



Exploring Schooling Experiences of Students with Visual Impairments in Pakistan: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

This qualitative study delves into the diverse schooling experiences of students with visual impairments in Pakistan, offering a comprehensive analysis within various educational contexts. Through semi-structured interviews and observations, the research investigates the accessibility and inclusivity of different types of schools available to these students. Five key dimensions are explored: (A) the range of schools accessible to students with visual impairments, (B) perceptions of teachers towards visually impaired students, (C) interactions and treatment of visually impaired students by their peers, (D) attitudes and behaviours of teachers towards visually impaired students, and (E) the adequacy of resources and accommodations in addressing their needs. Furthermore, the study delves into how enrolment in these diverse schooling environments shapes the cultural capital of visually impaired students. Educational settings examined include state-sponsored public schools, private institutions, religious academies, home-based education, and segregated schools catering specifically to students with disabilities. By scrutinizing these dimensions across varied contexts, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the educational landscape for visually impaired students in Pakistan and offers insights for policy and practice to enhance inclusivity and support.

Keywords: Disability, Inclusion, Special Needs, Equity, Inclusive Education.

1.1 Introduction

This paper will explain why visually impaired children are enrolled in different educational institutions in Lahore, Pakistan. Approximately 67% of people with disabilities in Pakistan are illiterate [1], with social stigma in combination with an undeveloped educational system keeping them so [2]. The educational experiences of those who manage to make it to school differ on the basis of their family background and the institution they enrol in. The ideal institutions for enrolment are perceived to be mainstream private schools. This paper will explore how the institutional enrolment of a student shapes their access to academic opportunities. The paper will then offer a comparative analysis of experiences across mainstream private schools, state sponsored schools for the blind, religious academies (madrassas), NGO based schools for the blind, and homeschools. It will then explore students' interactions with their teachers. While educational experiences vary from person to person, a student's self-advocacy skills, coupled with the empathy of properly trained teachers, are key in shaping said experiences. The argument is presented that parents rely on education and educational institutions to empower the success and independence of their visually impaired children.

1.2 Methodology

This paper explores the diverse schooling experiences of students with visual impairments in Pakistan, offering a comprehensive analysis within various educational contexts. Through qualitative interviews with students and their families the paper investigates the accessibility and inclusivity of different types of schools available to these students. The researcher, a blind Pakistani woman, acknowledges her positionality and its influence on her study, striving for sensitivity and transparency. The present review will examine five key dimensions: the range of schools accessible to students with visual impairments, the perceptions of teachers towards visually impaired students, interactions with and treatment of visually impaired students by their peers, attitudes and behaviours of teachers



towards visually impaired students, and the adequacy of resources and accommodations in addressing their needs. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, this research aims to recentre marginalised voices in academic discourse on disabilities. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and participant comfort, were prioritised throughout the research process.

1.3 The Meaning of Education

“I wanted to ensure that my children had the best opportunity to succeed. After all, education offers the best ticket for success, prestige, and empowerment.” [3]. Farzana, a single parent who belongs to a middle-class household, has two blind children. There was no question of educating them because disabled children’s social and economic opportunities are severely limited, and education offers their most significant chance of success. As Sami pointed out, “when I began to lose my vision, my parents realised that unlike my able-bodied brothers, I would not be able to contribute to the family’s finances” [4]. For Sami’s family, educating Sami meant giving him the skills and knowledge to earn for himself. Hoping to give their children better life chances, parents of visually impaired children try to convince them of the importance of education despite all the difficulties they encounter in schools by telling them that education is the only route to social acceptance and economic possibilities. Children who perform well in schools are also praised by their parents and extended families. Given the social stigma they encounter otherwise, this makes education very attractive for them.

