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Factors Affecting Social Belongingness of Individuals with Visual Impairment at School Level

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Abstract

This research examines the determinants of social belongingness among visually impaired students in inclusive schools, with emphasis on individual, interpersonal, and environmental factors. Social belongingness is an important component of students' emotional health and academic achievement, but visually impaired students experience special challenges in establishing meaningful relationships within school settings. The study was carried out in Lahore, Pakistan, on the basis of a purposive sampling method involving 114 participants, that is, special education teachers and future teachers. Data was gathered on a self-constructed questionnaire and interpreted based on descriptive and inferential statistics. The results indicated that supportive interactions between teachers and students, peer and peer relationships, and an attractive school environment played a significant role in promoting belongingness. In contrast, obstacles like exclusion, non-awareness, and fewer resources stood in the way of integration. The research emphasizes the significance of inclusive education practices, teacher training, and peer awareness programs in facilitating social belongingness among visually impaired students. Improving social inclusion can be enhanced through the implementation of teacher training programs, setting up peer mentorship programs, and improving accessibility through assistive

technologies. The research helps develop inclusive educational practices that can assist visually impaired students to excel socially and academically.

Introduction

Visual impairment has a substantial effect on social belongingness across different age groups, resulting in isolation and less social participation (Chu & Chan, 2022). Studies show that people with vision impairment tend to have difficulty making social connections, which can negatively impact their emotional health and school performance.

Adolescents and School Belonging

Vision-impaired adolescents are shown to have lower levels of school belonging than their visually impaired counterparts, negatively affecting their self-concept and academic engagement (Manitsa et al., 2024).

Close friendships in school are important to ensure academic achievement and emotional care, but close friendships are normally underdeveloped in visually impaired students (Manitsa, 2023).

Middle-Aged and Elderly Populations

Middle-aged and older people with visual impairment are especially susceptible to loneliness, which is associated with a range of health conditions, such as depression and cardiovascular disease (Carrijo et al., 2023).

Unemployment and living alone are factors that increase loneliness, emphasizing the importance of specific social support interventions (Chu, 2022).

Social Participation and Well-Being

A systematic review verifies that vision impairment is linked with reduced social participation, which in turn influences overall well-being and quality of life.

Successful interventions to increase social participation can counteract the adverse health effects of vision loss (Lassale, 2020).

Although the issues created by visual impairment on social belongingness are critical, it is important to acknowledge that interventions designed to enhance social skills and inclusive settings can yield positive results for those who are affected.

Background of the Study

Social belongingness has been a foundation of psychological and educational research. Theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs highlight its importance in overall well-being, with the implication that belongingness is a prerequisite for higher-order aspirations such as academic achievement and self-actualization. For students with disabilities, especially those with visual impairment, the path to acquiring this sense of belonging tends to cross paths with structural, interpersonal, and societal obstacles. Studies also indicate that peer acceptance, teacher attitudes, and accessibility play a critical role in determining their social experience. This research extends past studies by investigating the subtle factors affecting visually impaired students' social integration in schools (Saif, 2024).

International Scenario

People with visual impairment tend to experience social exclusion based on the biases of society and physical infrastructural barriers. In Namibia, for example, visually impaired persons are excluded at home and in society, and this influences their daily living and socialization (Tobias 2017).

Within schooling environments, students with visual impairment struggle to achieve social community, and therefore become isolated within mainstream settings. This is highly pronounced during the adolescent years, which is the period of maximum social development (Plaskett, 2015).

Advocacy groups and support networks are instrumental in fostering social inclusion. Organizations such as the National Association for the Blind and the all India Confederation of the Blind have worked in empowering people with blindness, especially women, to be free from discrimination and gain access (Cordeiro, 2013).

Local Scenario

In Pakistan, inclusive education is an emerging but underdeveloped field. Even with policy guidelines like the Right to Education Act, actual implementation is usually hampered by insufficient resources, untrained teachers, and infrastructural constraints (Muhammad et al., 2024). Non-governmental organizations have contributed immensely in creating awareness and offering assistive technologies, but regular schools still face challenges in mainstreaming visually impaired students successfully. Overcoming these cultural and systemic barriers is essential to establishing a more inclusive and equitable education landscape in the nation (Fatima, 2023).

