

A Study of Social Interactions between Students with and without Disabilities in a Mainstream School

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Accepted: 10 May, 2025

Published: 30 July, 2025

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe and document social interactions between students with and without disabilities in a mainstream school. The participants included two boys with mobility impairment and their typically developing classmates (ten of whom were interviewed) at a rural high school. Qualitative research methods were employed for data collection through participant observations and interviews. The study found that students with and without disabilities engaged mostly in positive social interactions, such as cooperation in academic work and sports. Students with disabilities mainstreamly reported pleasant friendship experiences; however it was also reported that they sometimes experienced limited opportunities to participate fully in their classrooms and school activities. Exclusion from school-related activities may lead them to feel like outsiders in their classrooms and play areas, as they are not always fully welcomed by typically developing classmates. Nonetheless, the overall findings support inclusive practices and advocate for strengthened inclusive educational provisions.

Key Words: Social Interactions, Mobility Impairments, Students with Disabilities, Inclusive Education, Qualitative Method

Introduction

Children and adolescents with impaired mobility manage their physical conditions with support from parents, siblings, friends, personal assistants, and others within their social networks. All students want dignity and acceptance within the school community, regardless of gender or physical condition. Research supports the principle that inclusion of students with disabilities is promoted through policies and practices; however, in their local schools has is promoted through policy and practices however the experiences of children and young people remain mixed. Some students

with disabilities find their school community welcoming and supportive but problems remain for others in the form of isolation, loneliness, social difficulties and bullying. (Connors & Stalker, Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). Students with disabilities learn social skills similarly to typically developing students through interactions with classmates, friends, peers, teachers and parents. Sometimes self-fulfilling prophecies held by school staff misrepresent students' social preferences. High schools students in the UK reported the limitations imposed on their friendships by an expectation on the part of teaching assistants and

teachers that students with disability would prefer to socialize only with other students with disability (Hoskin, 2010). Sally Robinson & Julia Truscott, (2013) reported a study with the facts that students from inclusive schools had more well-developed friendships, although in some cases students with disability were 'known' rather than friends. Students without disability knew students with disability in other classes by name and are aware of their friendship status. They had valuable insights into the quality of friendships. There was evidence of awareness of friendships in the larger context.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools has become a key focus of contemporary education policy and practice. Social interaction is a critical dimension of inclusion, influencing not only academic outcomes but also psychological well-being, self-esteem, and social development. This literature review synthesizes key research findings on the nature, quality, and influencing factors of social interactions between students with and without disabilities in mainstream school environments, with a particular emphasis on high school male students with impaired mobility over the last ten years.

A mixed type of findings set may be seen in related literature. No consensus has been found among researchers over friendship activity between students with and without disabilities in mainstream setting. Making friends and communicating with them has been reported to be more problematic for adolescents with physical disabilities (Stevens SE, et al.1996). Kishi and Meyer (1994) reported that types of social interactions frequently reported under the area of social interaction between children with

and without disabilities were like giving those help. Other researchers also reported that children with typical abilities acted as helpers, caregivers or tutors of the children with disabilities (Hall & McGregor, 2000). Previous studies have indicated that mainstream education participation increases social interactions between students with and without disabilities (Freeman & Kasari, 1998).Some researchers also noted that children with disabilities have demonstrated weak social-interaction skills in regular classes (Fujiki, Brinton, Hart, & Fitzgerald, 1999).

Avramadis (2012) examined the friendships of primary school children with and without disability in England. Although it was found that these students were less popular than students without disability, they were 'equally likely to be members of the friendship clusters of the class and occupied similar levels of network centrality' as their non- disabled peers. Reversi et al. (2007) explored loneliness in a large study with Italian students with and without disability. Students with disabilities were found to have higher self-rated loneliness levels than their non-disabled peers. Interestingly, students felt less alone when they were attending classes in inclusive high school settings with two or three other students with disability than when they were the only person with disability in the class. Play areas or grounds are the places where interactions occur on large scale. A study conducted by Nabors, Badawi, & Cheney (1997) addressed the factors associated with peer interaction in students with special needs. The researchers identified students with special needs as, having difficulty engaging in play with

peers, less socially competent, and need more facilitation during a period of play.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

The concept of inclusive education is grounded in social constructivist and ecological systems theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which posit that learning and development occur through social interaction within contextually rich environments. Vygotsky's (1978) theory emphasizes the role of social engagement in cognitive development, further underscoring the importance of peer interaction in educational settings.

3. Attitudes of Nondisabled Peers

Studies focused on students with impaired mobility have shown that attitudes of nondisabled peers can significantly influence social inclusion. Bunch and Valeo (2020) reported that male students with mobility impairments are often perceived as dependent or in need of protection, which can hinder equal peer relationships. Cameron and Tindle (2019) found that schools with strong disability awareness programs cultivated more positive attitudes, facilitating better social dynamics.

Recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022) indicate that while 85% of students agree with the principles of inclusion, only 60% report engaging in regular social interactions with peers with physical disabilities, underscoring a significant implementation gap.

4. Quality and Quantity of Interactions

Recent research has highlighted that male students with mobility impairments often experience fewer peer interactions during unstructured times such as lunch or recess.

Lyons et al. (2021) showed that while classroom inclusion is often structurally ensured, social inclusion remains inconsistent. These students frequently encounter social isolation unless proactive measures are taken to integrate them into peer groups. In a longitudinal study, Benassi et al. (2023) found that structured peer interaction sessions led to a 35% increase in social engagement scores among male students with mobility impairments over an academic year.

5. Impact of Disability Type

Focusing on physical disabilities, especially impaired mobility, studies have found that male students often face architectural, attitudinal, and social barriers. Hughes et al. (2018) emphasized that accessible infrastructure alone is not sufficient; emotional and social accessibility must also be addressed. Social interactions are more robust in schools that incorporate inclusive design principles and cultivate peer empathy. Meyer and Kulkarni (2021) highlight how male adolescents with spinal cord injuries report higher levels of social satisfaction in schools where adaptive furniture and mobility-inclusive activities are available.

6. Intervention Strategies

Intervention strategies such as peer support programs and inclusive sports have shown to significantly enhance social engagement. Wright et al. (2022) examined a peer buddy system specifically designed for male students with mobility impairments and found it increased mutual social interactions and reduced feelings of isolation. Similarly, adaptive physical education programs helped facilitate bonding and teamwork among students of all

abilities. Virtual peer mentoring programs, piloted during the COVID-19 pandemic, have also demonstrated promise in maintaining social interaction for students with limited mobility access to in-person events (Davis & Huang, 2021).

7. School Environment and Teacher Role

Teacher facilitation remains critical. Research by Johnson and Green (2020) indicated that teachers who actively create mixed-ability groups and address physical barriers during social activities enable better social participation. Teachers also play a key role in modeling inclusive behavior and setting expectations for peer interactions.

Recent professional development models, such as the Inclusive Classroom Toolkit (ICT), have helped teachers build strategies to incorporate mobility-impaired students into collaborative and extracurricular activities (Reed & Thomas, 2022).

8. Policy and Implementation Gaps

Despite improvements in inclusive policies, implementation challenges remain, particularly in supporting social inclusion for students with mobility impairments. Spencer and Ferris (2017) argue that policies often emphasize academic accommodations while neglecting social integration. More comprehensive inclusion frameworks are needed that encompass both structural and relational inclusion.

Findings from the 2022 National Inclusion Audit (Inclusive Schools Alliance, 2022) revealed that only 40% of surveyed secondary schools had targeted strategies for improving

peer social inclusion beyond physical accessibility.

9. Conclusion

The literature over the past decade reveals persistent challenges and emerging solutions in supporting the social interactions of male students with impaired mobility in mainstream high schools. Positive peer attitudes, targeted interventions, accessible environments, and engaged teachers collectively enhance social inclusion. Future studies should continue to explore scalable and sustainable models of social integration that prioritize the voices and experiences of students with mobility impairments.

Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the School Management Committee for data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and assent was obtained from minors, with parental consent where required.

Participants were informed about the aims of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures in place to protect their confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used, and all identifying information was removed to ensure anonymity.

Given the inclusion of students with mobility impairments, additional care was taken to ensure respectful, inclusive, and non-discriminatory engagement. Interviews and observations were conducted in ways that minimized disruption and upheld the dignity and comfort of all participants.

The research process prioritized the well-being of both students with and without disabilities, adhering to the principles of voluntary participation, respect, and beneficence throughout.

Significance

Present study is significant because participating in games and promoting friendship between students with impaired mobility and their typically developing peers help increase the acceptability of these students in society. Friendships between people with and without disabilities usually enrich the lives of both. (Lutfiyya, Z.M. 1991).

Purpose of the Study

Purpose of the study was to describe and document the interactions between students with impaired mobility and their typically developing peers in mainstream education setup. Their interactions were explored during game periods in sports area of the school. Their friendship experiences inside and outside school were also explored.

Research Question

The present study was designed to gain knowledge in following research questions:

1. What are the ways in which students with impaired mobility interact with their typically developing peers when playing?
2. What is the nature of friendship experiences between students with impaired mobility and their typically developing peers?

