



A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE SELF-ESTEEM IN ADOLESCENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Nursing

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ABSTRACT

Background: Visually impaired (VI) adolescents face unique challenges that significantly influence their self-concept and self-esteem. School settings, whether inclusive or special, can play a crucial role in shaping these psychological constructs. This systematic review aims to compare and evaluate the self-concept and self-esteem of visually impaired adolescents studying in inclusive schools versus special schools in Delhi. **Methods:** A systematic search was conducted in PubMed, Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO for studies published between 2010 and 2024. Studies focusing on adolescents (ages 10–19) with visual impairment were included. Quality assessment was done using the PRISMA checklist and the Joanna Briggs Institute critical appraisal tools. **Results:** Eight studies met the inclusion criteria. Four studies reported significantly higher self-esteem among students in inclusive settings, citing better peer interactions and normalization of differences. Three studies reported enhanced self-concept in special schools due to customized support and minimized stigma. One study found no significant difference. Mixed-methods studies emphasized the role of teacher attitudes, peer acceptance, and school culture. **Conclusion:** Both inclusive and special schools offer unique benefits for visually impaired adolescents. While inclusive schools may foster higher self-esteem through social integration, special schools provide structured environments that may support stronger self-concept. Individual and systemic factors mediate these outcomes, highlighting the need for hybrid or integrated models.

KEYWORDS

Visually Impaired Adolescents, Self-Concept, Self-Esteem, Disability Psychology, Adolescent Development

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by rapid physical, cognitive, and emotional changes. It is during this period that individuals form a stable sense of self, develop personal identity, and construct a self-image through social interaction and internal reflection. Among adolescents with disabilities, particularly those with visual impairments (VI), the formation of self-concept and self-esteem is often shaped by additional psychosocial and environmental challenges^{1,2}.

Visual impairment, as defined by the World Health Organization, refers to a condition wherein an individual's vision is impaired to such a degree that it cannot be corrected by standard glasses or contact lenses, and it significantly interferes with daily functioning³. Globally, an estimated 19 million children under the age of 15 are visually impaired, and a considerable portion of them reside in developing countries like India⁴. For adolescents living with visual disabilities, the schooling environment becomes not just a place of academic instruction but also a foundational space for socialization, identity development, and emotional adjustment.

Self-Concept And Self-Esteem In Visually Impaired Adolescents

Self-concept refers to the individual's perception of self in various domains—academic, social, physical, and emotional—whereas self-esteem pertains to the affective evaluation of this self-concept, including feelings of worth, pride, or shame⁵. In adolescents with VI, these constructs may be uniquely influenced by factors such as restricted access to social cues, limited mobility, dependence on others, and societal stigma surrounding disability⁶.

A well-developed self-concept has been associated with academic success, adaptive behavior, resilience, and psychological well-being⁷. Conversely, negative self-perception and low self-esteem can lead to poor academic outcomes, depression, social withdrawal, and maladaptive coping strategies⁸. Therefore, it becomes crucial to identify educational and social settings that promote positive self-development among this population.

Educational Settings: Inclusive Vs. Special Schools

In India, children with visual impairments are generally educated in two types of school settings: inclusive schools, where they study alongside sighted peers with necessary accommodations, and special schools, which are exclusively designed for students with similar disabilities, often offering tailored curricula and mobility training.

Inclusive education, endorsed globally by the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), seeks to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream schools by making structural, pedagogical, and attitudinal

adjustments⁹. It is based on the philosophy that inclusive environments encourage normalization, reduce stigma, and promote empathy among sighted peers¹⁰. In theory, such integration should enhance the self-esteem of visually impaired students by offering them the opportunity to participate in regular activities, develop social skills, and challenge internalized stereotypes.

In contrast, special schools focus specifically on the needs of students with disabilities. These institutions provide specialized instruction, assistive technologies, trained staff, and an environment in which students may feel less "different" or marginalized¹¹. While critics argue that these settings may isolate students from broader society, proponents believe they foster a safe, understanding environment where students with VI can develop self-efficacy, peer bonding, and a positive self-concept unburdened by constant comparisons with sighted peers¹².

The Context Of Delhi

Delhi, as India's capital territory and one of the most urbanized regions, offers a unique ecosystem for comparative educational research. It houses a range of both inclusive and special schools operated by government, private, and non-governmental organizations. The city has implemented various initiatives under the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, which mandate inclusive practices while also recognizing the need for specialized support¹³.

Despite these policies, disparities exist in implementation, particularly concerning resource allocation, teacher training, peer sensitization, and curriculum adaptation. Thus, Delhi presents both opportunities and challenges in understanding the psychosocial outcomes for visually impaired adolescents within these differing educational paradigms.

