NAVIGATING NARRATIVES: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED GRADUATES THROUGH THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY AND LABOV'S ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

The research process is vital for any research, as it helps to discover issues and reveal new information. Finalising the methodology of the study is important, as it gives the research a clear structure and ensures consistent and reliable data collection and analysis. This study presents the methodological framework employed to explore the perceptions and experiences of visually impaired and blind graduates from a higher educational institute in the Maldives. The study employs a narrative inquiry to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences through storytelling, adopting an epistemological stance. This study employs Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the emancipatory research paradigm, and Mike Oliver's social disability model as theoretical frameworks to contextualise the stories while also utilising the emancipatory paradigm to amplify the voices of marginalised groups and empower them. Data is gathered from the purposefully selected nine Maldivian visually impaired graduates from a higher educational institute through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Labov's narrative analytics model is used to analyse the data and identify story themes. Ethical considerations are rigorously followed throughout the study, including informed consent, trusting the participants to tell truthful stories, confidentiality, integrity, sensitivity, and relationships with them. This methodological approach helps us understand the participants' problems and the effects of social interaction, societal support, and attitudes toward visually impaired and blind students. Knowing these makes it easier to create better policies.

Keywords: Narrative inquiry, Higher education, Blind graduates, visually impaired graduates

INTRODUCTION

In the past, disabled students faced numerous challenges from society in proving their place within it. They struggle to meet the standards of the academic environment. Takshara and Bhuvaneswari (2025) proved that education is a tool for overcoming the challenges that come their way. People's attitudes toward marginalised groups have changed over the past decade (Rose & Shevlin, 2024). Society has begun accepting marginalised people. In the Maldives, the education system has begun moving towards inclusive education. However, the education system faces numerous barriers and challenges in practically applying inclusivity. Moreover, the higher education system in the Maldives has not yet found a practical application for inclusiveness, although it has started gaining momentum. Visually impaired students have started joining the educational system to complete their higher education. Conducting a study based on their experiences can help identify the barriers marginalised groups face when implementing proper inclusiveness in the system. Thus, this study aims to explore the following questions about the lived experiences of visually impaired graduates: What are the lived experiences of visually impaired graduates? How do social and institutional contexts influence their experiences?

Studies worldwide have focused on a broader population of disabled people (Kolli et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2024; Rose & Shevlin, 2024). Previous research has demonstrated that people structure many memorable experiences into narrative forms in their minds (Polydorou, 2024). Much research on narrative inquiry has shown that it is a beneficial way to get into the details of personal and social stories (Colla & Kurtz, 2024; Parks, 2023a; Partington et al., 2024; Sudarwati et al., 2022). This is especially true when looking at people's real-life experiences (Chand, 2022). Researchers have focused on the experiences of the visually impaired students, and most of the studies are solely on narrative inquiry (Jeyarani & Srimathi, 2024; Makondo et al., 2024; Pitsoane & Matjila, 2021; Uiras et al., 2024). For example, a study-based meta-analysis discussed the challenges faced by visually impaired students at the university, using narrative inquiry to identify how the visually impaired access information and have difficulty using technology (Safawi & Akay, 2023). Likewise, another study focuses on the employment barriers that visually impaired graduates face, emphasising that they need mentorship and support systems through a narrative inquiry (Darlaston-Jones, 2007). There are studies conducted on visually impaired people, focusing more on assistive technologies (Bhowmick & Hazarika, 2017; Manirajee et al., 2024). Moreover, this study also shows how the epistemological perspective, which leads to interpretivism, is consistent with narrative inquiry. The rationale for using this method is the belief that narrative inquiry is a design that helps students understand graduates' lived experiences better, especially for marginalised people.

