



**LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LEARNERS LIVING WITH  
PHYSICAL DISABILITIES IN SELECTED INCLUSIVE PRIMARY  
SCHOOLS OF ELGEIYO MARAKWET COUNTY, KENYA**

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**Abstract:**

This study explored the lived experiences of learners living with physical disabilities in selected inclusive primary schools of Elgeiyo Marakwet County, Kenya. The purpose of this study was to explore these learners' experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Participants in this study were purposively selected. Phenomenological design and participatory visual methodologies were used to generate data in this study. Data were analysed thematically using the guidelines for thematic analysis. This study revealed that learners living with physical disabilities were included and treated well in school. However, they also reported being excluded and neglected in a few instances. These learners besides exclusion in school also reported being neglected, discriminated and marginalised at home. Inadequate teacher training, unfriendly subject content, and less time for learning and assessment were reported as some of the challenges they faced in school. This study concluded that an inclusive primary school environment was better for learners living with disabilities compared to home. Moreover, retrogressive cultural beliefs were a major hindrance to their schooling and education. This study recommends that prospective teachers be trained on how to teach learners living with disabilities in inclusive primary schools. Teachers, pupils, parents and the general community to be

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sensitised on how to treat, and relate with learners living with physical disabilities at home and school.

**Keywords:** inclusive schools, persons living with physical disabilities, Elgeiyo Marakwet, Kenya

## 1. Introduction

Studies have revealed that learners living with physical disabilities do not feel safe at school compared to at home (Rosetti & Handerson, 2013; Massengale, 2016). In Kenya, there is scanty information on the learning experiences of learners living with physical disabilities. Waititu (2015) observed that a conducive learning environment for all learners was a major concern in the world. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) initiative stipulated that all children, including those with physical disabilities and other forms of special education needs, be given equal opportunity and access to education (UNESCO, 1990; 1994). According to Adoyo (2019), Inclusive education involves transforming a regular school environment to accommodate learners who are physically challenged. Physical disabilities are defined as challenges that interfere with an individual's mobility, coordination, communication, learning personal adjustment and learning which limit learners' functional abilities (Adoyo, 2019). Physical disability in Kenya is a term used to refer to a lack of / restriction of ability to perform an activity in a manner within the range considered normal within the cultural context of the human being (Kabare, 2018). Inclusion refers to members of a given community embracing diversity to live together as one. A review of early educational reforms in Kenya on learners living with physical disabilities reveals that whereas many learners with significant physical disabilities were provided with medical and custodial care, those with average to above cognitive abilities, were integrated into regular education schools (Moyi, 2017). Several reports since independence have recommended for equal education for all learners including those living with physical disabilities. The Ominde report of 1964 recommended that learners with mild physical disabilities be integrated into regular schools, Gachathi report of 1976 laid down measures to address Special Needs Education (SNE) which included the development of policy for integrating learners with SNE into regular schools. Kamunge report of 1988 emphasized the need to establish an SNE inspectorate at the district level in Kenya. The Koech commission of 1999 also recommended the establishment of a national special education advisory board (Moyi, 2017).

The Government of Kenya (Gok), in 2003, introduced free primary education with the objective of achieving universal primary education. In addition, it provided funding to schools that provided education to all learners living with disabilities (Gok, 2005). Sessional paper number 1 of 2005 gave clear guidelines on how learners living with disabilities would access quality, and relevant education (Gok, 2005; Adoyo & Odeny, 2015). In 2010, the new constitution brought provisions that promoted education for

disabled children guaranteeing every child the right to free and compulsory education (Elder, 2015). Further, the Policy for Learners and Trainees with Disabilities, (GoK, 2018) advocated for equity in opportunities, and all-inclusive education. Despite the formulation of this policy and efforts put in, learners living with physical and other forms of disabilities continue to regress and drop out of school. Thus, the provision of effective learning and teaching of these learners in primary schools can be compromised if attention is not paid to their experiences in the school environment. These experiences may be physical, psycho-social and or emotional. This, therefore, necessitated the need for a study to explore their lived experiences in an inclusive primary school.

### **1.1 The Experiences of Learners Living with Physical Disabilities**

Previous studies on the learning of learners living with physical disabilities report that they have normal intelligence, and can be integrated into regular schools (Obiero & Mwangi, 2019; Mwangi, 2017; Picard, 2015). Obiero *et al.*, (2019) noted that some modification and adaptation to the classroom and, the school's physical, social and emotional environment is necessary. However, the decreased motor fitness among learners living with physical disabilities leads to feelings of low-self-esteem. These feelings affect their social interactions with their classmates, especially in conventional school environments. They encounter multiple difficulties when they engage in activities that involve physical movements. These experiences result in their dislike for school, or a delay in their completion of education (Mwangi & Obiero, 2019). Rossetti and Henderson, (2013) noted that these learners were characterised by low self-esteem, less emotional support, academic challenges, and emotional adjustment. Moreover, these learners did not feel safe at school as compared to their homes (Rossetti & Hernderson, 2013; Massengale, 2016).

Studies have also revealed that these learners experience a myriad of challenges such as: limited time to move from dormitories to class, resulting in their being late for lessons. Whereas, others are affected by fatigue due to moving up and down on their wheelchairs, and clutches. It is also tiresome for some of them to access, and use toilets. Absenteeism is also a common phenomenon among learners living with physical disabilities. Some of the learners who have imputed upper and lower limbs use their mouths to write, whereas those without the upper limbs, use their lower limbs. These challenges reduce their ability to write faster. They are, therefore, left behind and excluded during the learning process. They are also excluded from hands-on activities such as the manipulation of laboratory equipment and sports. This study unlike previous ones that have looked at policies and their implementation with other stakeholders other than students taking part in the study, took a different trajectory. The study sought to investigate the lived experiences of primary school learners living with physical disabilities from their own perspective in a school setting. A qualitative approach and visual tools of data generation were employed. Visual tools help to reveal the hard to speak aspects of people's experiences. In this study, photographs and drawings were

used to enable the research participants to express themselves freely (Reavey & Johnson, 2008; Mitchell, De Lange & Moletsane, 2017).