There was an implicit understanding amongst parents that going to school will teach their children socially acceptable behaviour. Going to school allows these children to socialise with their peers whom they cannot meet or learn from at home. Aleem and Sadia were both 24 years old and yet, their family continued to send them to a small-scale NGO based school for the disabled because “at least they were seen to be doing something” [5]. These families were affluent and had extensive links within the business and political communities in Pakistan. For them, sending their children to school became a sign of prestige and utterance to social standards and expectations. Sadia and Aleem have been enrolled in the same school for the past 10 years. They have learnt the basics of braille and computer but have not sat any qualifying high school exams or beyond.

1.4 Where To Look: Finding The Right Educational Solution

Information literacy plays a pivotal role in defining the educational trajectory of visually impaired students [6]. When parents found out that their children had visual impairments, they were unaware of available support systems and did not know where to go to find guidance on next steps. There were no government agencies or NGOs immediately visible that they could contact. Parents of non-disabled children can easily get reviews from friends, family, and the internet, but people with disabilities seem to be searching in an informational vacuum. When interviewed, parents described feeling “isolated” in their educational journey. This lack of information increased the challenges for visually impaired children and their parents. Without other resources available, parents reached out to visually impaired adults and communities for advice. They subsequently made their schooling decisions on the basis of limited choices, sometimes resulting in them settling for subpar options. The main factors that shaped their decision included financial resources, their interaction with the school administrators, the experiences of siblings and the distance between the schools and their residence [7]. Parents identified that they would have preferred to have more information about the access arrangements and inclusive policies of schools. Improving access to information about existing services and institutions would enhance the educational experiences of visually impaired students and reduce educational gaps [2].

In many instances, parents relied on trial and error to find the perfect school for their children. More often than not, they were unable to find a school that offered all the services and qualities they were looking. These included qualified and experienced teachers, accessible technology, social acceptance, and extracurricular opportunities. Parents encountered a financial burden when changing the schools of their children multiple times. Farzana [3] described how her son had to change four different schools before they found one that suited him. Even then, her son experienced academic and social challenges and she contemplated changing his school again. Her financial situation and limited options prevented her from doing so. Her son was eventually able to adjust and thrive in the school because of supplemental family support. Three other parents also enrolled their children in the same



school following Farzana's experience. However, two of them decided to switch their children's schools after their O-Levels due to the barriers they encountered. Blind students recall frequently changing schools and struggling to settle down. This resulted in them not being able to concentrate on learning, impacting their educational success.

1.5 Elusive Private Schools: Chasing A Good Education

Private schools were identified as the most desirable educational institutions amongst interviewed parents. They felt these schools had more qualified teachers, offered one to one attention to students, granted access to elevated social networks, and were more prestigious. Most interviewed parents, regardless of class, tried to find private schools which would cater to the needs of their visually impaired children. Parents spent a considerable amount of time convincing these schools that their children could succeed in mainstream education. Parents across South Asia believe that enrolling in private schools will allow their children to have a competitive advantage and better prepare them for enrolment in prestigious higher education institutions [8]. Mothers who have experienced marginalisation in society are acutely aware of the importance of a private school English education. This awareness makes them try harder to find admissions and financial resources to put their children through a private school [9]. Interviews revealed that parents with more financial resources sent their children to high end private schools while parents with fewer financial resources sent their children to low-cost private schools. These schools were reluctant to offer admission to visually impaired students because they felt that their teachers were not trained to tutor such children. Interviewed subject experts also corroborated their experiences of administrative excuses. These included concerns that visually impaired students would become an additional, overwhelming burden for their teachers. Administrators also felt that visually impaired children would be more vulnerable to injury and would struggle to adjust socially, disrupting classroom environments.

