Schools of Assam. From the review of different studies, it is found that there are very less studies conducted in this area for the Visually Impaired Students. The objective of the study is to study the School Environment of the Visually Impaired Students of Assam. A purposive sampling method was employed to select respondents who could provide rich and relevant data. The sample included 11 teachers and 21 Visually Impaired Students from the Blind Schools of Assam. The study revealed that teachers in Assam's blind schools are consistently available to support visually impaired students both academically and emotionally. Warm teacher-taught relationships based on trust, respect, and motivation foster students' confidence and resilience. The curriculum, though aligned with the state syllabus, is effectively adapted through Braille, tactile materials, and life skills training. Despite infrastructural limitations, schools creatively utilize resources to ensure accessibility. Parental involvement emerged as a strong pillar, with parents providing both emotional encouragement and active collaboration with teachers. Together, these factors create a nurturing and inclusive school environment that empowers visually impaired students to thrive.

Keywords- Visually Impaired Students, School Environment, Blind Schools of Assam, Special Schools.

INTRODUCTION

The Right to Education is an internationally recognised right for all children. In order to make the 'Right to Education' for all a reality, efforts and initiatives must be ensured that all learners with diverse needs have the access to quality education within a reasonably accommodative inclusive environment that can meet basic learning needs and participation requirements towards enriching the lives of the marginalised and excluded children. Still today, millions of children, youth and adults continue to experience exclusion within and from education around the world. The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) and other international human rights treaties prohibit any exclusion from or limitation to educational opportunities on the bases of socially ascribed or perceived differences, such as ability, gender, ethnic origin, language, religion, nationality, social origin, economic condition etc.

Education is not simply about making schools available for those who are not able to access them. It is about being proactive in identifying the barriers and obstacles of learners' encounter in attempting to access opportunities for quality education, as well as, in removing those barriers and obstacles that lead to exclusion. A latest report published by UNICEF (2016) entitled, 'The State of the World's Children: A fair chance for every child', argues, "Promoting equity is more than a moral obligation. It is both a practical and a strategic imperative, helping to break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and thus, reducing the inequalities that undermine all societies." As of February 2013, 193 countries had ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and 127 countries and the European Union (EU) have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006). These are the bases of UNICEF's all activities. It is the most complete statement of children's rights ever produced and is the most widely-ratified international human rights treaty in the world history.

The year 2016 marks the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the UNCRC and the CRPD as remarkable progress that has been made in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities in the society in general and in education in particular. The spirit of the Conventions, as the first comprehensive human rights treaty of the 21st century is a benchmark document that works to ensure the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedom by persons with disabilities.

Visual Impairment

Visual impairment is a term experts use to describe any kind of vision loss, whether it's someone who cannot see at all or someone who has partial vision loss. Some people are completely blind, but many others have what's called legal blindness. They haven't lost their sight completely but have lost enough vision that they'd have to stand 20 feet from an object to see it as well as someone with perfect vision could from 200 feet away. People rarely lose their eyesight during their teen years. When they do, it's usually caused by an injury like getting hit in the eye or head with a baseball or having an automobile or motorcycle accident. WHO (2017) mentions that there are 253 million individuals worldwide with visual impairment, with 36 million being completely blind and 217 million is having low vision. A person's vision may be affected from birth or as a result of some events.

The child with poor vision not only faces many personal hardships through his early developing years but also presents numerous problems and challenges to the responsible adults in his life. All who are in contact with the visually impaired child are affected, with those who are the closest sharing the greatest concern and bearing the heaviest burden. It is the accepted responsibility of the parents and siblings, the paediatrician, the ophthalmologist, and educators to promote the physical and psychological well-being of all children while enabling them to develop the skills necessary to live safely and happily in our society. A person's experience of vision impairment varies depending upon many different factors. This includes for example, the availability of prevention and treatment interventions, access to vision rehabilitation, etc. Good eyesight gives us a tremendous access to the world around us. It helps us with our day-to-day activities, to interact with people around us, to see their expressions, to see the outcome of our activities and many more. On noticing visual impairment in children, immediate appropriate measures must be taken to inhibit the delay in development of wide range of skills which are easily learnt by sighted children. In 1834, Louis Braille completed the invention of Braille code which changed the quality and extent of services for blind persons worldwide. Reading Braille through touch became a miracle in the view of sighted persons and as a result the community started treating blind children as special. The growth of the "special school concept" in the case of blind children contributed to their segregation from society at large. Special schools became residential homes and this coming together of blind persons lighted gave them a sense of belonging. Therefore, the special school concept started gaining importance among blind persons. Ideas such as blind persons are special, blind people have a sixth sense etc., contributed to the stereotyped response to blindness and their attitudes to each other formed the present stream. The Government of India has also progressively introduced many programmes of assistance to the blind individuals. In 1973 the Government of India initiated efforts to develop Hindi Braille contractions, and this effort was further strengthened with the establishment of the National Institute for the Visually Impaired, Dehradun, in 1979. In 1981 a major step was taken by assisting the blind and other disabled persons for the purchase and fitting of special equipment needed for their education or rehabilitation. This was the first time that direct assistance to the individuals was introduced.

