

Social Inclusion of Visually Impaired Students Studying in a Comprehensive Secondary Mainstream School in the South of England

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Abstract- This study is an attempt to the exploration of the social inclusion of visually impaired (VI) pupils studying in a Comprehensive Secondary School level in the regular school setting in the south of England which involves the individual, cultural and social factors of a particular society. This school has a very well established VI resource centre which opened in 1996. The pupils enrolled in this school have varying degrees of visual impairment. The lack of sight causes a detachment from the physical and to some extent from the social environment. The pupils studying at secondary school level face difficulties in social inclusion as their behaviour changes at this stage and they strive to adjust with the society. Though there are some biological differences between male and female, they may share some common values, feelings and interests. If the VI pupils are socially accepted in the same way as other children, difficulties around school are then less apparent and they can adjust themselves better in the culture of the mainstream school.

Index Terms- Visual Impairment, Social Inclusion, Mainstream School, etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there are many children with disability studying in the mainstream education among them visually impaired (VI) children are a lot. The study of social inclusion of visually impaired children in the main school is an interesting one. The literature repeatedly indicates that both visually impaired and non-impaired children become benefited being studied in a mainstream school. Visually impaired pupils want to lead a normal life like any other fully sighted children. Studying in a mainstream school gives them the opportunity to develop harmonious relationships with their peers, friends, teachers, Learning Support Assistants (LSA) and with other staff as well. While studying together, sighted pupils learn to help and accept VI pupils normally; on the other hand, visually impaired children get the opportunity to be well adjusted with other pupils which helps better socialization for both the pupils. Moreover, supporting environment of mainstream education helps VI pupils to work more independently as much as their ability allows.

II. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES & INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Inclusive education has become burning issue in social and educational policy in the United Kingdom and the European Union, the United States and in many other countries as well.

Politicians are looking into their commitment to inclusion and social justice. Villa & Thousand (2005, p. 5) asserts: "Inclusive education is about embracing everyone and making a commitment to provide each student in the community, each citizen in a democracy, with the inalienable right to belong. Inclusion assumes that living and learning together benefits everyone e.g., those who are gifted, are non-English proficient, or have a disability". Villa & Thousand (2005, p.181) asserts: "When students with disabilities are provided with supports and services to access the general education curriculum, their peers maintain state benchmark-level performances, and the students with disabilities experience higher academic and social achievement" [1].

It has been recognized over the period that visually impaired children have the same basic physical, intellectual and emotional needs as all normal children [1]. It is obvious that the restrictions imposed by their limited visual acuity cause special needs. The special needs for these children include the adaptation of the school curriculum, instructional methods and the design of educational material. The extent of adaptation to these needs would determine the degree of school success that the child will enjoy in becoming a mature, independent and contributing adult [2].

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 10 per cent of the world's population suffers from some form of disability. <http://www.unicef.org/rosa/InclusiveBan.pdf> [3]. At present, there is little reliable data for this sector in Bangladesh. A comprehensive survey on the prevalence and status of disabled persons in Bangladesh has been undertaken by the Ministry of Social Welfare which is under process to be published.

The persons with Disabilities Act 1995 (Equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation) came into force in February 1996 in the UK. It is a landmark and a significant step to ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities and their full participation in national development programs [4].

It is essential to have a glance over the historical developments of education of visually handicapped. Education is one of the essential factors to ensure the quality of life of an individual. Education of blind children along with the sighted children became possible through Louise Braille, a blind teacher who invented a system of embossed dot symbols. The Missouri School for the Blind in St. Louise was the first American school to adopt Braille [5]. Until early 19th century, visually impaired children were being educated in special schools. According to Roberts (1986), cited in Huebner & Ferrell (1989), the children

with visual impairment were among the first children with disabilities to be mainstreamed in the 1940s and 1950s, but attitude toward and strategies for integrating them were inadequate [6].

