INTEGRATED JOURNAL OF
SOCIAL SCIENCES

'I am like everyone else…' Voices of Children with Disabilities in school settings: A literature review

Ritu Singh,[*] Geeta Chopra

Department of Human Development and Childhood Studies, Institute of Home Economics, University of Delhi Hauz Khas Enclave, New Delhi-110016. India.

ABSTRACT

Globally much has been advanced in the domain of inclusion and inclusive education, but still, the experiences of differences and exclusion persist and add to further stigmatization of children with disabilities. The inclusive education is not just strengthening the structural pillars, but also promoting the social inclusion where children with disabilities feel free to participate. When the philosophy of inclusion lies in optimizing the opportunities of children with disabilities to fully participate and feel included, then it becomes critical to listen to their voices in school settings as it would provide inputs in the building of more inclusive settings. The voices of children with disabilities as social change actors is crucial in making informed decisions for social inclusion as they are the experts on their own experiences. The article exhibited various aspects that are of concern for researchers, special educators, and policymakers in planning for social inclusion free from barriers of differences and exclusion.

Keywords: Voices of children with disabilities, peer interactions, bullying, teachers/teacher aides

Introduction

Education is the way to ensure full participation in the society; recent years have witnessed tremendous shift to inclusive education for children with disabilities. Inclusive education celebrates the principle of adapting the system and accommodating the needs of children with disabilities for development of their full potential. The inclusive education helps children with disabilities to be included and become productive members of the society (UNICEF, 2013). Much has been achieved globally by the governments and stakeholders in optimizing the situations for children with disabilities with respect to inclusion; but still a long path needs to be travelled in creating opportunities for full and effective participation of children with disabilities. Schools are the sites where the idea of disability is augmented by labelling, segregation and presumption about the children with disabilities.

The children's voices have pointed out that school contexts have become breeding grounds for social exclusion, and they felt marginalized and left out as documented in the research studies (French and Swain, 2004; Lightfoot, Wright, and Sloper, 1999). Social inclusion is a missing link for some children with disabilities in mainstream schools (MacArthur, 2002). This resulted in further marginalization and stigmatization of children with disabilities. According to David and Watson (2001), many of the studies have paid attention mainly on the structural aspects of school. They proclaimed that lives of children in school settings are more than the physical structures that affect them. The school experiences of children with disabilities are critical in highlighting the structures of disablement widely prevalent in school and society (Armstrong, 2003). French and Swain (2004) who ardently stated, for inclusion and inclusive education to thrive successfully, the views of people with disabilities need to be involved. Studies have illustrated that listening to voices and experiences of children with disabilities can promote the expansion of inclusive environments (Lewis and Porter, 2004; Tangen, 2008). Social inclusion is a missing link for some children with disabilities in mainstream schools (MacArthur, 2002).

In promoting inclusion and overcoming hurdles, children with disabilities themselves are the experts; nobody understands the impact of exclusion better than those who experience it. States parties to the CRC and CRPD have affirmed the right of children with disabilities as agents of change to express their views on matters concerning them and to be consulted when legislation and policies concerning them are developed and implemented (UNICEF, 2013). The voices of the children with disabilities will play a significant role in guiding framework for inclusion; the present scenario is to go by the motto "nothing about us, without us", i.e. in order to build an inclusive set up for advancing the rights of children with disabilities (Singh & Chopra, 2018).

*Corresponding Author: Ritu Singh
Department of Human Development and Childhood Studies, Institute of Home Economics, University of Delhi
Email: ritu21singh89@gmail.com

Integrated Journal of Social Sciences

Integr. J. Soc. Sci., 2019, 6 (2), 35-38   35

Their lived experiences is a window to their stories of difference, assigning meaning to their experiences, negotiation of daily challenges emerging from social and environmental barriers and inform the systems, institutions (Chhikara, 2015) and cultural contexts that these children encounter in their daily living (Watson et al., 2000). Thus, the present article is aimed at locating the voices of children with disabilities in school settings with respect to social interactions with peers, teachers and teacher aides for meeting the demands of inclusion not just in structural aspects, but in social terms as well.

