

Stigmatisation of Hidden Disabilities in India: Teachers' Perspectives of Inclusive School Communities for Dyslexic Learners

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 23 Feb 2025 Last revised: 28 Aug 2026 Accepted: 29 Aug 2026 Available online: 31 Aug 2026 Keywords: English Language Teachers (ELTs) Dyslexia Social stigma Inclusive schools	<i>Indian government policies and programs have expedited the inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream inclusive schools in India. However, various barriers plague the translation of the policies into practice. Set in Hyderabad, a city in southern India, this paper reports data gathered through an exploratory case study design. The paper examines the English-medium inclusive school community for dyslexic learners from the perspective of 16 English Language teachers (ELTs). Findings show that although a majority of the study's participants were philosophically grounded in the rights-based approach, challenges posed by the school community impeded the practice of inclusive education in the sample schools. Most of the participants acknowledged that students with dyslexia faced social stigma, isolation and rebuke within the schools. They were denied their right to quality education and equal and full participation within their schools due to teachers' lack of pedagogical skills and knowledge. Further, negative attitudes of the school community at large also impeded the implementation of inclusive practices within these schools. This paper argues that, alongside systemic support for inclusion through teacher training and education to develop inclusive pedagogical practices, addressing the cultural attitudes and beliefs that stigmatise children with dyslexia is essential. Additionally, the lack of training for teachers in the conceptual and pedagogical understanding of how to engage specifically with children with dyslexia needs to be addressed to ensure the inclusion of these students in mainstream, inclusive schools is productive and allows them to reach their full potential.</i>

INTRODUCTION

India adopted The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Government of India) Act in 2016. This Act is a milestone in itself, as it enabled a shift from earlier medical model-based policies, acts, and legislation to a human-rights-based approach. The Act outlines the specific rights of children with disabilities to receive inclusive education and reasonable accommodation within education. It attempts to create an environment of equity, protect their rights, and ensure their full participation in society. The Act has expanded the categorisation of disabilities

from seven to 21 types. It takes into its ambit some hidden disabilities, such as speech and language disability and intellectual disabilities (specifically learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorder), as legally recognised disabilities and provides reservations in education and jobs for people with these disabilities (Government of India, 2016).

Policies offer direction; however, their enactment does not guarantee optimal implementation. Though 21 types of disability are foregrounded with this Act, the issue of implementing inclusive education that plagued the country continues. Inclusive education requires a holistic approach that engages the entire school community. Of course, aspects such as pedagogy, curricular and assessment modifications, and teachers' skills in practising inclusion are essential factors that ensure the optimal implementation of inclusive education. However, perceptions and attitudes of the school community, comprising principals, teachers, students with and without disabilities, and their parents, greatly influence the social inclusion and well-being of students with disabilities in inclusive schools (Kalyanpur, 2020; Ramchand, 2025; Sawhney, 2015; Singal, 2019; UNESCO, 2019).

Using a disability studies lens, one sees disability as socially constructed (Brooks & Bates, n.d.). In social constructionism, "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent on human practices, being constructed in and out of interactions between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Meanings are constructed through social and conventional norms which precede us. These pre-existing systems influence our daily lives, and we also influence them (Crotty, 1998). The social construction of disability is influenced by how we view it as a society. It shapes the policy discourse, norms, value systems, and practices towards people with disabilities.

Within the Indian context, the social construction of disability is framed by the dominant cultural conceptions of normality and deviation. The role of Karma is crucial in understanding disability in India. Disability is believed to be retribution for the sins of one's past or present life. It comes with its share of social stigma, which results in a lack of acceptance of people with disability (Ghai, 2015; Klasing, 2007; Obeyesekere, 2006). In the case of visible disabilities, people are found, in many instances, to be confined to their homes and/or not reported in the census data to avoid the stigmatisation and discrimination that comes with being disabled (Klasing, 2007; Mehrotra, 2011).

The social construction of disability is also reflected in Indian policy and public discourse, wherein a hierarchy exists among the types of disabilities. This underlying perception results in people with physical disabilities, such as motor, hearing or visual impairments, gaining prominence, whereas people with hidden disabilities are often ignored (Johansson, 2016). Within schools, the types of disability tend to influence teachers' attitudes towards students. Teachers are more receptive to and accommodating of students with physical disabilities than of those with intellectual or cognitive disabilities (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Kamran & Siddiqui, 2023; UNESCO, 2019). In the Indian school context, teachers are relatively more open to accepting children with physical or mild disabilities as opposed to children with intellectual, cognitive and profound disabilities (Sawhney, 2015; UNESCO, 2019).

Dyslexia, a hidden disability, does not affect the regular day-to-day activities and functioning of people with dyslexia (Fletcher et al., 2007). The hidden characteristics of dyslexia lead teachers to underestimate its gravity and overlook the need to provide adequate support in day-to-day classroom learning for dyslexic learners (Peltier et al., 2022). Studies have shown that the lack of awareness about dyslexia, its characteristics and how to support students with dyslexia invariably leads to detrimental social and emotional consequences for dyslexic learners (Livingston et al., 2018).

