

Stimulating Factors of Social Inclusion of Children with Visual Impairment and Blindness in Sri Lanka

**T. Suraweera, T. Perera, P. Mihirangana, N. Rukmal and
V. Senaviratne**

*SLIIT Business School, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology
Sri Lanka*

Key words: *Visual Impairment; Blindness; Social Inclusion; Children*

Introduction

Social sustainability entails the mutual co-existence of individuals, diverse communities and societies. Social equity, social capital, human rights, quality of life, education and social responsibilities are the main factors that promote social sustainability. Persons with Visual Impairment and Blindness (VI&B) represent the largest component of the disabled population in most communities. Education is observed as a key determinant that promotes social inclusion, in particular with respect to children. However, support towards educating children with VI&B is quite poor in the South Asian region including Sri Lanka. Although promoting education is vital for social inclusion, the question arises as to how far Sri Lanka is geared to improve the level of education of children with VI&B. Sri Lanka Government Census of 2012 indicates that 996,939 persons of the age of 5 years and above are blind, which comprises 4.7% male and 6.0% female children (Holmes et al., 2018).

Past research, conducted in the West in particular, has observed that visual impairment not only impact on individuals, but also their families, caregivers and community (Köberlein et al., 2013). Sachs and Schreuer, (2011) suggest that promoting education is an essential requirement for people with visual impaired and blind children. Even in the domain of higher education there are several barriers and challenges for people with VI&B. Children with VI&B has more prospects for securing employment which in turn gain strength to sustain themselves financially with self-possession. Vuletić et al. (2016) state that the parents of children with VI&B are very much concerned about the future of their child.

Taking the above into consideration a serious knowledge gap exists with respect to social and economic aspects of children with VI&B. On the other hand, research studies focusing on persons with VI&B and differently abled persons are common in developed countries but lacking in the developing countries including Sri Lanka. Thus, this research focuses on the factors that determine promotion of education of children with VI&B in Sri Lanka.

Objective

The main objective of this research is determine the factors that promote (or hinder) education of children with VI&B in the context of Sri Lanka.

Methodology

This research was qualitative and based on in-depth interviews. The target population of the study was Sri Lankan families having visually impaired and blind children. A detailed investigation into 10 families having children with VI&B was conducted using in-depth interviews and a further set of information related to 25 families having visually impaired and blind children were used to derive inferences through using the questionnaire. The study selected “Sandagala Special School” in Kurunegala and “Deaf and Blind Special School” in Rathmalana, to locate the children with VI&B. Narrative analysis technique were used to build insights based on in-depth interviews data collection.

Results and Discussion

The children’s blindness levels vary from total to partial impairments, with high and low vision categories. Some of them attend state schools dedicated to Deaf and Blind children. The sample represented both genders. The analysis of interview data resulted in five key factors.

1. Blindness is not a barrier for learning: Most of the visually impaired and blind children in the sample demonstrated very strong academic rigor. For instance, the mother of one child indicated that her ‘blind’ daughter became the second highest from the blind students in Sri Lanka as well as 1st place from the North-West province. She had scored 173 marks for the scholarship exam and she received a President’s award with a Rs.100, 000 gift voucher. This girl demonstrates excellent musical abilities and is a ‘Visharads’ diploma

holder for vocal skills. It is also interesting to note that she has high ambitions aiming to become a professor in future.

2. Parental Support, role of Friedman peers: Productive support of parents, siblings, teachers and friends significantly impact on children's welfare and development. The results show that positive intervention of parents, teachers and siblings can enhance a child's education. For example, one mother, despite being a science teacher had learnt the braille system to help her child's education. She had also changed her teaching location several times to be with her blind daughter, and had proven academic achievements. While certain other children also get support for their studies from this blind child, they positively support social inclusion. On the other hand there are cases of marginalization of children with VI&B which has resulted in depression and other emotional problems.

3. Role of dedicated 'Deaf and Blind' (D&B) schools: Exposure in D&B schools provide significant support at early stages of education, but continuing with them negatively impacts their social inclusion. The results suggest that VI&B children who go to D&B schools at their early stages of education show high performance in education compared to those going to normal schools. But it minimizes their association with students who are not VI&B.

4. All children in the sample aspire to become teachers, and that may be due to limited exposure. Findings showed that most of VI&B children's ambition is to be a teacher, because their teachers are visual impaired and blind. Therefore they think if they learn well they could easily become a teacher. This thinking possibly reflects their limited environment.

5. Financial Issues: Transportation cost is higher for families with children of VI&B. Furthermore, large sums of money have been spent on non-confirmed orthodox medicinal treatments with almost no success. This is a major issue with respect to parents' knowledge (level of education), ability to grasp reality and their vulnerability towards social and cultural misconceptions.

Most of the families having children with VI&B fall into the 'poor' social category and only some have reached middle-income level. Most of the parents are casual unskilled laborers. Some of them have no permanent job at

all. It was observed most families suffer from not having sufficient income to cover their daily needs.

Conclusion

This research presents very important key factors that influence social inclusion of children with VI&B. Poverty and poor knowledge (level of education), inability to grasp reality and their vulnerability towards social and cultural misconceptions play a key role in this respect. Education seems a key factor for children with VI&B to make headway for improved social inclusion. Blindness is not a major barrier for learning if a conducive environment is provided. These findings also support the social theory of disability where the issues are not emanating from the person with VI&B, but is more a problem with society as whole.

References

- Holmes, W., Shajehan, R., Kitnasamy, S., Abeywickrama, C., Arsath, Y., Gnanaraj, F., Inbaraj, S., Jayakody, G., Durrant, K. & Luchters, S. (2018). Impact of vision impairment and self-reported barriers to vision care: The views of elders in Nuwara Eliya district, Sri Lanka. *Glob Public Health*, 13(5), 642-655.
- Köberlein, J., Beifus, K., Schaffert, C. & Finger, R. P. (2013). The economic burden of visual impairment and blindness: A systematic review. *Bmj Open*, 3(11), E003471.
- Vuletić, G., Šarlija, T. & Benjak, T. (2016). Quality of life In blind and partially sighted people. 2(2), 101-112.