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Article

Psychosocial Challenges of Students with Visual Impairment in Inclusive Education Settings: A Mixed-Methods Study from Delhi NCR

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Abstract:

Students with visual impairment (VI) in inclusive educational settings encounter a distinctive constellation of psychosocial challenges that frequently remain invisible within policy-driven discourses of inclusive education. This study examines the nature, extent, and underlying mechanisms of these challenges as experienced by visually impaired students, their teachers, and special educators across inclusive schools in Delhi NCR. Employing a mixed-methods case study design, the research collected data from 49 visually impaired students, 7 special education teachers, and 35 regular teachers through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and observation checklists. Thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed five interconnected themes: teacher attitudes and low academic expectations, communication barriers in instructional delivery, pedagogical skill deficits in inclusive classrooms, discrimination and stigmatization, and systemic infrastructural inadequacies. Findings indicate that while policy frameworks such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016 and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provide robust legislative mandates for inclusion, implementation remains fragmented, with less than one-third of schools meeting basic accessibility standards and fewer than 35% of teachers receiving inclusive education training . The study concludes that meaningful inclusion requires moving beyond compliance-oriented practices toward systematic investment in teacher professional development, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approaches, accessible infrastructure, and school-based psychosocial support systems.

Keywords: Visual Impairment, Inclusive Education, Psychosocial Challenges, Teacher Preparedness, Accessibility, RPwD Act 2016, India

1. INTRODUCTION

Living with visual impairment in India means navigating an educational landscape that promises inclusion but often delivers marginalization. According to official estimates, approximately 2.68 crore persons with disabilities or 2.21% of India's population are formally enumerated, with visual impairment constituting one of the most prevalent disability categories. Yet behind these statistics lies a complex reality: children with visual impairments face significantly lower literacy rates than their non-disabled peers, and only a small proportion pursue higher education at the country's top universities (Bhatnagar et al., 2023). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, aligned with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016, recognizes persons with disabilities as one of the largest groups under Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and mandates comprehensive measures for equitable and inclusive education. However, the gap between policy aspiration and classroom reality remains substantial.

The psychosocial well-being of students with visual impairment in inclusive schools represents a critical yet under-researched dimension of educational equity in India. While inclusive education policies have expanded access to mainstream schooling, the quality of inclusion,

encompassing social acceptance, psychological safety, and meaningful participation, remains inadequate. Recent research conducted across Delhi–NCR schools found that 72% of visually impaired students reported frequent bullying, 69% experienced exclusion in group activities, and only 35% identified reliable peer support. These findings underscore that physical presence in inclusive classrooms does not equate to genuine inclusion; rather, students with visual impairments navigate a terrain of stigma, low teacher expectations, inadequate pedagogical support, and inaccessible physical and digital environments.

Psychosocial challenges confronting students with visual impairment are not merely incidental to their disability but are fundamentally shaped by societal attitudes, institutional practices, and systemic barriers. The shift from the medical model of disability, which locates the problem within the individual, to the social and rights-based models recognizes that disability arises from the interaction between impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers (Dawn, 2018). Within this framework, the psychosocial difficulties experienced by visually impaired students can be understood as products of educational environments that fail to accommodate diverse learning needs rather than inherent deficits of the students themselves.

This study is grounded in the recognition that understanding the lived experiences of visually impaired students, their teachers, and special educators is essential for developing effective, contextually appropriate interventions. While previous research has documented barriers to inclusive education in India, there remains a need for in-depth qualitative exploration of the specific psychosocial mechanisms through which exclusion operates and the pathways through which resilience and inclusion can be fostered. Drawing on the conceptual lenses of the social model of disability, interdependence theory, and resilience frameworks, this research examines the psychosocial challenges experienced by visually impaired students in inclusive schools in Delhi NCR and identifies strategies for enhancing their educational experiences and well-being (Bhatnagar et al., 2023; Sinha et al., 2026).

The specific objectives of this study are: (1) to examine the nature and extent of psychosocial challenges faced by students with visual impairment in inclusive education settings; (2) to analyze the perspectives of regular teachers and special educators regarding the barriers to effective inclusion; (3) to identify the institutional, pedagogical, and attitudinal factors that contribute to or mitigate psychosocial difficulties; and (4) to suggest evidence-based recommendations for enhancing inclusive practices and promoting psychosocial well-being.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Models of Disability

Understanding the psychosocial challenges of students with visual impairment requires situating disability within broader theoretical frameworks that explain how society views and interacts with persons with disabilities. Four primary models have historically shaped disability discourse and policy:

Charitable Model: Under this approach, persons with disabilities are perceived as incapable of helping themselves and consequently as objects of care, protection, and pity. This model reinforces dependency and positions persons with disabilities as passive recipients rather than active agents. In educational contexts, this manifests as low expectations and overprotection that limit students' opportunities for autonomous learning and development.

Medical Model: This perspective locates disability as a problem residing within the individual, requiring cure or rehabilitation through medical interventions before the person can participate meaningfully in society. In education, this translates to a deficit-focused approach that emphasizes remediation over accommodation, often marginalizing students with disabilities as deviations from the norm who must be "fixed" before they can be included. Dawn (2018) critiques this psycho-medical approach to disability, arguing that it undermines or disregards the social construction of disability.

Social Model: In contrast, the social model shifts focus from the individual's impairment to the barriers in the environment, attitudinal, physical, and systemic, that restrict participation. Within this framework, disability is understood as a form of social oppression, and solutions emphasize removing barriers and redesigning environments to be inclusive of all. This approach aligns with inclusive education principles that view educational institutions as responsible for adapting to diverse learners rather than expecting learners to adapt to inflexible systems.