Research shows that general education teachers lack sufficient knowledge about dyslexia (Gwernan-Jones & Burden, 2010; Karande & Kulkarni, 2005), leading to serious misconceptions that compromise their engagement with dyslexic learners (Peltier et al., 2022; Woolfson & Brady, 2009). In many contexts, English language teachers (ELTs) have been found to have little awareness of dyslexia and are not adequately prepared to teach English to students with dyslexia (Fišer & Kałdonek-Crnjaković, 2022; Kalyanpur, 2020; Mohammad, 2022; Özçelik & Elverici, 2024).

The RPWD Act (2016) provides legal protections and rights for individuals with hidden disabilities, such as dyslexia, emphasising inclusive education, non-discrimination, and access to education and employment opportunities. Inclusion requires more than placing students with different learning needs in general education. Sharma et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of preparing and training new graduate teachers to effectively include all students in mainstream schools regardless of their individual needs. Teachers must be trained to engage with students with dyslexia and provide them with effective learning tools (Woolfson & Brady, 2009).

India is a multilingual country. English has become the 'lingua franca' and is the aspirational language for Indians. English-medium education is favoured and considered the ticket to improved employability, better social status, and upward social mobility. (Rose et al., 2021). The mastery of English is highly valued. The inability to acquire this skill is often associated with low intelligence and shame (Sreekanth, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the present paper explores the English-medium inclusive school community for dyslexic learners from the perspective of ELTs responsible for developing students' English language skills. Also, the aim is to explore ELTs' experiences and challenges in teaching English to dyslexic learners in inclusive schools in Hyderabad. The central question addressed in this paper is: how supportive do ELTs think the English-medium inclusive school community is of students with dyslexia? In doing so, the paper also aims to engage with their experiences teaching English to students with dyslexia.

METHODOLOGY

Using an exploratory case study approach, rich context-bound information was gathered (Creswell, 1994; Stake, 1994) with an underlying belief that the experiences of ELTs in teaching the English language to students with dyslexia were fraught with complexities and, hence,

needed to be understood from many dimensions (Yin, 2003). Private mainstream English-medium inclusive schools across Hyderabad that reported enrolling students with dyslexia in the primary grades (Grades I-V) were considered to encompass the case.

Research sample

As part of a previous field study, the researcher had a list of private mainstream English-medium inclusive schools across Hyderabad. Drawing on this list, through purposive sampling, eight schools that enrolled dyslexic learners formed the sample schools for this paper. These schools are situated in urban neighbourhoods with students from middle-class and affluent families. The schools are affiliated with the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) or the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) board. Each school had two ELTs for the primary grades (Grades I-V). Thus, the sample comprised 16 ELTs across the eight schools. Table 2 details the ELTs' educational background and professional experience.

Table 2
ELTs' educational background and professional experience

School	ELT	Gender	Educational Qualification	Overall Teaching Experience
School 1	1	Female	Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed.)	5–10 years
	2	Female	B.Ed.	10–15 years
School 2	1	Female	B.Ed.	Above 20 years
	2	Female	B.Ed.	Above 20 years
School 3	1	Female	B.Ed.	5–10 years
	2	Female	B.Ed.	10–15 years
School 4	1	Female	B.Ed.	15–20 years
	2	Female	B.El.Ed.	10–15 years
School 5	1	Female	B.Ed.	Above 20 years
	2	Female	B.Ed.	Above 20 years
School 6	1	Female	B.Ed.	10–15 years
	2	Female	B.Ed.	Above 20 years
School 7	1	Female	B.Ed.	Above 20 years
	2	Female	B.Ed.	10–15 years
School 8	1	Female	B.Ed.	Above 20 years
	2	Female	B.Ed.	Below 5 years

Before data collection started in the first school, the ELTs were asked about the number of dyslexic learners across the primary grades. At this point, they asked, “Do you want to know only about the students with a certificate of dyslexia or the others too?” On seeking clarification, it was found that there were two sets of dyslexic learners. One set was diagnosed and certified as dyslexic, and another set was labelled as dyslexic by either the ELTs themselves or subject teachers in the school. Thus, all ELTs were asked to list these two sets of students in their classes. Table 1 lists the students diagnosed with dyslexia or labelled by teachers in each school.

Table 1
Listing of students either diagnosed or labelled with dyslexia across the sample schools

School	No. of students diagnosed with dyslexia	No. of students labelled as dyslexic by the teachers
School 1	3	4
School 2	1	3
School 3	10	8
School 4	8	12
School 5	2	5
School 6	7	6
School 7	3	2
School 8	8	10
Total	42	50

Methods of data collection

Ten hours of non-participatory classroom observations (Yin, 2003) were conducted in the ELTs' classrooms. Grades with dyslexic learners (diagnosed and labelled) formed the sample classes for observations. Data gathered were recorded as detailed field notes for each ELT to ensure a thick description of the data. This engagement provided an opportunity to observe the ELTs' interactions with students in the classroom and to observe student-teacher interactions. Data gathered through this technique provided insights into teachers' attitudes, pedagogical practices, and the challenges and struggles of engaging with these students. Understanding of students' classroom participation and their relationships with peers and teachers was also gathered through the observations.

