

ISSN: 2583-603X (PRINT)

Theme:
Evidence-Based Practice and Disability Research across the Life Span

TISS JOURNAL OF DISABILITY STUDIES AND RESEARCH

A Peer Reviewed Journal
Half Yearly Journal
Volume-VI • Issue I • June 2026
RNI Number- MAHENG/2021/81181
Formerly (UGC-CARE)

RE-IMAGINING FUTURES
TISS
नवति NAVATI
1936-2026
ISSN: 2583-603X (PRINT)



Theme:
Evidence-Based Practice and Disability Research across the Life Span

TISS JOURNAL OF DISABILITY STUDIES AND RESEARCH

A Peer Reviewed Journal

Half Yearly Journal
Volume VI • Issue I • June 2026
Formerly (UGC-CARE)

TISS Journal of Disability Studies
and Research
Half Yearly Journal
Volume VI • Issue I • June 2026

Index

Editorial and Guidelines

S. No	Authority	Name	Page No.
1.	*Editorial*	*Vaishali Kolhe*	7
2.	*Executive Board*		16
3.	*About the Journal*		22

S. No	Title	Author/Name	Page No.
1.	Reasonable Accommodation and Diagnostic Visibility among Students with Invisible Disabilities in Indian Private Schools	Shrabanti Sen Vatsala Saxena	29
2.	National Disability Audit: Bridging the Implementation Gap under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016	Kajori Bhatnagar Sandeep Bhatnagar	62
3.	Enhancing Inclusivity: A Critical Analysis of Accessibility Challenges and Opportunities for Students with Disabilities in Kerala's College Libraries	Raysh Thomas Suresh B.	79

4.	Pathways to Inclusive Higher Education: Rethinking Accessibility for Students with Disabilities in India	Shiddappa Madar	107
5.	Beyond the Binary: A Scoping Review of Special and Inclusive Education for Dyslexic Learners in Mainstream Indian Classrooms	Manasi Panwar Pushp Lata	127
6.	Unveiling the Faces Of Ableism - A Phenomenological Study among Youth with Disabilities	Asish Dineshan B. Geetha	160

Editorial

TISS Journal of Disability Studies and Research, Volume VI, Issue 1 presents six peer reviewed quality papers on the theme 'Evidence based Practice and Disability Research across the life span'. The sub theme includes Politics of Disablement, Invisible Disabilities, and Special Education vs. Inclusive Education.

Disability Studies in India is an emerging academic discipline in rehabilitation sciences, engineering, social work and social sciences. The scientific discipline emerges from the body of knowledge consists of evidence based knowledge and practices. Disability Research across the life span is essential to centre stage concerns of persons with disabilities and works towards their inclusion as development agenda in the larger domain of sustainable development of all, leaving no one behind.

In Indian context, the evidence based body of knowledge has been empirically developed by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Centre for Disability Studies and Action as first centre established by University Grants Commission in the year 2006, Which is completing its twenty years of journey as a Centre. The Centre started its first of its kind, M.A. Programme in Social Work with specialisation in 'Disability Studies and Action' recognised by the Rehabilitation Council of India as an apex body of the Government of India, responsible for the quality and standardised education in the field of rehabilitation and disability sector in the country. Today nearly, 17 batches

of students have graduated since its inception completing this course with a two years substantial thesis in the field of Disability Studies and social work discipline. The thesis consist of disability centric research with evidence based knowledge as well as practices across the life span of human development in context of lives of persons with disabilities and their significant stakeholders such as families, teachers, employers, government organisations, Ministries, etc. Nearly three hundred and fifty M.A. Dissertation in the discipline of social work with specialisation in Disability Studies and Action are available today as a rich body of knowledge at the library of TISS with qualitative, quantitative and mixed methodologies highlighting the trajectory of ecosystem of persons with disabilities and factors affecting their lives.

Disability Inclusion is an unequivocal strategy of United Nations to facilitate inclusion in all spheres of life of the persons with disability for their sustainable development. This is an important thread in contemporary academics, critical policy analysis with special reference to persons with disability in multidisciplinary context. This highlights the questions of access, participation, values of equality and equity in everyday life of persons with disability.

The gap between formal recognition and lived experience remains a significant concern in disability studies. In India, this gap is shaped by the complex interplay of accessibility, reasonable accommodation, infrastructure, pedagogy, institutional practices, and social attitudes. The papers brought together in this issue examines these concerns from empirical, conceptual, and review-based perspectives. Taken together, they remind us that inclusion cannot be measured by legislation, administrative provisions, or physical access alone. It must also be understood through the experiences of persons with disabilities, the ways institutions are designed

and managed, and the extent to which these systems enable people to participate with dignity.

The first paper titled as *'Reasonable Accommodation and Diagnostic Visibility among Students with Invisible Disabilities in Indian Private Schools'*authored by Shrabanti Sen and Vatsala Sexena from the Ambedkar University, New Delhi. The Qualitative study has been done to interpret, and document the implementation of reasonable accommodation in private urban schools interpreting meanings, revealing institutional procedures, capturing stakeholder experiences, and observing everyday practices rather than measuring prevalence or outcomes. The theoretical framework of Critical Disability Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis used to study the language, the ableist stereotypes, institutional barriers, and the position of disability in the social and educational context of private schools in Delhi and Kolkata. The authors introduce the concept of "diagnostic visibility" to explore how students with conditions such as ADHD, specific learning disabilities, and autism spectrum disorder become recognised within school systems as special needs children. Their findings suggest that while reasonable accommodation can open doors to participation, it can also create experiences of conditional belonging, surveillance, and stigma when support is closely tied to documentation and deficit-based identification and increase labelling of children with disability. The study articulates the evidence based knowledge with critical and diagnostic lens. However, study recommends use of social model of disability to change the attitudes of school based stakeholders towards disability rights and early intervention as a best practice. The paper adds important dimension about student's dignity, participation and sense of belongingness in everyday life in classrooms promoting social inclusion in classroom.

The second paper *'National Disability Audit: Bridging the implementation gap under the Rights of Persons with disability Act. 2016'*, authored by Kajori Bhatnagar, Assistant Professor, South Asian University, New Delhi and Dr Sandeep Bhatnagar (I.A.S. Retired). This paper proposes a periodic, multi-layered, and nationally applicable National Disability Audit Framework (NDAF) prepared using secondary data analysis of various Ministries to evaluate the RPwD Act is being carried out across state governments and public agencies. The proposed National Disability Audit framework (NDAF) is structured around four objectives. The objectives aim to build accountability, compliance, ongoing monitoring, and close the gap between the objectives of policy documents and the reporting of achievements through various secondary level data review. The first objective is to create a periodic and structured assessment mechanism covering all disability-related domains to analyse the resources using Planning Commission of India, 2008; NITI Aayog, 2021 data. The second objective is to frame recommendations to fill gaps across all disability-related provisions. The third objective facilitates participation among persons with disabilities and their stakeholders by collating voices of people with disabilities as beneficiaries of schemes. The fourth objective is to strengthen implementation of the RPwD Act provisions in all government departments as broader recommendations. The paper highlights the aspirations of an IAS Professional to critically analyse the government mechanisms and identify gaps in the schemes on disability and its implementation mechanisms. The paper contributes to the body of knowledge through evidence based data analysis of the apex ministries of the country to understand the gaps in the system and suggest policy recommendations. The thorough literature review and commending robust disability audit framework significantly

contributes to the disability research in India and evidence based practices under disability studies at the policy level ensuring accountability.

The third paper is titled as *'Enhancing Inclusivity: A critical analysis of Accessibility Challenges and opportunities for students with disabilities in Kerala's college Libraries'*, authored by Raysh Thomas and Suresh B from The Library and Information Science, Madurai Kamaraj University. The study examines accessibility in college libraries in Kerala through survey of 66 students with disabilities. The study brings attention to physical infrastructures, measures creating an sensitivity in environment as enabling and participatory environment. The infrastructure accessibility involved, available ramps, lifts and tactical signage to some extent as facility for navigation largely catering to visual impairment. The paper recommends on accessibility and staff preparedness to create an enabling academic environment beyond infrastructure. The paper is as per the theme of the journal and contributes to the body of knowledge in disability sector.

The fourth paper is titled as *'Pathways to Inclusive Higher Education: Rethinking Accessibility for Students with Disabilities in India'* authored by Shiddappa Madar, Assistant Professor, Social Work, Government First Grade College, Mysuru A systematic literature review, conducted in line with PRISMA guidelines (2000), analysed national and international scholarly works. Only academic sources addressing accessibility in Indian higher education were included. The framework of the four A's – Accessible infrastructure, Accessibility audit, Assistive devices, and Awareness- is used in advancing higher education as a more inclusive and equitable higher education system in India. The paper is as per the theme of the journal and contributes to the body of knowledge in disability sector. What makes this

framework useful is its attempt to bring physical, procedural, technological, and attitudinal dimensions of inclusion together. The paper consequently argues that access cannot be secured through isolated measures. Rather, it calls for a coordinated and sustained institutional response grounded in rights, regular review, and responsiveness to the needs of students with disabilities

The fifth paper titled as '*Beyond the Binary: A Scoping Review of Special and Inclusive Education for Dyslexic Learners in Mainstream Indian Classrooms'*, authored by Manasi Panwar and Pushp Lata, from Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Birla Institute of Technology and Sciences, Pilani. This paper revisits the often sharply drawn distinction between special education and inclusive education. Based on a scoping review of literature published between 2010 and 2025, the paper argues that these approaches need not be treated as competing or mutually exclusive, particularly when considering dyslexic learners in middle school classrooms. Specialised support, the authors suggest, can be meaningfully integrated within inclusive settings when teaching and learning are designed with learner diversity in mind from the outset. Writing emerges in the paper as an important site of exclusion, but also as a space where re-inclusion can take place. The author highlights the importance of Universal Design for Learning-based framework for writing instruction to shift attention to design framework in context of inclusive education

The sixth paper titled as *'Unveiling the Faces Of Ableism – A Phenomenological Study among Youth with Disabilities'* authored by Asish Dineshan and Dr. B. Geetha, Assistant Professor Department of Sociology, Madurai Kamaraj University. This study used a qualitative approach combined with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to understand the lived realities of young six male adults with disabilities. The results exhibits four critical themes with description

of narratives of faces of ableism as a phenomenon. The transcript of each interview was analysed thoroughly and four major themes were emerged: (1) The World Is Not Built for Me. Where Can I Go and What Can I Do? (2) Treat Me as a Human Being First. Why Do You See Me as Different? (3) Can I Choose My Own Education? Who Decides What I Am Capable Of? And (4) Communication Is Universal, But Who Listens to Me? The article clearly highlights the voices of various categories of youth with disabilities of visual impairment, Locomotor impairments and intellectual disabilities. The findings point out the need that it is to address and eradicate ableism from mind set and recommends an attitudinal shift towards understanding and adopting proactive measures towards enabling environment for all.

Thematically, all the Six papers' running thread is contributing to the body of knowledge in disability studies and adhering to the evidence based practices to contribute to disability research. The papers highlights from the gap between formal provision and substantive inclusion of persons with disabilities and suggest recommendations. The six papers from the school's reasonable accommodation by PhD scholar in disability studies, disability audits framework suggested by an Retired, I.A.S Official, library accessibility in higher education suggested by Librarians, classroom pedagogy, or lived experience, the evidence based knowledge is highlighted at institutional governance mechanism to policy level, support mechanism, guarantee participation of persons with disabilities The papers highlights institutional practices that are accountable, accessible, pedagogical approaches that recognise learner's diversity to provide enabling environment with larger goal of full inclusion of persons with disabilities in all spheres of life, leaving no one behind.

Vaishali Kolhe

TISS Journal of Disability Studies and Research

ISSN: 2583-603X (PRINT)

TISS Journal of Disability Studies and Research attempts to work on serious engagement of faculty, students, practitioners on scientific enquiry & critical questions about lives of Person with Disabilities. The aim is to initiate the knowledge building process through rigorous multidisciplinary enquiry towards encouraging them to develop knowledge on disability studies and action research. The Journal attempts to develop multidisciplinary subject knowledge to add to the body of existing knowledge. The Journal invites research papers, manuscripts, reporting of original research,case comments, ethnographic studies, book reviews, empirical studies, scientific innovations, disability studies, social work through needs assessment, survey analysis or action work related to disability. The social science, humanities, any discipline highlighting academic research on disability issues to create scientific knowledge, scientific engagement contributing o disability studies, research into social policies and law, special education. Selected papers will be published in the issue. The Journal has been started in the year June 2021 as biannual Journal (June, December). This is an english journal with multi disciplinary subject.

EXECUTIVE BOARD

Editorial Board		
Chief Editor	1.	Dr. Vaishali Kolhe Associate Professor, Centre for Disability Studies and Action, TISS vaishali@tiss.edu, vaishali@tiss.ac.in
Associate Editors	1.	Prof. Vaishali Bambole, Professor, Dept of Physics, University of Mumbai vaishali.bambole@physics.mu.ac.in
	2.	Dr. Shamim Modi, Chairperson, Centre for Law and Society, School of Law , Rights and Constitutional Governance, TISS shamim@tiss.edu
Editorial Board Members Consulting Editors	1.	Prof. Jahanara Gajendragad, Head of Dept. Psychiatric Social Work, Institute of Human Behavior and Allied Sciences, (IBHAS) Delhi
	2.	Prof. Harshad Thakur, Professor, Centre for Public Health , School of Health System Studies, TISS. harshad@tiss.edu
	3.	Prof. Sanjay Jain, Principal, ILS, Law Department, Pune University
	4.	Prof. (Dr.) Krishan Mahajan, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of India, Former Dean, NLUO
	5.	Prof. (Dr.) Priti Saxena, The Vice Chancellor, HPNLU, Shimla
	6.	Prof. Yogesh Pratap Singh, Hon. Vice-Chancellor, NLU Tripura, Former Registrar, NLUO. vc@nlutripura.ac.in
	7.	Prof. Bino Paul, Professor, Centre for Human Resource Management and Labour Studies, TISS

Consulting Editors

Editorial Board Members

8. Prof. Gopinath P. Chairperson, Centre for Developing Economics, School of Development Studies, TISS gopinath@tiss.edu
9. Feroz Ikbal, Chairperson, Centre for Hospital Management, School of Health Systems Studies, TISS feroz.ikbal@tiss.edu
10. Sumi Mathew, Ex-Director, Ali Yawar Jung National Institute for Empowerment of Hearing and Speech Disability, Mumbai.
11. Prof. D. Pandiyan, Professor, Dept. of Psychiatric Social Work, NIMHANS, Bangalore
12. Prof. Gaurav Raheja, Professor, Department of Architectural Planning, IIT Roorkie, gaurav.raheja@ar.iitr.ac.in
13. Anjali Kant, Ex HOD, Dept of Speech and Language Disabilities, AYJNISHD(D)
14. Indraneel Chaterjee, Ex-hon. Gen Secretary, Indian Speech –Language and Hearing Association, (ISHA), Mumbai
15. Amit Mhambre, Head of Dept, Associate Professor, Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation, AIIPMR. Haji Ali,
16. Akhilesh K.S. Yadav
    Assistant Professor, CLIM, TISS
17. Preeja Balan, Director, Octave Speech and Hearing Centre, Banglore

Editorial Board Members	18. Rajeev Kumar, Additional Director (Research, Training & Communication) Agadhbodh Foundation, Ranchi.
	19. Ravindra Chingle, Advocate, Supreme Court of India
Consulting Editors	20. Poonam Gulalia, Independent Consultant, Ex Field work Coordinator, TataInstitute of Social Sciences, Mumbai
	21. Nandhu Radhakrishan, Associate Professor, Vocal Arts and Science: Evaluation and Enhancement (VASEE), Dept. of Speech and Hearing Sciences, Lamar University, Texas,USA
	22. Prof. Alireza. D., Head, ICT, Accessibility Lab, ZHAW, University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland.
	23. Dr. Navjit Gaurav, Asst. Professor, Department of Architecture, IIT Roorkee
	24. Prof. Vivek Kumar, Department of Sociology Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi 110067
	25. Prof. Shankar Das, Professor, School of Health Systems Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai
	26. Prof. Anil Sutar, Professor and Dean, School of Research Methodology Dean, Doctoral Students' Office, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai
	27. Prof. D.P. Singh, Professor, School of Research Methodology, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

ADVISORY BOARD

National Advisor	1.	Prof. (Dr.) Faizan Mustafa, Hon. Vice-Chancellor of Chanakya National Law University, Patna
Advisory Board Members Advisors	2.	Prof. M. Pushpavathi, Director, All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, Mysore
	3.	Shri. Nachiketa Raut, Director, National Institute of Empowerment of Multiple Disabilities. Chennai
	4.	Mr. Deependra Manocha, President & Founder, Daisy forum of India, Sakshum Trust, Sugamaya Pustakalaya Founder, New Delhi
	5.	Abhishek Thakur, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work ,University of Delhi
	6.	Commander Bijur, President, Association of Welfare of Mentally Handicapp, Parents Association, Parivar,
	7.	Charudutt Jadhav, Head Accessibility, Centre of Excellence, TCS Research and Innovation. Mumbai
	8.	Indumati Rao, CBR Network, Consultative Status to UN ECOSOC - Associate Member Rehabilitation International—Member, Global
	9.	Mr. Arman Ali, Director, NCPEDP, New Delhi
	10.	Prof. Bipin Jojo, Dean, School of Social Work, TISS

11. Prof. Sandhya Limaye , Professor , Centre For Disability Studies and Action, TISS
12. Madhura N, Assistant Professor, Centre for Disability Studies and Action, TISS
13. Smt. Meenakshi Sarvate, Ex Principle, Deaf and D Industrial Institute. Nagpur
14. Shri. Thiru Johny Tom Vaghese, I.A.S, Disability Commissioner Comminerate for the Welfare of the Differently Abled, Govt. of Tamilnadu, Chennai.
15. M.N. Nagaraja, Ex Director (Technical), S.R. Chandrashekhar Institute of Speech and Hearing, Banglore.
16. Mr. Akeel Usmani, Founder-Director, Disability Rights Advocacy Group (DRAG)
17. Prof. Shubhada Maitra, (Retired) Centre for Health and Mental Health School, School of Social Work, TISS

Editorial Support Committee :

1. Mr. Ram Arvind, Ex-Student-Centre for Disability Studies and Action, TISS, Research Consultant PRIA, Society for Participatory Research in Asia, Delhi
2. Dr Anshuman -Centre for Public Health, School of Health System Studies, TISS, District Consultant, UNICEF
3. Ms. Tania Chatterjee, Ex-Student Centre for Disability Studies and Action, Ex-Research Consultant, National Human Rights Commission, New Delhi
4. Ms. Shazia Qureshi, Ex-Student-Centre for Disability Studies and Action, TISS, Disability Accessibility Consultant NGOs

5. Mr. Pradip Parsure, Disability Prevalence in India, Research Project, TISS
6. Nitin Kumar, Disability Prevalence in India, Research Project, TISS

Research Ethics Committee

1. Prof. Shirish Despande, Ex HOD of Law Nagpur University, National Law University, Nagpur
2. Prof. (Dr) Priti Saxena, Hon. Vice Chancellor, HPNLU, Shimla
3. Prof. Sanjay Jain, Professor of Law, National Law School of India University, Bengaluru
4. Vaishali Kolhe, Associate Professor, Centre for Disability Studies and Action, TISS
5. Rajeev Kumar, Additional Director (Research, Training & Communication) Agadhbodh Foundation, Ranchi
6. Ravindra Chingle, Advocate, Supreme Court of India

External Expert

1. Dr. Suman Kumar, Director, Ali Yawar Jung National Institute of Speech and Hearing Disabilities (Divyangjan), Ministry of Social Justice, Govt. of India, Bandra Reclamation, Mumbai
2. Dr. Ravinder Singh, Co-Chairman GATEC, Assistive Technology, Senior Scientist, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Headquarters, New Delhi

Support Committee :

1. Yamunadevi A, Research Officer, TISS Project

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

TISS Journal of Disability Studies and Research is a Journal of multidisciplinary nature. The English Journal has been started in June 2021 as biannual Journal (June, December). It aims to transcend beyond the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines such as Social Work, Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, law, Technology, Engineering, Media, Medical Sciences, Rehabilitation Sciences, Social sciences to facilitate and develop disability related knowledge, research and innovative practices from the multidisciplinary perspectives. It is peer reviewed/ referred journal of interest to Disability studies professionals, social workers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech and hearing professionals, sociologists, special educators, teachers, legal experts, academia, psychologists, human rights professionals, health care experts, scholars in any discipline working in the disability sector, to contribute to the field of disability studies. This Journal attempts to address the contemporary and critical issues of persons with disability across the life span and epistemological questions. The social model conceptualises the social construction of disability, marginalisation, intersectionality. The Medical Model constitutes early intervention, therapeutic rehabilitation for mainstreaming disability for independent living with dignity. The Journal promotes indigenous work, evidence based practice, field based research, people centred work at grassroots that require scientific enquiry to develop disability studies with bottom up approach. Essentially to understand voices of persons with disability to contribute to the sector and identification of research gaps important for policy makers. Broader aspects are mainstreaming disability in education,

livelihood, and work, family, community are important towards strengthening their sustainable development. The journal deals holistically with issue of disability studies and inclusion with multidisciplinary lens to create an academic space in disciplines on the subject of disability to develop academic rigour and foundation of Disability Studies.

This is a flagship project of the Centre for Disability Studies and Action, TISS. Through this journal, TISS aims to establish a unique platform of multi-faceted discourse on disability in all forms, including epistemological research, evidence based practice, scientific analysis of people centered sustainable development, promote grass root level work, provide voices to people with disabilities and promote rights based approach with UNCRPD framework in the academic spaces and disciplines.

Aim To establish dialogue on multidisciplinary issues of disability and inclusion with an aim to create an evidence based knowledge and innovative practice to strengthen the field of disability studies and promote principles of the UNCRPD framework.

GUIDELINES FOR THE AUTHORS:

A. Submission of Manuscript

1. Communication and Submissions-All submissions and subsequent communications regarding the manuscript may be addressed to the chief editor by email at vaishali@tiss.edu, vaishali@tiss.ac.in
2. Basic Prerequisites for Submission-Before the article goes for peer review following prerequisites are required to be met-a) Title and content of the article shall meet the aim the Journal b) Word limit 5000-8000 words. c) Abstract upto 200 words d) Referencing in APA 7th

edition format as mentioned in the following guidelines. e) Maximum up to four authors.

3. Guidelines-The Manuscript published elsewhere or selected/ submitted for publication elsewhere shall be disqualified The submission should be made in the following manner-

Title Page/Covering Page: The said document must include the following details--

a. Complete manuscript **title**

b. **Declaration by Author** in covering letter with the article submitted is original and belongs to the author(s) and not published elsewhere.

c. *Details of the Authors:* Names of author(s), email address and contact number for correspondence, one-line author note for each author stating current designation and affiliation. About ascertaining authorship -All parties who have contributed to the article should be listed as authors. (i) Criteria for substantive contribution must include concept and design structure of the manuscript; (ii) drafting and/or finalizing the manuscript. In case of multiple authors, the order of naming the contributors should be based on the relative contribution of the contributor towards the study and writing the manuscript.

d. **Abstract** (200 words) should consist of brief description of study, methodological specifications, pedagogy, findings/outcome.

e. **Key words**-6-8 words

f. **Word Limit**- Articles (5000 to 8000 words) Papers that comprehensively analyse a theme and engage with the existing literature.

g. **Essays** (5000 to 6000 words) Papers that concisely analyse specific contemporary issues in Disability studies

h. **Manuscript Submission** - Title, Abstract, Key Words, Introduction, Literature Review, Research Design/ Pedagogy/Methodology, Analytical Discussion, Key Findings, Conclusion, Scope and Limitation.

i. *Acknowledgements:* All contributors who do not meet the authorship criteria should be acknowledged. Please note that acknowledgements should only include people who may have provided technical in the form of acquisition of funding, data collection and not otherwise.

j. *Funding:* The funding involved in the preparation of the manuscript needs to be declared. In case no funding was received, the same should be stated as "This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors" If self-financed it can mentioned as Self-financed.

k. *Declaration of conflict of interest:* The authors must disclose any conflicts of interest they may have with publication of the manuscript or an institution or product that is mentioned in the manuscript and/or is important to the outcome of the study presented. Authors should also disclose conflict of interest with products that compete with those mentioned in their manuscript.

l. Contact information of the corresponding author (name, address, phone and email) shall be mentioned at left corner first page after key words

B. Preparation of the Manuscript

a. All pages must be double-spaced (including notes and references) with margins measuring at least 1 inch. Use 12 point and Times New Roman font. The submission type must adhere the word limit mentioned in the '**Submission types admitted to the Journal'** section.

b. *Referencing Style:* Manuscripts should follow the style of American Psychological Association (7th Edition).

The APA website may be referred for learning to write in APA-7 Citation Format.

c. **Using Inclusive Language:** Inclusive language demonstrates valuing equality, human sensitivity towards dignity to all, acceptance for diversity, human differences and convey valuing all people irrespective of class, caste, ablism. The content shall not amplify superiority over others in relation to class, caste, culture, ableism, race and it should not promote any discrimination to anyone. The idea is to promote inclusive language in the Journal of Disability Studies

d. **Elaboration of the Editorial work:** The Journal adheres to peer review, transparent peer review system. The Publication Policies are that the <Name of the Journal> takes copyright infringement, plagiarism and other breaches seriously.

e. **Contact Details**: vaishali@tiss.ac.in, vaishali@tiss.edu, 8850038149 , 022 25525401 (TISS Landline No.)

f. **APA Referencing Style (7th Edition)** to be followed by authors Kindly visit this site -https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/apa7threv.pdf

g. **Copyright Statement -** Articles belong to the TISS Journal of Disability Studies and Research, Mumbai and Centre for Disability Studies and Action TISS.

GUIDELINES FOR BOOK REVIEWERS

1. **Communication**: All the emails related to book review should be sent to the Chief Editor of the Journal at vaishali@tiss.ac.in, vaishali@tiss.edu

2. **Preliminary requirements**: The book being reviewed should be aligned to the goals and scope of the Journal as mentioned in the above guidelines of the Journal.

3. **Expectation of the Book Review:** The transcript should review the following:
   i) objectives/theme addressed, organization of the matter and how the arguments are structured; ii) it is contemporary relevance and analysis of how the work contributes to the relevant field(s) of knowledge and/or theoretical literature;
   iii) Level of expertise and knowledge required by the reader to appreciate the book's content;
   iv) if any
4. **Submission of the Transcript for Book Review**
   i) The review must adhere to the word limit of 1500 word limit and adhere to mentioned guidelines in the 'Submission types admitted to the Journal' section.
   ii) The book review must contain the publication and reviewer data above the main text, using this format:
   - The Title of the Book, Series Title (Place of Publication: Publisher, Date of Publication). Pp.. cloth, paper.* ISBN.
   - Reviewed by book reviewers,
   - Reviews should not require notes.

   iii) Essay Book Review. The descriptive and detail book review can be done in 3500 words keeping the above guidelines for book review.
5. All submissions and subsequent communications regarding the manuscript may be addressed to of the <Chief editor> vaishali@tiss.edu . In case of electronic submission, kindly send it to <Chief Editor> vaishali@tiss.edu, vaishali@tiss.ac.in and copy it to vaishalikolhe2020@gmail.com.

