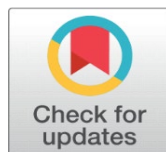


# THE STRUGGLES OF A DYSPLEXIC CHILD: FAMILY, SOCIETY, AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN TAARE ZAMEEN PAR

Vishnu Badra <sup>1</sup>, Dr. Sheeba C. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PG Student, Integrated MA English Language & Literature, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Integrated MA English Language and Literature, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India



## ABSTRACT

Dyslexia is a learning difference but often considered as an academic disability. Children with this differences are often misunderstood and marginalized. It is still neglected in many regions of the world, mainly where rigid academic infrastructures exist to enforce respect for rote learning. The kids in India carry the cross of learning disabilities that is much heavier because intelligence and educational success are thought of as synonymous, if not inextricably linked, with the approval of that society. Taare Zameen Par (2007) is the epitome of contrasted images in a film directed by Amir Khan that brings to light the struggles children with dyslexia have to endure and exposure to the ills behind the Indian educational system. The film is about the life of Ishaan Awasthi, who is so full of creativity but utterly failing in academics. Ishaan's dyslexia remained an undiagnosed medical condition. His teachers, as well as family, misjudged him, and he was sent away to a very strict boarding school, where instead of healing, his wounds of emotions would augment. Then, came his teacher, Ram Shankar Nikumbh, understanding Ishaan's problems, employed different teaching methods for his betterment. This paper studies the movie's depiction of the ostracism of children with dyslexia, considering its impact on Ishaan's emotional and psychological well-being, parent pressure, competitiveness of the educational system, and society's misunderstanding of intelligence that the movie points toward are critically studied. Taare Zameen Par presents learning-disabled children facing feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and social isolation from these experiences; in this regard, it accentuates the trauma of the mental trauma on academic measurements that are unattainable, and stress bestowed by comparisons to other children. This paper also investigates the implications of the representation of neurodivergence in cinematography. It inspects how animation, music, and color coding are used in the film as visual storytelling techniques to depict Ishaan's inner landscapes and emotional turmoil. The second part discusses Nikumbh as a transformative character in Ishaan's journey who stands against traditional methods and calls for a more inclusive and compassionate approach to learning. The family sphere concerning Ishaan's journey forms another focal point of the paper. His parents, especially his father, represent the societal attitude that awards precedence to academic success over individuality. The film's critique centers on how families dismiss unconventional learning requirements, explaining how parental ignorance and pressure can emotionally hurt the child. This research studies how Ishaan's eventual acceptance by and support from his parents reiterate the need for awareness and early intervention concerning learning disabilities. This paper also situates Taare Zameen Par within contemporary scholarly debates about dyslexia and media representation. It scans some earlier research on the depiction of dyslexia in cinema to gauge the film's contribution to controversies.

**Keywords:** Dyslexia, Learning Disabilities, Indian Education System, Taare Zameen Par

**Received** 29 March 2025

**Accepted** 21 April 2025

**Published** 25 April 2025

**DOI** [10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.ISMER.2025.6038](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.ISMER.2025.6038)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Dyslexia is one of the most prevalent yet underestimated learning disabilities affecting children and adults globally. Dyslexia has been encompassed in a veil of stigma, ignorance, and misperception in most societies, including India. Dyslexic individuals are too often misperceived as lazy, unruly, or incapable, which results in social isolation and psychological problems. Popular culture and cinema, however, can re-make attitudes and introduce critical awareness to learning disabilities such as dyslexia. Being a strong medium, film can represent the lived experiences of people with dyslexia and necessary dialogue regarding educational reforms and integration. This issue is tackled strongly within the movie *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), which was directed by Amir Khan. The film tells the story of Ishaan Awasthi, a dyslexic eight-year-old boy, who cannot be accommodated within the tight rules of his school and family. The movie does not merely present dyslexia as a learning difficulty but explores its social and emotional impacts on the child. Through the character of Ishaan, *Taare Zameen Par* depicts the challenges faced by children with learning disabilities in India's competitive and conformity-based education system. This research essay will examine how dyslexia is represented in *Taare Zameen Par* and how the representation adds up to a better understanding of the condition. The study also considers the general depiction of dyslexia in global cinema and how it contributes towards learning disorders awareness. Through a critical analysis of *Taare Zameen Par*, this paper aims to talk about how Indian cinema depicts the complexities of dyslexia within a culturally specific context.

