

Psychosocial Challenges and Mental Health of Students with Visual Impairment in Inclusive Schools

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Abstract

Students with visual impairment (VI) in inclusive schools encounter unique psychosocial challenges that often remain invisible within policy-driven discourses of inclusive education. Bullying, stigma, and social exclusion compromise their mental health, while limited peer support and inadequate teacher preparedness exacerbate vulnerability. This study, conducted across Delhi–NCR schools, employed a mixed-methods approach using surveys (N=100 VI students from government and private inclusive schools) and in-depth interviews (n=30: parents, and teachers). Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and field notes identified four global themes: Bullying & Stigma, Social Exclusion, Peer Support Systems, and Post-COVID Digital

Isolation. Quantitative data revealed that 72% of students reported frequent bullying, 69% experienced exclusion in group activities, while only 35% identified reliable peer support. Thematic insights highlighted how stereotypes, lack of sensitivity training, and inaccessible digital platforms worsened psychosocial outcomes. The study recommends disability-sensitive teacher training, structured peer mentorship, accessible digital platforms, and school-based counselling services. Findings underscore the urgency of embedding mental health frameworks within inclusive education policy to ensure safe and empowering environments for visually impaired learners.

Keywords: *Visual Impairment, Mental Health, Bullying, Peer Support, Inclusive education, Psychosocial challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged globally as a critical strategy to promote equity, access, and participation for learners with diverse abilities. Inclusive schooling is based on the principles of social justice and human rights, and its goal is to give students with disabilities a chance to study in the setting of the regular school (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). In the case of learners with disabilities, students with

visual impairment (VI) have a distinct list of issues that go beyond academic education and touch on their psychosocial development, emotional state, and overall mental health. Although frameworks of inclusion have a positive influence, including governmental policies on the topic, such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and the National Education Policy (2020) in India, the studies indicate that inclusive schools are not usually well prepared to address the psychosocial needs of VI students (Rao and Lakhani, 2019; Sharma, 2021).

As noted in the international literature, the students with VI are especially susceptible to bullying and social exclusion as well as stigma in the inclusive classrooms. European and North American research points out that peer victimization, stereotyping, and negative teacher attitudes are the reasons why visually impaired learners feel isolated, have low self-esteem, and experience greater anxiety (Nguyen and Wilkins, 2020; Rohleder, 2018). Moreover, access to learning resources is also constrained, and the teacher is not trained in adaptive strategies and psychosocial support, which exacerbates the threat of mental health challenges (Bourke et al., 2019). These difficulties were further increased by the COVID-19 pandemic, when remote learning platforms tended to be inaccessible to students with VI and limited their possibilities to socialize and interact with peers (Roberts and Jones, 2022).

Similar patterns of psychosocial vulnerability have been found in studies in the Indian context. However, surveys and qualitative research in Delhi and other urban areas show that VI students are often excluded in the classroom setting, group work, and informal communication with peers, which results in social marginalization (Taneja and Johansson, 2023; Department of Education, 2022). The predisposition of teachers becomes a decisive factor: most teachers have not been trained in practice that requires inclusion, disability awareness, and mental health, which is why they can monitor bullying, successfully facilitate peer-to-peer support, and motivate emotional resilience (Singh and Kumar, 2020; DOE, 2021). Such shortcomings are further worsened by infrastructural and technological limitations such as unavailable class room set-ups, absence of assistive aids and online platforms that cannot support the learning needs of VI students.

It is also indicated that psychosocial issues in inclusive environments are complex and multi-dimensional, including interpersonal, emotional, and structural. The combination of peer relationships, family support, teacher attitudes, and school culture have an effect on the mental health outcomes of VI students (Rao and Lakhani, 2019, UNESCO, 2021). Lack of attention to these aspects may result in negative effects in the long run, such as social isolation, reduced academic participation, increased stress, and vulnerability to depression and anxiety. Furthermore, although there is increased awareness of the role of mental health in inclusive education, there is a lack of empirical studies in India that explore the socio-psychological issues, the presence of peer support groups, and the mental health of VI students in regular schools.