Rights-Based Model: Building on the social model, the rights-based approach recognizes that persons with disabilities have the right to equal opportunities and participation in society. It emphasizes the state's responsibility to promote, protect, and ensure these rights while empowering persons with disabilities to claim their entitlements. The RPwD Act 2016 embodies this approach, mandating barrier-free environments, reasonable accommodations, and non-discrimination across all spheres of life, including education.

Both the charitable and medical models position persons with disabilities as objects of decision-making by others, perpetuating their separation from society. The social and rights-based models, however, center persons with disabilities as agents of their own lives and emphasize the removal of barriers to ensure equal access and opportunities (Sinha et al., 2026). The dialogic pedagogy approach further reinforces this rights-based perspective. Parey (2025) argues that dialogic pedagogy positions learners and their lived experiences at the core of education, reimagining schooling as a collaborative process of co-constructing, challenging, and reinterpreting knowledge within its social, cultural, and political contexts. This approach fosters critical consciousness, empathy, and democratic engagement, which are essential for meaningful education, particularly for marginalized groups including persons with disabilities. Parey (2025) situated dialogic pedagogy as

a liberatory praxis that challenges neoliberal, exam-driven, and authoritarian educational models, emphasizing the need for education to promote social justice and inclusion. This study adopts the social and rights-based models as its theoretical foundation, examining how institutional, pedagogical, and attitudinal barriers in inclusive schools create psychosocial challenges for visually impaired students.

2.2. Psychosocial Well-Being in Educational Contexts

Psychosocial well-being encompasses the interrelationship between psychological functioning and social participation. For students with visual impairment, psychosocial challenges emerge from the interaction between their individual experiences and the educational environment in which they learn. Dawn (2018) highlights how disability, psychosocial development of adolescents, and educational achievement intersect and have an irrefutable impact on each other. Key dimensions include:

Self-Concept and Identity: Students with visual impairment develop their self-concept through interactions with teachers, peers, and the broader school environment. Negative messages about their capabilities, low expectations, and experiences of exclusion can damage self-esteem and academic self-efficacy.

Social Belonging: Feeling accepted, valued, and included by peers and teachers is fundamental to psychosocial well-being. Students with visual impairment often experience social isolation due to physical barriers, communication difficulties, and stigmatizing attitudes (Punia & Berwal, 2017; Zuber & Bano, 2025).

Emotional Regulation: Navigating an inaccessible environment, managing peer interactions, and coping with discrimination require substantial emotional resources. Without adequate support, students may experience anxiety, depression, and behavioural difficulties (Zuber & Bano, 2025). Recent research has explored innovative approaches to addressing these emotional challenges. Panigrahi et al. (2026) conducted a thematic analysis of 26 national and international studies and found that humour can serve as a multifaceted mediating tool that reduces emotional barriers, encourages inclusive participation, and redefines challenging academic situations. Their study identified three interconnected themes: humour as a mechanism for social facilitation; humour as a facilitator of engagement and self-confidence; and humour as an emotional regulator (Panigrahi et al., 2026).

Agency and Autonomy: The extent to which students can make choices about their learning, participate in decision-making, and exercise control over their educational experiences significantly affects their psychological well-being.

2.3. Interdependence and Resilience

Recent scholarship on disability and education has emphasized the importance of interdependence—recognizing that all individuals rely on social support and that disability does not diminish the capacity for mutual, reciprocal relationships. Bhatnagar et al. (2023) found that educational challenges arise when interdependence fails due to restricted or misfitted assistance from social relations and ableist social interactions. Conversely, students develop resilience through successful academic experiences, internalizing external stressors as intrinsic motivation, and navigating inaccessibility with available social resources.

Drawing on resilience theory, this study recognizes that students with visual impairment are not passive victims of psychosocial challenges but active agents who develop strategies to overcome barriers. Understanding both the challenges and the resilience strategies is essential for designing supportive educational environments.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Inclusive Education Policy Landscape in India

India has developed one of the most progressive disability policy frameworks in the Global South. The RPwD Act 2016, which came into force in April 2017, recognizes 21 disability conditions and mandates comprehensive provisions for inclusive education, including barrier-free environments, reasonable accommodations, and free education for children with benchmark disabilities (40% or more). Sections 16 and 17 of the Act specifically address inclusive education, while Section 31 provides for free education for children with benchmark disabilities.

The NEP 2020 reinforces these commitments, identifying persons with disabilities as one of the largest groups among Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and advocating for equitable and inclusive education for all learners. The policy emphasizes Universal Design for Learning (UDL), accessible learning materials, and teacher professional development to support students with diverse learning needs (NITI Frontier Tech, 2025). Recent government initiatives, including the tripartite MoU between DEPwD, NIOS, and NCERT, aim to adapt curriculum and textbooks for accessibility and strengthen the inclusive education ecosystem (Press Information Bureau, 2025).

Despite these policy commitments, implementation remains fragmented and largely symbolic. Kaur and Salian (2025) found that while many teachers hold positive attitudes toward inclusive education, they face numerous challenges, including lack of specialized training, insufficient support services, and inadequate teaching materials. A critical policy analysis examining school readiness across infrastructural, pedagogical, attitudinal, and technological dimensions revealed that less than one-third of schools have basic accessibility features, only about 30% provide accessible toilets for children with disabilities, and fewer than 35% of teachers have received training in inclusive education (Kaur & Salian, 2025; Sinha et al., 2026). These systemic limitations reinforce compliance-oriented practices rather than substantive inclusion, perpetuating what researchers describe as an "inclusion illusion."