Some studies focus on narrative inquiry using either Mike Oliver's social model of disability (Makondo et al., 2024; Otieno, 2023; Thorneycroft, 2024) or Labov's narrative analysis framework solely (Bao, 2024; Gillespie et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2019). The social model of disability is a model that emphasises that society is disabled, not individuals (Shakespeare, 2021). According to Mike Oliver, society's organisational structure renders people impaired (Otieno, 2023). Furthermore, this model emphasises removing societal barriers that prevent disabled individuals from making life decisions. This theory further posits that knowledge acquisition necessitates a more knowledgeable person. Thus, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is integrated into the framework for the more knowledgeable person. Therefore, the study uses the social model of disability and sociocultural theory to understand the different types of barriers, the attitudes of peers and staff, and the societal support these individuals went through during their study period. Hence, this study aims to show how society and personal stories interact by connecting various frameworks and giving a complete picture of the lived experiences of visually impaired graduates.

All in all, integrating the emancipatory paradigm helps empower marginalised groups. Emancipatory research is enabling the disabled. It is a research paradigm that produces knowledge that benefits the disadvantaged people (Noel, 2016). This helps the disabled person feel a sense of belonging in society. This approach means that blind and visually impaired graduates will be active contributors to the study rather than passive participants. Looking into the lives of blind and visually impaired graduates using

an emancipatory research paradigm ensures that the research is inclusive, empowering, and relevant, leading to more accurate results and essential effects.

Labov's Narrative Analysis Model helps systematically analyse narratives by breaking them down into the six elements mentioned. Additionally, it makes it easier to compare the different narratives while focusing on the societal barriers mentioned in Oliver's model within the context. Among the various narrative analysis models proposed by Riessman (2008) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000), which emphasise more on co-construction of meaning, context, and identity, there is a lack of the structural precision that Labov's model offers. This model emphasises six phases, which highlight abstraction, orientation, complicated action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. William Labov's work analysing stories has significantly impacted the field (Analyzer, 2024). Furthermore, this approach requires the researcher to engage with the participants collaboratively to construct the meaning of their stories and ensure that their perspectives are central to the analysis. According to Kaluza (2023), Labov's model of narrative analysis involves identifying the leading stories based on the personal stories of the study participants. Labov's narrative analysis offers an organised way to understand how people make sense of and discuss their experiences. As a result, this study finds Labov's model of narrative analysis appropriate, as it provides a detailed framework for story analysis (Iqbal et al., 2019). Labov's model offers a brief, practical, and rigorous lens for research that seeks to study the lived experiences of visually impaired graduates, allowing their narratives to be meaningfully understood.

Thus, this study combines the three models to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the visually impaired graduates. Hence, integrating these approaches allows the researcher to gain a more thorough knowledge of how society shapes visually impaired people's experiences and how these experiences are articulated through personal narratives. Thus, this study aims to fill this theoretical gap by blending Mike Oliver's social model of disability, the emancipatory research paradigm, and sociocultural theory to examine the visually impaired graduates at a higher education institute in the Maldives. Therefore, by filling in the voids, this study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge already in use and offer critical new perspectives on the lives of visually impaired graduates.

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to investigate the experiences of nine visually impaired graduates from the Maldives selected purposefully, who graduated from a higher educational institute in 2023. These nine visually impaired graduates are the only individuals from their cohort who graduated with a visual impairment. Thus, the stories these nine graduates share are based on actual events, and studying those events helps identify the challenges they faced during their academic process. It is difficult to analyse these stories using statistical methods. According to Croft (2020b), the narrative inquiry approach facilitates understanding of their unique experiences and perspectives within the educational institution. This study is also based on the experiences of visually impaired graduates from a higher education institute. Thus, narrative inquiry fits in with the study of visually impaired graduates. In addition, this perspective helps guide the study of how institutions work and how students' peers behave in ways that affect the schooling of blind and visually impaired graduates (Croft, 2020b). Every story is different. The way each one interprets the story is different. Each person's expression of the story is also different. Therefore, using the epistemological framework, narrative inquiry would make it easier to get a more profound understanding. of the educational experiences of visually impaired graduates, showing both the problems, they face and how they manage to solve them along the way.