School Environment for the Visually Impaired

School environment is a powerful force and plays a pivotal role in the all-round development of the child. Schools are considered to be ideal homes for the welfare of the students. It is a well-known fact that all students do not get equal stimulating and congenial environment at home for their development. For this reason, ideal environment should be created in school. Students develop better if they get more congenial environment or atmosphere. Bloom (1968) regards this environment as a "shaping and reinforcing force which acts on the individual" (Sharma M. 1993). Therefore, the influence of the school could foster in their students the kind of self-reliance, the drive for independent mastery and an emphasis for competence that are necessary for strong achievement. The more congenial the school environment, better the development on the part of the student as every individual observes a unique climate, atmosphere, or personality is felt when he or she spend time with the teachers and peer groups of a

particular school or organization. A positive school environment went hand in hand with the atmosphere within the classroom, which, for some, included an equal relationship between teachers and students, so that students did not feel undermined but part of a supportive learning environment which enables them to focus on their work (Peng, et al., 2014).

Research shows that the context in which the learning occurs; inflexible curriculum, environmental inaccessibility, negative attitude which stems from both teachers and parents and inappropriate assessment procedures are some of the factors that can impede effective school participation of students with visual impairments (Fraser & Maguvhe, 2008). As researchers in the field of special needs education agree, accessibility of school environment can go beyond passageways, stairs and ramps to recreational areas (Sherrill, 1993). Based on the above facts, it is important to be aware about the presence of many factors that can interfere into the education of children with visual impairment.

In India the first School for blind was established at Amritsar in 1877. All the credit goes to the Christian Mission. The gates to the blind community in the field of education were opened when they were under miserable condition. They had no asylum except begging. In this situation special schools were started and they took care of the orphans and other blind children.

School is the second institution to nurture the visually impaired child's cognitive, affective and psycho motor domain and build up his/her personality, conduct and behaviour. There is a closer relationship between a visually impaired learner and the teacher. For this the blind school should provide optimum environment and a classroom-climate which is conducive in order to play a nurturing role by planning classroom activities to understand Pupil's desire, expectations and the demands of learning various subjects. Therefore, classroom activities should be enhanced and planned develop positive attitude in pupils for the school and to help them perform well in classrooms (Christian, 1991).

The different components from which the School Environment of the Blind Schools can be studied may be discussed as follows:

- (i) Availability of Teachers
- (ii) Teacher- Taught Relationship
- (iii) Teaching- Learning Methods
- (iv) School Curriculum and Adaptations and
- (v) School Management.

In order to meet their unique needs, subsequently, students must have specialized services, books and materials in appropriate media like Braille, as well as specialized equipment and technology to assure equal access to the core and specialized curricula, and to enable them to most effectively compete with their peers in school and ultimately in society. Placing a student with a visual impairment in a regular classroom by itself, doesn't ensure the inclusion of the student with visual impairment (Sherrill, 1993). If student with a visual impairment who does not have access to social and physical information because of his/her visual impairment, he/she is not included practically. Students with visual impairments will not be included unless their unique educational needs for access are addressed by specially trained personnel in appropriate environment.

Rationale of the study

Education is universally acknowledged as a fundamental right for the empowerment and development of individuals, especially for the differently abled persons. Among the diverse categories of disability, visual impairment presents unique challenges in accessing and participating fully in the educational process. For visually impaired students, the school environment and parental involvement play critical roles in shaping their academic achievement, social development, and psychological well-being. In this regard, the study titled "School Environment of the Visually Impaired Students" becomes significant both from theoretical and practical perspectives.

The school environment includes the Availability of Teachers, Teacher- Taught Relationship, Teaching- Learning Methods, School Curriculum and Adaptations and School Management in which Visually Impaired Students learn and interact. These factors significantly affect the educational performance and holistic development of these students. However, in many parts of India, including Assam, blind schools often operate with limited resources, outdated curriculum, and insufficient teacher training, which may obstruct the effective progress of visually impaired learners.

The present study is conducted to explore and analyse the School Environment of the Visually Impaired Students from different Blind Schools of Assam. From the review of different studies, it is found that there are very less studies conducted in this area for the Visually Impaired Students. Moreover, not a single study was found which together studied the School Environment of the Visually Impaired Students in Assam. This research mainly focuses on the Visually Impaired Students from five different Blind Schools of Assam. This will include the Blind Schools that come under the Assam State School Education Board (ASSEB) which also make the study unique as no such study is found to be conducted in the Blind Schools of Assam.

