

Redefining Agency: A Study of Disabled Children's Agency in the Global South and Its Implications for Research in China

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Abstract

This paper, based on the theoretical framework of childhood studies of disabled children, investigates the agency of disabled children in the Global South of the Northern Hemisphere, critically incorporating theoretical frameworks primarily developed in the Global North. Through a review and critical discourse analysis of 15 academic articles on the agency of disabled children, this study identifies how their agency is conceptualised and represented across different sociocultural and political contexts in the Global South. It was found that the agency of disabled children in the Global South is manifested as freedom, aspiration, contextual, and influenced by power relations; moreover, their agency often requires mediation, as their voices are not always trusted or understood. This research explores how these children, often viewed from a vulnerability perspective, demonstrate agency in uniquely resilient ways, challenging conventional norms and expectations. The findings reveal significant differences in the theoretical understanding of agency between countries in the Southern and Northern Hemispheres, emphasising the need to recontextualise Northern theories to accommodate the diverse realities of disabled children's lives in the Global South. Furthermore, the study discusses the implications of these insights for the theory of childhood and the agency of disabled children in China, suggesting that Chinese scholars and educational policymakers need to alter their perception of disabled children and view them as social agents. The research advocates for a nuanced understanding of institutions adapted to cultural, social, and economic diversities, which is crucial for advancing research on disabled children in China, as well as inclusive education and broader societal acceptance.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
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| AERE | American Educational Research Association |
| CS | Childhood Studies |
| CPDP | Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Disabled Persons |
| CDPF | China Disabled Persons' Federation |
| DS | Disability Study |
| CDA | Critical Discourse Analysis |
| CRPD | Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities |
| DCCS | Disabled Children's Childhood Studies |
| DSE | Disability Studies and Inclusive Education |
| LRC | Learning in Regular Classroom (Chinese policy) |
| UNICEF | United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund |
| UNCRC | United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child |

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Since the promulgation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations) in 1989, children's rights have attracted worldwide attention and academic discussion. Lots of academic discussion is centering on whether disabled children have agency and how their agency can be understood. James and Prout (1990) put forward the view of children as active participants in society in their book "The New Sociology of Childhood", which redefined children's roles and rights in society. However, questions about disabled children's agency, particularly whether they have the same agency as children without disabilities, remain complex and controversial.

Scholars from the Global North, such as Watson (2012) and Shakespeare (1996), believe that disabled children exercise their agency through struggles for their own lives. This perspective has led to policies recognising that disabled children should have the right to participate in society as well as their voices should be heard. For example, Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that disabled children should have the same rights as other children, especially the right to express themselves. Article 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states, "Every child with a disability should enjoy the best possible life in society.

Governments should remove all obstacles for disabled children to become independent and to participate actively in the community." Regardless of policy changes, the actual effect of the inclusive education environment people create for children will still be limited if it ignores the agency, thirst for knowledge, and efforts of disabled children to change their lives. Significant differences exist between the Global South and the Global North in their understanding of disabled children's agency (Kowitz, 2022; Abebe, 2019; Chataika & McKenzie, 2013), with implications for inclusive education. This study seeks to explore if and how the theoretical frameworks and knowledge systems of the Global North are equally applicable to the specific context of the Global South and whether these understandings and systems can be jointly understood in different historical and cultural contexts. Through critical discourse analysis, this study explores

scholarly understanding of disabled children's agency in Global South contexts and the connection between inclusive education and disabled children's agency, with the view of providing new perspectives and inspirations for improving inclusive education in China.

1.2 Research Background and Interest

China's education system faces unprecedented challenges (Yu et al., 2022). During the implementation of inclusive education, especially in the context of excessive competition and educational involution, many obstacles have arisen (Qu, 2019a). Chinese disabled children not only face discrimination and exclusion, but their voices are also often marginalized (Wang, 2021; Wang, 2019). To explore strategies to improve the educational and social life conditions of disabled children in China, this study seeks to derive insights from the childhood experiences of disabled children in various Global South contexts and the enablers of their agency through their social roles and childhood diversity.

As a former preschool teacher with approximately four years of experience and a volunteer at an orphanage, I encountered children with developmental delays, autism, and severe disabilities. What concerns me is that, despite China's educational policies moving towards inclusivity, allowing disabled children to attend kindergarten and receive compulsory education, teachers lack the mindset and skills to be inclusive. Very few teachers have the professional educational skills to provide appropriate and inclusive guidance, which highlights the significant shortcomings in China's teacher training. Consequently, in most cases, these children are not allowed to participate in classroom activities; instead, they are separated into different classes and play areas for fear that they might disrupt order. In such a high-pressure learning environment, disabled children rarely receive adequate help from teachers and lack educational resources, leading to their inability to perform academically and improve further. Thus, they often lack competitiveness in exams. From my observations, disabled children are frequently labeled as weak, having poor learning abilities, needing protection, and being unable to make decisions for themselves.

However, through coursework in childhood studies and children's agency theory, I began to reflect on these experiences. I realized that these children have their own thoughts and the ability to express their inner desires. They can choose what they like, where they

want to play, and with whom they want to interact. They even have their own learning abilities. Even the severely disabled children in the orphanage could express their likes and discomforts. I also realized that whether disabled children possess agency remains a controversial topic, with Global Northern and Southern scholars seeming to have different understandings of children's agency. This is why I decided to bring this discussion into my master's degree research.

Global Northern scholars, when exploring the agency of disabled children, often view them as social actors who actively participate in society and have the right to voice their opinions and be heard (Stafford, 2017). Research from the Global South also shows that while disabled children are considered to have agency, their agency is not entirely independent but is interdependent with their families and communities. Their agency can only be realized when their voices and needs are heard and responded to by the community (Grech, 2016; Meekosha, 2011; Ansell et al., 2016; Stafford, 2017). However, there is a significant lack of research on the agency of disabled children in China. This may be due to two reasons: first, as an emerging research field, the childhood studies of disabled children have not yet attracted sufficient attention from Chinese scholars; second, the concept of agency is believed to originate from Northern theory, making its application in the Chinese cultural context challenging. The rare literature discussing the agency of disabled children may suggest that disabled children in China lack or even do not possess agency (Zhu et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023).

Additionally, some literature argues that theories between the Global South and North often highlight inequalities in the global system of knowledge production (Nguyen, 2023; Grech, 2013). The argument is that many theories and international policies generated by the Global North based on its historical, cultural, political, and economic background are not always suitable for the Global South. If Northern-based theories are applied without considering the local context, it leads to continuous colonialism by the North over the South (Abebe, Dar & Lyså, 2022). Moreover, childhood cannot be homogenized; thus, Northern theories should be contextualized into different locales (Grech, 2013; Curran, 2013).

This study aims to understand how the agency of disabled children in the Global South is constructed and represented in selected journal papers, and what particular knowledge claims about disabled children and their agency are made through these constructions.

Finally, this study explores the implications of these constructions and knowledge claims for efforts to promote the agency of disabled children in China. In this process, I incorporate theoretical frameworks primarily developed in the Global North to discuss the issue of agency in the context of the Global South, and I seek to re-understand the agency of disabled children in the Chinese context. This research draws on literature from childhood studies, childhood experiences of disabled children, inclusive education, disability theoretical studies, and agency theory, with particular attention to exploring the childhood experiences of disabled children (see the work of Curran and Runswick-Cole, 2014) and theoretical frameworks on disabled children's agency.

1.3 Disabled Children's Agency

1.3.1 Who is a child?

This study adopts the UNCRC definition of a child (UNCRC, 1989), which considers an individual under 18 a child. The international community has widely recognised this definition, which reflects the global consensus on the concept of children and provides a clear age classification standard (Covell & Howe, 2022). Thus, relevant policy formulation and research work can be carried out within a unified framework (Beazley et al., 2009). By comparing the diverse experiences of individuals under 18 from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, this study aims to reveal that the childhood experience is not a single and universal stage but a phenomenon full of contradictions and complexities. This approach not only promotes awareness and protection of children's rights as an independent social group but also deepens understanding of the diversity of childhoods, including those of disabled children.

1.3.2 Terminology: Disabled Children or Children with Disabilities?

In research on disabled children, I encounter two terms: "disabled children" and "Children with disabilities". This thesis adopts a social model perspective to differentiate between these two concepts and avoid discrimination problems caused by the use of the terminology. According to Shakespeare (2006), the term "children with disabilities" is viewed as a liberal term in the medical model, while the use of "disabled children" is more consistent with the social model. The social model emphasizes that disability results from socially constructed barriers and exclusions rather than impairments or defects of the individual (Shakespeare, 2006). This thesis uses the term "disabled children" to conform to the ideas of the social model.

1.3.3 Voice, Children's Rights and Agency

In this study, the author will frequently discuss two related terms to agency: "voice" and "children's rights." These two concepts can be understood as specific manifestations of agency in different contexts. According to Prout and James (2015), children's "voice" refers to their ability to express their personal opinions, feelings, and wishes, which itself is an agency of expression. The importance of emphasising "voice" is to ensure that children are heard and respected at home, at school and in wider society. The UNCRC (1989) provides a legal and ethical framework for (disabled) children's agencies at the policy level to protect the rights of disabled children, for example, the right to have a voice, the right to participate in social activities, and the opportunity of education. This thesis contends that disabled children's agency can be demonstrated and exercised through "voice" and "rights". Whether it is through the "voice" of verbal expression or non-verbal expression, "voice" is conceptualised as the path to realising agency, which needs to be protected through rights policies. In the research field, listening to children's "voices" allows researchers to explore manifestations of children's agency and ensure that children's rights are respected in the research process. Thus, although "voice" and "rights" themselves are not entirely equivalent to the notion of agency, they provide key ways and support for understanding and practising children's agency.

1.3.4 Do (disabled) Children Have Agency?

One of the core discussions in this study is whether disabled children have agency. This term is defined as the ability of an individual to participate and act in society, have a certain degree of autonomy, and make choices (Prout & James, 1990). However, scholars have argued that understandings of agency that are limited to children's actions and individual choices are too narrow and simplistic because agency is complex, dynamic, and influenced by various social arrangements (Wyness, 2015; Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019). The extreme situations of child labor, child prostitution, and child soldiers in the Global South further affirm that children have agency no matter how complex the circumstances. However, none of these studies on Global South children mentioned disabled children nor discussed the question of whether they have agency. Many scholars from the Global North have researched the agency of disabled children and confirmed that they indeed have agency (Prout and James, 1990).

Fieldwork with disabled children showed how they resist, express, and act in challenging environments (MacArthur et al., 2007; Nind et al., 2010; Higgins et al., 2009). Olli et al. (2020) suggest that agency is a human attribute shared by all people; they adopt Mayall's (2002) perspective and argue that disabled children's agency is an interaction between individuals and others; the agency generates changes in their lives. Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2012) articulate that disabled children should be treated as active social agents and experts in their lives. Thus, their different voices deserve to be heard and studied.

Nevertheless, the approval from the Northern scholars is far from enough. Kowitz (2022) argues that international policies cannot provide enough protection to disabled children because children from the Global South and their situations are ignored. Southern disabled children's voices are still excluded away from the politics of impairment. Furthermore, the theory of disabled children's agency has been interrogated and criticized by scholars from the Global South, who believe that they do not take into account the collectivism and more complex and severe poverty and war issues in the Global South, which limit the agency of disabled children (Chataika and McKenzie, 2013; Monk et al., 2019). Some scholars even believe that if agency theory derived from the Global North is directly applied, it will destroy the interdependence and help between children and their families (Chataika and McKenzie, 2013). Thus, the scholars suggest that Southern disabled children's agency should be reconstructed and represented (Monk et al., 2019; Kowitz, 2022).

This thesis recognizes disabled children as social actors and situates them within the Global South's economic, cultural, and political contexts. Because disabled children from the Global South should be understood within their unique social environment (Meekosha & Soldatic, 2011), their agency needs to be reconstructed and rethought. By examining how disabled children in the South actively participate in and construct family and social life and how their agency is represented in research, this thesis aims to promote a more inclusive and just global perspective.

1.4 Research Purpose and Questions

This study aims to deeply understand and reconstruct the role of disabled children in society and the diversity of childhood life. To this end, this study will explore the different interpretations of the concept of "agency" in the global North, the South, and the specific context of China.

Agency theory posits that disabled children can express perspectives that are different from those of adults and that these voices deserve to be heard (James & Prout, 2015). They also have the right to make choices and decisions about their own lives (Ollie et al., 2020). In the context of the Global South, the concept of agency and the related discourses of rights, voice and participation construct disabled children differently from understandings in the Global North (Meekosha, 2008; Kowitz, 2022; Monk et al., 2023). This difference not only stems from the diversity of socio-cultural, historical backgrounds, economic and political systems but also reflects the different perspectives of the Global South and the North in viewing the social status and experiences of disabled children (Meekosha, 2008; Kowitz, 2022). This study will explore this variability and its impact on how disabled children are represented in society, especially how these representations may influence society's perceptions and attitudes toward them.

This study will also draw on knowledge and theories from the Global North and the South to promote China's development and progress in inclusive education and thus, protect the rights and interests of disabled children.

The research questions are:

1. How do the selected journal papers construct and represent disabled children's agency in the Global South?
2. What particular knowledge claims about disabled children in the Global South and their agency are made through these constructions?
3. What implications do these constructions and knowledge claims have for efforts to promote disabled children's agency in China?

1.5 Methodology

This study aims to explore how disabled children's agency in the Global South is constructed and represented in the selected journal papers. To this end, critical discourse

analysis (CDA) was selected as the main research method. This methodological choice not only helps to understand the life situations of disabled children in different cultural and social contexts but also promotes a deeper discussion about the concept and practice of agency of disabled children in the global South. CDA, which transcends the basic linguistic analysis for literature study, provides a powerful tool for analysing various discourses, including texts and spoken expressions, and how they interact with social power structures, ideologies and identity constructions (Mullet, 2018; Wodak, 2007). By uncovering the hidden social structures and power relations behind discourses, CDA enables us to better understand the power dynamics underlying agency for disabled children (Mullet, 2018; Liasidou, 2008).

1.6 Outline

In this section, the outline of this thesis is presented.

- Chapter 2: Theoretical Influences—Discusses the key theories and literature influencing the study, including the framework of Disabled children's childhood studies and the intersection of disability studies and childhood studies. The core theories about children's agency are about children's agency in the Global North and Global South and disabled children 's agency in the Global North.
- Chapter 3: Agency in Chinese Context, I will introduce how Chinese culture is, the economic and political foundation of childhood, as well as relevant policies on disabled children.
- Chapter 4: Methodology - How will I conduct Critical Discourse Analysis, data collection, methods of analysis of the data, research position, the way of guarantee the validity and reliability,
- Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion - Presents and discusses the research findings in existing literature.
- Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations—This chapter concludes the study with a summary of findings, implications for theory and practice, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Influences

2.1 Introduction

Since this thesis is based on the theoretical framework of Disabled Children's Childhood Studies (DCCS) (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014), which combines theories from Childhood Studies (CS) (James & Prout, 2015) and Disability Studies (DS), it is necessary to understand the theory of childhood and agency of disabled children within this framework. In this chapter, I will sequentially explain the theories and relevant principles of DS and CS, explore their respective limitations, and elucidate the necessity of integrating these two fields to form the DCCS theoretical framework. After establishing an understanding of DCCS, I will further elaborate on how scholars from the Global North and South study children's agency and structure theories, as well as their research on the agency of disabled children.

2.2 Disability Studies (DS)

Disability studies as a theoretical field challenge the traditional medical model that attributes the social problems of disabled people to individual impairments that need to be fixed and cured. Disability studies, based on the social model of disability, instead argue that it is the problematic social structures and ideologies that disable and set barriers to disabled people when they interact with societies (Oliver, 2013; Gabel & Connor, 2009; Goodley, 2014). The social model of DS was first proposed in the 1970s, inspired by the publication of the documentation

- Fundamental Principles of Disability (Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation [UPIAS], which declared that:

In our view, it is society which disabled physically impaired people. Disability is something that is imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society. (as cited in Gabel & Connor, 2009, p.380).

Gabel and Connor (2009) argue that the social model examines the disabling consequences of social exclusion and isolation and attempts to restructure society to enable disabled people to become more involved in all aspects of society.

Next, I will explore how Disability Studies intersect with Inclusive Education and other fields and what different perspectives it brings to address the challenges disabled people face.

2.2.1 Disability Studies and Inclusive Education (DSE)

In the field of education, Disability Studies is a highly valuable framework for identifying and resisting discrimination and exclusion in educational policies and practices. This framework aids in repairing policies and resource allocation, making inclusive practices more sustainable (Morton et al., 2023). The field of DSE originates from disability studies and aims to challenge traditional medical and psychological models of disability through the social model lens (AERA, 2023). It focuses on uncovering and deconstructing deep-seated societal inequalities, such as ableism and classism. Ableism is a form of discrimination that regards disability as a personal defect and believes that disabled people need to be "repaired" before they can integrate into normal society. This view leads to marginalization and discrimination of disabled people. Classism is a view that treats disabled people based on social class. People make distinctions and believe that people of higher social classes are superior to other classes, which leads to uneven distribution of resources and prejudice and discrimination against people of lower classes. DSE's core mission is to critically examine and confront these discriminations by expanding research horizons and employing interdisciplinary approaches to delve into the experiences of multiple marginalised groups—including disabled students and peoples of the colonised Global South (AERA, 2023). DSE emphasises the importance of education as a transformative and emancipatory process, intending to break through racism, economic crises, and environmental and ecological crises and working to build a more just and sustainable society (AERA, 2023).

In the study by Li, O'Hara-Gregan, and MacArthur (2022), DSE adopts a social model and suggests that the learning difficulties experienced by disabled children in inclusive education settings and the teaching challenges faced by educators are not due to the physical limitations of the children themselves. Instead, they arise from the restrictions imposed by societal systems and educational mechanisms designed by able-bodied or so-called "normal" individuals without considering the physical characteristics and learning needs of disabled children. DSE questions the lack of responsiveness to curriculum and learning environment differences and encourages teachers to view

disability and human diversity as culturally and socially constructed, enabling teachers to accept and value the diversity of children (Li et al., 2022).

DSE promotes viewing disability as a form of diversity in children rather than an obstacle and urges consideration of flexible adjustments in learning environments and curricula to support children's learning (Li et al., 2022). It plays a transformative role in identifying and reshaping inclusive education policies. Morton (2015) analyses the application and allocation of personalized funding for disabled students. The study shows that the application process for personalized funding requires a detailed description of a child's specific needs. If these needs are assessed as insufficient, the child may be denied admission to the school. In addition, wait times for funding approval can be extremely long, and even when funding is awarded, the funding is often insufficient to cover needs for the entire school day, resulting in schools potentially requiring parents to take their children home (Morton, 2015). This process increases the difficulty and risk for disabled students when applying for funding and participating in courses. Morton contends that this policy, as presented in the text, carries an assumption that disabled children lack capability. Drawing on DSE, Morton encourages scholars to explore similar or new transformative approaches even in less-than-ideal circumstances when developing inclusive education policies in other countries.

Li et al. (2022) and Morton (2015) provide very useful examples to illustrate how the social model in disability studies can be used to identify issues in inclusive education policies and practices. They also clarify that deficit discourses based on the medical model pose challenges in securing equal learning resources and opportunities for disabled students, leading to varying degrees of discrimination and marginalisation in different countries (Li et al., 2022; Morton, 2015).

