

Amplifying the Voices of Elementary Schoolers with Speech Impediments: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract : Elementary school students with speech impediments (ESSIs), delays, and differences often struggle to participate in class alongside non-ESSIs. This exploratory, semester-long study applied Park and Takahashi's (2013) 2-2-1 scanning strategy over sixteen weeks to understand the underlying factors of this issue and define an ideal reality conducive to ESSi participation. This process entailed conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and subject-matter experts while corroborating insights with prior literature. The convenience sample included two caregivers, two former speech therapists, two educators (one with a background in special education), an accessibility accommodations advisor, and a professor in special education from North Carolina and the Greater St. Louis area. A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts highlighted five core factors influencing ESSi participation in classrooms. These include (1) student confidence, (2) inclusion and peer awareness, (3) access to speech therapy, (4) educator training, and (5) staff capacity. To improve the current state of these factors, the study concludes that educational leaders must go beyond the definition of inclusion found in federal legislation to foster a school culture that values ESSi voices and belonging. Specifically, schools should provide educator training on promoting ESSi inclusion by normalizing speech differences through classroom lessons. Additionally, it is imperative for educational leaders to expand opportunities for collaboration among educators, therapists, and caregivers to ensure that students with ESSi obtain the necessary support to learn strategies that enhance their ability to participate in class. Finally, in light of the accelerated timeline of the study and limited research on this niche topic, recommendations are provided to researchers and practitioners.

Keywords : speech impediments, classroom participation, inclusive school culture, peer awareness, student confidence and self-esteem

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