Observations were followed by semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) of 30–45 minutes each with the ELTs. Data gathered from observations were incorporated into the interviews to understand the ELTs' perspectives on how the school's community engaged with dyslexic learners. Furthermore, the ELTs' experiences and challenges in engaging with dyslexic learners (diagnosed and labelled) in the language classroom were also explored.

Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed to ensure accurate information was retained and to avoid the distraction of taking notes during interviews. Using Robson's (2002) inductive approach, data were analysed through familiarisation and immersion in the dataset. Descriptive codes were allocated through open coding. This allowed for the development of a low-level of abstraction to identify emerging themes. The initial data codes were combined in the next stage to form narrative codes and clustered into different themes. This allowed the overall analysis to be collapsed around a few core ideas and their interrelationships.

Ethical issues

The ELTs were informed of the study's objective, and voluntary consent was obtained. Since the study also involved classroom observations, students were informed that the primary

purpose of the observations was to observe the ELTs' engagement with students in the classroom (Pirini et al., 2014). The purpose of this research and the students' roles was explained appropriately. All protocols to avoid the conundrum of deception, making clear the right to withdraw at any time during the research and to withdraw from participating in the classroom observations at any point, were explained to the students and the teachers. ELTs were informed of their right to decline to participate and to withdraw at any time, and to withdraw any part of the data at any time (Pirini et al., 2014). To ensure confidentiality, schools and ELTs have not been named.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) construct of trustworthiness was incorporated to address issues of validity and reliability of the qualitative data collected for this paper, with opportunities for scrutiny by colleagues, peers and academicians. Furthermore, a thick description of the empirical evidence and the fieldwork context has been presented. An audit trail was maintained, and quotes were used to discuss the findings (Shenton, 2004).

FINDINGS

As discussed in the sampling section, two groups of dyslexic learners were identified across all eight schools: those formally diagnosed with dyslexia and those whom the ELTs/teachers labelled as dyslexic. The ELTs across the schools referred to both sets as students with dyslexia, even if, in some instances, they did not agree with the label of dyslexia attributed to the learner. The findings discussed below, therefore, combine these two sets of students unless specified otherwise.

Superficial understanding of dyslexia

Six of the 16 ELTs were unaware of mechanisms such as Curriculum-based Assessments (CBM), the Dyslexia Assessment for the Languages of India (DALI), or any battery of tests used in psychoeducational testing to assess students for dyslexia. Yet all six ELTs believed they could identify dyslexic learners in their classes.

Some of them have been diagnosed by professionals, others are not. If you observe the students carefully, you will often see they are struggling with learning English. If they are given extra time or asked to stay back during the break, they will finish at least some work. If you see how they interact with their peers, you can identify the characteristics, we can get some idea that the child has dyslexia. (ELT 1, School 2)

The ELTs in all eight schools were confident that they knew the characteristics of dyslexia. One of the foremost characteristics listed was the disability that affects students' reading and writing skills.

Rudimentary understanding of dyslexia: On probing what dyslexia entails, ELTs from schools 2, 5 and 7 demonstrated a rudimentary understanding of dyslexia. These ELTs gave examples of students mixing the alphabet 'p' with 'q' and 'b' with 'd'. However, they could not elaborate on the technical aspects, which caused dyslexic learners to mix up these letters. Explaining this, ELT 2, School 5 stated:

It's a disability ... These students mix up alphabets like p for q. They are weak in academics. I think they are not interested, they don't want to try to remember the alphabet. They keep daydreaming, don't pay attention, so they make these kinds of silly mistakes. So many spellings mistake they make. I ask them to write 20 times but still they will make the same mistakes.

It is interesting to note that while these ELTs did relate to dyslexia as a learning disability, they also stigmatised the dyslexic learners as not being interested in or motivated towards academics. ELTs perceived the problem as stemming from dyslexic learners being lazy or lacking interest in academics, resulting in poor academic performance. Not only were dyslexic learners blamed for their lack of effort and desire to learn, but their parents were also believed to be uninterested in supporting their children in learning. The ELTs, in fact, did not believe dyslexia to be a disability. ELT 2, School 2 discussed:

When I did my B.Ed., there was nothing like learning disabilities. Now, more and more types of disabilities are coming. Maybe the child has a disability, but it is a minor issue. If only the parents and child put more effort into learning the language. Many parents use this as an excuse for their child's low performance. They want their child to get the benefits ... like extra time, scribe ... during the board exams.

It was found that senior ELTs were more unlikely to believe dyslexia to be a disability. They perceived it as a matter of disinterest or laziness on the part of the learners that could be addressed with more effort by the learners and their parents. These ELTs did not believe in the concept of dyslexia. Expressing her doubt on the genuineness of dyslexia being a disability, ELT 1, School 7 expressed:

Are there new disabilities being identified now? When I was in school, those who did not read well or made spelling mistakes, they were asked to write the spelling on the board many times. They got homework to write the spelling 20–30 times, and then they learnt it. Did they not? I am not saying there is no problem, but I really think more effort is needed from these students and their parents.