### **1.2 Participatory Visual Methodologies**

Participatory Visual Methodology (PVM) is qualitative in nature. In this research, participants were actively involved in designing a study, analysing data, and reporting the findings. PVM enable participants to express that which they cannot put easily in words and is difficult to obtain by use of other data collection instruments. Mitchell *et al.*, (2017) reported that PVM as a methodology is useful in engaging communities and policymakers in a dialogue with the view of bringing social change. Participants in this research position themselves as change agents rather than victims. Gubrium and Harper, (2015) noted that in PVMs, participants are not subjects to be studied but co-investigators, co analysts and co-writers. These participants are given voice and inputs into the study that often have direct implications for them and their extended community. PVM is not a kind of research aiming at data collection, but like Action research, it is the process and the study feedback that is of great concern, (Haalboom *et al.*, 2006 cited in Mitchell *et al.*, 2017).

Previous studies have been conducted using participatory approaches with various groups of people. Nind (2011) asserts that participatory approaches accord researchers the opportunity to listen and hear participants' various perspectives, understand their experiences, consult, and involve them in decision making which may bring change to their situation. Moreover, Participatory Visual Research is suitable when working with marginalized people, communities or topics deemed to be sensitive (Mitchell C., 2008; O. Fallen, Tyson & Dearth, 2000; De Lange, 2017; Wang 1999). It also allows ease of participation, and expression of ideas on an issue that seems difficult to articulate or believed to be inappropriate to discuss. PVM, therefore, triggers critical social change and in the process of knowledge production, the voices of the marginalized is seen as important (Mitchell *et al.*, 2017; Mitchell, 2016). According to (Bentley *et al.*, 2017; Bentley, 2012), the shared experiences, and a common cause of resisting oppression gave people living with disability a new sense of worth, a feeling of belonging, and a new insight into disability. Previous studies using Visual methods have been done with learners living with disabilities outside the school. Prosser and Loxley (2007) posit that, in order to meet the needs of LWD, a study needs to be done in a school context. There is scanty of information from the learner's perspective on their lived experiences in Kenyan inclusive primary school. Thus, the need for the current study.

## **2. Research Design**

This study was anchored on the interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative approach which allowed for the acceptance of multiple realities from the research participants (Creswell, 2016). A phenomenological design was employed where data on the lived experiences of participants were generated and analysed. The research participants were

engaged throughout the study and member checks were used for data validation (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

### **2.1 Sample and Setting**

The Non-probability Sampling technique was used to obtain the research participants. Purposive sampling was used to sample three inclusive public primary schools from Elgeiyo Marakwet County, and learners living with physical disabilities in grades 1 through to 7 were also purposively selected to participate in this study.

### **2.2 Data Generation**

The research process started with a prior visit to the selected school where the researcher met with the school heads of the selected schools, and teachers in charge of Special Needs Education. The activities carried out during this pre-visit were an introduction to inform participants about the purpose of the research, learners living with disabilities were taken through a drawing exercise where the researcher demonstrated how one could make a drawing of their individual experiences. They were also shown through demonstrations how to use a digital camera to capture their experiences.

The instruments of data generation included drawings and photographs. The research participants were engaged in making drawings and taking photographs showing their experiences of inclusion and exclusion in school. They were also requested to write captions on their drawings explaining what they meant in their individual drawing as well as talk to the researchers about the photographs they took (Mitchell, 2011; Mitchell *et al.*, 2011).

### **2.3 Data Analysis**

The qualitative data obtained in this research were analysed thematically using the guidelines for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The five phases of data analysis employed in this study enabled the researcher to take a back and forth move throughout the phases bringing forth the possible themes. The six phases included (1) Familiarization phase; The transcription of the verbal data obtained from the recordings and the captions was done in this phase. The researchers repeatedly and actively read the handwritten data searching for meaning, and patterns and taking notes on ideas for coding to be used in Phase two. (2) Generating Codes; after the initial list of ideas is listed in phase one, the researchers looked for similar ideas and identified facts that were interesting about them. (3) Searching for Themes; in this phase, the researchers looked at the long list of codes and sorted them into potential themes. The relationship between codes and between themes was identified and nothing was abandoned at this stage. (4) Reviewing themes; at this stage, the researchers had a set of candidate themes. Some were broken into two themes and others joined. Those without enough supporting data were disqualified. (5) Defining and Naming Themes; in this phase, the researchers had several themes and identified the story each theme told. For each individual theme, the researchers wrote a detailed analysis.

## 2.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical Clearance was sought and obtained from the ethics committee of Moi University, (IREC008/2021), and a national research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI, 482704). A permission letter was obtained from Elgeyo Marakwet county’s director of Education to allow the researchers to carry out research in the County.

Researchers visited the sampled schools to discuss the purpose of the study and seek permission from the headteachers of these schools, and parents. Researchers also discussed the purpose of this study with the class teachers of the participants. These participants were informed of voluntary participation and withdrawal from the study at any time they deemed fit. Anonymity is a critical aspect when carrying out research with vulnerable populations, and thus these researchers ensured that the identity of the participants was hidden through assigned pseudonyms and photographs were only zoomed in on the places of emphasis and faces were not shown.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Data generated from this study were presented and discussed in line with the principles of the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013; Bohman, 2019)). Participants were given room to make drawings and take photographs which were used to answer the research question. It explored the experiences of learners living with physical disabilities in an inclusive primary school. These participants were asked to make two drawings depicting instances that they felt good(included) or bad(excluded) in their school. During the drawing session, study participants were asked to make captions of their drawings and orally explain their meaning. Audio recorded information and oral explanations made by the participants were combined to form the written explanation on the drawings presented in this study. They were also divided into groups to take photographs showing feeling good or bad in school. Based on the explanations given by the learners about these drawings, this study revealed that their lives revolved around school and home. Their home and school experiences formed part of the learners’ lives. Two themes were derived from the drawings and photographs: Feeling good as well as bad at school as shown in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1:** Summary of Findings

Research Question	Themes	Categories
What are your experiences in your school?	Feeling good at school (Included)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School is good, I love being in school.</li> <li>• My teachers are good; they treat me well.</li> <li>• I have very many friends at school.</li> <li>• School is better than home</li> </ul>
	Feeling bad at school (Excluded)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neglected at school.</li> <li>• The school terrain is bad.</li> <li>• Mathematics is difficult.</li> <li>• Am discriminated and denied leadership roles.</li> <li>• There are no support services.</li> </ul>

### 3.1 Feeling Good at School (Included)

Learner(s) talking about their school, said that their school was a good place to be. To understand the meaning of this statement, the researchers asked the following questions: What makes school a good place for you? What happens at school? These learners were, however, not good at verbal explanation. The drawings and the captions made on them gave a clear picture of what they meant by the statement that school was good. The idea that there were people of like ability around made them joyous and motivated to remain in school.

