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Coping Beyond Inclusion: A Narrative Inquiry into Stress and Coping among Visually Impaired Students in Nepal

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This study aims to explore how VI students develop coping strategies within an inclusive mainstream school in Nepal, and the purpose of this study is to interpret them through the theoretical lenses of "Stress and Coping" and Hindu cultural beliefs. The study employed a narrative research design. Four VI students at the secondary level were purposively selected from two inclusive schools based on having visual impairments, enrolment in secondary level (grades 9 to 12), and willingness to participate with consent. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions. This study reveals that coping is a dynamic and evolving process that unfolds through interaction with challenges, continuous appraisal of challenges, access to and use of available resources, and the construction of meaning over time in the social, cultural, and institutional context. To overcome the challenges and survive in school education, VI students develop and adopt several coping strategies. Among them, peer support, self-resilience, utilization of modern technologies, familiarizing with the surroundings, and active listening and memorization play a central role. However, coping strategies were predominantly individual and peer support. This shows the significant gap in policies and practices of inclusive education.

Keywords: visually impaired students, coping strategies, inclusive education, narrative inquiry, stress and coping theory, Hindu philosophical and cultural concepts

INTRODUCTION

If the individual feels significant impairments in vision and these impairments cannot be fully resolved with medical treatment and they are called visually impaired (VI) (Kumar, et al., 2025). The World Health Organization (WHO) define VI as an eye condition that affects the eye system and vision function (WHO, 2019). The WHO divided the four types of VI considering visual acuity; Mild VI, Moderate VI, Several VI (low vision) and blindness (WHO, 2023). Nowadays, at least 2.2 billion people are living with visual impairments (WHO, 2023). Among the total visually impaired people, an estimated 1 billion are children (WHO, 2019). Regarding Nepal, about 0.8 million of the total population are living with disabilities, and among them, around 0.15 million are with visual impairments (NSO, 2021). Furthermore, estimated 36% of 0.15 million are children (NSO, 2021).

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VI people are living with a lack of education, health care inaccessibility, unemployment, poverty, stigmatization, discrimination, and lack of social support because visual impairments can be a barrier to educational activities and work life (Tshuma et al., 2022). This may prevent people from becoming full members of society because they are living with low literacy rate, low educational achievement and higher rate of dropout (Landstad et al., 2024; Kumar, et al., 2025). VI students are struggling to access quality education and are unemployed because they have not even completed their schooling (Williams, 2015). In Nepal, visually impaired students face a variety of challenges that impede their ability to access quality education. These challenges arise due to structural, social, and policy-related factors that marginalize students with disabilities in mainstream education systems (Opie and Southcott, 2018). While international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and national policies in Nepal promote inclusive education, the practical implementation often falls short of expectations. VI children have the right to quality education like every other child. However, they fail to meet their unique learning needs (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Although the Government of Nepal (GoN) has made significant strides in enacting inclusive education policies, its classroom implementation has been inconsistent and inadequate (Regmi, 2017). GoN has adequate policies for inclusive education, such as the constitution, the inclusive act, the inclusive education policy, the Human Rights Act, the 16th Periodic Plan, the national education policy, etc. Despite those policies, around half of the people with disabilities are out of school (Nepal Statistical Office [NSO], 2021). Amid the total population, 2.6% are living with disabilities and only 7.9% of this bracket complete their school education. This shows that dropout rate of children with disabilities seems higher (NSO, 2021). Moreover, these children also have lower learning achievement and higher rates of class repetition (Regmi, 2017). Therefore, VI students are struggling to exercise their educational rights and survive at school. Moreover, they have been suffering from limited knowledge of educational concepts, low self-confidence, pedagogical exclusion, infrastructure and environmental barriers, lack of inclusive educational resources, technological deficiencies, and exclusion in the planning process, etc. (Jessup et al., 2015; Otu, 2022; Reddy et al., 2018; Miyauchi, 2020).

The behaviours and ideas people employ to deal with stressful circumstances and minimize difficulties and issues are known as coping strategies (Fallon, et al., 1993). Coping strategies can be broadly classified as either emotion-focused or problem-focused (Lawrence & Fauerbach, 2003). The goal of problem-focused coping techniques is to remove the cause of stress by develop a plan, seek guidance, pick up new skills, and make use of technology. Emotion-focused coping strategies most likely include social support, physical activity, positive self-talk, problem-solving, self-care, reframing negative thoughts, and other techniques to help protect oneself from stress and difficulties (Herman & Tetrick, 2009).