It was also found that in these three schools, the ELTs' perception towards dyslexia was mainly shaped by the general discourse around learning disabilities. The movie *Taare Zameen Par* was cited as the first time they heard of dyslexia. The inclusion of dyslexia in the RPWD Act 2016 and the schools' policy on including children with disabilities were discussed as instances that made them aware of dyslexia. Discussing the sources of their knowledge of dyslexia, ELTs 1, School 2 and ELT 2, School 7, respectively, stated:

The first time I learned about dyslexia was years ago when I watched the movie Taare Zameen Par. Principal Ma'am has always encouraged inclusion in the school. She often tells us it's important to include all types of students. The new Disability Act (RPWD), which came a few years back, has added learning disabilities. The school counsellor also told us it's normal for these students to be confused with some alphabets; reading and writing are a problem for them.

I came to know about it from the social media. Suddenly, there is a focus on learning disabilities. There was a workshop in the school for teachers where they explained that dyslexia affects the language-grasping skills of these students.

Intermediate understanding of dyslexia: Elaborating on the cause of dyslexia, ELTs, Schools 1 and 6 were able to discuss some technical aspects related to dyslexia. For example, ELT 1, School 6 said, "Dyslexia is a neuro-developmental condition". ELTs from these two schools stated that it was challenging to identify dyslexia in children until they were actively engaged in phonological tasks. In describing the characteristics of dyslexia, ELT 1, Schools 1 and 6, respectively, opined:

I understand it to be a disability, as it hinders the student's academic performance. It's not only about the English language classroom. If they have dyslexia, it will affect their academic performance in other subjects too. The students' reading, writing, and expressive writing skills are affected. These skills are needed across subjects.

It's a processing problem in the brain. The child can't recognise the alphabet and mixes it up, saying p and q or b and d, or words like saw with was.

ELTs from these schools had opportunities to attend workshops on teaching students with disabilities, which enabled them to better understand dyslexia. Explaining how she learnt about dyslexia, ELT 2, School 6 elaborated:

Some of the easiest ways to hear about it are through the media. There are so many movies about disabilities set in schools or around education. Even through the newspapers, awareness is created. But this does not help us understand why the disability is there or how to address it. We had some sessions with the special education teacher, and she often comes to assist me in class. She told me specifically about the student's condition, and my knowledge increased.

Modest understanding of dyslexia: ELTs from the remaining three schools, schools 3, 4 and 8, were most knowledgeable about the characteristics of dyslexia and the issues related to it. ELT 1, School 8 and ELT 2, School 3 explained:

Dyslexia is a learning disability, and the primary issue is due to the brain's difficulty in processing. The students will have issues with linear sequencing. Following a list of instructions can become difficult for this student. There are aspects of short-term memory and coordination issues, they can be clumsy.

Dyslexia would result in a lack of accuracy in word reading and spelling skills. It can create visual and auditory processing issues for these students. They can't do reading comprehension well. They have difficulty with accurate word recognition. They make spelling mistakes and have poor decoding abilities.

Even though characteristics of dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD or other hidden disabilities can overlap, these ELTs were found not to have that clarity and were often found to isolate a specific character to a specific disability. However, it was found that the more dyslexic learners ELTs worked with, the clearer their understanding of these disabilities, the possible overlaps, and that dyslexia can play out in multiple ways. ELT 2, School 4 explained:

Not all students with dyslexia will act out the same way or need the same kind of support. There are levels of mild, moderate and severe dyslexia. Based on the severity of impairment, individual students respond to issues differently. In my years of teaching, I have taught only students with mild dyslexia.

ELTs in schools 3, 4 and 8 also reported the above-discussed sources for their knowledge about dyslexia. However, they pointed out that regular interaction with the special education teachers (SET) and counsellors helped them understand the needs of the different dyslexic learners. Discussing how her knowledge of dyslexia evolved over the years, ELT 1, School 8 elaborated:

My initial belief was that these students don't want to put in the effort, their parents don't support them or their mental age does not match their physical age. The general environment in the school is to be more supportive of these students. Special education teachers sensitise us to the condition. Some previous teachers will tell us what works with the child and why the child behaves in a particular fashion. At times, some short workshops are organised. Some of it also comes from my own interest to know more so I can support and encourage them in their academic work. The more I understand why the student is struggling, the more targeted approach I can bring in to support him.

ELTs in these schools understood that to support dyslexic learners, it was important to have a lucid understanding of what specific support the learner requires.

Perceptions: undermined gravity disassociated from reality

ELTs across the schools were found to argue for the right of a child with a disability to be in a mainstream inclusive school instead of a special school. There were instances during observations when the ELTs were found to counsel the subject teachers on the benefits of inclusive education, the rights of a child with a disability to study in mainstream schools, and/or to suggest strategies to support their learning. While a small number of the ELTs did not view dyslexia as a disability, given that there were “no visible telltale identifiers” (ELT 1, School 7), others considered it a disability that required accommodations in pedagogy, practices and curricular and assessment adaptations. However, all the ELTs believed that there was little

they could personally do to support the English-learning needs of dyslexic learners, as “it is a lifelong condition” (ELT 2, School 6).

Misconceptions, doubting the diagnosis and the learners’ capabilities: Findings showed that in schools 2, 5 and 7, the ELTs and subject teachers viewed dyslexic learners as having low IQs and believed them to be often distracted and involved in disruptive behaviour. In the remaining schools, subject teachers had similar perceptions. Discussing this, ELTs 1 and 2, Schools 5 and 3, respectively, opined:

They have low IQ, they can’t read or remember spellings. They will get into fights with the others; often, they need to be counselled.