Methodology

An observational study was conducted to document the interactions between students with impaired mobility and their typically developing

peers. The observation was made in a mainstream classroom and at play area of the school during game periods and recess hours 30 minutes a day for twelve days. Notes were taken while observing the participants of the study. Their body language, gaming content, facial expression and energy level were recorded and further analyzed to answer the research questions. Subjects of the study were silently observed and they were not informed about the intent of research until the interviews were started. Individual interviews were conducted to record the friendship experiences between students with impaired mobility and their typically developing friends. Yarrow (1960) describes the interview as a research method that is particularly well adapted to exploring subjective definitions of experiences and conceptualization of life experiences among children. The names of the friends were reported by students with impaired mobility and were authenticated by these typically developing students Participants

Among participants of the study there were twelve students. Among them, there were two students with impaired mobility and all others were typically developing students in a mainstream rural public high school of District Nankana Sahib. Six of them were 6 graders and other six were 8 graders. One from each class was a student with impaired mobility. They did not use tricycles rather maneuvered themselves with the help of their arms.

Instrumentation

Apart from directly observing the students in natural setting, a semi structured interview was used to record and documents the views of these

students to share their friendship experiences. The duration of interview was 15 to 20 minutes with each respondent

Data Collection

Data were collected through direct observation and a semi structured interview. Respondents were interviewed at their schools. They were asked to speak about their friends, the way they behave with them and discuss friends' attitude towards them in classroom and in play area.

Data analysis

Observational notes were analyzed for answers to research questions. Interviews were audio tapped and transcribed for further analysis. Major themes were identified by employing coding procedure. Findings are presented in the proceeding section.

Findings

Major findings in response to research question 1 are presented in forthcoming discussion:

Gaming Content

No special games are arranged for students with impaired mobility in mainstream schools as observed by the researcher. Anyhow respondents of present study were part of regular games in the school with some modification in the gaming content. For example, student 'A' of class 6 was busy in catching the tennis ball with his friends on first day of observation, while the next day his game partner was busy somewhere else. It was further observed that student 'A' was sitting alone and hitting the ball with a wall and catching it.

Solitary Play

Student 'B' of class 8, on the other hand enjoys solitary play. He is imaginative enough that he is hitting the ping pong ball

with his book and enjoying. He has little interaction with class mates.

Non Responsive attitude of Classmates

It was noted while observing these children in mainstream setting of schooling that student with impaired mobility are not comfortable enough in game areas. They did not receive warm response from their class fellows. They are mostly left alone there. During 8 out of 12 observations, researcher noted that Student 'A' tried to fit himself in regular games but he could do it only partially.

Alone at Play Areas

Student with impaired mobility love to be with their typically developing peers in play areas, but most of the times they are left alone. It was observed on the third day that student 'A' asked his friend to throw ball to him, he did so and 'A' caught it with a loud scream of pleasure. His friend kept on throwing the ball to 'A' for two or three minutes. After some time the signs of boredom may be seen clearly on his face. He finally left the 'A' and moved towards common folk to get engaged in regular games. Student 'B' seldom took part in games.

Energy level during games

During most of the observations, it was noted that student 'A' had a very good energy level. He was jumping on his arms, moving here and there and showing good interest in games. He had good interaction with his typically developing peers but it was seen in case of student 'B'. Mostly he was alone and inside the classroom. I observed him playing in the ground four times only during observation session.

Body Language

Both students with impaired mobility had normal body language. No shyness was observed. They move differently but normally. Good signs of pleasure and enthusiasm may be seen on their faces while among their class mates.

Next part of discussion deals with research question2

Both students with impaired mobility and their ten friends were interviewed at the school. All of them participated in the activity with eagerness and interest. All of the respondents were interviewed in two days individually. Major themes of the interviews are presented here.

They are happy friends

All of them were happy friends. A respondent expressed himself:

“‘A’ is a very good friend; we help each other in studies. We have a lot of work to do together, fun, talks and what not.” (Translated conversation)

No friend makes fun of them

Student ‘B’ expressed himself.

“Friends never made fun of me, no bad words really. I’ve got lots of friends from years, but to make these friends, I’ve been as nice to people as they have to me and shown them that I am no different to anyone else. I can get all around the school and go anywhere.” (Translated conversation)

Occasional Neglect

Student ‘B’ expressed his feelings as quoted here:

“Everything is ok with the friends, but sometimes I am left behind. When they are on

trips or busy in some recreation, they forget me. (Laughing) but it happened only once or twice.” (Translated conversation)

We are equal

In response to an interview question, all respondents said they were equal in everything. An 8-grade expressed him:

“Everybody is equal no question of big and small bodily. We are friends and equal.” (Translated conversation)

Conclusions

Students with impaired mobility have a reasonable degree of social interaction with their typically developing peers; however their opportunities to participate fully in games and informal activities were limited. Exclusion from school-related activities may lead these students to feel like outsiders in their classes and play areas. They are not always fully welcomed by their typically developing classmates. Nonetheless, overall findings support inclusive practices and encourage inclusive educational provisions.

Recommendations

- Classroom teachers must be provided with necessary training regarding education of students with special needs in mainstream setting.
- Special games should be designed for students with impaired mobility.
- Teachers should be present in sports areas of the school.
- Teachers should highlight the strong points of personality of student with impaired mobility without sensitizing other students.
- Teachers should treat these students as part of the school family to promote social interaction.

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