## 2. WHAT IS DYSLEXIA?

Dyslexia is a specific learning disorder (SLD) that primarily affects an individual's reading, writing, and spelling abilities. It is a permanent condition, normally diagnosed during childhood, that arises as a result of differences in the way the brain processes written and verbal language. According to DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition), dyslexia is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects basic skills such as phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension. [American Psychiatric Association. \(2013\)](#) Children with dyslexia are mostly characterized by symptoms such as failure to recognize words, reading fluency problems, persistent spelling errors, and writing blurry sentences with trouble. In spite of these scholastic difficulties, dyslexics tend to have average or above-average intelligence and exhibit creativity and problem-solving abilities, especially in non-verbal activities such as art, music, or spatial ability. Dyslexia is not related to a person's intelligence or effort, it is also rooted in neurobiological factors that affect language acquisition and literacy development. In many educational systems, particularly in developing countries, dyslexia is often underdiagnosed due to a lack of awareness and resources. Without early intervention and proper support, children with dyslexia may face severe academic setbacks, emotional distress, and low self-esteem. Understanding dyslexia requires a shift in perception, where educators and caregivers recognize it as a learning difference rather than a learning deficiency. This shift is crucial for creating inclusive educational environments that foster the strengths and talents of children with dyslexia. There are different symptoms in children and adults, and they experience difficulties with organization and time management. In the case of adult's symptoms like slow reading, difficulties in comprehending a text, and the major challenge with spelling and writing. This research suggests that dyslexia is caused by differences in brain areas related to

language processing. [Morgan \(2014\)](#). But with appropriate support and support interventions, individuals with dyslexia can learn to read and write effectively like early identification and intervention: recognizing dyslexia early and providing targeted support can make huge differences. And also learning or focusing more on spelling strategies, phonetics, and reading comprehension. Also, when dyslexic children with extra time for tests or offering alternative formats for reading their study materials can be incredibly helpful.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Multiple researchers have examined the representation of dyslexia in cinema, focusing on both Western and non-Western contexts. In her book *Dyslexia on Screen: Representation and Reality*, Ruth [Morgan \(2014\)](#) discusses how films like *Taare Zameen Par* and *The Big Picture* portray dyslexia in a way that balances educational value with emotional storytelling. Morgan points out that while films can raise awareness, they sometimes oversimplify the nuances of dyslexia for dramatic purposes [Morgan \(2014\)](#).

"Learning Difficulties in Popular Culture" Pauline [Davis \(2017\)](#) conducted a study on how learning disabilities are portrayed in popular media. Davis argues that *Taare Zameen Par* offers a culturally particular narrative where dyslexia intersects with family expectations and the exam culture prevalent in India. She further describes how visual storytelling and symbolism employed in the film enhance the audience's empathy towards children who are dyslexic [Davis \(2017\)](#).

"Cinematic Depictions of Dyslexia: A Comparative Study," written by Dr. [Patel \(2019\)](#) is a comparative study of *Taare Zameen Par* in comparison with Western films based on the problem. *Taare Zameen Par* is different from Western movies in its portrayal of dyslexia within the frame of Indian societal constructs, says Patel.

He reiterates that unlike Western movies concentrating on the individual process, *Taare Zameen Par* incorporates the process into the framework involving family, educators, and social pressures. These studies assert that even though dyslexia has been depicted in both Indian and Western films, the cultural backdrop greatly influences the way that the condition is perceived and portrayed [Patel \(2019\)](#).

"Learning Disability on Ishaan, Dyslexic character depicted In the Film Like Stars on Earth" (2018), by Somariah Fitriani & Sherly Felina analyzes Ishaan, the main character of *Taare Zameen Par*, as a figure of a dyslexic child who undergoes enormous academic as well as emotional adversities. As children normally acquire reading ability by age five or 6, those with dyslexia struggle because of inherent cognitive differences. Nonetheless, most dyslexic individuals possess high levels of intelligence and creativity, which makes early diagnosis and intervention important [Fitriani and Felina \(n.d.\)](#).

### 4. RESEARCH GAP

Although several studies have analyzed dyslexia in cinema, few have specifically focused on how Indian socio-cultural factors influence the portrayal of dyslexia in films like *Taare Zameen Par*. Most existing literature concentrates on the psychological and educational aspects but lacks emphasis on the cultural pressures that Indian children face, such as the weight of parental expectations, the rigid school system, and the emotional consequences of these pressures. Additionally, there is limited research on the long-term influence of such films on real-life

educational practices and public attitudes in India. There are questions still as to whether movies such as Taare Zameen Par have caused an overall change in the way that teachers, parents, and policy makers address learning disabilities in schools in India.

## 5. SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

This research is significant in that it provides insights into the intersection of cinema, dyslexia, and Indian culture. Through the critical analysis of Taare Zameen Par, this research aims to enhance knowledge regarding the representation of learning disability in Indian media and its broader implications on society. This investigation also seeks to explore how the cinema can serve as a junction between academic theory and popular discourse in attempting to promote empathy and reform in education in an inclusive manner.

## 6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature, involving content analysis of Taare Zameen Par. A qualitative research method involves a content analysis of the movie that is appropriate in studying dyslexia themes, symbols, and character development in the film. The research includes a close examination of the narrative, cinematography, dialogue, and character development of the film to find out the representation of dyslexia within the socio-cultural context of India. The analysis further entails reading secondary scholarly sources on dyslexia in educational psychology and media to give a wider context for the interpretation of the message of the film.