Methodology

The inclusion criteria for selecting articles for the review included (a) qualitative studies that included voices of children with disabilities, (b) the studies published in peer-reviewed English language journal and (c) studies published in the time frame 2007-2017. For the purpose of literature review, online databases were searched through search engines like Google Scholar, Elsevier, Springer, Sage, and Science Direct. The reference list of the research studies that met the inclusion criteria also was located. The abstracts of the articles were reviewed for inclusion in the review. The keywords employed for the search included voices of children with disabilities, qualitative studies, peers interactions, teachers and teacher aides. The search was done by using individual keywords and at times the combination of these terms using 'AND'.

Findings

The findings are organized on the following aspects as discussed below:

Social interactions with Peers

Children with disabilities viewed friends as someone with shared interests, being caring, helpful, kind, supporters, providing resistance against bullying, with whom they could cling to, participated in common activities, and felt a sense of acceptance and belongingness (Belin et al., 2007; Bourke & Burgman, 2010; Morris & Burgman, 2009; Schauwer et al., 2009, Mishra, 2014). The children with disabilities stressed on forming of meaningful friendship connections and sharing a warm bond with their friends (Foley et al., 2012; Morris & Burgman, 2009; Worth, 2013). But, disability was cited as a reason of social isolation and hampering social ties as evident from the verbatim of the child:

I do not have many friends in school. No one likes to be my friend because I cannot perform well in studies or sports. They do not call me to their home for birthday parties and other events. I want to be friends with my classmates. I always call them for my birthday party. I even drop them home in my car. But it seems that they do not reciprocate. (Das & Kattumuri, 2011, p. 34)

In a similar vein, Daniel and Billingsley (2010) found in the study that children with autism did have friends, but to befriend someone wasn't easy as few described difficulty in initiating a move, while others felt that they might end up getting exploited. To avoid incidents of exploitation and feeling different, children with disabilities preferred peers having disability as discovered by Salmon (2013), that the teens with disabilities chose people with similar circumstances who had shared experiences of stigma in order to have a thread of belonging, no fear of oppression and shared understanding and family kind of feeling. The feeling of connection in

friendship, with another girl with a disability was expressed by the teenage girl as she said:

"*We get to have fun together and we don't have to worry about our disability. We don't have to worry about [a shared medical problem] or having something wrong with us. We just stick together.*" (Salmon, 2013, p. 353)

Bullying and Overcoming Bullying

Children and young people with disabilities reported falling prey to bullying at the hands of non-disabled children be it verbal, emotional or physical bullying (Bellin et al., 2007; Bourke & Burgman, 2010; Connors & Stalker, 2007; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; MacArthur et al., 2007; McMaugh, 2011; Shah, 2007; Vlachou & Papananou, 2015). The acts of verbal bullying as expressed by the child:

"*They [classmates] say 'Oh you're slow, you're this, you're that. You're brainless. You've got brain damage, you haven't got a brain ' ...they say anything.*" (McMaugh, 2011, p. 858)

Being labelled, stared or bullied was found to be a source of distress among children with disabilities (Singh & Ghai, 2009). Bullying resulted in emotional impact on children with disabilities, as stated by the child with a physical impairment:

"*Some people are just being mean and I just want to [makes a hitting motion] ...punch 'em or something and that makes me angry and when they're being mean to me I feel sad.*" (Bourke & Burgman, 2010, p. 365)

Though it is worrisome that the incidents of bullying are on rise, but the studies have documented the coping mechanisms to curb the menace of bullying. The overcoming strategies ranged from the support of friends as safety net against bullying, or child's agency in responding to bullying, or role of significant people be it their family members, teachers, or counselors (McMaugh, 2011; MacArthur et al., 2007). The agency of the child in fighting the odds of bullying was well reflected in the verbatim of the girl Emma who got bullied by boys of her class and expressed:

