“A Kid Way”: Strategies for Including Classmates With Learning or Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract
Thirty-six children between 9 and 12 years of age were invited to share their ideas on how to socially include classmates with learning or intellectual disabilities at school. Participants generated 80 strategies which were categorized into seven major themes. Thematic categories focused on the need for teachers to intervene in academic and social situations, child-to-child instructional strategies, being supportive, focusing on similarities between children with and without disabilities, modelling appropriate behaviors and intervening in negative interactions, structured inclusive activities, and noninclusive activities. Participants were aware of the challenges experienced by classmates with disabilities, and recognized the need to work with classmates and teachers towards the social inclusion of children with intellectual and learning disabilities. Educational implications are addressed.

Key Words: social inclusion; inclusion strategies; elementary school children; intellectual disabilities; learning disabilities

The UNESCO document, Policy Guidelines On Inclusion in Education (2009), states that inclusive schools are in a position to change attitudes toward diversity by educating all children together. It also states that successful inclusion depends on the implementation of effective policies and practices. Researchers have suggested that successful inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classrooms involves the absence of withdrawal classes or other forms of integrated segregation, quality of participation in regular classroom activities, acceptance by teachers and peers, and achievement in academic and social–emotional learning (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2001; Humphrey, 2008). These factors underscore the importance of a supportive learning environment that addresses the academic and social needs of children with disabilities within the regular classroom. However, the social acceptance of children with disabilities can be one of the most challenging aspects of inclusion because it does not necessarily result in acceptance unless specific interventions are put in place (Gibb, Tunbridge, Chua, & Frederickson, 2007). Indeed, children with disabilities are at risk of social exclusion, bullying, and being the targets of negative attitudes and biases (Hamovitch, 2007).

Problems with social inclusion in the schools can be remediated through the implementation of formal and informal strategies which include school-wide programs, structured classroom activities, and simple, everyday strategies that focus on developing proactive social skills (Brigham, Morocco, Clay, & Zigmond, 2006; Hundert, 2007; MacKay, Knott, & Dunlop, 2007; Morrison & Jones, 2007; Skinner, Cashwell, & Skinner, 2000; Stanton-Chapman & Snell, 2011). However, there are few peer-reviewed studies on children’s ideas on how to include classmates with learning or intellectual disabilities. To address this gap in the literature, we invited elementary school children to share with us their ideas on this topic. We reasoned that children may have unique insights on how to include classmates with disabilities in day-to-day school activities.

Evidence-Based Strategies That Promote the Inclusion of Children With Learning or Intellectual Disabilities
Instructional strategies that can be used in inclusive classrooms have been discussed at length in the
Adapting the curriculum, scaffolding, breaking tasks into smaller units, making use of visual aids, emphasizing phonemic awareness, and the use of adaptive technology have been shown to be effective (e.g., Humphrey, 2008; Hutchinson, 2009; Rapp & Arndt, 2012). Furthermore, many of these strategies can be classified as universal in nature because they can enhance the learning of all children. Recently, there have been discussions in the literature about the use of universal design for learning in inclusive classrooms (Katz, 2012). Based on research on learning, cognition, and neuroscience, the general premise of universal design for learning is that flexible learning environments can accommodate individual differences in ability. There are three principles to this approach: the provision of (a) multiple means of representation to give learners various ways of acquiring declarative knowledge, (b) multiple ways of action and expression for learners to demonstrate what they know, and (c) multiple ways of engagement to encourage learners to fully engage with the curriculum (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

1. Wotherspoon (2002) suggested that social inclusion involves several important criteria that include showing respect and recognition to individuals, nurturing the potential of each person, and engagement in family and community life. At school, successful inclusion requires the social acceptance of children with disabilities by their classmates, but this can be a challenge when negative attitudes and stereotypes exist. Studies have shown that negative attitudes towards children with learning or intellectual disabilities are not uncommon (Hames, 2005; Maras & Brown, 2002; Smith & Williams, 2004). One way to challenge such attitudes is to replace misinformed views with accurate knowledge, but this is not a simple task. Children's knowledge about disabilities can be tied to cognitive development, type of disability, and daily interactions with siblings or classmates who have disabilities (Smith & Williams, 2004). Researchers have also concluded that children are generally lacking accurate knowledge about disabilities (Ralli et al., 2011). Without this knowledge base to draw from, it is conceivable that children will have difficulties in developing and using appropriate strategies for socially including their classmates with learning or intellectual disabilities.