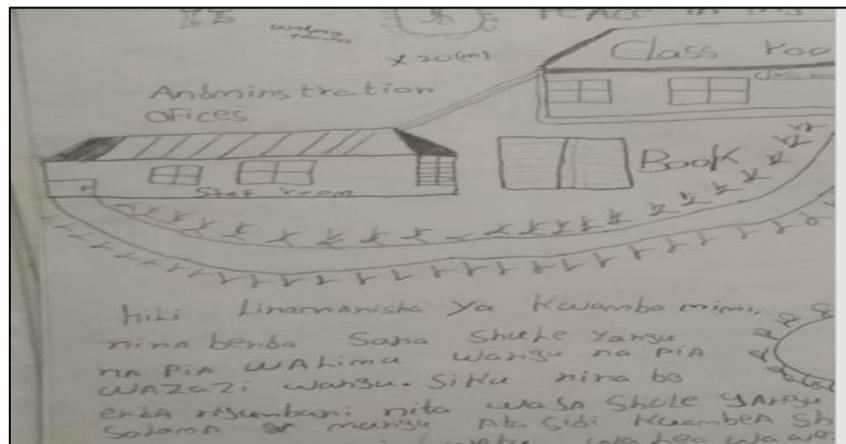


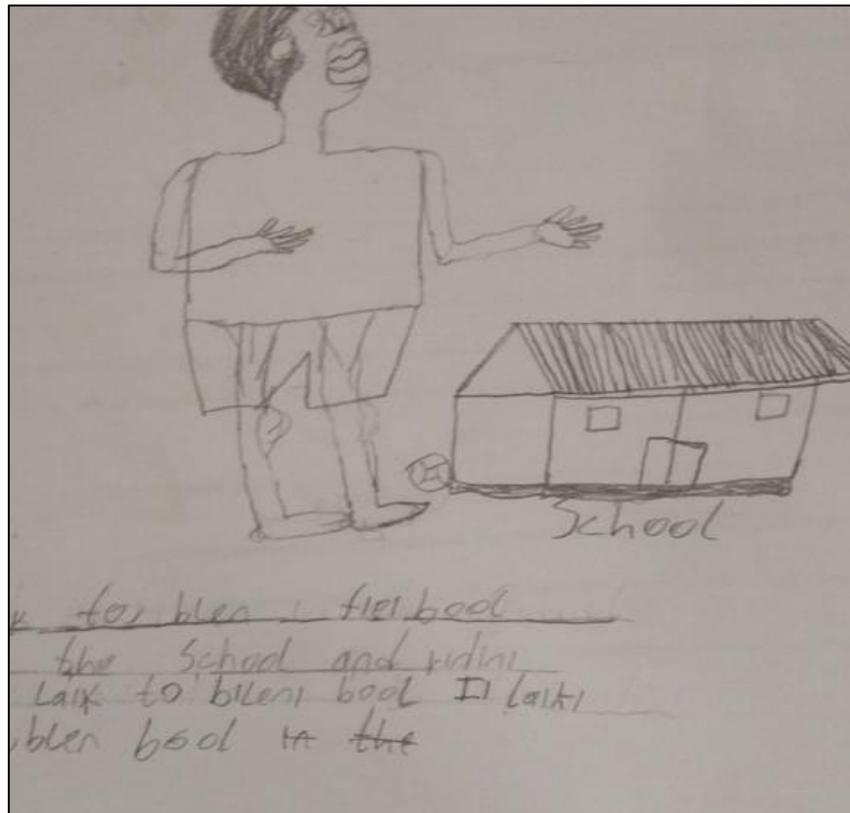
Figure 3.1: A drawing by Anita

*"I feel so happy especially when I am here at school. I love being in school, reading and staying with friends. I love flowers. I love cars they help with movement. I was in another school and transferred here in class seven. I love it here; I was the only one with this challenge. I am allowed to do chores in the small home. In my life, I feel so happy especially when I am here at school. I love being in school, reading and staying with friend."* (Anita)



Figure 3.2: A picture showing learners living with physical disabilities helping each other

*"We are many learners with physical disabilities in this school and we love each other. Pushing each other aids in faster movement although it is also challenging because we have to push our friends to and from the classroom daily. There are no good walk ways and most of them cannot wheel themselves. Most of the time we get late to class."*



**Figure 3.2:** A drawing by Tom

*"I get basic needs at school like food and shelter. There is good food at school, we are fed well. I have friends at school and enjoy my days with them. I love being in school. I feel good when I am in a science class. The subject has flowers like my school compound. I love flowers they represent love and love is very important to me. I have many friends at school, unlike at home. I am happy with my friends at school. I feel good when in the small home, we eat well and sleep well."* (Tom)

*"Drawing of my school, I love my school because we learn very well. I love my school because we have learnt it is very wonderful. Love being in school we have everything we want in school. I feel good in the classroom."* (Mary)

Some of the participants expressed love for their school by drawing pictures of flower decorations in their school compound. According to these participants, the school was a good place to be. Others expressed this verbally about how they were excited when their parents/guardians told them they were bringing them to school.

