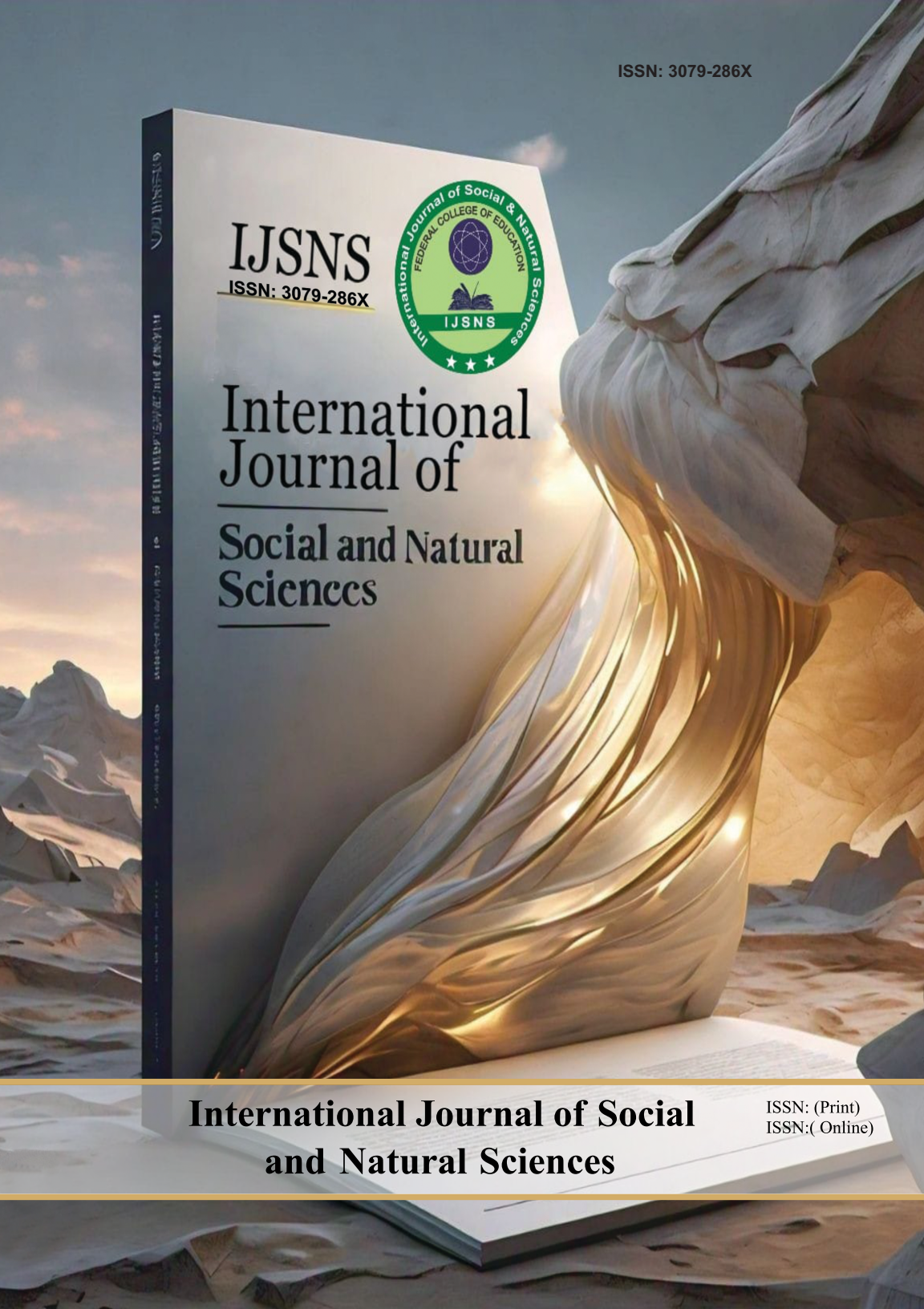
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School Heads' Attitudes Towards Admission of Students with Mobility Impairment to Mainstream Schools; Do They Think Mythically or Realistically?