The subject teachers will say there is a problem with the IQ. These students misbehave; they are always fighting in class or daydreaming all the time. The problem is that the teacher doesn’t want to work with the child. Principal Ma’am is very encouraging and gives strategies. These teachers don’t follow through. They think the child and parents are making excuses. When it’s about disability, many teachers will think it’s not worth putting in effort with the child.

Labelling and stigmatisation by teachers: In most instances, the label of being dyslexic was primarily attributed to the learners by subject teachers. With the label came stigmatisation. Discussing this, ELTs 2, School 6 and 4 and ELTs 1, School 6 remarked:

Many times, the subject teachers will come to the staff room and complain about certain students! They name students and say the student is not performing well in their subjects. They complain about spelling mistakes students make, about not reading properly ... Even with no testing, they say these students have dyslexia.

What these (subject) teachers will do, you know, they will see some habits of the child certified as dyslexic, and then they will project these traits to the other children. They are sensitive and considerate to the child, but the stigma of disability is there. They don’t believe in the child’s capabilities. They don’t have the capacity to address the students’ academic needs. Some of them will be polite and not shame the child publicly in class, but in the staff room, they will say that the child has dyslexia and is hopeless.

Occasionally, we use oral testing instead of asking the students to take written exams. But frankly, they think the student has a low IQ ... I know some of the students labelled as dyslexic are just struggling with the language and don’t have a disability, but you should hear the teachers’ conversations in the staff room. They don’t expect much from the student if he has a disability. All children at this age (Grade III) mix up the spellings. I ask you, didn’t you ever get confused with the phonetics and mix up the spellings? You know you have to give the child time! You just can’t label them or say it’s the language teacher’s job to ensure they learn the language.

Similar findings were reported across the schools. Not only were subject teachers presuming learners to be dyslexic, but they were also engaging in conversations among themselves, demeaning the dyslexic learners. The negative conversations perpetuated an unfavourable image of the learners among teachers. ELT 2, School 3 reported:

Some children are diagnosed, for some, the teachers presume dyslexia is there. Lunchtime, when we sit together, challenges from classrooms are discussed. They will tell the child is useless, does not work, is arrogant, or something or the other, they will talk negatively. What happens then is the other teacher, who has never taught the child, has already formed an opinion that these students will behave like this and will think let me not waste my time on this student.

ELTs were asked whether the learners labelled as dyslexic spoke English at home. Refuting this, ELT 2, School 4 stated:

I think they speak English outside school. Even if they don't speak English at home, these children have other options. Not having the opportunity to speak in English? I don't think this is possible. They come from homes that have access to the internet and media. At least one of the parents will have good English-speaking skills.

On further probing, it was found that these learners' struggles with English could be attributed to a lack of exposure to English and opportunities to practice it outside the school environment. All the sample ELTs believed that the students in their schools came from families that used English at home; even though they could not strongly support their arguments, they continued to believe the students' families were fluent English speakers. Thus, according to the ELTs, the students' difficulties and struggles with learning English were related to their lack of interest and motivation to learn the language.

Behavioural issues of dyslexic learners: Seven of the eight schools had counsellors who addressed behavioural issues as and when they occurred. All the ELTs other than those in schools 3, 4 and 8 regarded dyslexic learners as needing frequent counselling to encourage them to study. Few ELTs perceived dyslexic learners as having disciplinary issues. While ELTs in schools 3, 4 and 8 viewed that each case presents differently, some dyslexic learners would demonstrate disruptive behaviour in certain situations, others could become quiet and withdrawn. Explaining this, ELTs 1, School 2 and 3 stated:

This child is always angry and will go pick fights with others, he will disturb the others and spoil their work and not let them concentrate. All these children get provoked easily.

If the child is not kept busy with work, he will get fidgety and disturb the others. I sometimes give the students picture books and keep them busy with that.

Ill-equipped to teach dyslexic learners: ELTs from schools 1, 6, 3, 4, and 8 felt helpless as they did not believe they had adequate skills to support dyslexic learners. Even though

observation data show they attempted different pedagogies and methods in their classes, they perceived themselves as ill-equipped to develop the requisite English language skills for dyslexic learners that would enable them to function in the outside world. These ELTs agreed that the foundational years were essential to building language skills.

Using phonetics, I can support them to some extent, especially in the foundation years. That way, eventually, they can write exams. It's easier in mild cases of dyslexia; with moderate dyslexia ... only oral testing works. (ELT 1, School 4)

Expressing her helplessness in engaging with dyslexic learners, ELTs 1, Schools 3 and 8 elucidated:

I think what we do is tokenistic. The child should be able to read. It is about developing literacy skills. They need more support and guidance than we can provide them. It is my primary responsibility as I am the English language teacher. But I am not trained to teach them.

We understand the child's issues, but the reality is that it is very difficult for me to provide assistance given the diversity in the class and the number of students! I know what we do is not sufficient to support them. We can ensure they move beyond Grade V and eventually pass Grade X, but we should give them skills to survive the real world. I don't think we do justice to them.