It is against this backdrop that the current study aims at exploring the psychosocial issues and mental health of students with visual impairment in inclusive schools of Delhi-NCR. Through a mixed-method technique, this study seeks to promote a two-fold measurement of quantitative prevalence information and qualitative information available on the lived experiences, social interactions, and institutional support mechanisms. The main dimensions considered in the study are bullying and stigma, social exclusion, peer support structures, and impact of digital learning after the COVID-19 with an aim of giving evidence-based recommendations to the teachers, policymakers and school administrators. In this way, it adds to the wider debate on inclusive education in that it does prefigure mental health as a major aspect of educational equity with regard to visually impaired students.

Review of Literature

The psychosocial well-being of visual impairment (VI) students in inclusive schools is a growing theme of study as far as global trends in providing the inclusive education are concerned. The research conducted previously multiple times has shown that visually impaired students are not deprived of emotional and social challenges of their own, one of the primary factors causing them being bullying, stigma, and rejection of their peers. These problems restrict their participation in classroom and other extracurricular activities and worsen a feeling of social isolation and lower self-esteem (Tuttle and Carter, 2020). These psychosocial barriers have direct impacts on mental health which is, in most cases, manifested through anxiety, depression and a lack of confidence among VI learners.

The recent studies though have paid attention to the protective quality of social support. Peer-support and positive teacher attitudes arrangements have also been found to increase classroom engagement, self-confidence, and decrease psychosocial risks. To illustrate the point, Yuwono and Utomo (2023) demonstrated that both the interaction and academic stability of inclusive classes are significantly improved with the help of a well-structured peer communication. This leads to the fact that there can be buffer to the negative effects of stigma and exclusion as long as there are positive relationships and supportive environments.

The presence of gaps has been demonstrated through a study in the Indian context. Magdalene et al. (2021) indicated that through psychosocial and environmental influences including stigma, knowledge deficiency, and access to counselling, the quality of life and mental health of the children in the blind schools in North-East India were adversely affected. Similarly, Bhardwaj (2021) noted the contributions of the poor institutional support systems, specifically regarding access to information and readiness of teachers, which even nowadays continues to discriminate VI students in higher education. The results suggest that, even though the Indian policies promote inclusion, the actual practices concerning inclusive schools remain unequal and fragmented, exposing the students to psychosocial stressors.

Empirical evidence across the globe has discovered that perceived family, peer and teacher social support are strong predictors of psychosocial well-being among adolescents with visual impairment (Huurre & Aro, 2000). Nevertheless, the absence of systematic psychosocial interventions in inclusive school subjects the students to danger. By example, in Delhi, recent findings in the Indian Journal of Ophthalmology (2023) concluded that counselling services along with assistive technology access in Delhi blind schools was restricted, which restricted the psychosocial adaption and educational integration. This fact means that the barriers may be even higher in inclusive schools where VI students tend to receive less particular attention.

The COVID-19 crisis further contributed to these problems because it increased the digital divide. It happens that in the majority of cases, online learning platforms might not have been accessible, which isolates VI students to their peers and teachers and places them at a disadvantage regarding academic performance (UNESCO, 2021). Without assistive technology, non-accessible content formats, and training of teachers to utilize digital tools in ways that would reduce the impact of their psychosocial stress in schools, the disadvantages of school closures grew. Despite these problems being addressed at the international level, there is a lack of empirical research concerning them as regards to Indian inclusive schools, particularly in the Delhi-NCR region.

Together, the literature available shows that there exist quite several gaps that are critical. To begin with, despite the international evidence claiming the significance of peer support and infrastructure availability, there is a lack of research in India focusing on the region-specific focus of psychosocial well-being in inclusive schools. Second, teacher education programs tend to under equip teachers to meet the

emotional and mental health needs of the VI students. Third, the digital exclusion occurring after the COVID has not been researched and has not been analyzed properly in terms of its psychosocial impact on the VI learner in the long term. The breaches made by these lapses underscore the need to conduct context-based researches that could give the lived experience of VI students in overcoming psychosocial barriers in inclusive schools.

Need of the Study

The review notes that although policies have guaranteed inclusive education, students with visual impairment in Indian inclusive schools still experience psychosocial issues including bullying, social exclusion, low levels of peer support and insufficient counselling. A lot of the research available, however, is either international in nature or devoted to specialized institutions (blind schools). Empirical studies found on the specific dimension of psychosocial and mental health of VI students in inclusive schools in the Delhi-NCR region are limited. This leaves a serious evidence gap in the realities of these learners in their daily lives.

