"I want to do what the others are doing": Accounts of children who use AAC and their parents on inclusive education

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Short Abstract

Many children with disabilities in Australia do not enjoy their right to attend their local school or school of their choice because they face significant barriers to an inclusive education. Additionally, children who use AAC may need support to participate and engage with the curriculum. There is limited research investigating the accounts of children who use AAC in mainstream classrooms regarding their school participation.

To address this research gap, we asked the children in mainstream schools who use AAC regarding their school participation and experiences. We also asked their parents about their children's experiences, barriers and facilitators to inclusive education. We interviewed eight children (mean age=9.9 years) and 11 parents of the children. We analysed data using a rights based approach and case study principles.

Children shared experiences of what they do at school, including participation in academic lessons, as well as some describing playing with peers. They also described what was important to them at school. Parents reported staff training, access to funding, and the attitudes of leadership, and school community as key factors that either facilitated or created barriers to inclusion. The findings are in strong congruence with the recommendations by the Disability Royal commission regarding inclusive education, and the presentation will be discussed within this context.

Long Abstract

Attending school, developing interpersonal interactions, and building relationships with family and friends are key to the lives of all children (ICF-CY – Child and Youth Version, 2007). In the classroom, where communication is vital, students who use AAC may need supports to participate and engage with curriculum and in building and maintaining social relationships. It is the right of every student to attend their local school or school of their choice (Disability Standards for Education, 2020). 'Inclusion' is a process that involves significant adaptions, supports, and change to ensure equitable opportunities for students of all skills and abilities (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD, 2016).

The recent final report by the Disability Royal Commission on inclusive education highlighted the importance of inclusive education in Australia for children with disabilities (Disability Royal Commission, 2023). The report recommended a rights-based approach to provide an inclusive school system and that schools should promote positive attitude to students with disabilities

and an inclusive society. However, the report concluded that *students with disability face multiple barriers to inclusive education, underpinned by negative attitudes and low expectations* (p.10, Disability Royal Commission, 2023). Research on inclusion of students using AAC has to date predominantly focused on the perspectives of teachers and parents (e.g. Paseka & Schwab, 2020). Students' voices are essential for research underpinned by a rights approach to increase our understanding of the current inclusive education practices.

Aim

The aim of the presentation is to share the accounts of children who attend mainstream school and use AAC regarding their experiences of school participation – both the benefits and challenges they experienced. We also present the perspectives of the children's parents on their child's educational experiences. The research questions are:

1. What are the accounts of children who attend mainstream school and use AAC regarding their experiences of school participation, benefits, and challenges?
2. What are the accounts of parents of children who attend mainstream school and use AAC on the inclusive education opportunities, practices, and the outcomes?   What are the benefits and challenges?

Method

We used a qualitative case study design to understand the accounts of children and their parents and to inform the broader debate about inclusive education (Thomas, 2011). Researchers with knowledge and skills with AAC interviewed eight students (age range 5-12 years, mean age = 9.9 years) in mainstream schools who used AAC. Eleven parents of the students were also interviewed. Interviews were conducted from March to May 2022.

We specifically developed an interview protocol and data collection tools for the children's interviews. Children used their AAC systems (e.g. SGDs, gesture, PODDs), as well as Talking Mats© and Rating Scales. Visual representations of interview questions to support comprehension was utilised. Using familiar and trained communication partners and interviewer was vital to understanding what supports would facilitate their unique methods of communicating and engaging students in interviews.

The definition of inclusive education by CRPD was used to develop a coding framework to analyse the parent interviews. An inductive approach was used to analyse the children's interviews to identify common themes.

Results

Children shared experiences of what they do at school, including participation in academic lessons, as well as some describing playing with peers. Students used words such as "fun", and "good," when describing school. They also described what was important to them at school. Most indicated that being in the same class as everyone else was important.

Parents reported staff training, access to funding, and the attitudes of leadership, teaching staff, peers and school community as key factors that either facilitated or created barriers to inclusion;

 "…because she was the leader and she believed in inclusion whole-heartedly and was also then an incredibly skilled and respected, smart woman, everyone else just falls in line underneath her" (PP1)
 "I actually think the biggest drive is the school's attitude and money speaks louder than anything else" (PP9).

Discussions about the inclusive education experience were mostly positive, with all parents valuing their child's access to and participation in mainstream schooling. For parents, 'inclusion' meant building supportive environments and in turn communities:

"it means that her wellbeing is supported, her dignity is supported, her voice is supported, and she's welcomed" (PP7).
"...it means that we're going to have more people in future communities who – it's [disability is] just normal...And they just know how to interact with people of all diversity, because it's just always been there" (PP4).

Parents suggestions for changes that need to occur to enhance inclusive education opportunities, such as further professional development and education of leadership and teaching staff, including at a university level, and increased funding to schools.

Conclusion

This case study provides insights about how students who use AAC can be successfully included in research to understand their lived experiences. Students showed enjoyment in participating in mainstream school, with most identifying wanting to be with their peers. Parents identified key factors that influence successes or challenges in their inclusive education journeys. Benefits to the students, their peers, and the wider community were identified, reinforcing the need to build inclusive schools so we can in turn build inclusive societies.

The study findings support the broader recommendations from the Disability Royal Commission's recommendations (2023) that a quality inclusive education can only be implemented through significant transformation of school system; with changes to policy and legislations, and school culture and practices at the ground level.

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