Coping strategies often mitigate negative emotions, help overcome challenges, improve educational achievement, and increase the sustainability rate of VI students (Satterfield et al., 2010; Landstad et al., 2024). When people view challenges as learning

opportunities, they can continually develop positive coping strategies, leading to successful learning and professional practice (Delany et al., 2015). Therefore, coping strategies for VI students are means for achieving better educational outcomes and contributing to the survival of school education. While the state fails to ensure quality inclusive education for VI students, it is necessary to identify the coping strategies developed by VI students and share those as best practices in a broader range.

Challenges encountered by VI students have been documented by a number of studies; however, there is very little attention given to how they narratively experience and cope with such educational stress and challenges within inclusive mainstream schools, particularly in the South Asian context. Nepal made significant progress to introduce inclusive education policies, but there is a significant gap between policies and everyday classroom realities (Regmi, 2017). Because there is limited empirical evidence to document how inclusive education policies transform into daily classroom activities. Moreover, most existing studies rarely integrate psychological coping frameworks with the Hindu philosophical and cultural concepts that shape students' moral reasoning and resilience (Whitburn, 2014; Kafle, 2021). To address these gaps, this study integrates Stress and Coping Theory, with Hindu philosophical constructs on narrative inquiry into the coping experiences of VI students in Nepal. Therefore, this study provides a culturally grounded understanding of resilience in inclusive education.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to explore how VI students develop coping strategies within an inclusive mainstream school in Nepal.

Theoretical Frameworks of the Study

This study primarily employs the "Stress and coping theory" as its primary theoretical framework, developed by Lazarus and Folkman. Using the theory of stress and coping helps us capture challenges, coping strategies, and related elements. Therefore, this theory was used to analyze the data.

The Stress and coping theory focus more on adaptive responses that help them cope with situations (Follmer et al., 2018). Likely, it concerns how individuals appraise the impact of stress, assess resource availability, and choose strategies accordingly (Vik & Lassen, 2010). When stress arises from challenges an individual faces, they develop coping strategies to overcome that stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1991). Coping can also be understood as using resources to manage one's life's internal and external needs (Yarosh et al., 2021). The theory of stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1991) describes three levels of investigation of coping processes: appraisal, analysis of available resources for coping with stress, and selection of the best possible coping strategies using those resources (Biggs et al., 2017). This study focuses on the third level of appraisal, examining how VI students use available resources to cope with challenges. Because VI students' stress and challenges during teaching-learning activities are relevant, they have resources such as Braille books, assistive technology, peer support, memorisation skills, etc., and coping strategies to address the challenges and stress encountered on school premises.

It will not be easy to resolve every challenge that people experience. Sometimes, VI students need to accept and tolerate stressful situations as a coping mechanism (Lazarus & Folkman, 1991). Furthermore, acceptance does not indicate resignation. Therefore, this study focused on investigating how VI students cope with the problems or challenges that they have experienced during teaching and learning, especially within school premises.

Those concepts serve as "interpretive lenses" to provide the "why" and "how" behind the observed relation coping practices among participants. The concepts *Karuna, Sewa, Sahana Bhava,* and *Dharma* shape, within society, how individuals narrate challenges, respond to others' difficulties, and construct meaning during challenging situations (Srinivasan & Aithal, 2023). *Karuna* informs how peers and educators perceive the suffering of VI students. *Sewa* elevates as a spiritual duty and explains the support without the expectations of personal gain (Paranjpe, 1998). *Sahana Bhava* explains about patient strength or maintaining one's equanimity in the face of hardship. Dharma *i*s structural backbone of coping. Some of the responses of VI students to their constraints are based on their Dharma, which means responsibility toward their education (Maharana & Behura, 2024). This shows that culturally rooted moral frameworks and psychological assessments influence coping mechanisms in the context of Stress and Coping Theory.

METHOD

Researcher believes that reality exists in multiple forms and is shaped by the VI students' experiences. The strategies and approaches the VI students develop are shaped by a deeper understanding of their experiences, feelings, and perspectives. Moreover, this study builds on the participants' values and worldviews. With this philosophical assumption, this study adopted a qualitative research approach and collected first-hand data from the natural setting, focusing on the coping strategies adopted and developed by VI students to overcome challenges encountered during teaching-learning activities within school premises.

