



Studying Education of Visual Impairment from Within: Reflexivity, Restrictions, and Institutional Control in Fieldwork

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This paper examines how looking, showing infrastructure, and gatekeeping influence knowledge production in Schools for the Blind in Odisha. The paper employs a methodological approach called Quasi Autoethnography to examine access restrictions, supervised interviews, and how transparency constructs disability education. Building on Foucault, Goffman, and Haraway, this paper demonstrates how knowledge production is influenced by who is visible in institutions, not just how one conducts research. As a low-vision ethnographer, this paper examines how being disabled shapes insider/outsider concerns and worries in institutions. Refusal, restriction, and supervised access illustrate how being disabled is made visible and kept safe through infrastructure. I connect this to disability anthropology, science and technology studies, and how invisible processes in institutions are key to ethnography.

Keywords: surveillance, knowledge, ethnographic fieldwork

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1. Introduction

The anthropology of disability has consistently challenged the dominant understanding of the medicalization process by foregrounding the lived experiences of persons with disabilities (Rapp and Ginsberg, 2024). Rather than treating disability as a deficit, anthropologists try to unravel how everyday practices shape various contexts of disability (ibid.). Thus, the Schools for the Blind here function as everyday practice, holding a particular position and serving as sites of education, philanthropy, and welfare institutions. At the same time, it also becomes a site of vulnerability for catering to visually impaired students.

This research examines the challenges of conducting research in institutions for people with disabilities, specifically, Schools for the Blind. It also explores the challenges of conducting research as a person with a disability, in this case, a person with low-vision. Based on my fieldwork experiences, this paper analyzes the reshaping the knowledge production towards disability studies due to surveillance, gatekeeping, and infrastructural display.

The institutions most of the time function not only through overt rules but also through structured visibility (Foucault, 1977). Thus, Surveillance here not only regulates the students but also sets the narratives. The idea of a total institution (Goffman, 1961) is beneficial for understanding how residential educational institutions blur, even when schools are not as closed as a prison environment. The idea of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) reminds us that the knowledge, in this case, research data, itself is never neutral; rather, it is the embodiment of a situation.

Here, I argue that the research in disability institutions is not only shaped by mobility challenges but also by reputational anxieties, surveillance, and selective transparency, recreating access as an instrument of power. As a disabled researcher (low-vision), these conditions reinforce my view that missing data, redirection, and refusal are not methodological accidents but institutional productions of knowledge that set the required narratives. In the next section, I have discussed how I conducted my studies.

2. Methodological Underpinning and Research Context

The observational data I collected from Schools for the Blind primarily consist of detailed field notes documenting my experience during ethnographic research, specifically multi-sited ethnography. The methodological approach that I have adopted is described as a quasi-auto-ethnography that uses the elements and strategies of both auto-ethnography and ethnography. The auto-ethnography centers on researchers' personal experience (Adams et al., 2015), and the ethnography here, more specifically a patchwork ethnography (Günel and Watanabe, 2023), centers on conducting research through fragmented field visits, integrating the researcher's other commitments rather than relying on long-interrupted fieldwork. Here, I have used no school names due to ethical concerns and a non-disclosure agreement, but the study is based in Odisha, India. Therefore, I will use alphanumeric codes to refer to the schools.

The first site, which I shall refer to as School-1, featured state-funded schools. The site had technical rooms such as smart classrooms, a science lab, an E-library, and a recording studio. There were distinct classrooms for each grade and activity rooms for sports and music. The institutional pride in infrastructure was evident through the signage and display, like an exhibition.

The second location, School- 2, is in the same city as School- 1. A Non-Government Organization (NGO) manages it, and I could only one interview with a parent of a day scholar student, under close supervision in the principal's office, with the principal and staff members present during conversations with the parents of a day scholar, with scrutiny of what I am asking.

The third location, School- 3, is in the same district as Schools- 1 and 2, located in a rural area, and is managed by an NGO. It provided greater flexibility to participate freely. I could observe more casually in and out of class, have extended conversations with students, teachers, and staff, and visit frequently. Assistive devices, such as computers with braille keyboards were shared by students and used in their daily lives.

Methodically, my fieldwork revolved around permission regimes. In School- 1, I was allowed to stay on the campus to observe from a corridor. Not only was I not allowed to observe in the classroom or the learning process, but I was also not allowed to formally interact with any teachers, students, supporting staff, or parents. In School- 2, only one interview with the the parent was allowed, after which I was asked not to return. The school also did not permit me to observe the infrastructure by taking a stroll around. In contrast, School- 3 allowed my frequent visits.

Significant limitations also emerged. Due to institutional policy, I was not allowed to access parents' details. Although one or two details were available as the students were drawn from marginalized sections across Odisha, making individual outreach was difficult, especially given my own low vision conditions. Access to prolonged classroom observation on sexual health classes in School-3 and hostels, especially boys' (girls' hostel in School-3 was restricted due to same gender norms), in Schools- 1 and 2 was restricted due to gender stereotypes and security concerns, respectively. The construction work at School- 3 prevented me from staying in the boys' hostel, limiting my observations after late evening.

Such levels of variation reveal the kind of "field" that Bourdieu (2019) speaks of, which is a space of power with people in different positions. Thus, I believe, the mechanism of surveillance shaped the scope and form of knowledge production, which is not peripheral to the research; rather, it constitutes itself that I have discussed in the following section and sub-sections.