The research literature describes some effective, evidence-based strategies for social inclusion, but most of them are put in place by teachers or school administrators. These strategies can be as simple as teaching turn-taking skills (Stanton-Chapman & Snell, 2011) or more complex and multifaceted such as school-wide programs that require a commitment from the entire school community (Brigham et al., 2006). For example, Hundert (2007) suggested that social inclusion can be accomplished by planning activities that require children with and without disabilities to interact. Planning seating arrangements for circle time, using smaller circles, and planned interactive peer activities can be effective. Maras and Brown (2002) reported that structured, positive interactions such as sharing common tasks or goals are necessary for ensuring that social acceptance occurs between children with and without disabilities. Group work interventions that focus on socio-emotional perspective taking and developing good conversational skills can be helpful for children with disabilities to feel more included at school (MacKay, Knott, & Dunlop, 2007). As well, teaching appropriate turn-taking skills have been shown to facilitate positive dyadic interactions between preschoolers with and without intellectual disabilities (Stanton-Chapman & Snell, 2011). In fact, learning and practicing prosocial skills could be of benefit to all children in inclusive classrooms.

Several studies on class-wide interventions have been successfully conducted with the positive outcome of improved social relationships between children with and without learning or intellectual disabilities. Positive peer-reporting takes place during daily meetings between a teacher and his or her students in which a child is selected to receive positive public recognition by their classmates for appropriate behavior and achievements (Morrison & Jones, 2007). This intervention has been shown to increase the acceptance of children with disabilities and to decrease negative behaviors. Peer tutoring, a simple strategy in which children catch one another doing something good and then bring it to the attention of their teacher, has also been found to enhance the social inclusion of children with disabilities (Skinner et al., 2000). Other studies have shown that peer tutoring programs are effective in building positive social connections between children with and without developmental and learning disabilities, but successful implementation depends on informing
tutors about appropriate instructional techniques (Stenhoff & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2007).

Brigham et al. (2006) suggested that inclusion needs to be a priority for an entire school community in order to bring about positive change. They listed a number of factors that contribute to successful school-wide inclusion of pupils with disabilities, including peer-support groups, accessibility to school clubs, taking on mentored leadership opportunities, note-sharing programs, and ensuring that all staff and students engage in positive and supportive interactions with one another.

Inclusive classrooms have their own social structures that are defined by school culture and children who spend their days learning and socially interacting with one another. Effective inclusion strategies can be important contributing factors toward ensuring that school is a welcoming, positive, and productive place where children want to spend their days (Nowicki and Samuels, 2010). However, children who are not accepted socially at school may not want to be there, and this may adversely affect their academic and social learning. Although evidence suggests that formal programs and preplanned activities are critical for the social inclusion of children with learning or intellectual disabilities, such strategies are typically initiated by teachers or administrators. Currently, there is a considerable lack of peer-reviewed research on children's ideas on how to socially include their schoolmates with learning or intellectual disabilities. As researchers and educators, it is important that we listen to what children can teach us about inclusion because their daily social interactions and observations of people with or without disabilities may give them unique insights about inclusion.

We interviewed junior level elementary students on how they would go about including their peers with learning or intellectual disabilities at school. We then sought to uncover thematic commonalities in their ideas. We reasoned that their ideas could be helpful in informing other members of school communities on how to provide a welcoming and productive learning environment for children with learning or intellectual disabilities.

Method

Participants
Twenty boys and sixteen girls (mean age = 10.42 years, SD = 1.25) attending Grades 5 and 6 volunteered to take part in this study. They attended one of five schools in a district with a broad socioeconomic urban and suburban demographic in a medium-sized central Canadian city. The school district had a full inclusion policy with a mandate for all children within the school district to have the right to attend regular classrooms regardless of the presence or absence of disabilities. All participants had classmates with disabilities, with three to six children on individualized education plans (IEPs) for cognitive, physical or behavioral exceptionalities in each class.

Procedure
We obtained ethics approval for this study from our university ethics review board and the participating school district’s ethics committee. The school district’s research officer then contacted principals with an e-mail describing the study. Principals who expressed an interest in the study were visited at their schools by a research assistant who explained the study to them in more detail, and arranged classroom visits. During the classroom visits, the research assistant briefed children about the study, and gave them letters of information and parental consent forms to take home. Children who returned signed parental consent forms participated in the study.