Using narrative inquiry to examine personal stories embraces an epistemology where the participants construct knowledge. Moreover, educational research increasingly uses a research design based on narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006). According to Tenny et al. (2024), a narrative inquiry can help participants understand their narratives in depth. Through narrative inquiry, the participants' thoughts on their experiences of their academic journey can be narrowed down by identifying the barriers and the support they got to reach their graduation (Clandinin, 2016; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This study also

identifies the obstacles they encountered during their graduation process. Hence, the narrative inquiry approach can help understand their narratives and the barriers they experienced during their study.

Additionally, the procedure is a rigorous methodology where the researcher has to allocate time for the participants according to their wishes. This protocol involves participants telling their story to the researcher, who then retells it by incorporating the participants' ideas. This strategy will allow the researcher to create a single story based on the themes generated from the participants' experiences. Furthermore, the narrative inquiry method fosters a rapport that allows the researcher to extract the participants' stories. The approach enables the creation of a story from the participants' experiences, highlighting the barriers they faced and the societal support they received from peers and lecturers through their interactions.

Furthermore, narrative inquiry research design is a widely recognised qualitative research methodology increasingly used to present individual and group experiences (Tomlinson & Killingback, 2024). Moreover, the qualitative approach helps understand the narratives described by the study participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), as it is widely recognised for understanding human relations (Perkins et al., 2024). It provides a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of study participants (Banda et al., 2020; Mantula et al., 2024), who were selected using purposive sampling for this study. Springer (2023) states that a narrative inquiry study requires no set sample size. Moreover, Springer (2023) noted that a dissertation typically has a sample size of six to ten participants. Thus, this study will include all nine visually impaired students who completed their degree from the selected higher education institution in 2023 as participants.

This study generates data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews from an epistemological perspective. This method allows the researcher to collect the data meaningfully and develop it based on ontological properties (Ruslin et al., 2022). Additionally, semi-structured interviews will provide a voice to the under-represented (Atkinson & Hutchinson, 2013). Thus, the semi-structured interviews for this study enable the identification of societal barriers based on Mike Oliver's social model of disability and societal support based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Hence, an interview guide is prepared to conduct this study based on these frameworks. According to Ruslin et al. (2022), an interview guide helps focus on the main topics and follows a general pattern for data collection. The development of the semi-structured interview guide takes into account the study's narrative inquiry design and research objectives, which emphasise Mike Oliver's disability model and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory.

Furthermore, to continue with the interview with the participants, face-to-face interviews are the most appropriate for visually impaired graduates (Emara, 2025). Furthermore, according to Emara (2025), it is essential to create a comfort zone and use auditory communication by allowing visually impaired individuals to select the interview format: Zoom, mail, or telephone. Hence, this study will utilize auditory communication and provide participants with their preferred interview method. Additionally, rapport with the participants is important because those who are visually impaired feel marginalised. Thus, Emara (2025) argues the importance of building a rapport with the participants to ensure they feel comfortable sharing their stories with the researcher; hence, an emancipatory research paradigm is an important paradigm that can be used during the interview process (Humphries et al., 2020). Thus, because this study has those characteristics, it uses an emancipatory research paradigm during the interview process. The emancipatory research paradigm emphasises three principles that align with the lives of blind and visually impaired students. There is accountability, empowerment, and reflexivity. The researcher should be accountable for the graduates during the interview and address their needs and concerns. Moreover, the researcher should empower the participants during the interview by involving them in the research process. For instance, they can participate in the data analysis and ensure that the finding reflects their experiences. Additionally, as for this study, it is vital to build interpersonal relationships with the participants, and the researcher should create an environment that builds trust where participants feel comfortable in expressing their experiences with the researcher. This approach empowers them by giving them a voice and ensuring that their thoughts and experiences are appropriately conveyed (Biggeri & Ciani, 2019a).

In addition to the interview procedure, researchers must consider numerous ethical considerations when the research participants are disabled people. According to Oliver (2013), building a positive rapport between the interviewer and interviewee is crucial; for this reason, he suggested using the emancipatory

research paradigm. Moreover, it is challenging to get ethics approval, as visually impaired graduates are vulnerable people, and it is essential to think about how the process should be continued from different angles. Therefore, the university's ethics committee will oversee the research once approved. As soon as the researcher gets ready to conduct the study, an audio recording of the consent will be sent to the participants.