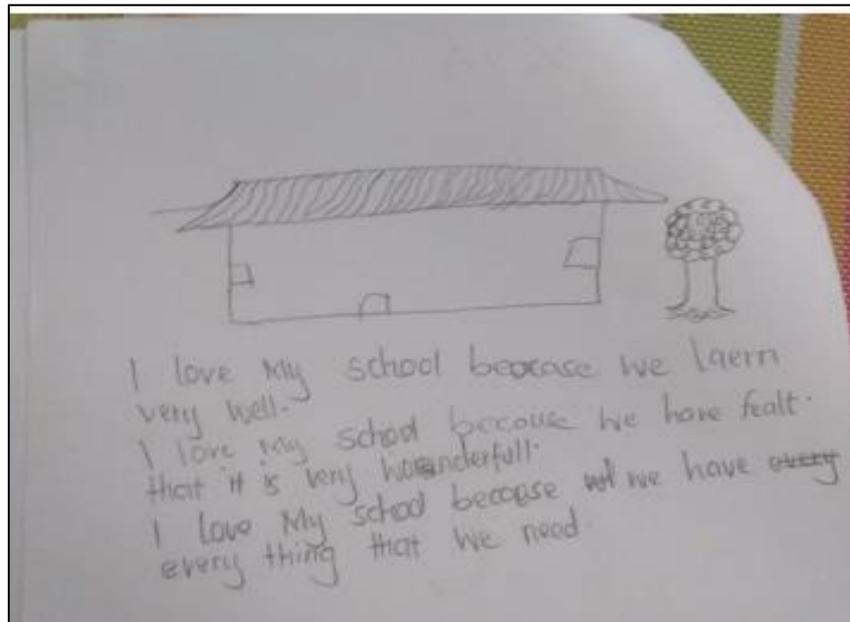


Figure 3.3: A drawing by Mary

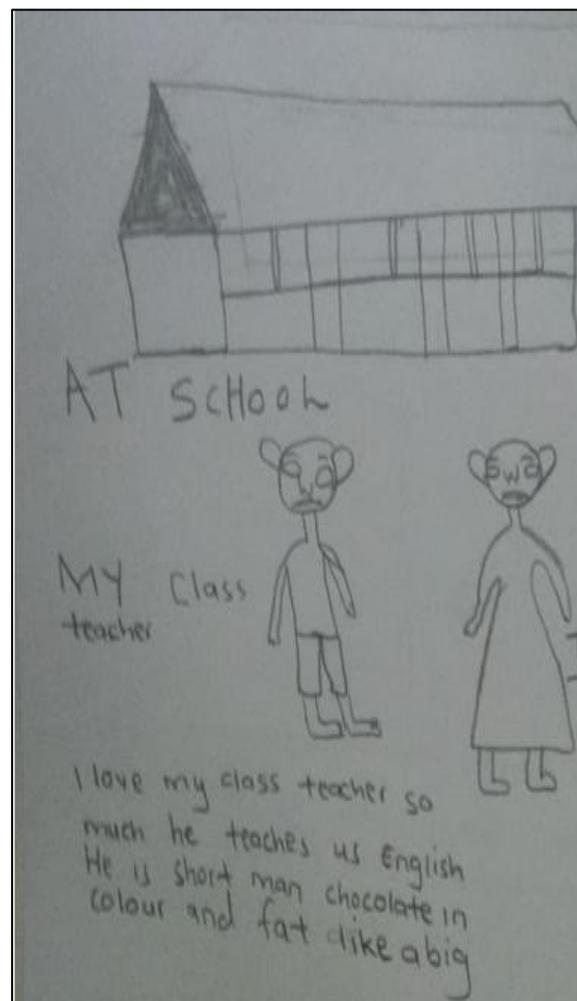
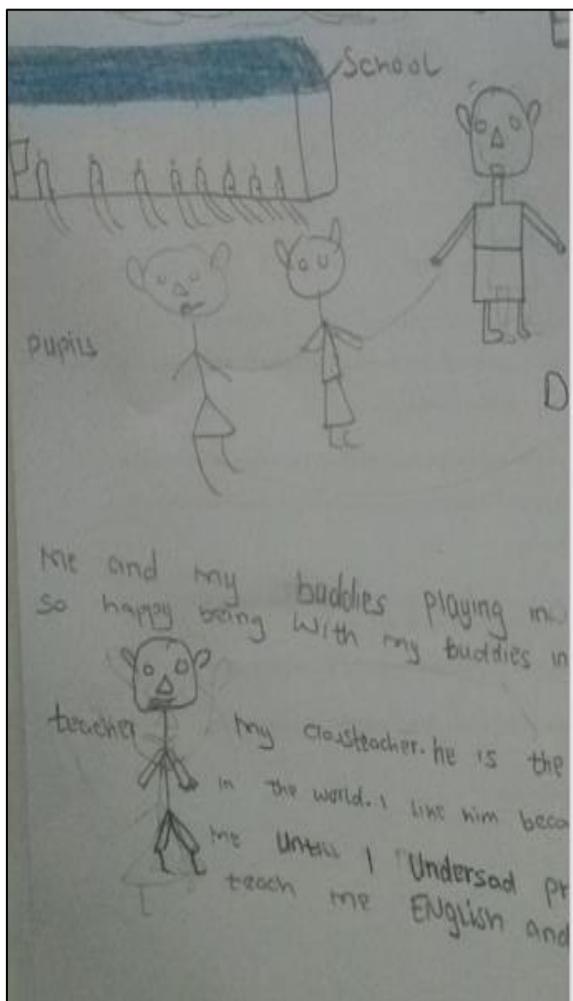
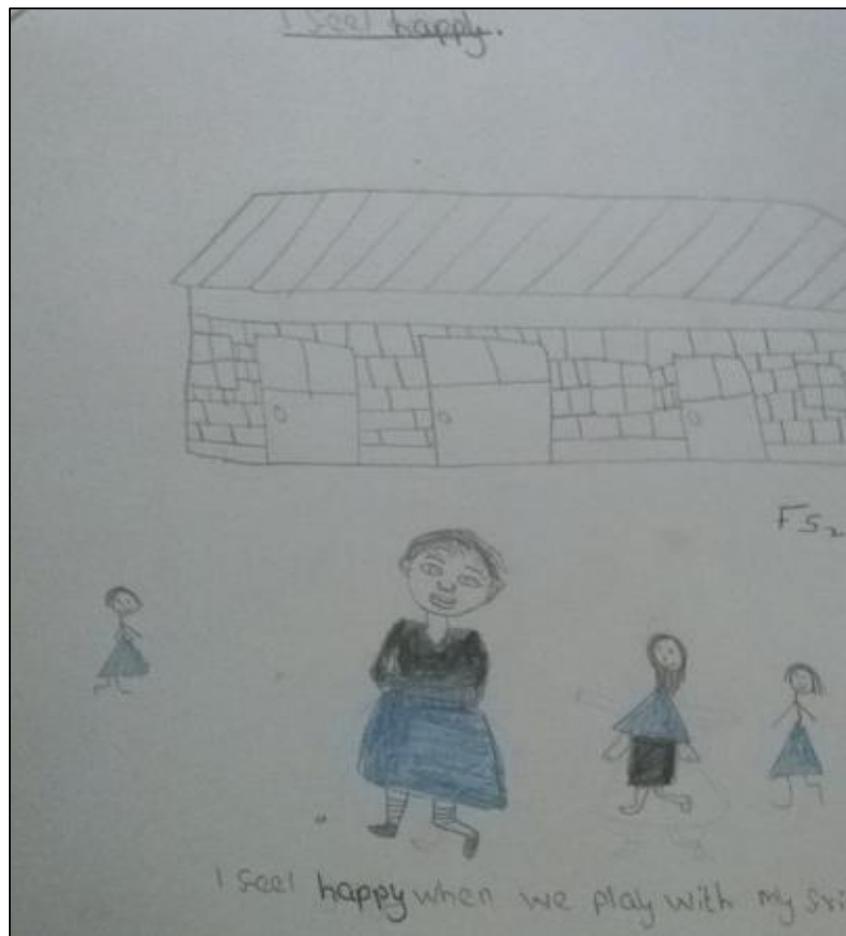