Research Design

To investigate the lived experiences of VI students on stress, challenges and coping strategies, this study employed a narrative inquiry research design. Narrative inquiry consistently provides meaningful interpretations of experiences and stories, focusing on those shared by participants (Clandinin, 2022; Nigar, 2020). Ryman (2016) also suggested the narrative research design for research on a community, school, organization, and person (as cited in Matsana et al., 2024). Therefore, this research employed a narrative research design to investigate the coping strategies of VI students.

Sampling Technique and Participant Recruitment

Four VI students from grades 9-12 at two inclusive public schools were purposively selected to ensure relevance to the research objective. WHO divided the four types of VI considering visual acuity (WHO, 2019). However, only two types of VI, Blindness and low vision, are considered as VI for this study. Because Blindness and Low vision are widely recognized as a functional classification of VI in school education and policy

context. According to WHO (2019), Blindness refers to the absence of functional vision, and low vision refers to very limited functional vision that cannot be fully corrected. and relevant in inclusive school settings. Because functional vision has a significant impact on access to learning materials and classroom interaction (Rule et al., 2011).

Two inclusive schools were selected based on their enrolment of VI students and their status as mainstream schools practising inclusive education. Participants were purposively selected based on having visual impairments, enrolment in secondary level (grades 9 to 12), and willingness to participate with consent. Students in lower grades and those with additional disabilities were excluded to ensure effective communication and consistency in the narrative data.

Before the field visit for data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the research committee of Nepal Open University in August 2024. The purpose of the study and the right to withdraw at any time during the interview were informed to participants before conducting the interview. Following that, written consent was taken from each participant and the school management committee. Moreover, the researcher was sensitive to not violating the rights of respondents and ensured the confidentiality of information provided by VI students and pseudonyms used in research documents.

Data Collection and Analysis

Open-ended questions were designed for a semi-structured interview and administered in September 2024. An inquiry approach was used for data collection, and interviews were recorded after obtaining participants' prior consent. A 60-minute interview was conducted with each participant in Nepali. Field notes were also taken during the interview to capture the contextual details (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Each interview was recorded with permission, and the recordings were fully transcribed to include all verbatim and nonverbal utterances, such as sighs and laughter. The transcribed data was cross-checked and read multiple times for accuracy to assess the relevant information and better understand how it organize. After that, it was read multiple times and divided into cohesive, relevant narrative themes. Barun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework was followed in the data analysis. As prescribed, the instructions were read multiple times to familiarise with the data. The initial code was generated, themes were searched, then reviewed, defined and named, and the report was written.

Member checking was used to validate the data (Cresswell, 2012, pp. 12-13). To maintain the study's credibility, all procedures were carefully documented, all interviews were conducted at the participants' selected locations, and no interviewee was informed of the other participants' experiences (Yin, 2014). An independent peer review was done by a qualitative researcher on transcription and coding, and discrepancies were discussed with the researcher. To maintain validity and credibility and to avoid potential biases, findings of this study were shared with participants and school management committee in the last week of October 2024. They confirmed the authenticity of the data. Finally, to avoid potential bias in the research, reflexive notes were used to examine assumptions and interpretations during data analysis critically (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

FINDINGS

VI students in Nepal face several challenges on their educational journey. Very few of them survive in school education and face challenges. They have developed some coping strategies to mitigate their challenges. During the discussion with the VI students in the study area, they shared their experiences coping with challenges. It was found that they developed their own coping strategies to overcome difficulties. Here are some common approaches and activities shared by the VI students in the study area:

Narratives of Sita

Sita, a VI student of grade eleven, describes her experience of the educational journey. She shared her experience in a mainstream classroom as well as the challenges. When she joined school, she felt proud to be studying alongside sighted peers. However, this optimism quickly ran afoul of the reality of teaching in a classroom. She shared that all lessons of mathematics depended heavily on visual materials such as diagrams drawn on the board. At that time, she felt panicked because she could not understand immediately. She said, "*I did not even know what the question looked like; everyone was writing the answer*".

Initially, she feels this is a personal failure. However, she began to develop practical ways of managing these challenges. For this, she began developing herself as an active listener. Primarily, she focus on words spoken in the class and try to change those words into mental images. She said, *"Initially, it was not easy to focus on the teacher's words. However, I always do, and I try to remember every detail and concept and visualise it in my mind. However, it would be better if the teacher provided clear examples and repeated the elaboration.*

Sita, also narrated her initial days in the schools. When she joined the school, she had difficulty moving around, even reaching the classroom, dining hall and toilets. To overcome these challenges she started to memorize the routes by counting steps and feeling the textures of the surroundings. She expressed, "*To move within school premises, I memorize routes by counting steps and textures of the surroundings. For example, I know how many steps I should take from my hostel to the classroom*". She also took support from her sighted peer for movement within the school premises.