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Abstract

This study explores the attitudes of school heads toward the admission of students with mobility impairments into mainstream schools, focusing on their perceptions regarding academic capabilities, social competence, and participation in co-curricular activities. Using an exploratory design, interviews were conducted with ten secondary school heads in District Nankana Sahib, Pakistan. The participants included heads with and without experience accommodating students with mobility impairments. Emerging themes revealed a mix of attitudes, with some heads demonstrating positive views about the academic abilities of these students, while others expressed concerns influenced by myths and logistical challenges. The study also uncovered barriers such as infrastructural limitations and perceived burdens on school resources. The findings suggest that misconceptions and lack of awareness persist among school heads, highlighting the need for professional development and policy interventions to promote inclusivity in education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Mobility Impairments, School Leadership, Social Competence, Co-Curricular Participation, Educational Policy.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a top-level agenda of the nations of the world. Nations have recognized the benefits of inclusive education. The world education scenario is changing and inclusive education is gaining acceptance at the governmental level as an agreed-upon philosophy. Mainstream schools are being re-structured to respond to the needs of diversified groups of learners. (UNESCO, 2005). Inclusive education is mainly concerned with overcoming the barriers that may hinder the participation of marginalized learners (Mittler, 2000)

Parents of students with mobility impairments hold the view that their children are excluded from mainstream schools either at the time of admission or after getting admission to mainstream schools. (Bourke et al, 2000). Students gain a good adjustment level with their peers but teachers and heads of the school think about them negatively. Studies have indicated that general education participation increases social interactions between students with and without disabilities (Freeman & Kasari, 1998). Some researchers also noted that children with disabilities have demonstrated weak social interaction skills in regular classes (Fujiki, Brinton, Hart, & Fitzgerald, 1999).

The success of any inclusion effort depends on many factors and variables. One of the most important factors is school heads' attitudes towards an inclusive program. (Fullan & Stregelbauer , 1991). Unfortunately, students with a disability are excluded from an inclusive setting due to low expectations of principles and teaching staff. (Keary , 1998). In an Irish study, students with physical disability reported that they were less seriously considered and their work was seldom acknowledged. (Shevlim, Kenny & McNeala, 2002)

In a Norwegian study, Nes (1999) reported that teachers of highly capable students with a disability did not expect her to attain much. Teacher' and heads' expectations regarding the skills and capabilities of SWD are often based on their self-filling prophesies. (Tauber, 1997)

Aainscow (1999) identifies that teacher rejection is often based on the single dominant characteristic of students. This may be a disability or otherwise. Praisner (2003) found a strong correlation between school heads involved in professional development and their positive attitude toward SWD. Some school heads do not want their schools to have students with disabilities. They held the view that parents of children without disabilities might not send their children to their schools (Bourke et al, 2000) A study from New Zealand reported that 10% of principals denied admission to students with disabilities on certain grounds. Another group of school heads stated that they had not denied admission flatly but discouraged such admissions. They used delaying tactics with the hope that their parents might enroll their child in some other school. Some heads think that enrolment of these students might be a burden on the funds of the school. Researchers also held the view that those were only assumptions and contained no reality. (Ballard, 1999)

Global Perspectives and Contextual Variations

Research over the past decade highlights that school leaders play a pivotal role in creating inclusive environments for students with disabilities. The attitudes, beliefs, and practices of principals significantly shape the culture and implementation of inclusion within schools. In the U.S., for example, effective leadership practices aligned with inclusive policies have been shown to foster greater inclusivity. These practices often include collaboration, advocacy for resource allocation, and capacity-building among teachers (DeMatthews et al., 2020) In Europe, particularly in Switzerland and Greece, legal mandates like the UN-CRPD have driven inclusive education policies, though implementation varies due to structural and bureaucratic challenges. School leaders in Greece often navigate systemic constraints but act as critical facilitators of inclusion through shared responsibility and collaboration with special education teams (Vlachou & Tsirantonaki, 2023)