Reasonable Accommodation and Diagnostic Visibility among Students with Invisible Disabilities in Indian Private Schools

About the Authors :
Shrabanti Sen
Vatsala Saxena

Contact Information of the corresponding authors :

Shrabanti Sen
PhD Scholar, (Disability Studies)
Ambedkar University Delhi
Head of Department,
Additional Learning Support Department
Pathways World School, Delhi
Email – i.shrabanti@gmail.com

Vatsala Saxena
Assistant Professor (Psychology)
School of Undergraduate Studies,
Ambedkar University, Delhi
Email – vatsala@aud.ac.in

Abstract

This paper understands reasonable accommodation as an evidence-based practice for inclusive education of students with disabilities in Indian schools. It is essential to understand invisible disabilities in this context of reasonable accommodations because learners with ADHD/ADD, Specific Learning Disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and overlapping neurodevelopmental profiles are often identified through school-based judgments and not visible

impairment. To explain this process, the paper develops the concept of diagnostic visibility, referring to the way student profiles become visible as learners who need "support". Being qualitative, this research is based on interviews with students, parents, and school members of seven private schools in Delhi and Kolkata.

The paper employs Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Disability Studies. The research uncovers three interconnected processes: First, students are typically identified through the use of deficit-focused institutional language. Second, evidence is accumulated prior to the assessment and documentation. Third, accommodations are limited to what can be recorded, audited, and defended.

The paper discusses that, while through reasonable accommodation, grant access, it may also be the case that such access leads to more control, stigma, and being conditionally part of the group, in case no change occurs in mainstream classroom practices. The final argument is that reasonable accommodation should not only be judged by whether support is provided, but also by whether this support enhances the dignity, participation, and belonging of students with invisible disabilities.

Keywords: Reasonable Accommodations, invisible disabilities, inclusive education, special education, diagnostic visibility, disability Studies, neurodivergence, critical disability studies

Introduction

In India, both at the legal and policy levels, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and the National Education Policy, 2020, acknowledge the right to education for students with disabilities. Reasonable accommodation (RA) is a key element of this acknowledgment. It means making changes in teaching, assessment, participation, and school environments

that help students with disabilities overcome their difficulties (Government of India, 2016, 2020). In the school setup, this includes providing RA through additional time during examinations, using differentiated instruction during classes, using assistive technology like calculators, word processors, or having flexible seating arrangements. Nonetheless, legal recognition cannot ensure inclusive practices.

Studies on inclusive education in India have illustrated that the disconnect between policy and the real-life school environment is still very large. Disability continues to be viewed primarily from a medical perspective, and students are pushed to conform to ableist standards of "normal" learning, behaviour, attention, and academic achievement (Ghai, 2015; Singal, 2005; Slee, 2011). More importantly, the everyday institutional processes, which a student has to go through to be considered for accommodation, are the least attended to. These processes comprise teacher observations, referral notes, parent-school communication, remedial records, diagnostic reports, and board-related documentation.

This paper examines neurodivergent students attending urban private schools in Delhi and Kolkata. The research involves students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD/ADD), Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as well as those having co-occurring neurodevelopmental conditions. The mention of these disabilities reflects that they are not always obvious at first sight. However, they are manifested in schools when students show struggle through aspects such as handwriting speed, reading fluency, attention, organization, social interaction, written expression, and test-taking. For quite a few students, their path to accommodation actually starts even before undergoing a formal diagnosis. It happens by means of classroom observation, teacher concern, parental

negotiation, and the school gradually noting the student's difficulties.

One of the main concepts for analysis in this paper is diagnostic visibility. By diagnostic visibility the authors mean the institutional procedure through which a student is identified as requiring assistance even at the stage of the formal diagnosis, if not before, or after. A student can easily be labelled inattentive, restless, slow, disruptive, careless, or weak without being recognized as experiencing obstacles in the learning environment. Such labels matter significantly since they influence how schools view the student and what kind of support can be offered.

The paper asks: How do private urban schools in India conceptualize, evidence, and practice reasonable accommodations for neurodivergent students?

The study highlights that RA is implemented as a multi-step procedure. First, deficit language highlights the student. Then, pedagogical support is turned into proof. Lastly, documentation not only legitimizes accommodation but also restricts the recognition of support. Through this, RA may open a door for the student, but it may also turn the student into a case to be handled, managed, and explained.

Conceptual Framework

Reasonable Accommodations and Disability Rights

RA is a central concept to disability rights because it shifts attention from individual deficit to the responsibility of institutions to remove barriers. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), RA is the modification or adjustment of procedures, practices, and policies that do not impose a

disproportionate or undue burden upon individuals. These accommodations should allow persons with disabilities an opportunity to enjoy their rights on the same basis as others (United Nations, 2006). In India, RA is defined by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (Government of India, 2016), which introduces a rights-based model within its national legal framework.

In terms of education, while there are laws recognizing this right, it does not always lead to changes in pedagogy. Examples of accommodations made during examinations such as additional time, readers, scribes, separate location from other students, and modified examination formats may result in easier access to examinations; however, classroom design may not correspondingly change. This distinction is important, as accommodations to pass an exam may improve access to examinations, but do not necessarily change how a child learns in class. Thus, a child may have accommodations to complete a test but remain marginalized when it comes to the way he/she learns in the classroom.

Critical Disability Studies and Ableist Schooling

Critical Disability Studies (CDS) examines disability as created by the social, institutional, and epistemic systems of the world (Campbell, 2009; Goodley, 2014). There are some dominant (normalized) ways of doing things in schools that operate from an assumption that all students will be able to move quickly, keep their work neat, pay attention, behave consistently, complete a large number of tasks successfully, and do well in examinations. The result of these expectations is the idea of an ideal student who is independent, has a brain that works the same way as most people (neurotypical), and is ready for assessment. When students don't meet these

expectations, it is common for them to be seen as being either deficient or disruptive rather than as being students who are learning in an environment that isn't accessible to them.

The Indian disability literature has documented how the concept of ableism interacts with meritocracy, with familial aspirations, and with recognition from bureaucratic institutions (Ghai, 2015; Singal, 2005). In these situations, accommodations made to help SwD are frequently perceived as a concession to an exception (an exceptional student), rather than an obligation (an obligation on behalf of the institution). The aim of this paper is to continue building on the current literature by investigating how the concept of RA is given meaning through school routines, teachers' language, parents' actions, and documents.

Critical Discourse Analysis and the Visibility of Diagnosis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to examine how institutional language creates educational realities. As Fairclough (1992, 2003) states, discourse is a type of social practice. Van Dijk (1993) has identified that discourse can be used to reproduce the social inequalities that are created by shared ideologies and access to institutions. As a result, terms like *slow, careless, weak, support, concession, different learner, and not ready* will be used in this study as institutional categories instead of neutral descriptors.

The term diagnostic visibility refers to the process of creating pre-diagnostic pathways that allow students who can be assessed and provided accommodations based on their perceived need. The idea of diagnostic visibility is not limited to those who obtain an official diagnosis; it encompasses the building of a case for providing accommodation through the

accumulation of teacher observational data, referral records, remediation records, parent communication, support logs, and diagnostic reports. As such, diagnostic visibility is a continuous process of meaning-making in the institutional context. Understanding how diagnostic visibility operates can provide students access to appropriate support, but it can also create inclusion through surveillance, stigmatization, and conditional belonging with respect to SwD.

Diagnostic Visibility

Diagnosing visibility is an aspect that relates to the process of becoming officially recognized as someone who needs accommodation prior to diagnosis. Diagnosing visibility entails the gathering of data about a student through teacher observation, referral data, documentation of remediation, parent contacts, accommodation notes, and diagnostic results. Diagnosing visibility can be an important tool for allowing students access to accommodations; however, diagnosing visibility can turn the diversity of the learner into a deficit that is recorded in a file. Diagnosing visibility, therefore, becomes an essential component of examining invisible disabilities in schools.

Methodology

Research Design

The main focus of the study was to understand, interpret, and document the implementation of reasonable accommodation in private urban schools through a qualitative case-study approach. Qualitative research was a perfect fit as the study revolved around interpreting meanings, revealing institutional procedures, capturing stakeholder experiences, and observing everyday practices rather than measuring prevalence or outcomes.

The current study is developed on the framework of Critical Disability Studies (CDS) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The theoretical structure of CDS helped in analysing the ableist stereotypes, institutional barriers, and the position of disability in the social and educational context. CDA on the other hand, was used a tool to explore how language, texts, and institutional habits demarcate certain students as those with "special needs".

RA, therefore, is not enacted via legal frameworks, but is manifested through institutional discourse and the process of documentation. Hence, school documents like the teacher referral forms, parent correspondence, assessment reports, IEPs, and accommodation documents were treated as discursive resources. These materials were analysed to observe how students with invisible disabilities were institutionally identified as *slow, careless, under-concern, challenging, etc.*

The findings and analysis were conducted in three interrelated steps of CDA. First, the paper aimed to understand the text features in the documents, primarily analysing frequently used terms, descriptors, and categories that are often employed to describe students and their learning challenges. Second, it studies discursive practices such as how issues were documented, circulated, warranted, and transformed into proof for referring a student for psychometric assessments or accommodations. Third, it analysed the broader social and institutional practices. For example, how the school standards are determined, what are the board requirements that schools comply with, what information is withheld at school, and what is shared with parents; above all, how a learner becomes the *difficult one* or *someone who needs accommodations.* Together, these three interrelated processes helped the current paper to link the everyday language used in schools with a

wider structure of ableism, evidence, and institutional power.

The current study is reported in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria For Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007). The overview of the focus group is mentioned in Table 1.

Setting and Participants

The study was carried out in seven private English-medium urban schools in India located in Delhi and Kolkata. These schools were chosen as they advertise themselves as inclusive schools and have considerable resources, followed by well-established special education departments. It was essential to analyse these educational contexts to understand how well-resourced schools practice exclusion and inclusion despite the presence of all necessary frameworks. These schools represent different curriculum boards like CBSE, ICSE, NIOS, and IB.

Purposive sampling was done based on the stakeholder involvement in the RA process. This included students, parents, mainstream educators, and special educators. All these stakeholders are either directly involved in receiving RA or mediating the process or directly referring and coordinating with the RA process.

The sample included 18 students, 9 from Delhi and 9 from Kolkata. 11 males and 7 females were studying across Grades 4 to 12. All students were diagnosed with neurodevelopmental conditions such as SLD, ADHD, ASD, and comorbidities. 18 family members were interviewed for each student, 8 mainstream teachers and special educators, and 4 school principals. Together, they provided a holistic understanding of the RA process, implementation, and the afterlife of RA.

Table 1

Participant and data source summary

Participant/ source category	Number	Role in analysis	Data source
Students with neuro developmental / invisible disabilities	18	Experiences of learning, support, stigma, diagnosis, and belonging	Interviews; observations in 16 cases
Parents / guardians	18	Advocacy, assessment, documentation, and school communication	Interviews
Teachers / special educators	8	Classroom support, referral, documentation, and workload	Interviews; documents
Principals / inclusion coordinators	4	Institutional policy, board requirements, and accommodation decisions	Interviews
Institutional documents and fieldnotes	Multiple site-based artefacts	Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), referral notes, communication records, observations, and policy-linked artefacts	Document analysis; fieldnotes

Data Sources and Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations in the classroom and school, fieldnotes, and institutional documents. Interviews were about how the participants understood disability, support, classroom participation, access to assessment, and documentation. The interviews were conducted in English, Bengali, or a combination of Hindi and English as per the participant's convenience. Observations focused on classroom participation, pull-out activities, learning support activities, and interactions with teachers and peers. For each student participant, at least two institutional documents were analyzed if available, which included IEPs, referral notes, accommodations provided, communication with parents/guardians, and support-related artifacts.

The researcher had access to on-site data collection through observations for 16 out of 18 students for three to seven days, depending on institutional permission. Observations were conducted in regular classrooms, learning support settings, the IEP process, and informal school settings. Interviews, observations, and documents were triangulated in order to compare the documentation of support provided in the institution with that of the student, parent, and educator experience. This was particularly essential since an accommodation like pull-out intervention may have been mentioned in the file as accommodation, but experienced by the student as relief and exclusion.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through thematic coding combined with Critical Discourse Analysis. The analysis started with repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and institutional documents.

At the first stage, unstructured coding was employed to surface recurring descriptors, practices, emotions, and institutional routines. These included descriptors like *careless, slow, under-concern, favour, extra work for teachers, parental responsibility, not ready for mainstream classroom, etc.*

During the second stage, these codes were merged with larger analytical categories, including diagnostic visibility, using pedagogy as evidence, documentary supremacy, surveillance, stigma, and conditional belonging. The aim here was to analyse how these themes were produced through school language, everyday institutional practices, and the process of documentation that converts the learner into a file.

In stage three, we employed CDA to track how language and documentation construct the concept of RA operating at three levels. Terms like *slow learner, weak, careless, concession, support, and not classroom ready* were understood as institutional categories rather than neutral descriptors. Discursively, the analysis examines how teacher concerns, parental narratives, remedial records, diagnostic reports, and accommodation files position the student as eligible or not eligible for RA. From the social practice perspective, the expectation of academic speed, independence, written expression, behavioural control, and examination readiness precedes diversity among students.

Silences and absences during interaction and observations were analysed as data. This also included gaps in school records, differences in whose voices were deemed credible, and which recommendations were implemented or ignored. These instances also contribute to the accommodation process. For example, a parent reporting a difficulty may be acknowledged informally by the school but would not have any formal recognition for accommodations.

To strengthen the credibility, data triangulation was undertaken across four sources: interviews, observations, fieldnotes, and institutional documents. A reflexive memo-writing, and repeated checking of emerging themes against the original data. Because the study adopted CDA, the focus was not on achieving statistical inter-rater reliability but rather on ensuring the analysis was credible, consistent, and transparent. Authors deliberated over chosen codes and themes to tweak the understanding while diminishing the individual interpretation bias. Disagreements or unclear points were considered as potentially fruitful for the analysis, especially if they brought to light the conflicts between the student's experience, the parent's account, the teacher's judgment, and the institutional documentation. This approach not only ensured that the final themes were supported by the data but also that they reflected the study's critical disability framework.

Findings

Four main findings emerged from the analysis: firstly, students came into visibility prior to diagnosis via deficit-oriented language used by institutions; secondly, pedagogical interventions provided proof of accommodation; thirdly, documentation validated support while constraining it; and finally, accommodation created access as well as conditional belonging. Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of addressing the conflict between special and inclusive education that lies at the heart of this paper. Pull-outs, remedial classes, and examination accommodations might be essential, but they do not solve the problem of the regular classroom.

Deficit Descriptors Produced Pre-Diagnostic Visibility

Before formal diagnoses, students frequently manifested institutional visibility through deficit descriptors. Teachers often described students as careless, weak, restless, immature, disruptive, and not ready for school. Descriptions of each student as *"careless", "lazy"*, etc., can be found in referral notes, meetings with parents, classroom discussions, and during teacher interviews. These deficit descriptions created actions for teachers, and as a result, some students were more likely to be monitored, sent to resource rooms for services, placed on a watch list, and/or talked about with their parents.

> *"He is a very intelligent boy, but he does not apply himself fully. He keeps disturbing others, lazy about his work, not serious about academics at all." (Teacher, School C)*

This verbatim highlights how diversity in terms of attention and behaviour is read through the ethical lexicon of seriousness, effort, and discipline. The student was acknowledged as intelligent; however, his distractions were understood as a behavioural problem rather than reflecting on the possibility of executive-functioning issues, environmental concerns, classroom set-up, or other sensory issues. As a result, the learner variability was understood as a personal flaw – being lazy, not serious, a concern that requires personal accountability over

> *"She makes silly mistakes all the time. She is always writing the wrong numbers, writing reverse letters, missing steps while copying from the board. Sometimes we think she is just careless." (Teacher, School E)*

In this instance, multiple errors in sequencing, writing numbers, and letter reversals were grouped as being

"*careless"*. Symptoms that might have been manifesting signs of processing difficulty, working memory load, anxiety, or insufficient instructions were read as evidence of the student's effort. These deficit descriptors serve as a form of pre-diagnostic sorting that leads to treating a student like a case who requires tracking, referral, or remedial intervention, before a formal intervention takes place.

> *"Teachers think I am slow, even if I do well, everyone thinks it is because I had* This narrative illustrates the process by which institutional labels influenced a student's view of themselves and their standing among peers. When a student was labelled as "slow" or "weak, " the achievement of academic success might be seen as relying on help rather than being a demonstration of one's ability. This led to a kind of recognition that was conditional: the student was accepted, but expectations were lowered. For some of those students, the labels caused feelings of embarrassment, self-doubt, and even anger. Some other students got so baffled by those labels that they didn't even know if the problem was with their effort, ability, diagnosis, or the very structure of the teaching.

Overall, these verbatims indicate that the process of making reasonable accommodations is, in fact, frequently initiated even before a formal diagnosis, simply through daily routines of observing, acknowledging, and recording differences. The use of deficit terminology makes the studied group or persons "visible" to the institution but at the same time gives a moral dimension to learning difficulties by depicting them as a lack of pot seriousness, care, maturity, or discipline. Such visibility even before the diagnosis is therefore double-edged: On the one hand, it can enable the student to access support, whereas,

on the other hand, it may lead to the student being stigmatized even before formal accommodation is contemplated.

This discovery is important as it redirects focus from diagnosis as the start of accommodation to the informal discursive activities that go on before diagnosis. In the schools researched, students did not become visible only through formal psychological reports. Their visibility started with teacher descriptions, classroom comparisons, remedial records, and parent-school conversations. These initial descriptions influenced the school route through which students were eventually referred, assessed, and accommodated. RA, thus, from being merely a legal right activated by the diagnosis, became an institutional practice influenced by daily evaluations of effort, behaviour, ability, and normalcy.

Pedagogical support became evidence for accommodation

The second main discovery was that support for teaching frequently turned into a kind of evidence gathering process by which students were assessed for eligibility of formal assessment or accommodation. Teachers in the schools detailed a number of supportive activities, such as withdrawing students for help sessions, doing remedial worksheets, questioning verbally, giving limited tasks, changing seating arrangements, as well as keeping a teacher's record. These activities were aimed at helping students learn, but at the same time, they produced records that could be used to advocate for the students' need for further assessment, inform parents about the issues, or get permission for accommodations. Thus, instruction became proof.

> *"We started keeping a record - missed homework, incomplete classwork, test errors - so that when we talk*

> *to the parents, we have proof."* (Mathematics teacher, School C)

Using the word "proof" is quite telling. It indicates that teachers were not merely addressing students' learning requirements but were also creating a credible document of their worries. Lack of homework, unfinished classwork, slow writing speed, reading mistakes, reliance on prompts, behavioural problems, and repeated patterns in test results were all turned into forms of school records. Such records enabled schools to make a case for a student needing formal assessment or accommodation, especially when parents were reluctant to acknowledge concerns or consider a diagnostic evaluation.

> *"Why do I have to go to SEN Classes again? Does it mean I am dumb?" (Student, School C)*

This reply demonstrates how support can be perceived as stigma. Even if the intervention was planned to help the student, being taken out of the class frequently also gave rise to worry about others' perception of one's capability. Thus, support was not only a remedy to academic issues but also an influence on the student's identity.

Another student described a more ambivalent experience:

"In pull-out, I can ask questions without feeling judged. But when I return, I do not know what happened in class. I feel behind again." Student, School D

This combination of two different functions is how the pull-out support program provided assistance to the student. The pull-out support program provided a quiet area without judgment where students could get their questions answered and succeed academically; however, being absent from the everyday classroom meant that the student was not learning

with the rest of the class, socializing with other students, and continuing a chain of learning. As a result, when the student returned to the classroom with the aid of a pull-out support program, they experienced the feeling of being behind in relation to their classmates again.

The two accounts, therefore, indicate that although the individual instructional support provided immediate relief, one-on-one assistance, and an opportunity for the student to obtain a formal accommodation, the nature of the pull-out support program has a negative side, whereby it separates the student from the everyday classroom experience and reinforces their difference. As a result, the pull-out support program serves both as a place of nurturing support and as a designation of classification for students.

This trend also raises a larger issue regarding the structure of reasonable accommodations. In numerous instances, assistance has been provided to alleviate the student's challenges without changing the standard classroom; a student who completed a worksheet successfully in a resource room may still return to an unchanged classroom environment. The responsibility for adjusting the student and the support system lies solely with the individual student and support system, instead of being shared across classroom pedagogy, curriculum design, and assessment methods. Therefore, reasonable accommodations have the potential to operate as a parallel way of managing difference, thus preserving the normative structure of the school.

Documentation authorized support and its limited scope

The finding that documentation authorized accommodations, but limited the scope of those accommodations, was another

significant theme. Providers across the board (teachers, parents, and coordinators) consistently expressed the need for formal documentation (diagnostic reports, referral histories, observation records, accommodation records, and acceptable documentation for the examination boards) as evidence of accommodation for students with disabilities. While professional opinion and the parents' account of how the student performs are essential in determining the ability of the student to access the curriculum, on their own, they are generally not sufficient to allow for accommodations. To access accommodations, the professional must use certain vocabulary that is mandatory to establish a disability condition for academic boards to formally approve any RA arrangements.

> *"If we do not have sufficient documentation in place by end of Grade 8, we would not be able to process documentation for board exams."* (Coordinator, School A)

The coordinator's statement illustrates how RA is made contingent on administrative evidence rather than on student variability. The modal construction "*not able to apply"* presents that schools are not deciding entities but are, in fact, constrained. The statement here focuses on documentation as the key to RA, rather than the student needs and diversity. Here in this context, the learner becomes secondary, and the documentation process becomes the primary. The focus on Grade 8, makes the process stringent; in the sense that students whose difficulties or needs are not visible by Grade 8 might miss the accommodation arrangements.

The parents' knowledge of their child on a daily basis was not completely ignored by professionals; however, it was deemed as being valid and credible to the degree that it was supported

by data from recognized sources. As part of this process, the parents' concerns had to be translated into a format that would be acceptable to the institution as proof of the child's need. Only after the parents' voice of experience was validated by reports, observations, and formal assessments was it regarded as having meaning and value within the context of the school.

For some parents, the ability to obtain documentation served as a source of comfort. The diagnostic report served to clarify that the child's difficulties are not due to laziness, disobedience, or a lack of effort. The report provided language for what were heretofore viewed as moral interpretations of the child's struggles. At the same time, obtaining documentation placed even more burden on parents. Parents (mostly mothers) have to assume the burden of attending school meetings, filling out paperwork, making clinic appointments, gathering reports, contacting teachers, and explaining the child's issues to other family members. The parents' knowledge of the child was often treated as emotional or subjective until it was validated via a written report. In essence, obtaining documentation served both to recognize and to place additional burden upon parents.

A number of respondents noted that it was often easier to provide testing accommodations than it was to implement pedagogical recommendations in reports. Support services or accommodations that can be documented (audited) and aligned with Ministry of Education specifications for the provision of accommodations, such as extra time, having a reader or scribe, or separate seating, were more likely to be acted upon than changes to the way accommodation is provided to students on a regular basis in the classroom. This indicates that documented support options or accommodation methods that can be documented were given a higher priority than more comprehensive pedagogical changes required for transformation.

The student file confirms the need for accommodation from the institution, but also limits the scope of support to what can be factually documented, supported, and defensible in a formal sense. This and other examples demonstrate that documentation served more than an administrative purpose in relation to supporting a student with a disability; documentation provided structure around the completion of the documentation necessary to demonstrate RA, the timing in relation to the request, and the limits to what can be considered by way of RA. Thus, while documentation enabled the student with a disability to access support services, it also created a condition for access to support services based on the existence of acceptable documentation. In essence, the right to RA was mediated through the student's file: the student became eligible for support services, not only on the basis of need, but by the documentation of that need in a format and manner that the institution could accept.

This evidence demonstrates that RA is determined by more than a student's need; this is an important conclusion. Students in the schools studied needed to provide the school with evidence of their need before they could receive entitlement to RA. Providing documentation made students known to the institutional systems of education; providing documentation, however, also controlled/regulated the way in which students could make their needs known. Parents, teachers, and students could express what were by nature authentic and reasonable requests for accommodation, but only after these requests have been documented according to the formal rules of the school on records, reports, logs, and other board-approved documentation. Accordingly, RA operated via the logic of documentation: accommodation was accessed via paper documentation, but accommodation was also limited by paper documentation.

Accommodation generated access and conditional belonging

Finding number four was that RA created both access and conditional belonging. The group of students who received extra time, modified tasks, reader support, changed where they sat, or had some other type of learning support tended to experience those types of changes positively. However, there were instances where the visibility of being given support was associated with feelings of being stigmatized. There were also concerns among students that they would be perceived by their peers as slow or special. For example, there were girls who did not want to accept visible support from the teacher because they were afraid they would be embarrassed. In contrast, there were boys who liked to relieve their pressure from the classroom in support rooms, but the teachers did not view this as positive and believed that the boys were not serious about trying.

> *"If I am different learner, why am I still doing the same test? Even then everyone thinks I have things easy. They think these accommodations makes me pass my exams." (Student, School D)*

The question raised by the student highlights the paradox that exists at the heart of accommodation practices. Although the label acknowledges differences, the assessment policy remains static; therefore, the student's place of belonging remains contingent. Students receive accommodations when their differences can be tracked, managed, or constrained; and thus, schools can provide accommodations and still maintain the structure of a mainstream classroom. The student is supported, but the context of their environment does not always change.

> *"When teachers call me careless in class, other students also laugh. Then I stop trying because I know they will not see me differently." (Student, School D)*

These illustrate that having RA does not indicate full inclusion. Accommodating may eliminate one barrier while causing others. For example, although providing extra time allows for completion of an exam, this may also stigmatize the student because they have been elevated in comparison to peers. Similarly, the use of pull-out sessions may provide an attainment benefit, but will disrupt continuity within the classroom. Additionally, while providing a diagnosis will aid in understanding a student's needs, it may also create greater stigma. As such, RA must be evaluated not just on the basis of its availability or access, but more importantly, on its impact on dignity, participation and overall belonging.

Discussion

Overall, the findings reveal that RA within elite private schools is not only a right derived from a student's condition as established through diagnosis, but a process of constant documentation, surveillance, and categorisation. These findings, taken altogether, provide a comprehensive picture of how neurodivergent students are made legible to the school — at what expense.

Such a narrative can be understood through Foucault's (1977) discourse on disciplinary power. The continuous creation of referral notes, remedial reports, observation logs, and assessment reports is less about documenting the needs of the student and more about establishing the student as a known, controllable individual. Campbell's (2009) definition of ableism as a productive practice — one that is not only a form of prejudice but also a means to generate subjects that are considered 'normal' — explains why deficit-based descriptions

predate assessment at all field sites. The institution does not need a diagnosis to categorise students; such categorisations happen continuously and diagnosis merely formalizes them.