During the school period, Sita always struggles to get resources. Initially, she relied on sighted peers. Sighted peers often read the resources, and she listened carefully. However, nowadays she starts to utilise technologies. She use mobile phones to record the lecture sessions and transcribe written text into audio scripts. Sita shared, "*Platforms like Coursera and Khan Academy are great because they are designed to work with assistive tools. I can pause lectures, rewind to understand better, and even take quizzes that are screen-reader friendly*".

She also added how she managed her stress and challenges by using the available resources. She shared, once she started to use available resources, she able to more focus on her study rather than frustration. She stated that, *"I failed a social study test, then I started listening to audio records and YouTube resources, reviewing the notes, etc., and I got better marks in the next exam. Now, I focus on improving rather than*

feeling defeated". During the discussion, she shared that nowadays she is capable of managing the classroom, and now she is getting good scores in all subjects.

Narratives of Krishna

Krishan is VI students of grade nine. He secured 2nd position out of 45 students in the final exam of previous grade also shared his experience. Like Sita, he narrated his initial challenges in inclusive education and emotional experiences of isolation. When he entered the mainstream classroom, he was unable to participate in group activities. Because his sighted peers often completed tasks without involving him. These moments created feelings of frustration and self-doubt.

Despite these difficulties, Krishna emphasises that he started trying to motivate himself. He remembers his reading effort, staying calm, and being more confident. He said, *"If I have to participate in new activities at that time, I always tell myself that I will be perfect after some practice".* Krishan shares, now he starts to believe in his abilities, enhancing confidence and resolving challenging situations. He shared, *"If I find it difficult to understand the concepts, I remind myself, 'You have learned in the class, you have Braille, you have already secured 2nd positions in your class by handling challenges, this is just another step forward".* To mitigate the frustration and self-doubt, Krishna also take support from senior VI students. He said, *"Our senior colleagues helping us in our study. They always encourage us to go together and step by step. Their support and encouragement keep us going"*. Krishna shared that now he is one of the members of the VI student associations. This orginzation is an informal support network outside the formal school structure. However, this group often helps him find a solution, mitigate challenges, and stay calm. Krishna says*, "When I joined the online support group, I met several VI people. This group often shares our issues, resources, motivational speechs and ideas. I am happy we can create solutions even if the formal system excludes us".*

Krishna started to see his challenges as a commitment of a greater personal dedication to education. He added that his self-motivation to mitigate stress and cope with challenges was important for pursuing degree, personal achievement and proved VI children could thrive in regular classroom settings. However, he still disappointed on not getting the facilities that ensured by the laws and policies.

Narratives of Nima

Nima VI students of grade 12 narrated their experience about how they overcame challenges, managed stress and adopted strategies. When Nima admitted in class four of mainstream school, she also experienced several challenges. Initially, she experienced lots of physical and mental issues to carry on her education. After two or three months when her sighted friends starteds to support her, she became relaxed. Then she started to overcome the challenges and stress with the support from peers, utilization of technologies and re-organized herself routines and activities.

She narrated that peer support was the most effective coping strategy to ensure her survival and sustainability in school education. When she started to get help from peers to interpret diagrams, review classwork, repeat the lesson, etc., it helps her better

understand educational concepts and fosters inclusion and friendships. She often asks her colleagues to explain the concept that the teacher does not explain verbally. Usually, her friends help her. Suppose they could not support her on complex concepts. At that time, she used audiobooks as much as possible. This approach helps her remain informed despite the lack of inclusive teaching-learning methods. Nima said,

> I have developed a good relationship with a sighted friend who is also knowledgeable in math and science. I often seek his support to understand the concepts of mathematics and science. I usually stay with him in the classroom. He explains an idea to me. Therefore, I better understand the concepts when someone guides me.

Nima further narrated, If she doesn't get audiobooks, she often records the lesson during class. If she doesn't do that, she asks sighted students to read the normal script and record this using the mobile app. She listens to it later and that helps her to understand and revisits the lessons and chapters. Furthermore, Nima often memorize key words of concept and repeats them to remember. For this, she listens to lectures carefully in class and try to memorize the concepts. She narrated that active listening skills help her cope effectively with stress and challenges. Active listening and mamorization technique helps her to create a mental picture in her mind. This strategy helped her to understand, store, and recall the educational concept.