Leadership Attitudes and Inclusive Practices

Studies emphasize that school principals' attitudes are critical in determining the extent and success of inclusion. Positive beliefs about the abilities and potential of students with mobility impairments correlate with more robust inclusive practices. Conversely, myths and misconceptions about disabilities

can hinder the progress of inclusion. Effective leaders actively address such biases by engaging in professional development and fostering a school culture of equity and respect (Sun & Xin, 2020; Pregot, 2021)

Challenges and Barriers

Barriers to inclusion often stem from a lack of resources, insufficient teacher training, and systemic issues. Leaders in decentralized education systems, such as Switzerland, have to balance autonomy and resource management while promoting inclusion. Conversely, in centralized systems like Greece, leaders face rigid policy frameworks that limit their flexibility (Koutrouba et al., 2018; Lazaridou, 2019)

Implications for Leadership Development
Developing inclusive leadership skills is critical. Research suggests that targeted training programs focusing on disability awareness, legal frameworks, and inclusive pedagogy can enhance principals' efficacy. For example, integrating inclusive leadership models in professional development programs has been linked to improved school practices and student outcomes (Hellmich & Görel, 2014; Vlachou & Tsirantonaki, 2023)

Significance of the Study

School heads are thought to be directly responsible for implementing inclusive policies in the schools. If they are reluctant to assume this responsibility, its implementation in letter and spirit is always doubtful. They are, therefore, said to be responsible for the success or failure of inclusive policy. (Avissar, 2000; CCS Disability Action, 2007; Kugalmass, 2003). They have a shared vision of an inclusive school.

Objectives of the Study

1. Investigate the attitudes of school heads toward admitting students with mobility impairments to mainstream schools.
2. Explore whether these attitudes are influenced by myths, stereotypes, or evidence-based practicalities.

Research Question

The present study was designed to gain knowledge in the following research questions:

1. What is the view of school heads regarding achievement, academic capabilities, social competence, and co-curricular participation of students with impaired mobility?
2. What is the attitude of school heads towards the admission of students with mobility impairments to their schools? If there is some denial, what are the reasons as reported by school heads,

METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted to document the responses of the head teachers of the public secondary schools of district Nankana Sahib who were interviewed for their view of the admission of students with mobility impairment to their schools. These school heads were interviewed with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire. The time for the interview ranged from 10 to 15 minutes. Notes were also taken regarding their body language. The interviews were transcribed and emerging themes were explored in the word data and notes taken at the time of the interview.

Participants/ Sampling

Among the participants of the study, there were 10 school heads from the secondary school of district Nankana Sahib. Five of them were those who had some students with mobility impairment in their schools, and the remaining five did not have such students in their schools. A purposive sampling technique was used for this study. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental sampling, is often used in qualitative research when the researcher wants to focus on specific characteristics of participants that are directly relevant to the study. In this case, purposive

sampling would allow the researcher to select school heads who have direct experience with the inclusion of students with mobility impairments, either by having such students currently enrolled or having experience with them in the past (Palinkas et al., 2015). This technique ensures that the sample is rich in information, as participants are chosen based on their knowledge and experience with the topic. It also provides in-depth data relevant to the research questions. Findings may not be generalizable to a broader population.

Data analysis

Interviews were analyzed for answers to research questions. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for further analysis. Major themes were identified by employing a coding procedure. Findings are presented in the proceeding section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discussion related to research question 1.

Major findings in response to research question 1 by those who have students with mobility impairments in their schools are presented in the forthcoming discussion:

Satisfactory Achievement

Four out of five respondents were of the view that students with mobility impairment had attained a satisfactory achievement level in almost all subjects. Though they are not brilliant students but they are good enough. One of them was holding a different view. When he was further asked was low achievement due to the physical condition of the student. He was not very much sure and did not insist on his view. Head ‘A’ reported. “I have one such student in my school. He is a jolly fellow and good in

all subjects like other mediocre students in the class. He is not at all a troublemaker" (Face-to-face communication, translated from Urdu). Head 'C' said, "I have two students in wheelchairs studying in my school. I allowed them admission reluctantly but now I am happy. They are no burden; doing well in their studies. No complaints really" (Face-to-face communication, translated from Urdu) Principal E held a negative view of the student who uses crutches and studies there in his school. He reported as cited below: "He works very slowly, and his teachers complain about him time and again. I admit there are so many others like him, I mean slow learners' (Face to face communication, translated from Urdu).