2.2.2 Disability Studies and Intersectionality with Other Fields

As a theory, DS has undergone intense debate and matured into a powerful tool for analysing issues of disabilities with more comprehensive and synthetic research methods (Oliver, 2013). Shakespeare (2007) critiques the social model/medical model and disability/non-disability dichotomy, arguing that the medical model, as opposed to the social model, is unsubstantiated and that there is no developed systematic medical model in medicine. He sees disability as a complex interaction requiring social conventions and

natural/biological circumstances to be analysed carefully (Shakespeare, 2007). Gabel and Connor (2009) argue that DS' potential intersections with research in other areas can support social justice and challenge dominant paradigms that marginalise specific individuals within mainstream thinking. For instance, the combination of Disability Studies with critical race studies reveals the multidimensional nature of human existence, where each aspect of human identity has the potential to influence others (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). When combined with multicultural studies, scholars find that racial and disabled identities are constructed categories to distinguish oneself from other groups (Jakubowicz & Meekosha, 2002).

Although these classifications are not scientific facts, once these artificially created labels become collective, enduring historical beliefs and bring about a certain level of resources and opportunities for specific racial groups, these concepts become challenging to eliminate and tend to perpetuate lasting harm, leading to persistent issues of unjust resource distribution in society.

What is worth learning here is the intersectional nature of disability studies and its interaction with factors such as age and childhood which provides a framework for exploring how these factors jointly affect disabled children. The impact of this intersectionality further contributes to the persistence of social inequality.

2.2.3 The limitations of DS

Shakespeare (2006) criticised the British-based social model theoretical framework, emphasising that its excessive focus on social barriers ignores the personal life experiences and subjective feelings of disabled people. He emphasised that this research approach fails to give due attention to the medical conditions and physical disabilities encountered by disabled people, as well as the agency of disabled people in shaping their lives and experiences. Shakespeare (2006) also specifically pointed out that the indiscriminate application of this British-based theoretical model to the wider research field failed to take into account the special circumstances of disabled groups in different countries. Grech (2013, in Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2013) further criticised mainstream disability studies for paying little attention to contexts in the Global South, noting that the field often ignores the lived experiences of disabled children, their families, and communities in the South. Curran and Runswick-Cole (2014) also

criticised DS for focusing too much on the social barriers associated with disabled children while ignoring the agency of individual children and their role in social construction. They noted that this practice resulted in disabled children being excluded from research.

The limitations of disability studies highlight the importance of considering personal experiences and the natural link between this need to understand the lived experiences of disabled children and childhood studies, which place a particular emphasis on gaining a deeper understanding of children's lived experiences through their voices (James, 2007). Childhood studies (Hanson et al., 2008; Corsaro, 2000), is a study that focuses heavily on children's experiences as they interact with their families, communities, and schools and believe that every child has agency, which means that children, regardless of age and physical condition, are capable of making choices and actively constructing their lives and childhoods. Childhood studies compensate for the limitations of disability studies by providing a more integrated and comprehensive analysis to see how children navigate their lives.

2.3 What is Childhood Studies (CS)

Childhood Studies is another emerging interdisciplinary field developed in the 1980s. It explores the interaction between childhood and other social factors and societal issues about children (Prout & James, 2015; Woodhead, 2013). Childhood Studies challenges the traditional approach to understanding childhood dominated by cognitive and developmental psychology advocated by Piaget and Vygotsky (Prout & James, 2015; Woodhead, 2013). It views childhood as a socially constructed and dynamic phase, not a universal and static physiological stage (Prout & James, 2015). Influenced by cognitive and developmental psychology, children are often perceived as immature, incomplete individuals who develop into mature and complete states with age (Qvortrup, 2009). Consequently, children are portrayed as vulnerable and passive recipients, often ignored by society (Prout & James, 2015; Woodhead, 2013).

CS acknowledges children's autonomy and decision-making capabilities, advocating for the respect of their voices, choices, and participation in matters that impact their lives. It draws on empirical research from various countries to demonstrate that children are

active agents. For instance, Corsaro (2009) explores how children, within their peer groups, develop shared understandings, norms, and practices that contribute to constructing a distinct peer culture. The author draws attention to children's agency in actively participating in and contributing to this culture, highlighting their ability to shape their social environment. Rasmussen (2004) employs the "place" theoretical framework to examine how Danish children navigate institutionalised childhood and everyday life. The study contrasts places provided by adults for children, such as playgrounds ("places for children"), with places chosen by children themselves ("children's places"), which often go unnoticed by adults. The findings reveal that children choose places they enjoy and actively construct their daily lives and experiences within these spaces. Therefore, CS recognises their influence and agency within family dynamics and peer relationships.

CS also asserts that childhood experiences are not solely determined by physiological age. Instead, they are socially constructed, varying across countries due to historical backgrounds, cultures, religions, economic conditions, and many other factors (Montgomery, 2003). Hence, childhood is not uniform and universal; instead, childhoods show the diversity of children's childhoods in each country. Dungal (2020) explores the war childhood experienced by Colombian child soldiers; Kjærholt (2003) describes the childhood life of Norwegian children building log cabins; Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi (2016) describe diverse childhoods that transcend stereotypes, covering Zambian children's lives in poor rural families, music shaping South African children's identities, and intergenerational relationships shaping Ethiopian children's expectations. These cases illustrate how children in different countries experience unique childhoods.

The view of children as subjects with agency has been widely accepted since the work of James and Prout in 1990, marking a new starting point for childhood studies. Their study emphasizes the importance of recognising that children have agency; they are autonomous, active social actors who can make their own decisions. Under this paradigm, scholars have explored how children explain their views on things, their role and necessity in social structure, and their interaction with social life, gradually

improving children's status from a national perspective and promoting broad recognition of children's abilities.

However, some scholars have pointed out that if agency is only understood as autonomy and independence, disabled children may be misunderstood and considered to be dependent on others, fragile, and lacking autonomy (Watson & Shakespeare, 1998; David & Watson, 2000). Other professionals even claim that disabled children are unable to make decisions about their own lives (David & Watson, 2012). In addition, the paradigm of childhood studies mainly focuses on children and their agency, who express their thoughts through written or oral forms but often ignores disabled children who cannot communicate through these traditional ways. This constitutes a major problem in childhood studies when dealing with issues of disabled children (Tisdall, 2012).

Despite these challenges, CS research has contributed research by demonstrating how disabled children cope with the life challenges of disability by exerting their own agency and utilising nonverbal forms of communication (Davis, 2017). Shah (2013) noted that although macro-level perceptions and practices of disabled children have changed, close connections between these changes and their personal lives—such as family life, social relationships, and self-identity—have yet to be captured. Therefore, it has become a key task to delve deeply into the agency of disabled children and their interaction with the structures of life in practice. This kind of inquiry not only contributes to the multidimensional analysis of the agency of disabled children but also highlights their complex interactions with the environment and promotes dialogue on research and policy improvements related to disabled children in the Global North and South. It is because of these considerations that countries in the Global North and South are now placing greater emphasis on researching the rights and voices of disabled children.

2.3.1 Why are DS and CS Useful for My Study?

There is a strong connection and similarity between Disability Studies and Childhood Studies.

1. Both fields are interdisciplinary, acknowledging and emphasising the intersectionality of identity. "Disability" and "childhood" are not isolated concepts;

they are intricately linked to society, culture, and history. Childhood Studies adds the factor of age to Disability Studies, intersecting with other influences.

2. Both fields adopt and apply a social constructionist perspective. Disability Studies challenges the medical model by emphasising social factors, while Childhood Studies critically examines the socially constructed nature of childhood.
3. Disability Studies assert that all students can be educated and are capable, actively encouraging the participation of disabled students and teachers in research. Childhood Studies align with this perspective by recognising children's abilities and positive influence and viewing them as capable informants and researchers.
4. Both fields show a high level of interest in inclusive education. Disability Studies focuses on inclusive practices in various societal contexts, including education, concerning the attention given to disabled individuals. Childhood Studies explores how the education system impacts all children and describes children's experiences within family, community, and school contexts.

Given these reasons, scholars find it useful to integrate these two fields, considering their potential to bring about a more comprehensive and crossdisciplinary research approach for disabled children and inclusive education (Tisdall, 2012; Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2013). However, the integration is not a simple merging but a synthesis of CS and DS (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2013). The experiences of disabled children are determined by the interplay of disability and childhood, necessitating a comprehensive and cross-disciplinary research approach. Disability Studies extends beyond studying disability and societal factors; it also considers age-related factors and the impact of discrimination against all children on disabled children and inclusive education.

Tisdall (2012) emphasised that within the childhood research paradigm, scholars have mainly focused on children and their agency who can express their thoughts through written or oral forms, and this approach often ignores disabled children who cannot communicate through traditional means. He believes that this neglect constitutes a major challenge for childhood studies in dealing with issues of disabled children. Curran and Runswick-Cole (2013; 2014) point out that although the understanding and practice of disabled children have changed at a macro level, the links between these changes and

their personal lives - such as family life, social relationships and self-identity - remain insufficiently investigated. Therefore, a deep understanding of the agency of disabled children and how it interacts with life structures in practice has become a task considered necessary by many scholars. Such inquiry is regarded as extremely important, not only to analyse the agency of disabled children at different levels and highlight their complex interactions with their surrounding environment but also to contribute to the dialogue on research and policy reform on disabled children between countries in the global North and South.

2.3.2 What is Disabled Children's Childhood Studies?

Due to a lack of historical literature on disabled children's childhood, whether in the Global South or North, their existence is mainly documented in deficit forms. Disabled children used to be invisible in society and were not considered to have capabilities and autonomy (Davis, 2005). In both the Global South and the North, disabled children often fail to contribute adequately to their families and society and, therefore, face chronic marginalisation and discrimination as their physical disabilities affect their productivity. Their presence is often seen as a burden on families and society, resulting in disabled children being deprived of many of the resources enjoyed by normal children, and are often described in the discourse of a deficit model, arguing that their plight stems from their own disabilities.

Their childhoods are consistently portrayed in the context of personalised and medicalised life in welfare institutions and through a pitiful narrative. This portrayal simultaneously neglects the inherent strength of disabled children themselves and the experiences and concerns of their families. The emergence of disabled children's childhood studies as a novel and distinctive research framework draws inspiration from disability studies and childhood studies (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014). It goes beyond deficit-based research frameworks, places disabled children at the forefront of research, and concentrates on their experiences and those of their families in communities and schools (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014).

Curran, Liddiard, and Runswick-Cole (2018) traced the development of DCCS. Early DCCS research revealed the lives of disabled children in institutional and segregated services and began to prioritise listening to and inclusively incorporating the voices of

disabled children (Morris et al., 2003). Shakespeare (2006) continually challenges past research that focused on disabled children as defective, passive, and dependent by studying their daily encounters with services from the perspective of disabled children and criticizing the exclusion of their voices. Connors and Stalker (2010a) explored the views of disabled children on identity differences from a childhood sociology perspective.

Even though scholars have started to explore disabled children's perspectives, Wells (2017) found very limited research on disabled children within the framework of childhood studies since 1993. She argued that disabled children are positioned on the margins in this field, seemingly disrupting the principles of the new sociology of childhood that characterises children as independent, rational, and capable social actors. As a result, disabled children who do not fit these criteria are often viewed as abnormal, which results in discrimination against them (Mosleh & Gibson, 2022; Valentin & Meinert, 2009). In the Global North, disabled children are still considered to deviate from normative childhood development, perpetuating the boundaries that exclude them from the mainstream (Curran, Liddiard & Runswick-Cole, 2018). The excessive emphasis on the medical diagnosis of disabled children leads to a lack of attention to the exclusion and inequality they and their family members face in other areas (Curran et al., 2018).

The emergence of DCCS attempts to bring about change by focusing on the contributions disabled children make to their communities. This emerging paradigm goes beyond criticising existing research frameworks and is not just a simple combination of DS and CS. Instead, it involves interrogating and reshaping the assumptions and norms that dominate children's lives, allowing the various childhoods to be presented.

The research framework incorporates three guiding principles:

1. The starting point for inquiry should be on the experiences of disabled children and young people that are beyond discussion of impairment and abuse so that disabled children can step out from under the shadow of the normative expectations that have clouded their lives.
2. Disabled children's childhood studies demand an ethical research design that seeks to position the voices and experiences of disabled children at the centre of the inquiry.
3. Disabled children's childhood studies seek to trouble normalising practices in their local, historical, and global locations (Curran, Liddiard & Runswick-Cole, 2018, p.45, as cited in Curran & Runswick, 2013).

Disability and childhood studies are mainly researched in the Global North context, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014). There is minimal research from the Global South on disability studies, leading to substantial neglect of disabled children's voices and agency (Kowitz, 2022). Scholars argue that global geographical location biases the understanding of disability. Therefore, it is crucial to reconsider definitions of disability, childhood, and agency based on context, geographical location, and various factors like political, economic, historical, and cultural contexts in different countries (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2013; 2014).

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2.4 Understanding Agency in Disabled Children's Childhood Studies

2.4.1 Agency in Childhood Studies

The concept of children's agency has diverse interpretations in the literature. For instance, Ahearn (2001) and Bandura (2001) suggest that not everyone possesses agency; it is only when individuals have specific abilities, such as self-reactivity, self-reflection and cognitive capabilities, that they have and are capable of using agency. Olli et al. (2020) discuss in their literature review that UNCRC (1989) indicates children's right to have voices only when they can express themselves. Additionally, CRPD (United Nations, 2006) recommends providing appropriate feedback and consideration for children's opinions based on age and maturity. Olli et al., (2020) critique that these provisions imply that children's agency and exercise of rights are contingent upon having the ability to express themselves and a certain level of cognitive capacity, which is constrained by physical and age-related conditions. Some scholars find this perspective problematic, as it presupposes that the capability of children (including disabled children) to exhibit agency is contingent upon a certain set of abilities they

must have. This is because they hold the view that agency is a characteristic that all human beings possess and its realisation depends on interaction with others (Olli et al., 2020; Prout, 2000; James, 2009; Mayall, 2002).

Through fieldwork and interviews, studies by MacArthur et al. (2007) and Olli et al. (2020) confirmed that the ways disabled children exhibit agency are manifested in their self-identification and their strategies for countering bullying and discrimination in school. In the study by MacArthur et al. (2007), disabled children highlighted a shortage of specialised curriculum materials in schools that are tailored for various abilities and needs. They argued that more inclusive and higher-quality learning environments can only be achieved by addressing diversity in learning and providing effective support comprehensively. The act of disabled students identifying problems and suggesting solutions demonstrates their agency. Olli et al. (2020) extended the explanation of agency, positing that all children have agency, particularly those who cry to express their needs, such as hunger or thirst. Their agency is expressed and recognised through signalling their needs to the external world and their needs are met.

2.4.2 Children as Social Actors and Agents

It is necessary to know, however, that agency does not mean children can do everything they want without any social constraints, but being "capable of exercising free will, indeed as able to govern their own behaviour on the basis of rational principles" (Hammersley, 2017, p.120). Definitions of the agency of all human beings, including children, are very vague, and most of them are descriptive concepts (Valentine, 2011). In this section, I will articulate the definitions of social actors and social agents because these two terms underpin understandings of agency and are frequently used in many kinds of literature.

When agency is discussed in childhood studies, the notions of "social actors" and "social agents" are always considered. However, although different terminologies are used, they are typically seen as having the same meaning and are used confusedly. Consequently, scholars are making efforts to distinguish the two terms. In childhood studies, children are considered as social actors, which means they can construct their lives and their childhoods (James, 2009; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2000). Due to the recognition of children's agency, they are also viewed as social agents, which illustrates the evolving epistemology of scholars in the social sciences regarding agency and emphasises the

broader socio-political significance of children's own experiences (James, 2009; Mayall, 2002; Prout,2000).

Mayall (2002) distinguishes between social actors and social agents: social actors are seen as actively constructing their own lives, the lives of those around them, and the society they inhabit, making their lives worthy of study. When children interact with others and society, their influence is considered and responded to by the external environment, leading to the realisation of children's agency. On the other hand, social agent is defined by Mayall (2002) as children interacting with society, and the interaction making a difference.

Olli et al., (2020) interpretation of the distinction between social actors and social agents is that the term "children as actors" is limited to describing children's behaviour, while "children as agents" refers to describing consequences and effects. When a child's self-expression is not understood or when the external world does not accept the impact they generate, it may limit the actualisation of children's agency, but it does not eliminate the existence of agency. Children are not merely passive subjects in social structures and processes; the significance and concept of social agents lie in children engaging in activities with others. Therefore, children's roles should be considered "in the lives of those around them" and "in the society they inhabit," forming independent social relationships and cultures (James, 2009, p.41).

James (2009) interprets children's agency from a critical realist perspective, critiquing the emphasis on continuity in social structures and highlighting children's transformative characteristics in societal life. Through various social relations, children intentionally or unintentionally bring about societal changes, such as cultural change. Corsaro (2009), in American and Italian kindergartens, observes children actively generating and transforming adult culture then they form their own peer culture. She calls this process "interpretive reproduction" (p.489), in which children's agency involves constant understanding and interpretation of the world, as well as resolution and representation of misunderstandings, ambiguities and difficulties from adult's culture.

In summary, children's agency and role of social actors are not only the theoretical foundation of Global North studies but also constitute the core theoretical framework of international DCCS. They are cited in many literature and contribute to the different

interpretations of disabled children's agency in the Global South (Jenkin et al.,2017; Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Kowitz, 2022; Chataika & McKenzie, 2013). However, childhood research also adheres to the principles of social constructionism and points out the significant social, cultural, political, and economic differences between the Global South and the North, which requires us to apply these theories to specific local practices to achieve more refined and contextual understanding. This need has inspired researchers and policy-makers to reflect on how to understand and support children's roles as social actors and change-makers in the specific countries of the Global South. The following sections illustrate how the studies from different contexts within the Global South present diverse forms of agency and reveal its diversity and complexity. They underscore the diversity of children's agency, emphasising that it cannot be understood as a monolithic concept but rather exists along a continuum influenced by a multitude of factors, including economic status, social norms ranging from collectivism to individualism, and the state of peace or conflict within a society.

2.4.3 Thin and Thick Agency

Children's agency is widely recognised as being active participation in society. Children are not just passive recipients but can make impactful decisions. Regarding the issue of Tanzanian child labor in rural households, Klocker (2007) analysed deeply the complexity of children's agency and proposed the concepts of "thin" and "thick" agency. "Thin" agency refers to decision-making and daily actions within a constrained environment with limited choices, whereas "thick" agency refers to the freedom within a broader range of choices. The "thin" or "thick" attribution of individual agency, which varies over time, space, and other factors, is crucial to understanding children's societal role (Klocker, 2007). Especially in Tanzania, girls are severely exploited and discriminated against due to age, gender, poverty and various socio-cultural factors. Having “thin” agency does not mean they cannot or will not exert influence despite constraints. Instead, it highlights their deliberate choice of housework as a means of survival and a way to improve their living conditions (Klocker, 2007). This perspective avoids a single narrative that sees children solely as victims or vulnerable individuals.

Abebe (2019) further explores how children with the "thick" agency make decisions that shape their lives, such as choosing marriage partners. This concept involves choices and

opportunities regarding materials, wealth, social networks or support systems to provide children with better living conditions. Furthermore, factors such as social structure, the environment, and interpersonal relationships influencing children's agency limit or expand the range of decisions available. This perspective shifts the narrative from viewing children as victims or vulnerable to the group of active participants and resilience in challenging situations.

2.4.4 Agency as a Continuum

Robson et al. (2007) conceptualize agency as a continuum that depends on their actions, the people around them, and their location (Robson et al., 2007). While the agency may be limited in certain areas, it can exert influence on others. Moreover, individuals are observed to navigate this continuum over time, adapting their positions based on their decisions. Hence, it implies a child may experience agency variations across different aspects of their lives. Robson et al., (2007) classify an individual's agency into distinct levels, ranging from nearly no agency to limited agency, secret agency, and public agency.

