The Challenges Experienced by Visually Impaired Students in Moroccan Universities

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Abstract

The current study aims to investigate the challenges and the barriers that encounter visually impaired students in the educational environment, particularly in Moroccan universities. To find out these challenges and barriers, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 15 visually impaired students from the majority of Moroccan universities through interviews to explain the challenges that these students experience in their studies mainly during the exam. Equally important, this research will examine the impacts of these challenges on the academic performance of this kind of population with disabilities in Morocco. The study found out that students with visual impairment experience four main challenges in Moroccan Universities including administrative, academic, environmental, and social difficulties. On the basis of these findings, a set of recommendations to Moroccan policymakers was made to respond properly to the needs of persons with disabilities, and to deal with these challenges that visually impaired students face when learning and taking exams in higher education regularly. Indeed, this research will play a crucial role in raising the awareness of Moroccan universities about the meaning of inclusive education and the importance of creating an inclusive and diverse environment where visually impaired students can lean equally as their non-visually impaired peers.

Key-words: visually impaired, inclusive education, discrimination, inequality, challenges, performance, policy makers

Introduction

People with disabilities mainly visually impaired students are among the most excluded and discriminated groups in our societies in general and in Moroccan society in particular. More than 400 hundred Thousand (Alachraf, Achahir, Maamari, Yahi, Al Hakim, Yaela, Youness, Dilwani, & Makdachi, 2022) visually impaired people in Morocco who experience various forms of discrimination and inequality based on their gender, social status, age, and place of residence among others. In many Moroccan universities, visually impaired students encounter several complexities that stand as a challenge for them to start or even pursue their education. Lack of the main facilities and spaces to meet the needs and support students with special disabilities is among these challenges that contribute to making visually impaired students unwilling to attend schools or universities. This difficulty is translated in reality by the huge rate of absence and dropouts in primary, secondary, and mainly higher education.

Before embarking on the main issue of the challenges that face visually impaired students in Moroccan universities, it is useful to provide some background information about the history of teaching visually impaired students from 19 century onwards in Morocco.

In the past few decades, visually impaired students were neglected , marginalized, and considered as a burden on Moroccan society that must be escaped from, they were excluded from Moroccan society which hold a negative attitudes and misconceptions about blind people, At that time no schools or curricula were designed for fully sighted students, those later did not even receive support services from vision support teachers or classmates nor interventional measures to help them overcome their visual limitations.

Visually impaired students were superheated from non-visually handicapped students and they were fully prevented from participating in schools as their normal peers **(Kroum & Benmassoud, 2017**). Schools were not able to accept them due to several reasons including lack of training, experience, and education on how to teach visually impaired students: Teachers didn't know how to deal and teach those kinds of handicapped students, they lack appropriate techniques and materials to support and to teach these people as equally as their normal classmate.

A few years ago, the movement of inclusive education emerged in Morocco, this project aims to integrate and incorporate visually impaired students in schools equally as their normal peers. This movement emphasizes the need of producing and adopting new teaching materials, approaches, teaching styles, and routines to adapt and familiarise the VI students with the classroom environment. Indeed this movement reflects that inclusive education is the main solution to help change society's negative vision toward blind people, as it is also a great opportunity to prepare visually impaired students for their future roles in Moroccan society and create a kind of social integration as Anne, 2004 stated in her book the *Gambia: Department of state for basic and secondary education* that inclusive education is beneficial not only to the blind students but to all other students in schools because it enhances social integration **(Anne, 2004).**

Although inclusive education was considered a new system that emerged not many years ago, it was and still is not implemented in many Moroccan higher institutions. This can be observed by the decreasing number of visually impaired students in public universities in Morocco, these students attend inclusive education and are taught by the same materials, approaches, teaching style, and routine and examined in the same manner and the same subject content with their non-visually impaired peers. Therefore, this situation makes these students face a lot of challenges and difficulties in their studies that affect their academic achievement.