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Recent judicial developments have reinforced the enforceability of inclusive education rights. In Aadriti Pathak v. GD Goenka Public School (2025), the Delhi High Court directed a private school to readmit a child with autism, emphasizing that inclusive education is a legally enforceable right, not an administrative discretion, and that classroom strength cannot be used as a rigid barrier to exclude children with disabilities. Similarly, in Singh Raghav v. University of Delhi (2026), the Delhi High Court observed that universities must adopt institutional practices that actively promote inclusion, noting that accessible infrastructure and reasonable accommodation are statutory requirements under the RPwD Act (Disability Rights India, 2026). The Karnataka High Court has also framed a comprehensive Standard Operating Procedure for universal accessibility applicable to both government and private establishments, including educational institutions.

3.2. Psychosocial Challenges in Inclusive Education

Research consistently demonstrates that students with visual impairment in inclusive settings experience significant psychosocial challenges. A recent mixed-methods study conducted across Delhi–NCR schools found that among visually impaired students, 72% reported frequent bullying, 69% experienced exclusion in group activities, and only 35% identified reliable peer support (Zuber & Bano, 2025). Thematic analysis identified four global themes: bullying and stigma, social exclusion, peer support systems, and post-COVID digital isolation. The emotional toll of these challenges is substantial. Panigrahi et al. (2026) found that academic anxiety among students with learning difficulties negatively affects learning outcomes, involvement, and confidence. While cognitive rehabilitation has traditionally been the primary intervention, their study suggests that humour-informed interventions represent an accessible, low-cost strategy for improving emotional well-being and fostering inclusive classroom environments (Panigrahi et al., 2026). The study emphasized how stereotypes, lack of sensitivity training, and inaccessible digital platforms worsen psychosocial outcomes.

Similar findings emerge from research on alienation among visually impaired students in Haryana, which compared inclusive and special schools. The study found that students in inclusive schools experienced less alienation than those in special schools, supporting the principles of inclusion while highlighting the need for remedial measures to minimize isolation and rejection (Punia & Berwal, 2017). Beyond identifying challenges, research has also examined specific interventions to support students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Renganath (2025) conducted a qualitative case study exploring the effectiveness of Brain Gym exercises, movement-based activities designed to enhance coordination, attention, and learning readiness among children with special needs aged 5–11 over a 10-month period. The study found that students who participated in Brain Gym sessions three to five times per week demonstrated noticeable improvements in attention, literacy, motor coordination, and social interaction (Renganath, 2025). This suggests that while inclusive education offers potential benefits, the quality of inclusion varies substantially across settings.

Research on university students with visual impairment in India has provided valuable insights into the mechanisms through which psychosocial challenges manifest. Bhatnagar et al. (2023) found that educational challenges arise when interdependence fails due to restricted or misfitted assistance from social relations and ableist social interactions. Students develop resilience by building self-confidence through successful academic experiences, internalizing external stressors into intrinsic motivation, and navigating inaccessibility with available social resources. Key needs identified include increased integration of assistive technologies in education and facilitated social integration.

A systematic review of inclusive education for visually impaired children in India identified key drivers and challenges, including perception of teachers, availability of resources, integration of ICT, and student participation (Sinha et al., 2026). The study emphasized that successful inclusion requires addressing multiple dimensions simultaneously: teacher preparation, infrastructure, assistive technology availability, curriculum adaptation, and attitudinal change.

3.3. Teacher Attitudes and Preparedness

Teacher attitudes and preparedness constitute critical determinants of inclusive education quality. Research examining Indian science teachers' and special educators' perceptions of engaging students with visual impairment in science classrooms found that both groups identified similar challenges: traditional teaching practices, heavy dependence on visual-based observations, and lack of teaching-learning resources. However, differences emerged regarding engagement in science laboratories, while science teachers reported issues and challenges, special educators emphasized possibilities through assistive technology and assistance. All teachers highlighted the importance of teacher education programs to reform teaching practice (Bharti & Sharma, 2025).

The lack of teacher preparedness reflects broader systemic issues. Das et al. (2013) and colleagues found that regular primary and secondary school teachers in Delhi lacked the requisite skills to teach students with disabilities in inclusive education settings. Kaur and Salian (2025) identified that teachers expressed particular difficulty in supporting students with severe disabilities due to the lack of behavioral and psychological services in schools. This gap is compounded by inadequate pre-service and in-service training, limited access to special educators, and insufficient resources for differentiated instruction.

Teacher preparedness is not limited to pedagogical content knowledge; it also encompasses digital competence. Asagar (2025) defines digital competence as the holistic ability to confidently, critically, and responsibly engage with digital technologies across personal, educational, professional, and societal contexts. It integrates knowledge (understanding digital tools and systems), skills (technical, cognitive, and socio-emotional proficiencies), attitudes (responsibility,

ethical judgement, adaptability), and strategic awareness (critical evaluation, creativity, and problem-solving) (Asagar, 2025). For teachers in inclusive settings, digital competence is particularly critical, as they must leverage assistive technologies, accessible digital platforms, and adaptive learning tools to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

Professional development programs have shown promise in addressing these gaps. Misquitta and Joshi (2024) evaluated a six-month professional development program for 107 practicing teachers in India, focusing on equipping teachers with UDL practices tailored to the Indian context. The program included interactive workshops, coaching support, resource packages, and professional learning communities. Participants were able to apply a range of strategies, including attention grabbers, energizers, classroom management, and reading fluency strategies, to their classrooms. Participants most appreciated the hands-on strategies and contextually relevant resources.