There is a full inclusion position statement from the leading organizations, such as American Council of the Blind, American Foundation for the Blind, Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired, Canadian Council of the Blind, Canadian National Institute for the Blind, National Federation of the Blind, and the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped has clearly expressed the approach recommended for providing an appropriate education for the placement of blind children in regular educational facilities. This approach commensurate with the philosophy of the individuals with Disabilities Education Act and asserts that the children with disabilities should be educated with the normal students to the maximum extent [7] [8].

III. DEFINITION OF VISUALLY IMPAIRMENT

“There is no universally accepted definition of blindness and because of this, one cannot satisfactorily compare epidemiological studies of the visually impaired from one country to another” [9]. The visually impaired persons are a highly heterogeneous group whose most common characteristic is some degree of visual loss. Some are totally blind while others are able to distinguish between light and dark or merely can see a couple of feet away. Individuals with tunnel vision have good sight for distance but are handicapped by very narrow visual fields. Others may have a high degree of photophobia; in that case, even with minor visual impairment, they are restricted in certain activities. These persons function differently in their environment. It is, therefore, hard to define who is and who is not handicapped by his / her visual impairment. A subtle and comprehensive survey of the blind conducted by the World Health Organization in 1996 lists 65 different definitions of visually impairment throughout the world [9].

Tobin (1994, p. 1) asserts: “In the United Kingdom, a person is eligible to be registered as blind if he is ‘so blind as to be unable to perform any work for which eyesight is essential’ [10]. The child with a mild and correctable visual impairment can lead almost a normal life using glasses or contact lenses

IV. SOCIALIZATION AND INCLUSION OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED ADOLESCENTS

A child is born with immense potential for a variety of behaviour. While growing up in a human society, a child has to learn the social norms, values, rules and regulations of the people in a particular social environment. An individual cannot be fully human without contact with others in the society. Hollander asserts: “Being led into the ways of a society or group is called socialization. This process occurs primarily through learning during the formative years, but adjustment to new situations is a lifelong process” [11].

Moreover, socialization and adjustment depend upon many factors such as, environment, cultural differences, etc. The culture of a particular society has a great influence of a man’s life

and behaviour. Socialization involves learning the rules, values and attitudes approved by the society. Every society has organized means for formal socialization, such as schooling. Nevertheless, there are many less organized patterns, such as family relationship, contact with other adults, peers, siblings, and mass media and so on.

A blind individual has to contact others for social adjustment. Therefore, relationships play a significant role of a blind individual’s emotional, social and vocational progress that involves society, parents, siblings, teachers, peers, and lovers. These relationships mold self-concept, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-acceptance formation in blind adolescence appears to be largely related to an adolescent’s ability to adjust to blindness [12].

V. ROLE OF DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIPS

In the case of visually impaired students lack of sight or defective sight is likely to be a source of additional stress and anxiety at this sensitive stage. Parents and child relationship is the most important thing in the development of a blind child’s life. The affectionate acceptance of the child in the family helps him to develop his academic performance and social interaction better. Sommers (1944) states: “Any ensuing educational program is likely to be affected by the attitude of parents towards their visually handicapped child and his handicap” [13]. Then, the child expands his world to include other family members, specially his/her siblings. Moreover, it is important to become a part of the group. His / her visual impairment retards his / her ability to act and looks like their peers. In this situation, parent’s, sibling’s and teacher’s help is necessary to identify the deficiencies of blind pupils in being like his group. They should help them to overcome those deficiencies and to be accepted to their sighted peers [14].

VI. ROLE OF A TEACHER AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The role of a teacher in a mainstream education is important to a quality educational program for the visually handicapped. A visually impaired pupil has a rightful access to an educational program which fulfills his / her needs and abilities. In a classroom, most of the instruction is given orally which is an advantage for those pupils. Provided with the necessary special materials, the visually impaired student can take his / her place in the classroom beside his normal peers (Lowenfeld, 1974, p. 83-85) [15].