Figure 3.4: A drawing by Jemimah

*"I love my class teacher he teaches us English. I feel good reading English and I love my English Teacher. I do well in English, unlike Mathematics. Mathematics is difficult it is not easy for me to construct. I love my teacher he is the best in the world. He teaches me English until I understand."* (Jemimah)

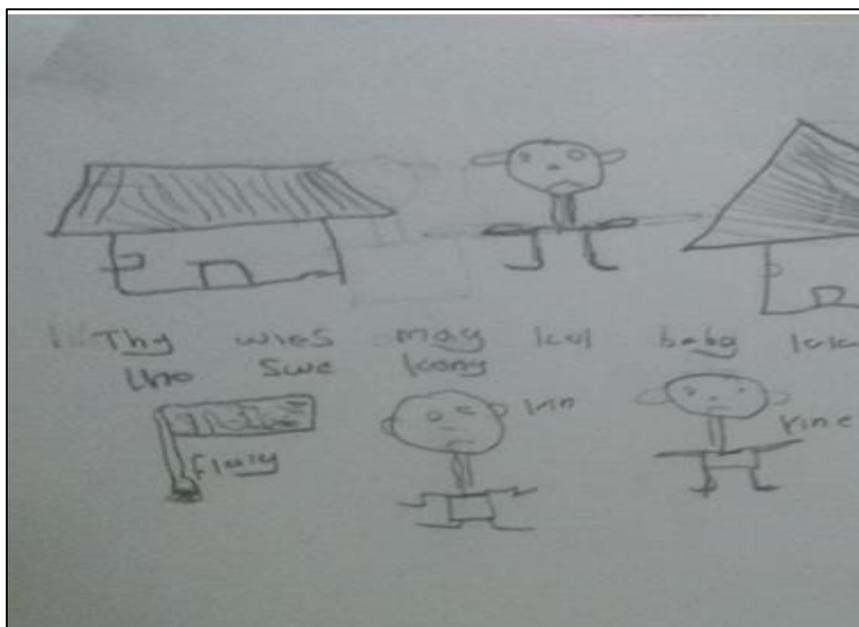
This study also revealed that teachers who were trained in special education needs took good care of the learners, were also amiable and learners liked them. Focused group discussion with teachers expounded on this fact. Teachers also played the role of parents by ensuring that these learners were comfortable in school. These teachers sometimes take the children home during school holidays at times when their parents fail to pick them. They provide them with their basic needs, help them navigate through the classrooms, and also help them clean their small homes.

Parents of children living with physical and other forms of disabilities are in most cases unaware of the support services available for these children. Since most of these children come from poor backgrounds, they are neglected by their parents (Odongo, 2018). Thus, these parents, take their children to school and leave them under the care of the teachers who are in most cases overwhelmed due to meagre resources resulting in these learners being disadvantaged.



**Figure 3.5:** A drawing by Sally

*"I have drawn a happy girl and others joining her. I am happy when included by my friends and when we are playing together."* (Sally)



**Figure 3.6:** A drawing by Paul

*"Drawing of my school. I and my friends. I am so happy being with friends in school. They love me. At home, they do not allow me to play with them. There no kids like me at home."* (Paul)

This study revealed that learners living with physical disabilities were accepted by their fellow students without disabilities. That notwithstanding, these learners preferred playing and interacting with their peers living with disabilities. This shows that even though they are not isolated or discriminated against by their classmates they prefer interacting amongst themselves

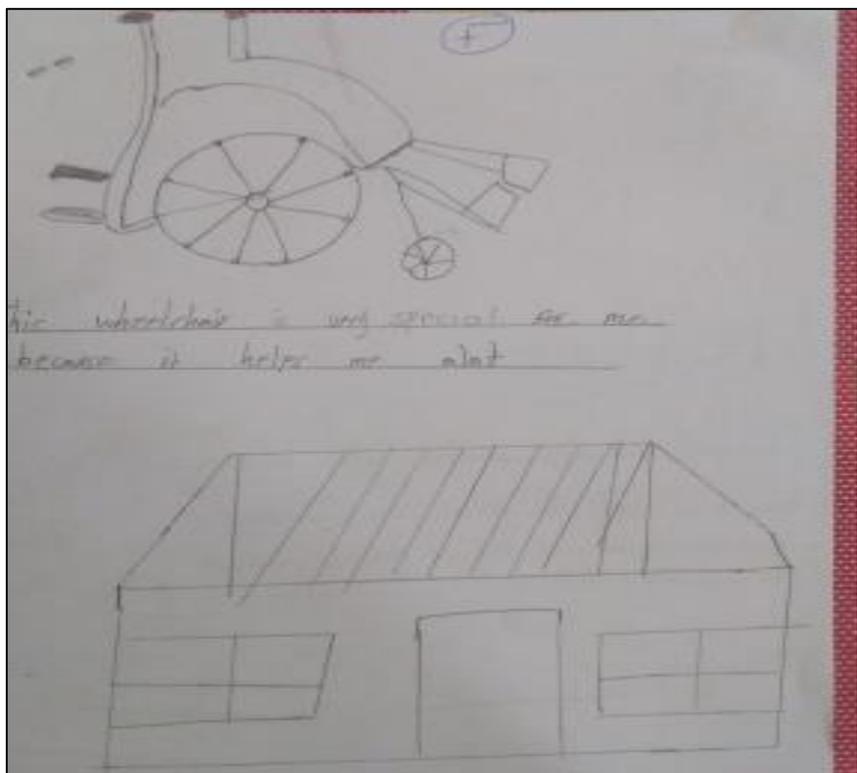
Waititu (2015) observed that all human beings whether living with disabilities or not, need the fulfilment of their psychological needs. These needs include: love, trust, security, and a sense of belonging. When learners, especially those living with physical disabilities are deprived of these needs, they develop low self-esteem (Waititu,2015).

Waititu noted that despite the fact that LWD are not isolated by their fellow students, they prefer the company of their fellow LWD to that of other learners.

Inclusive schools selected for this study had a special wing for the accommodation of learners with physical disabilities. This acted as their home in school where they went back after classes. Those learners who faced rejection and isolation at home loved and preferred being in school than at home. Through beautiful drawings, the learners told stories about their small home. Some of them had low self-esteem, therefore having people who loved and took care of them made them happy (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Jenson, 2018). In their verbal explanations, these learners expressed a deep love for their small homes. The researchers observed that the small homes were designed to

replicate home environment. There was a stand-alone kitchen, a recreation facility as well as good seats where the learners rested after a long day on their wheelchairs.