Research Gap

While much progress has been achieved toward understanding inclusive education, research regarding the social belongingness of blind students in inclusive schools is still limited. Precisely, how teacher interaction, peer interactions, and contextual factors contribute to their experiences remains an unexamined area of research. Moreover, while cross-country studies illustrate the advantages of inclusive approaches, there is limited context-specific research from Pakistan. This research fills these gaps by examining the intersection of peer inclusion, infrastructural accessibility, and teacher-student relationships in promoting social belongingness among visually impaired students (Donguiz, 2024).

Objectives

1. To determine individual, interpersonal, and environmental determinants of social belongingness of visually impaired students.
2. To explore how teacher-student interactions contribute to social inclusion.
3. To investigate the relationship between social belongingness, academic achievement, and emotional health.

Significance of the Study

This study informs the debate regarding inclusive education through the provision of evidence-based guidance to improve the social belongingness of visually impaired learners. In highlighting major obstacles and enablers, this research seeks to inform teacher development, policy, and community interactions. It reaffirms the imperative of developing inclusive settings that stress both academic and social integration as a means to provide equal access for visually impaired learners to progress.

Review of Related Literature

Theoretical Framework

Social belongingness has its roots in psychological theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which places belongingness high among the determinants of self-esteem and motivation.

Baumeister and Leary's belongingness hypothesis continues to lay weight on the inherent human need to be connected with others in meaningful relationships, positing that the absence of belongingness results in distress and low motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). Self-determination theory also emphasizes relatedness as one of the fundamental psychological needs, which is closely in line with the theory of belongingness. These theories form a basis for comprehending difficulties experienced by students who are visually impaired and how the inclusive practices can mitigate such challenges (Zimmerman, 2021).

Impact of Visual Impairment on Social Interactions

Visual impairment greatly impacts the capacity to decipher non-verbal communication, for example, facial expressions, body language, and gestures, all of which play a significant role in successful interaction. This consequently results in confusion and inability to build strong social relationships (Kushwaha, 2024). Literature shows that students with visual impairment are at risk of social isolation, stigmatization, and low self-esteem as a result of these factors. Interventions designed to deal with communication competence and peer sensitization have potential for reducing such impediments as well as further promoting social inclusion (Eccles, 2024).

Inclusive Education Practices

The report underscores the need for differentiated instruction and individual learning plans in the construction of inclusive curricula that support diverse learning needs, including those of children with disabilities (Sharma, 2024). It points to effective applications of adaptive teaching methods, such as collaborative learning and peer mentoring, that promote equity and enhance academic and social achievement. Through promoting systemic reform in curriculum design, the study upholds the belief that inclusive education can serve to meet the needs of visually impaired learners and foster a feeling of belonging (Dumbuya, 2024).

Teacher-Student Relationships

Teacher-student relationships significantly affect social belongingness. Teachers exhibiting empathy, patience, and comprehension of visually impaired students' distinct needs develop an enabling environment based on trust and affiliation (Sarwer et al., 2024). Evidence emphasizes that one-on-one teaching, proper communication, and constructive reinforcement notably enhance the confidence and feelings of inclusion of students. On the contrary, poor attitudes by teachers and a lack of understanding intensify feelings of loneliness among visually impaired students (Abid, 2024).

Peer Dynamics

Relationships with peers play a prominent role in the social life of a student with visual impairment. Positive relationships with schoolmates provide not only emotional support but also contribute to learning and participation. On the contrary, the ignorance and lack of understanding from sighted classmates tends to lead to exclusion and bullying. Strategies such as peer mentoring, disability awareness sessions, and group work participation tend to have a positive impact on peer interactions and foster inclusivity. (Amutha, 2025).

Environmental Factors

An enabling school climate, with its accessibility, inclusivity, and positive disability attitudes, is a key factor in fostering social belongingness. Accessible facilities like ramps, tactile markers, and audio-assisted devices facilitate visually impaired students' mobility within the school setting

without assistance. Equitable policies and practices that are inclusive and promote equity and diversity further reinforce students' sense of belonging by making the school environment welcoming and supportive (Kabir, 2024).

Research Methodology

Research Design

The descriptive research design employed in the study assists in capturing the prevailing state of social belongingness among visually impaired students without interfering with variables. It enables the researchers to determine correlations and patterns, which is important in comprehending the intricate dynamics involved in mainstream school settings (Manitsa, 2025).

Population and Sampling

Purposive sampling was applied to specifically target 114 participants such as special education teachers and prospective teachers from multiple institutions within Lahore, Pakistan. This type of targeted approach is appropriate to get insights from those who work directly with visually impaired students and possess firsthand experience regarding the issues and obstacles such students encounter.