Objective of the Study

1. To study the School Environment of the Visually Students of Assam.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The present study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate the school environment of Visually Impaired (VI) students in the Blind Schools of Assam. Since the objective was to gain in-depth insights into the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by VI students and their teachers, a qualitative approach was most appropriate. This design facilitated the exploration of participants lived experiences and enabled the researcher to capture the richness and complexity of their narratives.

Population of the Study

The population of the study consisted of Teaching staff and students from the Blind Schools of Assam functioning under the Assam State School Education Board (ASSEB). These schools give importance exclusively to the educational needs of children with visual impairments, making them relevant sites for understanding the school environment.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study covered five Blind Schools of Assam. A purposive sampling method was employed to select respondents who could provide rich and relevant data. The sample included 11 teachers and 21 Visually Impaired Students from the Blind Schools of Assam.

Tools for Collection of Data

For the purpose of this study, a Semi-structured interview schedule was prepared for teachers as well as the students. The interview schedule included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about participants' experiences, challenges, and perceptions of the school environment. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a conversational manner to create a comfortable atmosphere for participants. With consent, the responses were recorded in writing and in some cases through audio recording, ensuring accuracy and completeness.

Procedure of Data Collection

The researcher personally visited all five Blind Schools of Assam and conducted interviews with the selected participants. Each interview lasted between 30–45 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Assamese and Hindi, depending on participants' comfort, and later translated into English for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles of qualitative research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. The purpose of the study was explained clearly, and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Pseudonyms were used in reporting to protect identities. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw at any stage.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the data:

1. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and triangulation of responses across schools and respondent groups.
2. Dependability was maintained by keeping detailed field notes and maintaining an audit trail of decisions during data analysis.
3. Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of the context and participant experiences.
4. Confirmability was ensured by using participants' direct quotations and avoiding researcher bias in interpretation.

Data Analysis and Interpretations

For the present study, Thematic analysis was undertaken following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and writing the report. The narratives of teachers and students were analysed under the five major dimensions of the study.

Availability of Teachers

Theme 1: Adequate Teacher Presence Ensures Academic Support

Teachers across schools emphasized that their consistent availability within the campus encouraged students to seek guidance beyond classroom hours. One teacher stated, "We stay in the hostel premises so that students can reach us anytime they need help with reading, writing, or daily tasks." Students also confirmed this by noting that teachers were approachable and supportive whenever required.

Theme 2: Specialized Support for Visual Impairments

Participants highlighted that teachers made extra efforts to adapt lessons for visually impaired students. As one respondent expressed, "Our teachers explain things slowly and repeat them until we understand." This demonstrates the presence of a teaching force sensitive to the unique learning needs of VI students.

Theme 3: Emotional Availability Beyond Academics

Both students and teachers acknowledged the importance of teachers acting as caregivers and mentors. One student shared, "When I feel low, my teacher talks to me like a parent." This reflects how teacher availability goes beyond academics, extending into emotional and personal guidance.

Teacher-Taught Relationship

Theme 1: Bond of Trust and Affection

Students described their teachers as affectionate and trustworthy figures. "Our teachers treat us like their own children," remarked one participant. This nurturing relationship helped in reducing fear and building confidence.

Theme 2: Mutual Respect and Understanding

Teachers reported that students respected them while also openly sharing their concerns. "They never hesitate to ask questions, which shows they trust us," said a teacher. This dynamic suggests a classroom climate that fosters openness and inclusion.

Theme 3: Teacher as Motivator

Several narratives showed that teachers acted as motivators, inspiring students to overcome challenges. One student noted, "When I lose hope, my teacher reminds me that my disability is not my weakness."

School Curriculum and Adaptations

Theme 1: Curriculum Aligned with General Education

Teachers emphasized that the curriculum followed state board guidelines but with adaptations. "We use the same syllabus, but in Braille and audio," explained a teacher. This ensured equal access for VI learners.

Theme 2: Flexibility in Teaching Methods

Teachers adapted lessons by providing tactile materials, verbal descriptions, and interactive activities. A student expressed, "My teacher draws maps on a raised paper so I can feel the shapes."

Theme 3: Holistic Learning Beyond Textbooks

Both groups highlighted the importance of extracurricular and life skill training. One teacher shared, "We not only teach subjects but also train them in independent living skills."

School Facilities and Infrastructure

Theme 1: Accessible Learning Resources

Students appreciated the availability of Braille books, audio recordings, and specialized aids. "We have a Braille library where we can read in our own way," said one student.

Theme 2: Hostel as a Supportive Living Environment

Teachers and students pointed out that hostel facilities ensured continuous care and supervision. "Living together builds a family feeling," remarked one respondent.

Theme 3: Limitations and Adaptive Use of Resources

While some infrastructural constraints existed, teachers compensated creatively. For example, one teacher said, "Even if we lack some tools, we prepare tactile charts by hand."