The epistemic aspects of this process should be especially noted. Fricker's (2007) idea of epistemic injustice helps to understand why parents' testimony, in particular that of mothers in the current study, was considered to be in need of being validated clinically before it could become institutionalized as evidence. The issue is not that of personal bias on the part of the teachers or coordinators; rather, this is an institutional practice for determining which information about the child should be considered reliable. Addressing this problem will require, at least in part, questioning the criteria of evidence itself.

It is at this juncture that analysis shifts from critique to reconstruction. Understanding accommodations based on dignity, participation, and inclusion, not the mere presence of structures and frameworks. This necessitates a fundamental configuration of the evidentiary structures through which schools determine whether accommodations have been provided.

Implications for Evidence-based Inclusive Practice

The implications derived from this study necessitate an essential reframing of the concept of evidence in relation to inclusive education. By common understanding, evidence-based practices entail the use of scientifically validated information to enhance learning processes. This is a valid criterion. Nevertheless, it emerges from the current study that in educational institutions serving neurodiverse learners, the process through which institutions produce evidence through logs, referrals, diagnoses, and other documentation processes in order to legitimize accommodations is, itself, a politics of

evidence, one that defines, gates, and conditions the possibility of belonging. For evidence-based practices in inclusivity to be relevant, they ought to focus not only on the effectiveness of interventions but also on the politics of collecting evidence and whose knowledge is considered evidence.

Below are the implications that arise from the current study.

Re-defining evidence of learning needs

There is a hierarchy of evidence at work within the schools studied, one in which diagnostic reports carry the most weight, followed by observation logs, referrals, and then finally parent and student testimonies as marginal and often irrelevant forms of evidence. The hierarchy of evidence is epistemologically loaded, privileging officially certified professional knowledge over personal or relational knowing's. Evidence-based inclusive practice involves rejecting this hierarchy of evidence. Parental knowing's about a child's capabilities based on observations from both inside and outside of school and the student's own reports about the contexts in which they learn must be considered credible pieces of evidence, rather than as merely supplemental to official reports. There is no reduction of standards of evidence; this means widening the scope of what is considered credible information about a learner. This brings to mind Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice. When the school dismisses the parents'–in particular, the mothers'–knowledge because they require its confirmation through a diagnosis first, it is guilty of epistemic injustice, not rigour.

This implies that schools have to develop methods through which they can use family statements in the development of plans of action. This also means that the IEP process, when practiced, should ensure that the students' views are taken as part of the process and not as the object of discussion.

The relocation of the burden of evidence from the student to the institution

One consistent theme that emerged throughout all field site observations was the placement of the burden of evidence on the shoulders of the student and their family members. In doing so, students had to build up their history of referrals, records of remediation, and various diagnoses in order to be eligible for services. An evidence-based approach to inclusion, viewed through a rights perspective, would reverse this burden of proof. Instead of questioning whether the student had enough evidence to need accommodation, it would be questioned if there was enough evidence that the existing pedagogical environment was accessible.

These changes have practical ramifications when it comes to the way that schools will collect their documentation. Instead of collecting documentation about the individual shortcomings of each student, schools should gather information on the obstacles they face as instructors. These include data such as how many students need help completing a certain activity, how many students struggle to prove knowledge by taking written examinations, and how many students tune out during lectures. This type of institutional documentation will show that changes need to be made to accommodate learners instead of managing their shortcomings individually. This approach also aligns more closely with the RPwD Act of 2016.

Early intervention as a best practice approach

It is evident from this study that the students were visible to the teachers before any assessment took place; in most cases, years earlier. The deficit labels emerged in informal ways; informal assistance was given, informal concern was raised, but formal accommodation would not occur until there were

proper records. While this disparity in need and response is unethical, it goes against the best practice model supported by the developmental/educational psychological research, which suggests that early intervention is associated with greater success.

Principles of evidence-based inclusive practice demand that schools codify what their teachers intuitively know. An early response approach based on multiple tiers where teachers record particular barriers to learning in terms of difficulties with initiating tasks, cognitive load, written production, attention regulation, and sensory processing through behavioural and functional language instead of attributions and moral judgements becomes the evidence base at the level of the school that does not necessarily depend on an existing diagnosis. Clinical evaluations have their role when needed, but the first tier of the early response strategy can be developed and implemented regardless of any prior diagnoses. It is precisely because such a focus shifts from attributions to functionally observable phenomena that a teacher's statement "This student cannot start writing assignments alone and needs to be encouraged verbally" becomes evidence, whereas "This student is careless and unmotivated" becomes a judgement that hinders effective intervention. Thus, professional development of teachers should pay special attention to recording functional observations.

Difference between examination accommodations and daily participatory practices

From the results, there is a clear trend where examination accommodations like additional time, reader, scribe, and separate rooms for exams have been more easily facilitated than changes in pedagogy in the regular classrooms. Some of

this has to do with the documentation process, as examinations require a specific accommodation in a certain amount of time, which is sanctioned by the board, while pedagogical changes take place in a continuous manner and are hard to document. Therefore, inclusive practices in such schools tend to equate to evidence-based examination access.

For the adoption of evidence-based practice in the context of daily participation, a very different type of evidence is needed – formative evidence about whether students are able to gain access to the curriculum through a number of modes of teaching; whether the availability of flexible options of responding influences the quality of their output; whether lowering the copy work load makes a difference in the amount of effort students put into assignments, and whether feedback helps retain learning. All these issues are manageable and measurable, but they will demand that teachers treat their classroom lessons as interventions whose impacts must be measured. UDL (Universal Design for Learning) is an approach by Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014, and is only applicable if the school system manages to collect data concerning the impact of design variations on learning.

Accommodation as a form of dignity, not just access: evidence-based case

Lastly, the research study puts forward a well-supported claim – backed by testimonies of students – that accommodation practices that enhance access to education while concurrently contributing to stigma, surveillance, or conditional membership do not constitute complete inclusion practice. This is not just an issue of values but one of practice as well. The anxiety that students may experience as a result of being pulled out from regular classrooms and the fear of experiencing ridicule because of special examinations, and

even lowered expectations from teachers based on labels are all quantifiable problems that have been brought up through student experiences.

Schools do not usually inquire about the experience of their students regarding their accommodation to determine whether their accommodation process upholds their dignity and sense of belonging. The lack of data on psycho-emotional costs makes it possible to develop accommodation processes that further grow the accommodation process without taking into consideration the psychological impacts such processes have on students. In this regard, Reeve's (2012) notion of psycho-emotional disablism – which involves the damage to the self that comes from institutions with an ableist approach – provides the necessary theoretical underpinning. In other words, the process of accommodation should be evaluated through the lens of student experience because that is how we make sure that our process is more than access.

Limitations

This research study's scope is limited to urban, English-speaking private institutions in Delhi and Kolkata, and as a result, is not intended to represent all types of schooling contexts within India. Different types of government schools, rural schools, and low-cost private schools, along with vernacular language medium schools, may have provided other opportunities for accommodating students' needs and preferences. The focus of this study is on students with neuro-developmental disabilities as well as students who have an invisible form of disability, other forms of disability could be treated differently regarding visibility and appropriate documentation. Lastly, the access to schools for conducting this research was based on permission provided by specific institutions, which resulted in some practices being hidden or fewer than expected being recorded.

While these limitations do not diminish the contributions of the research, they do shape the analytical scope of the study. The reason that the sites selected for the study are important is to show that even in fairly high-resource settings, exclusion can exist. As such, the findings from the study also inform how resources, language, documentation, institutional discretion, and classroom norms will influence accommodations available to students.

Conclusion

The article analyzed RA as operationalized in the Indian private school context via the concept of diagnostic visibility. Students are generally identified in terms of negative or deficit descriptors, with evidence of pedagogical support being created; documentation provides evidence for support but acts as a limit for how much can be afforded. Therefore, RA can simultaneously provide access and govern.

The article provides three main contributions. First, it advances the concept of diagnostic visibility as a framework for studying how the pre-diagnostic and pre-accommodation processes through which students become legible to their educational institutions. Secondly, it shows that when schools use pedagogical practices to provide proof for documentation, support practices can become evidentiary practices. Thirdly, it centers the experiences of students and their parents to demonstrate that while accommodation may provide access to educational services, it can also produce stigma, surveillance, and conditional belonging.

If we want to make inclusive education real, then schools need to move away from support based on diagnosis; we need to be designing curriculum from the beginning for the variance among learners. One must question not if the individual

learner has sufficient evidence to receive support, but whether the school will be willing to change how they do things to facilitate learning, participation, and belonging.

Data availability statement

The qualitative data underlying this study include interview transcripts, classroom observation notes, fieldnotes, and institutional documents involving minors, diagnostic information, and identifiable school contexts. Due to ethical restrictions and participant confidentiality, full raw data cannot be made publicly available. Anonymized excerpts supporting the analysis are included in the manuscript. Requests for access to limited de-identified data may be directed to the corresponding author and will be subject to institutional approval and confidentiality restrictions.

Funding statement

The author received no external funding for this research.

Competing interests statement

The author declares no competing interests and no conflict of interests.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the participating students, parents, educators, and school leaders who contributed their time and perspectives to this study.

References

Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.

Ball, S. J. (2015). What is policy? *21 years later: Reflections on the possibilities of policy research. Discourse: Studies*

in the Cultural Politics of Education, 36(3), 306-313. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2015.1015279

Campbell, F. K. (2009). *Contours of ableism: The production of disability and abledness*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). *Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour*. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241-1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change.* Polity Press.

Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Pantheon.

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.

Ghai, A. (2015). *Rethinking disability in India.* Routledge.

Goodley, D. (2014). *Dis/ability studies: Theorising disablism and ableism*. Routledge.

Government of India. (2016). *The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act*, 2016.

Ministry of Law and Justice. Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy* 2020.

Ministry of Education. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Meyer, A., Rose, D. H., & Gordon, D. (2014). *Universal design for learning: Theory and practice*. CAST Professional Publishing.

O'Brien, B. C., Harris, I. B., Beckman, T. J., Reed, D. A., & Cook, D. A. (2014). *Standards for reporting qualitative research: A synthesis of recommendations. Academic Medicine*, 89(9), 1245-1251. https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000000388

Reeve, D. (2012). *Psycho-emotional disablism*: The missing link? In N. Watson, A. Roulstone, & C. Thomas (Eds.), Routledge handbook of disability studies (pp. 78-92). Routledge.

Singal, N. (2005). *Mapping the field of inclusive education: A review of the Indian literature. International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 9(4), 331-350. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110500138277

Slee, R. (2011). *The irregular school: Exclusion, schooling and inclusive education*. Routledge.

Thomas, C. (1999). *Female forms: Experiencing and understanding disability*. Open University Press.

Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., & Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): *A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 19(6), 349-357. https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzm042

United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.*

Van Dijk, T. A. (1993*). Principles of critical discourse analysis. Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 249-283. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006

National Disability Audit: Bridging the Implementation Gap under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016

About the Authors :
Kajori Bhatnagar
Sandeep Bhatnagar

Contact Information of the corresponding authors :

Kajori Bhatnagar
Assistant Professor (FLS)
South Asian University, New Delhi

Sandeep Bhatnagar (I.A.S. Retd)
House Number 45, Sector 4,
Chandigarh

Abstract

India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act), marks a decisive shift from the welfare-charity approach to a rights-centred framework for nearly 30 million persons with disabilities. Its progressive provisions, however, remain vulnerable to non-implementation in the absence of any independent compliance monitoring. This paper proposes a periodic, multi-layered, and nationally applicable National Disability Audit Framework (NDAF) to evaluate how well the RPwD Act is being carried out across state governments and public agencies. The proposal draws on constitutional guarantees of substantive equality, the State's directive-principle obligations, India's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) commitments, and comparative institutional design. It sets out the rationale,

scope, methodology, and expected outcomes of a disability audit mechanism that does not presently exist. Such audits are not only an executive policy matter but a constitutional necessity. Any plan or scheme without an embedded audit loop, one that catches failures and enables correction in the continuum, remains structurally incomplete. This NDAF is both structurally and functionally different from the audit mandated by the Act (Sections 86–88), where the financial allocation of the national or state fund is audited for its utilisation or misappropriation. It is also different from the Accessibility Audit (Section 40), as that is primarily a sector-specific audit, and also from the state-specific special limited performance audits of the CAG. The proposed NDAF is a multimodal, multisectoral, regular, periodical, concurrent, and holistic audit, covering the entirety of the Act.

Keywords: disability rights, RPwD Act 2016, disability audit, equality code, compliance monitoring, substantive equality, national disability audit, accessibility, disability compliance index

Introduction and Constitutional Foundations

The Indian Constitution's treatment of equality rests on its "equality code" found in Articles 14, 15, and 16. Read together, these provisions do not convey formal equality. Instead, they call for substantive equality, a standard that accounts for structural disadvantages rather than identical treatment of unequals. While equals must be treated equally, unequals may be treated differently. Such jurisprudence opens the door for measures specifically designed to correct the skewed equation that persons with disabilities face. To treat someone with an impairment the same as someone without is not equality at all; it is rather a denial of it, and unfair to both.

Under Article 41, the State is directed to make effective provision for the right to work, education, and public assistance in cases of disablement, within its economic capacity. However, these promises acquire meaning only when someone actually audits whether and what the State has delivered. Without that scrutiny, constitutional intent may stay confined to paper, instead of reaching the marginalised and geographically distant populations.

This paper targets a specific, unresolved gap in the enforcement of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, the absence of a standardised monitoring and audit mechanism for state governments and mandated functionaries. The Act of 2016 is undeniably forward-looking as it has not only expanded recognised disability categories from seven to twenty-one, but it has also sought to align India with its CRPD obligations (United Nations, 2007). Yet it conspicuously lacks a framework for performance monitoring. That gap is widened by the current practice of self-reporting by executing agencies, which tends to conceal ground-level failures.

Rationale for a Disability Audit

Definitional Scope

A National Disability Audit (NDA) is an independent, non-agent, external evaluation of how well disability rights are being implemented, how accessible services are in practice, and how diligently public agencies and state governments follow statutory obligations. It differs from departmental reporting precisely because it is conducted by those who have no stake in the findings and who are neutral, have fixed legal standards, and are assigned to generate conclusions that lead to corrective action. Without an external holistic audit, the system lacks both the tightening of screws and the oiling of the gears.

Legislative Goals and Critical Gaps

The RPwD Act covers a wide range of identification, early medical intervention, certification, disability relief allowance, reservations in education and employment, cultural support, housing priority, accessibility requirements, and the authority of commissioners. Three structural gaps, however, cut through its effectiveness.

Equitable Policy

There is no real-time monitoring of whether and how the 5% and 4% reservation quotas in education and employment are being maintained (RPwD Act, 2016, Sections 32–34). Without such comprehensive and continuous mapping, gaps accumulate unnoticed, and backlogs pile up. Eligible beneficiaries are deprived of timely relief while system administrators remain unaware of accumulating deficiencies. Periodical, regular, and concurrent audits, operating in real time, are thus essential to ensure that entitlement and disbursement remain aligned with the intent and mandate of the RPwD Act, 2016.

Accessibility Mandate

Other than a very few stand-alone, physical-disability-centric buildings and a limited digital inclusivity, no structure exists for assessing compliance with physical, digital, or cognitive accessibility. Ramps, escalators, and wheelchair access pathways are not periodically checked, renovated, or upscaled. Digital platforms are rarely rechecked for any updated applications or inclusive corrections. Cognitive accessibility and psychological safety are almost absent from formal evaluation. A regular multi-dimensional assessment is needed in all the verticals of accessibility as envisaged in the Act (RPwD Act, Sections 40–46).

Accountability

There is no independent body in the structural design that will test and evaluate all the features in the Act affecting the inclusion and delivery of services. Without such an autonomous agency in a position to investigate and report, violations are deferred indefinitely. This breeds the "carry forward" fiend, where unresolved obligations are rolled from one cycle to the next, thereby normalising negligence. Only a statutory oversight body can ensure that such a cycle doesn't become a norm.

These gaps have been documented repeatedly by associations of persons with disabilities (PwD), civil society organisations (CSOs), and Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) assessments (CAG, 2019–2022). However, in the absence of any periodic and institutionalised system of examining and reporting, such reports don't bring the desired substantive change in the monitoring mechanism.

Objectives of the Disability Audit

The proposed National Disability Audit framework (NDAF) is structured around four objectives. Though each objective targets a distinct dimension, jointly they aim to build accountability, drive compliance, enable ongoing monitoring, and close the gap between the objectives of policy documents and the reporting of achievements.

The first objective is to create a periodic and structured assessment mechanism covering all disability-related domains so that dependable data is available to allocate resources (Planning Commission of India, 2008; NITI Aayog, 2021). The second objective is to frame recommendations through which the gaps across all disability-related provisions are removed. The third objective is to promote inclusive

participation among persons with disabilities and other concerned stakeholders. The fourth objective is to secure the uniform implementation of the RPwD Act provisions in all government departments. The NDAF establishes standardised compliance benchmarks applicable at every tier of governance, removing the discretionary space within which local agencies defer their obligations.

Framework for the National Disability Audit

Audit Scope and Coverage

The NDA reaches every department, agency, public institution, and government-funded body, cutting across all sectors named in the RPwD Act, namely education, health, social justice, employment, housing, sports, transport, and others as mentioned in the Act. It examines infrastructure for accessibility barriers, services for equitable access, the role of appropriate authorities, and offences and penalties. Section 34 of the Act deserves particular attention. Reservation compliance in recruitment may be audited across every mode and kind of recruitment, i.e., tenure, category, and remuneration structure, thereby covering all forms of appointments in services.

Description of the Auditing Agency

A credible audit may be conducted by specialised, independent agencies with no personal or institutional stakes in the findings. Three models, which are not otherwise mutually exclusive, are proposed, thereby allowing performance-based combinations for better results.

Empowering Existing Mechanisms

The first model empowers the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (CCPD) and State Commissioners (SCPDs) with the mandate and resources to set up subject-

specific but autonomous Audit Wings with specialists in their offices. This builds on the statutory authority of CCPD and SCPD already embedded in the RPwD Act, thus avoiding the complexity of creating a new institution from scratch, though this may require additional investment in human resources and infrastructure.

Specialised Outsourcing

The second model allows for audit by accredited national disability institutes in partnership with professionals. This will provide expert knowledge of such special institutes in the working of Audit, though coordination amongst them will be an important issue.

A Special Statutory Body

The third model, the most far-reaching, envisions a National-level disability compliance council (NDCC), supported by corresponding State disability compliance councils (SDCCs). Among the three models, this model offers greater structural independence, statutory authority, and institutional permanence, specifically if it is designed to incorporate the elements of the other two models. The vertical integration between NDCC and SDCC will maintain a consistent standard in a uniform pattern while accommodating regional contexts as well.

All the aforesaid agencies, including NDCC and SDCCs, would ensure data disclosure by placing the reports in the public domain and submitting them to appropriate legislatures, ensuring transparency in the distribution of funds. (*Centre for Public Interest Litigation v. Union of India*, 2012).

Scope of Audit: Focus Areas and Key Metrics

A disability audit must assess that scheme interventions are effective, their compliance is substantive, and they bring

about a substantial difference. Nine audit areas are proposed, covering every critical dimension of disability rights under the RPwD Act.

Early Detection and Medical Intervention

NDA may assess the effectiveness of early detection programmes right from neonatal screening, subsequent monitoring, and corrective interventions as may be required. It may verify whether standard screening protocols are applied in designated health facilities, particularly for the marginalised sections of society and underserved areas. The availability, accessibility, and affordability of timely surgical and medical interventions such as cochlear implants and treatments for retinopathy of prematurity and similar others are examined. Audit outcomes may measure the reductions in preventable disabilities, especially within the critical developmental window, institutional response times for applied corrections, and quality of post-intervention rehabilitation.

Identification, Certification, and Registration

The audit may assess certification procedures and the issuance of Unique Disability ID (UDID) certificates. Awareness campaigns, the issue of medical certificates, and PwDs who happen to be excluded from the identification will be important outcome parameters.

Universal, Uniform, Special, and Inclusive Secondary Education

The audit may assess the level of inclusive education up to the secondary level, consistent with the RPwD Act (RPwD Act, 2016, Sections 16, 17, 19, 31). The provisions of physical infrastructure, assistive technologies, and trained special educators, among others, may warrant strict evaluation. Enrolment, retention, and transition rates of children with

disabilities across mainstream and special schools are the baseline information for the affirmative action. Outcome measures may cover learning gaps, applied corrections, and the uniform application of inclusive education policies across government, aided, and partly aided institutions.

Reservation in Higher Education and Employment

NDA may verify compliance with the 5% and 4% reservation instructions under Sections 32 and 34 of the RPwD Act across higher educational institutions and government departments, respectively. For section 32, it may scrutinise admission data, fee concessions, and campus accessibility. For Section 34, this may include post identification roster maintenance, the filling of reserved posts, backlog analysis, and justification for carry forwards. Outcome measures may quantify unfilled seats and vacancies and the reasons for backlog accumulation.

Accessibility: Built Environment and Digital Infrastructure

NDA may develop accessibility indicators as per Harmonised Guidelines (Ministry of Urban Development, 2016) and the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) Handbook (2014), Physical features like ramps, accessible toilets, seating, lifts, auditory signals, and transport access may be audited across public buildings, schools, offices, markets, hospitals, buses, trains, and recreational spaces including therein tactile pathways, accessible washrooms, signage, and emergency evacuation provisions.

Digital accessibility may be assessed against the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1; World Wide Web Consortium, 2018) and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) Guidelines for Indian Government Websites (2009/2019), with testing done by

PwDs themselves for their use. Audit outcomes may identify specific barriers to accessibility.

Financial Allocation and Expenditure

A normative financial audit may track expenditure on PwD schemes against actual utilisation at the budget-head level, identifying underspending, misallocation, and the diversion of funds earmarked for the Disability Relief Allowance (DRA), scholarships, and grants to certified care homes, similar to the CAG audit provided for under the Act (CAG, 2019–2022). However, NDAF may, in addition, cover the domains of other core areas beyond those of national or state funds. Budgetary provisions may be assessed for the volume and kind of the PwDs. Fund diversion patterns, unspent balances, and the efficiency of fund flows to beneficiaries may all be scrutinised beyond the numbers of utilised and unutilised. This audit domain, as such, will also show the linkage of funds and results. Audit outcomes may include expenditure efficiency, scheme-level utilisation analyses, and connectedness of financial architecture and optimal impact.

Role of Special Authorities

The statutory authorities under the Act (RPwD Act 2016 Sections 60–83), the Chief Commissioner, State Commissioners, Advisory Boards, and the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), may be assessed against criteria of stipulated meetings, reports, grievance redressal responsiveness, and case disposal rates. Outcome measures may include compliance with scheduled meeting structures, submission of reports, and complaint disposal rates.

Special Provisions: Culture and Sports

NDA may examine resources, infrastructure, accessibility, and budget allocations for PwDs' participation in designated

cultural and sporting activities, in compliance with the Act's specific mandates (RPwD Act, 2016, Sections 29–30; United Nations, 2007). It may verify the availability of dedicated funding, adaptive infrastructure, specialised coaching, and opportunities across para-sports and cultural programmes. Representation of PwDs in sporting associations, cultural institutions, and government-sponsored events may also be examined. Outcome measures may include participation rates, special training, and parallel recognition and awards.

Action Against Atrocities

NDA may examine institutional responsiveness in protecting PwDs from abuse, exploitation, violence, and atrocities. The cases in the Special Courts under the RPwD Act (2016, Sections 84–85) may be evaluated. The adequacy of the machinery responsible for placing the cases before the competent courts may also be subject to a targeted evaluation. Outcome measures may mention accessibility and the procedure of rehabilitation.

Methodology and Audit Procedure

Audit Instruments

NDA may combine standardised templates, digital survey tools, uniformly adopted structured questionnaires, and mandatory physical site visits. Standardised templates ensure comparability across different institutional contexts; digital tools allow scalable data collection; and site visits provide on-the-ground verification. PwDs may be taken into audit teams as active participants. Their lived-experience perspectives may provide validation of reservations, accessibility assessments, and service delivery evaluations. This is a methodological imperative, rooted in the CRPD's cardinal principle, "nothing about us without us" (United Nations, 2007), ensuring

that findings and recommendations genuinely reflect their experiences.

Audit Cycle and Frequency

An audit cycle must be regular, operationally feasible, and result-oriented. A three-layered model is proposed for NDA. A biennial comprehensive audit, partial sector-specific annual audits, and concurrent audits in the core-critical areas of reservations (RPwD Act, Sections 32 and 34). This calibrated spacing allows corrective actions between major reviews, while maintaining continuous checks on the most sensitive areas. These three layers, in combination, will also generate the data needed to consolidate the Disability Compliance Index as a performance appraisal instrument, showing the performance and progress of different agencies and departments, as per the provisions of the RPwD Act.

Dual-Tiered Approach

The NDA methodology may operate on two complementary levels, each validating the other: a quantitative desk review and a qualitative field assessment.

Desk Review (Quantitative Audit)

This tier involves systematic examination of official documents, financial statements, reservation rosters of all recruitments made on different platforms, and annual reports from CCPD, SCPDs, disability directorates, and relevant departments. Similar to the frameworks of performance audit of CAG (CAG, 2014), it establishes evidence-based compliance baselines enabling objective assessment and review.

Field Assessment (Qualitative Audit)

This audit will do a physical inspection of public utilities, office establishments, and educational institutions, and

include discussions with different stakeholders. In addition to data compliance, this field assessment will evaluate physical progress as well.

Standardised Scoring, Reporting, and Grading

Compliance Index

The NDAF may feature a Disability Compliance Index (DCI) to measure the institutional performance in the aforesaid areas of audit. The DCI will rate the departments on a standard scale covering all 21 disability categories. The DCI serves two purposes. First, it enables rigorous, comparable assessment across institutions and states; and second, it puts verified compliance data into the public domain in a form from which stakeholders can directly seek accountability.

Public Disclosure and Accountability

Audit reports under the NDAF may be placed unconditionally in the public domain with no financial barrier and no restricted access for PwDs, CSOs, researchers, policymakers, and the general public. This will be consistent with the Supreme Court's evolving jurisprudence on institutional transparency (*T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India*, 2012), which upholds citizens' right to information. DCI dashboards should display state-wise and department-wise scores in real time, in accessible formats. Re-audits triggered by correction cycles or identified compliance hotspots may verify the extension of recommended changes. This iterative loop of re-audit forms the basis of the NDAF.

Expected Outcomes and Policy Implications

NDAF has a unique embedded structure of participant and non-participant observation regarding the initiatives and outcomes. It may produce four outcomes that operationalise the constitutional mandate for substantive equality.

Enhanced Accountability

Clear performance indicators, as indicated by a well-formulated DCI, may allow the appropriate government to reward compliant departments and agencies while directing corrective interventions towards the defaulters. DCI, as a performance-linked indicator, will thus make the agencies and the departments visibly accountable for the prescription and enforcement of disability rights.

Data Integrity

Third-party verified audit data may supplement the indices of disability figures of the decennial census, establishing accurate and evidence-based baselines for policy formulation and fund allocation. Independently certified data may ensure that programmes and resource allocations are well-founded in verified reality rather than understated statistics.