Even upon successful admission to a private school, some parents found themselves bearing primary responsibility for their blind child's academic success. Saim's mother, Saima, was able to admit her son to a top tier private school because she had relatives in the school's administration. Through her relatives, she indicated to the school that she had no expectations beyond social and extracurricular involvement [10]. Farzana's children studied in a small mainstream religious school. They encountered prejudice from other children and were being mistreated by teachers. Before the school could expel her children, she gave up her job at a prestigious institution and began working at her children's school. She was then able to connect with their teachers, reducing the opposition her children encountered. Shakeela had a similar experience. After her son Shakeel's diagnosis, she took him to the school where she worked, and they were happy to accommodate his needs. She later recommended the school to another visually impaired child who contacted her. However, the school refused to admit him, citing the fact that they were not sufficiently prepared for it even though a blind student had been enrolled there previously and had thrived.

Graduates of private schools expressed pride in their education because of the prestige of these institutions. Although it was hard for them to integrate, it was nevertheless an invaluable experience. Most graduates of private schools recalled their schools favourably and feel that although their schools were ill prepared to accommodate for their needs, "they tried their best" [10]. Shiza, Amna and Farhan all recall that "most teachers were empathetic" and wanted to ensure their educational success. They also pointed out that they and their families did their best to minimise the burden on teachers. The expectation was that because the schools had admitted them despite their disabilities, it was up to them to address the rest of their educational needs. The administration was happy to help with any logistical support but did not do anything to make the physical environment of the school accessible. The schools were not open to listening to any complaints about specific teachers who mistreated their students. Both Amna and Shiza recalled that interactions with teachers who had biases against them left an indelible impact on them. They would question their capacity for academic success every time they had a negative interaction with these teachers. Conversations with family members and other teachers who were supportive helped them to not take notice of those ableist prejudices.

The interviews found that mainstream private schools lacked the infrastructural capacity to cater to visually impaired students. They lacked tactile equipment, accessible technology, and adequately trained teachers. A student's success was contingent on the goodwill of their teachers and there were no mechanisms to address discrimination from them. Despite such obstacles, graduates of private



schools were successful in their life after school. Amna went on to study at a very prestigious university in Pakistan and Shiza went on to study at a prestigious university in the United States [11].

1.6 In Segregated Schools for the Blind

A large part of Lahore's blind population is enrolled in segregated schools for the blind (both private and NGO based). Interviewees highlighted three main reasons for this. Firstly, it was relatively easy to obtain an admission to these schools, as they welcomed students with different visual impairments and levels of skill. Secondly, these schools were not expensive, making it possible for parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds to afford them. Parents were not responsible for procuring books, technology, or extra tutors, in significant contrast to parents of children in mainstream schools. Thirdly, schools for the blind appealed to the parents because of their very names and specialised nature. Their children would be with students like them who had the same disability and who subsequently faced similar challenges. It was hoped this would result in less marginalisation and less of a need to convince their peers of their competence. These institutions engendered high expectations from parents because they felt that trained teachers and equipment availability would make it easier for their children to reach their academic potential.

Located on the outskirts of Lahore, ABC is an NGO based school for the blind with a small student body. It is one of the most well-known schools of its kind and students enrolled in the institution do not have to contribute financially. The school accepts students from all socio-economic backgrounds and promises them a well-rounded education. The school offers all of its students individual braille machines, valued at around £1500 each, as well as white canes. There are tactile models of the earth, tactile board games and a huge library filled with braille books. Eshnaa, a student at ABC school until Year 7, said that "I really enjoyed my years at ABC school and felt that they trained me well to use my computer independently" [12]. Shazia said that she felt ABC school gave her the skills and tools that she needed to succeed academically and in her personal life. "They also taught us things like cooking and orientation because they knew that these life skills were essential for our success" [13]. While these interviews offered positive account of the school, Eshna's parents were quick to dispel this image. "The school is good, no doubt, but ultimately, our children have to enter a sighted world. The school does not prepare them for that." [14] Other interviewees expressed similar frustrations; after going to university, they experienced a huge social learning curve when it came to interacting with sighted peers and advocating for themselves with teachers. IB and O-Level classes are not offered to students, and neither is career guidance or assistance with university applications, despite ABC school's considerable resources. Most ABC school graduates, regardless of their socioeconomic background, do not obtain excellent exam results and end up enrolled in government universities on the basis of a quota for the blind, rather than in top ranked universities. These factors negatively impacted their career choices.