Nowadays, she feels much more comfortable handling educational challenges and stress for better educational achievements using available resources. She use memorizing technique, audio recording, peer supports and using technologies. Looking back on her experience, Nima still focused on her education because of her determination, skills, support, and encouragement from peers, even though she faced challenges, stress and an unsupportive formal governmental institution and mechanism.

Narratives of Ram

Ram, a student who studied in grade ten shared his experience. He also had a similar experience to his VI colleagues. He shared how he uses the familiarising technique to move around the school premises, and fixed routine and technology to cope with stress and challenges. He narrated that, in the initial days, when he needed to move within and outside the school premises, he often focused on the sounds and textures around him. He shared that he used to count the walking steps between one place to another place and practice of walking. He added that if he has to go to the library, he needs to walk 150 steps from his hostel. Now he feels much easier to move around while walking and keeps him safe from hurdles.

He also narrated that he created a personal system to organise his space and established a fixed routine to overcome the challenges related to overcrowded and unfavourable conditions. His seniors VI students mentor him on how to organize himself, his belongings, and his daily routine. This helps him maintain control of overcrowded situations because when he starts to manage properly, mismatch rate of his belongings is reducing. He said, *" I keep all my learning materials in a drawer. I used tactile*

markers to recognize the resource materials, like one dot for the Nepali notebook and two dots for the English notebook."

Ram always goes to the dining area with his peers at the same time so that they can support each other. When he is alone, he listens to music at low volume in one ear to stay focused and avoid getting disoriented. This strategy helps him cope with infrastructure and environmental challenges. Ram further added, *"I usually plan my day in the morning. Often, I set alarms for each schedule, such as classes, breaks, study time, dinner time, lunch time, etc. This alarm helps me know exactly what to do and when."*

Ram also used AI technology to cope with challenges and stress. He narrated, if he needs to read something that is not in Braille script, he takes a photo from his mobile phone, he uploads this into ChatGPT or Gemini and asks them to translate it into an audio transcript. He added he also uses TalkBack to read e-books, website articles, and textbooks.

Even though each participant has the same types of narratives, several patterns emerged across narratives. First, they initially encountered educational challenges and stress, leading to uncertainty about their success in the mainstream classroom. They experienced teachers' unwillingness to use tactile teaching-learning tools, lack of verbal tutoring, discouragement in technical subjects, limited access to educational resources, impartiality in the evaluation systems, overcrowding and unwelcoming environment, lack of disabled-friendly infrastructure, gap between government policy and ground implementation, etc., in their educational journey.

Second, peer support, use of technology, resource sharing between VI colleagues, personal determinations, memorising skills, positive self-talk, etc., played important roles in shaping their responses to stress and difficulties.

Most of the viewed challenges, stress and difficulties are an important part of the educational journey, not just setbacks in life. Stories from them show that coping strategies of VI students are a growing process of their challenges, stress, relationships and personal beliefs, and they work together over time to impact their educational experiences.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to explore how VI students construct coping strategies within inclusive mainstream schools in Nepal. Earlier sections of the findings identified that coping strategies emerge from a dynamic personal educational journey shaped by experiences, relationships, practices, and cultural meaning systems. Their experiences reflect how they overcome stress and challenges, interpret adversity, mobilise resources, and gradually construct resilience.

Appraisal in Coping Process

Stories of VI students revealed that they responded to challenges with cognitive and adaptive responses. Then, VI students use three levels of investigation of the coping process (Biggs et al., 2017). First, they assess the situation, then assess available

resources, and then select the appropriate coping strategies. Coping strategies often mitigate challenges, support to development of essential insights, and utilize available resources to continue the practices (Satterfield et al., 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1991). Lazarus and Folkman describe this as a primary appraisal of stress and coping. In this primary appraisal, VI students evaluated the challenges they faced. In the study area, VI students reported challenges, such as difficulties moving around the school premises, exclusive pedagogical practices used by teachers, and a lack of learning materials. VI students also expressed anxiety about sitting in a mathematics class. Teachers often draw the diagrams without verbal explanation. They also narrated their anxiety during examinations because of inadequate inclusive learning resources and the anticipation of dependency on peers. Initially, they took this as a challenge, and then they identified sources of support. This study identified a number of supports that VI students identified and used to mitigate challenges. That is the second appraisal of the stress and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1991).