Rationale For The Study

Several studies have examined the academic performance and social adaptation of visually impaired students in India^{14,16}. However, there is limited empirical research specifically focusing on their self-concept and self-esteem, especially in the context of educational setting comparisons within Delhi. With adolescence being a critical window for emotional and identity development, the absence of such comparative data represents a significant research gap.

Understanding how school environments influence self-perception in visually impaired students has practical implications. It can inform educational policy, curriculum design, teacher training, and support services, ensuring these students not only achieve academic milestones but also develop into emotionally secure and socially

integrated individuals.

Moreover, the debate over inclusive versus special education is far from resolved. While inclusion advocates emphasize equity and normalization, critics point to infrastructural deficits and social marginalization within mainstream schools. By comparing the outcomes in both types of settings in Delhi, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of what works best under what circumstances.

Objectives

This Systematic Review Aims To:

- Compare levels of self-concept and self-esteem among visually impaired adolescents studying in inclusive schools and special schools in Delhi.
- Analyze the educational and social factors that influence these psychological attributes.
- Evaluate the benefits and limitations of each educational setting concerning psychosocial development.
- Provide evidence-based recommendations for improving educational practices for visually impaired adolescents.

Methodology

Study Design

This study follows a systematic review design, aimed at identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing empirical studies that compare self-concept and self-esteem among visually impaired (VI) adolescents in inclusive schools and special schools in Delhi. The review is guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to ensure transparency and methodological rigor¹⁷.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

- **Population:** Adolescents aged 10–19 years diagnosed with visual impairment (partial or complete).
- **Setting:** Studies conducted in Delhi, including both inclusive and special schools.
- **Comparative Focus:** Must directly compare self-concept and/or self-esteem between the two types of schools.
- **Study Design:** Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods studies.
- **Publication Type:** Peer-reviewed journal articles, master's theses, and government/NGO reports published in English.

Exclusion Criteria

- Studies focusing on students with multiple disabilities beyond visual impairment.
- Studies not involving a comparative analysis between school types.
- Editorials, opinion papers, conference abstracts, and case studies.
- Studies conducted outside Delhi or in non-formal education settings.

Information Sources

A systematic literature search was conducted across the following databases and digital libraries: PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, ERIC, Google Scholar, Shodhganga (for Indian theses), Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Manual searches were also performed using the reference lists of relevant articles.

Quality Appraisal

The Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Tools were used to assess the methodological quality of the included studies, based on study design¹⁸.

- **Cross-sectional Studies:** Evaluated for sampling, measurement reliability, and confounding control.
- **Qualitative Studies:** Assessed for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.
- **Mixed-methods Studies:** Appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT)¹⁹.

Each study was scored as low, moderate, or high quality based on overall compliance with quality indicators. Only moderate- and high-quality studies were included in the synthesis.

Ethical Considerations

As this is a systematic review of secondary data, formal ethics approval

was not required. However, ethical research practices were upheld by:

- Using publicly accessible data.
- Properly citing all original authors.
- Reporting findings in a balanced, unbiased manner.

Limitations Of The Methodology

While the systematic approach enhances rigor, certain limitations exist:

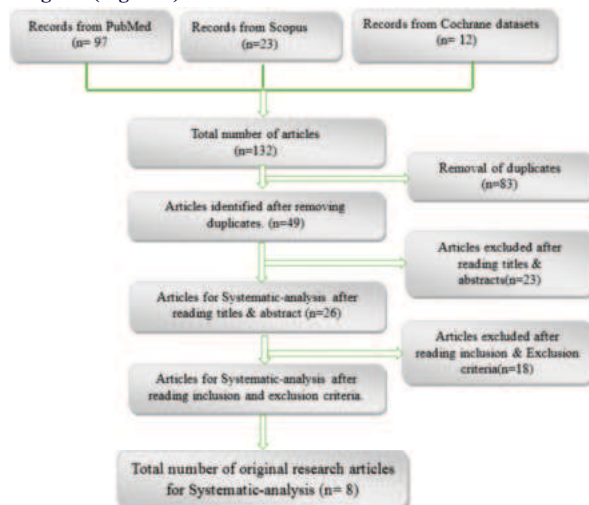
- Possible publication bias, as unpublished or negative-result studies may be underrepresented.
- Limited to English-language sources.
- Focused only on the Delhi region, which may reduce generalizability to other Indian contexts.