Children in government sponsored schools for the blind had distinctly different experiences in comparison to children from NGO-based schools for the blind. Most visually impaired students are enrolled in these schools, which are underfunded and understaffed. Sarah, a blind teacher at DEF school, described that there is no oversight for teachers or students. She purchases resources like glasses for her students because she knows that such resources are essential for students' success. "Not all teachers take on this financial burden which means that the students are left stranded." [15] Saleema had similar observations of the school while her son was enrolled there. Shazia indicated that her school suffered infrastructural and academic deficiencies, and she later enrolled at ABC school instead.

Parents choose to send their children to segregated schools for the blind because of the expectation that these institutions will have resources and trained teachers to accommodate their children. The process of acquiring a placement in these institutions is also easier. There is an expectation that there will be fewer social barriers for their children as their peers will be other visually impaired students. Alumni of state sponsored schools for the blind felt that the environment was not conducive to learning and that the schools did not have sufficient resources to cater to their needs. In most NGO based schools there were qualified teachers but very limited resources. ABC school, because of their vast endowment, was an exception, and the students were happy with the tools and teachers they had access to. However, both government sponsored and NGO-based schools for the blind did not have



an institutional capacity to train students for advocacy or to guide them in university applications and careers. This significantly affected students' ability to plan their futures.

1.7 Finding God

Religion played a key role in the lives of all interviewed parents and students. Religiosity varied across family backgrounds, but all interviewed parents made religious education arrangements of some manner for their visually impaired children. All interviewees were made to acquire some form of religious education. Boys were enrolled in madrassas because it was felt that the madrasa would offer the consistency, routine and expertise that were needed for them to complete a thorough study of the Quran. The interviewed women also had a strong affiliation with religious education, though it was not always formalised. While deciding the mode of religious education for their children, parents were not very picky. They considered three main factors, including the institution's willingness to enrol their children, the distance of the institution from their home and overall reputation. However, most students ended up enrolling in the institutions closer to their homes and were satisfied with that decision. It must be acknowledged that only Muslim families were interviewed. This exclusion of other religions was not deliberate but a result of finding participants through the snowballing method. Future research needs to be cognisant of the fact that religion may not play a key role in the lives of those with diverse religious beliefs.

Students enrolled in madrassas for multiple reasons. Their low costs made them very accessible for parents from diverse backgrounds. They were very open to enrolling blind students, with teachers believing that they could not deny anyone, regardless of disability, the right to learn about religion. But most importantly, parents felt a God-given responsibility to educate their children about God and that they would be held accountable in the afterlife if they denied their blind children this education. Interviewees who were enrolled in madrassas overwhelmingly highlighted the fact that they felt very included in the madrasa setup. Although there was no formal process for securing access arrangements, informal conversations with the Qari Sahab's (Quran teacher) sufficed, and they made inclusion a part of the structure of the class. Mohsin's Qari Sahab did not undergo any formal training to teach blind students. He made some of Mohsin's peers responsible for helping him memorise his lesson of the day. These peers unquestioningly performed this role, knowing that excuses would not be tolerated. Mohsin reflected that this practice was beneficial for both sides because maintaining their memorisation required continuous repetition [16]. Mohsin and the other interviewees who were enrolled in madrassas felt that the Qari Sahab did not discriminate between sighted and visually impaired students. Interviewees were quick to acknowledge the negative elements of their madrasa experience, including abuse, but nonetheless appreciated the equal treatment they received at these institutions. A majority of the parents of the interviewed children were satisfied with their religious learning and highlighted that religious education is a lifelong process that they wanted their children to continue. After graduating from the madrasa, most interviewees ended up enrolled in mainstream institutions. Even when they did not enrol in mainstream institutions, they were able to enrol in vocational institutions to learn braille. Following that, they were able to find jobs as religious clerics.