Secondary Appraisal: Evaluation of Coping Resources

Narratives of VI students revealed that when they assessed the situation, they identified available resources. Peer support, assistive/modern technology, personal determination, and prior coping experience were identified as major resources to mitigate the challenges. Authors also agreed that, when people take challenges as learning opportunities and analyze available resources, they can develop the best possible coping strategies leading to success, learning, and professional practice (Delany et al., 2015; Follmer et al., 2018).

VI students shared that assistive technologies, such as screen readers, voice recognition software, mobile applications, TalkBack, AI, and online learning platforms, enable them to access online resources independently. Availability of and access to technology benefit VI students (Heard, 2020). Binlang and Gonzuiz (2024) also found that using available technologies, such as pursuing audio resources, becomes a primary resource for VI students. Burgstahler (2020) found that VI students use digital tools to support reading, explore social media platforms, and achieve better educational outcomes. Almurayziq et al. (2022) found that voice recognition software helps them find resources and perform write-intensive tasks. Likely, mobile phones and mobile applications may be the major resources for the VI students and they can play a significant role in inclusive education by providing personalized learning experiences, adaptive learning resources, accessibility, usability, and equity with the diverse needs of students with disabilities and VI students (Mirzakhmedova et al., 2023).

This study also revealed that social networks were another resource available to the VI students. Furthermore, if VI students received support from their sighted peers, they experience acceptance and inclusion and increased courage to overcome the challenges (West et al., 2004). Moreover, authors agreed that social networks, peer networks, and study groups are major resources for VI students to mitigate challenges (Phiri, 2013; Sim, 2020; Hadidi & AI Khateeb, 2014). This concept also aligns with concept Dharma. Where *Dharma* highlights shared responsibilities and the importance of supporting each

other. Therefore, identifying the available resources to cope with stress and challenges is necessary for the survival of VI students in school education.

Narrative Journey of Coping

In the same way, after an appraisal of challenges and an analysis of available resources, VI students in the study area developed two types of coping strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Parker & Sheinin, 2020). VI students use available resources for problem-focused coping, such as notes taking, using assistive devices and technologies, sharing resources, etc. If their assessment does not identify any resources that, they use emotion-focused coping strategies, such as positive self-talk, resilience, and self-motivated learning. These strategies reflect the concepts of Dharama and *Sahana Bhava*. Because *Dharma* is related to fulfilling the personal duty, and *Sahana Bhava* is related to resilience (Aithal & Ramanathan, 2024). Moreover, some challenges are just minimised through the adaptive strategies, such as step count. Because not every challenge will be easy to resolve, people should accept and tolerate these situations as a coping mechanism, such as mobility (Lazarus & Folkman, 1991).

During the discussion, VI students shared that they used technologies and online learning platforms, which had a positive impact on their engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. That is another way to use available resources, as the stress and coping theory suggests. Dabi and Golga (2024) also found that accessible online educational platforms help VI students achieve better educational outcomes. Regular use of social media, online knowledge repositories, and website browsing likely enhances the learning abilities of VI students, increases social competencies, and supports sustained ingenuity for academic success (Rotzita & Aquee, 2019). Narratives also revealed that alternative support networks outside the formal school structure, such as online groups, also helped them cope with challenges. That is close to the Hindu philosophical and cultural concept *Sewa*.

Creating a learning environment despite challenges is crucial for the academic and social success of VI students (Amponsah & Bekele, 2023). Therefore, VI students in the study area developed infrastructure and environmental adaptation strategies that fostered confidence, independence, active participation in learning, and goal achievement. Familiarizing themselves with their surroundings, memorizing the routes by counting steps, and practicing moving around their surroundings are VI students' strategies for coping with infrastructural challenges. VI students learning the necessary routes to school premises from sighted peers and practising moving around (Rotzita & Aquee, 2019; Khan & Jayus, 2019). James (2023) underscores that familiarizing techniques give a sense of belonging, safety, freedom to move on and focus on studies.

Creating a personal system to organize their space, mentoring by senior VI students, following fixed routines, staying focused, and building confidence were major coping strategies for overcrowded and unfavourable school environments in the study area. Hastings-Speck (2023) and Otu-Danquah (2022) also argued that adopting fixed routines, allocating time slots for each activity and using mobile apps for reminders help VI students carry out daily tasks efficiently, minimise crowded situations, and cope with

infrastructure and environmental challenges. Furthermore, goal setting and time management significantly support VI students' academic achievement (James, 2023).