*“Drawing of a house, this is the small home we stay in and rest. I am well supported. The matron cleans our clothes. They give us daily duties to clean the washroom. I feel good about it; at home, they don’t allow me to do duties because of my confinement in a wheelchair. I feel good when in the dormitories in the small home. I love my school all the time. I love myself the way I am. I love my school as it makes me feel that I am very wonderful. We have everything that we need in school. My friends at school love me I feel good in the dormitory. (Prince)*

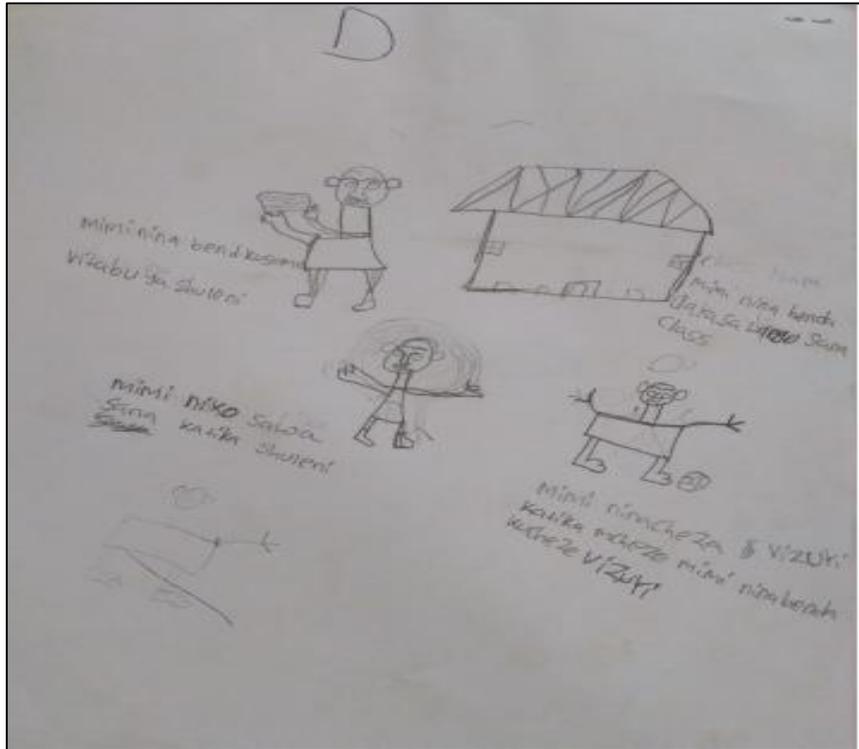


**Figure 3.7:** A drawing by Prince

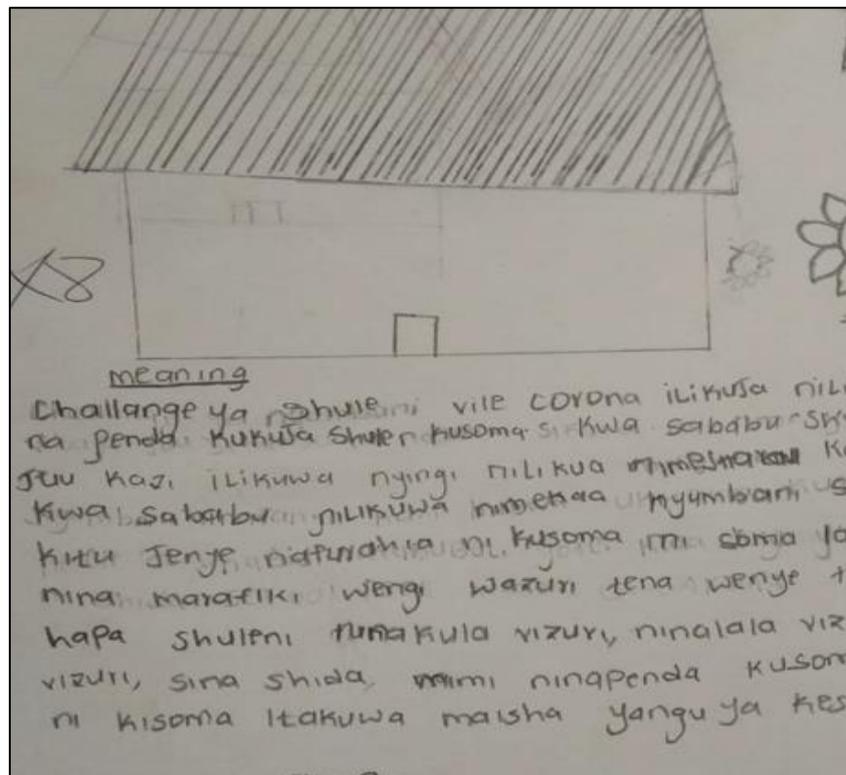
In these drawings majority of the learners showed that they loved their school more than home. Learners with disabilities reported that they are warmly accepted and treated well at school compared to their homes where their families hide them from public, or leave them under the care of the elderly (Waititu, 2015).

*“I am very much okay at school; School is good and I also sleep here. Home is challenging. I have more friends here in school than at home. I love playing games in school and I prefer being in school to home. I love my classroom teacher; she treats me better than my village mates.” (Lucy)*

*"I love it at school. I am allowed to do some chores such as cleaning the small home. My mother does not allow me to do the house chores such as swiping she says I am not able to. I think I am able."* (Janice)