3. Institution as Managed Space

I have explored every aspect of the context possible through the following subsections to understand the forms of knowledge production:

The Idea of Performed Narrative

In School-2, the presence of the principal during parents' interviews, listening closely, redirected my approach to ask questions formally. Before the interview, the principal also scrutinized the questions. Thus, I was not able to explore personal feelings, family dynamics, restricting my questions to achievement, discipline, and gratitude.

Drawing from Foucault's idea of panopticonism, surveillance here operated through proximity rather than social architecture (Foucault, op. cit., 202). The principal's presence turned everything into performances. The parents' responses were instead calculated to align with institutional norms, blurring the line between protection and censorship. Ethnographically, it is a reproduction of lived experiences.

The Control through Silence

In School-1, surveillance operated through prohibition with social engagement. I was permitted to stay on the campus during working hours but denied engagement with any participants. Although it is visible on the surface, accessing its users is impossible due to a denial of further visits. Here, access itself becomes a form of epistemically controlling the infrastructure, but I see epistemically that my presence is opaque. The result becomes observationally enriched but epistemically silent.

I feel such restrictions resonate with the anxiety of scrutiny. Disability inclusion here is publicly displayed but shielded from its examination. In my opinion, the school here appeared less social, more like an exhibition of modernity.

Spectacle vs. Practice

The contrast between School-1 and 3 was evident. In my opinion, the School-1 facilities appeared symbolic: labelled with advanced technical tools but inaccessible for observation. Whereas in School-3, the technologies are pretty functional and demonstrate daily use through circulation between students and teachers. The donor labels were visible, signaling accountability while embedding the tools into everyday practice. The whole scenario helped me recall the relation between actors and networks, where technologies are not inert objects but actors within the network (Latour, 2005).

The abundance of infrastructure thus did not guarantee transparency and participatory access. In School-1, it functions as a semiotic symbol of inclusivity and progress. In School-3, it shows a functional relation exhibiting the idea that the disability expertise comes not from the presence, but instead comes from integrating it into everyday life.

Spatial Boundaries through Gender

Gender Norms (Philbin et al., 2023) influenced the way I could conduct my fieldwork. As a male researcher, I was not permitted to enter the girls' hostel. The stereotypes of gender exhibited during my observation in sexual health classes also foreplayed another aspect of inhibition to understand their personal world. These boundaries the observation beyond after-school life, peer relations, and care. According to me, surveillance intersects with gender to determine who may see what. Thus, knowledge itself becomes spatially boundaried.

Suspicion vs. Trust

The Schools-1 and 2 perceived me as a scrutinizer, whereas School-3 treated me as a guest teacher, which exposes the culture of the institution, which is shaped by administration and reputational pressure. Thus, Schools for the Blind here not merely function as a site of research, but as a site of how disability is orchestrated. In the following section, I want to discuss my experience as a disabled researcher.

4. Being a Disabled Researcher

Conducting this research as a low vision scholar added a reflexive layer to these encounters. It is often assumed that disability would ease trust-building. But in my case, at times it intensified institutional caution. Thus, being a person with visual impairment did not provide insider status. It also encouraged me to see the idea of knowledge production from embodied positions (Haraway, Op. Cit.). My low vision shaped my navigation, experience restrictions, and interpretation of institutional behaviour. It also shaped how institutions see me, not as a researcher but as a disabled adult scrutinizing the management.

In Schools 1 and 2, I sensed anxiety of misrepresentation. Being asked not to return, scrutinizing the questions, and the presence during interviews produce responses of exclusion, frustration, and vulnerability toward the institution. Those responses themselves become the data. In School-3, the trust altered the field dynamics, and the informal welcome treated me as a guest teacher, which allowed deeper immersion. Yet, the institutional policies limited parental engagement and access to the hostel.

The tension between visibility and access defined my fieldwork. As a low-vision individual, I am accustomed to partial sight, which aligns with partial knowledge in these institutions and resonates with my idea of "Visibility without Depth". The dynamics of Disability research often emphasize empowerment and insider epistemology (Mohler and Rudman, 2022). However, my fieldwork experience as a disabled researcher shows that disability identity does not dissolve institutional suspicion but complicates it. The school fears that a disabled researcher might highlight the gaps within the school. The experience of interviews, supervised conversations, and restricted observation shows how the institution safeguards its reputation.

5. Conclusion

Through this paper, I want to demonstrate that research in Schools for the Blind is shaped by surveillance and gatekeeping, in which access, refusal, redirection, and selective transparency become the central analytic elements. Surveillance here operates on multiple levels through principals' presence, restricted interaction, and gendered boundaries. Infrastructure functions symbolically to perform inclusivity with limited scrutiny.

For researchers, especially disabled ones, these dynamics create another epistemic reality. Missing data, anxiety about institutional reputation, and refusal become forms of knowledge. Anthropologically, this contributes to disability research by foregrounding how institutions manage their visibility. Thus, understanding the hidden is as important as understanding the observed. Methodologically, it shows how restrictions can be analyzed rather than overlooking the aspects. As a low vision researcher, navigating these environments demonstrates that knowledge is derived from a particular location, is relationally based, and is shaped by politics. In my opinion, this indicates not only care and teaching but also control over the narrative.

Ultimately, my paper shows not only what I could see and hear, but also what I could not. Surveillance impacted how students spoke. Denial impacted the way I conducted my research. The culture within the institution impacted the way I compared things. Therefore, disability research must consider the nature of power, not only its impact on participants but also on what we can know.

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