Using tactile markers, organizing their personal belongings under the mentorship of their senior VI peer, labels for personal organization helped them identify and manage their belongings properly and independently. VI students develop their personal and organizational systems through tactile markers and personal belongings labels (Rai et al., 2019). Therefore, strategies developed by VI students for coping with infrastructure and environmental challenges are the backbone of their educational achievement and survival in school. Therefore, the narratives revealed by the VI students in the study area align with other findings, and VI students have been evaluating stress and adopting coping strategies based on available resources, strengths, and contextual limitations, as posited by stress and coping theory pioneered by Lazarus and Folkman (1991).

Emotional Resilience and Meaning-Making

Another significant dimension of narratives from VI students was how system failures forced them to address those challenges constructively. When VI students encountered the challenges and felt stress in inclusive education, they reinterpreted their challenges constructively. VI students believe that persistence in education was one of the ways to fulfil their Dharma. They believe that, once they do their Dharma, they will have a bright future in the coming days. For instance, VI students shared that positive self-talk and resilience always helped them stay motivated, strengthen their belief in their abilities, build confidence, and resolve challenging situations. Social and emotional skills would be a better idea to cope with challenges faced during the teaching-learning activities (Esere et al., 2016). VI students are motivated by the achievements of their peers, listening to motivational and inspirational audio recordings, and peer collaboration (Esere et al., 2016; Vik & Lassen, 2010). Lorenznan (2020) stated that self-awareness, adaptation processes, self-motivation, and peer support are the established coping mechanisms employed by VI students. Moreover, avoiding negative activities, seeking support services, and developing positive attitudes are the major coping strategies for VI students (Heard, 2020). Bhalalusesa (2018) found that acceptance of their limitations and determination towards their goals are major coping strategies for visually impaired students. Positive reinforcement and teacher involvement are other coping strategies for nurturing, enhancing, and sustaining VI students (Vik & Lassen, 2010). However, students' narratives did not indicate any positive reinforcement or support from formal structures, such as teachers and the school management committee. Concisely, such interpretations are similar to adaptive responses and meaning-focused coping. Because VI students use their motivation and resilience as an adaptive response system and draw upon broader belief systems to sustain motivation and resilience in coping with stress and challenges (Folkman, 2008).

VI narrated that they often remain calm and persistent during the stress and challenges, even they experience several challenges and even they do not have any resources that can use to develop coping strategies. This shows their *Sahana Bhava* to the academic challenges in inclusive education (Aithal & Ramanathan, 2024). The theory of stress and coping also claim that not every challenge will be easy to resolve; people should

accept and tolerate these situations as a coping mechanism, such as mobility (Lazarus & Folkman, 1991). This shows that coping strategies of VI students extended to culturally informed modes of emotional regulation and endurance, beyond the problem-solving strategies.

The Gap between Structure and Agency

Another narration of the VI students was a significant gap between policies and implementation. VI students acknowledged the importance of inclusive education policies. However, none of them has had a positive experience implementing policies effectively. They narrated the non-implementation of inclusive policies as a challenge to inclusive education in mainstream schools. During the discussion, it was found that coping strategies were developed and adopted informally and context-specifically rather than solely through formal institutional mechanisms.

The inclusive education policy emphasises accessibility and institutional support; however, it should support inclusive education (Wea, 2025). VI students in the study area haven't had a positive experience with accessibility in inclusive education and institutional support. Most of them depend upon resource sharing and peer support. They reported that most VI students came from low-income, deprived communities. Deprived communities often struggle to continue their education and well-being (Giri, 2022). VI students reported using a collaborative approach as a coping strategy to address the lack of structure and enhance a sense of community, leading to a higher survival rate in school education. Sharing resources and interactions between VI and sighted peers increases independence and enables them to overcome difficulties because of the gap between structure and agency (Bhalalusesa, 2018; Phiri, 2013; Matsana et al., 2024). These findings align with research by Hariharan et al. (2011), which shows that resilience and coping strategies are constructed through interactions between individuals and their environments. This study revealed that resilience and coping strategies were developed through interactions among (unsupportive) institutional structures, social relationships, and culturally embedded values. Thus, coping strategies of VI students are both problem-focused and emotion-focused. Both coping strategies are shaped by opportunities and challenges in the inclusive educational environment of the mainstream school and depend on rational and contextually situated processes.