**Figure 3.8:** A drawing by Janice

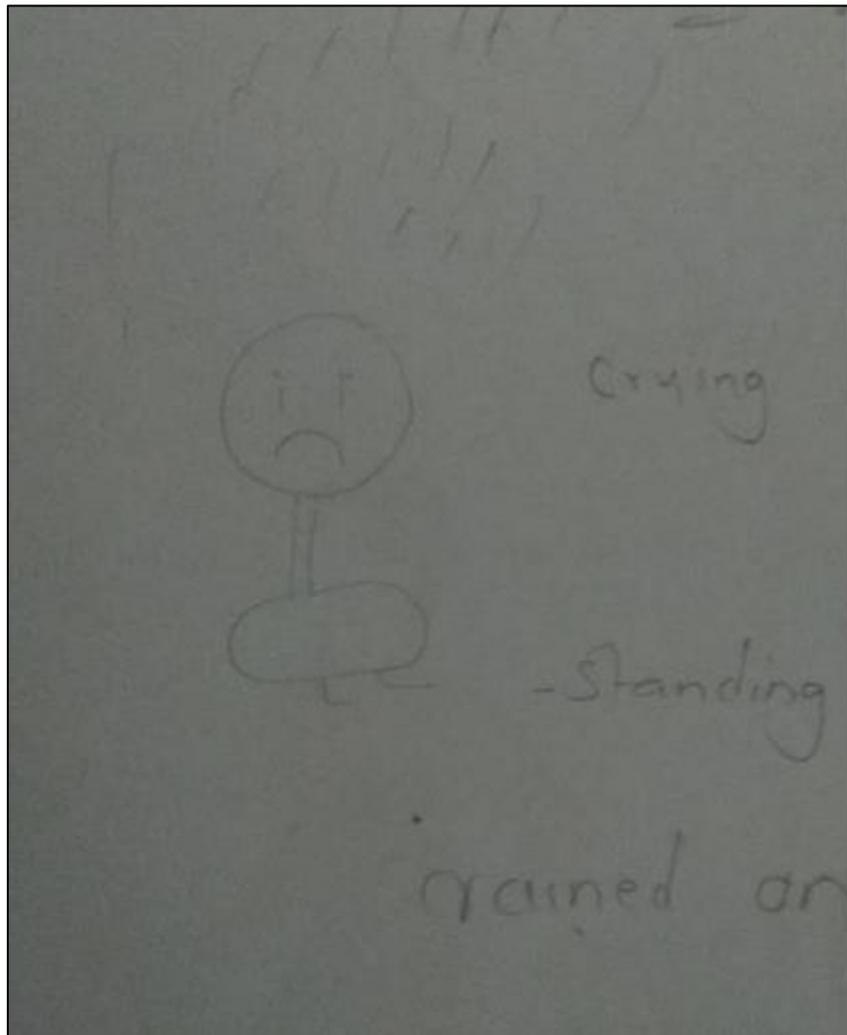


**Figure 3.9:** A drawing by Joan

*“School is better than home. I am always very happy when going to school. I feel good at school the teacher in charge takes good care of us. When the Coronavirus forced us to stay at home, I felt so sad, I love being in school.” (Joan)*

### **3.2 Feeling Bad at School (Excluded)**

Some of the learners drew pictures depicting they were excluded at school. These drawings showed that most learners with physical challenges were excluded not only by the society, their families, but also at school.



**Figure 3.10:** A drawing by Juliet

*“I have drawn myself being rained on. I feel bad about this. There are many things I desire to do but I cannot do on my own I feel bad when it is rainy and Muddy, my wheelchair does not move smoothly. When it rains, I am so sad I cannot play and I get rained on as I cannot run. (Juliet)*

*“I have been a prefect but they demoted me and appointed someone else. I always wonder why they demoted me. maybe it is because of my disability.” (John)*



**Figure 3.11:** A photograph showing the school compound

The learners pictured this to show how the school was challenging to manoeuvre especially on wheelchairs during the rainy season. They also noted that there were no wide verandas and shades in case of rain. The terrain also was challenging.

*“You know when it rains, we are rained on. The school verandas are also small. The school terrain also does not allow us to walk with our walking aids faster.”*

Children living with physical find it very hard to fit into an exclusive society and family. It is even worse when parents and significant others are not loving and taking care of them. The experience of exclusion leads to a negative self-concept (Mavole, Mutisya & Wambulwa, 2004).

Some of the learners reported that they are also disadvantaged during the teaching and learning process One of the participants reported:

*“Sometimes I feel bad because the teachers do not take care of us. They write very fast and sometimes I am punished for asking questions from the others the teacher says it is noise making. I feel that the teacher treats me differently.”*

*“It is challenging to see a school that is not united to support all learners.”*



**Figure 3.12:** A picture showing learners holding hands

One of the learners reported:

*“I started experiencing disunity right from my home. My family did not want me. As we are holding hands, we should remain united.”*

The group that took the above photograph expressed how the situation in their school was not as they expected, they reported that they were being isolated by their fellow learners. Others complained that their teachers did not treat them well. Most of the participants said that teachers did not pay attention to individual differences. They were too fast and did not consider the writing pace of learners with disabilities. They were in many instances left behind during the learning process. The researchers also observed that during lesson delivery most of the learners living with physical disabilities were left behind. Some of the teachers did not concentrate on this group and ended up doing cosmetic teaching.

*“I love writing but I am not able to write well with my leg; I feel I am like the others though doing things differently. my desk is different from the others. I use an adapted table which is my sit and my desk. I walk very slowly and I feel bad about it. For example, when I go to the washroom which is in the small home, I am late for the lesson. I don't have a wheelchair. it broke down. (Jasmine)*