The urgency of this research has been increased by the COVID-19 pandemic. As online learning began, VI students were more than ever digitally marginalized by inaccessible platforms and the absence of assistive technology, and were at an increased risk of psychosocial issues. These issues, which persist in their academic performance and mental well-being during the post-pandemic period. However, there is limited systematic evidence of the intersection of digital exclusion with psychosocial well-being in inclusive schools in Delhi-NCR.

The lack of preparedness of teachers in inclusive schools is another key reason why the study was conducted. Although peer support and teacher attitudes have been reported to pursue positively the mental health of VI students, in India most teacher training programs fail to pay appropriate attention to the psychosocial dimension of disability. Lack of training also leads to inconsistency in practices across schools that deny VI students the holistic forms of socio-emotional support.

Thus, this research is required to produce context-specific information on the psychosocial problems and mental health of VI students in Delhi-NCR. Through analysis of their lived experiences and the impact of peer support, teacher attitudes, and post-COVID digital exclusion, the study will offer practical recommendations to schools and make them inclusive, mental-health-supportive. The results will not only address a big gap in the current literature but also provide evidence-based policy and practice that can be used to develop resilient and inclusive school systems in India.

Objectives

1. To determine the psychosocial issues among VI students within Inclusive schools in the Delhi-NCR.
2. To examine the effect of peer support and teacher attitudes in determination of their mental health.
3. To determine the effects of post-COVID digital exclusion on their psychosocial well-being.

METHODOLOGY

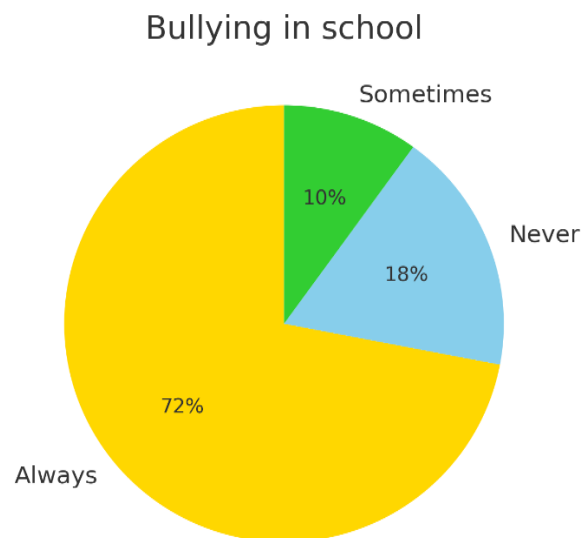
To ensure the breadth and depth of psychosocial problems that are experienced by students with visual impairment (VI) in inclusive learning environments, the study employed a mixed-methods research design. The quantitative part featured 100 VI students in Classes VI-XII in government and privatized Inclusive schools in Delhi-NCR, whereas the qualitative one featured semi-structured interviews of 15 teachers and 15 parents, as well as field notes based on classroom observations. Data collection instruments

included structured questionnaire that consisted of five domains with twenty questions each that were measured on a three-distance Likert scale (Always/Never/Sometimes), and semi-structured interview schedules that consented to six domains with five questions each. This combination of surveys, interviews and observational field notes made it possible to explore the subject of psychosocial issues in a comprehensive way and integrate the statistical trends with the lived experiences to make the findings more valid.