Review of literature

Several scholars have discussed the challenges and difficulties experienced by visually impaired students including blind and low vision students in an educational environment. One of these scholars is Bwire Maindi (2018) who stated that one of the most challenges facing visually impaired students in the educational environment mainly the science educational environment is the curriculum that is fully designed for fully sighted students and delivered through sight-related tasks (**Bwire Maindi, 2018**). However, designing an expanded core curriculum is an essential solution to develop and enhance the skills and senses of the visually impaired student to access information effectively. The expanded core curriculum (ECC) is an

essential curriculum that is considered foundational in preparing visually impaired students for success as adults. Indeed, the ECC was formalized by Dr. Philip Hatlen in 1996 Based on nine components: Compensatory access, sensory efficiency, assistive technology, orientation and mobility, social interaction, self-determination, independent living, recreation and leisure and career education (**The expanded core curriculum**)

Lack of learning materials is another challenge experienced by visually impaired students such as audio tape, braille, enlarged print assistive devices, technology, and other materials and other resources that support the needs of visually impaired students. In their article challenges and opportunities to implement inclusive education Wondwosen Mitiku, Yitayal Alemu and Semahegn Mengsitu (2014) indicated that the major challenge to the implementation of effective inclusive education is the lack of educational materials written in Braille and other supportive materials **(Mitiku, Alemu, and Mengsitu, 2014).** Similarly, Etenesh (2000) suggested that the lack of materials and learning resources designed for visually impaired students is the main challenge to the implementation of inclusive education in Ethiopia **(Etenesh, 2000**). Drawing on the same dichotomy Abebe Demisew (2014) stated that different factors which destructively affected the implementation of inclusive education including lack of awareness about disability, scarcity of resources, inappropriate curriculum, shortage of trained and skilled teachers (**Demisew 2014).**

The lack of trained and skilled teachers also stands against the learning development of visually impaired students. When teachers lack the competencies and skills to deal with and teach visually impaired students, those later may encounter a lot of challenges in their education. In his article "teaching students with visual impairments in inclusive classrooms a case study of one secondary school in Tanzania", Baraka Michael Mwakyeja (2013) stated that teachers' incompetence and inefficiency play a major role in increasing the challenges and difficulties facing visually impaired students **(Mwakyeja, 2013).** In this regard, the Ministry of education must provide training programs for teachers to train and educate teachers on how to use sign language, use braille materials, preparation of hearing aids, tactile diagrams and maps, and so forth.

Lack of application of policies on inclusive education also affects the learning process of visually impaired students. Although inclusive education was mentioned in Moroccan's policies, its application on the ground remains very weak in both public and private schools, as well as universities. The inclusive education policies are underutilized by teachers and staff members because of insufficient teaching methods, materials, and training for teachers, inspectors, and apprentices to make them better equipped to support this category of students based on a careful assessment of these children and their learning speed.

The lack of assistant staff in schools and universities constitutes a major obstacle and a challenge for this category of students particularly on the day of the exam. Many visually impaired students in Morocco encounter a difficult challenge on the day of the exam, as they cannot find anyone to help them write on the exam paper. However, some of them ask their classmates to assist them, but those later may have exams at the same period or they may lack commitment and accuracy. Therefore, both schools and universities must pay great attention to this particular problem and work hard to provide frameworks and assistants for this category of students to support them on the day of the exam.

Lack of time necessary to understand courses may also be considered a barrier to the learning and educational process of visually impaired students. Students who are visually impaired are slow in the learning and understanding process (**Kapur, 2018),** they need time to understand information and to complete their tasks and duties effectively. This makes the situation hard

for both VI students and teachers who need to ensure that visually impaired students understand, listen carefully and pay adequate attention to their visually unimpaired classmates. Indeed, it may be necessary for teachers to consider the amount of time allotted to visually impaired students and give them the necessary time to realize and understand the information, as well as enough time to answer the questions, especially on the day of the exam.

The lack of services and special units and committees to support disabled persons in universities and schools is another obstacle that faces visually impaired students. A unit of services needs to be established in both schools and universities to meet the needs of visually impaired students in a more organized and effective manner, as well as to consider their demands and solve any issues or problems concerning their learning. Those special committees and units should not only work as a consultant but also as monitors to ensure that every college, departments, faculties, and language centre provide the necessary facilities and supportive services for visually impaired students.

Lack of acceptance and a welcoming environment is one of the most challenges encountering visually impaired students and their caregivers. Receiving refusal can make it more difficult for visually impaired students and their families to acquire accurate information, knowledge, and skills to prepare them for successful career job. As a result of this rejection, visually impaired students feel that they have become a heavy burden on their parents and society in general, which reflects negatively on their psychological condition. Indeed, many schools and universities in Morocco view visually impaired students as a burden that is difficult to bear due to the lack of resources, materials, facilities, and skilled teachers. In his Article challenges encountered by students with visual impairments and teachers in an integrated school environment, Bornes Chepngetich Korir (2015) sheds light on several challenges that are experienced by the visually impaired students including the negative attitudes of the administration which consider visually impaired students as a burden to school, and as a consequences they do not meet their needs like providing the necessary learning materials even though they pay fees (**korir, 2015**).

