



A Study of Educational Pathways of Children with Visual Impairment and Blindness in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This study explores into the educational journey of visually impaired and blind children in Sri Lanka, aiming to uncover their challenges and assess available opportunities within the education system. Through three in-depth case studies, it provides a nuanced understanding of their experiences. Case 1 highlights the success of a 45-year-old blind individual, emphasizing the pivotal role of specialized schools. Case 2 underscores the importance of early detection and intervention for a 22-year-old undergraduate who lost sight due to early birth complications. The third case exemplifies a 26-year-old visually impaired woman pursuing a master's degree, showcasing the determination and potential of visually impaired individuals in higher education. While Sri Lanka offers various educational avenues for visually impaired children, including specialized and integrated mainstream schools, persistent challenges such as resource scarcity, inadequate teacher training, deficient infrastructure, and societal biases hinder their educational attainment. The study advocates for inclusive education and equal opportunities, urging for policy reforms, resource allocation, enhanced teacher training, and community involvement.

Keywords: Blindness and Visual Impairment; Educational Pathways; Inclusive Education

Introduction

In 1940 minister CWW Kannangara in his revolutionary reforms in education made it clear that education should be free for all students irrespective of different levels in the society. Later in 2020 a report published by the presidential taskforce for education had ensured that all students across the island should be given equal education without any discrimination such as race, religion, class castes, abilities, disabilities etc. In Sri Lanka a streamlined pathway to education is available for every child disregarding various levels or groups in the society (S. Yatigamma, 2021). Unfortunately, this opportunity or right is not clearly implemented for differently abled including visually impaired. Though several special schools exist in Sri Lanka, many reports indicate that most of such people have not obtained a formal education at all. The most poignant fact is that only a minority of visually impaired enter universities through some very high intellectual levels (T. Suraweera, 2022). History of our system of education reveals how the visually impaired students were kept out from most of the activities in teaching learning process, which was enjoyed by normal children and chance not given while the visually impaired students could not participate in physical education which plays an important role in personality development. Thus, this paper enabled us to focus and explore the educational pathways available to visually impaired children. The focus will be limited to education up to secondary level.

Müller (2013) examines educational pathways for lower secondary gymnasium students, with most progressing to university, while others opt for applied science or cease tertiary education. Notably, attention is lacking for pathways not leading to tertiary education. Multivariate models include variables like first-year cohorts and education certificates. March (2008) examines the educational pathways of two seniors from an alternative high school, employing a case study methodology to investigate individual complexities. The study uncovers relational identity discrimination among students, families, and educators, influencing educational trajectories. Lundqvist (2016) underscores the significance of early years education, focusing on the transition from preschool to grade 1 for children with and without special educational needs in Sweden. Employing a longitudinal study, multiple case study design, and mixed method approach, the research investigates various aspects such as support provision, inclusive education application, and students' experiences.

McKnight (2016) conducted a qualitative study focusing on African American female graduates of a STEM-based magnet high school. Utilizing the case study methodology, the study explored the impact of high school experiences on educational and career pathways. Data sources included archival records, interviews, and artifacts. Findings revealed the significance of internal and external influences, the role of STEM schools in major selection, and the impact of post-secondary pathways on career trajectories. Conclusions emphasized the multifaceted nature of influences on STEM education and highlighted the importance of diverse support systems for fostering STEM-focused graduates. Daniel (2012) investigates the impact of school placement on the self-concept and social interactions of visually impaired children. Comparing ordinary and special school placements, the study explores pupil-pupil and teacher-pupil interactions. Utilizing Likert-type scales, self-concept and interaction levels were assessed.

The current literature on education for the visually impaired children of Sri Lanka suggests research area with limited info on the transition from the

specialized education, the appropriateness of the resources, and teacher professional development for the integration education. While there are schools for visually impaired students, few researchers have addressed the knowledge of long-term effects of these pathways on HE attainment and employment among visually impaired students. Although several prior studies have addressed teacher training and readiness (Daniel, 2012; Lundqvist, 2016) other barriers experienced by the visually impaired students in the Sri Lankan education system still have not got enough attention.

Materials and Methods

The study focuses on an educational problem in learning for these students and the research adopted only one educational research method which is multiple-case study. Thus, the choice of the multiple case study type was made inclusive of three cases of blind or visually impaired individuals to consider their educational experiences in greater detail. This approach provides an opportunity to examine numerous and varied educational experiences and the difficulties of various participants. This consists of population of visually impaired or blind students within primary to secondary education system in Sri Lanka (Abepala, 2011). The sample consists of blind/low vision students currently in school or college, and their parents. Three such individuals and their parents were selected as the sample and used to represent the population. A sample offers a small manageable population which is easier to sort out and analyze at the highest degree of precision (Jayasuriya, 2000; Rathnapala, 2000).

Some collection tools used include questionnaires from the students and parents. The students filled up a self-designed questionnaire which included personal information as well as their experiences with peers, parents, teachers, and society, and how they undertook their education when they are visually impaired. The parents' questionnaire documented basic demographic information, as well as their experiences of handling their child's learning activities and communication with the school and

neighbors. Participants were interviewed orally, and data were described and analyzed based on the visually impaired or blind people. The analysis followed Atkinson's (2002) methodology for case study research, involving several steps: initial coding from the research questions, sorting these codes, analyzing the coded data, and specifying the propositions.