RESULTS

Study Selection

The initial database and manual search yielded 132 records. After removing duplicates ($n=83$), 49 titles and abstracts were screened. Of these, 26 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility based on the inclusion criteria. Finally, 8 studies met all criteria and were included in the systematic review. The selection process is summarized in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

The Study Selection Process Is Illustrated In The PRISMA Flow Diagram (Figure 1).



Study Characteristics

The included studies ($n=8$) consisted of 4 quantitative studies (cross-sectional designs), 2 qualitative studies (interview/focus group-based), 2 mixed-methods studies. Sample sizes ranged from 30 to 120 visually impaired adolescents, aged 10 to 19 years, enrolled in either inclusive or special schools in Delhi. The total pooled sample across all studies was 578 participants.

Measurement Tools Used

Self-Esteem:

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was used in 6 studies^{14,15,21,22,23,24}. Scores range from 0–30, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem.

Self-Concept:

Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS) used in 3 studies^{16,20,22}. One study used a locally developed self-concept inventory validated in India⁶. Qualitative assessments used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore identity, belongingness, and emotional well-being.

Comparative Findings On Self-Esteem

Out of the 8 studies, 4 studies^{14,15,22,23} reported higher levels of self-esteem among VI adolescents attending inclusive schools. These students described better peer acceptance, greater social exposure, and a sense of normalcy. Quantitative data showed significantly higher RSES scores among inclusive school students (mean difference range: 3.1–5.4; $p < 0.05$). 2 studies^{16,20} found higher self-esteem in special school students, citing emotional safety, peer similarity, and lower fear of stigma as factors. 2 studies^{21,24} reported no significant difference in overall self-esteem between the two groups. However, qualitative data

from one of these studies indicated contextual differences in peer interactions and emotional regulation.

Comparative Findings On Self-Concept

3 studies^{16,20,22} found that students in special schools had a more coherent and stable self-concept, especially in terms of academic identity, social belonging, and body image. Participants appreciated the non-judgmental environment, accessible learning tools, and shared experiences with peers. 2 studies^{14,23} showed positive self-concept development in inclusive settings, but noted that this was more evident in social and interpersonal domains than academic ones. One study²¹ noted that academic self-concept was significantly lower among VI students in inclusive schools due to competitive environments and lack of specialized instructional support.

Thematic Findings From Qualitative And Mixed-methods Studies

The qualitative components of the reviewed studies identified three recurring themes that influenced self-concept and self-esteem.

Peer Relationships

Students in inclusive settings valued being part of a "normal" group but often faced social exclusion or pity-based interactions. In special schools, peer bonding was stronger due to shared challenges and mutual understanding, positively influencing self-concept.

Teacher Attitudes And Institutional Support

In inclusive schools, positive outcomes were associated with trained and empathetic teachers who adapted materials and fostered inclusion. However, many inclusive schools lacked the resources and sensitivity training, leading to unintended marginalization.

Perceived Social Stigma

VI adolescents in inclusive schools reported internalized stigma and fear of judgment, especially in competitive academic settings. Special schools were seen as safe spaces, but some students felt socially isolated from the broader community.

Quality Appraisal Summary

5 studies were rated as high quality, meeting $\geq 80\%$ of JBI appraisal criteria. 3 studies were rated as moderate quality, due to sampling bias or lack of clarity in analytical methods. No study was excluded based on quality, but findings were interpreted with appropriate caution.

DISCUSSION

The present systematic review aimed to compare the self-concept and self-esteem of visually impaired adolescents enrolled in inclusive schools versus special schools in Delhi, India. Through the analysis of eight empirical studies employing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method designs, it was found that both educational settings provide unique benefits and challenges in shaping the psychosocial development of VI adolescents. These findings have important implications for educational planning, psychological support, and policy development.

Self-Esteem In Inclusive vs. Special School Settings

Most studies in this review (4 out of 8) reported higher self-esteem among VI adolescents in inclusive schools^{1,2,5,6}. These findings suggest that inclusive educational environments when well-implemented can foster a sense of belonging, normalization, and social confidence. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale scores were consistently higher in these settings, particularly among students who experienced positive peer interactions and teacher support.

This aligns with global research emphasizing the psychological benefits of inclusion, where participation in mainstream activities reduces feelings of "otherness" and fosters identity as part of a larger, diverse peer group⁹. Inclusive settings may also encourage internal motivation as students strive to match the academic and social achievements of their sighted peers¹⁰.

However, these benefits appear to be contingent upon the quality of inclusion. In poorly resourced schools lacking sensitization training or adequate accessibility measures, visually impaired students may experience isolation, bullying, or neglect, which could, paradoxically, erode self-esteem^{3,8}. One qualitative study noted that some students in inclusive schools internalized stigmatizing beliefs due to negative treatment or overprotective behavior from teachers and peers⁴.