Targeted Remediation

By identifying demographic, departmental, and structural gaps in initiatives and results, the NDAF allows for targeted interventions. Illustratively, a department with higher reservation compliance but lower accessibility measures may receive calibrated correction directives. This targeted remediation through DCI will fill the blanks associated with blanket responses of the agencies without corrective efforts.

International Obligations

The NDAF may show credible and independently verified evidence of India's committed and directed monitoring efforts towards disability. It may show transparent appraisal before the CRPD Committee's periodic review (CRPD Committee, 2019) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) commitments (United Nations, n.d.), showing a positive and

responsible approach of the country towards its disability rights obligations.

Coordination

Effective implementation of the NDAF may require multi-level coordination among different levels. Interdepartmental cooperation at the state level and consolidation of audit data at the central level will help generate a holistic policy. These two levels, in coordination, will facilitate generating a national coherent policy initiative for disability.

Conclusion

Affirmative action for disability works better when it is target-oriented. Thorough scrutiny of data and compliance by the NDA will verify the applicability, procedural fairness, and programme efficacy across all provisions. The NDAF will thus help remove inequities and dysfunctions in the programme.

Conducted by independent and specialised agencies with significant integration of PwDs in the process, NDAF may ensure proper inclusion and institutional accountability. It will help in transforming disability rights from entitlements to lived realities. As such, a strong NDAF is not only administratively desirable but is also a strong public governance tool.

Auditing the implementation of disability rights is not an extra input. Without it, policies on reservation and welfare lose their value. Disability programmes that are not audited for outcomes seldom become channels of real inclusion.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

Funding

The author has not received any specific funding for this article.

References

Central Public Works Department. (2014). *Handbook on barrier-free and accessibility*. Government of India.

Centre for Public Interest Litigation v. Union of India, (2012) 3 SCC 1 Supreme Court of India.

Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2019). *Concluding observations on the initial report of India* (CRPD/C/IND/CO/1). United Nations

Comptroller and Auditor General of India. (2014). *Performance auditing guidelines* 2014 (Chapter 8.8). CAG.

Comptroller and Auditor General of India. (2019–2022). *Report on social, general, and economic sectors (various states). CAG.* Constitution of India, Art. 14, 15, 16, 41.

Disability Rights India Foundation. (2021). *Monitoring the RPWD Act: A report on implementation gaps*. DRIF.

E.V. Chinnaiah v. State of A.P., (2005) 1 SCC 394.

Human Rights Watch. (2023). *Neglected and unprotected: The impact of the disability rights act in India.* HRW.

Indra Sawhney v. Union of India, 1992 Supp (3) SCC 217.

Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. (2019). *Guidelines for Indian government websites (GIGW) (Rev. ed.).* Government of India.

Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. (2023). *Annual report 2022–23*. Government of India.

Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. (n.d.). *Unique Disability ID (UDID) project*. https://www.swavlambancard.gov.in

Ministry of Urban Development. (2016). *Harmonised guidelines and space standards for a barrier-free built environment.* Government of India.

NITI Aayog. (2021). *SDG India index & dashboard 2020–21: Partnerships in the decade of action.* NITI Aayog.

Prasar Bharati *(Broadcasting Corporation of India) v. Union of India*, (2012) 13 SCC 114.

Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. Act No. 49 of 2016. Gazette of India Extraordinary, Part II, Section 1, dated December 28, 2016.

State of Kerala v. N.M. Thomas, (1976) 2 SCC 310.

T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India, (2012) 3 SCC 277.

United Nations. (2007). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (G.A. Res. 61/106,* U.N. Doc. A/RES/61/106).

United Nations. *India ratified on October 1, 2007. United Nations. (n.d.). Sustainable development goals: Voluntary national reviews (VNRs)—SDGs 10 & 16.* https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/

World Wide Web Consortium. (2018, June). *Web content accessibility guidelines (WCAG) 2.1. https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/*

Enhancing Inclusivity: A Critical Analysis of Accessibility Challenges and Opportunities for Students with Disabilities in Kerala's College Libraries

About the Authors :
Raysh Thomas
Suresh B.

Contact Information of the corresponding authors :

Raysh Thomas
Research Scholar
Library and Information Science
Madurai Kamaraj University
E-mail: raish.thomas@gmail.com

Suresh B.
University Librarian
Dr. TPM Library
Madurai Kamaraj University
E-mail: bsureshwin@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to empirically identify the infrastructure, technology, and system-level barriers to accessing academic libraries faced by students with disabilities. It explores the extent of provision of resources, library services, and institutional support to libraries catering to the needs of students with disabilities. The Social Model of Disability and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles are employed in the Indian context in this study. A structured questionnaire was administered to 66 students with disabilities using convenience sampling. Most importantly,

62% had visual impairments. Yet this high prevalence is quite counterintuitive given available resources: just 17% of libraries have Braille materials, and just 27% have screen-reading software. The findings showcase a "macro" accessibility vs. "micro" accessibility dichotomy. Though access to basic physical amenities such as ramps is common in 39% of libraries, essential vertical mobility (elevators, 18%) and sensory aids (tactile signage, 16%) have been limited, reflecting a compliance-oriented rather than a user-focused mindset. Library visitation rates are accordingly relatively low – 50% of respondents seldom visit. This underuse stems from pervasive systemic issues, particularly a severe lack of subject materials made accessible (cited by 91% as a hindrance), limited hours, and staff training. In order to mitigate this, the paper suggests prioritising digital accessibility audits, specific staff training in Assistive Technologies (AT), and the acquisition of particular accessibility tools. Indeed, creating a genuinely inclusive academic culture in Kerala will not happen if architectural tokenism is adopted. Institutions should integrate wide accessibility into their operating and teaching practices, so as to comply correctly with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) as well as UGC policy and guidance.

Keywords: Academic Libraries, Accessibility, Students with Disabilities, Assistive Technology (AT), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Social Model of Disability, Inclusive Education

Introduction

The Imperative of Inclusive Academic Spaces

In the contemporary higher education context, academic libraries are emerging as central locations for the conduct of scholarship and learning. An indispensable resource for

students in their quest for information equity and for carrying out the work required to attain academic success, academic libraries can also act as barriers or 'gates' to the information they seek. This barrier will differ for students with disabilities depending on the physical, digital, or attitudinal barrier that must be traversed. In this sense, accessibility of the libraries themselves refers not only to the physical accessibility of buildings, resources, and services, but also the level of availability and ease of access to digital information and technologies, as well as the social and linguistic climate within academic libraries and the broader library environment. Ensuring this full spectrum of accessibility can either empower students with disabilities and foster full participation in learning at higher education, or exclude them from academic and social activities in their institutions of learning. Enhancing the usability of academic libraries, then, is not only an infrastructural issue, but also an important one for fostering the rights of learners with disabilities and realizing their basic educational rights.

Academic libraries are crucial centres of learning, but poor support for students with disabilities is a serious impediment to their academic performance. In today's time of digitization and worldwide networked information, it is a big failure of the promise of education to exclude this population from utilizing it. This study aims to explore the lived realities of students with disabilities in Kerala, a state highly celebrated for having high literacy rates and progressive social indicators, and investigate whether the "Kerala Model" or how it may be translated into access to higher education infrastructure.

Framing the Research Gap

However, despite the significance of academic libraries to the learning process, there is a dearth in the empirical evidence, at least on the accessibility of specially handicapped students

at the college library level in Kerala and their impact on their academic success in the particular context of their area. Global and national studies emphasize accessibility problems—from limited access to ramps and screen readers to lack of access to media—while localized understanding as to how different types of accessibility consciousness, service utilization, resource availability, and institutional intervention affect differently able students in academic libraries in Kerala remains scanty.

Previous research tends to focus on more general legislation or inclusive institutions outside of the educational setting and often at a larger societal level without drilling down into the particular micro-environment of the library. Moreover, a major issue is ensuring that users know of library resources and services tailored for people with disabilities, and is not hidden barriers. Many students and staff members are unclear about how many supportive tools and supports are at their disposal, leading to neglecting their use and under-funding (Midhula & Sudhier, 2022). This study contributes to filling this gap by examining these elements, especially within the context of Kerala, in a more fine-grained way that connects legislative requirements with local dynamics.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is based on two powerful theoretical perspectives that transition from the "deficits" of the student to the "deficits" of the environment: the Social Model of Disability and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

The Social Model of Disability

According to the Social Model of Disability, disability is not something that you are by nature, but instead something that is created by the social and physical environment around

you. As argued by Oliver and further implemented in library science contexts, a person is not disabled by their impairment (e.g., visual impairment or mobility restriction) but by the barriers that society places in their path (e.g., stairs without ramps, books without audio versions, websites without alt-text) (Nottinghamshire, 2014). This is an important framework for this research as it orients the analysis within detecting and eliminating these environmental and systemic barriers (Lawson & Beckett, 2021). It disrupts the "Medical Model," which posits that disability is a condition to be cured or fixed, and instead calls for institutions to accommodate the diversity of people who use them (Zaks, 2023).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UDL complements the Social Model. UDL is a learning science and cognitive neuroscience framework that outlines the creation of adaptable learning environments, which take into account individual learning differences (Skaggs & McMullin, 2024). UDL proposes the following in the context of the library:

Multiple Means of Representation: Providing content in diverse formats (text, audio, video, Braille) so that all students can access information regardless of sensory impairments.

Multiple Means of Action and Expression: Giving students the ability to navigate library systems and demonstrate knowledge in different ways (i.e., voice search versus typing).

Multiple Means of Engagement: Designing spaces and services that motivate diverse learners (Skaggs & McMullin, 2024). Using this benchmark, this study evaluates whether Kerala's academic libraries are proactively designing for diversity or are simply reacting with retrofit accommodations when utilizing UDL.

Research Objectives

Purposeful engagement with disability issues in academic libraries has been recommended for many years to promote access for all. This study investigates disability awareness, service use, facilities provided, and institutional support to access library facilities and services in academic libraries. It aims at exploring the relationships between the variables so as to recommend ways through which libraries can enhance their services to meet the needs of users with disabilities. The research objectives that guided this study are:

1. To assess the present library facility provided to students with disabilities in colleges of Kerala.
2. To check that buildings have adequate infrastructure (ramps, lifts, toilets) and adequate technology (computers, machinery, ATMs, etc.) to facilitate access to different facilities and services.
3. To determine whether the students are aware of the services provided in the library for them
4. To explore the utilization of the Assistive Technologies (AT) available.
5. To suggest library services and policy-making measures that will help improve the library environment and achieve a more diverse and friendly academic atmosphere.

Review of Literature

Upon a deeper look at the existing literature, a landscape of accessibility has emerged that is far more complex, with tech promise often at cross purposes with infrastructure decay and limited funding. The review is organized into three main thematic areas: Assistive Technologies, Infrastructural Barriers, and the Policy-Practice Gap.

Assistive Technologies: The Digital Divide

Access to information in libraries in institutions of higher learning has changed due to the advent of assistive technologies (AT). Tools based on Artificial Intelligence (AI), like text-to-speech software and voice recognition applications, have immensely facilitated users who are visually or mobility impaired. JAWS (Job Access With Speech), NVDA (Non-Visual Desktop Access), and Kurzweil education systems are examples of systems that enable visually impaired students to navigate digital catalogues and read electronic texts independently in a way to potentially equalize the gap between them and their sighted compatriots (Khan & Singh, 2023).

Nevertheless, advances remain available, but assistive technologies continue to face difficulties. Most developing world libraries continue to struggle with uneven service provision and inadequate financial support that jeopardizes their ability to provide inclusive access solutions. (Eneya & Mostert, 2019). While the hardware may occasionally be purchased, the software updates and maintenance often lag, rendering the technology useless. In addition, there is a lack of instruction on assistive technologies delivered to library staff, resulting in insufficient provision of services being provided. The mere presence of technology does not make access possible without trained staff demonstrating the tools you have.

In some ways, the extent to which India's schools deal with various disabilities varies greatly. And perhaps this is one gap that is impossible to bridge (Mamabolo & Durodolu, 2023). At India's most elite universities, for example, text is read out to students by speech recognition technology, and students write in Braille using Braille printers. In a college in rural Kerala,

several hours from here, no software has been installed to read out text to students in the computer lab because none of the students who are blind have needed it, and the computers have never been used. And so the digital divide persists in the disability community, while it has largely been addressed in the education of the able-bodied, thus perpetuating the education disparities between the haves and the have-nots (Potnis & Mallary, 2021).

Infrastructural Development and Physical Access

Infrastructure development and professionally equipped staff play an indispensable role in assuring disabled students' accessibility to information resources. Ramps, lifts, and accessible toilet installation are critical for ensuring that the library is accessible, along with access to the resources. (Yadav & Singh, 2022). The "IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to People with Disabilities" explicitly state that physical access includes not just entry but movement 'within' the library—aisle widths, shelf heights, and elevator access to all floors. (Bolt et al., 2024).

However, empirical research from the Global South tends to provide a grim picture. Studies show that in practice, while many institutions do conform to "macro-accessibility" (e.g., ramp at the main entrance), "micro-accessibility" (e.g., tactile flooring, accessible catalogue terminals, elevators to stack rooms) is largely neglected. (Midhula & Sudhier, 2022). This was also the case with libraries in Pakistan — the majority lacked elevators, which prevented physically disabled students from accessing upper floors where vast collections were housed. (Jbeen & Iqbal, 2025). Similar results have been observed in the Indian context, in which heritage buildings containing libraries commonly cite architectural preservation

as a rationale for not adding elevators, which is in direct opposition to the social model of disability (which values function over form) (Farooq & Manzoor, 2021).

Awareness and Institutional Policy

Accessibility awareness is particularly important to the extent that learners with disabilities are able to access library material fully. Data show that some students with impairments do not know about existing services and, as such, cannot realize their access to needed curriculum materials. Abu Qaadan et al. (2024) emphasize that information literacy programs must be specifically tailored to include disability services. If a student does not know that the library offers format conversion services, that service effectively does not exist for them.

Furthermore, the lack of institutional policy acts as a silent barrier. Addressing these issues needs the development of policy and better collaborations with organizations that support disabled users. (Sunil & Madhu, 2025). In many Indian universities, disability support is treated as a charitable add-on rather than a statutory obligation mandated by the RPWD Act 2016. This lack of policy integration results in ad-hoc funding and the absence of a long-term strategy for inclusion (Bhardwaj & Tyagi, 2025) . Organizations that invest in promoting accessibility programs through community outreach activities and awareness campaigns report enhanced utilization and user satisfaction rates. (Khan & Singh, 2023).

The Context of Kerala

Specific to Kerala, previous studies have indicated a disparity between the state's high educational metrics and the reality of disability inclusion. Midhula & Sudhier (2022) noted that while special schools in Kerala often have dedicated resources, mainstream colleges—where the majority of higher

education occurs—are often ill-equipped. The information needs of differently-abled students have become complex and problematic due to the insufficiency of adequate information sources and services, and there are quite a number of challenges faced by these students in accessing information from the libraries. This research builds upon this foundation, seeking to quantify the current state of these challenges in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

Methodology

Research Design

This research employed a quantitative research design that involved a descriptive survey approach. By analyzing this way, one can obtain a standardized and measurable view of the status of library facilities and the perceptions of the user base. The descriptive approach fits this study to provide a "snapshot" of Kerala's current college accessibility state, a summary of dominant patterns or gaps, without changing any variables in it.

Sampling Strategy and Population

In this study, participants were students with disabilities at arts and science colleges within Kerala. In view of the no centralized database as yet available of students with disabilities in the higher education system and sensitive data, a convenience sampling method was taken.

Justification for Sampling Strategy:

Probability sampling lends to a more generalised sampling of the population, but convenience sampling is a common and generally required method for disability studies for several reasons:

Hidden Population: Students with disabilities are more reluctant to mention their status due to stigma or discrimination, making it impossible to develop an overall sampling frame (Leeds University, n.d.).

Small Population Size: The proportion of students with disabilities in higher education in India is still very low (generally stated as less than 3% of all learners) (Mangurkar, 2025). Locating these students needs to be done with existing networks, disability cells, and peer recommendations (snowballing).

Logistical Constraints: It is a geographically dispersed population among hundreds of colleges in Kerala, hence random sample sizes are logistically impracticable for an independent study (The Washington Group on Disability Statistics, 2019). Nevertheless, while the sample size of 66 respondents (out of 100 questionnaires collected) restricts the generalisability of findings for the entire national population, it gives valid and indicative data on the experiences of this study's participant group, following the practice of small 'n' studies in special education research (Courey et al., 2024).

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The instrument was designed based on the IFLA Checklist for Access to Libraries for Persons with Disabilities. (Bolt et al., 2024) and the UGC Accessibility Guidelines (UGC, 2020). The questionnaire consisted of:

- Demographic Data: Age, gender, type of disability (visual, physical, auditory, cognitive).
- Infrastructure Checklist: Availability of ramps, elevators, accessible toilets, and signage.

- Service Usage: Frequency of library visits, purpose of visits.
- Assistive Technology: Awareness and availability of tools like screen readers and Braille.
- Barriers: A multi-select section identifying key obstacles to access.

Ethical Considerations

Institutional review board approval was received for this study. All participants provided informed consent before the initiation of study activities. A cover letter was attached to each questionnaire that was given to students to explain the purpose of the study and to the fact that participation was voluntary and that the information given would remain confidential. A guarantee of academic and school confidentiality was also provided by the researchers to the students. Maintaining high ethical standards is very important, especially for groups of participants who are at risk of research fatigue and for whom maintaining confidentiality of information is essential.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the collected data—frequencies and percentages. Tables and charts were generated to illustrate the distribution of responses. Cross-tabulation was used implicitly to describe the association between the type of disability (e.g., visual impairment) and specific barriers (e.g., lack of Braille).

Analysis and Discussion

The following section presents the empirical findings of the study, interpreted through the lens of the Social Model of Disability.

Demographic Profile: Age and Disability Status

Table 1

Age-wise Distribution of Respondents

Age Group	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
18-21	27	41
21-25	25	38
25-28	8	12
28 and above	6	9
Total	66	100

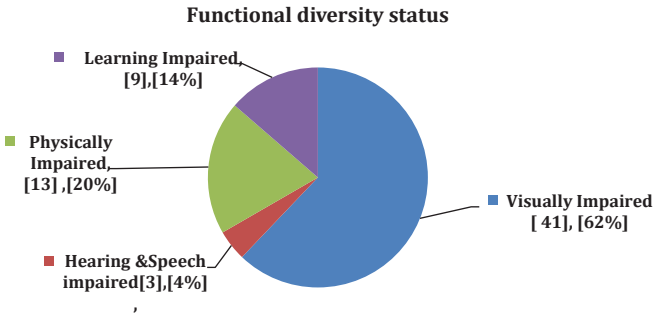
Table 1 shows that most of the differently-abled respondents are between the ages of 18–21 (41%) and 21–25 (38%). Given this demographic focus, interventions to improve library accessibility should be directed at the needs of young adults at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It is also a pivotal time of academic discovery when self-seeking informs subsequent career paths. The sharp decline in respondents aged 28 and above may reflect broader systemic barriers that prevent students with disabilities from pursuing doctoral or lifelong learning opportunities, a trend observed in national employment and education statistics for the disabled. (Mangurkar, 2025).

Functional Diversity Status (Disability Type):

The analysis of disability types reveals a significant skew:

Figure 1

Functional diversity status



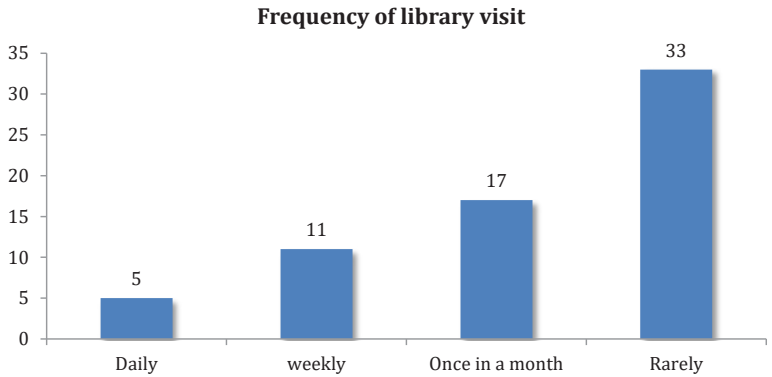
- Visually Impaired: 62%
- Physically Impaired: 20%
- Cognitive/Learning Impaired: 14%
- Hearing and Speech Impaired: 4%

Insight: The fact that this sample was chosen for this study is that 62% of the sample had some type of visual impairment. This is true in the context of Kerala as well, where several health studies conducted on school children have revealed that refractive and other types of visual impairment are a huge problem (Aparna et al., 2023). Taking all this into consideration, here are the priority areas for library interventions to ensure that every disabled child benefits from library resources: Formats such as Braille, audio, and screen reader text. If a library builds a wonderful entrance ramp so that wheelchair users can access the library, and yet does not make available Braille or screen reader text, then 62% of disabled children have no use for the library. And one size never fits all.

Library Utilization Patterns

Figure 2

Frequency of Library Visits



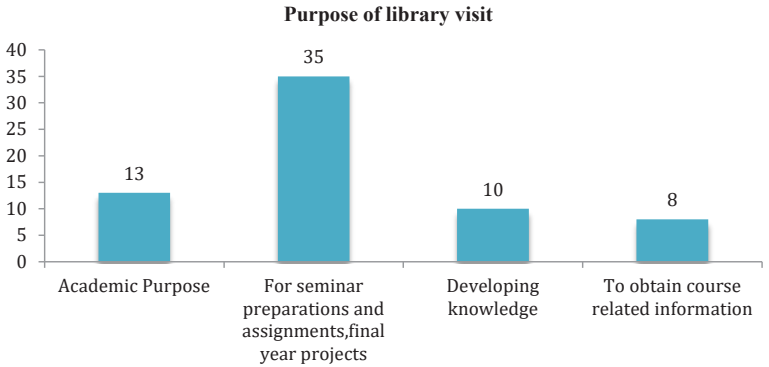
The study probed how often students visited the library.

- Rarely: 50%
- Once a Month: 26%
- Daily: 7%

The data shows that 50% of students visit the library less than once per week. With access to the library being a critical element of the learning environment, low visit frequency of this nature can only be described as exclusion, not indifference. Such disparity in visit frequency can be due to a lack of dedicated library time, insufficient relevant resources, the absence of assistive technology, and tools to support learning in students. If the "cost" of visiting (physical effort, need for sighted assistance, frustration with inaccessible books) outweighs the "benefit," students will avoid the space. This is a classic example of the Social Model: the environment is disabling the student's ability to be a library user.

Figure 3

Purpose of Library Visit



Note: Percentages reflect the primary purpose cited by respondents.

As shown in Figure 3, over half of students, or 53% of this population, go to the library for compulsory academic activities such as seminar preparation, assignments, and projects. Only 15 percent use it for "developing knowledge" or for leisure reading. This type of utilitarian usage pattern implies students visit the library only if compelled to engage in it by curriculum requirements. The library is not serving as a place for intellectual exploration for these students, probably because they cannot have their "browsing" experience, which is essential for serendipitous knowledge discovery; they will not browse due to physical and format barriers.

Infrastructural Support: The Physical Barrier

The study assessed the availability of key physical accessibility features.

Table 2

Availability of Infrastructural Facilities

Infrastructural Support	Response (Available)	Percentage (%)
Ramps	37	39%
Accessible Restrooms	26	27%
Elevators	17	18%
Directional signs in Braille/Large Print	15	16%

Table 2 has effectively demonstrated how accessibility features are proportionately distributed. Ramps (39%) are the biggest feature, but again, that is relatively few! Even more seriously, vertical mobility (Elevators: 18%) and sanitation (Accessible Restrooms: 27%) are severely deficient.

The Elevator Gap: The lack of elevators suggests that in multi-story libraries, students with physical disabilities are segregated to the ground floor. If the reference section or reading room is on an upper floor, then they have a hard time attending. This segregation goes against the philosophy of inclusive education.

The Signage Gap: Low rates of Braille or large print directional signs (16%) are especially harmful for this 62% visual impairment rate in the sample. Because no tactile signage exists, the visually impaired students are limited to navigation on their own in the building, and have to utilise help-seeking behaviours that may lead to stigma and dependency (Grimes et al., 2020).

Assistive Technology: The Digital Divide

Table 3

Availability of Assistive Technology

Assistive Technology	Availability (Count)	Percentage (%)
Audio books and alternative e-resources	13	33%
Screen readers (e.g., NVDA, JAWS)	11	27%
Adaptive keyboards	9	23%
Braille materials	7	17%

Note: Percentages calculated based on the subset of libraries/ respondents reporting any AT availability (N=40).

Audio books and alternative e-resources (33%) are the most widely available assistive technologies (as indicated in Table 3). This particular focus on auditory and digital techniques may be interpreted as a strategy to ensure broad access, as these tools are widely available. But the low availability of Braille resources (17%) is worrisome. For profound literacy and syntax comprehension (especially in academic settings), Braille is superior to audio. The absence of Braille resources indicates a gap in supporting rigorous academic study for the blind.

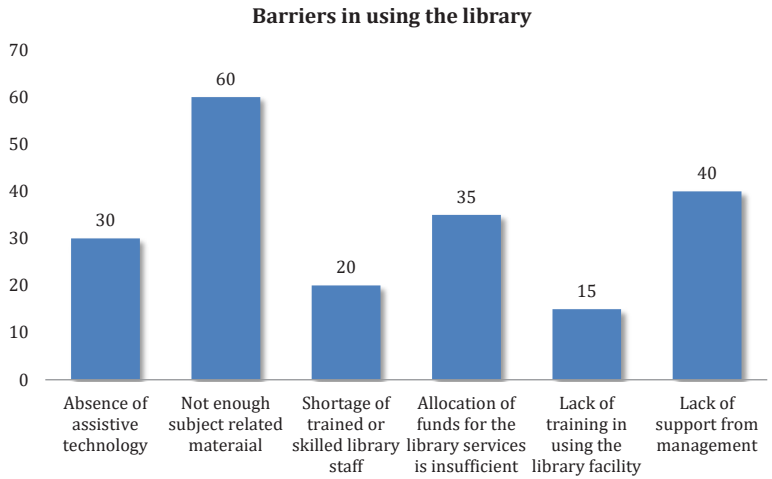
Software Gap: NVDA (free and open-source screen reader) is only available in 27% of cases. This is an indication that the library staff is not aware of the funds. If libraries are failing to install free software that might revolutionize a blind student's access to the internet, then it suggests a profound failure in staff training and IT policy.

Barriers to Access

Respondents were asked to identify the main barriers preventing their use of the library. (Note: Percentages sum to >100% as this was a multiple-choice question).

Figure 4

Barriers in Using the Library (Data Interpretation)



- Lack of Subject-Related Materials: 91%
- Lack of Management Support: 61%
- Insufficient Funding: 53%
- Absence of Assistive Technology: 50%
- Staffing Shortages: 30%
- Lack of User Training: 23%

According to the survey, 91% of students who responded identified "Lack of subject-related materials" as a barrier. The library does not seem to be functioning in its primary job, to serve the needs of students. Students can obviously enter through the ramp, and there is plenty of seating for reading

(furniture). The reason that students are not reading books is that the books that are relevant to their studies have not been made available in formats that can be read by students with visual impairments. Formats such as Daisy, Braille, and PDFs that can be read by text-to-speech software are lacking.