The lack of an inclusive environment at schools and universities also contributes to making the learning of visually impaired students more challenged. Feeling neglected and unappreciated at schools and universities make visually impaired students experience a kind of anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and isolation. When there is a lack of collaboration and lack of interaction among students and teachers, visually impaired students feel isolated and alienated. Thus, has a huge and frustrating negative impact on their performance in the educational and learning process.

Lack of parents' support and participation also stands as a barrier to visually impaired students' development and learning process. The majority of visually impaired students belong to low-income families, and poor and marginalized families, whose parents are often illiterate and they did not possess the skills and abilities to reinforce learning and education among their visually impaired children. The income they receive is not enough for them to buy and provide their visually impaired children with the necessary assistive devices, technology, and other materials. Consequently, visually impaired student will not be able to achieve a kind of improvement and progress in their learning and educational process. Fauzia Khurshid and Sufiana Malik (2011) conducted a study on the perception of visually impaired youth about familial, academic, and caregivers. They found that both visually impaired students males and females experienced a lack of social support from caregivers and visually

impaired male students who stay long hours in hostels face more difficulties (**Khurhid & Malik, 2013).**

This is just a summary of the main challenges encountered by visually impaired students, as we cannot address all the difficulties in this short article, but rather this needs a broad study. However, researchers and scholars need to investigate other difficulties and challenges facing visually impaired students at the universities including administrative difficulties, academic difficulties, physical and environmental, and social difficulties.

This topic needs more attention to make society aware of the difficulties and challenges faced by this category of students and also to create an inclusive and diverse environment where people with or without disabilities come together and stimulating integration between them. To achieve such interaction, it is necessary to eliminate as many thresholds as possible by providing initiatives that enlarge accessibility holds as possible.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews based on purposive sampling will be adopted to investigate the main challenges and barriers that encounter visually impaired students in the educational environment, particularly in Moroccan universities.

The semi-structured interview is considered and referred to as a conversation with a purpose (**Burgress, 1984**) it is a widely used technique and method in qualitative research, it focuses on conversational style to explore particular themes, and to learn about the motivations behind people's choices and behaviours, their attitudes and beliefs. The semi-structured interview is a data collection method in which the interviewer does not follow a formalized lots of questions, but he or she asks participants a set of open-ended questions and follows them up to explore participants' thoughts and beliefs about a particular topic in more detail. The advantage of the semi-structured interview is that:

> *"The researcher can critically scrutinize the conversation and varied initially superficial responses during the SSI to arrive at multi-layered conclusions. A researcher can further follow up most of the time, all verbal and non-verbal responses, such as hunches, laughter, and silence, to reveal hidden information that may turn out to be helpful in the final data analysis of different themes extracted from the conversation" (**Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, as cited in Kakilla, 2021).**

The purposive sampling consisted of 15 students with visually impaired disabilities from different universities in Morocco purposive sampling is also known as judgment, selective or subjective sampling is a sampling technique by which the researcher uses his expertise and judgment to select a sample that is most useful to the purpose of the research. In his article, Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling, Etikan Ilker (2016) stated that the " researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by knowledge or experience" (**Etikan, 2016, p.2)**

1- Objective of this research

In this research the main objectives was to investigates the main challenges that encounter visually impaired students at Moroccan universities, in order to raise the awareness of policy makers, administrators and professors to find out possible and effective solutions to these

challenges and barriers that encounter visually impaired students in educational environment particularly in universities.

2- Hypotheses

Based on the goals mentioned above, the pronounced hypotheses are as the following:

H 1 In Moroccan universities visually impaired students do not receive any assistance from the administration to meet their needs and help them find solutions to their academic problems.

H2 One of the most prominent problems that blind students encounter during the examination period, is represented in their inability to find someone committed and reliable to write on their behalf on the day of the exam particularly most exams in universities take the form of written exam instead of oral exams.

H 3 Although some Moroccan universities start accepting and including blind, deaf, handicapped , and disabled students, inclusion resources in the form of unit services, teaching learning devices and materials, welcoming environment for effective inclusion are still missing .

