

# **The Quiet Struggle: Understanding the challenges of including children with language difficulties in elementary schools.**

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Many children who have trouble understanding or using language blend into the activity of a typical classroom. Even in schools that value inclusion, these students often meet subtle communication barriers that make participation difficult. This article looks at the obstacles they face and offers practical ways schools can support stronger communication.

When entering an elementary classroom, it is not unusual to see a child sitting quietly amid the movement and noise of daily lessons. It may be a learner who is eager but misunderstood, or one who is trying to keep up with conversations that move faster than they can process. For many children with language needs, this is a familiar experience. It also serves as a reminder that inclusion is not limited to being physically present in the classroom. It involves being able to participate meaningfully.

Language is the core tool children use to interpret expectations, follow discussions, and communicate what they know. When this system is difficult to navigate, school life becomes far more demanding. Even environments with strong inclusive values may not immediately recognize these challenges.

## **1. Rapid classroom communication**

Teachers manage frequent transitions and give many verbal directions as they move from one activity to another. For a child who needs extra time to interpret spoken information, this quick pace can be difficult to manage. They may miss important steps, respond slowly, or stop attempting to follow along. Teachers may not always realize how much difference it makes to slow the pace slightly or check for understanding.

## **2. Curriculum demands that rely heavily on language**

Most subjects require students to listen, discuss, explain, or describe. Even areas like science and mathematics are commonly taught through verbal explanation or text-based tasks. As a result, children with language challenges often work significantly harder just to stay on track. At times they are mistaken for being disengaged when the issue is more complex. Some schools admit learners with limited language skills but lack clear guidelines on how to adjust teaching materials. Without structured support or collaboration with specialists, these students fall further behind.

## **3. Limited teacher preparation in language development**

Many teachers express a desire to support all learners yet feel unsure about identifying language needs or adapting lessons appropriately. Teacher-preparation programs often spend limited time on language development, and professional training tends to prioritize literacy skills rather than broader communication needs. This leaves teachers improvising without a clear framework.

#### **4. Classroom environments that hinder communication**

Small environmental features can create substantial difficulties: background noise, fast-paced questioning, group work with few visual prompts, or seating positions that make it hard to see or hear the teacher. Although these features are common and generally functional, they can unintentionally disadvantage students who need additional visual or auditory support.

#### **5. Stigma and social isolation**

Peers notice when a classmate struggles to communicate or needs longer to respond. Patience may wear thin, and some children withdraw socially as a result. Challenges with communication make forming friendships more difficult, and social isolation can intensify academic struggles.

#### **6. Gaps in assessment and identification**

Many students with language difficulties are identified far later than ideal, and some are not identified at all. Some schools depend on general academic performance rather than targeted assessments designed to detect language needs. Others lack access to speech-language specialists who can guide the identification process. Delayed recognition reduces opportunities for early intervention.

#### **7. Insufficient inclusive learning materials**

Even when teachers want to differentiate instruction, they may not have suitable materials. Many available resources depend heavily on text or assume strong language comprehension. Without alternatives such as visuals, scaffolding tasks, or simplified language supports, students with language challenges struggle to engage fully.

### **Building more inclusive classrooms**

There is realistic hope for improvement, as many solutions are practical and inexpensive. Awareness and intentional planning often make the greatest impact.

Helpful approaches include:

- incorporating visual supports such as pictures, symbol-based communication tools, diagrams, or gestures;
- presenting instructions in smaller, sequential steps;
- allowing additional time for students to respond
- checking understanding regularly;
- using clear, concise speech and avoiding unnecessary technical terms;
- providing tools or areas that reduce noise when needed;
- teaching vocabulary systematically and revisiting key terms;
- using structured peer or group activities that offer strong language models;
- creating quiet spaces for reflection;

- encouraging collaboration between teachers and Speech and Language Therapists during lesson planning.

A significant shift occurs when teachers view language support as part of their everyday practice rather than something only specialists handle. Increased teacher confidence can help students feel recognized and supported.

## **Why this matters**

Children with language needs often struggle in ways that are difficult to see. Because their difficulties are not always obvious, inclusion efforts may overlook them. Yet the impact of these challenges is real. True inclusion means ensuring every child can take part in learning and classroom life, not simply be present.

When schools create communication-friendly environments, strengthen collaboration with specialists, and establish clearer pathways for early identification, students with language difficulties gain opportunities to participate fully and confidently.

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