Madrasas are generally segregated for men and women. It is not as common for women to go to religious institutions because they are expected to learn at home. Female interviewees identified that, like their male counterparts, they had excellent interactions with religious clerics. Uzma, who identifies as blind, is enrolled at a religious institution that has campuses worldwide and offers a variety of programs for women, including multiple year diplomas and short term weekly and monthly courses. She found the process of integration to be "very easy and smooth" [17]. The rigour of the program and their mutual "love for God" allowed her to establish a good relationship with her peers and teachers. Samia began her religious education at a branch campus of the same institution as Uzma. She pointed out that "nobody really cared about my visual impairment. They just wanted me to learn irrespectively of how I did it." [18] Uzma and Samia had the shared experience of finding "accommodating", "empathetic" and "determined" teachers. Access arrangements included scribes, readers, and oral exams. Both Uzma and Samia continued to be affiliated with the institution even after their programme finished. Amna and Shazia highlighted that they have also been diligent in obtaining religious education, both memorising large chunks of the Quran [11] [13]. Both studied at home with tutors and family members as their families did not want them to abandon their education.



To summarise the experiences of the interview participants, the following quote from Muneeb is particularly apt: “Despite their lack of tools and training along with corporal punishment, religious spaces and institutes of learning have been the most accommodating and least discriminatory in my experience.” [19].

1.8 Easy Acceptance: Case Studies From Homeschools

Three of the interviewed participants were home schooled, with the environments of these homeschools distinctly customised for each student. Their families belonged to financially stable middle class backgrounds, and the constants across all three experiences were the support of private tutors and a relaxed pace of learning. A number of reasons for their homeschooling were identified. The most prominent included families’ inability to find a school that could cater to their needs as visually impaired students, and a desire to protect them from social stigma and ridicule. Sameer’s family moved to Pakistan from Canada and tried to find a school that would offer the same facilities as he was already accustomed to. When they were unable to find such an institution, they decided to homeschool him. He had a tutor who would prepare him for mainstream exams in daily two-hour sessions. His brothers had the same tutor to supplement their school learning. Sameer used accessible technology that he knew of from Canada but pointed out that this was not enough, stating “I am struggling to decide where to go next. I gave my matric exams but barely passed because they did not give me a competent scribe.” [20] Sameer’s parents were unfamiliar with the schooling system and could not figure out who to approach next to find a solution.

In Saleem’s case, his mother tried her best to find an accessible school that could cater to his specific needs, which included visual and cognitive impairment. This appeared to be “almost impossible” [21]. Mainstream schools refused him, and she felt that they would be an inadequate solution even if they did. Saleema took Saleem to a state sponsored school for the blind but felt that the school was “completely unprepared to work with blind children let alone those who had additional needs”. Following this experience she enrolled him in an NGO based institution. She felt that they were also under-prepared for a student with additional needs but were at least willing make adaptations and work with her to make Saleem’s education possible. She took some guidance from them in terms of syllabi and then taught him at home, feeling that she was able to create the environment he needed to learn properly. At home she also was able to cater to his interests in different languages and teach him the Quran.

Maryam’s lost her vision in the middle of high school [22]. After she left education, her parents did not search for any further educational opportunities for her. Fourteen years later, when she was around thirty years old, her parents were told about some children who successfully completed their O and A levels regardless of their visual impairment. Maryam then started preparing for her O and A level exams. She took private lessons from home tutors to help her prepare and to teach her how to use accessible technology independently. Despite their previous expectations, her parents now believed visually impaired students could succeed given the right environment.

Even those children who went to school regularly learnt various other important skills at home. Amna, Muneeb and Farzeen all highlighted that they learnt advocacy, orientation, and other life skills such as cooking and cleaning at home. These skills were crucial in allowing them to interact effectively with their peers and be independent. They were also able to learn accessible technology and braille from home tutors when their schools did not contribute to teaching those skills.