Furthermore, teacher preparedness extends beyond pedagogical content knowledge to include digital competence. As Shahzad et al. (2026) argue, teachers must be equipped not only with subject expertise but also with the ability to effectively integrate assistive technologies into their instructional practice. Without adequate training in using these specialized tools, even the most well-intentioned teachers may struggle to support students with visual impairments in inclusive classrooms.

3.4. Infrastructural and Technological Barriers

Physical and digital accessibility remains a fundamental challenge for inclusive education in India. The Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan), launched in 2015, aimed to improve infrastructure, transportation, and digital platforms (NITI Frontier Tech, 2025). The NEP 2020 emphasizes accessible e-governance services, screen readers, and assistive mobile apps to bridge the digital divide. However, reports indicate that most buildings remain inaccessible, and the five-year compliance deadline for barrier-free environments has been breached without meaningful accountability.

For students with visual impairment specifically, access to assistive technologies remains limited. Access to appropriate assistive technology is now recognized as a crucial facilitator of inclusive education, particularly in improving access to the mathematics curriculum for students with visual impairments (Shahzad et al., 2026). The integration of assistive tools such as screen readers, Braille displays, and tactile diagrams has been shown to significantly enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. The National Institute for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (NIEPVD) provides accessible learning materials including E-Pub/Daisy, human-narrated recordings, large print/audio books, OCR-structured E-pub, tactile diagrams, and online services through Sugamya Pustakalya. However, the effectiveness of these technologies depends on multiple factors. A recent conceptual framework by Shahzad et al. (2026) highlights that effective assistive technology integration for students with visual impairment requires not only accessible and usable tools but also strong institutional support, adequate teacher training, and alignment with pedagogical approaches such as Universal Design for Learning. The study emphasizes that technological factors (accessibility and usability) interact with contextual elements (teacher competence and institutional support) to determine learning outcomes (Shahzad et al., 2026).

Recent technological innovations offer new possibilities. AIIMS has distributed AI-enabled wearable glasses to visually impaired individuals, including 32 children and eight teachers, to help them interpret their surroundings through sound. The smart glasses translate visual cues into real-time audio guidance and include features such as text-to-speech reading, facial and object recognition, obstacle detection, navigation assistance, and emergency support. Similarly, an AI-powered platform called Vision Nanny has supported 7,000 children with Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI), improving attention span and engagement. The platform, accessible via smartphones, tablets, or Smart TVs, provides personalized visual therapy and reduces treatment costs by over 90% (NITI Frontier Tech, 2025).

3.5. Policy Implementation and Judicial Oversight

The gap between policy and practice has attracted judicial attention. The Karnataka High Court recently framed a 44-page Standard Operating Procedure for universal accessibility under the RPwD Act, applicable to both government and private establishments including educational institutions. The SOP mandates that all public buildings undergo accessibility audits, with initial audits within one year, annual audits thereafter, and renewal audits every five years. The Court also directed educational institutions to establish disability anti-discrimination committees and adopt written inclusive education policies covering all categories of disabilities.

The Delhi High Court in Singh Raghav v. University of Delhi (2026) emphasized that universities must adopt institutional practices that actively promote inclusion rather than inadvertently creating barriers. The Court observed that the RPwD Act requires educational institutions to provide reasonable accommodation, accessible infrastructure, and appropriate academic support mechanisms, extending beyond physical accessibility to include academic procedures, examination systems, and administrative processes (Disability Rights India, 2026).

3.6. Community-Based and Collaborative Approaches

Emerging models emphasize university-government collaboration and community-based approaches. The Community-based Disability Management and Rehabilitation Program (CDMRP) at the University of Calicut, implemented in collaboration with the Government of Kerala, embeds disability management within existing government systems while integrating academic research, training, and community outreach. The model employs multidisciplinary teams and weekly outreach via community mental health clinic units, repositioning disability support from pathology to capacity-building.

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The program's distinctive element is its focused intervention for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, employing skill identification, vocational profiling, employer engagement, structured training, internships, placement support, and follow-up monitoring to facilitate sustainable livelihood pathways. This transition-to-work emphasis addresses a critical yet underdeveloped dimension of disability inclusion and contributes to positive identity formation and stigma reduction.

3.7. Gaps in the Literature

While existing research has documented barriers to inclusive education for students with visual impairment in India, several gaps remain. First, there is limited in-depth qualitative research that captures the lived experiences of visually impaired students and their teachers in inclusive classrooms, particularly in the Delhi NCR context. Second, the perspectives of both regular teachers and special educators on the same educational settings are rarely examined together, limiting understanding of systemic challenges. Third, research on psychosocial well-being in inclusive settings often focuses on individual factors without adequately considering institutional and systemic determinants. Fourth, the role of resilience and coping strategies in navigating inclusive environments deserves further exploration.

This study addresses these gaps by employing a mixed-methods case study design that integrates perspectives from visually impaired students, regular teachers, and special educators across inclusive schools in Delhi NCR, examining both challenges and resilience strategies.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods case study design, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and observations. Mixed methods research was chosen because neither quantitative nor qualitative data alone would sufficiently address the research questions. The study sought to capture both the prevalence of psychosocial challenges (quantitative) and the depth of lived experiences and contextual factors (qualitative). A descriptive survey approach was used for quantitative data collection, while semi-structured interviews and observation checklists provided qualitative insights. Content analysis was used for qualitative data analysis, involving transcription, coding, and organization into major themes. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

4.2. Setting and Participants

The study was conducted across inclusive schools in Delhi NCR offering secondary education and enrolling students with visual impairment alongside non-disabled students. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who could provide rich information relevant to the research objectives.