Furthermore, participants will have ample time to seek clarification and resolve their doubts. Moreover, to protect the participants from potential vulnerability, one of the family members or a person close to the visually impaired participant will be allowed to sit with them during the interview (Emara, 2025). Furthermore, the interview environment will be tailored to the preferences of visually impaired graduates, ensuring they feel comfortable (Emara, 2025). The researcher should also be careful when choosing interview language for visually impaired graduates to avoid hurting them (Kolli et al., 2020). While interviewing visually impaired individuals, the researcher uses first-person language, does not make assumptions about their abilities, and uses open-ended questions to help them feel comfortable.

Furthermore, the researcher introduces herself or himself and others who are present to the participants and describes the environment and any action that takes place to them. Verbal cues, like "over here" or "to your left or right," will make the participants feel more comfortable. We will also use respectful language to ensure inclusivity and highlight their skills and achievements rather than focusing on their disability. The interviewer must be trained to understand the crucialness of the disability, including understanding more about the social model of disability and the societal barriers the individuals face. The confidentiality of the participants is also crucial. We maintain confidentiality in this study by excluding the participants' identifying details. As the Maldives is a tiny place with very few higher education institutes, and only in one institute are visually impaired students studying, it will be challenging to maintain anonymity. Thus, it is crucial to adopt a rigorous method to maintain confidentiality.

Labov's narrative analytics model will be used to analyse the interview transcript. Labov's model of narrative analysis involves identifying the leading stories from the personal stories of the study participants (Kaluza, 2023). For various reasons, Labov's style of story analysis is especially suitable for understanding the barriers blind and visually impaired graduates have overcome. This framework helps us methodically classify and organise the difficulties and events people experience. Oral narratives commonly undergo analysis using Labov's narrative analysis model. The abstract—the first part of Labov's narrative analysis model—concisely summarises the event. This part could be the heading of the story. This study's abstract will summarise the barriers discussed by blind and visually impaired graduates in Labov's model.

The orientation details the story's setting, including who, when, and where. For example, the orientation phase can use time, place, and characters. This study allows us to discuss the initial contextual background, which includes the educational and professional environments of the graduates. In this section, we will discuss their university workplace and the attitudes of lecturers, staff, and peers towards them. Include information about individuals' backgrounds, such as vision impairment, family support, and past experiences.

Next will be the complicated action. Complicating action is writing about the actual events in the narrative, the sequence of the events, or the plot. Graduates face various barriers, including educational, employment, social, and technological issues. These include a lack of accessible learning materials, discrimination, social isolation, and inaccessibility of digital platforms and tools. All these will be discussed in the complicated actions section.
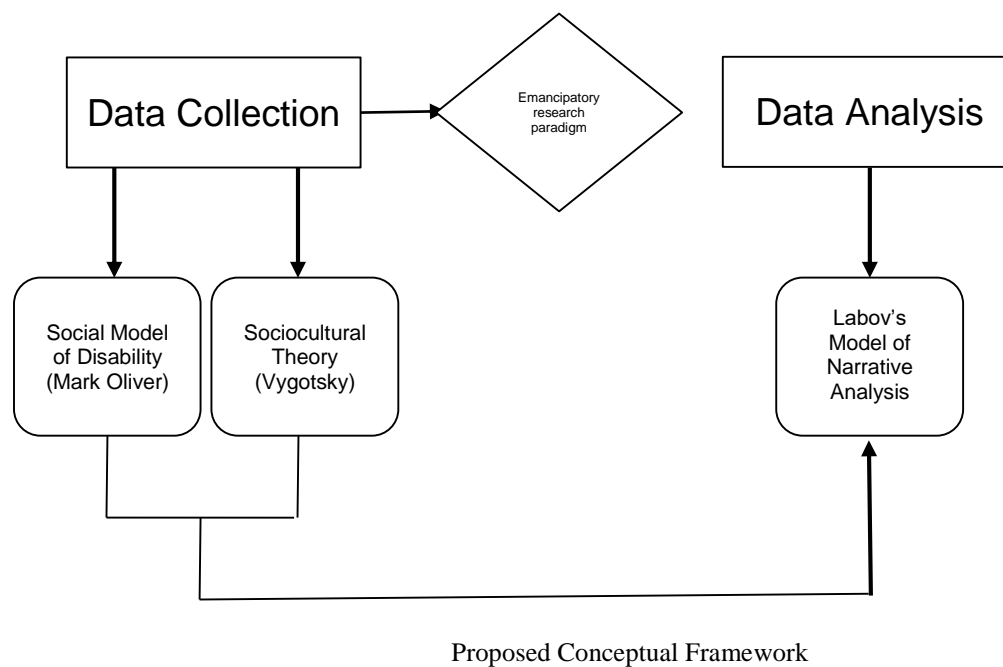
The evaluation comes next, during which we will discuss the impact of barriers. This phase includes discussing the psychological, emotional, and pragmatic effects on the graduates, including lowered self-esteem and frustration. Additionally, we will discuss the reasons behind the relevance of these barriers and how they influence the general quality of life.

