

SILENT STRUGGLES: ARE FUTURE TEACHERS READY FOR INVISIBLE DISABILITIES?

* *Dr. Pooja Birwatkar*

* Associate Professor, K. J. Somaiya College of Education, Somaiya Vidyavihar University, Mumbai.

Abstract:

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the challenges faced by students with invisible disabilities within educational settings. Despite this awareness, there remains a gap in adequately preparing educators to identify and support these students. This theoretical paper explores the preparedness of teacher training institutions to equip future educators with the necessary skills to identify and support students with invisible disabilities. Drawing on existing research and theoretical frameworks, it examines the current state of teacher education, identifies significant gaps, and offers recommendations for enhancing the training programs to better address the needs of students with invisible disabilities. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, enhancing awareness, and fostering inclusive pedagogical approaches, teacher education programs can play a pivotal role in promoting educational equity and fostering an inclusive learning environment for students with invisible disability.

Key words: *Inclusion, Invisible Disability, Teacher Training.*

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Introduction:

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 necessitates a deeper understanding of disability discourse and increased research in this area. The United Nations '2030' Agenda for Sustainable Development commits to ensuring that no one is left behind which is indicative that equal participation of individuals with disabilities is an integral component. In this sense inclusive practices are to be considered to be foremost in promoting teaching approaches that aims to foster the engagement of all students and considers each student as a valuable contributor to the learning community. Inclusive practices should be looked upon both as educational philosophy and methodology designed to enhance learning and active involvement of all students within a shared educational setting (Morina, 2017)

According to Article 21A of the Indian Constitution, the state is mandated to provide free and compulsory education to all children aged six to fourteen years, including those with disabilities (The Constitution of India, updated version, 2019). Inclusive education embodies the principle that all children, regardless of their abilities, should learn together in the same schools. UNICEF (2017) affirms that every child has the right to inclusive education. The RPwD Act 2016 further emphasizes this by defining an educational system where students with and without disabilities learn together, with the teaching and learning processes adapted to cater to the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

Considering the above, it is commendable that inclusion has been brought to the forefront. However, it remains quite restrictive as it primarily addresses those with recognized visible disabilities, failing to cover a broader

spectrum. There is a significant gap where many disabilities, particularly invisible ones, are not adequately addressed. This oversight leaves numerous students without the necessary support and accommodations they require to succeed.

Types of Disabilities:

Disabilities encompass a wide range of conditions that can affect individuals in various ways. Broadly categorized, disabilities can be visible or invisible, each presenting unique challenges and requiring specific accommodations. Understanding the different types of disabilities is crucial for fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for all individuals. Each type of disability requires tailored strategies and accommodations to ensure individuals can fully participate and thrive in various settings, including educational environments.

Some key types of disabilities:

- **Physical Disabilities:**

These impairments affect a person's mobility or physical functioning, such as muscular dystrophy or spinal cord injury

- **Sensory Disabilities:**

These include impairments related to sight or hearing, such as blindness or deafness.

- **Intellectual Disabilities:**

These disabilities affect intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, often presenting challenges in learning and social interaction.

- **Psychiatric Disabilities:**

Mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder fall under this category

- **Neurodevelopmental Disabilities:**

These include conditions that affect brain development and functioning, such as autism spectrum disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder

- **Invisible Disabilities:**

Conditions which are not immediately apparent, such as chronic pain, fibromyalgia, or certain mental health disorders.

Hidden in Plain Sight: Understanding Invisible Disabilities

According to the Invisible Disabilities Association (n.d.), invisible disabilities encompass various symptoms like severe pain, fatigue, dizziness, cognitive impairments, brain injuries, learning variances, mental health conditions, and hearing and vision issues. Thus, an invisible disability refers to a physical, mental, or neurological limitation that isn't immediately visible but can affect a person's movements, senses, daily activities, and overall life. As per Matthews, (1994), an invisible disability is defined as a condition that remains concealed from immediate notice by an observer, except in uncommon situations or when disclosed by the individual with the disability or an external source. Invisible disabilities may encompass a wide range of conditions, including

sleeping disorders, learning disabilities, autoimmune diseases, and brain injuries (Cook & Clement, 2019; Dalgin & Ballini, 2008; Norstedt, 2019).