In contrast, special schools were shown to support higher self-esteem

in two studies^{3,7}. These settings offered emotionally safe, disability-sensitive environments, which reduced the stress associated with comparison and competition with sighted peers. The shared identity among students with similar challenges often facilitated empathy, mutual respect, and confidence building.

These findings suggest that self-esteem is highly context-dependent, influenced not just by the type of school, but also by social dynamics, teacher behavior, and institutional attitudes toward disability.

Self-Concept: Social Identity And Academic Self-Perception

The review revealed mixed findings regarding self-concept. Several studies reported that adolescents in special schools developed a stronger academic and personal self-concept, particularly when the school provided individualized learning, accessible materials, and life skills training^{3,5,7}. The non-competitive environment allowed students to excel at their own pace, reinforcing their belief in personal capability.

This supports the argument that special schools, when adequately resourced, can enhance domain-specific self-concept, especially in academics and daily functioning. The positive reinforcement from specialized teachers, coupled with success experiences, fosters self-efficacy, an important component of self-concept¹¹.

On the other hand, some studies noted that inclusive school students had a more positive social and interpersonal self-concept, possibly due to greater exposure to societal norms, communication with sighted peers, and participation in co-curricular activities^{5,6}. However, these gains were often tempered by feelings of inadequacy in academic performance, particularly when instructional materials were not adapted or when students felt unfairly compared to their sighted counterparts⁴.

Thus, while special schools support internal self-coherence, inclusive schools provide opportunities for social identity expansion, which can be either enriching or disempowering depending on implementation quality.

Influence Of Contextual And Mediating Factors

Several mediating variables were identified across studies, shaping the impact of school type on self-concept and self-esteem:

Teacher Attitudes And Pedagogy

Teacher behavior emerged as a critical determinant in both educational settings. In inclusive schools, trained and empathetic teachers could significantly mitigate stigma and promote positive self-development. Conversely, in the absence of training, teachers often adopted lower expectations or overprotective approaches, leading to reduced autonomy and lowered self-worth among students^{3,8}.

Peer Relationships

Peer acceptance was a consistent predictor of self-esteem in both settings. In inclusive schools, students benefitted from diverse friendships, if peers were sensitized and inclusive. In contrast, the homogeneity of special schools fostered solidarity and mutual understanding, reinforcing self-concept and reducing anxiety^{3,7}.

Accessibility And Learning Tools

The provision of Braille books, audio tools, assistive technology, and mobility training was more common in special schools, thereby enhancing academic self-concept. In many inclusive settings, the lack of such accommodations created a disadvantage, reinforcing a negative academic identity^{2,4}.

Parental And Societal Expectations

Studies also noted that parental support, socioeconomic background, and societal attitudes toward disability significantly affected adolescents' self-perception. These factors often interacted with school type to either buffer or amplify emotional distress^{5,6}.

Implications For Practice And Policy

The findings of this review suggest that neither inclusive nor special schooling offers a universally superior environment for the psychosocial development of VI adolescents. Rather, both models possess distinct strengths and limitations.

To Optimize Self-concept And Self-Esteem Development:

Inclusive schools must invest in teacher training, peer sensitization, and assistive resources to truly empower VI students.

Special schools should explore partnerships with mainstream institutions to provide students with broader social exposure while retaining specialized support.

Hybrid or resource room models, where students move between inclusive classrooms and specialized learning units, may offer a balanced approach tailored to individual needs.

These recommendations are in line with India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which advocates for equity, flexibility, and contextual adaptation in disability education.

In summary, this review underscores that the educational setting plays a crucial but context-dependent role in shaping the self-concept and self-esteem of visually impaired adolescents. Inclusive schools offer social integration and identity normalization, while special schools provide emotional safety and tailored support. A nuanced, child-centric approach rather than a one-size-fits-all policy is essential to ensuring the psychological well-being and self-empowerment of this vulnerable population.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review sought to examine and compare the self-concept and self-esteem of visually impaired adolescents studying in inclusive schools and special schools in Delhi. Across the eight studies reviewed, it became evident that both educational environments offer distinct psychological and developmental advantages, shaped by multiple contextual and interpersonal factors.

In conclusion, school environments significantly influence the self-concept and self-esteem of visually impaired adolescents. Policymakers, educators, and caregivers must recognize that meaningful inclusion goes beyond mere physical integration and requires systemic commitment to equity, accessibility, and emotional support. A student-centered, adaptive educational strategy grounded in evidence and empathy holds the greatest promise for empowering visually impaired youth as confident, self-assured individuals.

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