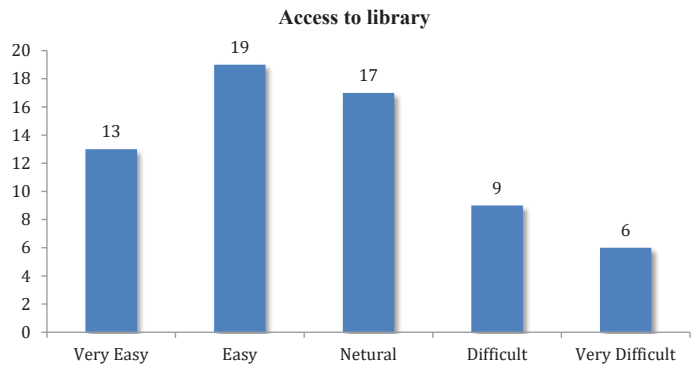
Systemic Failure: The major barrier that students identified was "Lack of Management Support" (61%), followed by "Insufficient Funding" (53%). Many students attributed the barriers they experienced to the institution. The lack of management support and insufficient funding in the library budget and institutional development plans confirm this. These are consistent with the literature that highlights the inadequacy of disability services in developing countries as a result of a lack of adequate resources and a charity-based rather than an institutional mandate (Eneya & Mostert, 2019).

Perception of Access

Interestingly, data from "Bar Chart 2" indicated that 51% of respondents found access "easy" or "very easy," while 22% found it difficult.

Figure 5

Access to the Library



There is quite a contradiction behind this 91% material barrier. Students can confuse "access" with "entering the building." With 39% ramp coverage, it may be an easy entry for many people. However, it is accessing the library (reading books) that is where the failure lies. But this gulf between actual physical access and intellectual access matters for the policymakers. If the shelves are devoid of accessible books, a ramp is not a sign of inclusion.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Drawing on these empirical results and the deficiency identified in the established infrastructure, this investigation recommends the following specific actions to improve the inclusivity in Kerala's college libraries.

Infrastructural and Technological Upgrades

a. **Strategic Resource Allocation:** Invest more in Braille materials, screen readers, and mobility aids. Digital accessibility should be the first priority, given the 62% visual impairment rate. Libraries should install free screen readers like NVDA on all public terminals and acquire licenses for JAWS where necessary.

b. **Vertical Mobility:** Libraries with multiple floors need to install elevators. If retrofitting is structurally impossible in heritage buildings, libraries must implement a proxy borrowing service where staff retrieve books from upper floors for disabled students, ensuring this service is advertised and not stigmatized.

c. **Sensory Navigation:** Increase the number of directional signs in Braille or large print. Tactile flooring strips should be placed to guide visually impaired students from the entrance to the help desk and the restrooms.

Policy and Institutional Support

a. **Institutional Mandate:** Management support is a must for colleges. Lack of Management Support is one of the major issues, as per the students (61%). This must be addressed by strict adherence to the UGC Accessibility Guidelines (2022) in colleges. Non- compliance must have penalties of not getting the accreditation of libraries and adequate funding.

b. **Funding Models:** 'Insufficient Funding' is the main constraint to the provision of Assistive Technologies (AT) in libraries, says 53% of the respondents. Some of the suggestions given to meet this challenge include: a) Collaboration with social welfare departments and NGOs to obtain grants-in-aid for the provision of AT. b) The Kerala State Higher Education Council (KSHEC) could direct libraries to reserve a fixed percentage of the library budget for improving accessibility in libraries.

Capacity Building and Awareness

a. **Staff Training:** Train the staff at intervals with presentations on assistive technology and disability etiquette. The staff who will work together with the disabled students should be able to assist them in using the screen reader and finding the learning materials.

b. **User Education:** By proactive outreach, you can address "Lack of User Training" (23%) and general low awareness. It is recommended that libraries arrange an induction programme at the start of each term for disabled students, explaining where they can get help with assistive technology and library services.

c. **Digital Repository:** Books and articles from libraries are needed for a number of subjects in classes. Library resources need an upgrade. Libraries may subscribe

to digital libraries such as Bookshare or Sugamya Pustakalaya. The number of complaints for missing books for subjects in schools is 91%.

Limitations of the Study

This study, in particular, is useful but suffers from certain limitations. Although these 66 respondents provide an appropriate snapshot of specific institutions surveyed, the sample size may not fully capture the lived experiences of all differently-abled students across the wider landscape of higher education in Kerala. Although the population is hidden and thus necessitates the use of a convenience sampling strategy, the findings may not be generalizable to the larger state or national population. Moreover, the data are self-reported, which could bring in response bias or differences in how different students understand "accessibility." A mixed-methods analysis, which could include a series of in-depth qualitative interviews and direct accessibility audits of library buildings to understand the barriers on a more holistic level, would be helpful in future research. The geographic expansion of the analysis that includes a comparative analysis between government-run and private-aided colleges would also provide important policy insights.

Conclusions

This paper presents an in-depth exploration of the current situation regarding differently-abled students' access to academic libraries in Kerala. The results show a situation that results in 'partial inclusion': some positive aspects – such as relatively good provision of ramps (39%) and an increasing understanding of electronic materials – but the study also shows a persistent number of challenges. The few visits to libraries, patchy infrastructure (lack of elevators and toilets, etc.), and limited access to assistive technologies, especially

for visually impaired users who account for the majority of this group, speak volumes to something much more is required.

However, the study exposes one of the biggest paradoxes — students have physical entry access to the building, but intellectual access to content is denied as accessible formats remain unavailable (the barrier is 91%). It just tells me that libraries (at this time) are being promoted towards a more ostensible compliance model than the actual Social Model of Disability. Herein lies the immediate challenge of ensuring these diverse challenges are managed through resource allocation, targeted development of infrastructure, and continual development of both users and staff. Engaging in such holistic ways will not only elevate the educational experience dramatically for disabled students but, more crucially, create a truly inclusive and equitable learning environment across Kerala's college libraries; one that will be at a leadership role in societal inclusion.

Acknowledgements

The author has no acknowledgments to declare, as no external technical support, data collection assistance, or funding was utilized for this study.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Abu Qaadan, A., Hamad, F., & Fakhouri, H. (2024). Facilitating digital accessibility for students with disabilities into

information services at Jordanian academic libraries. *Library Management*, *45*(8/9), 527–546. https://doi.org/10.1108/lm-01-2024-0001

Aparna, John, K. A., & Anvar, R. (2023). Prevalence of visual disturbances among medical undergraduate students of a tertiary care teaching hospital in South Kerala. *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health*, *10*(6), 2068–2073. https://doi.org/10.18203/2394-6040.ijcmph20231682

Bhardwaj, A., & Tyagi, S. (2025). Digital right management: The challenges of electronic resource accessibility for blind and visually impaired users in libraries. *Journal of Indian Library Association*, *61*(01), 156–165. https://journal.ilaindia.net/index.php/lib/article/view/739

Bolt, N., Asplund, H. C., Nomura, M., Uvodic, M. R., & Winkelstein, J. A. (2024). *IFLA guidelines for making libraries accessible for people with disabilities*. International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). https://repository.ifla.org/handle/20.500.14598/3719

Courey, K. A., Wu, F. Y., Oswald, F. L., & Pedroza, C. (2024). Dealing with small samples in disability research: Do not fret, Bayesian analysis is here. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, *69*(4), 335–346. https://doi.org/10.1037/rep0000579

Eneya, D., & Mostert, B. J. (2019). The application of the social model of disability and Wilson's model of information behaviour towards effective service delivery for students with disabilities within an academic library context. *Inkanyiso Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *11*(1). https://doi.org/10.4102/ink.v11i1.65

Farooq, T., & Manzoor, S. (2021). Library services for students

with disabilities: Barriers and way forward. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, *6720*. https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/libphilprac/6720/

Grimes, S., Southgate, E., Scevak, J., & Buchanan, R. (2020). University student experiences of disability and the influence of stigma on institutional non-disclosure and learning. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *31*(3), 23–37. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1273678.pdf

Jbeen, A., & Iqbal, M. (2025). Identifying barriers to library access and inclusion for students with disabilities. *The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies*, *3*(4), 2154–2171. https://doi.org/10.59075/z5705t14

Khan, M. A., & Singh, A. (2023). A Review of Literature on Library Services for Visually Impaired and disabled students in digital era. *Technix International Journal for Engineering Research*, *10*(4), 24–33. https://tijer.org/tijer/papers/TIJER2304274.pdf

Lawson, A., & Beckett, A. E. (2021). The social and human rights models of disability: towards a complementarity thesis. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, *25*(2), 348–379. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1783533

Leeds University. (n.d.). *Sampling strategy*. Disability Studies. https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/2011/10/sampling.pdf

Mamabolo, M. J., & Durodolu, O. O. (2023). Rural accessibility to digital libraries: requirements and challenges. *Digital Library Perspectives*, *39*(4), 551–570. https://doi.org/10.1108/dlp-04-2023-0025

Mangurkar, D. M. (2025). Library services for disabled

users: Literature review. *International Journal of Research in Library Science*, *11*(2), 283–293. https://doi.org/10.26761/ijrls.11.2.2025.1903

Midhula, S. V. S., & Sudhier, K. G. (2022). Library and information needs of differently-abled students in Kerala: A study. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 1–17. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/7333/

Nottinghamshire, D. (2014, January 7). *Social Model vs Medical Model of disability*. Disabilitynottinghamshire.org.uk; Disability Nottinghamshire. https://www.disabilitynottinghamshire.org.uk/index.php/about/social-model-vs-medical-model-of-disability/

Potnis, D., & Mallary, K. (2021). Analyzing service divide in academic libraries for better serving disabled patrons using assistive technologies. *College and Research Libraries*, *82*(6), 879. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.82.6.879

Skaggs, D., & McMullin, R. (2024). *Universal design for learning in academic libraries: Theory into practice*. ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries).

Sunil, M. V., & Madhu, K. S. (2025). Library services for users with disabilities in India: A bibliometric analysis. *South Eastern European Journal of Public Health*, *27*, 1046–1068. https://doi.org/10.70135/seejph.vi.6000

The Washington Group on Disability Statistics. (2019, August 22). *Basic guide to sampling for disability surveys*. WG Blog: The Washington Group on Disability Statistics. https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/wg-blog/post/basic-guide-to-sampling-for-disability-surveys-74/

UGC. (2020). *Accessibility Guidelines and Standards for Higher Education Institutions and Universities*. Ministry of Education. https://www.ugc.gov.in/e-book/

Accessibility_Guidelines_and_Standards_HEI/mobile/index.html

Yadav, B., & Singh, S. N. (2022). Library and information services for persons with disabilities: Indian students' perspectives survey. *Journal of Access Services*, *19*(2–3), 67–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/15367967.2022.2113085

Zaks, Z. (2023). Changing the medical model of disability to the normalization model of disability: clarifying the past to create a new future direction. *Disability & Society*, 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2255926

Pathways to Inclusive Higher Education: Rethinking Accessibility for Students with Disabilities in India

About the Author :
Shiddappa Madar, *MSW, PhD.*

Contact Information of the corresponding author :

Shiddappa Madar, *MSW, PhD.*
Assistant Professor,
Postgraduate Department of Social Work,
Government First Grade College,
KR Nagara, Mysuru, Karnataka
Email: siddu2g@gmail.com

Abstract

Disability is a global social justice concern, affecting approximately 650 million people worldwide. In India, 26.8 million individuals live with different forms of disability. Although 79 years of government initiatives and the efforts of higher education institutions have brought in many visible changes, these measures have not succeeded in significantly increasing enrolment. Only 1.2 percent of persons with disabilities are enrolled in higher education institutions, whereas the vast majority remain excluded. Among those enrolled, students continue to face challenges related to inadequate infrastructural facilities like elevators, ramps, reading facilities, and accessible washrooms. The study employed a descriptive research design with a qualitative approach to examine accessibility issues faced by students with disabilities in higher education. A systematic literature

review, conducted in line with PRISMA guidelines (2000), analysed national and international scholarly works. Only academic sources addressing accessibility in Indian higher education were included, and unrelated or nonacademic works were excluded. In this study, a detailed narration is carried out under specific thematic titles such as 'accessibility and social policy', 'accessibility as a right', 'inclusive infrastructure and its audit', engagement of civil society organisations', 'assistive technology', and availability of empirical evidence. The framework of the four A's – Accessible infrastructure, Accessibility audit, Assistive devices, and Awareness- is pivotal in advancing higher education, as these elements put together may foster a more inclusive and equitable higher education system in India.

Keywords: Disability, inclusion, accessibility challenges, and higher education

Introduction

Disability is a global social phenomenon, affecting approximately 650 million people worldwide. Notably, 80 percent of individuals with disabilities reside in developing countries. In India, about 26.8 million people (18.6 million males and 8.2 million females) live with various forms of disability. Data further reveal that the prevalence of disability increases with age. According to OECD statistics, disability rates are higher among individuals with lower levels of education; on average, 19 percent of less educated individuals have disabilities, compared to 11 percent of their better-educated counterparts (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2010; WHO, 2011). Over the past three decades, advances in medicine and growing human rights concerns have significantly contributed to efforts to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities. The

WHO has also noted that disability prevalence may rise further due to factors such as climate change, man-made disasters, and population growth (UDHR, 1948, WHO, 2026; United Nations, 2006; United Nations, 2015).

Education plays a vital role in the lives of persons with disabilities, not only by increasing literacy rates but by consequently enhancing awareness, employability, independence, confidence, and mobility. (Kunnath & Mathew, 2019). Indian educational statistics reveal that 8.5 percent of the population is entering higher educational institutions, while the NSSO (2013) found that only 1.2 percent (3.6 lakh) of disabled youth are enrolled in universities and colleges (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner [ORGI], 2011). According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), enrolment of students with disabilities in higher education declined from 578 in 2016–17 to 283 in 2020–21, representing a reduction of nearly half (AISHE, 2021).

Over the past seven-and-a-half decades, India has attempted to make higher education more accessible, affordable, and inclusive. However, significant challenges remain, including the lack of physical accessibility (Mir & Waheed, 2022; Sachs & Schreuer, 2011). Many higher education institutions in India fail to provide essential infrastructure such as elevators, ramps, reading facilities, and accessible washrooms (Kunnath & Mathew, 2019; Sambad et al., 2026). Other barriers include discrimination, prejudice, exclusion or segregation from mainstream settings, and inferior quality of education, even in institutions where children with disabilities have been "integrated" into non-inclusive systems. These factors make it difficult for persons with disabilities to pursue higher education (Jameel, 2011; Goodall et al., 2022; World Bank,

2007; Menon et al., 2014; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022).

Furthermore, many institutions lack proper policies and practices to support inclusion, and disability services often suffer from inadequate resources and funding (Boreal, 2014; Lid et al., 2024). Faculty and staff frequently lack awareness and understanding of the accommodations required by students with disabilities. Assistive technologies such as screen readers, magnifiers, and speech recognition software are either unavailable or unaffordable. A study by Ahmad (2018) revealed that 98.8 percent of India's higher education system is inaccessible to disabled youth. (Majhi & Rout, 2026).

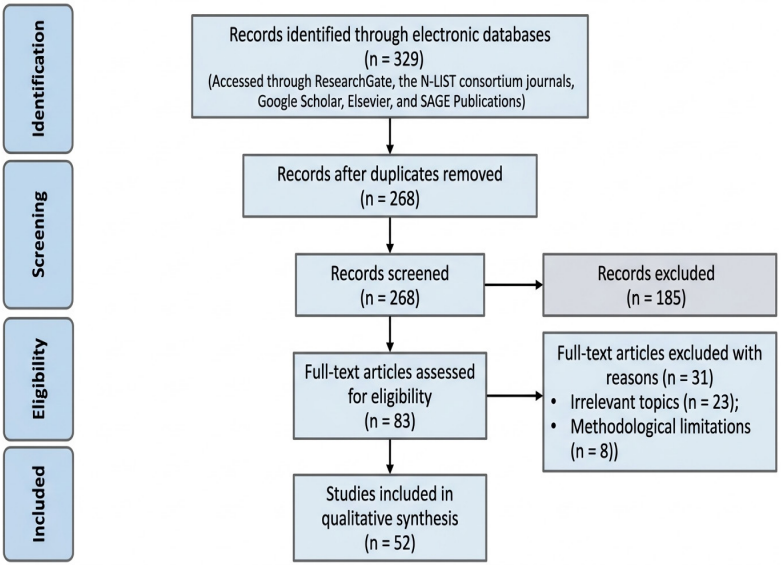
Despite these challenges, recent efforts by the Government of India, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, and the University Grants Commission have shifted the focus toward mainstreaming persons with disabilities in higher education. Measures such as reservation of admission, provision of access, special equipment, fee concessions, fellowships, scholarships, accessibility assessments for NAAC accreditation, institutional accessibility audits, teacher preparation in special education, financial assistance to faculty with disabilities (GoI, 2015), and the establishment of review committees for updates and assessments have contributed to strengthening institutional commitment. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, mandates that higher education institutions provide appropriate accommodations and support to students with disabilities, and, on 3 December 2015, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment launched a nationwide flagship campaign to create barrier-free accessibility in public transport and information and communication technologies (GoI, 2015; Menon et al., 2014).

Methods and Materials

The study adopted a descriptive research design, aiming to delineate the nature and characteristics of the stated problem through a qualitative approach. Its primary objective was to explore contemporary research concerning accessibility issues faced by students with disabilities in higher education. For the research paper, secondary sources were gathered from national and international open-access journals, and public reports published over the past twenty-six years were added. Further, according to the PRISMA guidelines (2000), a systematic review of the literature was ensured to maintain methodological rigour and transparency while analysing the sources. For the study, scholarly works focused on disabilities in higher education institutions in India, published between 2000 and 2026, were reviewed and, wherever necessary, adopted. As part of the study, qualitative and quantitative research works were envisaged to bring possible conclusions.

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Chart



Discussion

Given the study's purpose, the research highlights the accessibility issues. This element seems to be more significant as it poses a greater barrier within the system. Accessibility is not confined to disability, but it encompasses the essential requirements for all human beings. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) emphasises accessibility to the social, economic, physical, and cultural environment as well as to health, education, information, and communication (World Bank Group, 2022). The ability to move, participate, and function effectively across diverse environments is fundamental to building an empowered society. In contrast, inaccessibility creates obstacles in daily life, undermines self-esteem, and erodes human dignity.

Moreover, it imposes a substantial cost of social exclusion (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2021).

Accessibility and Social Policy

To ensure compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the guidelines on universal design have been adopted by all states worldwide, including India. They include the following on accessibility:

It is the "design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design. "Universal design" shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed." [3, article 2, CRPD, United Nations, 2006]

In India, the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2006, outlines 21 clauses, many of which emphasize educational accessibility for persons with disabilities. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, further mandates accessible physical infrastructure, digitised resources, and barrier-free access to all public buildings. Additionally, the Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992, focuses on the training and development of professionals to support the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities. Together, these three legislations and policies provide significant guidance on educational accessibility. To strengthen accessibility in higher education, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has issued comprehensive guidelines across 10 chapters, in order to ensure that every higher education institution has an Equal Opportunity Cell (UGC, 2022). However, our public authority has failed to implement the clear guidance because of its poor monitoring system, design issues, budgetary constraints, lack of a universal design approach, lack of accessibly audits,

delays in the disbursement of public funds, lack of political willingness, and lack of participation from the community (Rani & Roy, 2025; Thakar, 2021; Lakshmi, 2025; Raheja & Hajela, 2021).

Accessibility is a Right

Accessibility in higher education is indeed recognised as a core component of disability rights. Under frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, access to education is not treated as a privilege but as a legal right. Consequently, students with disabilities may seek redress through the courts, while institutions and governments are held accountable for ensuring compliance. In this regard, the UGC has issued clear guidelines requiring all higher education institutions to provide adequate accessibility within their campuses.

Inclusive Infrastructure and Its Audit

About inclusive infrastructure, the global agenda of SDG 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, explicitly addresses this concern. In the context of higher education in India, recent ASHE reports (2023; 2024) found that a significant number of institutions have introduced visible inclusive infrastructure, such as ramps, digitalised libraries, and the provision of wheelchairs. However, they continue to lack other essential facilities, such as universally designed infrastructure, accessible toilets, adequately wide doors, staircases with handrails, and lifts. Many institutions fail to comply with the Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility issued by the Government of India. Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence on accessibility auditing of these provisions in higher educational institutions.

Even publicly funded universities often lack audits, making it crucial to assess whether infrastructure has been constructed in accordance with accessibility standards (World Bank Group, 2022; Sambad & Khosla, 2026; ASHE reports, 2023; 2024).

Engagement of Civil Society Organisations

UNICEF (2021) and UN (2015) highlight how civil society organisations (CSOs) can be engaged at different levels and across various issues through their toolkit. Governments offer numerous projects and financial support to these organisations, enabling CSOs to contribute positively to the development of persons with disabilities worldwide. Their focus includes rehabilitation, building self-esteem, skill development, advocacy, accessibility training, inclusive education, and social integration with adaptation of a range of models – medical, legal, welfare, psychosocial, empowerment, rights-based, and development-based (Lang, 2000; Thomas et al., 2023). It is noteworthy that many organisations now provide accessibility training to students. The role of civil society organisations is crucial as they share responsibilities with the governments. It has also been observed in the field that the Association of People with Disabilities (APD) organisation has developed an AI-powered accessibility audit application, which is unique in accessibility auditing. Studies have found that the Public Private Partnership (PPP) model is effective in promoting accessibility, which is lacking in higher education institutions in India. (Sharma, 2025; The Hindu Bureau, 2024, December 4; Pino & Badini, 2014; ASHE Report, 2024; Ziedan, 2018; Singh & Singh, 2025).

Assistive Technology and Accessibility

Over the past three decades, assistive technology has made a significant contribution towards reducing barriers

in availability and accessibility within education. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 stipulates the provision of free assistive devices for students. But on the contrary, the empirical evidences reveal that there is considerable disparity between demand and actual provision for these devices for the needy. The study notes that approximately 90 percent of individuals depend on assistive technology devices for accessibility, which is helpful. Among them, only 29 percent have successfully procured them at their own expense, and a higher rate, i.e., 36 percent, reported being unable to afford such devices in India. These figures underscore the affordability issues and the ineffective provisions in institutions (WHO, 2022; Senjam et al., 2023). Apart from assistive technology, there is "advanced technology" i.e., AI-based assistive technology which has been mentioned in many scholarly works that describes the AI-driven assistive devices; which seem to be reasonably easy to adapt to and helpful in improving accessibility by bringing tasks to the fingertips like text to speech systems, voice directed spectacles, image readers and document scanners which can significantly enhance the academic outcomes of students in higher education. However, in India, research works related to AI-driven technology for the disabled currently remain limited (Dumitru et al.,2026; Neha, 2024).

Availability of Empirical Evidence

It is observed that there are limited empirical studies concerning the accessibility issues of the disabled population (Varghese et al., 2018). This study has considered existing studies sources from review articles, accessibility reports, policy reviews, and MPhil dissertations, often employing survey questionnaires rather than from an investigative approach to the challenges faced by the students with disabilities across the country

(Mistry & Panigrahi, 2023). These studies, which primarily focus on the significant barriers like inadequate infrastructure, attitudinal insensitivity from the part of peer group and faculty, and poor institutional support, however underscores the need for more robust empirical investigation backed by a theoretically driven framework (Arora, 2023; Mir & Waheed, 2022). This gap has particularly pronounced a substantial increase in disability enrolment in higher education, which necessitates a deeper understanding of effective interventions and policy implications (Panda, 2023). Despite conducting a comprehensive review of inclusive education strategies suiting higher education institutions in India, the evidences show that this intention has largely remained unfulfilled (Oswal et al., 2025).

Conclusion

From the foregoing matters discussed, it can be seen in this study that institutions' commitment to accessibility remains very minimal. The study found that many institutions are not willing to report their services to the public. Also, in the case of India, it can be seen that we have a long way to go in terms of achieving institutional inclusivity, which further suggests putting into play the four A's of inclusion, which are: Accessible infrastructure, Accessible audit, Assistive devices, and Awareness. This could be achieved with a culmination of tie-ups between CSR initiatives, Public Private Partnership models, and active engagement of civil society organizations to achieve better outcomes in higher education that can further enhance the visibility and accountability, thereby strengthening institutional commitments to accessibility.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

Funding

The author has not received any specific funding for this article.

References

Ahmad, Wasim. (2016). Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities in India: Challenges and Concerns. *Journal of Disability Management and Rehabilitation,* 2(1),1-3. htpps://doi.org/10.1177/2347631119840540

AISHE (2022). *All India survey on higher education (AISHE) 2020-2021*. https://aishe.gov.in/aishe/viewDocument.action;jsessionid =4516D98B54EE4BA9160D-232F0A204?documentId=322

Arora, R. (2023). Access of students with disabilities (SWDs) to higher education in India with special reference to Panjab University, Chandigarh, India. *Indian Journal of Public Administration,* 69(2), 360–371. https://doi.org/10.1177/00195561231154387

Boreal Ganapathi. (2014). Can inclusive higher education help with physical disabilities in India? A comparative analysis. *International Journal of Research in Applied, Natural and Social Sciences, 2(*5), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/2347631119840540

Census of India (2011), Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, https://censusindia.gov.in/

Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). (2024). *Annual status of higher education (ASHE) report 2024.* New Delhi: CII.

Dumitru, C., Muttashar Abdulsahib, G., Ibrahim Khalaf, O., & Bennour, A. (2026). Integrating artificial intelli-

gence in supporting students with disabilities in higher education: An integrative review. *Technology and Disability,* 38(1),3-24. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/10554181251355428

Fernández-Batanero, J. M., Montenegro-Rueda, M., & Fernández-Cerero, J. (2022). Access and Participation of Students with Disabilities: The Challenge for Higher Education. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(19), 11918. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191911918

Give.do. (2024). *NGOs working in the disability sector in India*. https://www.give.do

Goodall, G., Mjøen, O. M., Witsø, A. E., Horghagen, S., & Kvam, L. (2022). Barriers and facilitators in the transition from higher education to employment for students with disabilities: A rapid systematic review. *Frontiers in Education, 7*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.882066

Government of India (GoI), Mistry of Human resource Development (2015) *Press information bureau*, https://pib.gov.in/newsite/ PrintRelease.aspx?relid=118562.