2.4.5 Interdependent Agency

It is generally accepted that children in the North tend to display characteristics of independence and autonomy, which is reflected in having their own opinions and being able to make choices about their own opinions. This phenomenon is closely related to the individualistic values advocated by the social and cultural background in which they live. However, the agency of African children is contrary to exercising independent agency. Due to poverty, they often bear family responsibilities from a young age, contributing to the family and societal economy (Abebe, 2019). In Africa's context, people cannot be viewed as having agency if young man or woman do not raise their siblings, support their families, or give birth to children. Thus, in this sense, agency is a capacity to sustain interconnected livelihoods and meet familial obligations over an extended period, which is more than a simple display of proficiency (Abebe, 2019). It represents a collective strategy for coexistence, ensuring the ongoing continuity of social reproduction (Abebe, 2019). In such a context, children's agency is determined by their roles and responsibilities within the community. Families and communities also depend on the contributions of children. Thus, Abebe (2019) defines it as an interdependent agency.

2.4.6 Vulnerability as Agency

Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2013) provide crucial insights into how vulnerable children utilize vulnerability as their agency under extreme circumstances. They investigate the children in Accra who, due to poverty and domestic violence, seek refuge on the streets for resources. Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2013) find that vulnerability motivates children's agency, or in other words, vulnerability is a form of agency. They argue that street children in extreme environments spontaneously take action to their situation and make choices to exercise their agency, even though they may not anticipate that the dangers of the streets would place them in another crisis. Without their family's and relatives' support, their vulnerability in such extreme conditions becomes a source of power supporting their decision to leave their homes.

This perspective provides me with new insight and also provides the foundation for my research, prompting an exploration of how children experience "nonnormative" childhoods and how their agency is always misunderstood as weak or unable to support them in making choices effectively. Additionally, this perspective also raises another question about the factors enabling some children to exercise their vulnerability as the agency, thereby disrupting the standards of a normative childhood.

2.4.7 Summary

In examining the multifaceted concept of agency among children, this analysis draws from various studies to affirm that agency is an intrinsic characteristic of all children, notwithstanding the inherent vulnerabilities associated with childhood. This inherent vulnerability, a biological reality, forms the bedrock upon which children's agency is constructed, suggesting a complex interplay between vulnerability and agency. The concept of agency, however, is not uniform; it is profoundly shaped by national history, culture, and economic conditions and is seen through the prism of social constructionism. This results in a spectrum of agency, from minimal to full, that is both fluid and contextdependent, manifesting differently across time, spaces, and circumstances. This nuanced understanding of agency is crucial when considering disabled children, whose experiences introduce additional layers of complexity due to societal and physical barriers they encounter.

By acknowledging the diverse conceptualisations of agency across various contexts in the Global South, this discourse not only deepens our appreciation of children's roles as social agents but also illuminates the significant influence that contextual differences exert on how agency is articulated and recognised. This insight is paramount for grasping the varied realities faced by children, especially those in less examined scenarios. It highlights the importance of understanding how the agency of disabled children is shaped and constrained by their sociocultural and historical contexts, economic conditions, and other factors. Such a perspective enriches our understanding of agency and underscores the need for research that explores the agency of disabled children, illustrating how their unique experiences contribute to the broader knowledge of agency in childhood.

2.5 Voice and Agency

The voices of children allow their agency to be captured. 'Voice' and 'agency' are not the same. 'Voice' focuses on children expressing their opinions and signals that their perspectives deserve to be considered (Houghton et al., 2017). While agency is contained in children's voices, children's voices with their agency influence this world. However, children's voices may be influenced by adult researchers' misunderstanding and may be constrained by adults. Thus, voices do not equal agency (Houghton et al., 2017). Historically, children have been a silenced group, and thus, few people fully understand how children perceive the world (James & Prout, 1990; Christensen & James, 2008). When children express their needs or opinions on matters that concern them agency, adults often overlook them (James & Prout, 1990; Christensen & James, 2008). Childhood research aims to access children's voices, allowing their once-silent voices to be heard worldwide. This, in turn, enhances our understanding of childhood and provides insight into the world from children's perspective (James & Prout, 1990; Christensen & James, 2008).

Childhood studies scholars have argued that children have unique and compelling perspectives that are different from those of adults. Thus, "giving children a voice is not just about letting children speak, but about exploring the unique contribution that children's perspectives can make to our understanding and theorising of the social world" (James, 2007, p. 261). It also allows children to become an important basis for developing truly child-centred policies (Winkworth & McArthur, 2006). Additionally,

because childhood study views childhood as socially constructed, children's voices can vary due to social, historical, cultural, and economic development and individual experiences (Christensen & James, 2008). Even when addressing the same issue, children's viewpoints differ.

Woodhead (2003) conducted research on child labour practices influenced by the UNCRC's stance, which generally categorises child labour as detrimental to a proper childhood. However, given the diverse conditions across countries, employment can be essential for some children. Therefore, his study focuses on understanding child labour from the children's own perspectives. He found that contrary to common beliefs, work can play a positive role in the lives of these children, highlighting the importance of context and the children's viewpoints in assessing the impact of labour on childhood.

However, scholars argue that the term "voice" can be problematic. While "voice" represents children's rights and the UNCRC states that "children can participate by sharing their opinions and experiences", those considered incapable of expressing themselves are deemed as unable to exercise their participation and speech rights. For instance, in disability studies, many children cannot provide spoken information, and researchers sometimes struggle to understand what some disabled children are trying to express. Due to the difficulties of understanding disabled children's voices, their childhoods are always ignored, and they are often misunderstood. Yet, it is the voices of these invisible and inaudible groups that provide us with a new perspective on the world. In DCCS, Curran and Runswick-Cole (2013) and Grech (2013) emphasised the importance of disabled children as active social agents, arguing that their voices and lived experiences cannot be ignored because these factors directly shape their disabilities experiences and childhood. This thesis contends that understanding the voices and agency of disabled children is critical. The lives and experiences of disabled children in the Global South allow researchers to explore how they construct their lives through agency and hear their voices.

2.6 Agency and Structure in Childhood Studies

Childhood studies scholars James (2009) and Qvortrup (2009) adhere to Giddens' theory of agency and structure. They believe that researching childhood requires grasping both the subjective agency of individuals and social structures because these terms are inseparable, much like the two sides of a coin (Qvortrup, 2009). The previous section recognised that children's agency propels them to react and interact with the external world. This section focuses on structures and how the relationship between agency and structure plays out in childhood.

Giddens (1979) views social structure as patterns external to individual practices, consisting of rules and resources. It can be understood as institutions constraining the agency of individuals while simultaneously being the premise and condition for action to take place. The agency of social actors maintains and changes social structures. Sewell (1992) defines social structure as cultural schemas and social resources. Cultural schemas encompass formal and informal behaviour regulations, including thought patterns, conventions, speech habits, gestures, etc.; social resources refer to the capacity to obtain, maintain, or generate rights within human and non-human social relationships. Sewell (1992) thus sees the relationship between agency and structure as constraining and enabling, mutually limiting, and serving as prerequisites for action and change. Therefore, the balance between structural power and human agency is a constant concern, as societal change results from the interaction between structural conditions and conscious human intervention. Giddens (1979, p.69) argues that "every act which contributes to the reproduction of a structure is also an act of production and as such may initiate change by altering the structure at the same time as it reproduces it." Therefore, the restructuring of social structure allows individuals to use their agency.

Building on Giddens' theory, James (2009) further affirms that children have agency. He illustrates this with the example of a 5-year-old boy with leukaemia actively constructing and maintaining social order in a hospital ward, demonstrating that even such a vulnerable individual is capable of meaningfully engaging with the people and things in his family and the hospital. Therefore, children are capable social actors. James (2009) argues that the agency and structure dynamics give children the power to bring

about change, possessing the ability to influence their lives and the conditions of any social structure.

Qvortrup (2009) views childhood, adulthood, and old age as fundamental components of a population. Therefore, childhood, as an eternal component, is a stable structure that cannot be denied its influence on the overall structure of society and the interactions between every component. It is necessary to analyse childhood and its inherent political, economic, cultural, and historical "parameters" (Qvortrup, 2009). Scholars need to explore how children actively construct their childhood within the social structure of childhood and how their subjective agency is influenced by specific social conditions (Qvortrup, 2009; James, 2009; Prout, 2000).

Although current childhood studies scholars generally acknowledge that children possess agency (Qvortrup, 2009; James, 2009; Prout, 2000) and continuously explore it through their voices and actions, the primary concern is that agency might become a taken-for-granted concept and be misunderstood as children's responsibility and duty to society (James, 2009). Since each social environment is different, and external social structures affect children and childhood differently, the degree of social constraints and oppression also affects the use of children's subjective agency. The question of how much real agency and capacity children have to bring about change arises and what causes the invisibility or weakness of children's agency (Qvortrup, 2009). Childhood studies scholars argue that research must aim to make children's agency visible and analyse how to change social structures to enable children to exercise their agency (Prout, 2000; Lange & Mierendorff, 2009).

Nevertheless, it remains to be explored whether children's agency theory applies to all children globally, especially whether disabled children also enjoy the same degree of agency. Prout and James (2015)'s definition of agency - such as autonomy and decision-making capacity – means that in many cases, the choices of disabled children are replaced by adult decision-making, and they are also more dependent on their families. In addition, when analysing the representation of agencies for disabled children, some studies differ in understanding from the original theories and ignore the application of intersectional methods in disability studies.

2.7 Disabled Children's Agency

When discussing children's agency, traditional research is often reduced to a binary opposition, believing that children either fully possess agency or completely lack it. However, research in the Global South reveals more nuanced and diverse manifestations of children's agency.

When exploring the concept of agency in disabled children, scholarly discussions often implicitly classify these individuals based on their cognitive and communicative capacities. Disabled children who can comprehend and articulate their thoughts tend to have their agency readily acknowledged. Conversely, for those lacking these abilities, the acknowledgement of their agency raises debate. Although Davis and Watson (2000) did not discuss the term agency, the issue of disabled children's rights is not always considered. They highlight how disabled children frequently find themselves excluded from rights considerations when perceived to lack cognitive and expressive skills and their viewpoints are dismissed under the pretext of safety concerns. In educational environments, for instance, the challenge of eliciting anticipated responses from disabled students leads to a reluctance to involve them in decision-making, thereby intensifying stigmatisation (Davis & Watson, 2000).

Olli et al. (2020, 2021) argue that disabled individuals should be acknowledged as agents irrespective of their expressive capabilities. They underscore that manifestations of agency are contingent upon adult-child interactions, necessitating adult attentiveness and responsiveness to children's cues. "Adults' competence in listening to children's nonverbal communication and their ability to 'speak the same language' with the child is essential for realising the children's agency (Olli et al., 2021, p. 273). This insight underscores the significance of adult responses and identifies enabling and obstructive elements in realising agency.

In the North, disabled children are considered to be individuals with rights as well as independence and decision-making abilities. In contrast, scholars in the South interpret children's agency and rights differently. In the South, disabled children and their families often face the long-term effects of poverty, and in some cases, it is precisely because of poverty that disabled children become integral members of the family (Grech, 2013).

Therefore, their agency is formed in the interaction and dependence between children, family and society (Grech, 2013).

Kowitz (2022) re-examines the agency of disabled children from a decolonial perspective. He does not draw direct conclusions about whether they have agency but points out how colonialism has marginalised this group, causing their voices to be ignored or misunderstood. Disabled children suffer double marginalisation due to their disabilities and the failure of socio-political structures to fully recognise or incorporate their agency (Kowitz, 2022). By employing the concept of "subaltern," he criticises UNCRC for failing to provide adequate protection for southern disabled children. He highlights the need to reunderstand the term agency in the South, as well as disabled children's personalities and abilities, through a broader lens.

Chataika and McKenzie (2013), based on the African Ubuntu culture, which emphasises the above-mentioned interdependence, believe that disabled children lack agency and that it is inappropriate to apply agency theory to the diverse disability situations in Africa. They argue that insisting on agency theory in the African context only serves to undermine families' care responsibilities for disabled children. With extremely limited resources, the state is unable to provide adequate support for disabled children, and families become the only way to meet the immediate needs of disabled children (Chataika & McKenzie, 2013).

In summary, a review of the literature shows scholars calling for in-depth discussions of childhood and agency theory within the context of the South. It also provides theoretical support for further exploring agency for disabled children in the Global South. At the same time, Prout (2016) pointed out that although many scholars have confirmed children's agency through empirical research, their agency has not yet been fully and rigorously theorised. James (2011) contends that as the view of children and social mechanisms further improve, the understanding of children as social agents will also change.

2.7.1 Theorisation of Chinese children's agency

Having explored theories of agency for disabled children by scholars from the Global North and the South, this section turns to how Chinese disabled children's agencies are currently understood from the perspective of Chinese scholars. Two dominant theoretical perspectives influenced scholars' understanding of Chinese children's agency. One conceptualisation of Chinese children's agency draws on the theoretical foundation in psychology, while the other is based on the paradigm of childhood studies. Regardless of the theorisations Chinese scholars draw on, disabled children's discussion can rarely be found.

Agency theory based on Bandura and Vygotsky's psychology

First, based on the psychological theories of Vygotsky and Bandura, agency theory helps scholars explore how individuals shape their behaviors and attitudes in educational environments through various social and cultural factors. According to Li's (2006) study based on Bandura's self-efficacy theory, children's motivation to learn results from the interaction of personal agency, external factors, and personal beliefs. Therefore, Li (2006) considers children's agency as a similar concept to individual motivation. In a society emphasising collectivism, socialist values, and Confucian culture (see Chapter 3), Chinese children seemed to have internalised these sociocultural factors into their agency to learn through self-reflection, self-regulation, and self-control (Li, 2006). The process of integrating social culture and personal motivations leads children to learn to find a balance between social norms and personal pursuits and to cope with challenges in learning and life more effectively, thus enhancing their sense of self-efficacy. Thus, from a psychological perspective, individual agency is acquired in relation to social norms and in the interaction process with society. Ma et al. (2022) also used the agency theory in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, play and creativity theories to study how to increase students' enjoyment of acquiring knowledge by constructing rules in gamebased science activities while improving children's initiative, rules awareness and intellectual curiosity. Ma et al. (2022) consider that children's agency is the sense of responsibility and belonging gradually developed through interaction with the activity environment.

The Childhood Studies Paradigm and Children's Agency

The paradigm of childhood studies views children as active participants in sociocultural structures and emphasises the sociocultural construction of children's agency. In China, this understanding favours the development of children with the political agency, moral agency, and self-recovery needed to adapt to and serve society. In other words, the formation of children's agency is not an intrinsic process of the individual but is strongly influenced by a combination of the family, the education system and social policies.

Tesar et al. (2019), drawing on the research paradigm of Prout and James (2015), argued that the agency children possess is the ability to actively participate in constructing and determining their own lives while influencing others and society. According to the authors, Chinese children's agency can be understood in how they act, influence, challenge, and question the social order of their times or actively construct ideologies. By analysing picture books from different periods, Tesar et al. (2019) found that children's agency is constructed differently in different social environments, political systems, and economic conditions. For example, in the Confucian era, children were expected to have moral agency, whereas after 1919, when they entered the new political era, children were expected to have the power to innovate and change, and in the Maoist era, children's agency was interpreted as political (Tesar et al., 2019).

Yang et al. (2023) adopt the CS perspective of James and Prout (2015), viewing children with agency who can act consciously, speak on their own behalf, actively reflect on the social world, and shape their own and other people's lives. By studying the strategies used by poor children in Chinese cities to cope with life difficulties - including positive adaptation, self-improvement to change the environment, self-sacrifice and desperate choices - they found that these children did not adopt negative strategies entirely but adopted positive methods to cope with life difficulties. However, due to the effects of poverty, children's subjectivity may be diminished and restricted, which limits their ability to exercise autonomy. Although the study is based on James and Prout's (2015) theory, it has been criticized for ignoring the influence of the historical and cultural backgrounds of different countries. In developing countries, children's agency is often constructed within the interaction of collectivist societies and families, and children are expected to actively participate in economic production and social life (Yang et al.,

2023). Society's expectations of children also affect their agency: some children can actively interact with the real environment, adjust and develop coping strategies that best suit them, while others realize that they cannot meet social expectations and therefore lower their expectations, give up hobbies and dreams, and adopt a negative attitude towards life (Yang et al., 2023).

Overall, there is a relative paucity of research on the agency of Chinese disabled children, with the only study, Wang (2021), recognizing disabled children as a group in society with the capacity for active participation. This suggests that the voices and experiences of disabled children need to be further explored and valued to promote a more inclusive and equal society.

2.8 Summary

This chapter offers an in-depth exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of DCCS, merging insights from disability studies and childhood studies. DS, via its social model, underscores that an individual's disability stems not from personal defects but from external social barriers. CS advocates for viewing children as active actors and social agents in their lives, capable of expressing unique perspectives and actively shaping their lives and childhoods. Furthermore, childhoods are acknowledged as a social construct that varies according to different social factors, resulting in diverse childhood experiences based on these variables. Intersectional research across disability studies, education, and childhood reveals the complex challenges faced by disabled children, including multiple labels and extensive exclusions, enriching our understanding of their complex living conditions. Consequently, I emphasise the necessity of integrating CS with DS, highlighting that DS lacks a deep exploration of personal life experiences and the interpretation of lives from children's perspectives, while CS often overlooks the capabilities and agency of disabled children, necessitating a reassessment of their agency.

The discussion then shifts to various interpretations and representations of children's agency by scholars from the Global South and North. Children's agency is treated as being social actors and agents, where children are seen as active participants in their lives and childhood, capable of making decisions and influencing social interactions; The concepts of "thin and thick agency" illustrate that children's agency is contingent on

their environment, where restrictive settings limit their decision-making freedom, whereas supportive environments enable them to be more proactive; Agency is considered a continuum, influenced dynamically by environmental and various social factors;

Interdependent agency arises when, due to insufficient governmental support, family members become the sole support system, creating an interdependent dynamic that shapes the family's social structure; Children's vulnerability is also perceived as a form of agency that can foster self-protection and the search for suitable living conditions. Lastly, the relationship between voice and agency is examined, stressing that voicing personal opinions is a vital avenue for realizing agency. By expressing themselves, individuals not only articulate their needs and desires but also engage in the decision-making process, thereby amplifying their social and personal impact.

Moreover, the research critiques existing children agency theories for predominantly reflecting the circumstances of able-bodied children and neglecting the unique needs and abilities of disabled children. It also points out the disparities in childhood experiences between the Global South and North, noting the significant oversight of disabled children in the Global South and the dominance of Global North perspectives in current agency and childhood theories. This calls for enhanced dialogue and research collaboration between the Global South and North to broaden the focus on disabled children in the South. The chapter concludes by discussing the agency of Chinese disabled children, the insights from Global South research on disabled children's agency, and perspectives on children's agency from Chinese scholars. By outlining the research paradigm and agency theories, this chapter sets the theoretical stage for a deeper discussion in the next chapter on the Chinese social, political, and economic contexts surrounding disabled children.

Chapter 3 Chinese Context for Disabled Children's Agency

3.1 Introduction

Because (disabled) children's childhood and agency are socially constructed, they are interpreted and practised differently in different contexts. The literature shows that there are widespread disputes between countries in the Global South and the North over whether children should be allowed to work and when it is considered illegal child labour (Abebe, 2013; Abebe et al., 2022). This has not only led to divergent understandings of children's agency and rights (Abebe et al., 2022) but also different views on whether disabled children have agency (Kowitz, 2022). Social constructionism guides us to think about these issues in different contexts. This chapter explores the manifestations of children's agency and the rights of disabled children in the Global South, especially China.

