

## **A Conceptual Framework for Group Empowerment: Adolescents with Disabilities in the Urban Slums of North India**

Sonia Gulati, Margo Paterson, Jennifer Medves, Rebecca Luce-Kapler  
*Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada*

**Introduction.** Given the importance placed on participation and empowerment in global health initiatives, the perspective of young people with disabilities has emerged as a vital field of study.

**Objectives.** This critical ethnographic study gained insight into the perspectives of adolescents with disabilities (aged 12 to 18 years) who were affiliated with a community-based rehabilitation program in the urban slums of North India. This study highlighted the collective voices of adolescents with disabilities about their rehabilitation challenges, explored how the culture influenced the rehabilitation challenges faced by adolescents, and supported collaborative work among adolescents with and without disabilities that informed organizational activities.

**Methods** Fieldwork was conducted from January to May 2005 and October 2006 to March 2007 with 21 adolescents with disabilities, 11 adolescents without disability, and 10 community-based team members. Considering the socio-cultural context and adolescents' age, disability, education and/or lack of opportunity, multiple methods were utilized to collect data to ensure that adolescents could comfortably express their views.

**Results.** A conceptual framework, the 'Adolescent Group Empowerment Pyramid,' was developed which illustrates one process for empowering adolescents with disabilities and their peers without disabilities within a community setting. Group empowerment involves adolescents with disabilities working towards taking greater control over their rehabilitation while collaborating with their peers. The 'group' concept provided the foundation for the framework as adolescents viewed the group setting as enjoyable and effective. Three areas associated with meaningful group empowerment included: group participation, group demonstration, and group recognition.

**Conclusion.** Participants promoted a more liberal approach to empowering adolescents that embraced the notion of collaboration (rather than competition), interdependence (rather than independence), shared benefits (rather than individual gain), and the interaction of community groups. This approach promotes a harmonious balance between empowerment and the community, rather than an aggressive approach to gaining power over or from others.

**Contribution to Occupational Therapy.** Group empowerment encourages adolescents to collectively work for social and occupational justice. To ensure the sustainability of community-based rehabilitation initiatives, programs must be aware of personally meaningful factors that empower and maintain the interest of the target population.