In comparison to visible disabilities, invisible disabilities are often less noticed, less prominent, and frequently overlooked. This oversight can stem from a lack of awareness about these conditions and their manifestations, as well as societal perceptions that prioritize visible cues as indicators of disability. People are typically categorized as either able-bodied or disabled based on observable traits (Roman, 2009). Consequently, individuals with invisible disabilities often encounter scepticism since they do not exhibit visible signs of disability or illness (Lingsom, 2008; Stone, 2005).

Invisible disabilities, by their nature, do not have obvious physical manifestations, making them less noticeable to others. This can result in individuals with invisible disabilities facing skepticism or disbelief regarding the extent of their limitations. The distinction between being disabled and non-disabled is often less clear. This ambiguity increases the likelihood that the invisible disabled often pass as not having a disability, especially compared to individuals with visible disabilities. Due to the absence of visible signs, invisible disabilities may not attract as much attention or empathy from others, leading to a lack of understanding and support. This can contribute to feelings of isolation and invisibility experienced by individuals with these conditions. According to Poyade et al., 2017 Individuals with invisible disabilities are more susceptible to facing heightened discrimination, isolation, and anxiety in social settings compared to those with visible disabilities. There is no much of difference among those with visible and invisible regarding the challenges faced on daily basis (Roman, 2009).

Invisible disabilities are frequently disregarded or dismissed, both in social contexts and within systems of support and accommodation. This disregard can manifest in various settings, including healthcare, education, and employment. Research studies have consistently shown that disabled students still face significant barriers to accessing the same educational opportunities as their non-disabled peers (Dolmage, 2017; Eunyoung & Aquino, 2017). Considering that disability is largely interpreted in visible forms, there is a need to deliberate on what must be the situation of invisible disabled where the disability is hidden or often unexpressed. According to Venville et al. (2016) in context of invisible disability learners in educational spaces the barriers can be many like lack of access to appropriate learning and teaching approaches, mentorship, and guidance which could have a detrimental impact on their academic performance.

It is crucial for teachers to cultivate awareness, appreciation, and acceptance of students with invisible disabilities, recognizing the significant effects these disabilities have on every aspect of school life, including academics, social interactions, and behavior. Teachers must actively and consistently strive to identify and support students with invisible disabilities within their classrooms (Schall, 2017)

Invisible Disability and Teacher Training: Invisible disabilities often go unrecognized due to the absence of visible indicators. Teachers may misinterpret the behaviors of students with invisible disabilities as disciplinary issues rather than manifestations of underlying conditions. Additionally, stigma and a lack of awareness can further complicate the identification and support process.

Various studies suggest that sensitizing, informing, and training faculty members to recognize disabilities, respond appropriately, and utilize universal design for learning and assistive technologies could facilitate the participation of a broader student population. This recommendation is consistent with findings from the perspective of disabled students, which indicate that this student group often receives inadequate follow-up ultimately bearing individual's responsibility for their own inclusion (Brandt, 2011; Magnus, 2009; Redpath et al., 2013).

The study of Morina & Orozco, (2020) revealed faculty members' negative attitudes, lack of awareness, and inadequate training concerning disability as significant hindrances to inclusive education. It is pertinent to note that in terms of teachers the knowledge about disability is crucial along with sense of responsibility, and skills in addressing the needs of disabled students which otherwise may become hurdles in inclusive practices (Mutanga & Walker, 2017).

Incorporating invisibly disabled students into educational settings necessitates an understanding of student diversity and proficiency in inclusive teaching methods (Svendby, 2020). It is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of current educational support services for students with invisible disabilities. (Venville et al., 2016). More resources and educational programs are necessary to guide society in discussing invisible disabilities and using appropriate language. These efforts should inform policies in schools, workplaces, and government to promote inclusion. To ensure these resources accurately reflect real experiences, they should be co-created with individuals who have invisible disabilities. Future initiatives should focus on developing this training and these resources. (Hendry et al., 2022).

For both pre service and in-service teachers who have not studied or personally encountered invisible disabilities and their negative social, psychological, and educational impacts, a lack of understanding of these issues can significantly restrict the accommodations and adaptations they offer (Brady & Woolfson, 2008; Parasururam, 2006).