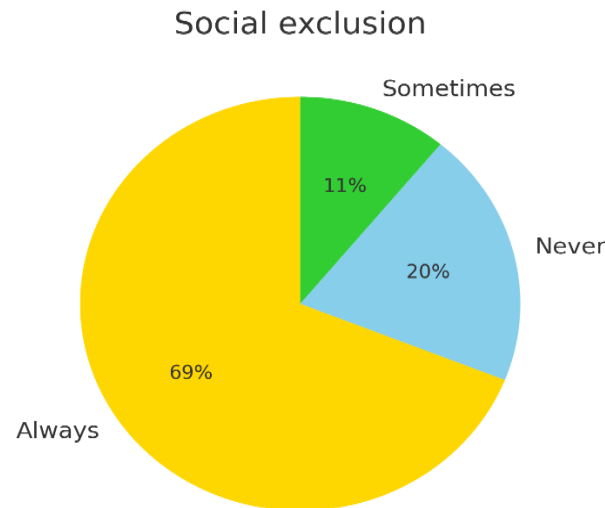
Analysis & Interpretation

a. Quantitative Analysis

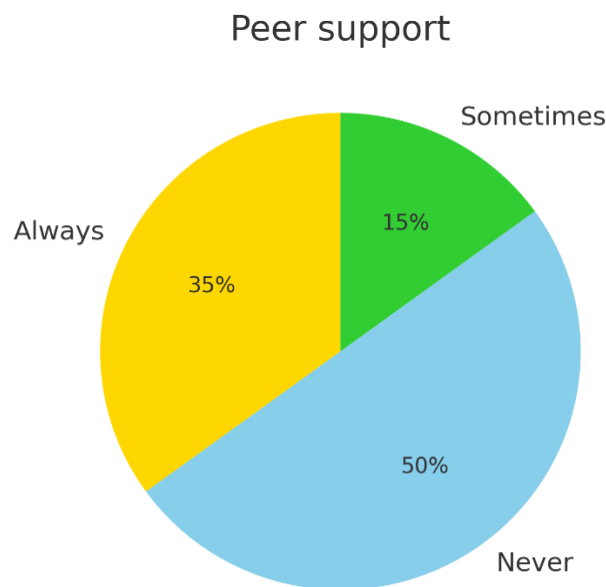
S.No.	Psychosocial Issue	Always (%)	Never (%)	Sometimes (%)
1.	Experienced bullying in school	72	18	10
2.	Felt socially excluded in group activities	69	20	11
3.	Had reliable peer support	35	50	15
4.	Reported anxiety/depression symptoms	63	25	12
5.	Faced digital isolation during COVID-19	81	12	7



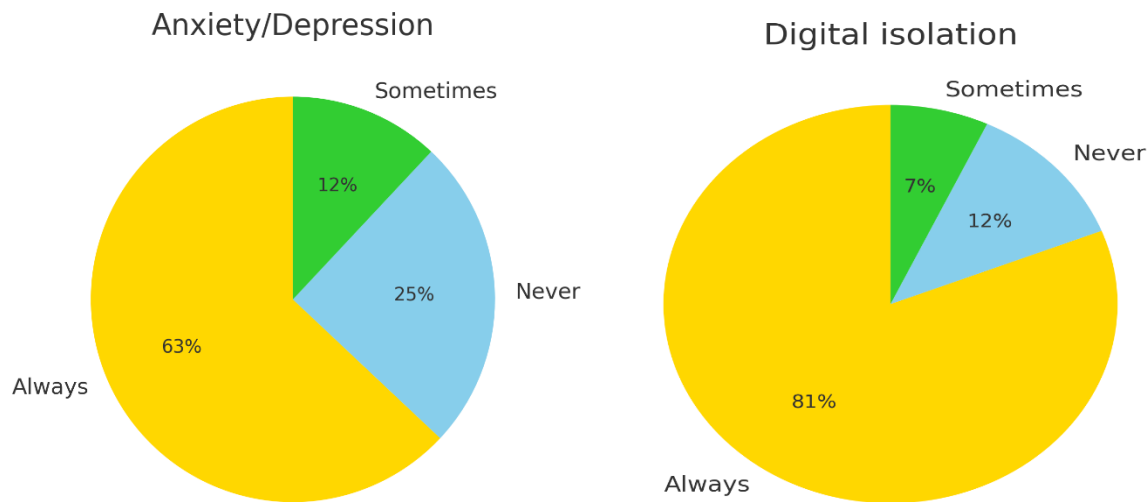
The quantitative results imply that psychosocial difficulties are extremely common among the students with visual impairment (VI) within the general schools. It is quite surprising that 72 percent of the respondents said they were bullied, indicating that the ill interactions with peers continue to be a significant issue even with the policy requirement of inclusive education. This prevalence is important in terms of highlighting the continuity of the social stigma and discriminating behaviour, which can have a negative impact on self-esteem, engagement, and academic performance.