Analysis of Demographic Data

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic information of the respondents. These include the use of frequency and percentage. The results are presented in Table 1

Table 1

Demographic Information of Students

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	62	54.4
	Female	52	45.6
	Total	114	100.0
Age	25-30	94	82.5
	31-35	14	12.3
	36-40	6	5.3
	Total	114	100.0
Qualifications	Fsc	6	5.3
	BSc	44	38.6
	MSc	48	42.1
	M.Phil./MS	10	8.8
	PhD	6	5.3
	Total	114	100.0
Experience	1-5 Years	96	84.2
	6-10 Years	6	5.3
	11-15 Years	4	3.5
	16-20 Years	4	3.5
	21-25 Years	4	3.5
	Total	114	100.0
Institute	Public	66	57.9

Private	48	42.1
Total	114	100

Instrumentation (Research Tool)

The questionnaire developed by us had 29 items, scored on a 5-point Likert scale, which offered a sound tool to measure students' social belongingness perceptions and influencing factors. The individual factors (e.g., self-esteem), interpersonal factors (e.g., peer relationships), and environmental factors (e.g., school climate and access) were the thematic areas covered.

Validity and Reliability

The content validity of the questionnaire was ensured by expert review, which is a critical process for ensuring the instrument measures what it is supposed to. Reliability was ascertained through Cronbach's alpha (0.73), which reflects moderate internal consistency.

Number of items	No. of Respondents	Cronbach's Alpha
29	114	.73

*Level of Significance **P<.05*

Data Collection and Analysis

The information was gathered through both hard and soft copies of the questionnaire to make it accessible to respondents. The analysis of data using SPSS enabled the use of descriptive statistics (e.g., means, standard deviations) and inferential statistics. These methods enabled the identification of patterns and relationships among the variables.

Results and Data Interpretation

Peer Relationships

Statement	Never	Rarely	Some-Times	Often	Always	M	SD
The student is accepted by his/her peers at school.	4(3.5)	26(22.8)	42(22.8)	12(10.5)	30(26.3)	3.3	1.1
The student is included in group activities or projects	4(3.5)	26(22.8)	32(28.1)	22(19.3)	30(26.3)	3.4	1.2
The student is excluded by his/her peers during classroom activities.	12(10.5)	26(22.8)	44(38.6)	14(12.3)	18(15.8)	3.0	1.1
The student is accepted by his/her peers at school							
The student experiences bullying from his/her peers at school.	20(17.5)	26(22.8)	28(24.6)	24(21.1)	16(10.0)	2.9	1.3
The student is supported by his/her teachers at school.	2(1.8)	14(12.3)	34(29.8)	26(22.8)	38(33.3)	3.7	1.1

The student is satisfied with your effort to include him/her in the classroom activities.	10(8.8)	16(14.0)	30(26.3)	16(14.0)	42(36.8)	3.5	1.3
The student feels ignored or neglected by his/her teachers at school.	26(22.8)	22(19.3)	34(29.8)	24(21.1)	8(7.0)	2.7	1.2
The student is accepted by his/her peers at school.	8(7.0)	28(24.6)	44(38.6)	28(24.6)	6(5.3)	2.9	0.9
The student is supported by other school staff such as counselors or administrators.	10(8.8)	8(7.0)	36(31.6)	30(26.3)	30(26.3)	3.5	1.2
The school staff makes an effort to accommodate his/her visual impairment	6(5.3)	28(24.6)	26(22.8)	24(21.1)	30(26.3)	3.3	1.2
The student is overlooked by school staff.	12(10.5)	16(14.0)	32(28.1)	22(19.3)	32(28.1)	3.4	1.2
The student feels frustrated by the lack of support from school staff.	22(19.3)	12(10.5)	30(26.3)	24(21.1)	26(22.8)	3.1	1.4
The student witnesses emotional support by his/her family in relation to his/her visual impairment.	6(5.3)	24(21.1)	26(22.8)	24(21.1)	34(29.8)	3.4	1.2
His/her family provides practical support to help make education possible for him/her.	12(10.5)	14(12.3)	30(26.3)	26(22.8)	32(28.1)	3.4	1.3
The student is burdened by his/her family's expectations.	8(7.0)	20(17.5)	36(31.6)	36(31.6)	14(12.3)	3.2	1.1
The student is misunderstood relating to his/her family.	22(19.3)	6(5.3)	46(40.4)	28(24.6)	12(10.5)	3.0	1.2
The student is confident in his/her ability to navigate the school environment	8(7.0)	22(19.3)	32(28.1)	26(22.8)	26(22.4)	3.3	1.2