To get an overall idea of the education received by children with vision impairment in different sites in Sri Lanka, multiple-case study approach has been chosen. The use of case studies enables a deep analysis of a certain phenomenon with reference to the environment in which it occurs (Yin, 2018). This study uses case-study approach to concentrate on teaching careers of the children with visual impairments in Sri Lanka which helps to consider all the aspects of their education and experience the specific difficulties, opportunities, and assistance available to them. Every case is unique with the observations focusing on one child, giving exhaustive information on educational and social contexts as well as coping mechanisms of learners (Stake, 1995). The interpretivist philosophy is well supported by the case study strategy since it provides the researcher with an opportunity to explore separately each child's day-to-day experience.

Results and Discussion

The comparison of the case studies highlights the fact that the education, training and previous experiences of the visually impaired patients also vary significantly. All cases describe the specific career trajectories and personal experiences of each participant with regards to switching from the specialist to general tracks of schools and their choice of higher education.

Educational Background and Experiences

The first case study highlights enrollment in distinct types of schools and switching between these types, as well as continued education in a higher education institution at the level of the University of Kelaniya. The second case looks more diverse with specializations and general education as contemporary schooling

at the University of Colombo. The third case study is also structured in a similar manner and reveals the changes and current educational program at Sri Jayewardenepura University.

Relationship with Teachers and Peers

Interpersonal relationships with teachers and peer groups are another principal characteristic that is predominant in all cases. In Case Study 1, there have been satisfactory relationships, in Case Study 2, there has been support and love from teachers and friends, while Case Study 3 has focused on the support from teachers as well as colleagues. Such relationships are beneficial and necessary for the educational and social-emotional growth of students with visual impairment.

Academic Achievements and Extracurricular Activities

All three cases exhibit academic performance and co-curricular activities indicating a good performance. These achievements demonstrate passion and hardworking of the characters, their ability to excel in their studies and participate in hobbies with visual impairments.

Transition from Special School to General School

The shift to general education institutions shows the intentions of the people to attend specialized schools to enjoy general education environments. These transitions offer a chance to the students with visual impairments to interact with other students and to establish connections with other educational materials.

Career and Leadership Roles

The achievements of the people in the case studies' multiple careers and leadership positions indicate their desire to excel and be productive members of society. For Case 1, the areas highlighted are advocacy and education, Case 2 include student organization/ leadership, and Case 3 is teaching/ academic positions.

These career paths show that with the proper educational intervention students with visual impairments can have successful careers and be active members in their society. They were also engaged in leadership positions in the student organizations and clubs as portrayed in the first and second cases which makes them responsible for offering input on the concerns of disability and society in general (Atkinson, 2002). However, Daniel (2012) mentioned that there is lack of sufficient number of sources to provide adequate career guidance and mentorship for the visually impaired students in Sri Lanka and hence these areas need to be strengthened.

The academic performance of participants, with reference to this study, was an indicator of how such groups overcome barriers towards education. Nevertheless, it is also pertinent to find out that their educational experiences are characterized by systematic barriers including adequate resources, available teachers, and the means of switching from special to general education. This has been discussed regarding the work done by Lundqvist (2016) whereby the effectiveness of visually impaired students depends more on the trained teachers and adequate and proper teaching aids. In Sri Lanka, there are numerous schools which are mainstream, but they have inadequate facilities such as specialized equipment and teaching aids to address the needs of the children with visual impairments that affects the learning abilities of such children.

Factors such as the interpersonal relationships between the learners and instructors, and the general learning environment within the school significantly influence the learner's performance. Research shows that qualified teachers who are trained to teach students with visual impairment do play a vital role in the learners' success (Schneider, 2013). However, Barakat et al. (2021) still identified lack of teacher supply and insufficient teacher preparation in Sri Lanka; To this argument, Yatigamma (2021) opined to afford the followings to support students with disabilities. Actually solving these challenges remains the key to enhancing students with disabilities' learning experiences.

Conclusions

The views on educational preparation for visually impaired and blind children's education in Sri Lanka is comprehensive of various settings and portrays hurdles. Thus, awareness of the problem emphasizes the significance of equal education for all children and the inclusion principle. However, obstacles such as a scarcity of quality teaching/learning resources, poor professional development, subpar infrastructures, and discrimination negatively impact education. Nevertheless, the case presentations suggest the fact that children with impaired vision can be successful at school and prove their persistence and aptitude. The understanding is also established on the fact that there is need for schools to provide support, change policies and train teachers to ensure full learning for children with visual impairment.

To improve educational outcomes, the following recommendations are made: support students with assistive technologies and specialized teacher education; use more teaching material, Braille, and digital content; improve the education of teachers in new approaches to inclusion; make school infrastructure more accessible; encourage cooperation among schools, parents, and organizations; reduce prejudice through educational campaigns; provide support with specialized personnel; conduct research for new intervention strategies; lobby for policy changes that support inclusive education; and assess actions carried out frequently to guarantee compliance. These steps are important to ensure an equitable education policy and its implementation of the educational needs of the visually impaired children in Sri Lanka.

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