3.1.1 The Sociopolitical Contexts of the Global South

Childhood research shows that children's agency is closely linked to the rights enshrined in international policies. When discussing the concept of children's agency, James and Prout (1990) pointed out that children's agency is not only an inherent attribute of the individual but also the result of the interaction between children and the surrounding life and social structure. This not only covers the impact of society on children, but also how children participate in the world, participate better, express their understanding of the world, and gain knowledge and interact with the world through education. To ensure the exercise and recognition of children's agency, the social structure must be equipped with appropriate support mechanisms.

Various rights are established for children in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) - the right to survival, the right to development, the right to protection and the right to participate – all of which are intended to ensure the safe survival of children, to tap and promote children's potential and ensure that children have the right to speak and participate in social activities. In other words, these rights are intended to ensure that children can effectively exercise their agency.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) further strengthens this framework. The CRPD (2006) clearly stipulates that

disabled people, including disabled children, enjoy all basic human rights and freedoms. This includes placing the child's best interests as the primary consideration in all decisions involving disabled children and giving disabled children the right to fully express their views, thereby ensuring that disabled children are also able to exercise their agency (CRPD, 2006). Although the UNCRC (1989) and UNCRPD (2006) provide a policy framework for protecting children's rights, Kowitz (2022) points out that ignoring the unique sociopolitical context of the lived experiences of disabled children, as well as the specific circumstances of countries in the Global South, may disable children and all children being inevitably neglected by agencies.

Singal and Muthukrishna (2014) highlighted the uneven distribution of global resources and how power differentials between the Global North and the Global South exacerbate poverty in the Global South. In this context, the lives of disabled people are often portrayed as victims abandoned by the world, seen as fragile and worthy of sympathy.

Yang et al. (2023) expressed concerns about James and Prout's Northernbased conceptualisation of children as active agents with the ability to make decisions. They contend that this conceptualisation may lead to the wrong conclusion that children in the Global South lack agency due to poverty (Grech, 2009; Kowitz, 2022; Yang et al., 2023).

In summary, scholars believe that Northern-based descriptions of disabled children around the world are too singular and homogeneous and highlight the need to get rid of Global North stereotypes. This requires rethinking disability according to the context and geographical location of the Global South as well as children's positions and roles in families and societies and how they find their way to survive in such an environment (Singal & Muthukrishna, 2014; Kowitz, 2022; Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2013).

3.1.2 The Chinese Policy Context

According to the official website of the China Disabled Persons' Federation (CRPD, 2021), since the 17th meeting of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in 1990, China has formulated the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Disabled Persons" (CPDP). This law aims to safeguard the legal rights

of disabled people, promote the development of causes for disabled people, and ensure that disabled people can equally participate in social life and enjoy social material and cultural achievements (CDPF, 2021). Despite these legal provisions, China is still considered to be deficient in the implementation of laws, resulting in the government failing to protect disabled people, especially disabled children (Shang & Fisher, 2015). It was not until 2005 and 2006 that the issue of disabled children became a priority issue at home and abroad (Shang & Fisher, 2015), and the new version of CPDP was revised in 2008, which provided more details of the protection strategies for disabled people. (CDPF, 2021).

Chinese scholars have paid attention to China's efforts in caring for and protecting disabled children, ensuring their economic security, and increasing social participation. Although China has made some progress at the policy and implementation levels, there are still insufficient policies and unsatisfactory improvements (Shang & Fisher, 2015). Many families of disabled children are in poverty, with disabled children having insufficient protection in terms of medical care and education (Yang et al., 2023). Disabled children in China also experience discrimination, bullying, and exclusion (Shang et al., 2011; Wang & Florian, 2019). These problems point to shortcomings at the policy and implementation levels.

3.2 Chinese Sociocultural and Sociopolitical Context on Disabled Children's Agency

One of the key issues this thesis aims to explore is the implications of DCCS and agency theory for constructing a theory of agency for Chinese children. In addition, this article further examines the implications of these findings for inclusive education policy in China. Recognising that the construction of knowledge requires consideration of the joint effects of local factors such as history, culture, economics, policy, and education, these factors will be analysed and discussed in detail in this chapter.

3.2.1 Confucianism

Chinese history and culture are deeply influenced by Confucianism, which is highlighted in three books discussing Chinese children's childhood (Kinney, 1995; Saari, 2020; Hsiung, 2005). Confucianism emphasizes maintaining order and achieving social harmony through cultivating and observing "etiquette," which requires people's

obedience from subjects to the king, filial piety from children to elders, and humility in dealing with brothers, sisters, and friends. Therefore, from ancient times to the present, Confucian culture has guided children's childhood education to take obedience and filial piety as the main principles and goals (Kinney, 1995; Saari, 2020; Hsiung, 2005). They must obey their parents at home and their teachers in school and follow social systems in society to serve the social hierarchy (Hong & Howes, 2014). From a Confucian perspective, this is essential for maintaining social stability and harmony (Xu et al., 2018).

In China, social hierarchical order has traditionally been based on age, family seniority, and a social level based on an individual's control of social wealth and power (Bian, 2002). In ancient times, social status was often determined by the social position of the family (Kinney, 1995), while in modern times, it relies more on individual abilities - in other words, people with more professional abilities are more likely to obtain more wealth, resources and higher social status (Bian, 2002). However, this social hierarchy based on ability is very difficult for disabled children, both in the past and now. Since disabled people are usually assumed to be unable to make the same contribution to society's production and labour because of their disabilities, they are often placed at the bottom of society and can only access the least resources (Zheng et al., 2016). Additionally, traditional beliefs in ancient Chinese culture, influenced by feudal and superstitious ideologies, often attribute disabilities to punishment from heaven or the result of ancestral sins, viewing them as ominous signs. These outdated perceptions contribute to persistent discrimination against disabled individuals (Zheng et al., 2016).

The concept of family upbringing in Chinese Confucianism emphasizes respect for parental authority and does not allow children to challenge their parents. To enforce adherence to family rules, corporal punishment is commonly employed. In disadvantaged families, instances of corporal punishment and domestic violence are even more frequent. Yang et al. (2023) describe this approach to family parenting as "a rigid manifestation of generational order consistent with Confucianism," which constrains the ability of children to exercise their agency (p. 382).

For disabled children, the social hierarchical order stressed in Confucian culture, combined with the feudal belief that views disability as unlucky, greatly limits their

agency. Substantial social prejudice and discrimination further restricts the opportunities for disabled children to participate in education, social activities, and broader societal engagements.

3.2.2 Socialist Collectivism

Confucianism is also consistent with China's socialist system and collectivist spirit (Qu, 2021b). Collectivism is a major feature of Chinese culture, emphasising that individuals should be collective-centered and that the individual and the collective share weal and woe. However, this group-centered thinking is not friendly to disabled children.

Yang et al. (2023) noted that under socialist systems, children in developing countries are often viewed as members and resources of the family or clan. Consequently, the primary goal of educating children is to prepare them to participate in collective economic production and life entirely, fulfilling roles deemed appropriate by society for specific age groups. While this form of collectivism and socialism contributes to social harmony and stability to some extent, it may also lead to the sacrifice of children's agency, particularly that of disabled children. This occurs by suppressing their personal potential, needs, and interests to meet broader social objectives, including self-expression. Therefore, in such a sociocultural context, the childhood of Chinese children is different from the standardized model of personal development through play and learning, resulting in their agency being significantly thinner (Yang et al., 2023).

Additionally, all Chinese children must abide by the policies set by society, and their birth and growth are also given social responsibilities. This is particularly evident in China's population control policy, the one-child policy. In the 1970s, China implemented the "one-child policy" in response to the challenge of rapid population growth (Li, 1995). Under this policy, families can only have a second child if the first child dies or becomes disabled. In other words, disabled children are not viewed as full human beings. To a certain extent, this reflected the social discrimination against disabled children at the time (Shettles et al., 2012).

3.2.3 Disabled Children's Voices and Participation

There is a large literature gap in current research on the voices of disabled children in China, indicating that this area has not yet received the attention it deserves. Among the few existing studies, Qu's (2019a) study sheds light on the challenges disabled students face in regular schools. Teachers often labeled students who exhibited challenging behaviours as “naughty,” “bad,” and “in need of discipline.” These students often end up being forced to leave regular schools as teachers lack appropriate training and guidance methods to support these students. In addition, through interviews with parents, Qu's (2019a) study found that disabled children encounter difficulties in expressing themselves and are easily misunderstood and abused. This highlights the weak voice of disabled children in the education system and the lack of adult understanding of the voices of disabled children.

Shi et al. (2023) also believe that, based on Chinese Confucianism and Collectivist ideologies, discrimination against disabled children results in their parents denying their participation in family and social activities. Wang's (2021) study found a similar situation, noting that teachers rarely allow disabled students to participate in major events or vote, further confirming that the voices of disabled children are generally ignored. The voices and perspectives of disabled students are the key to understanding and recognizing children's agency. However, in China's educational practice, the self-expression ability and agency of disabled children are severely restricted.

3.2.4 Economic Development on Disabled Children's Agency

Economic development is also affecting disabled children's agency. The reform and opening up policy implemented in 1978 introduced market mechanisms and opened up exchanges and cooperation between the domestic market and the outside world. Before this, China's economic development was relatively backward, and insufficient educational resources resulted in limited educational opportunities for children (Guo et al., 2022). Reform and opening up prompted China to focus on economic development in the late 1980s. Economic growth provided more resources for education. The reform of central institutions aimed at decentralizing power, giving schools greater autonomy, and providing free and compulsory education for all children. The right to education was

guaranteed for children who were previously deprived of educational opportunities (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012).

Scholars believe that reform and opening up introduced Western ideas, among which neoliberalism has affected China's economic marketization and capitalization (Hui, 2003; Chu & So, 2010), as well as education system (Qu, 2019b; Mu et al., 2020). Neoliberalism emphasizes the importance of markets and the minimization of government intervention. Under the influence of neoliberalism, education in China has gradually become market-oriented (Kipnis, 2007). Kipnis (2007) discusses how neoliberalism affects China through quality education policies that encourage students to develop into individuals who can compete in the global market. The quality of education is improved through competition, and schools measure student competitiveness through performance assessments and standardized tests (Qu, 2019a). However, neoliberalism has exacerbated inequalities in resource distribution and structural barriers in the implementation of inclusive education related to disabled children (Qu, 2019b; Mu et al., 2020), thus limiting their participation and the exercise of their agency, which will be discussed in the next section (Wang, 2021).

To sum up, China's economic development and accompanying neoliberal policies have, on the one hand, provided more educational resources for disabled children, thereby enhancing their right to education; on the other hand, due to the competition mechanism introduced by neoliberalism, it also causes disabled children to be excluded and ignored in education and social participation, making it impossible for disabled children to exercise agency.

With an understanding of such contextual factors - the impact of history and culture, social hierarchies and structures, and the political system on children, especially disabled children, in Chinese society - I will explore how children's agency is understood and constructed under these conditions. This discussion will reveal how Chinese society interprets children's agency within specific cultural and political contexts, as well as its perceptions of children's rights to self-expression, decision-making abilities, social participation, and related practices.

In the following chapter, I will elaborate in greater detail on how China's inclusive education policies and their implementation affect the construction of agency for disabled children.

3.3 Chinese Education for Disabled Children

Kinney (2005) pointed out that in ancient China, children were seen as individuals full of potential. Confucius also advocated that disabled people should be treated kindly and emphasised providing education for all without class discriminations (有教无类, *you jiao wu lei*) (Qu, 2022), indicating that all people, including disabled people, should have the right to education. However, in historical practice, inequality of educational opportunities has always existed (Qu, 2022). Traditionally, due to the scarcity of educational resources, only children of the royal family and nobles could receive education (Xu et al., 2018). This situation has continued into modern times and is reflected in the barriers disabled children face in accessing education and employment opportunities. For two thousand years, China has not established educational institutions for disabled children (Deng, Poon-Mcbrayer & Farnsworth, 2001). It was not until the 1980s that China began to experiment with allowing disabled children to study together with regular classes in rural areas (Fei, 2007). In 1994, China signed the Salamanca Declaration, marking its international commitment to inclusive education, thereby accelerating the implementation and development of the Learning in Regular Classroom (LRC) policy, which allows disabled children to learn in regular schools (Jia & Santi, 2020).

In the almost four decades since the implementation of the LRC policy, relevant social actors and policymakers have made great efforts to address disabled children's educational issues. For example, the LRC policy was officially implemented in 1994 (Qu, 2019a). The "Special Education Improvement Plan (2014-2016)" (MoE, 2014) and the 2018 "China Compulsory Education Law" formally included the LRC into compulsory education, which means disabled children can access free education. In the education system (MoE, 2018), these policies have greatly supported more disabled children to enter regular classrooms and access the same educational resources as other children.

However, scholars believe that disabled children do not truly learn in regular classes but are instead marginalized and neglected, finding it difficult to participate into the classroom's courses and activities. The attitudes of peers and adults can hinder disabled children from expressing their agency. Research indicates that the attitudes of professionals, the communication dynamics between adults and children, and organizational factors are crucial for disabled children to express their agency (Olli et al., 2012). Studies also point out that although many cities have implemented inclusive education policies, the lack of specialized teachers and teacher training makes it difficult for teachers to teach effectively. Additionally, the insufficiency of educational hardware and resources prevents students from fully realizing their learning potential (Mu, 2019; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012).

In the context of inclusive education, influenced by structural problems within the education system, neoliberalism promotes the monitoring and motivation of teachers through performance evaluation and results-oriented management, thereby increasing teachers' work pressure (Qu, 2019a; Mu et al., 2020). In China's college entrance examination system, teachers' performance often depends on students' college entrance examination scores, and disabled students are often unable to compete due to a lack of educational resources and professional guidance, resulting in them frequently being ignored by teachers (Qu, 2019a; Wang, 2021; Mu et al., 2020; Jia & Santi, 2020). Discrimination and exclusion of disabled children still exist within the education system, leading to these children not only being ignored by teachers but also often bullied by classmates, yet there is a lack of legal mechanisms to protect their right to speak out about their experiences (Wang & Florian, 2019; Zhang & Chen, 2023). Furthermore, Wang (2021) pointed out that the participation and voting rights of disabled children in schools are often not taken seriously (also seen in Shi et al., 2023). In children's studies, although disabled children are regarded as social actors and should be given the right to participate and voice their opinions (James and Prout, 2015), in the Chinese context, they are often perceived as lacking agency. There is also almost no discussion of agency for disabled children in relevant Chinese literature, which indirectly suggests that disabled children may not be fully recognized as having agency in Chinese society.

Compared with the internationally recognised notion of inclusion notion, Chinese policies and practices still tend to favor the medical model, which attributes the developmental obstacles of disabled people to their physical conditions rather than social factors (Qu, 2019a). Although China's nine-year compulsory education system provides free education opportunities for all children, disabled children still face significant challenges in accessing appropriate educational resources and equal participation (MoE, 2018). In the context of pursuing elite education, disabled children often have difficulty achieving excellent academic performance, and their voice and participation opportunities are also severely limited (Wang, 2021; Qu, 2021a). There is little evidence in the inclusive education literature that disabled children can participate in school activities or participate in all activities.

3.4 Summary

This chapter, by elucidating China's sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts—including Confucian culture, the socialist and collectivist political system, and the economic development following the reform and opening up policy, the influence of neoliberalism as well as Chinese inclusive education's practice—it is helpful to understand how the childhood and agency of disabled children are shaped and perceived. It is evident that the agency of disabled children is often overlooked and restricted due to the impact of multiple sociopolitical systems, affecting their participation in family, school, and social activities. Nonetheless, I also believe this indicates that researchers in China's disability studies and inclusive education need to fill the research gaps in DCCS's paradigm and the theory of agency for disabled children.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

From the discussions in chapters 2 and 3, it is obvious that the concept of "agency" needs to be analysed in different cultural and social contexts. There are significant differences in how the term is interpreted around the world, and these differences, in turn, influence specific practices with disabled children. Critical discourse analysis can provide in-depth insights into this issue. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can provide the tools to explore and understand how agency and childhood are constructed and reshaped in different contexts, which is crucial for improving support and inclusion strategies for disabled children. As Abebe et al. (2022) emphasizes, the aim is not to reject the influence of Northern theory, but to enrich the construction of our understanding of disabled children in the Global South by promoting dialogue between North and South.

4.2 Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology is the study of the nature of existence and reality (Scotland, 2012). In the complex fabric of the world, individuals navigate various phenomena, prompting researchers to question what constitutes essence, truth, and authentic existence. Scholars must take a stance on how they perceive the genuine nature of things and their operational mechanisms (Scotland, 2012).

Epistemology, on the other hand, is concerned with the nature and forms of knowledge. It delves into how knowledge is created, acquired, organized, and applied (Scotland, 2012). The epistemological foundation of methodology outlines the conditions a good study should meet, the reasons and purposes for conducting research, and the necessity and value foundations, providing ethical principles for research (Strega, 2005). Therefore, conducting research in a clear and rigorous manner according to epistemological principles forms the basis for achieving meaningful results.

In this thesis, DCCS serves as the paradigm guiding the overall orientation and theoretical framework of my research. DCCS not only establishes the ontological and epistemological foundations of this article but also directs the chosen research methods.

Within the realm of DCCS, ontological foundations from childhood studies (CS) and disability studies (DS) are drawn upon (Curran & Runswick-Role, 2014).

The ontology of DCCS first posits that disabled children have the ability to express their experiences and viewpoints and their voices are valuable to be explored (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014). Due to past influences from developmental psychology, as well as "normalcy" and "ableism," they have been neglected. However, research results indicate that disabled individuals are not without value; even their silent voices are worthy of study and should be placed at the center of research.

Secondly, influenced by the Global North's dominance in defining normative childhood as the period of "schooling and play" (UNICEF, 2014), childhood has been perceived in a singular manner. Disabled children's childhood is considered abnormal, necessitating improvements based on conventional standards in their respective countries. DS points out that the challenges faced by disabled children do not originate from their disabilities or illnesses per se but are caused by various problems in social structures and mechanisms (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014). This view emphasizes that in order to truly understand and respond to the needs of disabled children, in-depth analysis and reform must be carried out from the perspective of the social environment and system.

In sum, this thesis contends that childhood is socially constructed, and the understanding of "children" and "childhood" varies at different stages within the same country, with significant differences in understanding between different countries. Therefore, childhood is diverse and requires analysis of how it is constructed based on various variables in different countries.

Post-structuralism and Social Constructionism

Post-structuralism and social constructionism provide the epistemological theories that guided the research methodology. When addressing the imbalance of power relations, discourse is a common element in post-structuralist analysis. Discourse is considered a space for creating reality and existence, as well as a space for deconstructing, challenging, and reorganising knowledge and reality (Leotti, 2019).

Post-structuralist discourse analysts, represented by Foucault, reveal the process of constructing discourse, which involves deconstructing things in social life that are perceived as naturally and unquestionably normal (Williams, 2014). The process of deconstructing discourse involves the destruction and dismantling of knowledge and practices, which are believed to help counter discrimination and exclusion based on factors such as gender, age, ability, and class. It aims to reveal the impact of power and overlooked knowledge and related factors behind phenomena (Williams, 2014).

Post-structuralist scholars assert that knowledge does not develop freely in an unrestricted domain but is constrained by certain theories and methods. In the construction process, marginalised perspectives and theories need to be reexamined, as this may be the key to adjusting imbalanced relationships. Therefore, interdisciplinary permeation is needed, transcending the boundaries of knowledge and disciplines to facilitate a broader and more comprehensive analysis of issues.

