RESEARCH ARTICLE

ATTITUDE TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: UNDERSTANDING PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES

[1]*Amrutha, P. and [2]Dr. Sathyamurthi, K.

[1]Research scholar, Department of Social Work, Madras School of Social Work, Chennai,
[2]Associate Professor and Head of the Department, Department of Social Work (Aided), Madras School of Social Work, Chennai

ABSTRACT

Disability stands out as a significant barrier to education globally, particularly affecting children who are among the most vulnerable groups. Despite sharing the same aspirations for quality education and career opportunities as their peers, children with disabilities often encounter various systemic obstacles that impede their educational access. These hurdles range from inaccessible school infrastructure to a lack of trained educators and appropriate learning resources. Moreover, societal biases and misunderstandings about disabilities can further marginalize these children, curtailing their social interactions and developmental prospects. In response to these challenges, inclusive education has emerged as the preferred approach to educating children with special needs, reflecting the belief that every child deserves equitable access to education and learning opportunities. Inclusive education entails providing all students, including those with special educational needs, with equal opportunities to learn and participate in mainstream classrooms alongside their typically developing counterparts. The success of inclusion mainly depends upon the attitude of parents towards it. This conceptual paper focuses on delving into the attitude of parents of typically developing children as well as the parents of children with special needs towards inclusive education.

INTRODUCTION

UNESCO defines inclusion in education as *"a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning"*(UNESCO, 2005)*.* The notions of social justice and equal rights are central to the democratic interpretation of inclusion. It revolves around the initiatives directed towards integrating those who have been marginalized and ensuring their participation in various spheres of social functioning. 'Integration' involves placing students with disabilities, either partially or completely, within regular schools, whereas 'inclusion' goes beyond mere physical presence. Within and beyond the school setting, inclusion aims to alter values, attitudes, policies, and practices (Polat, 2010). Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations (1948) recognized inclusion in education as a fundamental human right. The continuous endeavour to ensure universal access to basic education commenced with Article 26 and was subsequently reinforced by various pivotal declarations, including: Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 by UN, The World Declaration Education for All,1990, Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action on Special Needs Education (World Conference on Special Needs Education, 1994), The Dakar Framework for Action, 2000, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2007 (UN) and the Education for All (EFA) flagship Education for

Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion, 2010 by UNESCO. Special education originated as an alternative method to assist in the education of individuals with disabilities. It involves specialized instruction, support services, and individualized education plans tailored to address specific learning challenges. The emphasis in special education is on providing interventions and accommodations to help learners overcome barriers to their education. While this approach has been instrumental in ensuring access to education for many individuals with disabilities, it has also been critiqued for potentially segregating students from the mainstream educational system and perpetuating stigmas associated with disability (Hornby, 2014). Integrated education emerged as a response to the limitations of special education by advocating for the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classroom settings to the greatest extent possible. In integrated education, students with diverse abilities learn together in inclusive environments, supported by collaborative teaching practices, universal design for learning, and individualized support services. The focus shifts from segregating students based on their abilities to creating environments that celebrate diversity and promote meaningful interactions among all learners. Integrated education aims to foster a sense of belonging and acceptance among students with disabilities while promoting social cohesion and understanding among their peers (Sharma & Deppeler, 2005).

In recent times, inclusive education, an approach or a system to educate students with special educational needs in mainstream schools, has been accepted globally as an alternative for special education. Inclusive education entails embracing the diversity of humanity and embracing all children and adults as equal participants in an educational environment. It involves valuing and facilitating the complete involvement of everyone within standard educational contexts. Inclusive education necessitates acknowledging and safeguarding the rights of all individuals, appreciating human diversity as a valuable asset inherent in all human settings and interactions (Cologon, 2013). In practical terms, inclusive education aims to increase the access and participation of all the students in the educational setting. Facilitating inclusive education necessitates a detailed transformation of education systems, encompassing legislation, policies, funding mechanisms, administration, curriculum design, teaching methods, and monitoring practices (UN, 2016). In actual situations, it becomes uncertain whether the anticipated change has taken place due to a multitude of challenges concerning attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, systems, policies, administration, and more.

METHODOLOGY

An extensive search of literatures using the keywords parental attitudes, inclusion, children with special needs, typically developing children and disability was performed in various databases to gain insights about the attitude of parents towards inclusive education during the months of April and May.