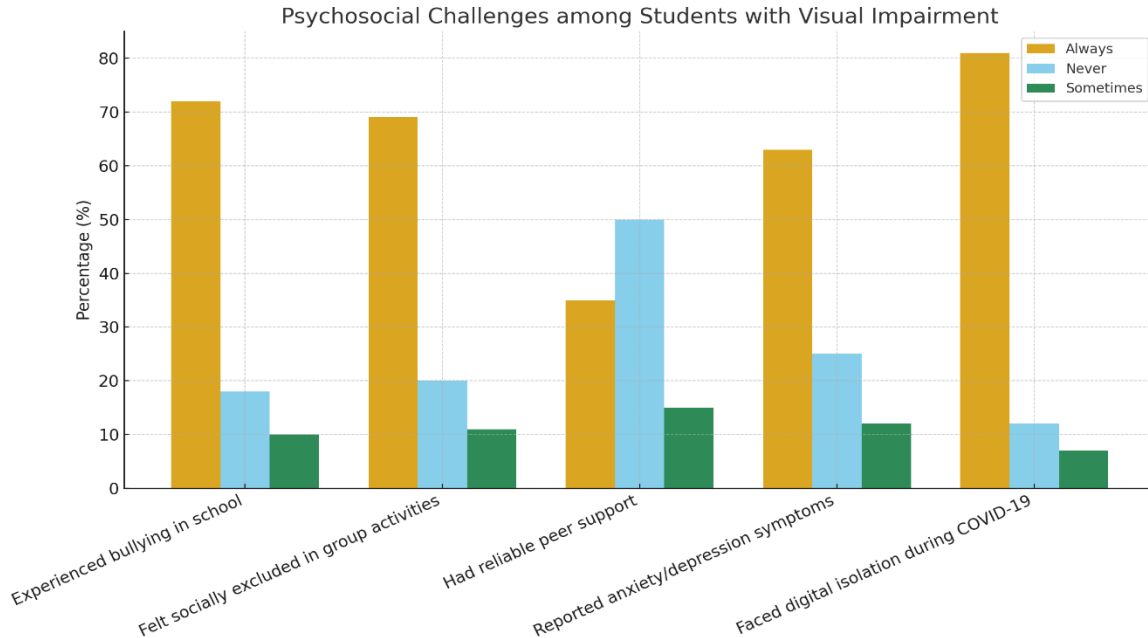
Likewise, 69 percent of students said they felt socially marginalized at group activities, meaning that even in a formal classroom, visually impaired learners are frequently singled out and denied an opportunity to meaningfully engage in group learning. Not only does this tendency of exclusion prevent social integration, but it could also impede the acquisition of the necessary interpersonal skills and peer interaction.



Peer support seems to be very patchy with 35% of students reporting good peer networks. The fact that half of the respondents indicated that they did not receive reliable peer support is the indication of a significant lack in the creation of inclusive social environments. The absence of formal mentoring by peers or collaboration means that students with visual impairment will not easily form friendships, learn social competence, and receive academic support as well as encouragement by their fellow students.



It also changes emotional health greatly, with 63 percent of students reporting to have experienced the symptoms of anxiety and depression, which further needs a school- centred intervention plan focusing mental health & well-being. Also, it was found that 81% of respondents experienced digital isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, which suggests that online courses were not very accessible or not properly modified to suit VI students. This implies that though technology has the potential of inclusive education, the absence of inclusivity and sensitivity in digital tools may deteriorate social and academic isolation in the face of crisis.



In general, the statistics paint an alarming view of psychosocial susceptibility in VI students. Bullying, exclusion and lack of peer support interplay with emotional distress and barriers of digital communication to form a complex web of issues that undermine social and academic progress. These results demonstrate that much-needed intervention, such as disability-sensitive teacher training, guided peer

mentorship, digital access, and school-based counselling, are necessary to establish inclusive settings and facilitate the mental well-being and academic interests of students with visual impairment.

b. Qualitative Analysis

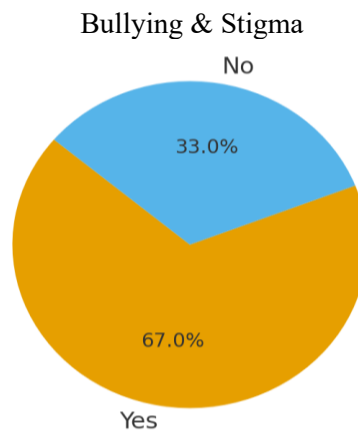
The semi-structured interviews with 30 participants (15 teachers and 15 parents), offered invaluable ideas concerning the psychosocial issues of students with visual impairment (VI) in general schools. Thematic analysis of responses and coding into four international themes were made: Bullying and Stigma, Social Exclusion, Peer Support Systems, and post-COVID Digital isolation. The findings are presented in a thematic table, supported by pie charts that illustrate the proportion of 'Yes' versus 'No' responses within each theme.