One-to-one interviews took place in a quiet room at the participants’ schools. A research assistant explained the study to each participant and asked if they had any questions. Participants were informed that their responses would be confidential and anonymous. The interview began with a rapport building question about what the participant liked to do in his or her spare time. Next, participants were told that the aim of the study was to find out what children in Grades 5 and 6 knew about children who had learning difficulties at school. Participants were then asked to describe what was meant by “learning difficulty,” and to describe some things that people who found learning difficult might find challenging to do. Responses indicated that all participants had some degree of knowledge about learning difficulties. The digital recorder was switched on, and participants were asked the focal question, What are some things that can be done at school to help children with learning difficulties feel socially included? Prompts such as “Can you tell me more? Is there anything else you can think of?” were used as needed. Participants typically completed the interview session in 5 to 15 minutes. Responses were later transcribed by the interviewer.
We chose to use the term “learning difficulty” rather than more formal terms such as intellectual, developmental or learning disabilities, autism, or pervasive developmental disorder in the interviews because it is more general in nature and reflects accessible, everyday language that children can understand (Nowicki, 2007). We were interested in finding out children’s ideas on how to include any child who finds learning difficult rather than focusing on the inclusion of children with specific disabilities.

Results
We used a general interpretative approach to organize and reduce the data into thematic categories. Conventional content analysis was used to develop coding categories that were derived directly from the data; this is known as a grounded theoretical approach (Berg & Lune, 2012). We began by reading the transcripts and isolating simple statements that had had at least one subject, a predicate, and referred to one strategy (e.g., “give kids who have learning difficulties more time to do their work”). Comments that included two or more strategies were split into two or more statements depending on the number of strategies. Eighty statements were identified. Statements were read and re-read to identify thematic categories that we found meaningful (e.g., be kind, help them, get the teacher). Some of the initial categories required further refinement. For example, we created subcategories for an “involve the teacher” category to reflect different teacher-directed inclusion strategies that emerged as we re-read the statements (e.g., demonstrating social inclusion, instructional assistance, promoting knowledge about disabilities). Some other categories were combined to reflect a common overarching theme (e.g., supportive behaviors that included general helping, encouraging, and giving advice). We used this process to identify seven general themes, most of which were subdivided into more specific subcategories (see Table 1).

 Interrater reliability was determined by providing a rater with operational definitions of each of the seven themes, and then having them place every fourth statement in the original list of 80 statements into one of the thematic categories. Interrater agreement was 90%. The discrepant statements were placed into an appropriate category following a discussion between the coders. Each theme is discussed, below.

Theme 1: Involve the Teacher
Strategies that required the assistance of a teacher formed the largest category of the seven with 33 (41.25% of the total number of statements). Three subthemes were identified: social inclusion with 16 statements, instructional assistance with 15 statements, and promoting knowledge about disabilities with 2 statements. All of these statements explicitly referred to teachers and their roles in facilitating inclusion. Social inclusion strategies focused on the need for teachers to intervene when a child is socially excluded from a group on the playground or in the classroom. One child suggested, “Teachers can ask the group if the person with learning disabilities can join or just ask if they want to.” Another comment provided a similar message, “Teachers can go to the kid with the disability, and say, do you want to play basketball? And if the teacher saw some kids playing basketball they can bring the person over and say, can this person play with you?” Children also gave a very clear message to teachers to discontinue the practice of allowing children to pick their own groups in the classroom: “Instead of everyone choosing groups, it’s not always fair because people are excluded. The teacher should choose.” A similar comment was made by another child, “Teachers should pick groups and you should stay in them for most of the time so kids get to know each other. They (teachers) might want to help the groups and go around and see if the group is doing OK or if you need more help.” These comments underscore the important role that teachers have in making sure that no child is socially excluded at play or in the classroom. The act of excluding someone is noticed by children but their comments suggest that their teachers need to actively intervene in order to change the situation.

Strategies focusing on instructional assistance provided by teachers included “helping them pronounce their words so that they can read better when they go to college and when they need to learn more”; and “Instead of reading independently, sometimes someone with a disability or even in partners can’t read very well then you can read as a class or in groups so they can follow along and also know the words.” Other strategies described the importance of “paying more attention to them,” “giving them more time,” and “reading the questions over again so then they can understand what people want from them.” Also, suggestions include providing more resources: “Maybe the teacher can support that student more than others if that student doesn’t have an EA (educational assistance, promoting knowledge about disabilities).
sometimes there are resources that can be purchased to help the student and sometimes the teacher can make their own resources. My Mom is a teacher and she sometimes purchases resources to help the special needs kids.