Academic Capabilities

All of the five heads agreed that being with physical impairment did not mean being incapable academically. theme emerged from interview data showed that heads had a positive view of the students with mobility impairment regarding the academic abilities of these students. Head 'E' who did not hold a good view of the achievement pace of these students was satisfied with their academic capabilities. He said, "No doubt they are good in reading writing and learning new academic skills like essay writing and creative writing, etc. they are also good in language learning." (Face-to-face communication, translated from Urdu).

Social competencies

A mixed view was there regarding the social competencies of students with mobility impairments. Three out of five heads were of the view that they interact with them, with their teachers and classmates like other students did. They were of the view that many other students without disabilities may also be backward in social competencies, while the other two were of the view that the students with mobility impairments were poor in learning social competencies. Head 'B' said, "They are hesitant in mixing with others. They don't initiate in greetings, often in the back rows in classrooms. Has little or even no friendship." (Face-to-face communication, translated from Urdu).

Co-curricular Participation

All of the five heads were in agreement that students with mobility impairments did not participate in physical education and game-related activities. They related it to the lack of special gaming content in the school prepared keeping in view the special needs of such students. Two of them reported that such students took part in speech and *Naat* competitions and out-performed. Head 'A' said, "It is our fault. We don't provide them opportunities otherwise they are good enough to make their place in co-curricular activities." (Face-to-face communication, translated from Urdu).

Views of the Heads who don't have Students with mobility impairments

Four out of five school heads were doubtful about the achievement speed, academic abilities, social competencies, and co-curricular participation of these students. One of them was rather optimistic about

these students. He was head 'G' who held a good view of them. He said if equal opportunities were offered to them they could do well. He asserted, "There should be different things for them like different games that suit their nature of disability. If the environment is friendly, they can grow like others in the schools. They are physically different not mentally." (Face-to-face communication, translated from Urdu).

Discussion related to research question 2.

As attitudes are inferred from word data in qualitative studies therefore it is not as simple as thought. The researcher has to be very careful when reporting the findings of the study. He or she has to rely on the words of the respondents and must avoid personal views. After carefully counting the sub codes following themes were established and some are presented here:

Students with mobility impairments may be troublemakers

Eight out of ten heads were of the view that they may create some trouble for the head, teachers, and students or themself, although they could not present some valid examples of the nature of the problem. Head 'J' offered his view as follows, "They may be at risk in some parts of the school building because buildings are not friendly for such students. There is no special toileting facility for them therefore they may be troublesome for management and classmates" Head 'E' presented it from another side, "Working in a lab or library is not easy for them. There is nothing like special arrangements in the school. They should go for special education arrangement." (Face-to-face communication, translated from Urdu).

Their parents are more demanding

Most of the head teachers were of the view that parents of such children were always careful about their children and resultantly became more demanding. It was difficult to always make special arrangements for them. Head 'A' was complaining as follows, "I have my class eight on the first floor some parent of the student with mobility impairment would ask me to arrange it at the ground floor as his child couldn't go upstairs. I was nothing to do save arranging it on the down floor" (Face-to-face communication, translated from Urdu).

Why don't they go for Special Education?

More than half of the total respondents were of the view that they should go for special education provisions as they were more suitable for students with mobility impairments. Keeping in view the above-cited findings it may be inferred that respondents of the study are not clear enough about inclusive education as policy and philosophy.

CONCLUSIONS

1. School heads must be provided with necessary training regarding the education of students with special needs in general settings.
2. Success stories of people with disabilities should be included in the curriculum and syllabi.
3. School heads should carefully listen to the point of view of the parents of

students with impairments.

4. School heads should highlight the strong points of personality of students with impaired mobility.
5. School heads should treat these students as part of the family to repair and reshape the perceptions and negative stereotypes.

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