Whose responsibility is it to develop English language skills?: Most of the ELTs considered SETs to be more knowledgeable and capable of supporting the needs of dyslexic learners in their English language learning. Some excerpts from the interviews with the ELTs elaborate on these concerns.

There are students with Autism, IDD and Dyslexia in the class. Generally, the same method will work for all of them. These children need extra time and effort. Special teachers come to the class to help these students. Sometimes the students are sent to the resource room for remedial classes. I can't do much to support them because I need more training. Overall, I can give them some special attention, but then other students get neglected, so I have to be selective in giving my time to these students. (ELT 2, School 6)

All students with disability have a problem in learning. They all need special methods. We have little training in teaching children with disabilities. There are four to five students with disabilities in my class. I can't give individual attention to everyone. The special education teacher takes care of their reading and writing skills. (ELT 2, School 1)

The ELTs reported that subject teachers in their schools believed the onus of teaching students to read, spell and write neatly in English was primarily the responsibility of the ELTs. All ELTs across the eight schools reported subject teachers to "blame" them for the dyslexic learners' lack of reading, writing, spelling and reading comprehension skills.

Subject teachers complain about the spelling or English language skills of certain students. They blame us (English Language teachers) because so and so students do not read well, makes grammatical errors ... (ELT 2, School 8)

The overall culture towards inclusion and children with disabilities is good in our school. But with learning disabilities, there is a different perception among some teachers. They presume the child has dyslexia; they will tell me to work on his language skills. (ELT 2, School 4)

Parents' fear of screening for dyslexia and diagnosis: As discussed in the previous theme, the ELTs were inept to the characteristics of dyslexia and how it could play out differently among the learners. Yet they reported advising parents to get their child screened and diagnosed for dyslexia. Similarly, subject teachers were reported to make such suggestions to parents. ELT 2, School 6 remarked "often they (subject teachers) ask parents to get the child tested for dyslexia".

Responding to how the parents received these suggestions, ELTs reported that parents did not accept the possibility of their child having dyslexia and resisted a screening for dyslexia. While a few ELTs perceived these suggestions for screening children in some instances were unwarranted, others attributed the resistance to the stigma attached to people with disabilities. Discussing these concerns, ELT 1, School 4 argued:

There are tests to diagnose a student with dyslexia. Parents don't want to get their child tested. Rightly so! Because children are being children! You know they have no disability-related problems! Children would rather play than sit in class the whole day. They don't want to study because they want to play. It is not a disability. In many instances, the parent will not want to go for testing, if the child gets diagnosed with dyslexia, they have to deal with the stigma of the child being disabled.

Stigmatisation brought on by the community: The ELTs' perceptions of the school community's outlook, attitude and engagement with dyslexic learners are already embedded in the above-discussed themes. However, few ELTs, who were sensitive towards dyslexic learners, clearly expressed their strong feelings towards the traumatic experiences dyslexic learners endured in their schools. Discussing this, ELTs 1, Schools 3 and 4 and ELTs 2, Schools 6 and 8 elaborated:

I can only do this much with my limited knowledge. I can support them to some extent. But how much can I achieve if the other teachers break the child's confidence or the peers make fun of them? The entire community needs to have faith in the capabilities of these children.

Ours is an inclusive school; you can see the principal, and all are so pro-inclusion, but you can also see what happens in the classroom. Of course, there is a stigma towards disability and more so for conditions like dyslexia, because people feel these kids are faking it. Parents of non-disabled children complain that these students get unnecessary provisions that help them score better. No one pays attention to the ridicule, rebuke and humiliation these students face daily.

My sympathies are with these children. I know I don't do enough, I don't have the skills. But I will never humiliate the child. I feel sorry for the pressure these children have to go through. They have performance pressure and anxiety. It is stressful for them. One student came to me and said "I don't want to come to school ... everyone makes fun of me".

Some parents of children without a disability say that the certificate of dyslexia gives these students an advantage. They think the student does not need it, but has got it because the parents paid a bribe. They say this certificate allows children who are dumb to score well.

The attempt to develop an inclusive culture within the sample schools was evident in the interviews with the ELTs. The principals and some of the ELTs are sensitive and considerate of the issues faced by dyslexic learners, but the larger community seems to stigmatise these students implicitly and explicitly.

Experiences and challenges of teaching dyslexic learners in English Language classrooms

Experience of teaching dyslexic learners: Irrespective of how well the ELTs understood dyslexia, data from observations show the ELTs used a combination of structural, functional and interactive pedagogies to teach the learners. Activities such as collective reading of texts, individual reading, questions and answers, writing on the blackboard, and using flashcards were used to engage the learners.

Across the schools, ELTs were observed to need guidance in addressing these learners' academic needs in their classrooms. As reported by ELTs across the eight schools, school principals supported inclusive education and provided whatever support teachers required. During observations, it was noted that the principals, SETs, and counsellors often visited the classrooms to engage with the learners, counsel them when needed, or offer words of encouragement and support. To some extent, support and guidance from the principals, SETs, and counsellors enabled the ELTs to teach these learners. Schools 2, 5 and 7 did not have SETs. For the ELTs in these schools, only the principals' knowledge and motivation enabled them to teach dyslexic learners in their classes. ELT 2, School 5 reported:

Our school principal is very determined to offer inclusive education. She has always encouraged us to support students with disabilities. The counsellor is also there. I seek their support in teaching students with dyslexia, but the problem comes with not finding the time to give one-on-one attention to the students. They need a lot of my time. So many times, I ask them to read, but they can't ... other students get restless when this student is struggling with the reading.