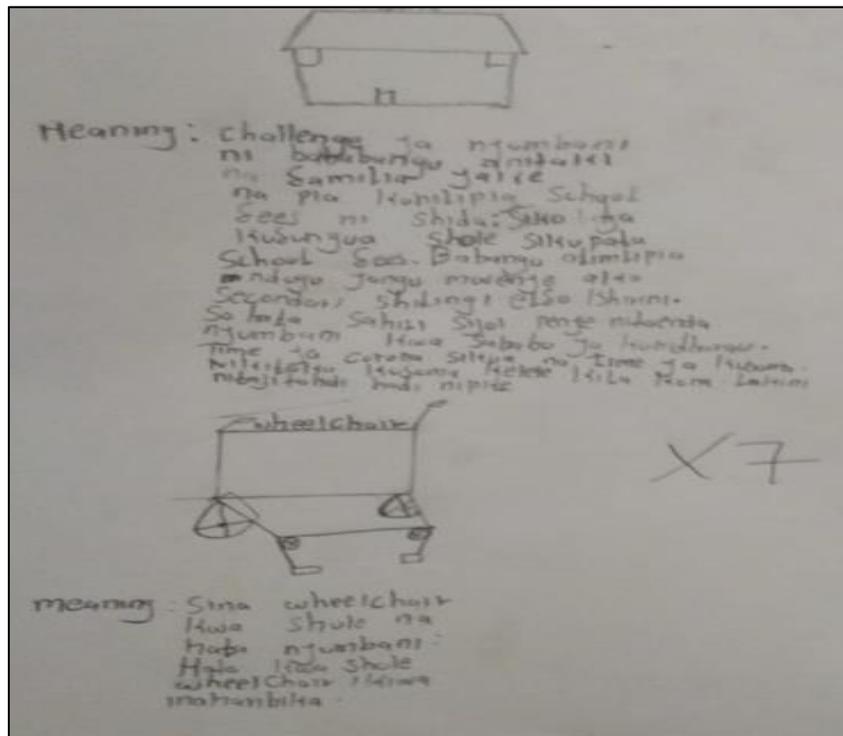


Figure 3.13: A drawing by Jasmine

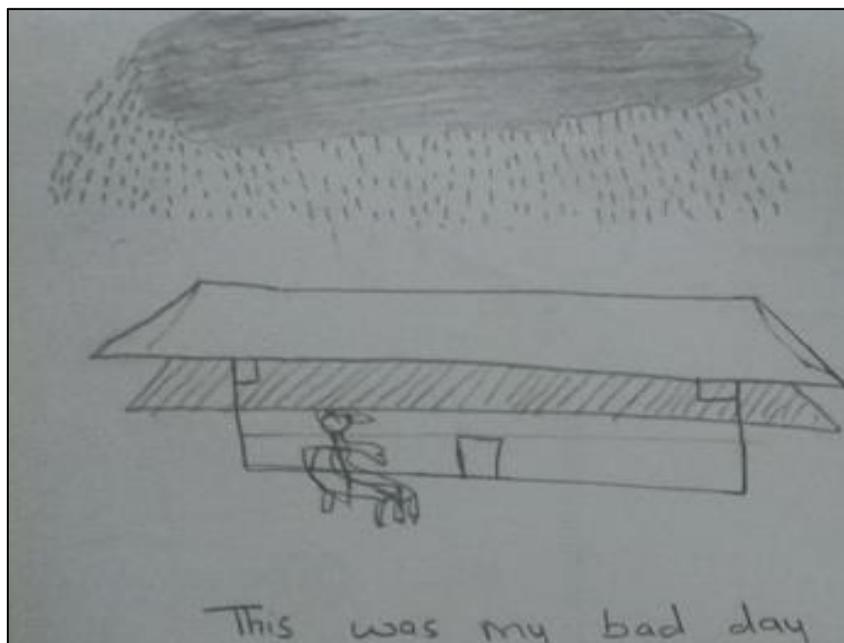
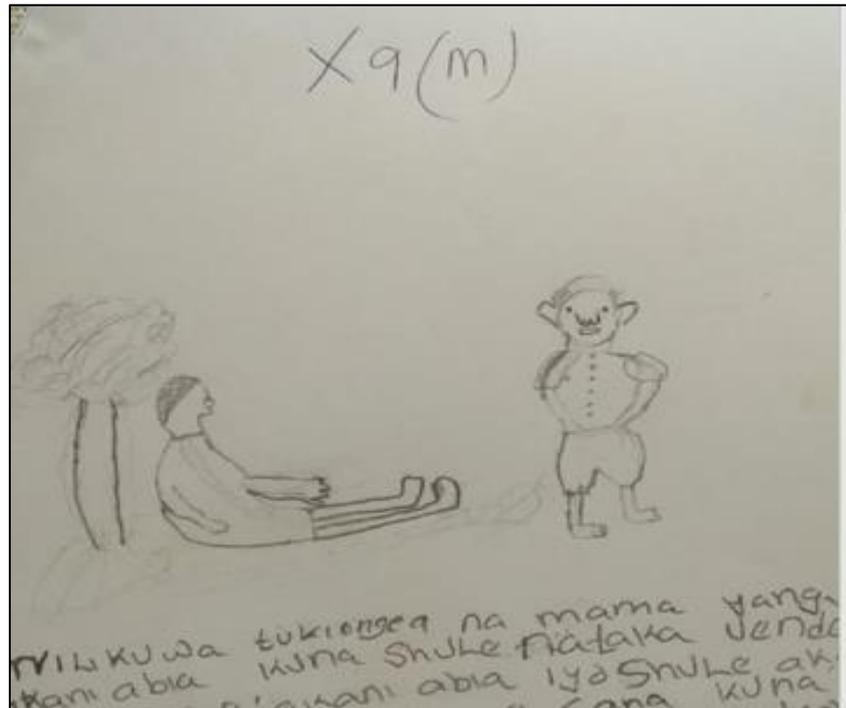


Figure 3.14: A drawing by Joel

*"This is a drawing of one seated alone. I am angry because I am alone. The others do not want to relate to me. They say I am not like them. my father and his family do not want me. He does not pay my school fees; he pays for my brother. I don't know where I will go after school. They disregard me, Coronavirus was a challenge because I could not go to school."* (Joel)



**Figure 3.15:** A drawing by Suzan

*“Here I was talking to my grandmother. She was telling me about a school. Since there is no one to take care for me at home I live with my old grandmother. My other brothers and sisters do not have a disability they went to school “mapema Sana” early enough. (Suzan)*

Majority of the young mothers who happen to give birth to disabled learners before marriage do not go with their disabled children to their new homes. They are left behind under the care of their grandparents who live in absolute poverty (Waititu, 2015). These children need support from significant others such as relatives and the school community. Intriguingly, some of these learners reported that they were isolated by their fellow counterparts and treated differently.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Learners living with physical disabilities have varied experiences at school. The majority of these pupils reported that they are not discriminated, against and enjoyed favorable learning environment at school. They were treated well by their teachers and peers, felt included and integrated into the school community, and thus preferred school to home. In addition to these good experiences, they reported that they were stigmatized and marginalized at home due to cultural beliefs. At home, some of the parents live in denial and self-pity for having given birth to disabled children. As evidenced by this study, they also experience some challenges in school. Some of the physical terrains are not learner-friendly, hindering their mobility to and from class. Most of the teachers are not trained to handle learners with special needs thus they are not sensitive to their needs. They do

not pay attention to individual differences during the teaching and learning process. As a result, learners with disabilities are left behind and disadvantaged.

## **5. Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations were made:

- Teaching and learning classroom activities should be all-inclusive and accommodative to learners with physical disabilities.
- Disability-friendly games be introduced in inclusive schools to minimize instances of exclusion.
- School compound and the structures should be accommodative to the learners living with physical disabilities.
- Prospective teachers should receive formal training on how to teach learners with special education needs.
- Workshops, Seminars, Teacher- Parents conferences should be organized to sensitize teachers, parents and the community at large on the issues concerning learners with special education needs and how they should be treated.
- The government and ministry of education should involve teachers of special needs education when formulating policies regarding inclusive education so as to benefit from their insights as implementers of these policies.
- More research needs to be conducted to increase empirical data on the experiences of learners living with physical disabilities on a large scale.

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## **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this paper.

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