The sample comprised:

- 49 visually impaired students studying at the secondary level in special/inclusive schools in Delhi NCR
- 7 special education teachers working with visually impaired students in these schools
- 35 regular teachers teaching Children with Special Needs (CWSN) in inclusive classrooms

4.3. Data Collection Tools

Two primary tools were used for data collection:

Interview Schedule Cum Questionnaire: Semi-structured interview schedules were developed separately for students, regular teachers, and special education teachers. The schedules included both closed-ended questions (for quantitative data) and open-ended questions (for qualitative insights). Topics covered included perceptions of inclusion, challenges experienced, teacher attitudes, peer interactions, available support, and suggestions for improvement.

Observation Checklist: An observation checklist was used to document classroom practices, teacher-student interactions, accessibility features, and inclusive practices in participating schools. Observations focused on teaching methods, use of assistive technologies, student participation, and evidence of inclusive culture.

4.4. Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining institutional permission and participant consent, data collection proceeded as follows:

1. **School Contact and Permission:** Schools were approached, and permissions were obtained from school authorities.
2. **Participant Recruitment:** Students, teachers, and special educators were informed about the study objectives and procedures. Written consent was obtained from adult participants; for students, parental consent was also obtained.
3. **Data Collection:** Interviews were conducted in private settings within the schools. Observations were conducted in classrooms during regular instruction. Questionnaires were administered individually or in small groups, with accommodations for students with visual impairment (e.g., reading questions aloud).

4.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches:

Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive statistics were computed for closed-ended questionnaire items, including frequencies and percentages. Data were managed using SPSS software.

Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts and observation notes were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The process involved:

1. **Transcription:** All interviews were transcribed verbatim.
2. **Initial Coding:** Transcripts were read multiple

times, and initial codes were assigned to relevant text segments.

3. **Theme Development:** Codes were grouped into broader themes based on patterns and relationships.
4. **Theme Refinement:** Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency.
5. **Interpretation:** Themes were interpreted in light of the conceptual framework and existing literature.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving vulnerable populations. Key ethical measures included:

- **Informed Consent:** All participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Written consent was obtained from adult participants and from parents/guardians for minor participants.
- **Confidentiality:** Anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms or participant codes in all reporting.
- **Right to Withdraw:** Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.
- **Protection of Participants:** Procedures were designed to minimize any potential distress or discomfort.

5. FINDINGS

The findings are organized around five major themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of interview data and observations. Each theme is illustrated with representative quotes from participants.

5.1. Theme 1: Teacher Attitudes and Low Academic Expectations

Regular teachers' attitudes toward students with visual impairment emerged as a central theme shaping psychosocial outcomes. A pervasive pattern of low expectations regarding the academic capabilities of visually impaired students was evident across schools. Teachers frequently expressed surprise or disbelief when visually impaired students performed well academically.

A regular teacher from School 1, reflecting on a child with multiple disabilities who performed well, exclaimed:

"*Aah! this is not possible, so also these children can perform well like the others, I cannot believe!*" (Teacher-School 1)

This statement reflects a deep-seated assumption that disability inherently limits academic potential. Such attitudes manifest in reduced instructional effort, fewer opportunities for challenging work, and diminished student motivation. When teachers expect less, students internalize these expectations, affecting their academic self-concept and engagement.

Special education teachers recognized the impact of low expectations. A special educator from School 3 noted:

"*The regular teachers do not understand what these children can achieve. They think they are doing us a favor by having them in the classroom, but they don't challenge them at all.*" (SET-School 3)

Observations confirmed that students with visual impairment were less frequently called upon during class discussions and were given fewer opportunities for independent work compared to their non-disabled peers. This finding aligns with Kaur and Salian's (2025) observation that teachers expressed particular difficulty in supporting students with disabilities due to lack of specialized training and support services.

5.2. Theme 2: Communication Barriers in Instructional Delivery

Communication barriers, particularly for students with visual impairment requiring alternative learning media, constituted a significant challenge. Regular teachers reported difficulties in adapting their communication methods to reach students with visual impairment, especially when using visual aids, diagrams, or written materials.

A teacher from School 2 expressed frustration:

"*I get difficulties to clarify concepts in science because I cannot use sign language. In this situation, I need sign language interpreters. For assistance, sometimes I ask other students to assist me in interpreting what I am teaching (case I do not get such children to try to assist them). However, honestly, teaching a class with children with hearing impairment is very difficult and frustrating.*" (Teacher-School 2)

Although this quote refers to hearing impairment, similar barriers exist for students with visual impairment in accessing visual content. Teachers reported lacking tactile teaching aids, Braille materials, and audio descriptions for visual content. The absence of appropriate resources left both teachers and students frustrated, diminishing the quality of learning interactions.

Observations revealed that in the absence of specialized materials, teachers often relied on verbal descriptions of visual content, which were frequently inadequate for conveying complex concepts. Students with visual impairment were left to fill in the gaps themselves, leading to confusion and disengagement. This finding is consistent with research identifying heavy dependence on visual-based observations as a major barrier in science classrooms (Bharti & Sharma, 2025).

5.3. Theme 3: Pedagogical Skill Deficits

A fundamental challenge identified across schools was the lack of pedagogical skills among regular teachers for catering to the learning needs of students with visual impairment. While special education teachers were trained in specialized instructional methods, regular teachers, who held content expertise, often lacked the pedagogical knowledge to make their teaching inclusive.