The need for teachers to educate children about disabilities formed the third subcategory. One child commented, “Just an idea, maybe when a person is going off with an EA the teacher can talk to the kids and explain why they had to leave, so kids will say, oh that makes sense, he’s just a normal person.” Another child commented, “Well, maybe the teachers can talk to the kids, all the kids, when the kid with an LD isn’t in the room and they can talk to them and tell them that everyone is the same and God made us all special.”

Overall, the proportionately large number of statements in this category indicated children’s concerns about the need for teachers to become actively involved in facilitating inclusion. Comments showed that children are aware of acts of social exclusion and of the academic struggles that are experienced by some of their classmates, but they want teachers to show an awareness of the social and academic difficulties experienced by classmates with disabilities, and to respond to them.

Theme 2: Instructional Strategies That Can Be Used by Children

This theme consisted of nine statements (11.25% of the total number of statements) and focused on instructional strategies that children can use to help their classmates with learning difficulties. Four statements focused on different instructional strategies, three referred to the need for more time to be allocated to tasks, and two referred to adjusting the academic level.
allotted in learning tasks, and two described the need to adjust the level of academic instruction. Two of the suggestions in the instructional strategies subcategory referred to language-based activities: “Well, if they have trouble pronouncing words then you can take a book and pronounce the word slowly to help get the word right”; and “if they have trouble speaking language, like let’s say they want to speak Spanish, you have to get a Spanish book and like say the words in Spanish so they get it.” Other ideas focused on good teaching and learning strategies: “Maybe go step-by-step teaching them,” and “Take time to read with them every day. Practice math that includes multiplication, dividing and others.” One comment that was particularly interesting stressed the need for children to approach their peers with disabilities in “a kid way”: “If they’re stuck on a question you can help them out—like not give them the answers but help them out in a way. Sometimes teachers do it in a way that grown-ups understand. Do it in a kid way that they’d understand.”

Children recognized the importance of giving their classmates with disabilities more time to do their work or to learn new games. Comments included, “They could have their own time to learn new things with other kids who can help them,” and “Kids with disabilities, like with a writing problem or an understanding problem, they could have some more time with other kids to help them learn more about it instead of the whole classroom.” Another child suggested that, “Maybe instead of rushing to teach something like a hobby or a new game, maybe they (kids) could take the time to go over it again.” They also volunteered that adjustments to academic expectations would be helpful: “Kids can make them feel more included by teaching something lower,” and “Maybe most of those children have the same learning problems, maybe they have the same reading level that other kids can help them with.”

It is interesting to note that some of these strategies are common instructional practices that teachers use to guide the learning of children with learning or intellectual disabilities. Sounding out words, breaking tasks into steps, daily reading and practice of math skills, more time to learn and to complete work, and teaching at an appropriate level are discussed in the research literature and in special education texts (e.g., Hutchinson, 2009). Children may have noticed their teachers using these strategies and realized that they can use similar instructional interventions to help one another.

Theme 3: Being Supportive by Helping, Encouraging and Giving Advice

Eight strategies (10% of the total number of statements) described ways in which children can be supportive of classmates with intellectual or learning disabilities. Four strategies focused on the need to be helpful, two discussed the importance of offering encouragement, and two more were about giving advice. The comments about being helpful were general in nature: “Try to help them if they need help at recess,” “Students should help the persons with disabilities”; “You can ask them maybe if they have been having trouble with anything and just help them”; and “I’ve helped autistic people. It’s usually just a small group of them, it’s like they are excluded.”

More specific comments referred to the need to be encouraging. One child said: “Well, just to say good job when they do something well, and if they did something right say good job—you get a really great mark on that, you did great. And let them know that they are doing great work and stuff.” Other encouraging comments included, “Support them and, um, encourage them. Tell them that it’s OK to have disabilities … you were born with it and it’s going to be OK,” and “You can tell them that it’s not their fault that they can’t learn as quickly as you.” On giving advice, one child mentioned that “You can talk to them about any problems and how to fix what’s wrong.” Another child directed her advice at children without disabilities: “They could feel more included if the other kids that don’t like how they are dressed or look. I would tell the other kids that if they don’t like it then they don’t have to look but they don’t have to cause a problem and make the other person feel bad because it is just not necessary.”

Overall, the strategies in this category have a common thread of general but supportive behavior that children offer to their classmates who have disabilities. They are all simple in nature and speak to the need for children to support one another in a positive way.