"*I just dig my nails into them. If it is just a bully I want the bully to stop.*" (MacArthur et al., 2007, p. 8)

The role of supportive friends in counteracting the menace of bullying was pronounced in the studies (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; McMaugh, 2011). One child expressed the role of her friends as buffer against bullying:

"*Now if someone teases me, I don't really care! I just think they are a loser, so who cares anyway! [laughing] My friends will go and ask them why they did it. They help me. They comfort and support me.*" (McMaugh, 2011, p. 858)

The role of teachers in overcoming bullying was observed as they organized discussions around awareness of social experiences or making children with disabilities mingle with children without disabilities thus valuing diversity (Mac Arthur, 2013). But in contrary to this, some children with disabilities mentioned the oblivious role of the teachers in dealing with bullying (Bourke & Burgman, 2010).

Teacher and Teacher Aides

Mac Arthur (2007) reported both positive and negative role of teachers towards children with disabilities, as some teachers were accommodating in terms of adopting different teaching methods (Malik, 2017, Bhalla, 2015) and taking opinions of children with disabilities into consideration, while others were

Integrated Journal of Social Sciences

Integr. J. Soc. Sci., 2019, 6 (2), 35-38   36

non-reflexive, thus contributing to perpetuation of an idea of difference among children with disabilities. The preference of understanding teacher was mentioned by children with disabilities (Davis et al., 2008; Schauwer et al., 2009). Rutherford (2012) found that children with disabilities reported the reluctance of teachers to deal with them and aides were only meant for them. Due to the indifferent attitudes of the teachers, teacher aides were a respite. The supporting role of teacher aide in academic learning as described by one student in absence of the teacher:

"That would have been a huge struggle. I don't think I would be here today without those teacher aides. They pushed me and stuff like that. You have got to have someone that can push you beyond that next boundary." (Rutherford, 2012, p. 770)

The support of an aide was acceptable among children with disabilities in terms of participation and adaptations with work, else too much support was quoted as invasion to their independence, autonomy and stigmatizing. It made them felt different from rest of the class and found to impact their social relations with the peers (Asbjørnslett et al., 2015; Mortier et al., 2011; Shah, 2007; Schauwer et al., 2009; Worth, 2013). To have their own independence and space was highlighted in the verbatim of the child:

"*I don't like having a TA around me all the time because I want some of my own space … it's not really fair on my friends having to sit next to a TA all the time when I want to sit with them.*" (Shah, 2007, p. 435)

The agency of children with disabilities to resist the pervading negative assumptions in the minds of their teachers was well documented in the study, as expressed by one child Joanne:

"*Just that 'cos some people think that like being disabled is the worst thing ever, but I just like proving people wrong like 'cos some people say "Oh you can't do that" and then I show them that I can. And just showing people that I can do–I can try to do everything.*" (MacArthur et al., 2007, p. 10)

Conclusions

The findings discussed in the article described children with disabilities as change makers by voicing their opinions. Children's narratives of peer interactions represented varied facets as some of them experienced positive friendship patterns, while there were others who faced bullying and exclusion. Though incidents of bullying were disturbing but children with disabilities showed their agency in counteracting them. The mixed reactions were observed with respect to the role of teachers as some were accommodating towards the needs of these children while still others were non-reflexive. In the absence of supportive teachers, teacher aide was welcomed by these children but to an academic extent only, as their over indulgence was seen as an invasion to their social relationships with the peers and also it led to the feeling of "being different" in these children. The children depicted their stance in resisting the discriminatory attitudes of teachers.

These findings have an implication for the inclusive education as school is the context where the child spends most of the time and participates in activities along with the other actors involved in the education domain. These social interactions with peers demonstrated the desire of these children to be valued as friend and feel belonged, but at the same time they had fear of exclusion or exploitation owing to their impairment. Overly presence of teacher aides made them feel different from rest of the class, and thus feeding into stigmatization.

To sum up, these insightful voices of children with disabilities highlighting the insider's perspectives have an inherent ability to inform policy makers and stakeholders involved in inclusive practices to recognize the needs of children with disabilities and let their voices as active change makers be incorporated to build a prospering inclusive set up.