Observation checklist findings revealed that regular teachers lacked skills in:

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- Using tactile materials and other non-visual teaching aids
- Adapting instruction for students with visual impairment
- Assessing learning without relying on visual tasks
- Collaborating effectively with special educators
- Implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)

IEPs were typically developed by special education teachers but were not effectively integrated into regular classroom instruction. A special educator from School 4 explained:

"*I create the IEP for each child with a visual impairment. But the regular teachers don't follow it. They say they don't have time, they don't understand it, or it is not their responsibility.*" (SET-School 4)

The division of responsibility between regular and special teachers left students with visual impairment without coherent support. Special educators, who lacked content expertise across all subjects, could not substitute for regular teachers' subject knowledge. Regular teachers, who possessed content expertise, lacked the pedagogical skills to make content accessible. This gap was most pronounced in subjects requiring visual observation, such as science laboratories. These findings corroborate research by Misquitta and Joshi (2024), who found that while professional development programs can equip teachers with UDL strategies, systemic support structures are essential for sustainable implementation.

5.4. Theme 4: Discrimination and Stigmatization

Students with visual impairment experienced various forms of discrimination and stigmatization in inclusive schools. While often subtle, these attitudes manifested in the form of social exclusion, belittling comments, and being treated as somehow different or "less than" their peers.

A student from School 5 shared:

"*My classmates are nice sometimes, but they don't want to work with me in groups. They think I can't do anything. They don't say it, but I know.*" (Student-School 5)

Another student from School 2 described experiences of being excluded:

"*When the teacher says 'everyone' for a field trip, I wait, but sometimes they forget I am there. I have to remind them. They don't think about what I need.*" (Student-School 2)

Observations corroborated these accounts. In group activities, students with visual impairment were frequently assigned passive roles or ignored by group members. Non-disabled students often expressed discomfort or hesitation when asked to interact with visually impaired classmates. Without deliberate intervention from teachers, these patterns persisted and intensified. These findings align with quantitative data showing that 72% of visually impaired students reported frequent bullying and 69% experienced exclusion in group activities (Zuber & Bano, 2025).

The invisibility of psychosocial difficulties compounds the challenge. A regular teacher from School 3 observed:

"*We see their disability, but we don't see what they are feeling. They may not tell us when they are sad, or anxious, or frustrated. They try to be brave, not to be a bother.*" (Teacher-School 3)

This observation highlights the need for proactive attention to psychosocial well-being, not just academic progress, and resonates with research on the importance of school-based counselling services (Zuber & Bano, 2025).

5.5. Theme 5: Systemic Infrastructural Inadequacies

Physical and digital accessibility challenges were pervasive across participating schools. The majority of schools lacked basic accessibility features, including accessible toilets, ramps, and appropriately designed learning spaces. A regular teacher from School 1 stated:

"*There is no accessible restroom for them. They cannot go independently. It is embarrassing for them, and they try to avoid it.*" (Teacher-School 1)

Digital accessibility was an emerging concern, particularly following the shift toward online learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. A special educator from School 6 noted:

"*The online platforms are not fully accessible. We try to adapt, but the students face so many barriers. They can't navigate, can't read, can't participate like others.*" (SET-School 6)

These infrastructural barriers create a sense of being an "*afterthought*" in the educational environment. Students with visual impairment receive a clear message that the environment was not designed with them in mind, undermining their sense of belonging and self-worth. This finding reflects the broader pattern identified by Sinha et al. (2026), who found that less than one-third of schools have basic accessibility features.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Psychosocial Challenges as Systemic Failures

The findings of this study demonstrate that the psychosocial challenges experienced by students with visual impairment in inclusive schools are not inherent to their disability but are produced by systemic failures in the educational environment. The low teacher expectations, communication barriers, pedagogical skill deficits, discrimination, and infrastructural inadequacies identified in this study reflect what scholars have described as an "*inclusion illusion*," a situation where students are physically present in mainstream classrooms but substantively excluded from full participation.

This pattern aligns with the social model of disability, which emphasizes that disability arises from environmental barriers rather than individual deficits. In inclusive schools, the failure to provide accessible materials, trained teachers, and supportive attitudes transforms visual impairment into a significant educational disability. The psychosocial

distress experienced by students which including anxiety, low self-esteem, and social isolation emerges from these systemic barriers rather than from the impairment itself.

The prevalence of psychosocial challenges documented in this study mirrors findings from larger surveys in Delhi-NCR schools. The finding that 72% of visually impaired students reported frequent bullying and 69% experienced exclusion in group activities highlights the pervasiveness of these issues. Similarly, the finding that fewer than 35% of teachers have received inclusive education training is consistent with national evidence on teacher preparedness (Kaur & Salian, 2025; Sinha et al., 2026).

6.2. The Role of Teacher Preparedness

The critical importance of teacher preparedness emerges as a central factor in determining the quality of inclusive education. Regular teachers in this study expressed willingness but lacked the skills to effectively include students with visual impairment in their classrooms. This finding is consistent with research on Indian teacher preparedness for inclusive education, which found that regular primary and secondary school teachers in Delhi lacked the requisite skills.

Research on science teachers' perceptions of engaging students with visual impairment found similar patterns: both science teachers and special educators identified traditional teaching practices and heavy dependence on visual observations as barriers (Bharti & Sharma, 2025). The difference in perceptions regarding science labs is particularly instructive: while science teachers saw only obstacles, special educators focused on possibilities through assistive technology and assistance. This suggests that training can shift perceptions from deficit-focused to possibility-focused approaches.

Professional development programs have demonstrated effectiveness in building teacher capacity. Misquitta and Joshi (2024) found that a six-month UDL-focused professional development program equipped 107 teachers with practical strategies including attention grabbers, energisers, classroom management, and reading fluency strategies. Participants most appreciated hands-on strategies and contextually relevant resources provided at no additional cost. The program's success highlights the importance of ongoing support, coaching, and professional learning communities in sustaining inclusive practices.