3- Data collection

In semi structured interview, the interviewer develops questions and conversation to draw information from the interviewee about their thoughts, beliefs and attitudes. In this type of interview, the interviewer may prepare a list of questions that will be used to guide the conversation. Indeed, in this research the semi structured interview incorporated nine main questions, each being supplemented by possible follow up questions to draw out more specific evidence and to deepen the responses to a question and also to increase the richness of the data being obtained about the candidate's asset. The main questions prepared for the interviews were as follow:

Q 1 What are the administrative difficulties that you encounter? Do you receive any kind of support and service from the administration? Do you find that the administration is able to meet all of your requirements?

Q2 What are the academic difficulties that you encounter at the university?

Q4 What are the most difficulties you encounter during the exam period?

Q5 Do you find that the time that professors allocate in explaining their lessons is sufficient for you to absorb the lessons?

Q6 As a visually impaired students, what are the environmental and physical difficulties that you encounter most?

Q7 what are the social difficulties that you encounter as visually impaired students with your teaching, administrative staff?

Q8 What are the social difficulties that you encounter with your peers of ordinary students?

Q9 Are there any other difficulties that you want to talk about?

Results and discussion

Concerning the administrative difficulties that face visually impaired students in universities, the majority of visually impaired students agreed that the administration does not take their needs and requirement seriously and this is due to the absence of the necessary means and facilities to respond to these challenges. Another difficulty that encounters visually impaired students are related to the absence of frameworks that are specialized in academic guidance, which makes them vulnerable to many social and psychological problems. At the beginning of each university year, visually impaired students need some kind of guidance and preparation to support them in their academic course. However, the absence of this guidance leads visually impaired students to feel alienated and surrounded by mixed feelings of fear and psychological instability.

One of those visually impaired students from Chouaib Doukkali confirmed that:

"When I went to the administration office to complete the registration process or to ask for my papers, the administration takes a lot of time to meet students' requests, especially us" He adds *"there is a lack of communication and guidance, which make us feel unequal as the administration does not definitely and seriously respond to our requirement".*

As for the academic difficulties that visually impaired students encounter, the majority of students agreed that the most prominent of those challenges are: the difficulty of competing with non-visually impaired students, the difficulty of taking exams, and the struggle of absorbing and understanding the educational material mainly those related to laboratories. However, these difficulties can be explained based on many direct or indirect factors, one of them is the loss of vision to perform well academically, the lack of commitment of some volunteer students or workers at the universities to support students on the day of the exam. Extra time allowance to completely understand the assignments and integrate the information.

The lack of volunteers to write on the day of the exam is considered a big challenge and burden for students with visual impairment. Visually impaired students make a great effort to find volunteer students to support them write on the day of the exam in addition to the lack of extra time allowance to complete their writing, students with low vision take a longer time to complete the dictation process. Therefore, the volunteer students' commitment and accuracy on the day of the exam play a great role in the writing process, especially in the English language, where students with disability are held responsible for the spelling errors committed by the volunteer students who are doing the writing process, which forces visually impaired students sometimes to spell some words for the students' writer, the things that lead to the expiration of the exam time.

One of the visually impaired students from Ibn Tofail university in Kenitra claimed that " *I find it hard to find someone who can help me write on the day of the exam because at that time the majority of students have exams or are busy preparing for their exams, in most cases, when we find students who can help, we may encounter other difficulties represented in the writing process, especially in French and English language where we have to dictate each word separately, and this requires a lot of additional time and effort"*

Regarding the physical and environmental difficulties, the participants stated that the university facilities and buildings are not suitable for students with visual impairments, the learning environment is unpleasant for visually impaired students, and the classrooms are poorly equipped with appropriate equipment, materials, infrastructure, and facilities. Moreover, the university libraries lack the appropriate number of halls prepared for visually

impaired students. Furthermore most disabled students rarely participate in the academic activities organized by the university because the building and facilities inside the university are not suited for their needs.

In our interview with a visually impaired student from ibn Zohr University in Agadir who stated that *'the corridors in which there are stairs are considered dangerous for me to go up and down and for all disabled students like me, in addition to other obstacles that can be found on the university sidewalks and roads such as digging, three branches and water drains".* Indeed, these challenges considered as a barrier to the freedom of movement of disability students, a poorly built university environment would make education difficult for visually impaired students despite the effort made by the university administration and other parties to eliminate as much as possible these difficulties and reduce them, these difficulties are still existing in the majority of Moroccan universities.