Attitude of parents towards inclusive education: Positive attitudes appear to be crucial for the effective implementation of inclusion initiatives (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Throughout the implementation phase, various groups of stakeholders are involved, including students, professionals such as regular and special needs educators, psychologists, school administrators, external support entities like social and youth welfare organizations, recreational facilities, as well as parents (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). While research on the attitudes of teachers and students has significantly expanded in recent years, parents have unfortunately received comparatively less attention. The significance of parental support and engagement is widely acknowledged as pivotal in promoting inclusive education. Moreover, to conduct a thorough evaluation, it appears necessary to include the perspective of parents, providing an external viewpoint on inclusive education practices. Hence, this paper aims to examine the attitudes and perceptions of parents, placing them at the core of its investigation.

A study conducted by Naskar and Upadhyay (2019) found that majority of the parents of typically developing children are in favour of inclusion of children with special needs in their child's class. They support the fact that children placed in regular classrooms derive greater benefits compared to those in special schools. However, certain parents of children without disabilities expressed concerns regarding the safety of their child in an inclusive classroom, fearing that the teacher might implement a modified curriculum for the entire class. Additionally, they worry that their non-disabled child might receive less individual attention, as the teacher may allocate all extra time to the child with a disability. Furthermore, research indicates that there is no distinction in attitudes toward inclusion in education between rural and urban parents.

However, a notable difference was observed between male and female parents, with female parents exhibiting a more positive attitude towards inclusion in education than their male counterparts (Naskar & Upadhyay, 2019). Bhuyan and Joshi (2022) reported that, in general, most of the parents possess positive attitude towards the inclusion of children with special needs in general classroom settings. The study compared the attitude of male and female parents as well as parents in urban and rural areas. No significant variations in the attitude in terms of sex was noted. Although male parents seemed to have more favourable attitude than female parents. When compared in terms of locality, parents from urban areas exhibited more positive attitude than parents from rural areas (Bhuyan & Joshi, 2022). According the findings of Abu-Hamour and Muhaidat (2014), parents who perceived inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder negatively did outnumber those who perceived it positively on a slight scale. These parents were of the opinion that both the students and school administrators are not ready for the inclusion. Alongside, some parents worry that their children may get ill-treated or harmed in the regular classrooms, which make them hesitant towards accepting the inclusive education approach. Parents' educational qualification appeared to have an impact on the attitude towards inclusion. Parents with higher educational background were more supportive and willing to include their children with ASD in regular schools. Another finding was that parents with relatively more negative perception towards inclusion hold the view that regular classrooms are not fit enough to include their children with low-function ASD (Abu-Hamour & Muhaidat, 2014).

Disability type of the child may influence parents' attitude towards inclusion. It was found that while the attitude towards the inclusion of children with physical disabilities turned positive, attitude towards children with mental disabilities and behavioural problems happened to be negative. Parents of children attending inclusive classes hold more positive view of inclusion than parents of children attending regular classes. Thus, experience of inclusion has direct correlation with the attitude towards inclusive education (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). The findings of the research by Arjmandnia and Kakabaraee (2011) indicated that 80% of the parents are in favour of inclusion of their children who are slow learners. Improved social compliance and interpersonal relations are the important factors for which parents give emphasize. Socio-economic status of the family does have an impact on the acceptance of inclusive education (ARJMANDNIA & KAKABARAEE, 2011). Sharma and Trory (2019) also concluded that both the parents of children with special needs and typically developing children were supportive of inclusion and its implementation. Social development of the children was identified to be the key benefit of inclusion by the parents of typically developing children. But they did express their worries about their children getting frightened by the behavioural problems of children with special needs and teachers spending more time with these children, giving less attention to their typically developing children. At the same time, social acceptance and academic skills development were identified by the parents of children with special needs as the major advantage of inclusion. Both the parents advocated for teachers' training to successfully integrate children with disabilities in the regular classrooms (Sharma & Trory, 2019).

Torgbenu et al. (2018) argue that lack of knowledge about inclusive education has been the major reason behind parents' varied attitude towards inclusion. Willingness of parents to enrol their children in inclusive classrooms can turn out to be the major factor deciding the sustainability of inclusive education (Torgbenu, Oginni, Opoku, Nketsia, & Agyei-Okyere , 2018). According to Gupta and Buwade (2013), social acceptance of children along with instructional quality and support services availability seem to puzzle parental views, thus creating uncertainty. Another significant observation made by the researchers was student's age appeared to be a critical factor in shaping the attitude of parents. The results of this study showed that the concept of inclusive education appeals more to parents of younger children, compared to parents whose children are already adults (Gupta & Buwade, 2013).