Guide Star India. (2023). *Directory of NGOs in Indi*a. https://guidestarindia.org

Jameel, S. S. (2011). Disability in the context of higher education: Issues and concerns in India, *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education, 2* (7), 1-21. https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ejie/vol2/iss7/3/

Kumari, A., & Bhutani, S. (2023). Accessibility of higher education in India. *Indian Journal of Adult Education, 84(*2), 123–137. https://doi.org/https://www.iaea-india.in

Kunnath, S. K., & Mathew, S. N. (2019). Higher education for students with disabilities in India: Insights from a focus

group study. *Higher Education for the Future, 6*(2), 171-187. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/2347631119840540

Lakshmi, J Sri (2025). Empowering persons with disabilities in India: Challenges and strategic interventions, *International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM), 5*(3), 45-50, https://ijhssm.org/issue_dcp/Empowering%20Persons%20with%20Disabilities%20in%20India%20%20Challenges%20and%20Strategic%20Interventions.pdf

Lang, R. (2000). The role of NGOs in the process of empowerment and social transformation of people with disabilities. *Asia Pacific Disability Rehabilitation Journal, 1*(1), 1-19. https://www.karnatakaphysio.org/pdf2/Role_of_NGO_in_People_with_disabilities.pdf

Lid, I. M., Chalachanová, A., Van Den Breemer, R., & Raustøl, A. (2024). Recognizing students with intellectual disabilities in higher education. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, 11*(1), 71–81. https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2024.2382366

Majhi, S. K., & Rout, S. P.(2026). Accessibility and inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education: Policies and practices in India. *International Journal of Political Science and Governance,8(*2), 321-326. https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2026.v8.i2d.907

Menon, N., Parish, S. L., & Rose, R. A. (2014). The "state" of persons with disabilities in India. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, 15*(4), 391–412. https://doi.org/ 10.1080/19452829.2014.938729

Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India (2021) Harmonised guidelines and standards for universal accessibility in India, 2021. https://divyangjan.depwd.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/2262.pdf

Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India (2020). Persons with disabilities (Divyangjara) in India- A statistical profile: 2021. https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s3e58aea67b01fa747687f038dfde066f6/uploads/2024/10/2024102947528543.pdf

Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. (2006). *National policy for persons with disabilities*. Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Government of India. https://depwd.gov.in/en/policy/national-policy/

Mir, A. A., & Waheed, A. (2022). Experiences of students with disabilities in Indian higher education: An interpretative phenomenological study. *Higher Education for the Future*, *9*(2), 186–202. doi.org/10.1177/23476311221111442

Mistry, Hemendra & Panigrahi, Sudarshan. (2023). Inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education in India: Some issues and suggestions. *Asian Journal of Inclusive Education. 11*(1),31-52. htppt;//doi.org/10.59595/ajie.11.1.2

Neha, K., Kumar, R., & Sankat, M. (2024). AI wizards: Pioneering assistive technologies for higher education inclusion of students with learning disabilities. In R. Kaluri, M. Mahmud, T. R. Gadekallu, D. S. Rajput, & K. Lakshmanna (Eds.), *Applied assistive technologies and informatics for students with disabilities* (53–71). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-0914-4_4.

Neha, K., Kumar, R., Sankat, M. (2024). AI Wizards: Pioneering Assistive Technologies for Higher Education Inclusion of Students with Learning Disabilities. In: Kaluri, R., Mahmud, M., Gadekallu, T.R., Rajput, D.S., Lakshmanna, K. (eds) Applied Assistive Technologies and Informatics for Students with Disabilities. Applied Intelli-

gence and Informatics. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-0914-4_4

Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011). *Measurement of disability through census: National experiences: India*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2010). *Sickness, disability and work: Breaking the barriers: A synthesis of findings across OECD countries*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264088856-en

Oswal, N., Al-Kilani, M. H., Faisal, R., & Fteiha, M. (2025). A systematic review of inclusive education strategies for students of determination in higher education institutions: Current challenges and future directions. *Education Sciences*, *15*(5), Article 518. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15050518

Panda, Saksham. (2023). Service design for inclusion and accessibility at higher education institutes. *Linköping Electronic Conference Proceedings*, (91), 1814–1827. https://doi.org/10.3384/ecp203091

Pino, A., & Badini Confalonieri, A. M. (2014). National social protection policies in West Africa: A comparative analysis. *International Social Security Review, 67*(3–4), 71–94. https://doi.org/10.1111/issr.12051

Raheja, G., & Hajela, A. (2021). Accessibility Planning for Higher Education Campuses in India: A Contextual Approach to Universal Design. In Universal Design 2021: From Special to Mainstream Solutions (161-175). 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road, London, EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications.

Raheja, G., & Hajela, A. (2021). Accessibility planning for higher education campuses in India: A contextual approach to universal design. In *Universal design 2021: From special to mainstream solutions* (pp. 161–175). IOS Press. https://doi.org/10.3233/SHTI210393

Rani, Mamata, & Roy Ankita (2025). Transforming higher education in India: The impact of digital initiatives, *International Journal of Advanced Research in Engineering Technology & Science, 12*(4), 25-35. https://www.ijarets.org/publication/130/10.%20ijarets%20april%202025.pdf?utm_source=copilot.com

Sachs, D., & Schreuer, N. (2011). Inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education: Performance and participation in students' experiences. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *31*(2), Article 1593. https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v31i2.1593

Sambad, K., & Khosla, R. K. (2026). Accessibility in higher education: Assessing physical, academic, and digital inclusivity for students with disabilities in public universities. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, *8*(1), Article 65347. https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2026.v08i01.65347

Senjam, S. S., Manna, S., Kishore, J., Kumar, A., Kumar, R., Vashist, P., ... & Kamath, R. (2023). Assistive technology usage, unmet needs and barriers to access: a sub-population-based study in India. The Lancet Regional Health-Southeast Asia, 15. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2023.100213

Senjam, S. S., Manna, S., Kishore, J., Kumar, A., Kumar, R., Vashist, P., Titiyal, J. S., Jena, P. K., Christian, D. S., Singh, U. S., & Kamath, R. (2023). Assistive technology usage, unmet needs, and barriers to access: A

sub-population-based study in India. *The Lancet Regional Health - Southeast Asia*, *15*, Article 100213. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2023.100213.

Sharma, S. K. (2025). Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) In Higher Education Funding: Success Stories and Lessons Learned in The Indian Context. https://www.irejournals.com. https://www.irejournals.com/formatedpaper/1709197.pdf

Sharma, S. K. (2025). Public-private partnerships (PPP) in higher education funding: Success stories and lessons learned in the Indian context. *Iconic Research and Engineering Journals*, *8*(12), 1303–1311. https://www.irejournals.com/formatedpaper/1709197.pdf

Thakur, Apurva (2021). Policy shortcomings: Effective implementation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. *The Chanakya Law Review*, *2*(1), 31–46. https://www.cnlu.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Policy-Shortcomings-Effective-Implementation-Of-The-Rights-Of-Persons-With-Disabilities-Act-2016-by-Apurva-Thakur.pdf

The Hindu Bureau. (2024, December 4). AI-powered accessibility audit campaign launched on International Day of Persons with Disabilities. *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/bangalore/ai-powered-accessibility-audit-campaign-launched-on-international-day-of-persons-with-disabilities/article68942654.ece

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, Act No. 49 of 2016, Gazette of India (Extraordinary, Part II, Sec. 1) (Dec. 27, 2016). https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/2155/1/a2016-49.pdf

Thomas, S., Thankalayam, S., Kamath, P., & Ninan, N. A. (2023). Defenders of dignity: The role of NGOs in sup-

porting disabled children in India. *Shodh Kosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, *4*(2), 3723–3731. doi.org 10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.4157

UNICEF (2021). Engaging with organizations of persons with disabilities in humanitarian action. https://www.unicef.org/media/124216/file/Engaging%20with%20organizations%20of%20persons%20with%20disabilities%20in%20humanitarian%20action.pdf

United Nations (2016) Youth with disabilities unsdn.org/wp-content/uploads /2016/06/youth-with-disabilities.pdf

United Nations Development Programme. (2006). UNDP and civil society organizations: A toolkit for strengthening partnerships. https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2141UNDP%20and%20Civil%20Society%20Organizations%20a%20Toolkit%20for%20Strengthening%20Partnerships.pdf

United Nations (2006). Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. General Assembly [online]. http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/ conventionfull.shtml

United Nations (2015). Conference of states parties to the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. Improvement of disability data and statistics: objectives and challenges. http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/COP/cosp8_report_e.pdf

University Grants Commission. (2022, February). *Comprehensive accessibility guidelines and standards for higher education institutions and universities (Draft)*. Government of India. https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/8381868_Draft-Guidelines-UGC_20-Feb-2021.pdf

Varghese, N. V., Sabharwal, N. S., & Malish, C. M. (Eds.). (2018). *India Higher Education Report*

2016: Equity. SAGE Publications India. https://doi.org/10.4135/9789353280611

WHO (1980). The international classification of impairments, disabilities, and handicaps (ICIDH). WHO, Geneva [pdf]. http://apps.who.int/ iris/bitstream/10665/41003/1/9241541261_eng.pdf

World Bank. (2022). Technical note on accessibility: Part 3: The thematic fact sheets: Fact sheet 5: Accessibility in the infrastructure operations. https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/228314b2c11c0e5cee2af40998878d-bc-0320012022/original/WBG-TECHNICAL-NOTE-PART-3-5.pdf

World Health Organization (WHO)(2022). Rapid assistive technology assessment tool (rATA) [Internet] [cited 2022 Oct 22]. Available from: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-MHP-HPS-ATM-2021.1; 2022.

World Health Organization, & World Bank. (2011). *World report on disability 2011*. World Health Organization. http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report.pdf

World Health Organization. (2001). *International classification of functioning, disability and health: ICF*. https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/42407/9241545429-eng.pdf

Ziedan, Saad Kasem (2018). The role of civil society organizations in achieving social protection for the disabled. *Journal of Sociology and Social Work, 6*(1), 56-63. https://doi.org/10.15640/jssw.v6n1a7

Beyond the Binary: A Scoping Review of Special and Inclusive Education for Dyslexic Learners in Mainstream Indian Classrooms

About the Authors :
Manasi Panwar
Pushp Lata

Contact Information of the corresponding authors :

Manasi Panwar
(Corresponding Author)
PhD Research Scholar
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Birla Institute of Technology and Sciences
Pilani, Pilani Campus, Rajastha
Email: p20230444@pilani.bits-pilani.ac.in

Pushp Lata
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Birla Institute of Technology and Sciences
Pilani, Pilani Campus, Rajasthan
Email: plat@pilani.bits-pilani.ac.in

Abstract

The goal towards making education a means of holistic development for learners of all capabilities is outlined in the global frameworks of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). However, the realization of provisions for inclusive and equitable education as outlined in these frameworks remains lacking and incomplete, particularly in the context of middle school dyslexic learners in Indian

classrooms. Grounded in the Social Model of Disability, the present study engages with the binary framing of special and inclusive education within the Indian educational landscape. The study argues that these models of education must be positioned as complementary rather than mutually exclusive to efficiently support the needs of neurodivergent learners, such as those with dyslexia. The study adopts a scoping literature review design to map the existing literature across the domains of pedagogy, Policy, and specialized support available to address writing-related challenges faced by middle school dyslexic learners. The analysis highlights the potential of a design-oriented classroom framework, grounded in the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), to support the academic needs of dyslexic learners within mainstream classrooms. The study emphasizes integrating dyslexic learners into mainstream classrooms by accommodating their learning needs through pedagogical adaptations and reducing reliance on segregated educational models. By positioning special education as a supportive mechanism rather than a substitute for meaningful inclusion of dyslexic learners in the Indian educational landscape, the study contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive education.

Keywords: Special Education; Inclusive Education; Middle School Dyslexic Learners; Social Model of Disability; Universal Design for Learning (UDL); Writing Difficulties; SDG 4; UNCRPD

Introduction

The global movement for inclusive and equitable education for learners of all capabilities draws from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), advocating for reforms in education by creating learning

spaces where no learner is marginalized (United Nations, 2006, 2015). These frameworks enable the reconceptualization of education beyond the existing segregated schooling models and encourage the accommodation of learner diversity within classroom praxis. Despite the intent, scholarship highlights significant policy-practice gaps in these commitments that lead to tokenistic inclusion of neurodivergent learners, such as those with dyslexia, in mainstream Indian classrooms (Slee, 2018; Haug, 2017). In the absence of contextually-situated pedagogical adaptations for middle school dyslexic learners in India, this gap becomes more pronounced, thereby reducing the potential of inclusive education to a mere policy imperative (Singal, 2006).

From a legislative perspective, frameworks such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD, 2016), and the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) guide collective efforts towards inclusive education for all learners. However, studies examine gaps in the effective implementation of these frameworks in everyday classroom practice (Sarkar, 2020). These policy-practice gaps are exacerbated by the ambiguities arising from the co-existence of special schools, home-based schooling, and inclusive schools within the same framework (Kalyanpur, 2011; Singal, 2010). In addition to this, systemic constraints, such as examination-oriented curricula, rigid and monomodal instructional design, and a lack of an adequate number of special educators, further contribute to a non-linear operationalization of inclusive education within a hybrid education system in India (Sharma & Sokal, 2016).

In this context, dyslexic learners who struggle with reading, writing, transcription, and the coherent organization of their thoughts occupy a particularly complex position (Snowling & Berninger, 2019). Research establishes the

need for specialized, differentiated instruction and remedial pedagogical accommodations to support the learning needs of learners (Snowling & Berninger, 2019). In India, only traditional special schools are equipped to provide the required support for the learners, thereby inhibiting their integration into mainstream classrooms (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014). This duality reflects that inclusion in India is being pursued without adequate attention towards pedagogical adaptations that impact the everyday educational experiences of middle school dyslexic learners.

The present study engages with the binary framing of special and inclusive education, arguing that the potential of these models of education is best achieved when they are considered complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Analyzing the existing scholarship within a scoping literature review design, the study positions special education as a supportive mechanism to inclusive education, reinforcing their complementary relationship. Lastly, the study proposes integrating a design-oriented framework grounded in UDL principles to provide dyslexic learners with equitable learning opportunities (CAST, 2018; Troia, 2019).

This review synthesizes scholarship from the year 2010-2025 across three domains, including:

i) Global and Indian policy frameworks informing inclusive education;

ii) Writing-based challenges faced by middle school dyslexic learners;

iii) UDL as a design-oriented framework for inclusive mainstream classrooms.

These domains were examined to establish the conceptual and practice-based space into which the present study operates, centering the voices of dyslexic learners via cited scholarship.

The synthesis reflects that writing, as a skill, emerges as a critical site of both inclusion and exclusion, as the writing-tasks-based challenges faced by middle school dyslexic learners become the most pronounced and academically severe.

Global and Indian policy frameworks informing inclusive education

Moving beyond the traditional Medical and Charity models of disability, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was adopted in 2006 to ensure inclusive education as a human right and legal obligation for learners of all capabilities (United Nations, 2006; Ainscow, 2020). More specifically, Article 24 of the UNCRPD explicitly directs the nation states to ensure "an inclusive educational system at all levels" and "lifelong learning opportunities for all", highlighting the shift towards a rights-based and equity-oriented learning space for learners of all capabilities (United Nations, 2006).

Such a normative turn is consistent with the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990), which emphasizes the critical role of systemic constraints in the lives of learners with disabilities. The aim is to reposition dyslexic learners at the center of equity-based educational accommodations that address their writing-related challenges, rather than the regressive view of "fixing" or "curing" them (Goodley, 2017; Slee, 2018).

Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) emphasizes inclusive and equitable education for all learners, particularly outlining provisions to accommodate learners with disabilities (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2015). SDG 4 serves as a guiding framework for collective efforts towards integrated, inclusive models of education for learners

of all capabilities (Ainscow, 2019; Deppeler, 2019).

However, the symbolic compliance of these frameworks results in tokenistic inclusion for dyslexic learners, emphasizing the policy-practice disconnect within classroom praxis (Haug, 2017; Slee, 2018).

This disconnect becomes more pronounced and consequential in the context of the Indian educational landscape, given its status as a signatory to the UNCRPD and a key actor shaping the implementation of SDG 4 in South Asia (Singal, 2019; UNESCO, 2017).

For instance, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD, 2016) outlines special provisions of home-based schooling for learners with disabilities and legally recognizes Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) as a distinct category, under which dyslexia is recognized as one of the conditions (Government of India, 2016; Sarkar & Koles, 2020).

This explicit acknowledgment and recognition of dyslexia within the national disability mandate created a statutory criterion for the formal identification, certification, and access to required support by the learners. More recently, the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) reinforced the notion of neurodivergent diversity within classrooms, emphasizing teacher training, institutional support, and access to inclusive educational resources for all learners (DSEL, 2025).

However, policy analysis studies highlight the persistent gaps between the intent and rhetoric of these policy frameworks and classroom realities in India, for instance, weak infrastructural accessibility, insufficient capacity-building for teachers, lack of specific and tailored pedagogical interventions, and lack of neurodivergence-related awareness among stakeholders

(Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, 2024).

Scholars argue that inclusive education in India is largely shaped by "policy borrowing", where global discourses are adopted without sufficient attention to contextual realities (Singal, 2016). Similarly, scholars note that the realization of inclusive education requires systemic transformation, including tailored pedagogical interventions, flexible assessments, and trained professionals, which are difficult to achieve in resource-constrained settings, such as those in India (Ramaswamy and Das, 2020).

Thus, from an empirical perspective, the enrollment of a dyslexic learner in a mainstream school might suffice as evidence of inclusion, the neurotypically designed and one-size-fits-all classroom practices will further disadvantage dyslexic learners (Mehta & Sharma, 2019; Sharma & Sokal, 2016).

The provisions of hybrid and co-existence of special education and inclusive education within the same policy framework add another layer of complexity for dyslexic learners in India (Sarkar, 2020). In many states in India, a dual track educational model persists, where special schools and mainstream inclusive schools operate alongside, reflecting an inconsistent and complex policy-practice trends across the educational landscape (Kalyanpur, 2011; Mehta & Sharma, 2019). This approach reflects an oscillating tension between two competing logics: one that focuses on the normalization of dyslexic learners in mainstream schools, and the other that relies on remedial interventions required by dyslexic learners to cope with the academic requirements.

Research on Indian secondary schools documents how this oscillation becomes more pronounced for middle school dyslexic learners as the existing curriculum and assessment

cultures define "merit" or "academic success" for them (Armstrong, 2012).

Taken together, existing studies reveal that in the absence of systemic reformation from segregated to integrated models of education, the promise of inclusion would remain incomplete in India (Singal, 2016; Singh, 2021). The present study examines this institutionalized co-existence of special and inclusive education as a critical entry point to examine its implications on the writing skills of middle school dyslexic learners in Indian classrooms.

Dyslexia and Writing in the Indian Context: Between Recognition and Marginalization

Dyslexia is identified as difficulties in phonological processing, fluent word recognition, and accurate spelling, which affects their ability to produce coherent written text (IDA, 2002; APA, 2013). Specifically for middle school dyslexic learners, these difficulties compound as they are expected to engage with text-intensive curricula, time-bound assessments, and complex literary tasks without adequate adaptation of instructional practices (Wagner et al., 2019; Berninger, 2019).

For instance, in traditional Indian classrooms, writing tasks that primarily focus on rote memorization, essay writing, or comprehension-centric assessments leave little room for scaffolding, creativity, or differentiated support required by dyslexic learners (Mahdi, 2024; Sharma & Sinha, 2019).

Given the writing-based challenges faced by middle school dyslexic learners, specialized and remedial pedagogical interventions are required to ensure sustained engagement and long-term participation in academic pathways (Berninger, 2019).

While special educational models do have the potential to address these challenges, they often reinforce a deficit-based understanding of dyslexia in society, contributing to further marginalization of learners from and within mainstream classrooms (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014). As a result, writing emerges as a site of exclusion for dyslexic learners and potential inclusion becomes "tokenistic", often being limited to policy discourse and without meaningful participation.

Since the goal of inclusive education is to minimize the need for special education services over time, and to assimilate learners with disabilities, such as those with dyslexia, into mainstream classrooms (Kalyanpur, 2011; Florian, 2019). However, in the absence of a seamless and supported transition, provisions of the inclusive educational model create an unresolved tension between the required support for middle school dyslexic learners and their mandated participation in mainstream classrooms.

The present study explores this discourse by analyzing the conceptual foundation of special, remedial education as "parallel" or "support", rather than as an integral component of the inclusive pedagogy model in India.

The study suggests that by repositioning special education as complementary to inclusive education, writing can be reconceptualized as a site of access and participation for dyslexic learners through design-oriented pedagogical interventions. This reconceptualization can help middle school dyslexic learners cope with the writing-based challenges, and the mainstream classrooms can become the site of both specialized support and inclusive participation, thus aligning with the broader goals outlined in the global and national frameworks.

Universal Design for Learning: A design-oriented framework for inclusive writing instruction

The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST, 2018) developed the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to accommodate learner diversity by providing flexible and multiple pathways to learning. Grounded in the principles of inclusion, the framework provides learners with multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of expression, thereby laying a coherent structure for designing classroom practices, suited to the needs of middle school dyslexic learners (CAST, 2018; Edyburn, 2010).

Unlike the rigid traditional approaches to writing-based tasks in Indian classrooms, multiple means of representation in UDL-grounded principles will provide dyslexic learners with the agency to access writing through multimodal pathways, reducing cognitive load (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

This instructional design allows teachers to provide learners with written prompts alongside audio instructions, visual aids, and multimedia tools, so that dyslexic learners can utilize them during the tasks to support their organization of ideas and comprehension (Rao et al., 2017; Dalton, 2019).

For instance, middle school dyslexic learners can enhance their writing skills when they are provided with sentence-frame templates or annotated model texts to envision the architecture of the text without experiencing anxiety or cognitive load. Research establishes that such pedagogical interventions can improve the working memory and executive functions by offloading the visual and organizational demands of writing-based tasks, particularly for middle school dyslexic learners (Swanson, 2017; Berninger, 2019).

Similarly, multiple engagement strategies focus on restructuring writing-based tasks so that middle school

dyslexic learners can complete them with sustained attention and motivation.

For instance, learners can be engaged in meaningful, contextually adapted assignments, such as writing blogs for class, their daily routine, or school newsletters, moving away from rigid time-based assessments (Rao et al., 2017). Studies emphasize that such pedagogical reconfigurations can play a crucial role in reconceptualizing writing for middle school dyslexic learners, enhancing their engagement, participation, and motivation in the writing-based tasks (Pollak et al., 2017; Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014).

Lastly, multiple means of expression challenge the assumption that "good writing" is synonymous with error-free transcription, thus allowing dyslexic learners to approach writing-based tasks without hesitation or anxiety (CAST, 2018).

This way, writing-based challenges faced by middle school dyslexic learners can be supported through a range of modalities, including traditional written essays, multimodal projects, digital tools, and oral presentations supported by visual aids (CAST, 2018; Troia, 2019).

Existing studies map the potential of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as an effective intervention to enhance the writing skills of learners; however, its contextual adaptation suited to Indian classrooms and the needs of middle school dyslexic learners remains an area of further exploration. At the same time, most studies closely associate the success of UDL-based writing instruction in special-education contexts with fewer studies mapping its integration in mainstream educational settings (Berninger, 2019; Florian, 2019).

To ensure a targeted, evidence-based response to the writing-focused needs of middle school dyslexic learners, the present

study proposes integrating a design-oriented UDL framework into mainstream classrooms while maintaining contextual sensitivity.

The proposed framework builds on the possibility that operationalization of UDL principles in ways that are responsive to classroom realities in the Indian context can reposition special education as a supportive, rather than a substitute, mechanism for meaningful inclusion.

2. Research Gap(s)

Based on the scoping literature review (2010-2025), the present study addresses the following research gap(s):

i) Limited studies examine special education and inclusive education as complementary models in Indian classrooms.

ii) Insufficient research maps the translation of inclusive education policies into writing-focused classroom practices for dyslexic learners.

iii) Limited scholarship conceptualizes writing as a site of exclusion, participation, and identity affirmation for dyslexic learners.

iv) Few studies explore the contextual adaptation of UDL-based writing instruction in Indian mainstream classrooms.

v) Limited research proposes design-oriented frameworks integrating specialized pedagogical support within inclusive mainstream classrooms.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopts a scoping literature review research design (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; PRISMA-ScR, Tricco

et al., 2018) to map the breadth of existing scholarship across three domains – policy frameworks, dyslexia-specific pedagogical interventions, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Following a scoping review approach, the study focuses on examining the conceptual and practice-based landscape in the aforementioned domains and identifying the gaps linking these domains to the writing-related challenges faced by middle school dyslexic learners in Indian classrooms. The review also examines how the binary framing of special education and inclusive education shapes everyday classroom practices for middle school dyslexic learners in India. The findings from the review informed the integration of a design-oriented, UDL-grounded framework into everyday classroom practices.

Rooted in the Social Model of Disability, the study highlights the role of external factors, such as social, institutional, and systemic structures, which shape the educational experiences of learners with disabilities (Oliver, 1990). The study explores global and national policy frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the Right to Education Act, 2009, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD, 2016), and the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) to map and report their operationalization into everyday instructional practices in Indian classrooms.

As the existing scholarship highlights the persistent policy-practice gaps in the context of Indian classrooms, the present study proposes a design-oriented framework grounded in the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that has the potential to serve as a bridge between national mandates for inclusive education and the specialized support required by middle school dyslexic learners.

Positioning special education as a complementary mechanism to inclusive education, the study aims to reconceptualize writing as a site of access, participation, and long-term development of middle school dyslexic learners.

Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

To examine the conceptual and practice-based key literature sources across the domains, a structured search was conducted using the following keyword combinations for each domain:

i) *Policy and framework analysis – "inclusive education" and "policy" and ("India" or "SDG4" or "UNCRPD" or "RPwD");*

ii) *Dyslexia-specific pedagogical studies – "dyslexia" and "writing" and "dyslexia pedagogy" and ("middle school" or "intervention");*

iii) *UDL and its contextual adaptation to Indian classrooms – "Universal Design for Learning" and "UDL principles" and ("Indian classrooms" or "context").*

The screening of texts was first done for title/abstract, followed by full-text screening against the inclusion/exclusion criteria mentioned below.

The inclusion criteria for the texts were:

i) Publication year: 2010-2025;

ii) Peer-reviewed/Scopus-indexed or authorized policy documents;

iii) Directly engages with the academic needs of middle school dyslexic learners, writing-related challenges, or policy/design frameworks (UDL, SDG4, UNCRPD, RPwD, NEP);

iv) Contextually situated or adapted to Indian classrooms.

The exclusion criteria for the texts were:

i) Studies focused on disabilities or neurodivergent conditions unrelated to dyslexia/specific learning disabilities;

ii) Studies set in higher education or early-childhood contexts;

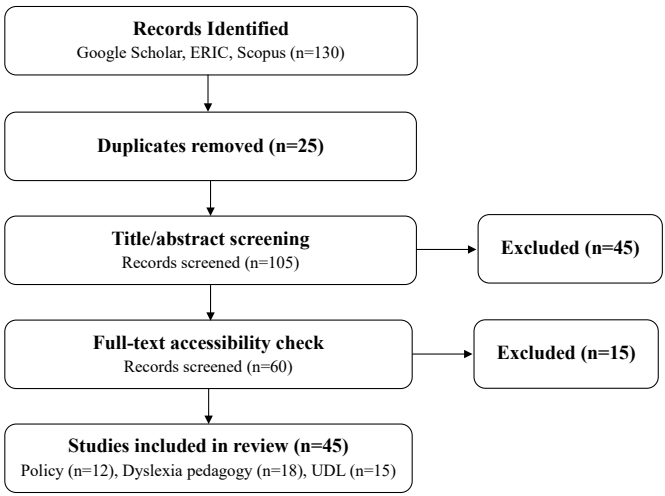
iii) Non-peer-reviewed literature sources, opinions, blog pieces;

iv) Full texts not accessible.