The teacher can help the visually impaired child to fit into the school program through creative modifications and adaptations. The teacher helps others to contact with the child and accept the child’s abilities and limitations and guide the child to meet his / her needs within the school program. According to Kekelis and Sacks (1988): “Experiences in the mainstream were more successful when the classroom teacher and special education resource teacher formed a strong partnership. These experiences were further enhanced when the two teachers considered social-emotional competence to be a major focus of the child’s education” [16].

VII. METHODOLOGY

Case study has been chosen for the study as the research method as it is essentially a research in depth rather than breadth. According to Robson (2002, p. 179 & 181), case study is a well-established research strategy where the focus is on a case. It is interpreted in a wide range to include the study of an individual person, a group, a setting, an organization, etc. in its own right in which context is taken into account [17]. The study has been carried out in a Comprehensive Secondary School in the South of England that helps systematic and in depth study on certain population in a single institution. From a single mainstream school, different social setting and events were examined to explore the social inclusion of visually impaired pupils. Therefore, this study is a descriptive one which tries to penetrate new possibilities from a particular social setting.

Data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. It includes interviews, observations and documentation as tools of data collection. The questionnaires were semi-structured but the questions were predetermined so as to suit the conditions that were deemed to be the most appropriate. The following research questions were set to collect information: 1. How well do non-VI students accept (treat, relate to) VI children and vice-versa; 2. How the Mainstream Teacher and Learning Support Assistant help the VI students in their learning and socialization with their peers; And, 3. How well are the VI students socialized into the culture (including values, norms of behaviour etc.) of the mainstream school? The questionnaires of the study were based on the research question mentioned above.

Sample consists of nine people interviewing of two visually impaired pupils (X- Partially Sighted Female, Y- blind, Male), three sighted pupils as well as two teachers, a Learning Support Assistant, a parent and an educational psychologist.

VIII. PROCEDURE

The School was visited twice. At the very outset of conducting the study the topic and purpose of the study was explained to the authority of the school. Before interviewing, permission was sought from those who were being interviewed to maintain the ethical concern of the research. Two visually impaired pupils (X- Partially Sighted Female, Y- blind, Male), three sighted pupils as well as two teachers (Mainstream Teacher and a Science Teacher), a Learning Support Assistant (LSA), a parent and an educational psychologist were interviewed. During the study, observation was done to have deeper insight into the matter of interaction of the VI pupils with non-VI pupils in the school. Lesson study in the classroom was also observed very keenly.

Information has also been collected from relevant literature review and other documents as well. When making questionnaires, the questions were grouped under sub-headings. Data have been analyzed which were collected from the interviews and observation for a possible range of themes or patterns and to narrow it down to give a manageable shape. It involved ongoing reflection on data and its interpretation. Data were analyzed, coded and re-coded after collection [2]. In analyzing data, questionnaires were categorized according to the theme of the research and also recoded after getting the response

from the participants. This post coding occurs when the coding is selected from a sample of the responses and responses are then given a value. In this study, validity and reliability are both being achieved by source- triangulation as interviews, observations and documents have been used to collect information. 'Triangulation is a valuable strategy (...) to enhance the rigour of the research' [17].

IX. OBJECTIVES

- How do the VI students along with other sighted children study and interact with each other in a mainstream school;
- How the support of Mainstream Teacher and Learning Support Assistant enhances the learning and socialization of VI student with other non-VI students in a mainstream class.
- How the VI students turn out successfully and offer them to gain independence, self-confidence and self-esteem and also trust in their own abilities as well as expectations of quality of life in an inclusive school setting.