In this sense, the responsibility falls on teacher training programs to thoroughly equip future educators with the necessary skills to recognize and empathetically address the needs of invisibly disabled students in their classrooms. These programs should prioritize comprehensive instruction on understanding the diverse spectrum of invisible disabilities, including their potential impacts on learning and participation. By fostering a culture of awareness and sensitivity, teacher training programs can empower educators to create inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued and supported. Additionally, training should focus on practical strategies for effectively accommodating invisible disabilities, such as implementing universal design for learning principles and utilizing assistive technologies. Through robust preparation, educators can play a crucial role in promoting the academic success and well-being of students with invisible disabilities, ultimately contributing to greater equity and inclusion in education

To bridge the gap, teacher training institutions must prioritize the inclusion of comprehensive content on invisible disabilities. This involves integrating theoretical knowledge with practical strategies, ensuring that future teachers are well-equipped to recognize and support students with these conditions.

This leads on to analysing the teacher training programs primarily designated as Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) offered by institutions across India. To understand their crucial roles in addressing all types of disability there are few questions that need to be addressed.

- How do teacher training courses address the needs of invisibly disabled students in their curriculum?
- What specific strategies or modules are included in teacher training programs to raise awareness of invisible disabilities among prospective teachers?
- In what ways do teacher training courses emphasize the importance of inclusive practices for supporting invisibly disabled students?
- How do teacher training programs prepare future educators to recognize and accommodate the diverse needs of students with invisible disabilities?
- What resources or support systems are provided to pre-service teachers to enhance their understanding and responsiveness to invisible disabilities in the classroom?
- How do teacher training courses incorporate experiential learning or practical experiences related to interacting with and supporting invisibly disabled students?

The above questions require a detailed analysis of the curriculum of teacher training programs in terms of the theoretical and experiential components. Analysis of the programs reveals a generic observation of teacher training programs varying widely in their inclusion of content related to special education and disability awareness. While some programs incorporate comprehensive modules on inclusive education, others barely address the specific needs associated with invisible disabilities. This inconsistency can lead to significant disparities in teacher preparedness.

Teacher training courses may not adequately prepare educators to address invisible disabilities, as they often focus primarily on visible disabilities. These courses typically cover topics such as physical disabilities, sensory impairments, and sometimes intellectual disabilities, which are more easily identifiable. However, the training may lack sufficient depth or emphasis on understanding and accommodating conditions like chronic pain, mental health disorders, or learning differences, which fall under the category of invisible disabilities. For example, within the curriculum of teacher training programs, modules on special education or inclusive teaching practices may prioritize discussions and case studies related to visible disabilities, such as mobility impairments or visual impairments. While these topics are essential, there may be limited or no specific instruction on recognizing and supporting students with invisible disabilities. Pre-service teachers graduate with a limited understanding of the diverse needs of students with invisible disabilities and are not equipped to effectively support them in the classroom.

Implications for Teacher Training Institutions:

Teacher training programs should benefit from expanding their curriculum to include more comprehensive coverage of invisible disabilities. This could involve incorporating case studies, guest lectures, and practical experiences that highlight the challenges faced by students with invisible disabilities and provide strategies for creating inclusive learning environments. Additionally, faculty members could undergo professional

development to enhance their own awareness and understanding of invisible disabilities, thereby better preparing them to educate future educators on this crucial, significant and much neglected area.

The curriculum of teacher training programs must be critically updated to include the following actions:

- Developing and implementing a protocol for the early identification of students with invisible disabilities.
- Providing resources and training to enhance teacher awareness of invisible disabilities, covering aspects such as definitions, barriers, and identifying characteristics.
- Organizing professional development opportunities to improve teachers' understanding of invisible disabilities and their ability to make effective adaptations and accommodations.
- Incorporating training on the use of assistive technologies that can support students with invisible disabilities.
- Promoting collaborative practices among teachers, special education professionals, and families to support students with invisible disabilities.
- Including case studies and simulations in training programs to give teachers practical experience in identifying and supporting students with invisible disabilities.
- Ensuring on-going assessment and feedback mechanisms to continually improve teachers' skills and strategies in working with these students.
- Emphasizing the importance of a supportive and inclusive classroom environment that respects and values the diversity of all students.

Conclusion:

Current teacher training programs are often insufficient in preparing future educators for the challenges associated with invisible disabilities. While some programs have made strides in inclusive education, many still lack the depth and practical focus required to address these issues effectively. This theoretical exploration underscores the critical need for teacher training institutions to enhance their curricula and training methods to better prepare future educators for the realities of invisible disabilities in the classroom. By implementing targeted strategies and fostering an inclusive educational environment, teacher training programs can ensure that all students, regardless of their visible or invisible challenges, receive the support they need to succeed.

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