Parental Involvement

Theme 1: Parents as Emotional Anchors

Students described their parents as their greatest source of encouragement. “My parents always tell me that education will make me independent,” shared one respondent.

Theme 2: Active Participation in Education

Teachers reported that many parents regularly visited schools, attended meetings, and followed up on their child’s progress. “Parents ask us how to help at home,” explained one teacher.

Theme 3: Collaboration Between Parents and Teachers

Narratives suggested a strong parent-teacher partnership. Students noted that this cooperation boosted their confidence. “When my teacher and parents talk together, I feel they all care for me,” shared a student.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to explore the school environment of visually impaired students in the Blind Schools of Assam through an in-depth qualitative inquiry. The thematic analysis revealed consistent patterns across dimensions, which can be meaningfully discussed in light of existing research and theoretical perspectives.

Firstly, the availability of teachers emerged as a critical factor in ensuring both academic and emotional support for VI students. Teachers’ physical presence within the school and hostel environment aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the role of immediate caregivers in shaping the microsystem of children. Prior studies (Creswell, 2018; Ainscow, 2020) also affirm that continuous teacher support creates a sense of security and fosters learning among children with special needs.

Secondly, the teacher–taught relationship was marked by mutual trust, respect, and affection, resonating with Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, which highlights the centrality of guided interaction in learning. The finding that teachers acted as motivators echoes research by Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011), which stresses the role of emotional scaffolding in inclusive education. This suggests that in Assam’s blind schools, relational bonds are as significant as instructional practices in promoting resilience among students.

Thirdly, regarding the school curriculum and adaptations, the study found that while the general state syllabus was followed, effective modifications such as Braille, tactile materials, and audio resources made learning accessible. This is consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates multiple means of representation and engagement for diverse learners (Meyer & Rose, 2014). The emphasis on life skills training also reflects best practices in special education, where holistic development is prioritized.

Fourthly, school facilities and infrastructure, though limited in some aspects, were adapted resourcefully by teachers and students. This reflects a culture of resilience and innovation, where lack of resources does not necessarily become a barrier to learning. Previous research (Miles, 2000) has similarly highlighted how schools in resource-constrained contexts can thrive through adaptive practices.

Finally, parental involvement was found to be a cornerstone of student success. Parents not only provided emotional reassurance but also actively collaborated with teachers. This supports Epstein’s (1995) model of parental involvement, which emphasizes home–school partnerships as vital to children’s learning outcomes. For VI students in Assam, parents’ encouragement seems to reinforce both academic motivation and self-confidence.

Overall, the findings suggest that the school environment in Assam’s blind schools is shaped by a synergy of teacher dedication, adaptive pedagogy, parental support, and resourceful management of facilities. While infrastructural challenges exist, the strong interpersonal bonds and collaborative networks compensate for limitations, offering a nurturing environment for visually impaired learners.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored the school environment of visually impaired students in the Blind Schools of Assam, with a particular focus on dimensions such as availability of teachers, teacher–taught relationship,

curriculum and adaptations, school facilities, and parental involvement. Using a qualitative exploratory design, the narratives of both teachers and students were thematically analysed to gain an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences.

The findings revealed that the availability of teachers extended far beyond classroom instruction, encompassing emotional and personal guidance. Teachers played a dual role as academic facilitators and caregivers, ensuring that students never felt isolated in their educational journey. The teacher–taught relationship emerged as one of warmth, trust, and mutual respect, thereby reinforcing students' confidence and resilience in the face of challenges.

The study further established that the school curriculum, while aligned with the state syllabus, was meaningfully adapted through Braille, audio resources, tactile materials, and life skill training. This reflects the schools' commitment to inclusivity and holistic development. Similarly, school facilities and infrastructure, although constrained in certain respects, were effectively utilized and adapted by both teachers and students, demonstrating resourcefulness and dedication.

Another significant dimension was parental involvement, which emerged as a strong pillar of support. Parents not only encouraged their children emotionally but also actively collaborated with teachers, thus strengthening the home–school partnership. This synergy between school and family provided a conducive environment for academic growth as well as personal development.

Overall, the study concludes that the school environment of visually impaired students in Assam is characterized by a culture of care, adaptability, and collaboration. Despite infrastructural and resource limitations, the combined efforts of teachers, parents, and students themselves create a learning atmosphere that is nurturing and empowering.

The research contributes to the understanding that inclusive education is not solely dependent on material resources but also on human relationships, adaptive practices, and community involvement. The insights gained can inform policymakers, educational planners, and practitioners about the importance of strengthening teacher training, enhancing parental engagement, and providing more accessible resources for visually impaired learners. In essence, the findings affirm that when supported by a compassionate school environment and strong family involvement, visually impaired students can not only overcome barriers but also thrive as confident and independent learners.

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