X. THE STUDY ON THE SECONDARY MAINSTREAM SCHOOL IN THE SOUTH OF ENGLAND SHOWS THE FOLLOWING FINDINGS

- A. *Traveling to the School & Movement Around the School*
- The VI pupils need a very little support from others for their mobility if they are well supported in the school. A partially sighted visually impaired (VI) girl (X) does not feel any problem in her mobility inside or outside the school. Wearing glasses or contact lenses she can move quite normally like other pupils. The blind pupil Y usually used to travel 20 miles to get to school by a taxi, a public transport with a couple of pupils which shows his normal social interaction with those pupils. He also mentions that free movements depend on surroundings. As he gets more support from the school, he can work independently inside the school but he needs support outside. One of the LSAs (Learning Support Assistant) said, when a VI pupil enrolls in this school, LSA always support that pupil for the first two weeks so that they become more independent afterwards in their mobility and in their every day work in the school environment.
- VI pupils (X, Y) and are given proper orientation and mobility training along with LSAs support. As VI pupils are well supported in the school, they need a little help from others for their mobility. Actually, mobility skill depends on the degree and condition of individual's visual impairment. The partially sighted VI pupils are facing fewer problems than the blind pupils in their mobility. For the blind pupil Y, mobility outside the school is dangerous. Experience shows that even though a blind person with a highly mobility skill is somewhat dependent on the assistance of others which affects the social attitude and interaction.
- B. *Functioning in the Class/School*
- The class teachers are very much caring to VI pupils in this school. When VI pupils face any difficulty to understand lesson

or any learning instruction LSA assist to support them. Both the teachers form a supportive environment in the classroom. Sometimes, VI pupil's peers and friends help them in reading sheet or white board and in their mobility. In fact, with the correct and efficient support of the school, they enjoy normal life as much as possible. The mainstream teachers with the help of LSAs and VI provision have built a strong, supportive teamwork which helps congenial social and academic environment for VI pupils in the classroom.

The partially sighted Pupil X does not use Braille but uses enlarged and modified texts. Wearing lenses or taking special support a partially sighted pupil can work almost normally with their other peers. Pupil Y, who is legally blind, needs more special support which he gets from LASs in the class. He uses Braille for reading and writing. It is noted that sometimes, VI pupils are given extra time to complete their works. Pupil Y is often slower to complete work so is given opportunity to complete some of his homework during school time. Both VI and sighted pupils take part in group discussion to share ideas and also take part in other activities in the school with their peers enthusiastically. Thus, VI pupils are well accepted by their peers and teachers in the school.

Findings show that blind pupil Y is very confident and with the correct support he performs well in school. The partially sighted pupil X works almost normally. She needs least support in doing her work, so is independent inside the school as well as outside. Indeed, with the correct and efficient support of the school, they enjoy normal life as much as possible. The mainstream teachers with the help of LSAs and VI provision have built a strong, supportive teamwork which helps congenial social and academic environment for VI pupils in the classroom. Moreover, as other sighted pupils accept VI pupils normally, a friendly environment has been developed for their social inclusion in the school.

C. *Social Inclusion in the School*

Findings show that both VI and other sighted pupils develop friendship normally in this school. Pupil X who is partially sighted and pupil Y who is legally blind meet their peers and friends in the tutor group meeting for registration which is a good example of their socialization. They have fun and talk and chat together in their free times. VI pupils have full participation in all school activities. To support VI pupils' extracurricular activities, after-school clubs and educational visits, the school makes all necessary arrangements.

Future Plan: Both the VI and sighted pupils have their future plan and have common feelings. The VI pupils are as confident as sighted pupils in their choice of study. As VI pupils are supported enough from this well resourced school, they are able to develop self-confidence and independence and thus are able to retain their self-esteem.

About the Secondary Mainstream School: If the children with disability (visually impaired) are supported enough with their special needs facilities they become more independent. It is found that the LSA and staff of the VI provision have formed a very caring and supportive community in this school. The VI unit is keeping in contact with The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) to get support and to improve their quality of support towards VI pupil. The VI students get enough support

which includes in-class, technical modification, networked computers with speech and magnification software, mobility orientation alongside the Mobility Officer.