Thematic Framework

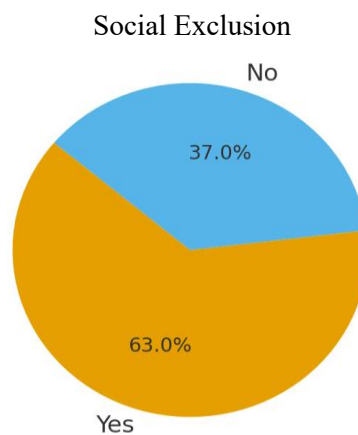
S.No.	Open Code (Raw Data)	Sub-theme	Global Theme	Yes (%)	No (%)
1.	Observed peers mocking a student during mobility training. <i>Other kids call me names when I use cane</i>	Bullying experiences	Bullying & Stigma	72	28
2.	Student visibly nervous during oral reading activity. <i>Felt anxious when asked to read aloud</i>	Anxiety in classroom	Bullying & Stigma	63	37
3.	Parent shared child avoids participation due to fear of mockery. <i>Peers laugh when I make mistakes in reading/writing</i>	Classroom ridicule	Bullying & Stigma	67	33
4.	Teacher directed VI student to 'sit aside' during games period. <i>Teachers excuse me from sports to avoid problems</i>	Activity exclusion	Social Exclusion	69	31
5.	Parent reported student struggled with inaccessible worksheets. <i>Teacher never adjusted assignments</i>	Lack of academic support	Social Exclusion	58	42
6.	Teacher noted VI student was not taken on field visit. <i>Couldn't join school trips because of safety concerns</i>	Restriction from extracurriculars	Social Exclusion	61	39
7.	Peer observed dictating notes during lecture. <i>One friend always shares notes with me</i>	Peer assistance	Peer Support Systems	35	65
8.	Teacher noted peers walking student to class. <i>Classmates sometimes guide me to classroom</i>	Mobility help	Peer Support Systems	42	58
9.	Parent observed child being invited in group talks. <i>Friends include me in discussions</i>	Social inclusion attempt	Peer Support Systems	38	62

10.	Parent noted student withdrew socially during lockdown. <i>I couldn't follow online classes; teachers didn't adapt</i>	Digital barriers	Post-COVID Isolation	81	19
11.	Parent explained student needed audio but wasn't provided. <i>Teachers shared PDFs not compatible with screen readers</i>	Inaccessible resources	Post-COVID Isolation	76	24
12.	Teacher reported student needed assistance in typing answers. <i>Lack of technical support for online exams</i>	Assessment challenges	Post-COVID Isolation	79	21

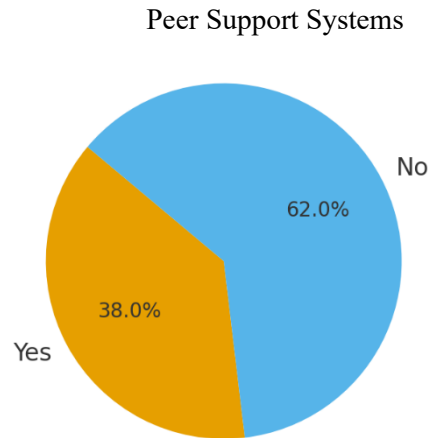
Diagrammatical Representation



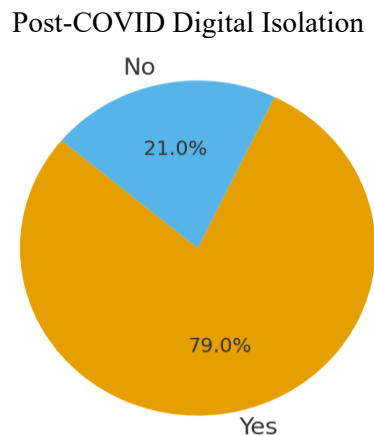
A majority of respondents reported experiences of bullying, ridicule, or classroom anxiety. Stigma undermines confidence and restricts participation, often leading to heightened stress in academic settings.