This process led to the identification of a total of 45 core texts (N=45) across three domains: Policy and framework analysis (N=12); Dyslexia-specific pedagogical studies, focused on middle school writing challenges and existing interventions (N=18); and UDL and its contextual adaptation to Indian classrooms (N=15) (Figure 1).

Figure 1

PRISMA-ScR flow diagram of the literature search and selection process



The texts are assigned coded identifiers within the following domains: PolicyFM1-12, DyslexiaPG1-18, and UDL1-15, and the same are used throughout the findings and discussion section.

Data analysis

The findings from the scoping review of the key literature sources yielded recurring patterns, which were subsequently developed into themes and informed the development of a design-oriented framework (Levac et al., 2010).

From the selected core texts, initial codes were generated following a deductive-inductive approach to identify and map conceptual constructs, such as pedagogical practices, writing instruction, and UDL adaptations. To organize these codes into final themes that reflect cross-domain patterns, an iterative review, refinement, and synthesis approach was employed. To maintain transparency and analytical rigor, NVivo software was used for the organization, visualization of conceptual constructs, and subsequent development of the framework.

Through the lens of policy frameworks, pedagogical interventions, and design orientation, the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990) and Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018) were employed for data analysis. The rationale for employing the Social Model of Disability was to highlight the systemic barriers faced by dyslexic learners within Indian classrooms, while the UDL enabled the operationalization of tailored, flexible, and design-oriented pedagogical interventions to support the writing skills of middle school dyslexic learners in mainstream classrooms.

Collectively, the framework provided a targeted analysis of how policies shape inclusive writing practices for middle school dyslexic learners in Indian classrooms.

Trustworthiness & Rigor

The criteria of credibility, transparency, and dependability were central to the study's methodological approach. The iterative review process helped maintain consistency in the conceptual mapping of texts, and NVivo software facilitated a systematic organization of recurring themes. To strengthen the interpretation across the three domains, policy frameworks, pedagogical interventions, and adaptations of UDL, triangulation was conducted. Reflexive memos documented analytical decisions, minimizing bias.

Ethical Considerations

As ethical considerations are central to every research study, all the source materials were accessed via institutional subscriptions. All the authors are duly credited in the study. The study involved no human participants; however, dyslexic voices and their representation were prioritized via cited scholarship. Data were stored securely for research purposes only.

Results & Discussion

Based on the conceptual and critical examination of 45 selected core texts (PolicyFM1-12, DyslexiaPG1-18, UDL1-15), the analysis revealed that the association between special and inclusive educational models for middle school dyslexic learners can be best understood as dynamic and complementary.

The present study proposes to rethink the traditional binary framing of special schools and inclusive mainstream schools as mutually exclusive and proposes an interdependent partnership between these educational models. In the context of middle school dyslexic learners and their writing skills, the

findings are organized in three themes:

i) Policy-practice disconnect: The persistence of tokenistic inclusion;

ii) Centrality of writing as a site of exclusion and potential re-inclusion for middle school dyslexic learners;

iii) Adaptability and potential of a design-oriented framework grounded in the principles of UDL to integrate writing-focused specialized pedagogical intervention into mainstream classrooms.

Policy-practice disconnect: The persistence of tokenistic inclusion

The cluster of policy documents (PolicyFM1-12) highlighted the common thread aligning the national frameworks, including the RTE Act (2009), RPwD Act (2016), and NEP 2020, with the global commitments to inclusive education, including the UNCRPD (2006) and SDG 4 (2015).

Despite the common goal and intent of the frameworks, coded patterns around keywords, such as "policy intent", "policy-practice gap", and "implementation gap" in these texts, suggested the persistence of tokenistic inclusion (Ainscow, 2019; Florian, 2019; Singh, 2021). Scholars describe this tokenistic inclusion as the symbolic presence of dyslexic learners in mainstream classrooms, without substantive changes in pedagogical practices (Slee, 2018; Ainscow, 2019).

This tokenistic inclusion of dyslexic learners is produced by systemic constraints and by the disconnect between the intent of policy frameworks and their translation into practice.

In resource-constrained classrooms, such as those in India, a persistent disconnect between policy mandates and their translation into everyday classroom practices was pronounced

(PolicyFM8-11). The national disability mandate, i.e., RPwD Act, 2016, outlines provisions for pedagogical accommodations to address the academic needs of learners with disabilities, such as those with dyslexia; however, limited literature engages with actionable classroom-based pedagogical accommodations for writing-intensive subjects (Singh, 2021; Vidhi Center for Legal Policy, 2024).

In the absence of concrete, clear guidelines on how to address the needs of dyslexic learners, teachers are expected to interpret "accommodation" based on their own expertise and understanding, leading to the ineffective implementation of policy frameworks in classroom praxis (PolicyFM6,11; Mehta & Sharma, 2019).

These findings corroborated the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990), highlighting that the exclusion and marginalization of dyslexic learners from mainstream classrooms is not inherent to learners themselves, but is produced by systemic barriers and gaps in policy architecture. The literature suggests that although policy frameworks officially recognize dyslexia under the Specific Learning Disability (SLD) category, classroom realities reveal that dyslexic learners continue to face difficulties in the rigid and monomodal instructional practices (PolicyFM2-10; Singh, 2021; Kalyanpur, 2011).

The present study thus highlights the persistent policy-practice gaps that manifest in the marginalization of middle school dyslexic learners from mainstream classroom settings. Dyslexic learners continue to remain limited as empirical evidence, and are included "only in principle but excluded in practice". In addition to this, the segregated model of special education and the disconnect in the transition of middle school dyslexic learners to mainstream classroom settings reinforce the deficit-based understanding around disability.

The study proposes a complementary framing of special and inclusive educational models, as opposed to the traditional binary framing, to support the writing skills of middle school dyslexic learners.

Centrality of writing as a site of exclusion and potential re-inclusion for middle school dyslexic learners

In the context of writing, the findings suggest that the dyslexic learners experience difficulties with sentence construction, coherent organization of thoughts, and comprehension (Armstrong, 2012; Snowling, 2013).

Given the persistence of these difficulties, the findings reveal that in the absence of specialized, remedial pedagogical interventions that address the writing-specific needs of middle school dyslexic learners, writing becomes a site of exclusion for these learners (DyslexiaPG11-14; 17-18).

The review further suggests that this exclusionary impact of writing-related tasks and instruction is reinforced by several interrelated factors. Firstly, the intensive academic expectations of middle school, including complex writing tasks, coherent written production, and time-bound assessments, create anxiety and disengagement from classroom participation (DyslexiaPG1-5; Mehta & Sharma, 2019; Sharma & Sokal, 2016). The continued reliance on these classroom practices leaves little room for differentiated writing-based tasks or alternative forms of expression, further exacerbating the challenges of middle school dyslexic learners. Conceptual constructs that emerged from the texts (DyslexiaPG1-5; 7-11; 15-18), such as "transcription difficulty", "organizational writing", and "marginalization of learners", further highlight the exam-centric and text-dense nature of Indian curricula. Secondly, the study highlights the absence of specialized

pedagogical interventions in mainstream classrooms as a product of systemic constraints and limited teacher training. As a response to these constraints, writing is often characterized as a mechanism through which exclusion is institutionally reproduced (DyslexiaPG1-18; Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014).

Lastly, the absence of systematic and formalized screening mechanisms to facilitate the early identification of dyslexic learners leads to misinterpretation of their writing-based difficulties as "laziness" or "low intelligence", rather than as neurodevelopmental variation (Pollak et al., 2017; Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014).

However, the same body of literature (DyslexiaPG1-18) also points to the potential of pedagogical interventions that can help reconceptualize writing as a site of re-inclusion and identity affirmation for middle school dyslexic learners in Indian classrooms.

To achieve the goal of inclusive education in mainstream classrooms, classroom practices must be redesigned to accommodate learner diversity. For instance, learners should be provided with opportunities to demonstrate their learning through multimodal pathways, oral presentations, or visual aids to increase their engagement and self-efficacy (CAST, 2018; Troia, 2019).

The study emphasizes that integrating targeted pedagogical interventions into mainstream inclusive classrooms will not only challenge the notion of writing-based tasks as disabling but also reframe them as a meaning-making process for learners. In this way, writing as a skill can serve double functions in the lives of middle school dyslexic learners: as a key mechanism of exclusion under existing classroom practices, and as a potential site of access, active participation, and identity affirmation through reconfigured, UDL-oriented pedagogical interventions.

Adaptability and potential of a design-oriented framework grounded in the principles of UDL to integrate writing-focused specialized pedagogical interventions into mainstream classrooms

The review of the cluster of texts (UDL1-15) highlighted the potential of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to reconceptualize special education as a design-oriented and supportive mechanism for middle school dyslexic learners within mainstream classrooms.

The deductive-inductive coding process yielded three core conceptual constructs: "flexible representation, "active engagement," and "responsive expression" (UDL1-15).

Studies have consistently linked similar conceptual constructs to improving outcomes in writing-based tasks for diverse learners, including those with dyslexia (Dalton, 2019; Rao et al., 2017).

Grounded in the principles of UDL, the study proposes a design-oriented framework to integrate writing-focused specialized pedagogical interventions into mainstream classrooms, maintaining contextual sensitivity to the Indian middle school context (Table 1)

Table 1

Design-oriented UDL-inclusive writing framework for middle

school dyslexic learners

UDL principle	Key classroom practices	Link to source-domain evidence
Flexible representation	Audio instructions; graphic organizers; sentence-frames; multilingual glossaries; visual models of essays (CAST, 2018; Edyburn, 2010).	Informed by DyslexiaPG1-18 studies on organizational difficulties and PolicyFM1-12 needs for clearer task scaffolding.
Active engagement	Topic choice; collaborative writing; real-audience tasks (blogs, magazines); structured peer feedback (Dalton, 2019; Rao et al., 2017).	Draws on DyslexiaPG1-18 motivational patterns and PolicyFM1-12 concerns about affective exclusion.
Responsive expression	Speech-to-text, digital word-processors, multimodal projects, oral presentations with visual supports (CAST, 2018; Wan et al., 2020).	Informed by DyslexiaPG1-18 transcription difficulties and UDL1-15 assistive-technology findings.

The framework foregrounds the Social Model of Disability as a moral and policy imperative for reconfiguring pedagogical

practices in mainstream classrooms, arguing that removing systemic barriers is a matter of social justice, not merely instructional convenience (Oliver, 1990; Goodley, 2017). It emphasizes the special-education expertise, such as the use of sentence frames, scaffolded writing prompts, and graphic organizers, to be embedded into the design of mainstream classrooms, particularly in the context of writing-based tasks and instructional approaches.

In this context, the review of texts (UDL1-15) suggests that a "systemic UDL design" suggests that the benefits and potential of UDL are the most pronounced when the framework is implemented as an integrated feature of classroom practices, rather than as a supportive or parallel accommodation for dyslexic learners (Edyburn, 2010; Lowrey et al., 2017).

In Indian classrooms, the adaptability of the UDL-inclusive writing framework has the potential to reconceptualize the writing-based challenges faced by dyslexic learners, enabling them to be productively accommodated within mainstream classrooms (Goodley, 2017; Ainscow, 2019).

This shift has profound implications in Indian classrooms, where the rigidity of writing-intensive curricula and assessment practices can be redesigned to suit the needs of middle school dyslexic learners.

The study thus highlights that adopting the design-oriented UDL framework in Indian classrooms will help teachers proactively and systematically redesign writing-based tasks for middle school dyslexic learners.

Conclusion

The present study reconceptualizes the traditional binary framing of special education and inclusive education as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. The findings

highlight that inclusive education for middle school dyslexic learners in India relies heavily on formalized collaboration between special and mainstream education professionals, adoption of a design-oriented pedagogy, and a conscious sense of responsibility among key stakeholders.

This reconfiguration of special and inclusive education as complementary to each other equips teachers with actionable guidelines to address the writing-specific needs of middle school dyslexic learners in Indian classrooms.

In sum, the present analysis emphasizes that meaningful inclusion of middle school dyslexic learners cannot be limited to enrollment in mainstream schools, but should focus on redesigning and reconceptualizing learning spaces to accommodate and celebrate learner diversity. The focused, targeted collaboration of special education expertise with UDL-grounded pedagogical interventions can reframe writing-based tasks as more accessible and affirming of learners' identities and capabilities.

The study ultimately contributes to the broader discourse on special education, inclusive education, and the dyslexia-specific pedagogy movement to reimagine writing as a site of access, participation, and identity affirmation for middle school dyslexic learners in Indian classrooms. By emphasizing accommodation of learner variability from the outset, rather than retrofitting accommodations for meaningful inclusion, the study underscores that the success of an inclusive educational model must be evaluated in terms of its ability to support learner diversity and long-term development. Importantly, the objectives of the study align with the broader goals of SDG 4 and UNCRPD, which emphasize education as a means of enabling full participation in society.

Scope & Limitations of the Study

i) As the study specifically focuses on middle school dyslexic learners and writing-specific challenges in Indian mainstream classrooms, its direct applicability to other disabilities, age groups, or educational contexts is limited.

ii) The other dimensions of dyslexic learners' educational experiences, such as mathematics, social interaction, or emotional well-being, remain beyond the scope of the present analysis.

iii) The study considers 45 core texts published between 2010 and 2025 for review. However, this may have excluded earlier foundational scholarship in the domains and recent emerging perspectives beyond the selected corpus and time frame.

Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge the support and academic guidance provided by the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS) Pilani, Pilani Campus, Rajasthan, during the course of this study. The authors also acknowledge the scholars and researchers whose work contributed to the conceptual development of the present analysis.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. The authors further declare that no financial, institutional, or personal

relationships influenced the design, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of the study.

References

Ainscow, M. (2020). Promoting inclusion and equity in education after SDG4. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24*(1), 1–6.

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing.

Badian, N. A. (2016). Writing fluency difficulties in dyslexic learners. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 39*(2), 87–98.

Basham, J. D., Hall, T. E., Carter, R. A., & Stahl, W. M. (2016). An operationalized understanding of Universal Design for Learning principles in classroom practice. *Exceptionality, 24*(2), 89–105.

Berninger, V. W. (2019). The writing brain and dyslexia. *Topics in Language Disorders, 39*(2), 101–115.

CAST. (2018). *Universal Design for Learning guidelines version 2.2*. http://udlguidelines.cast.org

Coyne, P., Pisha, B., Dalton, B., Zeph, L. A., & Cook-Smith, N. (2020). Universal Design for Learning for diverse learners. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 52*(3), 166–175.

Dalton, B. (2019). Multimodal approaches to writing instruction through Universal Design for Learning. *Journal of Special Education Technology, 34*(2), 95–108.

Department of School Education and Literacy. (2025). *Implementation strategies for inclusive education under NEP 2020*. Ministry of Education, Government of India.

Deppeler, J. (2019). Universal Design for Learning in policy contexts. *UDL Theory and Practice, 4*(1), 33–48.

Eden, G. F., Schulte-Körne, G., Shaywitz, S. E., & Shaywitz, B. A. (2013). Spelling and literacy challenges in dyslexia. *Annals of Dyslexia, 63*(2), 89–102.

Edyburn, D. L. (2010). Would you recognize Universal Design for Learning if you saw it? Ten propositions for new directions for the second decade of UDL. *Special Education Technology Practice, 12*(1), 33–41.

Elliott, J. G., & Grigorenko, E. L. (2014). *The dyslexia debate*. Cambridge University Press.

Faggella-Luby, M. (2014). Morphological instruction for learners with dyslexia. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 29*(4), 140–148.

Florian, L. (2019). On the necessary co-existence of special and inclusive education. *Oxford Review of Education, 45*(5), 691–704.

Goodley, D. (2017). *Disability studies: An interdisciplinary introduction* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Government of India. (2016). *The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016*. Gazette of India.

Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education.

Graham, S., & Harris, K. R. (2018). *Evidence-based writing practices for students with learning disabilities*. Guilford Press.

Hall, T. E., Meyer, A., & Rose, D. H. (2015). *Universal Design for Learning in the classroom: Practical applications*. CAST Professional Publishing.

Haug, P. (2017). Understanding inclusive education: Ideals and reality. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 19*(3), 206–217.

International Dyslexia Association. (2002). *Definition of dyslexia*. International Dyslexia Association.

Joshi, R. M., Padakannaya, P., & Nishanimath, S. (2022). Dyslexia in Indian schools: Challenges and interventions. *Dyslexia, 28*(2), 145–159.

Kalyanpur, M. (2011). Paradigm and paradox: Education for all and the inclusion of children with disabilities in Cambodia. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 15*(10), 1053–1071.

Karande, S., Mehta, V., & Kulkarni, M. (2018). Management of dyslexia in urban Indian schools. *Indian Pediatrics, 55*(1), 35–40.

King-Sears, M. E. (2014). Universal Design for Learning in secondary classrooms. *Remedial and Special Education, 35*(2), 68–77.

Kulkarni, A. (2023). Assistive technologies for dyslexic learners in India. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 43*(1), 1–15.

Lowrey, K. A., Hollingshead, A., Howery, K., & Bishop, J. (2017). More than one way: Stories of UDL and inclusive classrooms. *Journal of Special Education Technology, 32*(1), 45–57.

Mahdi, S. (2024). Writing-related pedagogical challenges in Indian classrooms. *Journal of Educational Studies, 12*(1), 44–58.

Mangen, A., & Velay, J. L. (2010). Digitizing literacy: Reflections on the haptics of writing. *Journal of Writing Research, 2*(3), 385–401.

Marino, M. T., Black, A. C., Hayes, M. T., & Beecher, C. C. (2014). Universal Design for Learning and technology integration in urban classrooms. *Urban Education, 49*(2), 263–289.

Mehta, A., & Sharma, U. (2019). Inclusive education and learners with disabilities in India. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 23*(7–8), 789–805.

Ministry of Education. (2009). *The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009*. Government of India.

Moats, L. C. (2020). *Speech to print: Language essentials for teachers* (3rd ed.). Brookes Publishing.

Novak, K. (2020). *UDL now!: A teacher's guide to applying Universal Design for Learning*. CAST Professional Publishing.

Ok, M. W., Rao, K., Bryant, B. R., & McDougall, D. (2017). Universal Design for Learning in pre-K to grade 12 classrooms: A systematic review of research. *Preventing School Failure, 61*(2), 116–125.

Oliver, M. (1990). *The politics of disablement*. Macmillan Education.

Pisha, B., & Coyne, P. (2020). Universal Design for Learning: Origins and development. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 43*(4), 235–245.

Pollak, D., Jones, P., & Hall, J. (2017). *Dyslexia, the self, and higher education*. Trentham Books.

Ramaswamy, S., & Das, A. (2020). Inclusive education in resource-constrained educational settings. *Contemporary Education Dialogue, 17*(2), 221–240.

Rao, K., Ok, M. W., & Bryant, B. R. (2017). A review of research on Universal Design educational models for students with disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 40*(3), 153–166.

Reid, G. (2016). *Dyslexia and literacy: Theory and practice*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Rello, L., & Baeza-Yates, R. (2013). Good fonts for dyslexia. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 111–120). ACM.

Rose, D. H., & Meyer, A. (2002). *Teaching every student in the digital age: Universal Design for Learning*. ASCD.

Rose, D. H., & Strangman, N. (2018). *Universal Design for Learning guidelines*. CAST.

Sadoski, M., & Paivio, A. (2013). *Imagery and text: A dual coding theory of reading and writing*. Routledge.

Sarkar, S. (2020). Inclusive education policy and implementation in India. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24*(9), 921–935.

Sarkar, S., & Koles, B. (2020). Disability rights and dyslexia recognition under the RPwD Act. *Indian Journal of Disability Studies, 6*(2), 55–68.

Sharma, U., & Sinha, P. (2019). Classroom challenges in teaching learners with dyslexia. *Indian Journal of Educational Research, 58*(2), 77–91.

Sharma, U., & Sokal, L. (2016). Can teachers make inclusive education work in India? *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 20*(9), 990–1007.

Sharma, U., Forlin, C., & Loreman, T. (2012). Inclusive education in India: Past, present, and future. *Asia Pacific Education Review, 13*(4), 609–620.

Shaywitz, S. (2019). *Overcoming dyslexia* (2nd ed.). Vintage Books.

Singal, N. (2006). Inclusive education in India: International concept, national interpretation. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 53*(3), 351–369.

Singal, N. (2010). Education of children with disabilities in India. *Prospects, 40*(4), 469–481.

Singal, N. (2016). School inclusion and educational inequality in India. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 20*(1), 1–15.

Singal, N. (2019). Challenges and opportunities in inclusive education in India. *Educational Review, 71*(3), 283–295.

Singh, P. (2020). Inclusive education in India: Policy gaps and implementation barriers. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24*(11), 1145–1160.

Singh, P. (2021). Policy-practice gaps in inclusive classrooms in India. *Journal of Educational Policy Studies, 19*(2), 88–104.

Slee, R. (2018). *Inclusive education isn't dead, it just smells funny*. Routledge.

Snowling, M. J. (2013). *Dyslexia: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Snowling, M. J., & Berninger, V. W. (2019). Dyslexia and writing development. *Reading and Writing, 32*(3), 563–576.

Swanson, H. L. (2017). Working memory and writing disabilities in dyslexia. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 32*(1), 23–35.

Troia, G. A. (2019). Writing instruction and intervention for students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 52*(4), 287–299.

Udai, R., Sharma, K., & Patel, V. (2022). Universal Design for Learning in Madhya Pradesh schools. *Indian Journal of Disability Studies, 8*(1), 101–116.

UNESCO. (1994). *The Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education*. UNESCO.

UNESCO. (2015). *Incheon Declaration: Education 2030*. UNESCO Publishing. https://doi.org/10.54677/DFBK1471

UNESCO. (2017). *A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education*. UNESCO Publishing.

UNICEF. (2012). *The right of children with disabilities to education: A rights-based approach to inclusive education*. UNICEF.

United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. United Nations.

United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations.

Vadivelu, S. (2021). Dyslexia in Hindi-medium schools: Classroom implications. *Journal of Indian Education, 47*(2), 52–67.

Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy. (2024). *Inclusive education and disability policy implementation in India*. Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy.

Wagner, R. K., Torgesen, J. K., & Rashotte, C. A. (2019). Literacy and writing challenges in dyslexia. *Annals of Dyslexia, 69*(2), 101–118.

Wan, S., Rao, K., & Ok, M. W. (2020). Assistive technologies and multimodal expression for learners with disabilities. *Journal of Special Education Technology, 35*(4), 221–233.

Washburn, E. K., Joshi, R. M., & Binks-Cantrell, E. S. (2011). Are preservice teachers prepared to teach struggling readers? *Reading Research Quarterly, 46*(2), 123–140.

Unveiling the Faces Of Ableism - A Phenomenological Study among Youth with Disabilities

About the Authors :
Asish Dineshan
B. Geetha

Contact Information of the corresponding authors :

Asish Dineshan
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of Sociology,
Madurai Kamaraj University
Email: ashish.ad.351@gmail.com

B. Geetha
Assistant Professor,
Department of Sociology,
Madurai Kamaraj University

Abstract

Ableism, in its most basic form, can be understood as a form of bias or discrimination against persons with disabilities (PwDs). It is mainly derived from the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour of the persons without disabilities, which degrade, alienate, and discriminate against individuals with disabilities. Therefore, ableism can be considered as an injustice and a denial of the dignity and rights of PwDs. Ableism has its roots in a lack of understanding or ignorance of their actual world that they experience and live in. For understanding this problem from the perspective of them, this research tried to explore ableism. To make sense of what people are experiencing in their lives from ableism, this research used an Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis. In-depth interviews which were aligned with an interview guide and observations, helped to gain a deep understanding of their problems and struggles that they went through. Data were collected from six individuals with different disabilities who were enrolled in a Higher Education Institution in India. Findings of this research disclosed that ableism persists even in this contemporary society. This research also brought attention to the psychological and emotional effects of prejudice and discrimination, which lead people to experience marginalisation, feelings of being left out, and lower self-esteem. Their well-being, as well as their quality of life, is affected due to these negative attitudes and related emotional and psychological effects. This concludes that in order for a society to establish an ableism free society, it has to understand that ableism and disability are constructed in a societal manner.

Keywords: ableism, disability, persons with disabilities, discrimination, exclusion, phenomenology.

Introduction

According to the WHO, disability is a comprehensive term and a complex phenomenon that reflects the interaction between an individual's physical features with features within a society in which he/she might be living in. So, Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) have multiple challenges regarding their inclusion in society, even though they have many legal safeguards for inclusion at a national and international level. They get excluded from many social spheres and events due to 'ableism', which marks a collective term for 'prejudice', 'discrimination', and 'social stigma' (Timmons et al., 2023). Universally, there is a very serious interconnection within the general societal perception about disability and ableism. The only way to understand the above-mentioned interconnection

can be rendered by understanding the societal structure and attitude related to an environment that marginalises.

Central to this connection of disability and ableism is the socially constructed concept of 'normalcy'. This idea will create a population with ableist opinions where the individuals with disabilities are avoided or alienated from various domains of society. In historical periods, many cultures perceived disability through the lens of superstition or viewed it as punishment for wrongdoing (Dineshan & Geetha, 2023); thus, PwDs have had a history of being regarded negatively. This shows that the ableist mentality is not a new phenomenon, but it has existed for a long time. Those attitudes from the past are impacting the mindsets of those in the present and that is perpetuating ableism. Ableism results in unequal levels of accessibility, discriminatory practices and prejudiced attitudes towards PwDs, which isolate them from society and create barriers within society (Jones, 2025; Branco et al., 2019). People's choice of words also has the power to change social attitudes and perceptions towards PwDs. Therefore, using derogatory terminology and language also strengthens negative stereotypes regarding disabilities, again resulting in discrimination and devaluation. In a society that has ableist structures, these groups are marginalised from opportunity and labelled as 'unworthy' or 'unable' to succeed.

There is research that only looks at the structural aspect of ableism, by looking at inaccessibility in buildings, unfair policies, and the lack of assistive technology. But what is lacking is research that hears from persons with disabilities and reports on their own experiences. In India the disability research is very much centred around laws and numbers. This study tries to fill that gap using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to put the voices of youth with disabilities front and centre.

This study is based on the social model of disability which was put forth by Oliver in 1990. This model puts forward that disability is not a result of a person's body or mind. It is a result of the barriers society creates. A person may have an impairment but it is the world around them that turns it into a dis-ability. Also the study uses the work of Campbell (2009) and Hahn (1988) which focuses on ableism as a belief system. They report that society has for long accepted that only certain types of bodies and minds are 'normal'. These two frameworks shape the understanding of the experiences of the participants in this study. Their issues are not personal failures. They are the result of a society that did not include them.