Theme 4: Focusing on Similarities Not Differences

Of the seven strategies in this category (8.75% of the total number of statements), five discussed the importance of focusing on similarities between children with and without disabilities rather than on differences, and two ideas described the importance of children imparting accurate knowledge about disabilities to their classmates as a way
to address misperceptions. Suggestions about emphasizing similarities rather than differences were typified in the following responses: “Maybe a lot of people would say he has a little difficulty with learning but he’s exactly the same as you and I,” “Don’t act like they are different because they aren’t,” and “Say to other kids he’s just a normal kid like you and me.” One child elaborated further: “… by letting the other kids know that it is OK, that they aren’t different. We are all the same, they just happen to not be as smart as you. Some kids just need to know. I think other kids need to realize that there are no differences.”

Two children spoke about the need to provide information to their classmates about disabilities as a way to encourage social acceptance. One child addressed the misconception of disabilities as being a contagious condition: “People who know it isn’t contagious, they could play with them and then the other kids would be like, oh wow, he or she played with them and they are OK, and then more people would come and play with them.” Another child provided some insightful advice about the role of knowledge. She said, “For other kids to include them, discussions about like, this is what kids kind of need to know about what types of disabilities some kids have so they understand what it is. Like, if they have cerebral palsy or something, or like, you can explain that they were born like this, and they can’t really help it. And it’s not that bad, you could have it too.” These ideas are aligned with comments made by researchers in the field of social inclusion who suggest that focusing on similarities between people with and without disabilities should take precedence over a focus on differences (Nowicki and Samuels, 2010).

Theme 5: Modelling Appropriate Social Behaviors and Intervening in Non-Appropriate Social Behaviors

This was one of the larger child-centered set of strategies with 15 statements (18.75% of the total). Seven statements described positive behaviors that children can use to help classmates with learning or intellectual disabilities feel included. Being respectful, kind, and not rude or mean were frequently mentioned. Children commented that it was important “not be rude, and just make the kids with learning difficulties feel happy and welcomed because otherwise, they won’t feel really welcomed at the school”; “Don’t be mean to them, just because of the learning problem, and be nice and get to know them”; “Um, don’t ignore him and just be friendly and kind”; and “Just be kind to them because there is nothing wrong with them.” Being a good friend to someone with a disability was also discussed: “When you are a buddy, then the other kids would see later, all of your friends would start to like the autistic child and all of the people who are bullying would think otherwise.”

Eight comments addressed the importance of intervening in negative social interactions between children with and without disabilities. Intervening in bullying situations was mentioned several times. One child suggested, “If you know someone who is being bullied and they don’t appreciate it, then just go and help them.” Another child spoke about an anti-bullying initiative in her classroom which she believed could be used at recess time: “… like, in my class, we have an anti-bullying Prime Minister and we voted and everyone made a little poster and we had a presentation on what we could do to help. And maybe they could have an anti-bullying PM in the school yard, and like, and they can watch around the school … and if he or she sees anything going on at recess, something bad, he or she can tell the teacher and get someone to do something about it or he or she can try and figure out a way to do something him or herself.” Other comments addressed the fact that mean behaviors are inappropriate and need to be stopped: “If people are being mean to the person then you have to say to the other people, hey, don’t do that,” and “if you see someone pushing and shoving a person with a disability then tell them to stop and then tell the teacher.”

Strategies in this category indicate that children are aware of the day-to-day instances of aggressive behavior directed at children with disabilities, and are aware of the fact that such behaviors are inappropriate and need to be stopped. However, several comments suggested that intervening in instances of aggressive behavior may require the back-up support of a teacher.

Theme 6: Structured Social Interactions That Are Inclusive

Five strategies (6.25% of the total) directly mentioned structured activities that require children with and without disabilities to engage in social interactions. For example, two children suggested that group work can be an effective way for children to help another: “I think they could, like, do more group work so they can understand what we are doing and participate in it,” and “They could, like, do a group project in class, and you see people saying they don’t want them in your group but you can invite
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them into your group and chances are you can become friends.” Another idea focused on the role of buddies: “I think maybe if they had a buddy activity. If there was a sign-up list, and like, say on one day like, Frankie and Joe help the autistic child.” Two children commented on the role of school clubs that could welcome children with and without disabilities. One child suggested a club where children with and without disabilities could “all kind of play and talk and play games and then people would know they are capable and can do stuff better than they think. They can be asked what they are good at then play together that way.” Inclusion in intramurals “like football or soccer and stuff” was also suggested.