Social constructionist scholars view things, discourse, and issues as coconstructed by social members through social interaction (Andrews, 2012). They assert that multiple realities may exist in different social groups and cultural backgrounds. Each group has a unique background and social cognition, leading to different interpretations and understandings of the same phenomenon. Furthermore, social constructionism emphasises the historical and cultural aspects of social reality, suggesting that social reality is not fixed but evolves with changes in time and culture (Burr & Dick, 2017). Therefore, researchers conducting CDA are advised to consider the political, economic, historical, and cultural context of discourse construction (Burr, 2015).

4.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a qualitative research method used to study internal power dynamics, ideologies, and the causes of social inequalities within discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Mullet, 2018; van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2013). Unlike general discourse analysis, which focuses on descriptively analysing the social rules, practices, and cultural phenomena behind discourse, CDA aims to analyse the implicit or hidden power relationships within discourse, revealing the inequalities

present in society (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Mullet, 2018; van Dijk, 1993; Spratt, 2017; Fairclough, 2013). Specifically, CDA is instrumental in "critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities" (Mullet, 2018, p.116, as cited in Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Mullet (2018) understands social inequality as an imbalance of power and resources between the speakers and listeners in discourse and their unequal access to these resources. This thesis draws on CDA to analyse the unequal power relationships between speakers and listeners in discourse, how this leads to unequal distribution and access to resources, and the underlying societal reasons behind it (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Mullet, 2018; van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2013).

CDA is dedicated to studying and understanding discourse as a social and cultural practice, emphasising that discourse is not just a linguistic expression but also a reflection of social practices and a manifestation of power (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Mullet, 2018; van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2013). As discourse is constructed by society and participates in shaping society, CDA strives to understand how discourse is socially constructed (Spratt, 2017; van Dijk, 1993). For instance, in disability studies, the analysis of terms like "disability" and "deficit" helps understand how such discourses emerge in society and what societal ideas they represent (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). CDA finds that these discourses often stem from medical models, attributing the challenges faced by disabled individuals to personal reasons rather than societal factors, thereby avoiding addressing complex social issues (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Spratt, 2017). On the one hand, CDA is committed to understanding how discourse is socially constructed; on the other hand, it analyses how discourse contributes to shaping society (Spratt, 2017). For example, researchers found that discourses related to disability in medical models guide people to perceive disabled individuals as socially isolated in education policies and practices and perpetuate a value system that leads to ongoing exclusion and discrimination (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Spratt, 2017).

CDA contributes to understanding the current state of society, revealing how discourse influences and constructs societal ideologies, thus maintaining specific social relations and structures (Mullet, 2018). The goal of a CDA analyst is to bring about social change through critical analysis and understanding (van Dijk, 1993; Mullet, 2018; Fairclough,

2013). By revealing how discourse, ideologies, and social practices interact and construct one another, CDA helps comprehend issues of social inequality and provides tools to drive social change (van Dijk, 1993; Mullet, 2018; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Fairclough, 2013). Recognizing the mutual construction between discourse and ideology identifies a breakthrough point for societal problems, offering policymakers and social actors tools to exert influence and propose solutions based on the analyzed social issues (Foucault, 1971; van Dijk, 1993). This is considered to have a transformative function in promoting social change.

4.4 Discourse Theory

This section discusses what discourse is, the relationship between discourse, power, and ideology, and the methodological principles and guidance for this paper.

According to Foucault (1971), discourse is an expression of power, emerging within power relations and the operation of knowledge. In the process of societal construction, daily dialogues are filled with people's views and opinions on things, forming a collective understanding with inherent logic among various languages and perspectives. Thus, discourse is not arbitrary language in conversations but a social practice that people think about and derive meaning from, constituting and organising knowledge, as well as conscious and unconscious thoughts. If the language spoken daily has the power to influence others to some extent, discourse constitutes power and can play a dominating role.

Unlike regular written and spoken language, discourse exists in various types of languages, texts, and expressions (Fairclough, 2013; Mullet, 2018). It is not confined to policies or written texts such as textbooks but encompasses all forms of expression, including dialogue, speeches, meetings, classroom language, non-verbal communication, visual images, multimedia, films, and other forms (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Fairclough, 2013; Mullet, 2018).

The functions and abilities inherent in discourse can be reflected in societal construction (Fairclough, 2013), resource allocation and flow (Foucault, 1971), and the direct or indirect domination of others' behavior and thoughts (Mullet, 2018). Within the methodological research framework of CDA, the intrinsic logical structure of discourse leads people to accept discourse as facts, making discourse a crucial component in societal construction. In this process, the power contained in discourse shapes and regulates societal cognition and behavior. The implicit power relations in discourse can directly or indirectly dominate the behavior and thoughts of others by shaping people's perceptions of resources and ideas about distribution. Those who control and manipulate discourse, specific groups or institutions, can effectively exercise power, determining to some extent the allocation of resources. This process often leads to issues of inequality and unfairness in society. However, it also suggests that if discourse analysts can reveal the power relations and implicit rules behind discourse, they can promote understanding and challenge societal injustices and inequalities.

4.5 Sampling Criteria and the Literature Search Process

4.5.1 Sample: Selection of Academic Literature

When reviewing concepts of agency and rights for disabled children in scholarly literature, we must recognize that these scholarly discourses serve not merely as mediums of information exchange. Academic journals and papers serve as crucial channels for screening and preserving elements of the knowledge system, providing reliable resources for establishing a solid theoretical foundation (Lindsey & Kirk, 1992). Scholars' works, once published, gain a certain level of authority, convincing other scholars and contributing significantly to knowledge dissemination (Leotti, 2019). The authority of academic literature facilitates the acceptance of knowledge and discourse, prompting practitioners to absorb, apply, and update recurring knowledge and information. More influential viewpoints and findings will have a lasting impact during the dissemination process (Leotti, 2019). Thus, academic journals play a crucial role in the production and dissemination of knowledge and discourse.

Like all other texts, these academic articles are also crucial places for the expression and interpretation of ideological and power dynamics (Mullet, 2018;

Van Dijk, 1993). Van Dijk (2006), in the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), emphasizes the "mind control" function of authoritative discourse, especially discourse originating from academic and political backgrounds, significantly influencing the formation and shaping of individual mental models. The shaping impact of discourse depends not only on the structure and form of the text but also on the context. Therefore, social science and social work journals play an important role as mediators of authoritative knowledge and discourse, particularly in guiding research, policy development, and practice (Leotti, 2019). Numerous articles indicate that published social science research is pivotal in steering research directions, formulating policies, and implementing intervention measures (Landry et al., 2001; Albaek, 1995; Edwards, 1991; Marsh & Reed, 2016). This dual function makes in-depth study of scholarly literature particularly important, especially when these topics are closely linked to broader social and political issues. Therefore, my research focuses on unveiling the ideological foundations of discourses on agency and rights within scholarly journals, underscoring the importance of examining these academic publications.

4.5.2 Sample choosing

When selecting research samples, researchers need to find an entry point from various levels and sources and provide reasons for text selection. According to Foucault and Fairclough, the range of discourse texts that can be chosen is extensive, as each discourse undergoes a construction process and represents specific ideas (Leotti, 2019). Therefore, researchers need to precisely define the research topic, narrow down the selection, and clarify the roles and functions of the chosen texts. This section explains how I screen articles from academic literature that are suitable for analysis.

Which Key Words and Why?

The primary objective of this paper is to examine how the agency of disabled children in the global South has been studied and understood in comparison with theories from the global North. I primarily used Google Scholar as the main search engine, employing keywords such as "disabled children's agency," "disabled children's voices," "disabled children's rights," "disabled children's participation," and "global South." Keywords related to the agency of disabled children are often closely associated with terms such as "voices" and "participation" (Smith, 2007; Tisdall, 2012; Kowitz, 2022). Scholars

typically argue that understanding children's agency can be achieved through their voices and perspectives, often studied through participatory research in the field of childhood studies. Participatory research can involve research “with” disabled children or research “on” disabled children.

Using these keywords is intended to ensure that I can obtain as many relevant articles as possible, providing a comprehensive understanding of the agency and childhood experiences of disabled children in the global South.

Why Google Scholar?

When conducting academic literature searches, I primarily utilized Google Scholar as my main search engine. Research indicates that, compared to other 11 academic search engines and bibliographic databases, Google Scholar is considered the most comprehensive (Gusenbauer, 2019).

Age Criteria for Research Participants

In this paper, the definition of children is based on Article 1 of the UNCRC, which states that a child means every human being below the age of eighteen unless under the law applicable to the child, the majority is attained earlier. Therefore, articles related to higher education (e.g., "Agency and Advocacy: Disabled Students in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania") are excluded.

How to Define Disabled Children

This paper does not categorize disabilities into severe and mild. Based on the definitions by Mallet and Runswick-Cole (2014) and Curran and Runswick-Cole (2014), all disabled children are included in the study. Studies have shown that even children with severe disabilities “are able to participate in research when considered and approached properly, that is, researching with rather than researching on children and young people with disabilities” (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2012; Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2014, as cited in Stafford, 2017, p.601).

Criteria for Types of Literature

This paper only included empirical research from journal paper or book chapters as such studies are typically based on collecting and analysing actual empirical data, such as observational data, providing researchers with more specific materials. This supports analysts in reanalysing discourses, power relations, social structures, and some other types based on materials collected in empirical research. While this paper primarily focuses on qualitative empirical research, quantitative analysis studies on discourse were included if they support critical interpretations of qualitative discourse. However, academic literature solely discussing theories will not be considered.

How relevant papers were retrieved

When I initially searched for " global south disabled children's agency" "voices", and "participation", Google Scholar yielded 29700 results. Some articles did not meet the criteria. For instance, "*What about my voice': emancipating the voices of children with disabilities through participant-centred methods*" (Stafford, 2017) was not relevant to children in the Global South. The book Chapter of "A handbook of children and young people's participation: Perspectives from theory and practice" (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009) was not relevant to disabled children. "Human Rights and the Global South: the case of disability" (Meekosha & Soldatic, 2011) was not empirical research, but a theoretical study. "Exploring narratives of education: disabled young people's experiences of educational institutions in Ghana" (Gregorius, 2016) involved individuals over the age of 18, thus not falling within the child category. "Growing up with a Disability in Ethiopia: The Perspectives and Experiences of physically disabled children" was a Master's thesis, not a paper or book chapter; therefore, it is omitted.

Using this method of identifying relevant samples, I found 15 literature that finally met all the criteria.

4.6 Method and Analysis

Then, I adopted Mullet's (2018) seven steps to meticulously examine academic literature concerning disabled children's agency.

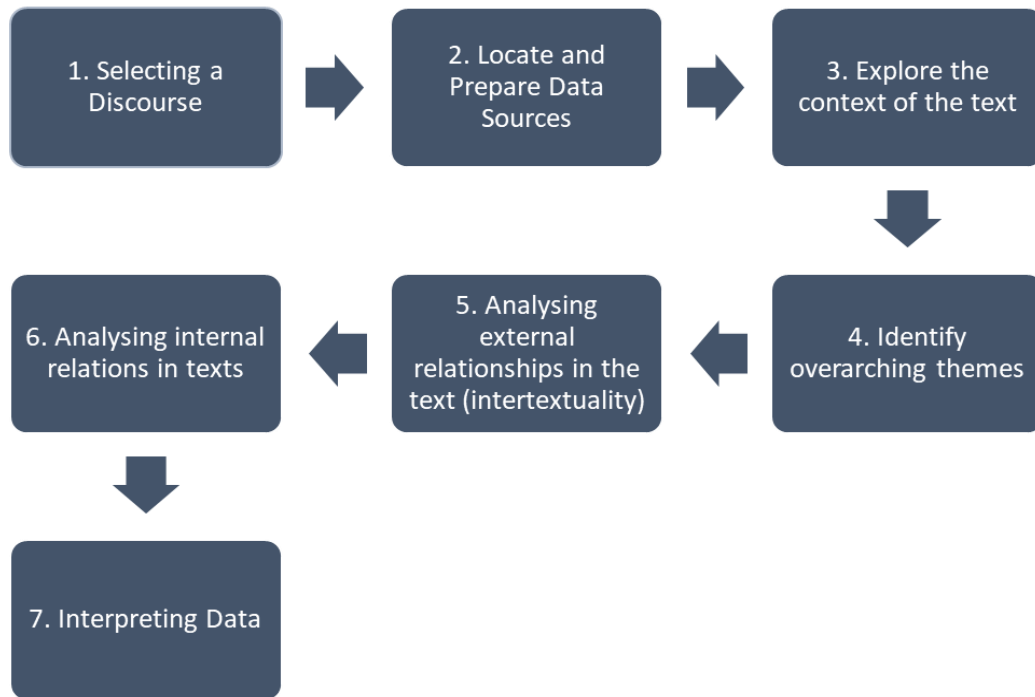


Figure 1 The steps of conducting CDA

Step 1 Selecting a discourse

The topic of my thesis is about agency of disabled children. In the theoretical chapter, I discussed other related discourses. Agency will have different interpretations in different dimensions and contexts. For example, in policy, agency is understood as children's "rights"; in rights and children's social behaviour, there are "expression" and "participation"; in childhood research, the role of disabled children in society is considered to be "social agents" and "social actors". Therefore, these words will be examined carefully when reading the literature.

Step 2 Locate and Prepare Data Sources

Earlier, I discussed in detail how I searched and selected relevant documents through "Google Scholar". These documents were all related to "agency," "participation," and disabled children's childhood in the Global South from 2013 to 2023.

Step 3 Explore the Context of the Text

In the third step, to explore the context of the literature, I utilised an Excel spreadsheet to catalogue essential details of the selected articles, including the full bibliography, year of publication, authors' affiliations, country of origin, literature type, topic area, key

themes, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, results, limitations, and their interpretations of agency. This initial phase was crucial for familiarising myself with the data sources. During this organisational phase, my focus was particularly on identifying the usage of specific keywords by the authors—"agency," "children's rights," "children's participation," and "children's voices"—and understanding their interpretations and arguments regarding these terms, making concise notes for subsequent analysis.

Step 4 Identify Overarching Themes

In the fourth step, I categorised the literature based on how different authors understood agency. Some authors did not discuss agency directly but explored how children participate in local life, their responses to bullying and exclusion, their dreams for the future, and other related themes. I organised the collected voices of the children from each article according to these themes in OneNote because this software allows me to manage data by thematic content and to discover that family, school, and society can categorise children's participation in life. Within these different environments, data was further organised by contributions, relationships, bullying, and future aspirations.

Step 5: Analysing the Internal Relations in the Text

In this step, I primarily examined the relationships between different discourses within the text; the text may contain discourses related to human rights, some related to charity, and others possibly related to the medical model; these discourses can sometimes overlap or conflict. If these internal relationships are not effectively managed, my position may not be clear; therefore, it is necessary to clarify the definitions of different discourses. For example, Medical Model Discourse typically focuses on children's defects and problems, emphasising the need for medical treatment or intervention; Social Model Discourse points out the resources and structural problems in society, emphasising that environmental and social barriers are the main factors causing disabilities; Rights Discourse focuses on the rights of disabled children to participate and to have voices, emphasising the rights and capabilities of children as actors; Charity Discourse often involves the need for sympathy and protection for children, emphasising the provision of help and support.

Analysing the relationship between different discourses can help me see how they support or contradict each other, which in turn helps me see the contradictions in the literature and the complexity of opinions.

Step 6: Analysing the External Relations in the Text

In the sixth step, I organised discussions with various authors on the participation, voices, and rights of disabled children. Furthermore, I reflected on how these studies reveal the different environments faced by children in the Global South and how these environments contribute to constructing the agency of disabled children. I also tried to reflect on the different understandings of agency between the global North and South.

This methodological approach underscores my comprehensive strategy for coding and analysing selected literature, facilitating a nuanced exploration of disabled children's agency from various dimensions and perspectives.

Step 7: Interpreting the Data will be presented in the Findings Chapter.

4.7 Researcher Position

In this study, I have a strong interest in re-examining the issue of agency for disabled children in the Global South and how to represent their agency. This perspective allows me to view how disabled children face life challenges from a new angle and to challenge the traditional notion that disabled children, especially those in the Global South, are weak and incapable. As a teacher with four years of experience in early childhood education, I believe that recognizing the agency of disabled children is crucial for researchers and practitioners in inclusive education in China, especially given the scarcity of related research in this field. Therefore, I have a deep understanding and strong motivation for this research topic.

As a researcher, I have adopted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, aiming to rethink how the agency of disabled children in the Global South is represented and to challenge the dominance of theories from the Global North. The aim of employing CDA is to uncover the implicit power relations in discourse (Mullet, 2018). The researcher's own ideology can interact or even conflict with this objective, and power often manifests

through discourse control. I am aware that my background and experiences might influence data collection and analysis. Therefore, throughout the research process, I continuously reflect on my analysis, questioning whether I still perceive disabled children as vulnerable and incapable, and whether I truly recognize their agency as the strength to learn, understand their environment and the world, and overcome all difficulties.

Given that the analysis involves multiple voices of disabled children and diverse viewpoints from authors, it is crucial not to let my biases overshadow these voices and perspectives, ensuring that these voices and perspectives are authentically represented. This commitment reflects the ethical obligations of research practice (Mullet, 2018). I carefully consider my language to minimize personal bias and avoid leading readers to hold more prejudices against disabled children or to overestimate their abilities, remaining vigilant against any form of power abuse resulting from imposing my viewpoints (Mullet, 2018; Taft, 2015).

Since this paper systematically and critically reviews research literature from the past decade, it does not involve interaction with participants. However, I still ensure strict adherence to ethical standards, protecting the privacy and rights of all research subjects. During data analysis, I always maintain respect for disabled children as research subjects, striving to present their voices and perspectives objectively and fairly.

In summary, my stance as a master's researcher is one of openness, critique, and reflexivity. I acknowledge my position and its potential impact on this study. I am committed to authentically representing viewpoints and being mindful of the dynamics of power and ideology (Taft, 2015).

4.8 Evaluative Criteria and Ethical Considerations

This study adopted a social constructionist perspective and explored how the agency of disabled children in the Global South is represented through a CDA approach. Evaluation criteria and ethical considerations play a vital role in ensuring the rigor and reliability of research. Evaluation criteria guide researchers to approach research data,

representations, and interpretations critically and reflectively. Ethical considerations prompt researchers to focus on safeguarding the rights and well-being of disabled children. This section aims to discuss how these aspects influence the design and execution of research.

The literature shows CDA does not have unified evaluation criteria (Mullet, 2018). However, a point of convergence is that CDA must explore the dynamics of the relationship between discourse and context and, in this thesis, how these relationships affect the understanding of disabled children (Liasidou, 2008). This perspective emphasises an in-depth and thoughtful analysis of the construction and representation of agency for disabled children.

Although my research did not directly involve live interactions with children, I reanalysed and represented the answers of disabled children captured in the literature and, therefore, had to consider whether the impact of these representations on the interpretations of disabled children might have negative consequences. Researchers must adhere to the principle of reflexivity throughout the entire process of childhood study (Mullet, 2018; Christensen & Jame, 2017), including when constructing research questions, designing interview questions, collecting and analysing data, and forming conclusions.

Throughout this thesis, I ensured that my descriptions of disabled children align with the social model of disability, which focuses on societal barriers that hinder individuals rather than their physical limitations. This approach highlights the environmental and social obstacles that impede disabled children's participation and agency. When characterising disabled children, I strived to present a balanced view that recognizes their capabilities as well as the challenges they face to avoid perpetuating stereotypes of them being needy and vulnerable (Wihstutz, 2011). In describing the education of disabled children, I checked my portrayal against the principles of inclusive education to ensure that I am supporting narratives that foster inclusion rather than segregation.

