

Commentary: Blindness, schools for the blind: Our scenario!

The current prevalence of blindness in children in India is known to be around 0.8 per 1,000.^[1] In developing countries, 30% to 72% of pediatric blindness is avoidable with most, in fact, being preventable.^[2,3] The causes of blindness, based on studies conducted in blind schools, have shifted from preventable causes to irreversible causes due to better health care facilities.^[4] Paradoxically, according to the present study's authors (IJO_3725_20) Vasudha Kemmanu *et al.*, study^[4] and our experience, children with low vision and correctable blindness are wrongly included in blind schools, and children who are actually blind are sent to regular schools.^[4,5] Likewise, children with low vision are recruited in regular schools, who actually need special teachers (integrated education) to help them. There is a definite disparity in recruiting children in blind schools and regular schools.^[4] This implies that we need to improve the way we are examining children, categorizing the type of visual impairment and blindness, and issuing certificates. Certifying that a child is blind needs to be standardized irrespective of the issuing authority, and if required, appropriate investigations and opinions from nearby higher centers can be obtained. This can eliminate the common problem of error of inclusion and exclusion in schools for the blind.^[4] Apart from this, there is definite misuse of the whole system to obtain disability certificates so as to avail the benefits made available for these children. This can be minimized if proper guidelines are laid down to establish a diagnosis, personnel/authority to issue certificates, and how to avoid various practical problems and errors. These guidelines should be standardized and implemented universally. It is important to motivate parents of visually challenged children to allow their children to get an education in schools that are best for them. Yet another pathetic situation is that there is a gender-based difference: male children more often are privileged to get an education compared with girls.^[4] Parents fear to send their girl child to a residential school, far away from home, which is a natural feeling. To overcome this, we probably need to have schools with hostels exclusively for girls with lady teachers and supporting staff. This may motivate parents and make them feel secure to send their daughters to school. To conclude, we need to standardize the guidelines to define vision impairment and blindness, certification process, and service delivery. Strengthening the schools for the blind and regular schools for integrated education with regard to infrastructure, human resources, and adequate training is very essential. Emphasis should be on equal distribution of schools for the blind, and details of the same should be uploaded on the website. Needless to say, we need to increase the awareness about vision impairment and blindness among the general public.

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