Theme 7: Special Programs and Activities That Are Noninclusive

Three strategies (3.75% of the total number of ideas) were placed in this category. These ideas focused on noninclusive activities for children with learning or intellectual disabilities. One comment focused on providing a separate area for “kids when they have really big learning difficulties, so maybe they could have a special part of the school.” Although this comment clearly endorses segregated learning, the other two suggestions referred to special activities as a way to ensure that children with disabilities were not left out altogether. One child suggested “a special program for kids with learning difficulties, maybe at lunchtime or recess or after school or something … they could stay at the time provided and maybe have a little help with their homework … where they can go when they don’t have many friends … could make a group where all kids that have learning problems could start bonding.” Another child offered that “they could have a special thing, maybe if they can’t run or jump, they could have something special to do with writing … or a craft activity instead of all of the sports and intramurals … to include that person.”

Discussion

Previous research has provided strong evidence that children with learning or intellectual disabilities struggle with social demands at school, are at risk for social exclusion, and can experience aggressive and negative social interactions with their peers (Hames, 2005; Maras and Brown, 2002; Ralli et al., 2011; Smith & Williams, 2004). Our study shows that these challenges are, in fact, noticed by other children. Our participants offered insightful and potentially effective inclusion strategies that focused on teachers’ and children’s roles in the inclusion process.

More than a third of the children’s comments focused on the role that teachers have in inclusive education. Their comments can be viewed as an appeal for teachers to become more proactive when it comes to including students with disabilities, and to use their status to correct perceived inequities in instructional and social settings. Children’s comments focused on the need for teachers to ensure that children with disabilities can reach their academic potential and are protected from adverse social interactions. Furthermore, some of the suggested instructional strategies for child-to-child teaching and learning, such as reading together and taking more time to teach new games or skills, were reflective of the practices that teachers use in inclusive classrooms. Children may have observed their teachers using these strategies in the classroom and have noted them as being helpful.

A dominant response set focused on the importance of addressing negative social interactions directed at children with learning or intellectual disabilities. Several comments implied that children are sometimes hesitant to become involved in instances of aggressive behavior. Participants’ comments on this topic suggested that children are reluctant to deal with bullying or other aggressive social interactions without the active support of their teachers and school administrators. Therefore, not only are anti-bullying policies needed to ensure that all children have a safe place to learn, but there may also be a place for children to articulate and teach one another about the positive behaviors that contribute to a welcoming school environment.

Although we specifically asked our participants to share with us their ideas on social inclusion, they nonetheless referred to social and academic inclusion strategies. It is unclear why they confused social and academic inclusion. A possible explanation is that they viewed inclusion in a holistic way such that the act of helping someone with their school work is in itself a social action. Indeed, the importance of supporting schoolmates with learning or intellectual disabilities was frequently discussed by our participants. They commented on the need to be helpful, to think about similarities between children with and without disabilities, to be kind and respectful, and to find common interests and activities as a way to engage in positive social and learning interactions.
Overall, the children in our study seemed to be well aware of the learning and social challenges experienced by children with learning and intellectual difficulties. Although these strategies may resonate with other same-aged children in inclusive classrooms, it remains to be determined if children will embrace and implement these ideas. Future studies are needed to determine whether children actually practice their own inclusion strategies. Nonetheless, we encourage educators to share the strategies in this study with their students, and to encourage their students to use them.

Limitations and Implications

The participants in our study attended schools in a district that had been using a full inclusion model for over two decades. Teachers and students were likely well-acclimatized to the principles of inclusion. Consequently, the ideas offered by our participants may not be typical of children who attend schools with less well-entrenched policy and practice. Thus, it would be worthwhile to compare children’s inclusion strategies between school systems that actively promote inclusion with those that do not. We also need to note that the children who volunteered to take part in our study were in the junior elementary school grades, and we cannot assume that non-volunteers or children in other grades would offer the same strategies. Furthermore, the strategies presented in our study may vary according to cultural differences toward disability and inclusion.

Nonetheless, our study offers educators, researchers, and parents some interesting and encouraging insights into the thoughts of children on the topic of inclusion. The children in our study had a number of potentially effective, thoughtful, and compassionate ideas on the inclusion of children with disabilities. The strategies they offered are simple and cost effective to put in place. Our participants have informed us that inclusion can be made a reality when we think about prosocial ways to include those who have disabilities, but we need to work together to correct perceived wrongs and inequities. We need to listen to what children can tell us about how to make schooling more socially and academically accessible for all. There is indeed the potential within our children to have a very positive effect on inclusive education, and we need to take heed and act on what they have told us.

References


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