Childhood studies particularly emphasise the importance of recognising the unequal power relations between adults and children when using adult understanding and language to represent children's voices (Taft, 2015). This inequality can lead to misinterpretation and misrepresentation of children's information, mistaking adult understanding for the children's own intentions (Liasidou, 2008). Therefore, the principle of reflexivity is crucial, requiring researchers to continuously examine whether they hold biases, stereotypes, or unequal attitudes toward children. If this is not addressed, this inequality will perpetuate in research and continue to impact children's representations. Disabled children are often described as vulnerable individuals needing sympathy from others rather than individuals with agency (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2013, 2014; Wihstutz, 2011). This process requires the researcher to clearly understand his or her own position, which also constitutes the ethical considerations of this study. Therefore, I critically and carefully choose and make the representation of disabled children as being with agency within the social model, in case of portraying this group as vulnerable and needy beings, with charity discourses.

Research on disabled children's childhood conducted within a social constructionist framework holds that knowledge is jointly constructed by researchers and children based on specific historical and cultural contexts (Phillimore et al., 2014). The principles of validity and reliability followed by the research require researchers to deeply understand the context and related constructing factors in which children's voices are formed and how children construct their knowledge. This reminds researchers to reconsider reliance on traditional empirical paradigms by considering the complex cultural and demographic characteristics that may be involved in this study. Social constructionism is viewed as a process by which people's life worlds are described, explained, or otherwise illuminated. While taking into account the cultures of different countries, it is also necessary to pay attention to the lived experiences, perspectives and collective subjectivities of the children in the participating communities themselves. Such research is necessarily empirical, focusing on children's voices and the context in which they live. Therefore, when I read the academic literature I reviewed, I marked the relevant cultural, religious, and economic backgrounds mentioned in the text; and excerpted all children's words and works into One-Note. For each quote I extracted from the literature, I took notes, including who, which country, what happened and why the author used these examples

and what they wanted to convey. My depiction of the childhoods of disabled children aimed to preserve the diversity and inclusivity inherent in childhood experiences. I consider various aspects of childhoods, acknowledging that disabled children's experiences are not monolithic but vary widely based on numerous factors including cultural context.

In addition, researchers must ensure the transparency of the research process and present the research methods, processes, and conclusions completely and transparently to readers and reviewers. To achieve this goal, I presented the details of the data collection and analysis process, including the rationale behind my methodological decisions.

By applying these evaluative criteria and ethical considerations, this study ensured a contextualised analysis of the childhoods and agency of disabled children in the Global South and strived to reflexively reduce the influence of authoritative adult discourses on the representation and interpretation of disabled children.

4.9 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, I detailed the research paradigm of DCCS and related social constructionism and poststructuralism research theories. In the context of these theories, I explained the reasons for using CDA as a data analysis method, the relevant theoretical foundations, and the steps to implement CDA concretely. Furthermore, I illustrated how to process the data using the seven-step analysis method proposed by Mullet (2018) and described my strategies for keeping these processes transparent and achieving my research's validity and reliability. In the end, I introduced my research position and my evaluative criteria and ethical considerations. In the next chapter, I will present my findings from the examined literature.

Chapter 5 Findings and Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses findings from a critical discourse analysis of 15 academic articles on the childhood experiences of disabled children. It reveals that the agency of disabled children in the Global South is depicted by authors as characterised by freedom, aspiration, and contextual factors, and how power relations influence it. Due to poverty, countries in the Global South face a lack of infrastructure development and resource scarcity, which limits the expression of disabled children and constrains their agency. Understanding their voices poses a challenge for researchers, necessitating mediation. The study also indicates that disabled children are not fully trusted by researchers, which hampers their ability to access the entire scope of the research.

5.2 Emerging insights: overarching trends in the literature

Within the selected 15 articles, from 2013 to 2023, scholars have employed diverse approaches, such as participatory research, ethnography, and qualitative interviews, to gather the voices of disabled children. During my literature search, I found that many participatory studies revolve around adults, with limited involvement of disabled children. However, around 2013, research into the childhoods and voices of disabled children began to increase significantly, with most of these studies being participatory in nature. This surge aligns with the emergence of DCCS around 2013 and 2014. Therefore, I believe that the increased research and attention to disabled children can be attributed to the advent of DCCS. These studies span across 16 countries in the Global South. The basic information of the 15 articles is summarised in Table 1

Table 1: Information on Selected Studies of Voices and Agency of Disabled Children in the Global South

| | Title | Year | Authors | Regions | Methodologies | Sample size |
|---|---|------|--|-----------|---|-------------|
| 1 | Disability, Childhood and Poverty: Critical Perspectives on Guatemala | 2013 | Grech (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) | Guatemala | Ethnographic research, including interviews and observations in rural communities | 1 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|--|------|--|------------------------------|---|---|
| 2 | Ask us too! Doing participatory research with disabled children in the global south | 2014 | Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam (University College London, UK) | India and Sri-Lanka | Participatory Research with disabled children | 3 |
| 3 | Don't Forget Us, We Are Here Too! Listening to Disabled Children and Their families Living in Poverty | 2016 | Wickenden & Elphick (UK and South Africa) | India, SriLanka and Uganda | Participatory Research with disabled children | 3 |
| 4 | Girls with Disabilities in the Global South | 2019 | Nguyen (Carleton University, Canada) | Vietnam | Participatory Research and indepth interview | 1 |
| 5 | Listening to the voices of children: understanding the human rights priorities of children with disability in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea | 2017 | Jenkin et al (Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia) | Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea | Participatory Research | 3 |
| 6 | Challenging Power Dynamics and Eliciting Marginalized Adolescent Voices Through Qualitative Methods | 2020 | Pincock and Jones (University of Oxford; Overseas Development Institute, London) | Jordan and Ethiopia | Participatory methods | 2 |
| 7 | 'Ubuntu Bulamu'– Development and Testing of an Indigenous Intervention for Disability Inclusion in Uganda | 2020 | Bannink Mbazzi et al (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), based in Uganda) | Uganda | A combination of traditional research methods used with adults: Participant Observation; Some participatory tools: drawing, photographs, and activity worksheets; narrative approach with children with intellectual disabilities | 1 |
| 8 | 'Teachers Did Not Let Me Do It': Disabled Children's Experiences of Marginalisation in Regular Primary Schools in China | 2021 | Wang (University of Edinburgh, UK) | China | Ethnographic study combined with participant observation, semistructured interviews, and child-friendly participatory activities | 2 |

| | | | | | | |
|----|---|------|---|-------------------------|--|----------------|
| 9 | The Participation of Children with Intellectual Disabilities: Including the Voices of Children and Their Caregivers in India and South Africa | 2020 | Dada et al (University of Pretoria, South Africa; University of Calcutta, India) | India and South Africa | Mixed Research combine with quantitative Questionnaire research and qualitative interview research | 0 ¹ |
| 10 | Listening to the voices of children with disabilities in Colombian Escuela Nueva schools | 2023 | Hayes (University of Cambridge, UK) | Colombia | Visual participatory methods | 1 |
| 11 | Becoming a student representative in Brazil: a phenomenological study of students with intellectual disabilities | 2023 | Murahara et al (McGill University, Canada; Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paulo, Brazil) | Brazil | based on phenomenological method, the researchers carried on semistructured interview and active observation | 3 |
| 12 | Finding the Hard to Reach: A Mixed Methods Approach to Including Adolescents with Disabilities in Survey Research | 2021 | Seager et al (Milken Institute School of Public Health, US) | Bangladesh and Ethiopia | Mixed methods with quantitative survey and indepth qualitative interview | 1 |
| 13 | Interrogating the agency and education of refugee children with disabilities in Northern Uganda: A critical capability approach | 2023 | Monk et al (Gulu University, Uganda; University of Nottingham, UK) | Uganda | Case Study | 1 |
| 14 | Perceptions and Concerns about Inclusive Education among Students with Visual Impairments in Lagos, Nigeria | 2016 | Brydges & Mkandawire (Carleton University, Canada) | Nigeria | Qualitative indepth Interview | 1 |
| 15 | 'The school of our dreams': engaging with children's experiences and hopes at a remote school in India | 2023 | Rangarajan et al (Monash University, Australia; Haute-École Pédagogique du canton de Vaud, Switzerland) | India | Participatory research | 1 |

Table 1

¹ For Dada et al., (2020), which is mixture research and without interview with disabled children, so I only use the research result and background to support my point.

As Table 1 shows, the selected articles collectively cover 15 countries from the Global South, spanning across Asia, South America, and Central America, African regions (Southern Africa, Eastern Africa, and Western Africa), and two countries in Oceania. Among these, India and Uganda are involved in three studies each which are the most frequent researched countries; Ethiopia is involved in two studies, while research involving other countries occurs once each. However, interestingly, although these researches are based on the Southern context, 12 articles' authors are affiliated with the Northern institutions, and only Bannink Mbazzi et al., (2020) and Dada et al. (2020), two literatures are based on Southern institutions; Monk et al., (2023) and Murahara et al., (2023) are based on both South and North. This prompted me to ponder why most research on disabled children in the South is conducted by universities in the Global North. I looked into the backgrounds of each author and found that there are scholars from the Global South currently working in the North, such as Nguyen from Vietnam and Wang from China. Whether this indicates that Northern countries have more and better educational resources to support their research those Southern institutions requires further discussion.

The figure 2 illustrates the number of times disabled children from different countries were studied across the 15 selected research papers:

Figure 2 Frequency of Studies on Disabled Children Across Different Countries

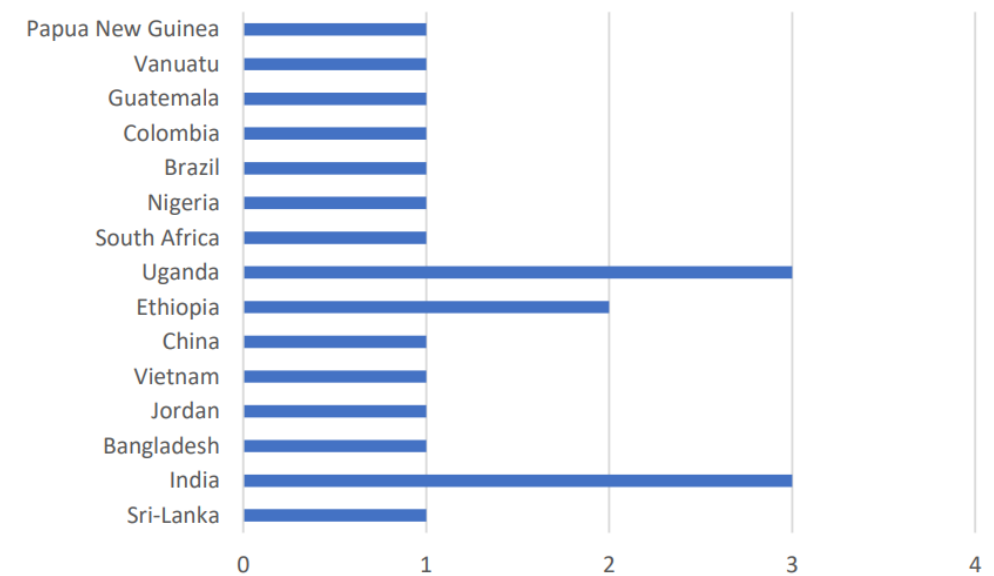


Figure 2 Frequency of Studies on Disabled Children Across Different Countries

While other methodologies possess their respective strengths and can provide unique insights into specific research questions and subjects, the data from this thesis suggest that participatory research is particularly favoured among scholars studying disabled children and childhood studies. It is noteworthy that out of the 15 articles selected, 8 are participatory research. Among them, Bannink Mbazzi et al., (2020) combined a narrative approach of interviewing intellect disabled children with participant observation with adults. Except these eight articles, there is another article by the Chinese scholar Wang (2021), which, although ethnographic, used participatory research tools to interview children. A total of two articles employed ethnographic research. The study by Murahara et al. (2023) is based on the phenomenological method, where the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and active observation. Two articles used a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Additionally, there is one article each utilising case study methods and qualitative in-depth interview research.

An analysis of the methodologies employed in the selected articles for collecting the perspectives of disabled children from various countries indicates a predominant use of participatory research methods. This preference is attributed to the ability of participatory approaches to directly involve disabled children in interactive processes, allowing them to express their viewpoints in their own ways (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Nguyen, 2016). Participatory research also accommodates the use of various interview tools, offering a more friendly and flexible approach that enables researchers to navigate around the barriers of language and text (Nguyen, 2016; Hayes, 2023).

In summary, the data literature on disabled children in the Global South from 2013 to 2023 shows that while the studies focus on the Global South, most authors and institutions are from the Global North, highlighting academic resource distribution issues and Southern scholars' absence. It also reveals the predominant use of participatory methods, chosen for their inclusivity and flexibility in engaging with disabled children.

5.3 Positioning of agency in the literature

This section presents how authors in the data literature understood and represented the agency of disabled children. The articles examined express the different agencies disabled children possess from various dimensions to highlight how these children have

their own perspectives on matters and the ability to express them. Some scholars consider disabled children's agency as their freedom, for instance, the freedom of expression, the freedom of mobility, and the freedom of participation (Seager et al., 2021). Other scholars believe that the agency of disabled children is manifested in their role as active social agents, having their own views and insights on many social and educational issues (Gregorius, 2016; Murahara, 2023; Nguyen, 2016). While agency as freedom primarily emphasizes the individual's capacity for free expression and action without constraints (Seager et al., 2021); children as social agents sees agency as the product of interactions between disabled children and society, especially the consequential influence that they bring from their actions (Mayall, 2002). Some scholars, without explicitly stating their perspective, believe that the agency of disabled children is obscured due to imbalanced power relations and cultural factors, resulting in a lower status that makes it unrecognizable (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). Regardless, most articles implicitly considered agency as contextual, highlighting how disabled children's agency is a product of interactions with the larger familial, cultural, social and economic contexts.

5.3.1 Agency as Freedom

Some scholars consider disabled children's agency as their freedom, for instance, the freedom of expression (Rangarajan et al., 2023; Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Wickenden & Elphick, 2016; Jenkin et al., 2017), the freedom of mobility (Seager et al., 2021), and the freedom of participation (Seager et al., 2021; Pincock & Jones, 2020; Wang, 2021).

Some researchers interpret the agency of disabled children as the freedom of mobility and participation. For example, Seager et al. (2021) point out that disabled children are often limited in their actions due to their disabilities. A physically disabled girl expressed the fatigue from her disability, which prevented her from participating in various activities:

"I am not a member of any clubs. All the activities are done outside the class and in an office area. I don't like to go there and here. I didn't feel ashamed of my physical disability. The only factor that hinders me is my tiredness to go here and there." (17years old, Ethiopia, p.163).

From this example, Seager et al. (2021) argue that the mobility of physically disabled children is restricted due to the lack of infrastructure, transportation, affordable assistive devices, ongoing discriminatory attitudes, and parental concerns. Physical mobility restrictions cause them to face barriers in participating in school and community activities, thereby losing their freedom to attend many activities. However, this does not mean that physically disabled children have no desire to participate. An 18-years old physically disabled girl in in Nguyen's study (2016) said:

"Disability? No problem. I can still confidently participate in extra educational activities"
(Ly Thi Thanh, P. 65).

By showing the photo and handmade poster of her active engagement in school activities, she demonstrates that her physical disability did not hinder her participation in various activities nor her aspirations to teach other disabled students in the future. This illustrates how physically disabled children desire to exercise their agency in spite of the challenges.

Similarly, intellectually disabled children express their happiness while attending social activities, indicating their eagerness and competence (Dada et al., 2020; Rangarajan et al., 2023). Dada et al. (2020) show that intellectually disabled children are generally excluded from schools and communities. However, they still enjoy, yearn for, and can participate in various activities. Rangarajan et al. (2023) also interpret such desire as a form of agency. For disabled children, expressing what they want or think with freedom is a way of exercising their agency. Disabled children can make choices and take action in their lives. Only when they can express their needs and desires without fear or restriction within schools, families and society can disabled children truly participate in the decision-making processes affecting all aspects of their lives. This perspective is echoed by scholars in the other articles, indicating a shared viewpoint (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Wickenden & Elphick, 2016; Jenkin et al., 2017).

In contrast to how disabled children are often perceived as having nothing to say or unable to provide valuable insights, scholars who consider disabled children's agency as their freedom highlight how they are capable of expressing their needs, opinions, and choices and express a desire to be asked, cared for, and understood by more people (Pincock & Jones, 2020; Grech, 2013). In Pincock and Jones (2020), a 13-year-old Syrian adolescent refugee girl with cerebral palsy in Jordan was interviewed, and she said,

"I rarely get to decide anything... I wish someone would ask me questions..." (p. 7)

Even severely disabled children are thought to want and can communicate their emotions in different ways, such as through tapping objects (Jenkin et al., 2017).

Through different examples, Pincock and Jones (2020) demonstrate how disabled children exhibit their agency of expression by sharing experiences and thoughts about their lives. For instance, when the authors ask a deaf girl what is the important thing in her life, she points out that the coloured cane and the weaving basket that she has been using play an essential role in her livelihood. These instances not only reveal the agency and capability of disabled children in navigating their daily lives but also emphasise their ability to discern what matters most to them.

Not only do they have a strong desire to be asked and to have their voices heard, but they also have their own opinions on things that concern them and have the ability to express them and take action. In Wang's (2021) study, a disabled student expressed the desire to participate in the school's election voting process, but the teacher perceived their participation as disruptive and believed they could not partake. Wang (2021) argues that election activities also serve as a means for disabled students to express their opinions and make judgments about matters. However, because the teacher deemed them incapable, they were deprived of the right to participate and express themselves. Nguyen's (2016) study showcases how disabled girls, through their own actions such as creating posters, broadcasting, and communicating with school leadership boards, work to change public discrimination and exclusion against them. Disabled girls and facilitators share similar views on exclusion and marginalization. They believe that both they and the school need to take more action, advocating for inclusion and unity to overturn the school's exclusionary practices. In Murahara et al. (2023), the interviewees expressed a strong desire to become student representatives to help articulate their classmates' daily challenges in school and become a key resource in addressing these issues.

Therefore, interpreting children's agency as the freedom to express, participate, and act, scholars illustrate through these examples the desire, capability, or for some children, the potential ability of disabled children to have these freedoms. They long to express and are eager to be genuinely asked, and they can articulate what they like, their views on

matters. They yearn for the freedom to participate in various activities, and they have the capability to engage in a wide range of activities. However, it is the lack of necessary physical infrastructure to support their participation, along with discrimination from schools and society, that prevents them from being given the opportunity to participate.

Viewing desire and expression as forms of agency is beneficial, as it expands the understanding of agency to disabled children. Viewing only physical participation as agency is restrictive, as it renders many children without agency when external limitations hinder their participation. Conversely, defining children's agency as expressing themselves in verbal or non-verbal ways expands our perspective and shifts our focus to what the children desire from what restricts them.

5.3.2 Agency as Aspiration and Dream

Aspirations and dreams are also a form of agency. Children's aspirations and dreams refer to disabled children's expectation about their future and was investigated in 6 of the 15 selected articles (Wickenden & Elphick, 2014; Nguyen, 2016; Jenkin et al., 2017; Wang, 2021; Monk et al., 2023; Rangarajan et al., 2023). It is found that disabled children's aspirations revolve around two areas: education and work.