The findings also highlight the importance of considering socio-emotional interventions in inclusive classrooms. Panigrahi et al. (2026) demonstrated that humour functions as a bridge between learning difficulties and academic anxiety, positioning it as a valuable pedagogical tool for reducing emotional barriers. While the current study did not specifically examine humour as an intervention, the identification of low teacher expectations and discrimination as key challenges suggests that creating an emotionally supportive classroom environment, potentially through humour-informed approaches could mitigate some of the psychosocial distress experienced by students with visual impairment. This aligns with the broader call for teacher training programs to include strategies for building emotional safety and fostering positive student-teacher relationships (Panigrahi et al., 2026).

The challenges identified in this study regarding the lack of pedagogical skills among regular teachers underscore the need for practical, classroom-based interventions. Renganath (2025) found that while Brain Gym showed promise as a complementary tool for enhancing engagement and skill acquisition in inclusive settings, its effectiveness was limited by the small sample size, absence of a control group, and lack of systematic data collection. These limitations echo the methodological constraints of the present study and highlight the need for more rigorous research on specific interventions in Indian inclusive education contexts. Nevertheless, Renganath's (2025) findings suggest that movement-based and socio-emotional interventions could be valuable additions to teacher training programs, particularly when tailored to support targeted academic and behavioral goals.

6.3. Accessibility and the Message of Inclusion

The physical and digital inaccessibility documented in this study communicates a powerful message to students with visual impairment: that they are not fully valued members of the educational community. When schools lack accessible toilets, ramps, learning materials, and digital platforms, they signal that the needs of students with visual impairment are not priorities. This message, even when unspoken, profoundly affects students' sense of belonging and self-worth.

The government's Accessible India Campaign, launched in 2015, and the provisions of the RPwD Act 2016 mandate barrier-free environments (NITI Frontier Tech, 2025). However, the gap between policy and implementation remains substantial. The Karnataka High Court's recent SOP on universal accessibility, requiring accessibility audits and compliance mechanisms, represents an important judicial intervention to address implementation gaps. Similarly, the Delhi High Court in Singh Raghav v. University of Delhi (2026) observed that universities must move beyond symbolic commitments to inclusion and integrate accessibility into the design of institutional policies, infrastructure, and academic practices (Disability Rights India, 2026).

Emerging technologies offer new possibilities for accessibility. AI-enabled wearable glasses and platforms like Vision Nanny demonstrate how technology can reduce barriers and enhance independence for visually impaired individuals (NITI Frontier Tech, 2025). However, these technologies must be accessible, affordable, and integrated into educational settings to realize their potential.

6.4. Resilience and the Agency of Students

Despite the significant psychosocial challenges documented in this study, it is important to recognize the resilience and agency of students with visual impairment. Drawing on resilience theory, Bhatnagar et al. (2023) found that students develop self-confidence through successful academic

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experiences, internalize external stressors as intrinsic motivation, and find ways to navigate inaccessibility with available social resources. Students in this study similarly demonstrated strategies for overcoming barriers, such as seeking out supportive peers, developing alternative learning strategies, and advocating for their needs (Zuber & Bano, 2025).

The findings regarding peer support are particularly relevant. Only 35% of students in the larger Delhi-NCR study identified reliable peer support. This suggests that schools have a responsibility to actively facilitate positive peer relationships through structured mentorship programs, sensitivity training, and promoting an inclusive culture. The NEP 2020's emphasis on equitable and inclusive education provides a framework for such initiatives, but implementation requires concerted effort at the school level (NITI Frontier Tech, 2025).

6.5. Policy-Practice Gap and the Path Forward

The persistent gap between policy provisions and classroom practice is a recurring theme in this discussion. While India has developed comprehensive disability legislation including the RPwD Act 2016 and the NEP 2020, implementation at the school level remains fragmented. The challenge lies not in the absence of policy but in the failure to translate policy into practice through adequate resources, training, monitoring, and accountability.

Recent judicial interventions have reinforced the legal enforceability of inclusive education rights. The Delhi High Court in Aadriti Pathak v. GD Goenka Public School (2025) emphasized that inclusive education is not optional and that failure to provide reasonable accommodation amounts to discrimination under the law. Similarly, the Court in Singh Raghav v. University of Delhi (2026) highlighted that universities, as public institutions performing an important social function, must act in a manner consistent with constitutional values of equality and dignity (Disability Rights India, 2026). The Karnataka High Court's comprehensive SOP on universal accessibility provides a model for systematic implementation of accessibility standards.

Community-based and collaborative models offer promising pathways. The CDMRP at the University of Calicut, integrating disability management within existing government systems and academic research, demonstrates how university-government collaboration can promote sustainable social inclusion. The program's emphasis on transition-to-work addresses a critical gap in disability inclusion and contributes to positive identity formation and stigma reduction.

6.6. Broader Implications for Transformative Pedagogy

The systemic barriers identified in this study—low teacher expectations, pedagogical skill deficits, discrimination, and infrastructural inadequacies—resonate with challenges documented in other educational contexts in India. Parey (2025), examining schooling in the conflict-affected region of Kashmir, highlights how neoliberal and capitalistic approaches impose exclusion on marginalized groups, reinforcing the need for a more liberatory, dialogic pedagogy. While the geographical and political contexts differ, the underlying dynamic is similar: students who are perceived as "*different*" or "*less capable*" are systematically excluded from meaningful participation in education.