Literature Review

Ableism is a term created by disability activists and scholars in the latter part of the twentieth century. Hahn (1988) was among the first researchers to articulate the concept of ableism by arguing that non-disabled society's anxieties toward disabled bodies constitute the primary driver of discrimination against persons with disabilities. According to Campbell (2009), compulsory able-bodiedness refers to the societal expectation or belief that all people should try to be similar to people without disabilities. Social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) transformed the understanding of disability as a medical/physiological condition within the individual to a social condition caused by disabling factors and attitudes. In a similar way, Linton (1998) contested the dominant position of the medical model of disability, stating that disability is also cultural and political, apart from being physiological. These foundational studies provide insight into the theoretical roots of ableism and contextualise the recent empirical work reviewed below.

Jones (2025) reports that ableism is still an issue in the world. It causes PwDs to not be treated the same and to not be included in social structures. The author also notes that this is a result of social and psychological factors like stereotyping, devaluation, and identity based discrimination. Timmons, McGinnity, and Carroll in 2023 looked at the role of ableism in many different scenarios. What they found is that ableism is not a one size fits all issue. It changes in each case based on the type of disability, gender, and social environment. Branco et al. in 2019 looked at the health and well being issues related to ableism. Also they looked at how it does in fact compare to other forms of discrimination. What they present through the study was that ableism has a connection to exclusion, poor quality life, and psychological distress.

Mir and Waheed (2022) looked at what students with disabilities go through in Indian universities by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as research design. They interviewed twenty-four samples and discovered that there was an unfavourable attitude on the part of university teachers and university staff. This made it extremely difficult for the disabled students to be accepted into these universities. In addition, poor physical accessibility and institutional insensitivity compounded the problem.

Jamei et al. (2022) have studied accessibility in various domains of life. These included transport, public buildings and basic services. They discovered that lack of accessibility is not only a physical problem. It's a much deeper issue. When people with disabilities can't move around safely, they are excluded from work, education, healthcare and social life. So accessibility is really about equality. Prandi et al. (2021) also reported that most cities around the world do not have proper navigation systems. Visually impaired peoples are especially

at risk in public spaces that are poorly marked and hard to navigate.

Al-Azzam et al. (2025) and Sommer et al. (2025) report that the system is riddled with issues. Old infrastructure, tools which do not integrate well, and a lack of training for users and service providers put forth as main problems. Joshi and Thomas (2020) looked at people with disabilities in formal employment in India and found that these workers have issues with fill out online forms, virtual meetings, and communication with colleagues. The main reason was that the technology used at work was not accessible to them.

The studies reviewed above, both from India and around the world, point to the same sad reality. Despite laws, awareness campaigns, and policy efforts, ableism is still very much present in the lives of persons with disabilities. Public spaces are still hard to access. Social attitudes still lead to stigma and disrespect. Schools and universities continue to exclude rather than include. And communication barriers continue to silence people and take away their dignity. India faces all of these challenges too. But the situation here is made worse by deep-rooted cultural and historical attitudes, weak implementation of existing laws, and a serious lack of assistive technology. These factors come together to produce a uniquely difficult living conditions for persons with disabilities in India.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach combined with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand the lived realities of young adults with disabilities. As Creswell (2007) has stated, IPA is an effective methodology to figure out the deep meanings of the lived experiences of people and will help in understanding and interpreting participant experiences.

The data used in this research were collected from six students and research scholars with different disabilities studying at Madurai Kamaraj University, Tamil Nadu, India. Purposive sampling was used, and participant's informed consent was obtained before the selection of the respondents. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names since the study involved sensitive and private data. Using IPA, the study followed a number of successive steps. Initially, each respondent was interviewed in-depth using a semi-structured interview guide so as to collect the data. After the collection of the interviews, the recordings were transcribed, and the researchers took ample notes and coded the information in order to find keywords, emotions, and themes. Through this process, the researchers were able to understand the deeper meaning of the participants' words as well as what they said and how. Next, themes that were recurrent and patterns that were common were identified, and a cross-case analysis was done to compare results across participants. From here came the final interpretation of the data. Observations were another method of collecting the data along with the interviews. By observing them in their natural environments, a more thorough and deep understanding of the participants' experiences was made. Participants are informed of all necessary information related to the study procedures and are asked to provide their informed consent before participation. All information will be kept strictly confidential, and data will be anonymised to hide personal identity.

Table 1

Participant's Demographics

Participants	Age	Sex	Education	Type of Disability
P1	21	Male	Post Graduation	Intellectual Disability
P2	22	Male	Post Graduation	Visual Impairment
P3	24	Male	Ph. D	Visual Impairment
P4	25	Male	Ph. D	Visual Impairment
P5	22	Male	Post Graduation	Locomotor Disability
P6	23	Male	Post Graduation	Visual Impairment

All six participants in this study were male. This wasn't intentional. They are the only students with disabilities who studied at the host institution during the time of data collection. Also reflects the divide in educational access between genders. Gender does play a big role in how ableism is experienced, and the authors are aware of this. More research would be needed for that.

Results

The transcript of each interview was analysed thoroughly and from the result, four major themes were emerged: (1) The World Is Not Built for Me. Where Can I Go and What Can I Do?, (2) Treat Me as a Human Being First. Why Do You See Me as Different? (3) Can I Choose My Own Education? Who Decides What I Am Capable Of? and (4) Communication Is Universal, But Who Listens to Me?

Theme I: The World Is Not Built for Me. Where Can I Go and What Can I Do?

The term accessible in this instance represents a place, programme or a service that is convenient and easy for an individual with a disabilities to navigate, approach, enter, interact with, and use in a safe and dignified manner (Americans with Disability Act, 1990). Ableism is not always loud. A lot of the time, it hides in plain sight. It is built into the roads we walk. It is in the buses we take. It is in the building we enter. Society may or may not intend harm, but the effect is the same: people with disabilities are left out. When the world is built without PwDs in mind, they feel it every single day. That is exactly what the respondents in this study experienced.

Each of the participants responded that they are experiencing accessibility challenges in most aspects of their lives. These challenges came up across physical spaces, mobility, education, social participation, family relationships, communication and personal autonomy. In all the interviews, they described challenges to access and participation, whether in public spaces, immediate spaces or educational contexts.

During physical training hours, when the other classmates go to the playground, the respondents have different stories; for them, time for physical training is for special classes or free hours, which they need to sit alone. For P2 and other students with disabilities in that school, physical training hours are made for special classes, where they are excluded or marginalised from their peers without disabilities. What makes it even tougher is the absence of facilities catering to their needs. This experience underlines an exclusion axis we cannot ignore or a gap in inclusivity, showing how little things related to physical education can translate to high levels of exclusion.

The respondents draw attention to the problems with accessibility, unsafe public places, and transportation systems. Many places have only stairs, with no elevators or ramps. For instance, P1 and P5 have intellectual disabilities and mobility problems, respectively, and they face difficulties in climbing stairs to the first-floor classrooms. The visually impaired respondents are claiming that there is no accessibility on the buses or at the bus stations. Most buses and bus stations do not have any assistance or announcement systems. In line with this, an absence of accessible pathways or sidewalks causes them to compulsively walk with heavy moving traffic on the road. Crossing roads becomes challenging due to the lack of facilities to ensure their safety. Based on P3 and P5 experiences:

> *P3: Buses do not completely stop at the bus stops. They just slow the bus down so that passengers can get off. One day, I fell off when I alighted because I thought the bus had stopped. I sustained injuries from that fall.*
>
> *P5: Drivers of public transport buses seem to believe that passengers are superhumans; they can jump up into a moving bus. Even though they could see me and thereby knew I was not fit to jump into a moving bus, they refused to stop for me. What kind of mentality is this?*

The systematic physical, technological and infrastructural barriers towards inaccessibility are restricting the individuals from independent movement, access to services and daily social life. These barriers force them to depend on others which leads them to emotional distress and loss of personal space and autonomy in life.

> *P6: I am not able to access all the places. They are not built for us. I love travelling very much, but independently it is not really possible. There are no tactile paths and the footpaths are in very poor condition.*

When I joined the university for my higher education, I expected the infrastructure and the library to be accessible, but unfortunately, they are not. Everything makes me more dependent on others.

These experiences present the issues of access that PwDs have in public places and transport which they use daily. Until the spaces are designed for all, ableism will exist in the built environments that PwDs use daily.

Theme II: Treat Me as a Human Being First. Why Do You See Me as Different?

Ableism does not only live in buildings or policies. It lives in people's minds too. It shows up in what people say, how they treat others, and what they assume. For the participants in this study, the most painful barriers were often not physical. They were human. A wrong word. A dismissive look.

Various stigmas and forms of discrimination faced by PwDs because of negative attitudes of society spread throughout their lives and social relationships, including interpersonal relationships, institutional practices, and systemic barriers, that collectively prevent them from accessing employment, services, and the formation of friendships (United Nations, 2018, p. 66). The experiences of the respondents demonstrate how such attitudinal discrimination manifests. All respondents described experiences of discrimination including stereotyping, prejudice, and pitying, due to the negative and judgmental attitudes of society.

From the experiences of P6, who lives with two siblings having the same visual impairment as the respondent, faced deep and intense ableism from his relatives, peers, society and institutions. While describing these attitudes the respondent stated that it was often emotionally violent, making one more

dependent, and discouraging confidence and self-worth. P6 and P6's parents often faced the questions like *"Why was he born like this?" "Why would we bear the burden?" and "Why wouldn't you kill them at birth?"*

> *P6: In my family, three of us were there as visually impaired; they always have a feeling that raising us was a big burden. Even today, people including my family and relatives, only talk about what I cannot do, not what I can do.*

Next to the family, educational spaces are now evolving into a pivotal area of discrimination, wherein peers carry out physical and emotional violence on PwDs. Hurtful comments about the abilities of someone, criticism of their academic abilities, reading skills, writing skills, etc.

> *P4: Neighbours and classmates frequently use derogatory words to define me with reference to my so-called disability. Although it was not easy at first, I can proudly say that words have encouraged me and shaped me. I would be grateful to them because they encouraged me to achieve.*

The discriminatory environment within institutions of learning was exacerbated by experiences of exclusion, which included denial of entry into academic forums or competitions.

> *P2: My mother spoke about an event that happened in my kindergarten class, which I realised was my first experience with ableism. My mother was told by my kindergarten teacher on the day I had a group photo shoot with my classmates that they would not be able to include me because I have a visible disability. Till now, my mother has not yet healed from those words.*

It is evident from the narratives gathered from respondents that they are frequently encounter social devaluation and that deeply rooted biases within the discriminatory network.

> *P1: During one of my journeys, when I showed my UDID (Unique Disability ID) card to the bus conductor so that I could get a government approved concession for the bus ticket, he not only refused my request but also ordered the bus to be stopped and asked me to get down at a very unfamiliar and isolated location., leaving me stranded in the middle of nowhere.*

These narratives are examples of the hidden sides of negative attitudes toward PwDs. Also, their desire to be treated as everyone else echoes throughout these experiences.

All respondents experienced pity or sympathy in their entire lives and they consider this as a negative attitude. Majority of the respondents believe that these kinds of sentiments, although well-intentioned, stem from a sense of being different or less than others. This is a different kind of discrimination which is not like complete exclusion or refusal; instead it is more subtle, more complex and an almost accepted form of graded inequality.

Negative attitudes towards PwDs are not a born trait. They are a product of socialisation and time, which also means they are learned and can be unlearned. In this study the respondents did not ask for sympathy. They did not ask to be treated as special. What they did ask for is to be treated with dignity.

Theme III: Can I Choose My Own Education? Who Decides What I Am Capable Of?

Education is to open new doors. When schools do not provide what students need it is not a failure of the student, but an issue of the system. Ableism in education does not always present itself in easy to see, recognize or understand ways. It silently plays out in terms of limited subject choices for PwDs, in the inaccessibility of school buildings, and in the absence

of basic support. Over time they become the normal. Nobody questions them. When discrimination is treated as routine, it becomes invisible. And what is invisible rarely gets fixed.

PwDs are increasingly facing discrimination in their educational settings, which shows there is a problem with the necessity of enhancing equity and inclusivity at places of learning. Discrimination against PwDs at schools or colleges can be in several forms. All these affect PwDs' well-being and capacity for learning. Lack of facilities at places of learning is one form of discrimination against PwDs.

> *P3: In the beginning, my parents were not aware of special schools for visually impaired students. As a result, my parents enrolled me at a normal school. I attended that school till I completed the sixth standard.*

Consequently, P3 struggled much with learning some fundamental things which would needed for inclusion, like braille, grammar, and the alphabet, due to his visual impairment.

From P2's experience, it can be seen that bias and stereotypes have not yet faded out among academic individuals. The higher secondary courses provided for students with any permanent impairment at P2's school include solely "history." Learners with disabilities are denied equal opportunity to pursue academic subjects like science and commerce streams. At an institutional level, disability leads to discrimination towards learners with disabilities when choosing subjects for academic learning. It sparks a judgmental approach among these students, indicating that they cannot engage or that they perceived as incapable of studying various academic subjects.

> *P6: I did not have the option to choose or decide where to study or what to study, someone else chose it for me. That was the biggest mistake that happened in my life.*

Another significant form of discrimination highlighted by the respondents is the obstacles encountered in securing a scribe for exams.

> *P2: When I was in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, it was easier to get a scribe to write an exam. After coming to Madurai, finding a scribe was the major challenge I faced. Usually, we have to book a person one or two months before the exam, otherwise we will not get them, and we also need to pay money for writing exams.*

Most of the respondents responded that their educational institution did not support them in sourcing help for writing exams and other academic needs. In addition, such educational institutions also have restrictive environments and a lack of accessibility in terms of infrastructure and physical spaces, which also limiting them from participating in education.

> *P6: In my special school, I had to study and sleep in the same classroom itself. During the daytime, it was a bench and at night, I had to spread a bedsheet on the same bench and sleep there.*
>
> *P6: Practical subjects like science or ICT were taught only theoretically, and we did not have experiments or practical exposure like sighted students.*

All the participants have come to the same conclusion that the accessibility on the campus is very limited. This situation makes them way more reliant on others and also restricts students with disabilities from getting into higher education.

The right to education means more than being allowed inside a school. It means having what you need to actually learn. When that is denied, educational institutions become a site of ableism. The one that limits what students can study and what they are capable of becoming.

Theme IV: Communication Is Universal, But Who Listens to Me?

In the contemporary milieu, communication is not just a desirable skill; it plays a vital role in our daily lives, and is essential for full participation in society. However, PwDs face many challenges in communication because of multiple barriers that obstruct their communication. Communication is how people connect, argue, ask for help, and claim their rights. When someone is cut off from communication, whether because of technology, attitudes, or lack of support, they are cut off from life itself. For the respondents in this study, communication barriers were both technical and deeply personal.

Based on respondents' experiences, accessibility to several communication platforms, including websites, video conferencing platforms, documents, etc., is poorly managed for PwDs. There is a notable awareness gap about assistive technologies for communication, and they are far too inflexible to accommodate the varied needs of the vast group.

> *P3: If I want to send an email or a text message, I need to ask someone for help. Even though I tried to use the speech-to-text feature, it didn't work well for me, so I had to double-check the message with someone's assistance.*

Not only technologically, but the dominant negative attitudes towards PwDs in society also act as a barrier to communication. That is observable in the everyday experiences of P1, who is having difficulties with distorted speech because of his disability. His friends from his native place tend to mock him for that, they use this weakness as a chance to tease him.

In P6's life, communication barriers mainly pop up due to lack of active listening, misinterpretation, silencing and social discomfort.

> *P6: If I start talking about what happened today, they, including my family and friends, are not ready to listen, they say, it is enough, you are talking too much. They do not listen and they do not understand my challenges.*
>
> *Many times, I can not express myself correctly, especially when people troll me or when my rights are violated. At that time, I become very tensed and scared to speak up or argue.*

These participants report that they are affected in many areas of their lives because of communication barriers which include their interpersonal relationships, education, employment, access to public services and so on. These findings show that a person's free flow of communication is a prerequisite for full participation in society. Also the barriers that the study's participants reported were not only technical. They are examples of a world that still does not value the voices of PwDs, which does not see them as equal or worthy of attention.

Discussion

All over the world most people with disabilities at some point in their lives experience ableism. Also most studies have paid less attention to the personal lived experiences of PwDs in which they describe ableism. But this study looked at the degree and prevalence of ableism in society based on the lived experiences of youth with disabilities.

The study's results are presented through the social model of disability which puts out that there is a difference between impairment and disability. Impairment is a person's physical or cognitive difference. Disability is what society makes of that difference. The barriers which participants reported like broken footpaths, inaccessible buses, negative attitudes, and

limited education options are not due to their impairment. They are from a world which is not designed and built for all.

The respondents reported they had issues with access to public spaces, education, built environment and transport systems. Such experiences expose the harsh reality that societal structures often fail to address the needs of everyone. Similar to this study, the other researchers also mentioned the discrimination in the accessibility and safety of built environments, including roads, housing, public buildings, spaces, and essential services such as sanitation, transportation, water, education, health, emergency responses, and as well as information and communications (Jamei et. al., 2022; Prandi et al., 2021; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2020). This also highlights that globally, they face these accessibility challenges in their day-to-day life. Additionally, this study, it highlights the need for accessible facilities for physical training for them.

The findings of this study brought attention to the sociocultural and attitudinal discrimination that PwDs face. The experiences shared by the participants show different forms of discrimination, including stereotyping, prejudice, and pity, which affect many parts of the lives of PwDs. These attitudes can destruct the overall welfare of persons with disabilities (Chatzitheochari & Butler-Rees, 2022; Babik & Gardner, 2021). Participants also expressed that they want to be treated equally and with respect, just like others, which shows that society needs to take action to challenge bias and encourage inclusive attitudes.

Respondents reported a variety of educational discriminations which ranged from that of not having access to basic resources to that of choice in what higher education courses to take. Also it is reported that in institutions proper resources, support systems and trained teachers are absent which in turn hold back learning and restrict what students are able to do.

Also report by Jagoe et al. (2021) and Kundu and Nath (2018) speak of issues that students with disabilities face such as teachers' negative attitudes, non inclusive curriculum, limited resources, infrastructure barriers, parents' lack of awareness, poor planning, and weak policy implementation. The research reports on the importance of special schools and also brings to light the issues that come up when enrolling students with disabilities in regular schools which may not be designed for them. In many small towns and rural areas, many families do not know that there are special schools for children with disabilities are available. P3's experience speaks directly to this. This was not a failure of parenting. It was the failure of the society and the system to reach families who needed that information most.

Discrimination in communication was often mentioned by respondents, related either to inaccessible platforms for communication or to social attitudes. A lack of available communication tools and a lack of awareness about assistive technologies will have serious implications in relationships, education, work, and access to public services. Communication assistive technologies are crucial for healthy, productive, and independent living; however, most of them are still unavailable worldwide. As noted by the UN (2018), barriers in communication may be a contributing factor to poor social integration, reduced participation, and disturbed behaviour. Similarly, Joshi and Thomas (2020) also give information on discrimination that PwDs suffer in the domain of information and communication technology. Further, it is found that it became difficult for them to fill out online forms, get information, participate in virtual meetings, and communicate with co-employees. Though past research has focused on responses to discrimination based on communication, this research tried to find out why such discriminations occur and identified the roots of ableism.

Conclusion

To grasp an understanding of ableism and its effects on people with disabilities, IPA was used in this study, with a focus on lived realities of young people with disabilities. From the experiences of respondent's multiple themes were identified.

The findings point to a clear pattern. Impairment alone does not create marginalisation. It is the attitudes people hold and the structures societies build that do the real exclusion. Together, they create the conditions for ableism to thrive. Through the experiences of the participants, it can be determined that ableism transparently and restrictively affects access to various aspects of their lives, including public places, transport, and learning places. Discrimination was uncovered in various aspects, including methods of communication, distribution of resources, and prevailing attitudes. Their experiences have clearly shown them how their physical and mental health can be affected because of the unfavourable attitudes of people around them. As such, the research stresses the importance and need for a holistic shift towards PWDs' acceptance, recognition, and inclusion as equal members of society. The findings point out the need that it is to address and eradicate ableism. Hence, it recommends an attitude shift towards understanding and adopting proactive measures towards creating an enabling and encouraging atmosphere for everyone, including those living with impairments, to attain a status of self-sufficiency and empowerment.

Scope and Limitations

There are some limitations that exist in this study. They must be taken into account when considering the results.

The sample has only a small variation in terms of participants' demographics. So, the diversity of perspectives considered is limited. Also, not all kinds of disability are included in this

study. The selection was made based on the availability and willingness of participants to be included.

The study examines only those experiences that are seen from the perspective of PwDs. Such an approach is necessary, although it still remains partial. After all, caretakers and people close to the disabled also suffer from ableism.

The researchers themselves have never faced problems related to disability. Therefore, their background may impact the analysis. Reflexive efforts are made to avoid bias.

The sample is relatively small. It is enough for IPA but not for the generalisation of results.

It may be useful to analyse bigger and more varied samples in future studies, including representatives of different institutions, regions, and different kinds of disability. It would also be very helpful to include people with disabilities who identify as women, non-binary, or transgender.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the six participants who generously gave their time and shared their personal experiences for this study. Their openness and willingness to speak made this research possible.

Funding

The first author received a fellowship from the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan, Madurai Kamraj University, Tamil Nadu, which supported the conduct of this research.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this manuscript.

References

Al-Azzam, N., Al-Wazzan, K., & Al-Amro, S. (2025). Enhancing healthcare for people with disabilities through artificial intelligence: Evidence from Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Personalized Medicine*, 15(7), 1024. https://doi.org/10.3390/jpm15071024

Babik, I., & Gardner, E. S. (2021). Factors Affecting the Perception of Disability: A Developmental Perspective. *Frontiers in psychology*, *12*, 702166. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.702166

Bartel, N.R. and Guskin, S.L. (1971). A Handicap as a Social Phenomenon. In Cruickshank, W.M. (Eds.), *Psychology of Exceptional Children and Youth*. Prentice-Hall.

Branco, C., Ramos, M. R., & Hewstone, M. (2019). The Association of Group-Based Discrimination with Health and Well-Being: A Comparison of Ableism with Other "Isms". *Journal of Social Issues*, *75*(3), 814-846. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12340

Chatzitheochari, S., & Butler-Rees, A. (2022). Disability, Social Class and Stigma: An Intersectional Analysis of Disabled Young People's School Experiences. *Sociology*. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221133710

Creswell, J. W. (2007). Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry. In *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five Approaches* (pp. 53-84). Sage Publications.

Dineshan, A., & Geetha, B. (2023). Concept of 'Disability' – From the Historical Trajectory. In S. Vijayakumar (Ed.), *Proceedings of International Conference on Social Sciences, Languages and Culture* (pp. 174 – 178). Alborear (OPC) Pvt. Ltd.

Jagoe. C., McDonald. C., Rivas. M. & Groce. N. (2021). Direct Participation of People with Communication

Disabilities in Research on Poverty and Disabilities in Low and Middle Income Countries: A Critical Review. *PLoS ONE,* 16(10). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0258575

Jamei, E., Chan, M., Chau, H.W., Gaisie, E. & Lättman, K. (2022). Perceived Accessibility and Key Influencing Factors in Transportation. *Sustainability*, 14(17). https://doi.org/10.3390/su141710806

Jones S. E. (2025). 'Disabled joy is resistance': Insights and recommendations from social psychology on reducing ableism. *The British journal of social psychology*, *64*(3), e12893. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12893

Joshi, B., & Thomas, B. (2020). Barriers Faced by Persons with Disabilities in Formal Employment in India. *Disability, CBR & Inclusive Development*, 30, 125-132. https://doi.org/10.5463/dcid.v30i3.823.

Koirala, P. (2022). Silent Sufferings of People with Disability (PWD) and the Barriers faced by them in Pokhara Metropolitan City. *Journal of Development and Social Engineering*, 8. 39-53. https://doi.org/10.3126/jdse.v8i01.54266.

Kundu, A., & Nath, K. (2018). A Study on the Challenges of Realising Inclusive Education in India. *International Journal of Education*,10. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.27737.65126.

Mir, A. A., & Waheed, A. (2022). Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Indian Higher Education: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study. *Higher Education for the Future*, 9(2), 186-202. https://doi.org/10.1177/23476311221111442.

Peimani, N. & Kamalipour, H. (2020). Access and Forms of Urbanity in Public Space: Transit Urban Design

Beyond the Global North. *Sustainability*, 12. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12083495

Prandi, C., Barricelli, B.R., Mirri, S., & Fogli, D. (2021). Accessible wayfinding and navigation: a systematic mapping study. Universal Access in the Information Society, 22, 185 - 212. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10209-021-00843-x

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. SAGE Publications.

Smith, M., Manduchi, B., Burke, E., Carroll, R., McCallion, P., & McCarron, M. (2020). Communication difficulties in adults with Intellectual Disability: Results from a national cross-sectional study. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 97. 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2019.10 3557

Sommer, J., et al. (2025). Assistive technologies in healthcare: Utilization and healthcare workers perceptions in Germany. *BMC Health Services Research*, 25(1), 223. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-024-12162-x

Sumalinog, E., Sambrana, G., Diaz, W. D., & Bebero, L. K. (2023). Emerging Communication Gap to the Lives of Differently Abled Individuals Working in a Blind Massage Service. *American Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation*, 2(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.54536/ajmri.v2i1.1076.

Timmons, S., McGinnity, F., & Carroll, E. (2023). Ableism differs by disability, gender and social context: Evidence from vignette experiments. *British Journal of Social Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12696

United Nations. (2018). *Promoting Inclusion Through Social Protection Report on the World Social Situation.* Retrieved from https://desapublications.un.org/file/774/download.

TISS Journal of Disability Studies and Research (TJDSR)

Annual Subscription Rates*

		Individual	Institutional	This Copy/Single Issue
1.	India	Rs. 700/-	Rs. 700/-	Rs.250/-
2.	USA, UK, Europe, Australia	US$ 70	US$ 70	US$ 50
3.	South Asia, Africa	US$ 35	US$ 35	US$ 25
*All prices inclusive of mailing charges				

Demand Draft (D.D.), online payment should be drawn in favour of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, V.N. Purav Marg, Deonar, Mumbai 400088.

Phone : +91-22-25525401 (Office), +91 88500 38149 (Mobile),
Fax : +91-22-25525050
e-mail : vaishali@tiss.edu, vaishali@tiss.ac.in
Place : Mumbai

Cover Page Painting by Ms. Poonam Malpani, International Artist, Paris

Tata Institute of Social Sciences, (TISS)
V. N Purav Marg, Deonar, Mumbai 400088,

Printed and Published by **Dr. Vaishali Kolhe**, on behalf of **Tata Institute of Social Sciences**, Deonar, Opp-Deonar Bus Depot, Mumbai-400088. Printed at **India Printing Works**, India Printing House, 42, G.D. Ambekar Marg, Wadala, Mumbai-400031. Published from **Tata Institute of Social Sciences**, 201, Tower Building, Navroji Campus, Deonar Farm Road, Deonar, Mumbai 400088. Editor- **Dr. Vaishali Bhanudas Kolhe**.

Visit us at **www.tiss.edu,www.tiss.ac.in** **RNI Number- MAHENG/2021/81181**