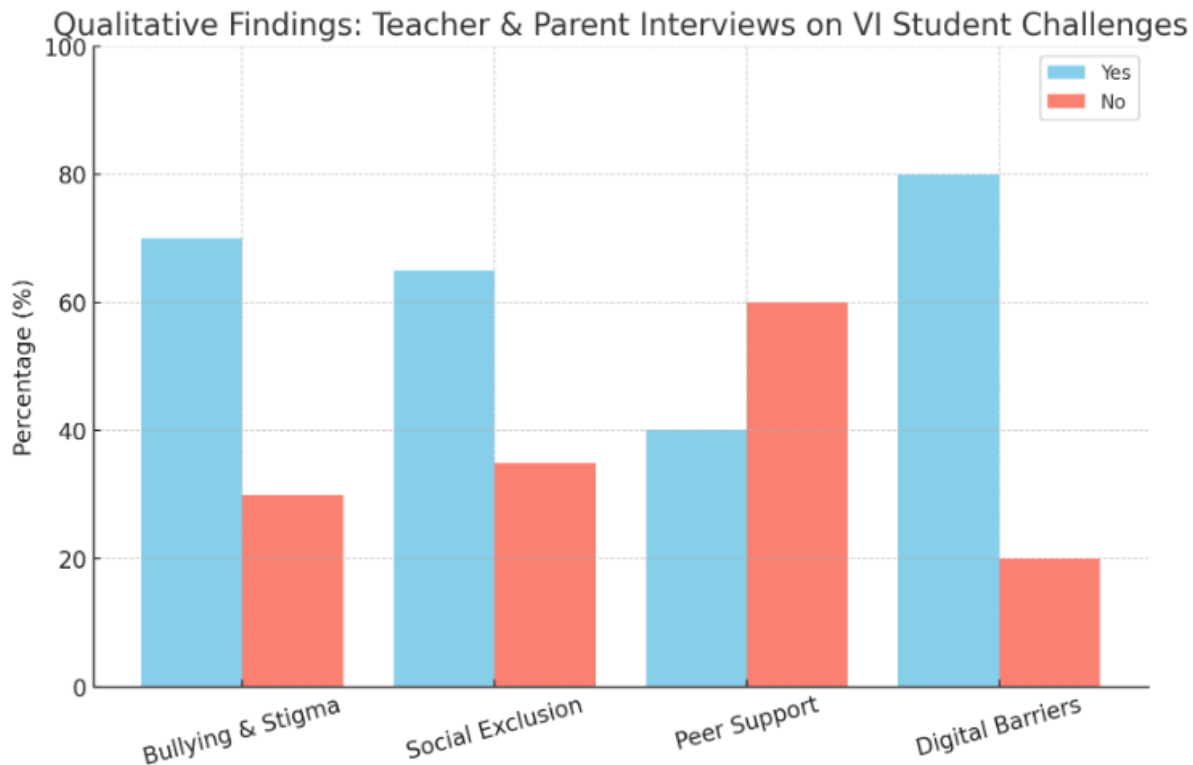
More than half of respondents confirmed exclusion from sports, academics, or extracurriculars. These practices—often framed as protective—reinforce institutionalized marginalization.



Only a minority observed consistent peer support. Informal assistance exists but remains unstructured and unreliable, highlighting the need for formalized peer mentorship.



This theme showed the most severe barrier. Students with VI struggled significantly with inaccessible online platforms and assessments, leading to withdrawal and disengagement.



Overall, the qualitative findings reveal a systemic cycle of stigma, exclusion, and inadequate support that compromises the psychosocial well-being of visually impaired students. While bullying and stigma are pervasive, institutional practices often reinforce exclusion, and peer assistance remains fragile. Post-COVID challenges, particularly digital inaccessibility, emerged as the most pressing concern. These results underscore the need for disability-sensitive teacher training, structured peer mentorship programs, accessible digital learning platforms, and integrated mental health support to foster a genuinely inclusive educational environment.