References

Armstrong, D. (2003). Experiences of Special Education: Re-evaluating Policy and Practice through Life Stories. London: Routledge Falmer.

Arora, A., & Sahu, P. (2015). Inclusive education in India: how and why?. Journal of Disability Studies, 1(1), 31-34.

Asbjørnslett, M., Engelsrud, G. H., & Helseth, S. (2015). Inclusion and participation in everyday school life: experiences of children with physical disabilities. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19(2), 199-212.

Bellin, M. H., Sawin, K. J., Roux, G., Buran, C. F., & Brei, T. J. (2007). The Experience of Adolescent Women Living with Spina Bifida Part I: Self-Concept and Family Relationships. Rehabilitation Nursing, 32(2), 57-67. doi:10.1002/j.2048-7940.2007.tb00153.x

Bourke, S., & Burgman, I. (2010). Coping with bullying in Australian schools: how children with disabilities experience support from friends, parents and teachers. Disability & Society, 25(3), 359-371.

Bhalla, J. (2018). Computer access to teachers………reality or legend???. Integrated Journal of Social Sciences, 5(1), 7-14.

Chhikara, B. (2015). Good Governance: Role of science, technology and Innovations. Integrated Journal of Social Sciences, 2(1), 7-14.

Connors, C., & Stalker, K. (2006). Children's experiences of disability: pointers to a social model of childhood disability. Disability & Society, 22(1), 19-33.

Daniel, L. S., & Billingsley, B. S. (2010). What Boys With an Autism Spectrum Disorder Say About Establishing and Maintaining Friendships. Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 25(4), 220-229.

Das, A., & Kattumuri, R. (2011). Children with Disabilities in Private Inclusive Schools in Mumbai: Experiences and Challenge. Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education, 2(8), 1-51. Retrieved June 23, 2017, from :http://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ejie

Davis, J. M., & Watson, N. (2001). Where Are the Childrens Experiences? Analysing Social and Cultural Exclusion in Special and Mainstream Schools. Disability & Society, 16(5), 671-687.

Davis, E., Shelly, A., Waters, E., Mackinnon, A., Reddihough, D., Boyd, R., & Graham, H. K. (2009). Quality of life of adolescents with cerebral palsy: perspectives of adolescents and parents. Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology, 51, 193-199.

Foley, K., Blackmore, A. M., Girdler, S., O'Donnell, M., Glauert, R., Llewellyn, G., & Leonard, H. (2012). To Feel Belonged: The Voices of Children and Youth with Disabilities on the Meaning of Wellbeing. Child Indicators Research, 5(2), 375-391.

French, S., and J. Swain. 2004. "Controlling Inclusion in Education: Young Disabled People's Perspectives." In Disabling Barriers – Enabling Environments, edited by J. Swain, S. French, C. Barnes, and C. Thomas, 169–175. London: Sage.

Humphrey, N., & Lewis, S. (2008). `Make me normal' The views and experiences of pupils on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools. Autism, 12(1), 23-46.

Kalgotra, R., & Warwal, J. (2017). Intellectual Disability in India: An overview. Journal of Disability Studies, 3(1), 15-22.

Lewis, A., Davison, I., Ellins, J., Niblett, L., Parsons, S., Robertson, C., & Sharpe, J. (2008). The experiences of disabled pupils and their families. British Journal of Special Education, 34(4), 189-195.

Lewis, A., & Porter, J. (2004). Interviewing children and young people with learning disabilities: Guidelines for researchers and multi-professional practice. British Journal of Learning Disabilities, 32(4), 191-197. doi:10.1111/j.1468-3156.2004.00313.x

Lightfoot, J., Wright, S., & Sloper, P. (1999). Supporting pupils in mainstream school with an illness or disability: Young peoples views. Child: Care, Health and Development, 25(4), 267-284.