The remaining five schools had SETs who could support dyslexic learners, and they were often observed visiting the class and working one-to-one with them. As part of this interaction, SETs would coax the dyslexic learner to copy notes from the blackboard, read the questions aloud, encourage them to read, etc.

The reason ELTs receive little guidance from SETs on how to teach dyslexic learners is that, in the Indian context, SETs are trained to address a single disability. None of the SETs in the sample schools was trained to address the needs of dyslexic learners. Thus, no accurate methods could be developed to teach these learners. Observations show students with dyslexia often step out to interact one-on-one with the SETs. Across the eight schools, ELTs reported participating in generic professional development courses on inclusive education for students with disabilities, but not specifically on dyslexia.

Provisions and pedagogical adaptation for dyslexic learners: Most of the ELTs mentioned providing provisions as suggested by the RPWD Act (2016) for dyslexic learners. More specifically, ELTs discussed provisions, such as prompters, scribes, readers and extra time for dyslexic learners during examinations. ELT 1, School 5 stated:

See, in another school, they would have to move to a special school after Grade V. However, our principal is very supportive of students with disability. Even if they don't perform, these students will continue at this school. Sometimes, I will ask the boy sitting next to this child to complete the notes for them. Then, the parents can help the child learn from these notes. But the dyslexic student can't remember.

Findings from the classroom observation and interviews with the ELTs showed that irrespective of the level of awareness and support from the SETs and the principals, ELTs made few changes in their pedagogy and practices. Similarly, they reported a few pedagogical changes that they had heard of being made by subject teachers. The lack of training in engaging with dyslexic learners, time and the need to complete the curriculum were cited as primary reasons for not being able to support the dyslexic learners. Five of the eight schools were found to occasionally use ICT to engage dyslexic learners, providing visual and auditory cues that enhance their English language learning.

Dyslexic learners marginalised by teachers and peers: ELTs from schools 1, 3, 4, 6 and 8 argued that being considerate and sympathetic towards these students was important. Yet, it was observed that these ELTs did not provide learners with adequate time or support, despite their awareness and sensitivity. Data from observations showed that ELTs at these schools occasionally conversed with dyslexic learners during classroom interactions. They gave them fewer opportunities to respond to questions, even though the students often raised their hands and volunteered. Observation data show that, largely, dyslexic learners are ignored, and ELTs would get impatient with them or ask one of their peers to support the dyslexic learner. ELTs in Schools 2, 7, and 5 were observed to be consistently impatient with dyslexic learners. During interviews, all ELTs acknowledged that dyslexic learners experienced "social neglect" (ELT 1, School 4). Observations showed that in all schools, dyslexic learners worked independently. Even when they were put in groups, they ended up being isolated by their peers. Interactions among these students and their peers were observed to be limited to necessary conversations and communication, even during break time and playtime.

In schools 1 and 6, it was observed that often peers would stop the dyslexic learner from volunteering to read a text or write on the board. These learners were ridiculed by their peers

for their slow reading pace. For instance, in school 1, when a student with dyslexia raised his hand, wanting to do loud reading in class, a peer immediately spoke up to the teacher and said, “Ma’am, not XX, he makes mistakes and is very slow. We will never finish the reading if he reads”. The others immediately joined in agreement. To all of this, ELT 1 said, “okay, okay, quiet!” and moved on to pick another student to do the reading. During the interview, when this instance was brought up, the ELT reported, “Sometimes I go with what the class wants, at times I try to argue. I need to consider completion of the syllabus too, so I can’t take too much time”.

However, in Schools 3, 4 and 8, ELTs were more supportive and more concerned about the social and educational engagement of the dyslexic learners. In these schools, peers were also observed to be most respectful and supportive of dyslexic learners. Data from observations show peers prompting the student with dyslexia during reading time, nudging them to go back to writing when they are distracted, or simply giving them space if they want to vent their frustrations or are unable to accomplish a task.

When discussing the behaviour and interactions of dyslexic learners, ELTs from schools 3, 4, and 8 were found not to demean them in their classes and were quick to stop instances of bullying. For example, ELTs 2, School 3 and 4 stated:

Students pick up the cues from teachers. In my class, I ensure that no student will laugh or make fun of these students when they make errors or struggle with the reading. But I know for a fact that dyslexic students are bullied. They are bullied in the corridors during lunch breaks. Among themselves, the students talk of these children by referring them as duffer. See, these students are very young. They don’t even understand the concept but know something is not normal.

We stop the students from making fun of a student with dyslexia. One day, when this child was writing on the board, he wrote the wrong spelling. A student stood up to try to help him get the spelling correct. We try to put them in groups and encourage them to support each other.