Findings

The quantitative analysis revealed that psychosocial challenges are highly prevalent among students with visual impairment (VI) in Delhi–NCR inclusive schools. Notably, 72% of students reported experiencing bullying, and 69% felt socially excluded during group activities. Conversely, only 35% indicated having reliable peer support, while 63% reported symptoms of anxiety or depression. Digital isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic affected 81% of students, highlighting the exacerbation of existing vulnerabilities during online learning transitions.

Qualitative insights from interviews and field notes further contextualize these figures. Students described repeated experiences of marginalization, teasing, and neglect, which deeply impacted their self-esteem and willingness to participate in classroom and extracurricular activities. Teachers' accounts revealed limited preparedness to address psychosocial needs, indicating gaps in disability-sensitive pedagogical training. Parents emphasized both the protective role of peer support and the inconsistencies in its availability, reinforcing the quantitative finding that only a minority of students benefit from stable social networks. Collectively, these findings underscore that psychosocial barriers for VI students are systemic, involving not just peers but also institutional practices and infrastructure.

The discussion aligns with global and national literature. Consistent with Hameed et al. (2020) and Rohleder (2018), bullying and stigma significantly undermine self-esteem and learning engagement. Teacher unpreparedness points to the absence of structured, disability-sensitive training programs. Peer support emerges as a critical resilience factor, yet its variability limits its protective effect. The post-COVID situation echoes the results of UNESCO (2021) that learners with disabilities were denied opportunities more often in online education because they could not access digital systems, which further demonstrates structural disparities in the accessibility and participation of learners with disabilities. The above results shows that the process of inclusion is not only including children with visual impairment in regular schools or giving them admission but it also emphasized the importance of their emotional and mental well-being which will achieve through psychosocial safety, peer group support and mental health stability of the children.

Conclusion

The research finds that learners with visual impairment in inclusive schools in the Delhi-NCR area are faced with complex psychosocial issues which largely influence both their academic and social lives. Such issues are recurrent bullying, the inability to participate in group activities socially, and isolation on the Internet, which is especially visible during the times of online education like the COVID-19 pandemic. The availability and quality of peer support and friendships as a source of resilience and coping is important; however, due to the inconsistent nature of such support, students will be prone to anxiety, low self-esteem, and a sense of marginalization.

The study further identifies presence of serious systemic gaps in existing education and policy systems. Even though such ground-breaking policies as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and the Rights of persons with disabilities (RPwD) Act (2016) encourage inclusion, they are insufficient to meet the psychosocial and mental health demands of students with disabilities. Lack of formalized mental health interventions in regular schools increases the susceptibility of the visually impaired students, as they are not able to utilize the benefit of the inclusive educational settings.

In order to attain successful inclusion, the study highlights the importance of implementing holistic mental health models in schools, making certain that digital learning tools comply with the standard of accessibility, and putting in place systematic forms of assistance via teacher education and mentorship initiatives. Also, sensitizing parents and communities about the issues of visually impaired students will help to enhance social networks and create a more supportive and empathetic environment. Finally, inclusive schooling no longer should be confined to simple physical location of students with disabilities, but should be psychosocial inclusion whereby visually impaired students are not only academically active, but also socially empowered, resilient, and capable of enjoying the full range of school life.

Recommendations/ Suggestions

The research proposes a number of important recommendations that can be used to deal with the issues of the students with visual impairments. On the one hand, it highlights the relevance of disability-sensitive training of teachers and even proposes to include psychosocial awareness, anti-bullying measures and inclusive pedagogy in teacher training courses. On the other hand, peer group interaction and group activities should be encouraged in the classroom environment in a structured manner to ensure & motivate social participation and resilience among students with or without visual impairment.

In the study, the necessity of school-based mental health services, such as counselling and psychosocial support are identified as unique and specific to the needs of disabled students. Also, it is essential to ensure the access to the digital space; the e-learning solutions must be provided in accordance with the WCAG standards to avoid digital exclusion and facilitate equal access to learning. Lastly, parental and community sensitisation will play critical role and workshops designed to challenge the stigma and reinforce the support networks of students with disabilities will be important in creating a more inclusive and supportive environment, both in school and outside.

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