1.9 Experiences With Teachers

One of the main qualities that shaped people’s educational experiences was teacher interactions. Teachers’ empathy played a major role in giving students access to educational opportunities and increasing students’ educational interest and participation in the classroom. The teacher-student relationship was particularly key in mainstream private schools, where students’ educational and social exposure was contingent on the goodwill of the teachers owing to a lack of institutional policies or support systems. Amna pointed out that her maths teacher was particularly keen to make sure that she succeeded academically. To this end, he would spend hours outside the classroom without monetary compensation explaining concepts to her and making that she was prepared for her exams.



Her accounting tutor was similarly interested in and committed to her educational success. He agreed to scribe for her final O-level exam to ensure that it would proceed seamlessly. Muneeb identified similar experience with his debate coach, who was also the vice principal of his school. He would help Muneeb with his coursework and would mentor him about career choices.

In classes where participants did not have good teachers, they did not feel encouraged to contribute or learn. In such instances this directly impacted children's love for and engagement with a particular subject. Shiza expressed how unmotivated she felt when teachers were not supportive. Her maths teacher was unwilling to understand that her visual impairment meant that she took significantly longer to complete her work and was unwilling to accommodate for that. This teacher told Shiza that she would be better off within a special school for the blind. Muneeb and Farzeen had similar experiences with their maths teachers, who gave them a hard time for their visual disability and were unwilling to find alternative teaching methods to accommodate them. The maths teachers' refusal to assist their blind students, and their perception of their interactions with these students, is worth considering in depth. The students themselves identified that this could be a consequence of the belief that blind students would not be able to succeed in maths-based subjects because of their visual nature. The scope of this research did not include the perspectives of teachers, but it is worth noting that none of these teachers had been given any training to instruct blind students. Interviewees pointed out that those teachers who *were* invested spent hours researching the best tools and methods of teaching their visually impaired students. Not only that, but they would also purchase required material to help their students.

Teachers in madrassas were similarly untrained. While of the interviewees recounted feelings of marginalisation or exclusion from madrassa teachers, corporeal punishment and verbal abuse were a common part of the teaching culture. Students felt that the teachers thought that this was an effective tool for teaching and therefore continued to sustain this culture. In state sponsored schools for the blind, teachers were supposed to have a master's level qualification. However, interviewees felt that these teachers were disengaged from the teaching process and that they did not have strategies to manage the classroom environment effectively. The unanimous comment about NGO-based schools was that the teachers were qualified and trained to instruct blind students. Students at NGO-based schools also recalled the excellent class management skills of their teachers. This created a good environment for the students to learn, in contrast to the experiences of students at state sponsored schools.

1.10 Conclusion

Parents want to educate their visually impaired children to improve their life chances and give them better career and social prospects. The experiences and expectations of parents and the children for schools often diverge. Personal characteristics, including class and religiosity, also determine the choice of schools. A student's ability to advocate for themselves was a key skill that students learnt regardless of the educational context they were enrolled in. Irrespective of institution, parental involvement played a major role in determining students' educational opportunities. Despite the popular opinion that teacher training impacts their ability to impart knowledge, this research discovered that the teacher's ability to empathise massively determines their interaction with their students and their students' subsequent success. Government institutions were underfunded and unstructured, leading to misappropriation of resources. There also seemed to be a gap between the aspirations and portrayal of NGO based institutions and the educational attainment of students. Experiences at madrassas challenge the popularly held exclusionary perception of these schools. What a child learns at home is equally important in giving them the life skills for success. Technology is not incorporated in mainstream schools because of how expensive it is, which is why students' learning remains restricted. The interviewed students felt that schools for the blind left them ill prepared to merge into mainstream schools and that even if a school for the blind is necessary to teach essential skills, this should only happen for primary and secondary years. Furthermore, interviewees from segregated schools felt that their career choices were drastically restricted because of a lack of career support and training.



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