ELTs in these schools discouraged their peers from ridiculing dyslexic learners. Overall, students in these schools were found to be more receptive to dyslexic learners than those in schools 2, 5, and 7.

Non-cooperation from parents of students without a disability: ELTs across all schools reported the lack of support from parents of children without a disability as a challenge they found difficult to overcome. Explaining this, ELTs 2, Schools 4, 6 and 8 explained:

But our issue is parents of children without disabilities. They don’t want their child to interact with the students diagnosed with dyslexia. These students get socially isolated and go into a shell. The little progress I make is lost.

Parents will tell us that their child's spelling is going bad because of the child with dyslexia. They don't want their child to be associated with students with disabilities.

They (parents of children without disability) feel it will be a distraction for their child if they become part of the buddy system and support the students with disabilities. Some students come up to us to say they don't want to be part of the buddy system because their parents are against it. We try to put them in groups with diverse abilities so they learn to support each other. You do this and the next day, the parent will send a note to request that we don't do so. Parents of non-disabled children are not always supportive and in PTMs (Parent-teacher meetings), they will say, "My child will also get lazy and not want to work. Please keep him away from that child" (a student with dyslexia/disability).

DISCUSSION

Dyslexia is an underlying notion that is invariably not apparent. The symptoms range from moderate to severe (Fletcher et al., 2007). Identifying dyslexic children is challenging (Snowling et al., 2020). However, within the sample schools, despite lacking clarity about what dyslexia entails, teachers were found to 'identify' learners they perceived as dyslexic. For these learners and the ones who were screened and diagnosed as dyslexic, the primary identity of the student became 'dyslexic child'. This identity was riddled with negative connotations.

In instances where ELTs did not believe in the concept of dyslexia, they labelled these learners as lazy, disinterested, or not motivated to learn. They believed more efforts from the learners and/or their parents would improve their English language learning. In some instances, parents of non-disabled peers believed that the diagnosis of dyslexia for a learner in their child's class and the provisions that it provided were detrimental to their child. These parents felt that provisions and accommodations given to dyslexic learners resulted in a disadvantage for their child. The level of misunderstanding seeps down to parents of non-disabled students, who believe that spelling errors are contagious and that a child who does not make these errors would learn to do so merely by associating with a dyslexic learner (Bhengu, 2006; Leseyane et al., 2018; Nugent, 2008; Riddick, 2010).

The identity of being a 'dyslexic learner' brought with it a social stigma that required non-disabled peers to be kept at a distance from students with dyslexia. This identity brought with it stigmatisation, rebuke, isolation and bullying. Link and Phelan (2001) describe stigma as involving labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, adverse emotional reactions, and discrimination. The findings discussed in this paper clearly show that dyslexic learners are singled out in the sample schools. Even in instances when a diagnosis was warranted, parents were hesitant to do so due to the fear of stigmatisation attached to a confirmed diagnosis.

Some ELTs expressed that dyslexic learners' engagement with the school's community was traumatic. They were socially stigmatised and reproached by almost every school community

member, be it teachers, peers or parents of non-disabled peers. Being diagnosed results in stigma. Likewise, not getting diagnosed also results in stigma. Either way, there is no respite for dyslexic learners in the sample schools (Alexander-Passe, 2015; Lisle, 2011; Nugent, 2008; Roe, 2004).

The social construction of disability in India is based on the deficit model that focuses on the shortcomings in the person. The lack of visible markers in dyslexia results in some learners being deprived of the provisions and support they rightly deserve because the 'deficit' is invisible. For others, it brings with it social stigma of being disabled because, in the Indian context, disability comes with social stigma (Ghai, 2015; Klasing, 2007; Obeyesekere, 2006). Negative perceptions and attitudes of school community members contributed to the social stigma that hindered dyslexic learners from accessing opportunities of full participation and having a sense of belongingness to their schools.

CONCLUSION

Findings discussed in this paper show that, although most ELTs and principals were philosophically grounded in the rights-based approach and sensitive to the needs and concerns of students with dyslexia, challenges within the school community impeded the practice of inclusive education in the sample schools. Most of the ELTs themselves acknowledged that students with dyslexia faced social stigma, discrimination, isolation, and rebuke within the schools. While they were enrolled in inclusive schools, they were denied their right to quality education and equal and full participation within their schools due to teachers' lack of pedagogical skills and knowledge. Further negative attitudes of the school community also hindered the optimal implementation of inclusive education in these schools.

Including learning disabilities within the ambit of the RPWD Act of 2016 does not suffice; more significant systemic issues need to be addressed. In-service and pre-service teacher training is needed to enable teachers to develop inclusive pedagogical practices. Teacher training curricula should address the dimension of Indian cultural attitudes and beliefs that stigmatise dyslexic learners. Additionally, training for ELTs in the conceptual and pedagogical understanding of how to engage specifically with dyslexic learners needs to be addressed to support the inclusion of these learners in mainstream inclusive schools.

A limitation of the paper is that it does not engage with learners diagnosed with dyslexia, those labelled as dyslexic, or their parents. Undoubtedly, qualitative interviews with this sample set would provide valuable insights. However, this paper aimed to explore the English-medium inclusive school community for dyslexic learners from the perspective of 16 English Language Teachers (ELTs).

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