DISCUSSION

The involvement of parents of children with special needs has been highlighted as a significant driving force for the promotion of inclusive education across various nations. Parents, as primary stakeholders in their children's educational journey, wield substantial influence in shaping policies and practices surrounding inclusive education. Their perspectives and beliefs not only reflect societal norms and values but also directly impact the successful implementation of inclusive initiatives. But only limited studies have explored the attitude of parents towards inclusion. In general, both parents of children with special needs and those with typically developing children exhibit either positive or neutral stances on inclusion. Several studies have explored the correlation between socio-economic status and parental attitudes. While some studies suggest that female parents tend to hold more positive attitudes than male counterparts (Torgbenu, Oginni, Opoku, Nketsia, & Agyei-Okyere , 2018), but this is contradicted by (Bhuyan & Joshi, 2022). Thus, the gender-based divergence in attitudes is not conclusive. Regarding parental educational qualifications, the majority of studies argue that parents with higher educational attainment are more supportive of inclusive education, possibly due to their deeper understanding of inclusion and higher aspirations for their children's futures. Parental attitudes also vary depending on the type of disability. Inclusion of children with physical disabilities is widely endorsed, whereas inclusion of those with behavioural or mental disabilities is viewed with skepticism (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).Parents of children with significant support needs often hold ambivalent views toward inclusive education (Leyser & Kirk, 2007). They express their concerns about the safety of their child, capacity of the school to promote inclusion, inadequate training of teaching professionals, social exclusion of children and lack of resources and support services (Bennett, DeLuca, & Bruns, 1997). Some parents argue that the inclusion of students with behavioural problems would be difficult if the school lack sufficient staff members to minimise the dropping of lessons and instruction time (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). Parents of typically developing childrenalso acknowledge the importance of integrating children with disabilities in regular classrooms (Stevens & Wurf, 2018). This group of parents has received less attention in inclusion studiesdue to the focus on children with special needs and their parents. Most of the studies on parents of typically developing children prove that, they are in favour of inclusion policy, sometimes more than that of parents of children with special needs. Additionally, some of the parents believe that the inclusion can result in improved self-worth and interpersonal relationships.They consider the social benefits of inclusion as the greatest advantage of inclusion (Peck, Gallucci, & Schwartz, 2004). But they are also worried if the children with special needs would monopolize teacher's attention and their child's individual progress would be hampered in an inclusive classroom. This concern has been raised by most of the studies. They also fear that if their child would develop inappropriate behaviour. However, parents of typically developing children who had direct experience of inclusive environment are in favour of inclusion and appraised positive changes in their child's academic progress (Innes & Diamond, 1999). The lack of awareness about inclusion and the absence of structured inclusive policies contribute to neutral or negative parental attitudes toward inclusive education. It is crucial for success stories of inclusion to reach all parents, and governments must prioritize transforming more regular classrooms into inclusive ones by providing adequate training to teaching professionals, shaping inclusive spaces, and raising awareness about the importance of inclusive education among the general public.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, parental attitudes significantly influence the advancement of inclusive education. While many parents recognize its importance, variations exist based on socio-economic status, education, and their child's disability. Concerns, particularly among parents of children with significant needs, highlight challenges in implementation. Implementing inclusion poses a challenge for schools, necessitating a reconsideration of organizational limitations and a shift towards embracing change. Inclusive practices can be effectively implemented with the support of parents, who can serve as strong allies both within the community and in the political sphere. That's why understanding the attitude of parents towards inclusion is crucial. Their active involvement not only enhances collaboration between schools and the community but also influences policy decisions. As advocates for their children, parents can drive positive change and ensure that inclusive practices are prioritized and sustained.