## 7. DYSLEXIA IN GLOBAL CINEMA

Cinema plays a vital role in shaping public opinion and can function as an effective tool to educate audiences about conditions like dyslexia. Over the years, several films across the globe have addressed dyslexia either directly or indirectly. In Western cinema, for instance, films such as *The Big Picture: Rethinking Dyslexia* (2012), a documentary by James Redford, highlight real-life experiences of individuals with dyslexia, including well-known personalities like Richard Branson and Charles Schwab. The documentary challenges common misconceptions and focuses on the strengths of dyslexic individuals. Other Western films, such as *Like Stars on Earth* (the international title for Taare Zameen Par) and *Mical* (2020), depict dyslexia through a narrative format. Redford (2012). These films often portray how children with dyslexia are initially misunderstood by their families and schools. Eventually, someone identifies their condition and provides the necessary support to help them overcome their challenges.

Common cinematic portrayals of dyslexia include the trope of the "struggling student" who is labeled as a failure, followed by a "mentor figure" who recognizes the child's true potential. While this formula effectively creates emotional appeal, it also risks oversimplifying the complexities of dyslexia. Nonetheless, films serve as cultural texts that reveal how societies perceive learning disabilities and what values they attach to education and success. While Western films have gradually moved towards offering dyslexia in a better and diverse fashion, Indian film went a step further with Taare Zameen Par, which is completely based on a child who is dyslexic's internal and external spaces and therefore offers a rich and empathetic description.

## **8. DYSLEXIA IN TAARE ZAMEEN PAR**

Taare Zameen Par presents a highly emotional and culturally appropriate representation of dyslexia through the character of Ishaan Awasthi. Ishaan is a talented and imaginative boy who fails in studies due to his undiagnosed learning disability. The movie depicts his reading and writing problems, and these are misconstrued as laziness and disobedience by his teachers, neighbors, and parents. The movie is narrated in a manner that reflects Ishaan's inner world, which is rich and full of imagination, and his outer world, where he is criticized, punished, and isolated. Visual motifs such as animated sequences show Ishaan's rich imagination, while scenes at school reveal his isolation and fear. The movie also portrays the rigidity of the Indian school system, where cramming and high marks dominate. Ishaan's father, who subscribes to the ideologies of discipline and success, gets him enrolled in a boarding school to "fix" him up, thus adding to the emotional trauma of Ishaan. The watershed moment arrives when Ram Shankar Nikumbh, an art teacher, diagnoses Ishaan's dyslexia. Nikumbh adopts creative teaching methods, gives confidence to Ishaan, and aids him in studies. The movie also reveals how individualized care, and sensitivity can transform the life of a dyslexic child. By emphasizing the emotional turmoil that Ishaan experiences, the film transcends the surface-level signs of dyslexia to investigate its psychological impact. The portrayal of Ishaan's gradual healing process under Nikumbh's supervision highlights the importance of empathy, individual teaching approaches, and emotional support for children with learning disabilities.

## **9. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT ON CHILDREN**

Dyslexia affects not only a child's reading and writing. It affects their emotional well-being, social interaction, and self-concept. Dyslexic children experience constant failure in school, which leads them to feel frustrated, humiliated, and develop low self-esteem. They feel useless when they are put in contrast to their academically successful classmates. Socially, dyslexic children are ostracized because they cannot meet the expectations of teachers and parents. If not diagnosed and treated, these children become diagnosed as disobedient, lazy, or inattentive. The pain of not being understood and not being supported can lead to anxiety, depression, and withdrawal from social life. In Taare Zameen Par, all these symptoms are evident in Ishaan. His alienation from family, shunning from peers and mood breakdowns are portrayed as immediate responses to ignorance and lack of knowledge of his disease. The movie illustrates the grave significance of the immediate identification and treatment to prevent further harm to his mental health.

## **10. CONCLUSION**

Taare Zameen Par is not just a film in Indian cinema due to its sensitive and inclusive handling of dyslexia as a reflection of the failure of our society, family dynamics, and education system in supporting neuro divergent children. Through Ishaan's journey, the film looks back at India's education system and social attitude towards learning disability. This research illustrates the emotional difficulties of dyslexic children and stresses the importance of empathy, understanding, and various methods of teaching. It highlights the manner in which films like Taare Zameen Par have contributed immensely towards awareness regarding dyslexia among the public. However, with all these, there is still much to be done in order to transform this awareness into practical change in the education system. This film

emphasizes the urgency of national-level educational reforms and inclusive practices at Indian schools. These reforms will guarantee that dyslexic children receive the necessary assistance to flourish academically as well as emotionally. In deconstructing traditional notions of intelligence and accomplishment, the movie urges us to redefine education as a nurturing climate rather than an arena for one-upmanship.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

### **REFERENCES**

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>
- Davis, P. (2017). Learning Difficulties in Popular Culture. Routledge.
- Fitriani, S., & Felina, S. (n.d.). Learning Disability on Ishaan, Dyslexic Character Portrayed in the Movie Like Stars on Earth. Retrieved from <https://intjcss.com>
- Morgan, R. (2014). Dyslexia on Screen: Representation and Reality. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Patel, K. (2019). Cinematic Depiction of Dyslexia: A Comparative Study. *Journal of Media Studies*, 15(3), 45-60.
- Redford, J. (Director). (2012). The Big Picture: Rethinking Dyslexia [Documentary film]. HBO Documentary Films.