The resolution will discuss the strategies used by the blind and visually impaired graduates to overcome the barriers. Based on the data collected, we will discuss personal strategies like developing resilience, seeking resources, leveraging networks, accessing services, and using technological solutions to navigate educational and professional environments.

The Coda will discuss the graduate's overall journey and recommend enhancing accessibility and support for the visually impaired.

DISCUSSIONS

This study's methodology is based on a narrative inquiry using Mike Oliver's social model of disability, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and Labov's narrative analysis framework. The researcher adopts an emancipatory research paradigm throughout the data collection process. Mike Oliver highlights the barriers facing the environment, while Vygotsky's sociocultural theory identifies societal support. This study considers institutional, attitudinal, and physical obstacles from Mike Oliver's model of disability. More knowledgeable people and peers provide support to visually impaired graduates. Thus, the data collected from the participants is analysed using Labov's narrative analytics model.

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│  Data Collection │ ───▶   research paradigm      │  Data Analysis   │
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        │       │                                           │
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┌───────────┐ ┌───────────┐                        ┌───────────────┐
│Social Model│ │Sociocultural│                      │   Labov's     │
│of Disability│ │  Theory   │                        │   Model of    │
│(Mark Oliver)│ │(Vygotsky) │                        │  Narrative    │
└───────────┘ └───────────┘                        │   Analysis    │
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Proposed Conceptual Framework

CONCLUSIONS

This study is based on the lived experiences of nine visually impaired graduates. It aims to identify the barriers they faced during their education. A narrative inquiry design helps to explore the participants' lived experiences. Mike Oliver's social model of disability and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory guide this study. By blending these two models with the narrative inquiry, the study aims to understand the societal barriers and the cultural context that have shaped the narratives of the visually impaired graduates.

The data collection process is based on societal barriers, which include physical, attitudinal, and institutional barriers. Focusing on these societal barriers shifts the focus from the individual impairment to the society that makes the visually impaired feel disabled. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory makes this process more meaningful by highlighting society's role in developing the narratives of the visually impaired.

Labov's narrative analysis model helps in systematically constructing narratives using the model's core elements. This framework helps in analysing the complexities and nuances of each individual, bringing out the societal barriers and cultural contexts that influence the lived experiences of each visually disabled graduate. By combining narrative inquiry, sociocultural theory, and Labov's narrative analysis to analyse the data, this study captures a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the lived experiences of visually impaired graduates. Overall, this study can contribute to the growing body of literature on disability research, which shows the importance of blending multiple theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. More research could be conducted in the future to explore the intersections of the narrative, disability, and sociocultural contexts, so that it helps in understanding disabled individuals more and identifying the support they get from society. Furthermore, the findings can reduce the barriers they face and promote inclusivity.

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