REFERENCES

UNESCO. (2005). *Guidelines for Inclusion: ensuring access to education for all.* France: UNESCO. Retrieved May 7, 2024, from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ ark:/48223/ pf0 0001 40224

Polat, F. (2010). Inclusion in education: A step towards social justice. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 50-58. doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2010.06.009

Hornby, G. (2014). *Inclusive Special Education.* New York: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-1-4939-1483-8

Sharma, U., & Deppeler, J. (2005). Integrated Education in India: Challenges and Prospects. *Integrated Education in India: Challenges and Prospects, 25*(1). Retrieved May 10, 2024, from https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/ dsq/article/ view/524/701

Cologon, K. (2013). Inclusion in education-towards equality for students with disability. *Children with Disability Australia Submission* , 1-49. Australia. Retrieved May 10, 2024,   from

https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childcare/submissions/post-draft/submission-counter/subdr903-childcare-appendix3.pdf

UN. (2016, September 1). *UN News*. Retrieved May 10, 2024, from UN: https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/09/537952

Florian, L., & Spratt, J. C. (2013, May 16). Enacting inclusion: a framework for interrogating inclusive practice. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 28*(2), 119-135 . doi:10.1080/08856257.2013.778111

Paseka, A., & Schwab, S. (2020). Parents' attitudes towards inclusive education and their perceptions of inclusive teaching practices and resources. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 35*(2), 254-272. Retrieved May 10, 2024, from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/08856257.2019.1665232

Naskar, S., & Upadhyay, P. (2019, February). Attitude of parents towards inclusion in education: An Indian perspective. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research, 6*(2), 406-416. Retrieved May 10, 2024, from https://www.researchgate.net/ publication/368476499_ATTITUDE_OF_PARENTS_TOWARDS_INCLUSION_IN_EDUCATION_A_STUDY_ON_INDIAN_PERSPECTIVE

Bhuyan, M., & Joshi, S. (2022). Parental attitude towards inclusion of children with special needs in general school settings. *JOURNAL OF EDUCATION: RABINDRA BHARATI UNIVERSITY, 23*(1), 316-322. Retrieved May 10, 2024, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360996269_Parental_attitude_towards_inclusion_of_children_with_special_needs_in_general_school_settings

Abu-Hamour, B., & Muhaidat, M. (2014). Parents' attitudes towards inclusion of students with autism in Jordan. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 18*(6), 567–579. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2013.802026

ARJMANDNIA, A. A., & KAKABARAEE, K. (2011). The investigation of parents' attitude toward inclusive education for slow learners. *International Journal on New Trends in Education and Their Implications, 2*(4), 88-95. Retrieved May 11, 2024, from http://www.ijonte.org/FileUpload/ks63207/File/09._arjmandnia.pdf

Sharma, J., & Trory, H. (2019). Parents' Attitudes to Inclusive Education: A Study Conducted in Early Years Settings in Inclusive Mainstream Schools in Bangkok, Thailand. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPECIAL EDUCATION, 33*(4), 877-893. Retrieved May 11, 2024, from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1219309.pdf

Torgbenu, E. L., Oginni, O., Opoku, M. P., Nketsia, W., & Agyei-Okyere , E. (2018, December 13). Inclusive education in Nigeria: exploring parental attitude, knowledge and perceived social norms influencing implementation. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1-17. doi:10.1080/13603116.2018.1554715

Gupta, P., & Buwade, J. (2013, December). Parental attitudes towards the inclusion education for their disabled children. *Voice of research, 2*(3), 12-14. Retrieved May 11, 2024, from http://voiceofresearch.org/Doc/Dec-2013/Dec-2013_4.pdf

Avramidis, E., & Norwich, B. (2002). Teachers' attitudes towards integration / inclusion: a review of the literature. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 17*(2), 129-147. Retrieved May 11, 2024, from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/08856250210129056

Leyser, Y., & Kirk, R. (2007). Evaluating Inclusion: an examination of parent views and factors influencing their perspectives. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 51*(3), 271-285. Retrieved May 11, 2024, from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10349120420002592333

Bennett, T., DeLuca, D., & Bruns, D. (1997). Putting Inclusion into Practice: Perspectives of Teachers and Parents. *Exceptional Children, 64*(1), 115-131. Retrieved May 11, 2024, from https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/ abs/10.1177/001440299706400108

Stevens, L., & Wurf, G. (2018). Perceptions of inclusive education: A mixed methods investigation of parental attitudes in three Australian primary schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24*(4), 351-365. Retrieved May 11, 2024, from https://www.tandfonline.com/ doi/full/10.1080/13603116.2018.1464068

Peck, C., Gallucci, C., & Schwartz, I. S. (2004). Parent Perception of the Impacts of Inclusion on Their Nondisabled Child. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 29*(2), 135-143. doi:10.2511/rpsd.29.2.135

Innes, F. K., & Diamond, K. E. (1999, April). Typically Developing Children's Interactions with Peers with Disabilities. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 19*, 103-111. Retrieved May 11, 2024, from https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:145283631

****