The student feels proud of his/her achievements in school despite visual impairment.	12(10.5)	20(17.5)	24(21.5)	26(22.8)	32(28.1)	3.4	1.3
The student feels himself/herself insecure in the school environment (due to his/her visual	14(12.3)	28(24.6)	34(29.8)	22(19.3)	16(14.0)	2.9	1.2
The student is discouraged by challenges due to visual impairment in school	18(15.8)	22(19.3)	34(29.8)	18(15.8)	22(19.3)	3.0	1.3
The student seeks support deal with challenges faced in the school.	8(7.0)	18(15.8)	30(26.3)	34(31.6)	22(19.3)	3.4	1.1
The student avoids support to deal with challenges being faced at school	16(14.0)	20(17.5)	40(35.1)	20(17.5)	18(15.8)	3.0	1.2
The student perceives overwhelmed by the challenges faced in the school.	6(5.3)	20(17.5)	42(36.8)	16(14.0)	30(26.3)	3.3	1.2
The student perceives his/her school community as a whole.	6(5.3)	14(12.3)	32(28.1)	28(24.6)	34(29.8)	3.6	1.1
The student feels himself/herself as a part of the class.	6(5.3)	10(8.8)	34(29.8)	24(21.1)	40(25.1)	3.7	1.1
The student is belonged to the group assigned a co-curricular or extracurricular activity.	4(3.5)	12(10.5)	30(26.3)	22(19.3)	46(40.4)	3.8	1.1
The student perceives himself /herself an important part of the school community.	14(12.3)	14(12.3)	28(24.6)	20(17.5)	38(33.3)	3.4	1.3
The student feels isolated from the school community	22(19.3)	20(17.5)	36(31.6)	12(10.5)	24(21.1)	2.9	1.3

The student perceives

himself/herself fit in the school community. 6(5.3) 12(10.5) 32(28.1) 20(17.5) 44(38.6) 3.7 1.2

Research confirmed that visually impaired students tended to have partial integration in group activity but were often excluded and subjected to bullying. This is with accordance with all previous literature reviewing the social barriers of students with disabilities in ordinary schools. Inferential Analysis of Students' Perception based on Demographic Data

Table 3

Independent Samples t-test of Students' Perception Based on Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male	62	61.90	7.19	112	-0.78	0.436
Female	52	62.92	6.64			

The t-test results reveal no statistically significant difference in the perception of social belongingness between male ($M = 61.90$, $SD = 7.19$) and female ($M = 62.92$, $SD = 6.64$) students with visual impairment, $t(112) = -0.78$, $p = 0.436$. This suggests that gender does not play a significant role in shaping students' sense of social inclusion at the school level among individuals with visual impairment.

Table 4

Independent Samples t-test of Students' Perception Based on Type of Institution

Institute	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Public	59	63.71	7.10	112	2.18	0.031
Private	55	60.93	6.51			

A statistically significant difference was found in the perception of social belongingness between students from public ($M = 63.71$, $SD = 7.10$) and private institutions ($M = 60.93$, $SD = 6.51$), $t(112) = 2.18$, $p = 0.031$. This implies that students enrolled in public institutions report a higher sense of social belongingness compared to those in private settings, indicating that institutional environment may influence their social inclusion.

Table 5

One-Way ANOVA of Students' Perception Based on Age Groups

Age	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	102.79	2	51.39	1.07	0.35
Within Groups	5327.74	111	48.00		
Total	5430.53	113			

The ANOVA results for different age groups showed no significant differences in the perception of social belongingness among students with visual impairment, $F(2, 111) = 1.07$, $p = 0.35$. This indicates that age does not significantly impact students' perceived sense of belonging at school, suggesting that belongingness remains relatively stable across age categories.

Table 6*One-Way ANOVA of Students' Perception Based on Qualification Level*

Qualification	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	98.07	2	49.04	1.02	0.36
Within Groups	5332.46	111	48.04		
Total	5430.53	113			

Analysis of variance based on qualification levels revealed no statistically significant difference in the perception of social belongingness, $F(2, 111) = 1.02$, $p = 0.36$. This finding indicates that the educational level of students with visual impairment does not significantly influence their feelings of inclusion and connection within the school environment.