Wang's (2021) and Rangarajan et al.'s (2023) studies explored the aspirations of disabled and marginalised children about their schooling and education issues.

Wang: We were just talking about what kind of school activities you would attend. But you said that you did not do anything.

Qi: That's right.

Wang: Why?

Qi: Why?

Wang: Yes.

Qi: Teachers did not let me do it. I cannot sing. I cannot do... I can do nothing (Wang, 2021, p.2061).

These studies recognise the agency of disabled children as self-expression and participation in decision-making. By sharing their experiences of school, the discrimination and marginalisation they have experienced, disabled children can articulate the changes they would like to see in school and their solutions. Through these interactions, the study found that disabled children could articulate their views and that the suggestions they provided were useful in building the school. However, their voices and needs were often ignored, limiting their agency as social actors and agents.

Dreaming is a central component of disabled children's agency, as several studies highlighted. First, Wickenden and Elphick (2014) emphasized that dreams allow disabled children to demonstrate self-understanding, including understanding their own preferences, which is the basis for forming children's agency. The lives, dreams, and agency of disabled children constitute a complete personality.

I want to talk about dreams ... I wish to be a vet. (A, 11-year-old girl, urban Sri Lanka);
I wish I could be a dog trainer. (J, 11-year-old boy, urban Sri Lanka);
Dreams ... I wish to be running like a tiger and quicker (D, 9-year-old boy, urban Sri Lanka) (p.147)

Wickenden and Elphick (2019) believe that children have different dreams based on their own preferences and life experiences, which is the recognition of self-preferences. Jenkin et al. (2017) pointed out that dreams reflect thinking and planning for the future and a way to acquire necessary life and career skills through education, enabling disabled children to participate more freely in family and social activities. Children's agency can empower them to have aspirations in their education and have jobs to participate in family life and society and contribute.

"I want to have a coffee plantation like my father. I want to harvest the coffee beans, sell them, and build a big house for my parents and me" (Mellisah, PNG, five years old, hearing and cognitive disabilities, p.370).

Monk et al. (2021) expand on the concepts of "thin" and "thick " agency to analyse how structural factors influence an individual's agency. Monk et al. (2021) show that disabled children's agency depends on how they perceive their educational opportunities in the future; their agency will be diminished if they cannot foresee any chance, and vice versa.

"in future I want to be like others, but because of my status I cannot go back to school" (Alobo, a 15-year-old girl, in Monk et al., 2023, p.11).
"They also said if I study I may also change the situation in my country and may even stop the war in [home country] (Monk et al., 2023, p. 11-12)"

The previous example shows how Alobo's agency was diminished because she foresaw she couldn't go to school; the latter shows how the boy has strong agency as he believes that he will have the chance to study and stop the war.

Thus, disabled children's lives, dreams, and agency are inseparable. The dreams of disabled children show that they want to actively participate and contribute to maintaining the lives of their families, school, and society. It challenges previous stereotypes of them as passive recipients and shows them as active participants in any

context. Ultimately, understanding and supporting disabled children's dreams not only facilitate their participation in society but also promotes their growth and development as independent individuals.

In Obuntu society, a child shows his/her hope which is influenced by their collectivist Obuntu philosophy that more disabled children will have opportunities to go to school so that they will learn more knowledge about disabilities:

“I would want that more children with disabilities join the school with other differences or other disorders from mine so that the other children become more aware of other disabilities’ (child with a disability) (Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2020, p.411)”.

This example may show that social culture may also influence children's agency of aspiration.

5.3.3 Agency as Power Relations

Scholars who conceptualised agency as a product of power relations highlight how disabled children's attempts to exercise their agency could be sidelined in the name of good intentions. They illustrate how despite some disabled children having good communication skills, the power dynamics between adults and children lead to a lack of trust in the children's voices. Consequently, adults make decisions on behalf of the children, believing their decisions to be more rational and suitable for the children than those they might make themselves.

Murahara et al., (2023) share the experience of Grace, a student representative. She is a student with exceptional communication and leadership skills. Unfortunately, she had to interrupt her studies due to health issues, transferring to another school and withdrawing from an ongoing research project (Murahara et al., 2023). Her parents, overly concerned about her health and deeming her physically fragile and prone to illness, imposed strict dietary restrictions on her, only allowing her to consume food prepared at home. Despite Grace not having any food allergies or specific dietary needs and expressing her wish to try school food, her parents did not consider her opinion (Murahara et al., 2023). The fact that Grace became a student representative, giving her a voice among her peers, was an unexpected surprise for her, as she did not think she would be chosen. However, just a few months later, she was forced to transfer schools due to her family's health

concerns, thus losing the opportunity to participate in the second round of interviews for the study, leaving us unaware of her thoughts and emotional changes about the transfer (Murahara et al., 2023).

The case of Grace illustrates that even when disabled children possess clear self-expression and the capacity to serve as student representatives, the distrust and decision-making processes of parents, which overlook the voices of disabled children, can have profound effects on the children. The authors argue that habitual disregard for listening to such cases, as with Grace, can harm many children's futures, as they are forced to compromise their independence and autonomy for the sake of others' interests (Murahara et al., 2023). For disabled children who have a sense of self-identity, not being listened to can reinforce the infantilization of disabled individuals, rendering the entire disability community's voice passive. When disabled children are not accustomed to expressing opinions, making choices, and decisions (Wickenden & KembhaviTam, 2014; Murahara et al., 2023; Wickenden & Elphick, 2016; Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2020; Wang, 2021), their voices and decisions are often replaced by the perspectives of adults.

In a similar case observed by Wang (2021), it was found that disabled students were often placed in resource rooms by their teachers. Wang (2021) argues that disabled children have no agency or choice in this matter. Despite expressing their dissatisfaction with this mode of instruction in their own ways, disabled children could not opt out of attending these resource classes, and some even pretended to forget their schedule to avoid going to the resource room. The educational practices in these rooms were based on the assumption of lower abilities, leading to simpler instructional content and unique decorations. While some children preferred the resource room environment, noting that teachers were kinder and more respectful there, others recognised that the material taught in resource rooms was overly simplistic and disliked being there. Children sent to resource rooms were frequently labelled as "bad kids," thus many did not appreciate being placed there. Some children felt they were missing out on activities in the regular classroom; others did not want to be perceived as bad kids. For instance, Wang (2021) notes:

"Some child participants tried to keep it a secret; for example, during one resource lesson, Xin suddenly crouched down to hide under the table, saying she was freaked

out – it turned out that her classmates were walking past the corridor outside” (p. 2062).

Wang (2021) then explains that Xin’s action was actually to avoid being seen by her classmates. Forced to attend lessons in the resource room, Xin resisted the teacher’s treatment by not letting her classmates see her.

When disabled children experience violence, discrimination, and marginalization in life, they have their own perspectives and coping mechanisms. When facing peer bullies, they also have different solutions: some believe in responding to violence with violence, while others show love to the aggressor.

“Yeah J, I can stand up to him, I will chase him and give him a whack” (a 11-yearold girl says,; I don’t like hitting. I like to love others "(Lak, 14-year-old girl, urban India, who had been teased) (in Wickenden & Elphick, 2014, p.173) .

In summary, disabled children often face challenges from adults' power structures when exercising their agency. These cases highlight that disabled children exercise their agency to navigate different power relations they have with protective parents and discriminatory practices within the education system (Wickenden& Elphick, 2014; Seager et al., 2021; Jenkin et al., 2017). While some children conform to what their parents or teachers say instead of making their own choices (Jenkin et al., 2017), others quietly resist or find their own ways to push back or escape from it (Seager et al., 2021). Additionally, disabled children can exercise their agency when faced with violence and bullying by their peers, choosing to respond non-violently or to fight back.

5.3.4 Agency as Contextual

"Agency as contextual" describes how children exercise their agency within specific familial, social, cultural, and economic contexts. It highlights how the choices and actions of disabled children are shaped by the constraints and possibilities of their particular situations. Many examples below illustrate how disabled children navigate challenges such as poverty, lack of educational opportunities, and varying levels of family support or lack thereof. Scholars' understanding of the agency of disabled children emphasizes the importance of considering the specific context, as different backgrounds can restrict or facilitate the exercise of agency in various ways.

For example, in Indian context, there is shortage of educational infrastructure:

“The school should be on the road at the base of the hill. The school here is not in the good location because everybody has to walk up or down the hill. If school is located on the main road then it is reachable by vehicles” (Pihu, (Rangarajan et al., 2023, p.748).

Lack of educational resources may restrict disabled children’s agency.

Many of the researched countries have lower levels of economic development. They show that disabled children’s lives are impacted by poverty (Grech, 2013; Seager et al., 2021; Dada et al., 2020; Brydges & Mkandawire, 2016; Rangarajan et al., 2023), leading to hunger (Seager et al., 2021, and a lack of basic infrastructure such as schools (Wickenden & Elphick, 2014; Jenkin et al., 2017; Hayes, 2023; Seager et al., 2021; Rangarajan et al., 2023; Brydges & Mkandawire, 2017), resources (Nguyen, 2016; Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Jenkin et al., 2021; Pincock & Jones , 2020; Rangarajan et al., 2023; Brydges & Mkandawire, 2017), health service centers (Wickenden & Elphick, 2014; Monk et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2016; Brydges & Mkandawire, 2017), resulting in numerous limitations and difficulties for disabled children.

Limitations and difficulties linked to material deprivation can make it difficult to understand the voices of disabled children (Seager et al., 2021). In many of the researched countries, barriers to education for disabled children are significantly higher due to a range of factors, including poverty and insufficient school infrastructure (Seager et al., 2021; Jenkin et al., 2017; Wickenden & Elphick, 2016; Grech, 2013). The absence of appropriate educational resources results in children with hearing and speaking impairments being unable to learn sign language, writing, drawing, or other alternative methods of communication. For children who have visual impairments, this deficiency translates into an inability to utilize Braille for reading. If these educational needs are not met through school education, it is equally improbable for family education to address the linguistic learning requirements of children from impoverished backgrounds. Consequently, when interviewing disabled children in the researched countries, researchers encounter significant challenges (see section 5.4.1).

Disabled children within their family units

In several of the researched countries, the family unit is fundamental to society, and the relationship between disabled children and their families is not separate but forms a

continuum (Grech, 2013; Hayes, 2023). This means that the lives of disabled children are inextricably linked with the daily life and work of their families. For instance, in Guatemala (Grech, 2013), Uganda (Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2020), and India (Dada et al., 2020; Wickenden & Elphick, 2014), the interdependence between individuals and their families is particularly pronounced. As Grech (2013) notes, disability is no longer seen as an individual issue but as the responsibility of the entire family.

In Global South countries where resources, hospitals, and health centres are scarce, most support for disabled children comes from their families—including parents, grandparents, siblings, and other relatives. This familial support is the most direct and readily available help they can access and is crucial for maintaining their essential lives.

“Mummy cooks food, she makes tea and she even buys clothes for me. (Lak, 14-year-old girl, urban India, Wickenden & Elphick, 2016, p.172)
Because till today wherever I have to be taken for my foot, baba [grandfather] takes me; Baba has taken care of me most. (Po, 15-year-old girl, rural India, Wickenden & Elphick, 2016, p. 173)”.

These children consider the relations with their family members to be the most important thing in their lives; similarly, in rural areas of Guatemala, the care and responsibility for disabled children are almost entirely undertaken by their families (Grech, 2013). As a result, these children can have a multifaceted impact on their families. For instance, in conditions of extreme poverty, caring for a disabled family member can mean reduced time and opportunities for other family members to engage in paid labour, leading to a decrease in overall family income. Moreover, resources for meeting the basic needs of all family members, such as healthcare, food, and education, may be significantly reduced, plunging the family into deeper poverty (Grech, 2013).

However, children in these families, including those who are disabled, are not merely passive burdens or consumers (Jenkin et al., 2017; Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2020; Wickenden & Elphick, 2016); they often contribute to family agricultural work to the best of their ability, compensating for the labor that other family members cannot provide. At times, disabled children also substitute for family members when they engage in other work or lose their ability to work. In this context, the mutual support and symbiotic relationship between disabled children and their family members are reflected

not only in daily life support but also in jointly shouldering family responsibilities and facing challenges together. This family structure and dynamics, prevalent in the researched countries, highlight the importance of the family as a social support network.

“There is much that is difficult here, much that is really hard, but we survive because we have each other, because we know our environment, and we can all help. My son, even with his physical disability, is helping us so much, he feels good that he is doing so, and we value his input ---- every task that everyone can do is beneficial to us as a collective. (Rigoberto)” (Grech, 2013, p.97).

Hence, the concept of family in collectivist societies is essential, so forming a family has become a crucial responsibility for all children. Having a complete family is also the standard to decide whether they can be viewed as having complete personhood. In the context of Guatemala (Grech, 2013), having this complete personhood means that men need to get married, own a house, have children, and support the family's needs; for women, it involves economically supporting their husbands, bearing and raising children, and maintaining familial and social relationships. Thus, children are expected to learn these skills when they are still young and meet these responsibilities as adults. However, that also means disabled individuals who cannot meet these criteria may not be viewed as having complete personhood, leading to diminished social status and discrimination, and can pose specific challenges and difficulties within this cultural backdrop (Grech, 2013).

Disabled children within the broader society

Disabled children in an Indian school context suffer discrimination, and their agency is represented as they are able to explain what happened in their schooling experience:

“They [classmates] will feel like, if they dictate for you, they won't be able to pass. if they teach you, you will pass them. Sometimes, you will get someone who will dictate for you in the class, they will just dictate like half of the note, and tell you he is tired, and just leave you” (Brydges & Mkandawire, 2017, p.219)”.

Bannink Mbazzi et al. (2020) introduced the core cultural philosophy of Ubuntu, which illustrates how Ugandan society collectively addresses challenges in settings characterised by limited resources and extreme conditions. Within the Ubuntu framework, despite their disabilities, children maintain strong social ties with the community.

“ We have to include all, even children with disabilities and help them to learn like others” (teacher of a child with a disability, in Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2020, p.409);

“Other parents support us; when we tell them about our children’s conditions they understand them and learn how to love them [...] I work at night, it’s my neighbours who help me while I am away” (mother of a child with a disability, in Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2020, p.409);

“I would want that more children with disabilities join the school with other differences or other disorders from mine so that the other children become more aware of other disabilities’ (child with a disability, in Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2020, p.411)”.

These examples demonstrate that within Ubuntu, there is no individualism. In situations of extreme poverty and scarce resources, the lives of disabled children depend on everyone around them, whether neighbours or the parents of other children, regardless of blood relations. Especially from the third example, it is evident that disabled children are not passive recipients waiting only for help. Instead, they are capable of supporting other disabled children and are eager to learn how to assist them. Thus, disabled children are interdependent with the broader society.

This resonates with the example in section 3.5.2, where a disabled child expresses the desire to learn and to help end his country's war, improving the national situation and advocating for peace. This example portrays him as the representative of a group of people eager to engage with a broader context.

Another similar example is in Hayes (2023). The researcher found that all the interviewed disabled children knew the importance of farming knowledge and skills and would like to help their families with farming. Here is an example of Katerine, a 7-year-old with self-care difficulties and low attendance (Hayes, 2023):

Katerine: My dad is a farm worker, and my mum looks after trout and sowing for all of the farm.

Researcher: And do you have to work with them?

Katerine: I help them. I can sow potatoes, clean clothes. I can do everything" (Hayes, 2023, p. 2202).

From their extensive agricultural knowledge, disabled children contribute significantly to their families. Hayes also considers that disabled children love and are willing to protect nature. Apart from enjoying a sense of relaxation and comfort, the natural environment is closely related to family agricultural production, and nature provides them with food, so they also realize the importance of protecting nature. Thus, there is also a very important relation between disabled children with the broader environment.

Interviewer: And in the future, what would you like to do? Would you want to stay where you live or...?

Katerine: Well, I don't know yet, but what I love... where I live, I walk outside and I feel, I feel (puts arms out wide, inhales and exhales deeply, smiles) oh, my land! [ai, mi tierra!] There it is so peaceful, and this is my favourite.

Dada et al., (2020) explored India and South Africa, both being lower-middleincome countries with cultures emphasizing collectivism, collective norms, and values, stemming from interconnected daily activities of families and communities. Collectivist cultures shape the perception that individuals are inseparable parts of society. However, the collectivist cultures of India and South Africa differ, with Indian society maintaining a caste system, while South Africa's divisions are primarily racial and economic (Dada et al., 2020). In India, the caste system and beliefs lead to disabilities being considered inauspicious or punishment for sins in a previous life, resulting in discrimination and exclusion of disabled people. In South Africa, Disabled children are seen differently, which depends on the specific country; such as in Uganda, disabled children are equally seen as social members, but in some other countries, they are generally seen as useless and social burden (Dada et al., 2020; Bannink Mbazzi et al, 2020).

It should be understood that the agency of disabled children is not static or unchanging; it varies in response to changes in the surrounding environment. The examples in this section illustrate that although poverty is a common issue in Global South countries, political systems, economic policies, and cultures can lead to significant differences in the childhoods of disabled children. Monk et al. (2023) argue that agency is determined by the opportunities available for social participation. When disabled children find themselves in an environment extremely lacking in resources and unable to receive any societal support— especially when they anticipate the absence of support—their agency is considered relatively "thin" or diminished. However, even under such conditions, if they have access to significant social support, such as educational opportunities, their agency is strengthened or becomes "thicker".

5.4 Whose Voices? Whose Agency?

This section emphasises the complexities of understanding the voices of disabled children, adding challenges to capturing their agency, where communication barriers such as language differences and non-traditional communication methods are key issues. Intermediaries such as family members or local translators are often crucial for bridging the gap between children's expressions and researchers' understanding. However, this

process often requires researchers to critically reflect on how adult power relations influence their interpretations of children's voices. This section questions how researchers can truly grasp the voices of disabled children without insights provided by those familiar with them, prompting a reassessment of how their agency and voice are understood in DCCS.

5.4.1 A Mediated Agency

While the articles reviewed are in general agreement that it is necessary to acknowledge disabled children's capacity to make decisions and express opinions and encourage exploration in this area (Wickenden & Elphick, 2016), several pieces noted difficulties in identifying the agency of disabled children, with communication barriers as a representative issue. This problem manifests in multiple aspects: firstly, there are language barriers, including the obstacles related to indigenous languages of different countries, sign language, and other alternative communication methods (Jenkin et al., 2017; Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Pincock & Jones, 2020; Brydges & Mkandawire, 2016; Seager et al., 2021); secondly, disabled children's expressions, gestures, and body language are also difficult to understand (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Murahara et al., 2023; Seager et al., 2021). This means that it is inevitable for intermediaries, such as family members and local translators, to be engaged in interpreting disabled children's agency.

In their study, Jenkin et al., (2017) highlighted fourteen instances where children initially did not understand certain questions, demonstrating the particular challenges of translating concepts such as "dreams" and "hopes" for children in specific countries. This example not only highlights the importance of thorough consideration and learning of specific vocabulary used during the translation process in interviews but also illustrates the dangers of using inappropriate words when interviewing children; the research results will deviate from the real situation.

In Murahara et al.'s (2023) study, a student representative, Vanessa, has intellectual and physical disabilities and can only reply to non-verbal cues for communication. She cannot participate in traditional interviews. Her communication needs to be interpreted by her mother, Fabia, whose understanding of Vanessa's expressions and body language comes from a longterm, in-depth relationship (Murahara et al., 2023). During bedtime—a time usually reserved for storytelling and opening up—Fabia noticed a change in Vanessa's emotional state: her daughter was unusually talkative and agitated, hinting at possible bullying at school (Murahara et al., 2023). Without Fabia's insightful

interpretation of Vanessa's behavior, both researchers and her daily teachers might not recognize the challenges Vanessa faces at school.