The VI pupils study the same lesson as like as the rest of the pupils. But VI pupils are provided with modified text according to their eye condition. N 18 which is enlarged or adapted for the partially blind pupils and N 24 (Braille format) with fewer pictures and in larger font to support the blind students for their science, practical work (Exploring Science). They are given practical lesson especially, on Food, Technology and Physical Education to be more independent in their everyday life, because there are many dangers around a kitchen area or in a wood work or science room which need to be explained to VI pupils. So, LSAs are always supporting them in those lessons. In addition, for examination, they get modified examination paper and also get 100% extra time. In addition, to participate in the school's extra-curricular activities, after-school clubs and educational visits for VI pupils, the school makes all necessary arrangements. School does not exclude VI pupils from the opportunity rather they make sure that they are safe as they believe that pupils with a visual impairment integrate well within the school's everyday life.

As the students are well supported with special needs, they perform well. Villa & Thousand (2005, pg.181) asserts: "When students with disabilities are provided with supports and services to access the general education curriculum, their peers maintain state benchmark-level performances, and the students with disabilities experience higher academic and social achievement." [1]. Findings show that the classroom teacher and the LSAs and staff of VI provision have formed a very caring and supportive community for the enhancement of social and academic development of VI children in this school. Indeed, in an inclusive school setting, partnership of both the classroom teacher and LSAs is most important to help VI pupils to become competent enough to cope with the school environment. It enhances the ability of VI pupils. There is some other study that has also shown the similar effect when VI and sighted pupils are studied together. Even the school authority believes parents are a very important part of the partnership that is necessary if each pupil is to achieve his / her full potential.

XI. CONCLUSION

This study is an endeavour to find out the response of two main research questions: how the VI student along with other sighted children study and interact with each other in a mainstream school; How the support of Mainstream Teacher along with Learning Support Assistant (LSA) enhances the learning and socialization of VI student with other non-VI students in a mainstream class. The aim was to find out how VI pupils come out successfully to retain their self-esteem, self-confidence and independence.

It is evident from the findings that pupils with disability perform well and learn better in an inclusive school setting. The study affirms the statement of Villa & Thousand (2005) that inclusion assumes living and learning together benefits both disabled and normal pupils [1]. The VI pupils, in this Comprehensive Secondary School, learn better how to adjust themselves with other pupils and also learn how to cope with the

situation. Simultaneously, normal pupils learn to help VI pupils which foster a harmonious socialization for both the pupils.

Once again, the study relates to the experience of Villa & Thousand (2005). For normalization, the pupils with disabilities need special support and services to access into general curriculum. When VI pupils are provided with supports and services to the common curriculum, their peers maintain 'state benchmark-level performances'. On the other hand, pupils with visual problem experience 'higher academic and social achievement'. The study also ensures the same experience where VI pupils' academic performance is good. They are able to develop better socialization. On the other hand, sighted pupils learn to help VI pupils and perform well. While the Mainstream Teachers with the help of LSAs and other VI provisions build a supportive teamwork, it enhances conducive environment in the socialization and academic performance for the VI pupils in the classroom.

Indeed, it is generally experienced that visually impaired pupils in the mainstream school, experience isolation and insecurity. If these pupils are provided with special needs support and are well accepted by other sighted pupils, teachers, staff, etc. they will grow up into more independence which helps better socialization. In this study, the visually impaired pupils in this Comprehensive Secondary School have developed their independence mastering the basic skill of everyday life successfully. With the correct and appropriate support of the school, they have grown their self-esteem and become confident in their own abilities in every step of their life which helps them to achieve higher expectations of life. They are also well accepted and socialized into the culture including values and norms of the mainstream school. Therefore, this school could be a model for the other mainstream schools to be followed who are working for the inclusion of the visually impaired pupils towards independence. Thus, the aim of the study has been proved to be true in reality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to thank Roehampton University, Erasmus Mundus Course Authority for rendering support in doing the research on Social Inclusion of Visual Impaired Students in A Comprehensive Mainstream School of South of England and grateful to Professor John Lodge for efficient and proper guidance.

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