Table 7*One-Way ANOVA of Students' Perception Based on Teaching Experience of Staff*

Experience	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	287.57	2	143.79	3.10	0.05
Within Groups	5142.95	111	46.33		
Total	5430.53	113			

A significant difference was found in students' perception of social belongingness based on the teaching experience of staff, $F(2, 111) = 3.10$, $p = 0.05$. This suggests that the experience level of educators may play a role in fostering or hindering students' feelings of inclusion, with more experienced teachers potentially creating a more supportive and inclusive environment for students with visual impairments.

Teacher Relationships

Supportive teacher interactions were positively related to social belongingness. Nevertheless, some students felt neglected, especially when teachers failed to give them sufficient attention or were oblivious to their needs.

Environmental Factors

The research found that accessibility and an enabling school climate played a significant role in predicting how social integration could be achieved by visually impaired students. Schools with improved physical facilities and assistive technologies were more socially inclusive.

Results

The research investigated teachers' and future teachers' perception regarding factors influencing the social belongingness of people with visual impairment. The research used a descriptive approach with a closed-ended questionnaire, administered among 114 respondents from different institutions in Punjab. The data were analyzed using frequency distribution, and the results were derived from a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "always" to "never."

The findings reveal that students with visual impairment have different degrees of inclusion and support within schools. Although "sometimes" answers ranked the most for all statements, it implies that there is a need to improve peer acceptance, teacher support, and efforts from the entire school community in meeting the needs of students with visual impairment.

Recommendations might include increasing peer interactions, elevating teacher sensitization and training, and general support system development in schools towards creating a more inclusive atmosphere for such students.

Findings and Discussion

The research established that teacher-student interactions and peer relationships are crucial in promoting social belongingness. Obstacles such as unawareness, limited resources, and stigmatization interfere with integration. Suggestions are directed teacher training, peer awareness initiatives, and enhanced accessibility measures.

The research indicated that interactions between the teacher and students are key in building social belongingness. Where the teachers are caring and treat the students with inclusiveness, this favors students' integration socially. Even with some good encounters, students still experienced social exclusion and bullying. This indicates that schools should have peer awareness programs that will curtail stigma and enhance empathy among the students.

The research identified a number of social integration barriers, such as unawareness, resource constraints, and stigmatization. These barriers hinder visually impaired students from being fully engaged in school life and reaping the rewards of belongingness. Based on the findings, Grounded on the results, the research provides the following recommendations for enhancing social belongingness among visually impaired students:

These must emphasize inclusive education techniques and visually impaired students' unique requirements. Having programs to match visually impaired students with guide peers will assist them in developing social networks. Schools should make physical adaptations to the surroundings and invest in assistive technology to enhance accessibility. Increasing awareness among students and personnel to decrease stigmatization and foster empathy is important for building inclusive school climates.

Conclusion

The social belongingness of visually impaired children is shaped by a mixture of individual, interpersonal, educational, societal, and technological influences. The extent of visual impairment may impact a child's social interaction ability, with those who have severe impairments experiencing greater difficulties in social interaction. Positive self-concept, high levels of family support, and accepting peer relationships are essential in building a sense of belonging. Inclusive learning settings that offer accommodations and promote awareness of visual impairment are also important. Attitudes of teachers and training in inclusive practice are critical in developing a positive learning environment.

Attitudes and stigma related to visual impairment can provide a barrier, and attempts must be made to challenge these using awareness campaigns. Access to public spaces and provision of assistive technology are significant in ensuring independence and social engagement. Proper facilities such as individualized educational assistance and rehabilitation care need to be available to cater to the individual requirements of visually impaired children.

In summary, encouraging the social inclusion of these children involves taking a well-rounded approach to address individual, interpersonal, educational, societal, and technological aspects, to contribute towards an inclusive setting where all children have a chance to succeed.

Recommendations

Encourage teachers to engage with students with visual impairment beyond the classroom setting in order to better understand their situations and viewpoints.

Facilitate effective communication and coordination among teachers and parents or guardians of students with visual impairment to create a supportive and encouraging learning environment.

Integrate assistive technology, including screen readers, braille displays, and magnification software, to ensure learning materials and classroom activities are accessible to students with visual impairments.

Offer regular counseling and support services to address any social or emotional issues that may arise for students with visual impairments, supporting them in developing self-confidence and resilience.

Foster inclusive language and practice within the school community, avoiding stigmatizing terms and promoting person-first language.

Foster open discussion and conversation regarding visual impairment and disability concerns in the classroom and school-wide environments.

Highlight the success and contributions of students with visual impairments, and present their talent and ability to the school community.

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