In Jenkin et al.'s study, (2017), when asked, "What is important in their lives now?", a boy with hearing and communication impairments answered the question by beating a stick on the table. His mother interpreted this behavior:

"These loud noises are important to him because he thinks he is beating a drum. He likes the guitar...and has learned to play the strings more gently rather than just banging it" (Jenkin et al., 2017, p.369) .

The authors describe this child's behavior as highlighting the importance of entertainment, leisure, and cultural life for disabled children. Many children talked about music, singing, sports, customs, and church ceremonies because these activities and places allow children to make friends and play with them (Dada et al., 2020).

The examples demonstrate that even if children do not possess traditional communication abilities, adults can understand disabled children's perspectives and life experiences through long-term cohabitation and observations. However, family members are not always the best interpreters of disabled children's agency. Seager et al. (2021) highlight a complication of involving family intermediaries to hear the voices of disabled children: during their quantitative research in Bangladesh and Ethiopia, they found that some disabled children were reluctant to discuss their disabilities in the presence of their parents.

These examples raise questions about whether researchers who may not have the opportunity to spend a long time with disabled children can truly understand the connotations behind their expressions and actions. Is it that every time children manipulate toys with a happy expression, it represents that they are playing? Or are they trying to express their thoughts through manipulating objects? Additionally, the movements and demeanor of children with severe disabilities often require parents, teachers, or doctors who know them well to act as an intermediary for interpretation. The question remains whether and how researchers can obtain children's authentic voices, especially when their voices are mediated by parents, teachers, or surrounding

caregivers' interpretations. The unequal relationship between children's voices is another important consideration when analyzing and studying children's voices, to what extent are adult voices replacing children's thoughts, I think this question should be considered critically.

While some scholars see removing these intermediaries as a solution, Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam (2014) highlight how the long-term silencing of disabled children might still lead to their internalizing adult opinion and expectations as their own. Disabled children often know what is expected of them or what they are not allowed to say or do. The long experience of being silenced leads to children not being accustomed to expressing opinions, making choices, and decisions (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Murahara et al., 2023; Wickenden & Elphick, 2016; Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2020; Wang, 2021). Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam (2014) discussed how local researchers observed that children liked "saying what they thought a 'good Sri Lankan child should say' (p.13)." One of the teachers involved in the research was skeptical about the possibility of the researchers obtaining genuine insights from the children: her understanding of the children led her to believe that the children would provide answers they thought adults wanted to hear. Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam (2014) attribute this phenomenon to the imbalanced power relationship between adults and disabled children, especially within the context of specific cultural factors. As a result, disabled children's voices and decisions are often replaced by adults' perspectives.

5.4.2 Can Researchers Really Understand the Voices and Experiences of Disabled Children from the Global South?

For children who cannot use any form of verbal language, sign language or other alternative communication methods, there is a significant communication barrier when researchers want to research their childhoods and related social issues from their language and perspectives. This leads to the impression that disabled children are fundamentally incapable of expressing or providing any useful information (Wang, 2021; Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Seager et al., 2021).

A case in point is when disabled students show violent behaviors. An interviewed teacher in Murahara et al.'s (2023) study views the disabled student's violent behavior as asking for help:

"He will find a way to express himself, maybe it will be through a pinch, or by pulling your hair, or by hugging you all the time, these are forms for him to show something. That's why, when some students show some violent expressions in the classroom, the first thing that comes to my mind, that is a cry for help (Gisele, Interview 1.2 in Murahara et al, 2023, p.214)".

This presents a critical question for researchers: How can they access and interpret the voices or nonverbal information of children who lack traditional communication abilities?

A Chinese researcher on the childhood of disabled children, Wang (2021), believes that although children from the Global South are excluded and marginalized in research due to these misunderstandings and the actual communication barriers present, researchers can still convey meaning, understanding, and needs through other possible means of communication. Additionally, by observing expressions, gestures, and body language and relying on explanations from teachers and parents, researchers can understand the voices and experiences of these children.

5.4.3 Do researchers really believe in disabled children's agency? Researching the lives and experiences of disabled children from their own perspectives and voices presents challenges. These challenges stem from the difficulty in accurately capturing and interpreting the true intentions and expressions of disabled children. Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam (2014) argue that beyond the children's own intellectual disabilities or verbal impairments, these difficulties are primarily due to cultural, linguistic, and power relationship barriers between researchers and participants. Stereotypes about disabled children often lead to the external assumption that they have nothing to say; unequal power relations and adults' distrust towards children have historically oriented research from an adult perspective, neglecting the children's viewpoints. The immaturity of past research methods has led children to defer questions to their parents or others, resulting in passivity and learned helplessness, unaccustomed to speaking up for themselves. However, it is precisely because of these reasons that directly accessing children's voices is even more crucial.

Of the fifteen pieces of literature I reviewed, eight employed participatory research methods. These studies span a variety of locations, including Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam's work (2014) in India and Sri Lanka, Wickenden and Elphick's (2016) study in Uganda, Nguyen's (2016) research in Vietnam, Jenkin et al.'s (2017) exploration in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, Pincock and Jones's (2020) investigation in Jordan and Ethiopia, Bannink Mbazzi et al.'s (2020) project in Uganda, Wang's (2021) study in China, and Hayes's (2023) research in Colombia. While all the sampled research papers claimed that disabled children have agency, disabled children have not really participated in the process of analyzing data; only in the collection of data for the research (Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam).

Participatory research is a methodological approach that seeks to place the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of disabled children at the forefront of the research process (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Jenkin et al., 2017). This approach is fundamentally designed to expand the representation of disabled children's voices within academic and policy discussions and highlights their capacity to contribute valuable insights into their own lives. One of the core objectives of participatory research is to utilize various tools and methods to explore and eliminate the barriers to listening to children (Nguyen, 2016; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). This includes creating accessible means for children to express themselves, whether through art, storytelling, digital media, or other innovative techniques that cater to their diverse abilities and preferences. By doing so, participatory research aims to foster a more inclusive environment where the voices of all children, regardless of their disabilities, are heard and valued (Pincock & Jones, 2020). It confronts misconceptions about disabled children as either having nothing of significance to say or being unreliable informants by demonstrating the competence and agency of disabled children in articulating their experiences and viewpoints. Central to this approach is the emphasis on direct interaction and engagement with disabled children, empowering them with basic human rights such as the right to participate and to have their voices heard (Nguyen, 2016). This not only acknowledges their agency but also respects their agency as individuals capable of influencing research that affects their lives.

However, while disabled children can be involved in the entire research process in participatory research, it is notable that none of the articles fully involved them; essentially, all studies limited their participation to the collection of data, excluding them

from the analysis and conclusion phases. This inevitably raises concerns about whether the voices and capabilities of disabled children are genuinely trusted. The unequal power relationships in these disabled children's studies thus need to be further addressed by researchers.

5.5 Summary

To conclude this chapter, it thoroughly analyses how disabled children in the Global South display agency and the constraints they face in exercising it. The agency is described in 15 selected articles as freedoms of expression, participation, and action. However, due to poverty, these children face barriers such as a lack of assistive facilities and educational infrastructure, leading to discrimination and exclusion from activities they wish to partake in. Furthermore, the agency of disabled children is context-dependent and dynamic, varying with different situations and often limited by adult power relations. Disabled children have dreams often linked to education and employment, but their agency weakens when they perceive a lack of opportunities. During research, language barriers necessitate careful translation, particularly for children who communicate non-verbally or speak indigenous languages. Researchers often depend on adults like family members and teachers for translation, but these power dynamics can prevent the accurate capture of the children's real thoughts. This issue presents a challenge in participatory research, as technical difficulties or mistrust by researchers can prevent disabled children from fully engaging, suggesting a need for further discussion.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore the agency of disabled children in the Global South within the framework of Disability and Childhood Studies, drawing on theories of childhoods and agency from the Global North. I formulated three research questions to guide this inquiry: 1) How do selected journal articles construct and represent the agency of disabled children in the Global South? 2) What specific knowledge claims about disabled children in the Global South and their agency emerge from these constructions? 3) What implications do these constructions and knowledge claims have for efforts to

promote the agency of disabled children in China? For this qualitative research, I conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate how discourses of agency, voices, and rights are constructed in fifteen articles. I explore how the agency embedded in their voices is both constrained by power relations and stimulated. In this chapter, I will summarise my findings related to the three research questions. After the final summary, I will discuss the limitations of this research and offer some suggestions for future research.

6.1 Summarizing Findings

Disabled children's childhood study emphasises that these children are informative and active social agents who can speak for themselves, articulate their opinions, and impact society through their voices and actions. Journal articles and book chapters that conducted empirical research on the childhoods and voices of disabled children, alongside the children themselves, coconstructed the notion of children's agency. Compared with the theory from the Global North, theories in the Global South constructed through diverse contexts, are narrow, dynamic and contextual. However, similarly, disabled children's voices and agency are not always trusted by adults as they cannot access the whole process of research. Thus, more efforts and consideration are needed in further research.

6.1.1 Conclusions about RQ 1: How do the selected journal papers construct and represent disabled children's agency in the Global South?

Agency is not static but dynamic, depending on disabled children's situation, which can be limiting or facilitating. Building on "social agent" (Mayall, 2002) and "social actor" (James & Prout, 2015) theories, the agency of disabled children in the Global South is differently constructed within their countries' political, economic, cultural, and belief situations. Researchers can further understand how disabled children's agency works by analysing their actions, voices, aspirations, and needs. Dreams help disabled children be aware of their preferences for the future, and drive them to engage in various activities. It also helps researchers shift our focus from disability issues to disabled children's visions for the future to understand what they want.

Through the selected literature, we learned that disabled children in the Global South support their families by helping them with agricultural activities and household work.

In school, they study hard to acquire knowledge; in society, they work to support themselves and their families. The children expressed a desire to sing, dance and play with friends, to learn and participate in work, to have a partner and children, and to be cared for and listened to by others. The freedom to express and to be heard, and the freedom to participate in school and social activities—is important for these children. However, current research suggests that there are challenges in listening to disabled children. For example, due to lack of education, disabled children cannot write or draw to communicate; some can only use gestures or other communication methods, which increases the difficulty for researchers to interpret their opinions; some countries only use indigenous languages. These communication barriers require third-party mediation, usually a close adult figure, but unequal power relations with adults can result in children's voices being replaced by adults.

Additionally, due to the constraints of poverty in the Global South, the lack of accessibility, inadequate infrastructure such as schools and health care centres, and socio-cultural and religious biases against disabled persons, disabled children are often seen as incomplete and sinners and suffer from discrimination, exclusion, bullying or even sexual assault, which limits their freedom of mobility, expression and participation. Therefore, the conclusion can be drawn on Global Southern disabled children's agency as: agency constructed by different social structures, economics and cultures, influenced by power relations and their prediction of the future. Everyone has agency, which is shaped and manifests its power differently everywhere. It is necessary for our adults to reflect on how children's power is suppressed and what we neglect from children's world. In particular, the agency of disabled children in the Global South has been invisible in the international lens, and people have strong stereotypes of them, considering them as needy and vulnerable. However, what we should know is that we overlook not the voice of the weak but another perspective on viewing this world, the impact that children have on this world, and how they exercise their agency to confront the struggle and suppression from this world.

6.1.2 Conclusions about RQ 2: What particular knowledge claims about disabled children in the Global South and their agency are made through these constructions?

These constructions of agency highlight that the agency of disabled children is contextually and diversely constructed, showcasing how they actively shape their own childhoods by confronting and navigating challenging situations.

Consequently, the pictures of childhoods are diverse.

These constructions of agency demonstrate how every culture and political system constructs its own version of childhood and the inappropriateness of regulating children's growth with a global standard when childhood does not have a standardised pattern but varies according to specific social, cultural, and political circumstances. For instance, due to differences in social systems and cultures, children in the Global North are protected by law and child labour is prohibited. However, it is common for disabled children in the Global South to help their families with some housework and farm work. In such collectivist societies, disabled children develop a sense of social collectiveness and consciously use their knowledge to help other disabled children and other members of society. Rather than purely exploitation, child labour can sometimes give disabled children in the Global South more opportunities to make their own decisions and choices than children from the Global North who have a single environment and choices.

The selected papers' representation of disabled children's agency also provided evidence that disabled children are able to express their own experiences growing up and see the world from a unique perspective. They made clear the fact that how these children describe their lives, perceive problems, and see themselves in the different environments they grow up in are invaluable source of information. Communicating with disabled children and understanding their life experiences is not only giving them the right to speak, but also a way to gain a deeper understanding of social diversity. Their voices deserve to be heard. However, disabled children face many obstacles in interacting freely with society and participating in various activities. These problems are not the children's own problems but society's underestimation of their abilities and the lack of mechanisms for expressing opinions and participation. Society should reevaluate its views on disabled children and provide more support and convenience so that these children can better integrate into society and realise their potential.

For disabled children in the Global South, vulnerability is not a barrier to demonstrating agency but can be a key enabler. By understanding and supporting their needs, society can promote their development and participation more effectively. Vulnerability can inspire society's attention and support for disabled children, further promoting improvements in social structures and policies to accommodate their needs.

Through this, disabled children prove to be active participants with significant potential, contributing meaningfully to their families and pursuing their aspirations. With this understanding, it becomes crucial to reassess how we perceive disabled children, recognising their inherent value and strength.

6.1.3 What implications do these constructions and knowledge claims have for efforts to promote disabled children's agency in China?

Overall, the findings suggest that it is crucial for the Chinese government, scholars and public to value the importance of disabled children's participation in various activities in school and society. Differences often arise from the filters through which people view problems. When we change our view of disabled children to that of valuing their contributions, abandoning inherent prejudices and stereotypes, and adopting a mobility-based perspective and childhood theoretical framework, we may see a different picture: these children are no longer a burden to society, and not passive beings, but individuals full of abilities, potential, and dreams.

As discussed in the methodology section, academic articles influence policy and implementation. Chinese scholars need to focus their attention on the theoretical research of the childhood and mobility of disabled children in China, especially in the context of policies and practices in Learning Resource Classes (LRC). We must first reassess our view of disabled children, considering whether we see them as active social agents and recognize their distinct impact on social structures. Scholars need to rethink how disabled children are depicted in Chinese educational policies, moving away from medical discourses such as "deficit" and charity discourses that portray them as "helpless" and "in need." Instead, this portrayal should be rewritten in a social discourse, reflecting on the barriers and limitations that exist within current policies and practices that hinder disabled children's participation in learning and activities. We should

encourage more disabled children to participate in school activities fully, value their views and suggestions on issues within the school and educational system, and listen to the voices and opinions of disabled children.

As the findings demonstrate, although disabled children can communicate through drawing, writing, and photography as mediation, mastering these skills requires schools to focus on assisting them during educational activities. Additionally, due to the excessive pressures faced by teachers and the educational system, there is often no time to consider providing better support and assistance for disabled children to learn and master suitable forms of expression. Besides helping them to express themselves, it is also important to consider establishing mechanisms to listen to disabled children. This brings to mind the study by Muarahara et al., (2023), where disabled students were empowered to serve as student representatives, developing their abilities in expression, organization, and negotiation. Disabled students also require such mechanisms to express themselves, ensure their voices are heard and appreciate their perspectives on identifying and addressing gaps within the educational system. The Chinese government also needs to increase educational opportunities and address the issue of excessive pressures within the education system, to better integrate disabled children into mainstream schooling.

As the research findings, it is suggested that disabled children and their families are interdependent, also children's family members can be their mediated agency. Thus the unit and power of family should be underscored. Attention should be paid to the families of disabled children to understand the needs of these families and to provide training to family members to help them better understand and cope with disability-related measures and skills and how to support their children's participation in society and development effectively. Family-based psychological and material support, financial assistance, and family counseling services should be provided. At the same time, mechanisms should be established to listen to the voices and needs of families with disabilities and involve them in social advocacy and policy formulation.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Academic Research

This study found that current research on disabled children in the Global South is primarily supported by scholars and academic institutions in the Global North. This may

be due to the lack of resources in the Global South. The work of Global South researchers should be valued, and funding should be increased for Global South academic institutions to encourage more research or journals published from Global South.

In Section 5.4.2, I raised the question of whether researchers can truly understand the voices and needs of disabled children. Understanding the nonverbal language (such as gestures) of disabled children is challenging. Given the interdependent relationships between family members and children, parents can often help researchers with better understand their disabled children. Therefore, it is recommended that parents be used as informants in research. However, parents' interpretations must be critically analysed. This requires researchers to closely observe the interactions between parents and children.

In establishing a good relationship with a disabled child, the researcher may need a longer time to establish trust and consider using multiple research tools to conduct multi-angle examinations, such as children's voice recordings, drawings, photos, and data provided by parents. The consistency between these data should be checked. If there is a contradiction, the reasons need to be reconsidered.

Finally, disabled children can be involved as collaborators in participatory research. As highlighted by Bannink Mbazzi et al. (2020), the wisdom and examples provided in the concept of ubuntu remind us that disabled children have a profound understanding of their own conditions, the challenges they face in life, and their emotions. They also possess the willingness and ability to assist other children. Therefore, in participatory research, disabled children can be involved as collaborators to help interpret the thoughts and life situations of their peers. Additionally, the Disabled Children's Childhood Studies (DCCS) as discussed by Curran & Runswick-Cole (2014), affirm that disabled children have their own perspectives and interpretations of events. Understanding how disabled children interpret the experiences of others can teach adults to see issues from the viewpoints of disabled children and to appreciate their insights.

6.3 Limitations of the Thesis

As a new researcher, I may lack extensive experience in analyzing data and presenting results. To overcome this, I followed Mullet's research guidance (2018) for beginners, carefully following each step to ensure no important details are missed in the literature.

This study examines the agency of disabled children in Southern countries through secondary data analysis of existing academic literature. The effectiveness of this approach depends on the quality and scope of the original research. Recognizing that each author's perspective could bias how disabled children's agency is depicted, the study employs several strategies to mitigate potential biases: thorough examination of the research background and cultural context to accurately understand the authors' intentions; cross-cultural comparisons to include diverse interpretations of agency, enhancing the richness of the analysis; and critical discourse analysis to identify and reduce biases in the original data, aiming for a more objective reassessment of the findings.

Additionally, due to the background and timing of the literature, secondary data may not fully reflect the current or unique circumstances of different groups in the Global South. To minimize the impact of time-related biases on authors' understandings of children's agency, I selectively used only literature from the past decade.

Furthermore, studying the agency of disabled children in China requires more empirical research from within the country to provide specific and practical suggestions for inclusive education and studies on disabled children's childhoods.

6.4 Implications for Future Research

Firstly, I believe that research on disabled children in the Global South still needs some more effort. There are many challenges in representing the agency of disabled children due to their conditions being more complex than in the Global North. However, through my research, I recognise that the potential of disabled children is undeniable; they possess numerous strategies to cope with life's challenges. How disabled children's abilities and agency are elicited by their environment and how we can facilitate their agency are still topics worthy of discussion.

Research on the childhood and agency theories of disabled children in China has been largely overlooked. This neglect, I believe, overlooks the intrinsic power of disabled children, how they influence social structures, and how they live in China's unique environment. Studying their narratives and their childhoods could bring new insights into research. Moreover, there are significant differences between urban and rural settings in China, which are reflected in the lives and childhoods of disabled children, potentially highlighting societal issues that need addressing. Integrating research on the childhoods of disabled children with inclusive education studies could also facilitate the advancement of policies and practices in inclusive education in China. The existing gaps in research guide the direction for Chinese scholars.

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