

Academic Achievement of Persons with Visual Impairment and Blindness: contributory factors and challenges - evidence from Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Education of the disabled community is a major area of research in the western world. Persons with visual impairment and blindness (VI&B) represent a significant proportion of disabled people. Globally, 2.2 billion are estimated to be visually impaired, of which one billion are severely impaired or blind. However, there are major knowledge gaps in research into the education of persons with VI&B, particularly in developing countries, including Sri Lanka. A review of 53 relevant past research papers confirmed this assertion. The objective of this paper is to explore the factors that contribute to the academic achievement of persons with VI&B and the challenges experienced in this respect. This research adopted a qualitative approach whereby in-depth interviews were held with eleven respondents identified through purposive sampling representing varying levels of academic achievements. Thematic analysis was the main method used for data analysis. The study reveals that there are several high achievers in the academic arena in several fields, of which some have even bypassed most other sighted colleagues confirming that blindness is not a barrier to academic success. Several factors, including their family background, encouragement, and support of family and peers, personal attitudes, conducive infrastructure including libraries and other sources of information, favorable instructional strategies, have been identified as determinants of the academic success of this community. Most of these factors, in turn, act as barriers for prospective learners. The fact that only the user perspective is examined in this study is a limitation, and other perspectives could also be explored to strengthen this research. Since education is a key means of empowering persons with VI&B, educational policymakers could use the findings of this study to strengthen the educational systems to accommodate their needs. The other stakeholders, such as family members, can also contribute towards this community to better achieve academically.

Keywords: *Visual impairment and blindness; Academic achievement; Disability Studies; Determinant.*