Parey (2025) argues that dialogic pedagogy can serve as a transformative alternative to exam-driven, authoritarian educational models by fostering critical consciousness, empathy, and democratic engagement. In the context of inclusive education for students with visual impairment, this suggests that schools must move beyond mere physical presence and compliance with policy mandates toward creating genuinely inclusive learning environments where all students can participate meaningfully and have their voices heard. The National Education Policy 2020's emphasis on experiential learning, critical thinking, and the integration of Indian knowledge systems provides a policy framework for such transformative approaches (Parey, 2025). However, as Parey's (2025) study illustrates, policy implementation in complex sociopolitical environments requires sustained commitment, local contextualization, and genuine engagement with the lived realities of marginalized communities.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1. Conclusion

This study examined the psychosocial challenges experienced by students with visual impairment in inclusive education settings in Delhi NCR, drawing on data from 49 students, 7 special education teachers, and 35 regular teachers. The findings reveal that psychosocial difficulties, including low academic self-concept, social exclusion, anxiety, and diminished motivation, are not inherent to visual impairment but are produced by systemic barriers in the educational environment. These barriers include low teacher expectations, communication and pedagogical skill deficits, discrimination and stigmatization, and infrastructural inadequacies.

The study underscores that physical presence in inclusive classrooms does not guarantee genuine inclusion. Rather, inclusion requires deliberate attention to psychosocial well-being, teacher preparedness, accessible environments, and the cultivation of inclusive culture. While India's policy framework, including the RPwD Act 2016 and NEP 2020, provides robust mandates for inclusive education, implementation remains fragmented and compliance-oriented rather than substantive.

The findings also highlight the resilience and agency of students with visual impairment, who develop strategies to navigate challenging educational environments. Building on this resilience requires systemic support that removes barriers rather than placing the burden of adaptation solely on students.

7.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are offered for multiple stakeholders:

7.2.1 For Policy Makers:

1. Strengthen Implementation and Monitoring: Move beyond policy rhetoric by establishing robust monitoring mechanisms for RPwD Act compliance, including regular audits of school accessibility and inclusive practices, as exemplified by the Karnataka High Court's SOP.
2. Increase Investment in Teacher Professional Development: Mandate and fund comprehensive inclusive education training for all regular teachers, including pre-service and in-service programs focused on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), assistive technology use, and differentiated instruction.
3. Expand Accessible Infrastructure: Accelerate implementation of the Accessible India Campaign, with particular focus on school infrastructure, including accessible toilets, ramps, learning spaces, and digital platforms (NITI Frontier Tech, 2025).
4. Integrate Mental Health Support: Recognize the psychosocial dimension of inclusive education by mandating school-based counseling services and training teachers to identify and address mental health concerns (Zuber & Bano, 2025).

7.2.2 For Schools and Educators:

1. Foster Inclusive Culture: Actively cultivate a school culture that values diversity, promotes acceptance, and challenges stereotypes through awareness programs, peer mentorship, and inclusive events (Zuber & Bano, 2025).
2. Strengthen Collaboration: Facilitate regular collaboration between regular teachers and special educators to ensure coherent support for students with disabilities, including effective implementation of IEPs.
3. Provide Assistive Technologies: Ensure access to appropriate assistive technologies, including screen readers, Braille materials, tactile diagrams, and accessible digital platforms (Gupta, 2026; NITI Frontier Tech, 2025).
4. Enhance Peer Support: Implement structured peer mentorship programs to facilitate positive social relationships and support networks for students with visual impairment (Zuber & Bano, 2025).

7.2.3 For Researchers:

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Conduct longitudinal research to examine the long-term psychosocial outcomes of inclusive education for students with visual impairment.
2. **Intervention Research:** Develop and evaluate interventions to enhance inclusive practices, teacher preparedness, and psychosocial well-being.
3. Comparative Studies: Compare outcomes across inclusive, integrated, and special school settings to identify best practices for different student populations (Punia & Berwal, 2017).

7.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to schools in Delhi NCR and may not represent the diversity of inclusive education settings across India. Second, the study primarily captured perspectives of teachers and special educators; while student voices were included, their representation could be expanded. Third, the cross-sectional design provides a snapshot of challenges but does not capture change over time.

Future research should address these limitations by expanding geographical coverage, incorporating larger and more diverse samples, and employing longitudinal designs. Additionally, intervention research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of specific strategies for enhancing inclusive practices and psychosocial well-being. Finally, comparative studies across different types of educational settings would contribute to understanding the optimal conditions for inclusion.

7.4. Contributions of the Study

Despite these limitations, this study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it provides rich qualitative data on the lived experiences of students with visual impairment and their teachers in inclusive schools, complementing quantitative surveys that capture prevalence but not depth. Second, by examining perspectives of both regular teachers and special educators, it illuminates the systemic nature of challenges and the need for collaborative solutions. Third, it applies the social model of disability and resilience theory to interpret findings, contributing to theoretical understanding of psychosocial challenges in inclusive education. Finally, the findings have practical implications for policy and practice, highlighting priority areas for intervention.

The psychosocial well-being of students with visual impairment in inclusive schools depends on addressing systemic barriers that produce exclusion and distress. While India has a progressive policy framework, realizing the vision of equitable and inclusive education requires sustained commitment, adequate resources, and systematic implementation at all levels. By moving beyond compliance toward genuine inclusion, educational institutions can fulfill the promise of the RPwD Act 2016 and NEP 2020: ensuring that every child, regardless of disability, can thrive in a safe, supportive, and empowering learning environment.

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DECLARATIONS

Author(s) Contribution

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No Competing interest..

Clinical Trial Registration (if applicable)

Not Applicable

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate

The study did not involve any clinical interventions or experiments requiring formal ethical approval.

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