As for the social difficulties that are represented in the relationship between visual impaired students and teaching and administrative staffs, the results indicated that the most important difficulty that encounter disability students is teacher's lack of skills and abilities to deal with visually impaired students, teachers are not educated and trained enough in sign language , use of braille materials , preparation of hearing aids , tactile , diagrams, and maps and so forth, in addition to the administration's inappropriate treatment and lack of consideration of the circumstances and conditions of these students , and this may be due to the lack of sufficient experience of some faculty members and some administrative staffs in addition to the lack of knowledge of the impact of this kind of disability on students academically, psychologically and socially, also to the total absent of the necessary facilities that should be provided for a less restrictive environment including assistive devices, technology and other materials which stand as a barrier against teacher's desire to achieve inclusive teaching and the principle of equality for all students.

One of our visually impaired interviewees from Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakech claimed that " *a large number of employees within the university administration do not know how to deal with us in particular, as they do not take our requests and needs into consideration".*

About the social difficulties that are represented in the relationship between visually impaired students and their non-visually impaired peers, the study indicated that blinds students suffer from the negative attitudes and labelling of their non-disabled colleagues whether inside or outside the university, sometimes those later may use some inappropriate words while talking to these disabled students which indicate that university students do not have sufficient experience and awareness to deal appropriately with disabled students in general. As a result, visually impaired students find it hard to build a relationship with their non-disabled peers and due to these problems, they may develop negative attitudes towards educational institutions, subjects, materials, and institutional strategies. Due to negative attitudes, visually impaired students may even discontinue their education   and drop out of university. Therefore, the misconceptions prevalent in society about people with disabilities and their needs and abilities represent a major obstacle to discovering the nature of how to deal with this category of students.

In our interview with a visually impaired student from Sultan Moulay Slimane University in Beni Mellal, indicated that " *I was tired of the look of pity and the labelling that I receive from students everyday like 'the poor boy' " penniless" and " miserable" because of this, I decided to drop out of university".*

Based on the analysis, visually impaired students interviewed argue that these challenges greatly contribute to their poor performance in the university modules; they also claimed that due to these challenges, their performance was substantially worse than non-visually impaired students. Indeed this poor performance stands as a burden and as a stumbling block to the improvement and augmentation of learners' ambitions and professional aspirations. However, to eliminate these challenges that are faced by visually impaired students at the universities there are some recommendations that can be adopted to enhance their academic development, skills, and abilities and also to encourage them to pursue their higher education like their non-disabled peers.

First, working on preparing and organizing the university physical environment to suit students with disabilities in terms of corridors, sidewalks, stairways, bathrooms, walkways, elevators, toilets, car parks, slopes, tactile blocks, and clear signage based on universal design specifications ….in addition to reconsidering the problem of elevators and stairs and providing appropriate solutions to enable this category of students to move easily.

Second, preparing and equipping dedicated halls in university libraries to welcome students with disabilities to enable them to get benefit from its facilities to continue their academic achievements.

Third, increasing the number of social workers, counsellors, psychologists, and sign language interpreters in the student counselling department so that the psychological well-being of disabled students can be maintained and improved.

Fourth, attracting a group of supportive and volunteers students to support visually impaired students and implementing programs to educate and assist them.

Fifth, organizing some cultural and social activities that are suitable for students with disabilities particularly visually impaired students and taking into consideration of the location and the nature of the disability.

Moreover, sharing awareness and understanding of the needs and rights of disabled students and providing a supportive and conducive environment through online campaigns on university websites or through integration programs between disabled students and non-disabled students.

Furthermore, setting up and establishing special units and committees that support the services and empowerment of disabled students in every public university so that the needs of disabled students can be meet in a more organized and effective manner.

Last but not least, amending some university laws and regulations to suit the needs and requests of these categories of students.

Conclusion

Based on the finding above we can conclude that these challenges experienced by visually impaired students in Moroccan universities did not pave the way to implementing inclusive education and an inclusive environment where students with or without a disability can interact with each other, and are helpful toward each other and friendly toward each other. Consequently, Moroccan university staff and teachers also policymakers and stakeholders should work hard to overcome these challenges experienced by visually impaired students and

create a quality inclusive and diverse educational environment where students with disability can receive a free and appropriate education.

The believe in the right to education is a belief in inclusion because education for all means education for everyone. Students have different needs and requirements; they need expert teachers and professors who hold all the keys to work more inclusively and a learning environment that has necessary resources and basic care with a universal design where every student has the opportunity to learn. Indeed, inclusive education is not education as we mean in general but it's the education of any student who is in a vulnerable situation not only students with a disability but also multilingual students, students who have different religion, or students who have a low socio economic status and so forth.

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