Integrated Journal of Social Sciences

Integr. J. Soc. Sci., 2019, 6 (2), 35-38   37

Macarthur, J. (2002). Students with disabilities and their parents talk about friendships and relationships at school. SET: Research Information for Teachers, 1, 13-8.

Macarthur, J. (2013). Sustaining friendships, relationships, and rights at school. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 17(8), 793-811.

Macarthur, J., Gaffney, M., Kelly, B., & Sharp, S. (2007). Disabled Children Negotiating School Life: Agency, Difference and Teaching Practice. The International Journal of Childrens Rights, 15(1), 99-120.

Mcmaugh, A. (2011). En/countering disablement in school life in Australia: children talk about peer relations and living with illness and disability. Disability & Society, 26(7), 853-866.

Malik, N., & Shanwal, V. (2017). A comparative study of Traditional and Smart Classrooms in relation to their Creativity and Academic achievement. Integrated Journal of Social Sciences, 4(1), 15-19.

Meena, S. (2015). Disability studies and scope for rehabilitation of differently abled children. Journal of Disability Studies, 1(1), 35-40

Mishra, S., & Shanwal, V. (2014). Role of Family Environment in Developing Self Efficacy of Adolescents. Integrated Journal of Social Sciences, 1(1), 28-30.

Morrison, R., & Burgman, I. (2009). Friendship Experiences among Children with Disabilities Who Attend Mainstream Australian Schools. Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 76(3), 145-152. doi:10.1177/000841740907600303

Mortier, K., Desimpel, L., Schauwer, E. D., & Hove, G. V. (2011). 'I want support, not comments': childrens perspectives on supports in their life. Disability & Society, 26(2), 207-221.

Mprah, W., Amponteng, M., & Owusu, I. (2015). Barriers to inclusion of children with disabilities in inclusive schools in Ghana. Journal of Disability Studies, 1(1), 15-22.

Mprah, W., Edusei, A., Owusu, I., & Dahamani, T. (2016). Attitude of teacher trainees towards children with disabilities in the Northern Region of Ghana. Journal of Disability Studies, 1(2), 55-60.

Rutherford, G. (2012). In, out or somewhere in between? Disabled students and teacher aides experiences of school. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 16(8), 757-774. doi:10.1080/13603116.2010.509818

Salmon, N. (2013). 'We just stick together': how disabled teens negotiate stigma to create lasting friendship. Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, 57(4), 347-358.

Schauwer, E. D., Hove, G. V., Mortier, K., & Loots, G. (2009). 'I Need Help on Mondays, It's Not My Day. The Other Days, I'm OK'.-Perspectives of Disabled Children on Inclusive Education. Children & Society, 23(2), 99-111.

Shah, S. (2007). Special or mainstream? The views of disabled students. Research Papers in Education, 22 (4), 425-442.

Singh, R., & Chopra, G. (2018). 'Don't stare at me….' Exploring the lived experiences of adults with disability. Indonesian Journal of Disability Studies, 5(1), 10-25.

Singh, V., & Ghai, A. (2009). Notions of self: lived realities of children with disabilities. Disability & Society, 24(2), 129-145.

Tangen, R. (2008). Listening to children's voices in educational research: Some theoretical and methodological problems. European Journal of Special Needs Education, 23(2), 157-166.

The State of the World's Children 2013: Children with Disabilities. (2013, May 13). Retrieved August 28, 2017, from https://www.unicef.org/sowc2013/

Vlachou, A., & Papananou, I. (2014). Disabled students' narratives about their schooling experiences. Disability & Society, 30(1), 73-86.

Watson, N., Shakespeare, T., Cunningham-Burley, S., Barnes, C., Corker, M., Davis, J., & Priestly, M. (2000). Life as a disabled child: A qualitative study of young people's experiences and perspectives: Final report to the ESRC. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Department of Nursing Studies.

Worth, N. 2013). Making friends and fitting in: a social-relational understanding of disability at school. Social & Cultural Geography, 14(1), 103-123.

.

Integrated Journal of Social Sciences

Integr. J. Soc. Sci., 2019, 6 (2), 35-38   38