Peer Support: Example of *Sewa* Karuna, *Sahana Bhava* and Dharma

Taking peer support from sighted peers and good coordination with them was a common narration from all VI students. However, Tonegawa (2022) found it to be a major challenge in the inclusive education system of Myanmar. VI students developed different coping strategies for better educational achievement, surviving in school education, and a better future. Among those coping strategies, peer support was the most frequently practised. Hadidi and AI Khateeb (2014) argue that VI adolescents received more support from their families than their sighted peers. However, this study found that all VI students relied on peer support from sighted students, and that this support was the most reliable for their educational achievement and personal work. These findings can be agreed upon through the cultural lens of Hinduism. Peer support is more related to the value of mutual aid. Hindu philosophy focuses on the importance

of *Sewa* (selfless service) and mutual accountability (Aithal & Ramanathan, 2024). VI students often get support from their sighted peers to navigate the challenges as expressed by these cultural values.

Even when the institutions are not actively supportive to VI students, they have been reaching out to their peers to get support on educational concepts, recording the lessons, moving on to surroundings, etc. This concept is related to the Hindu idea of Sangha (community), where the community's members depend on communal strength and network. According to Aithal and Ramanathan (2024), Hindu philosophy focuses on the Dharma (Social responsibility), which involves executing one's duties and responsibilities to family, community, and society while adhering to ethical principles and moral ideals. Moreover, *Sahana Bhava* (empathy) also encourages and fosters harmonious relationships and cooperation among diverse individuals, exceeds narrow self-interest, and grows a broader perception that covers the well-being of the entire community and world (Srinivasan, & Aithal, 2023).

Furthermore, Hinduism's spiritual concept promotes empathy and compassion. It focuses on recognizing the Atama (soul) in others. Recognizing the Atma in others' is related to helping others (Maharana & Behura, 2024). Support to others is seen as good deed that leads to virtuous spiritual results; therefore, this encourages sighted students to support VI students. In conclusion, it is possible to interpret the peer assistance that VI students rely on as an expression of the embedded Hindu cultural beliefs of service to others and interconnection: Karuna, *Sewa*, *Sahana Bhava*, and Dharma. In addition to helping VI students overcome academic obstacles, this cultural framework strengthens their sense of community and purpose.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION AND SUGGESTION

To flourish in these challenging settings, VI students develop coping strategies to address challenges, improve academic achievement, survive in school, and mitigate negative emotions. This study explores coping strategies of VI students in inclusive school settings through a narrative inquiry approach. Narratives of VI students reveal that coping is a dynamic, evolving process that unfolds through interaction with challenges, continuous appraisal of those challenges, access to and use of available resources, and the construction of meaning over time within the social, cultural, and institutional context. Self-motivated learning, self-resilience, using social network, utilization of modern technologies, peer supports, resources sharing between peers, auditory learning memorization, active listening, remembering and repetitions of the keywords and concepts, using mobile applications, online learning platforms and AI, familiarizing with their surroundings, memorize routes by counting the steps, practicing moving around, creating a personal system to organize their space, following fixed routines, staying focused and building confidence are major coping strategies develop by the VI students. The findings indicate that coping strategies were predominantly individual and peer support. This shows the significant gap in policies and practices of inclusive education.

This study contributes across theoretical, policy, and practical domains. Theoretically, this research provides a credible case for the continued development of the Stress of

Coping framework beyond its traditional individualist focus. Narrative of VI students highlights that coping among VI students is deeply relational and culturally embedded within the Hindu philosophical landscape. Narratives of VI students reflected that Dharma (sense of duty), *Karuna* (compassion), *Sewa* (selfless service), and *Sahana Bhava* (Patient Strength) supported them in coping with the challenges.

From a policy and practice perspective, this study warns policymakers and educators to design contextually inclusive education policies with reference to students with VI's real-life experiences, promote accessible learning resources and environments, and encourage peer engagement, contextual teacher training programmes, and the empowerment of VI students as active agents in their educational journeys. Likely, this study can serve as a powerful tool for advocacy, raising awareness, and replicating the coping mechanisms developed by VI students. This study also recognize and integrates culturally embedded values, which can further enhance inclusive education practice Furthermore, this study explores the strengths, adaptability and agency of the VI students; it seeks to contribute to a more inclusive educational landscape where every learner's story is heard, respected, and acted upon.

Despite this contribution, this study is limited by its sample size, its focus on a specific school context, its methodological framework, and the types of participants. Because this study does not incorporate the home-schooling context, it relies only on a narrative inquiry research design and the school management committee; teachers and parents are not included as participants in this study. Therefore, further research should consider policy and practice gaps, longitudinal designs, include diverse categories of disabilities and participants, and further explore the role of Hindu philosophical concepts and cultural values in developing coping strategies and adopting coping processes. Those efforts would provide deeper insights into how to build a more inclusive and responsive educational system.

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