

PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS OF TYPICAL CHILDREN TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of parents of typical children towards inclusive education and children with special needs. The research design was exploratory and descriptive in nature. Fifty parents of typical children of an inclusive school and 5 experts heading an organisation for children with special needs formed the sample. In-depth interviews were conducted to gain information on the awareness and understanding about an inclusive setup, descriptions and explanations of children with special needs, and advantages and disadvantages of an inclusive setup for children. In addition, draw and dialogue technique was used with parents and experts to supplement the data from the interviews, to elicit descriptions and understanding of children with special needs. Results showed positive reactions towards children with special needs. Parents supported inclusion, but suggested separate classes for academics. Experts' descriptions of children with special needs were more technical than those of the parents.

Key words: Inclusive education, children with special needs, India

INTRODUCTION

The notion of inclusion is based on three main perspectives: equality of education, financial issues, and social interactions for children with special needs (1).

Research evidence indicates that inclusion is a positive practice for all those who are involved. The success of inclusion is also largely determined by the attitudes of those involved. The well-being of typical children, children with special needs, parents/families, and the teaching profession through inclusion has to be studied to understand effects of inclusion (2).

Studies on parental views and opinions on inclusion have examined the attitudes of parents as a group, instead of investigating separately the attitudes of parents of children with special needs and parents of typical children (1). It is evident that perceptions of parents of both children with special needs and typical children need to be considered, since that will determine the success of inclusion.

In India, inclusive education was a shift that was initiated with the understanding that learning difficulty is not necessarily due to a problem within the child but can also be due to the school system. Therefore, education policy has referred to the social and environmental factors and rests on the theory that the child is a product of his/her experiences, and the interactions of the child within the environment have an effect on growth and development. The shift in the thinking that the problem does not lie with the child, but with the society, has also made the language used more appropriate and less offending or demeaning (3).

Reactions of parents

For parents of children with special needs, initially, acceptance becomes the main concern. They go through various emotional phases, which are coping strategies. Parents go through grief, frustration, denial and anger, before the child's condition is accepted (2). The other concern for parents is the education of the child with special needs.

Parents who favour inclusion believe that it would increase their child's learning ability due to higher standards in a regular class, and would provide a stimulating environment for learning. A majority of parents show favourable attitude towards inclusion in terms of promoting positive role models, friendships, facilitating acquisition of pre-academic, social, language, and motor skills (4). Parents who are not in favour of inclusion feel that teachers would be overburdened with the child's disability and that the classroom would not accept and welcome their child (5).

On the other hand, parents of typical children have revealed that their children's experiences were positive; they preferred having their children in classes that included children with disabilities; and there was an increase in personal development, and improved self-worth by helping others (6). Specific gains were in terms of social cognition, i.e., awareness of other children's needs, prosocial and personal characteristics and greater acceptance of human diversity (6).

The concerns that parents of typical children show are in the effectiveness of instructions; the fact that some children with special needs do not receive enough help from teachers, and that their children sometimes emulate the inappropriate behaviour of children with special needs. Other concerns stated by parents are that the demands of children with special needs become so great, that they interfere or compromise their own child's growth and education (7).

Role of teachers

Classroom teachers play an important role in developing an effective inclusive environment. The attitude of teachers towards inclusion depends upon the type of impairment, severity, and needs of the child. Bringing about emotional and behavioural changes towards persons with disability is achievable only when information about disabilities is provided, and there are linkages to practical experiences (8).

Special educators and general educators have suggested that administrative support and collaboration were factors for positive attitudes towards inclusion (9). There is a need for a differentiated programme of training and development that recognises the particular needs of head teachers from special schools. Sharing staff expertise and commitment to change, have been identified to be helpful in making inclusion work (10).

Beliefs and Concepts Regarding Inclusion and Special Needs

The prevailing socio-cultural context is another factor which plays a major role in how one perceives children with special needs. Certain beliefs and taboos prevailing in the Indian scenario influence the attitudes and values for inclusion of children with special needs. There is a strong belief in some families that the birth of the child with disability in the present life is attributable to past life (11). The family and especially the parents of the child with special needs face a lot of social and emotional stress. Another prevalent notion is about God inflicting the suffering on 'good people,' to test their resilience and inner strength (12). In the Indian context, mothers are often blamed for the birth of a child with disability, in the belief that she is punished by God (11). In the Indian situation, families who have children with disabilities see themselves as the weaker section of society. Superstitions, witchcraft, attitudes and behaviours have been barriers to the development of children with special needs (11).

AIM OF THE STUDY

The study was an attempt to explore the perceptions of parents about inclusion and about children with special needs in the local context. It also aimed to develop an understanding from the point of view of parents of typical children.

METHOD

The study was explorative and descriptive in nature.

Sample

The sample was selected with a purposive sampling technique. A local school which offers inclusion was the site of the study and the classes with children with special needs were chosen. Within these classes, school teachers did a random selection of participants. The school offers an inclusive environment for children with physical disabilities, mild and moderate intellectual impairment, learning disability, speech and hearing impairment, Down's syndrome, autism, attention deficit and hyperactive disorders, and behaviour problems. A few 'gifted' children are also included in this school. These children are part of the school from kindergarten to standard 7. The sample comprised 50 parents (25 mothers, and 25 fathers) of typical children from these sections. An attempt was made to have an equal number of fathers and mothers from each section. Five experts heading an organisation that offers services to children with special needs also formed a part of the sample. Therefore, the total sample was 55, out of which 50 were parents and 5 were experts.

Tools

1. Interview schedule for parents: The investigator prepared a semi- structured interview schedule to obtain information from parents on their views on inclusion and special needs. Information was elicited on their background, their perceptions about children with special needs, general opinions about the inclusive setup and opinions about children in an inclusive setup.
2. Interview schedule for experts: This was semi- structured, to elicit their views on children with special needs, opinions about children in an inclusive setup, and advantages and disadvantages of an inclusive setup.
3. Draw and dialogue technique: This technique was used with a randomly selected sub-sample of 25 parents, constituting 13 mothers and 12 fathers. An attempt was made to select three parents from each class. The technique was used to see how parents and experts envisage a child with special needs and a typical child. The aim of utilising the draw and dialogue technique was to supplement the information obtained from the interview schedule.

RESULTS

Awareness and understanding about an inclusive setup

a) Perception about inclusive setup

Responses of parents indicated that they had some idea of an inclusive setup. More responses were forthcoming from mothers than from fathers. The parents viewed an inclusive setup as one where their typical child would be together with a child with special needs in the same school environment. Parents also mentioned that children with special needs should have the basic right to education along with typical children. It was suggested that teachers in an inclusive setup have to be trained and need to have a positive attitude towards children with special needs. Parents also suggested separate classes for academics for both groups of children. Therefore, most parents agreed that an inclusive setup is one where all children are together, irrespective of different needs.

b) Programme for a child with special needs

Perceptions of parents about the kind of programme that would be helpful to a child with special needs were based on: (a) factors that would affect the programme, and (b) views on the kind of programme. The programme for a child with special needs depended on two factors: the severity of impairment and the decision of parents for the placement in a programme that was best suited to the child's needs. The views on the programme components showed that majority of the parents (90%) indicated that an inclusive setup was beneficial for children with special needs over special schools, as they learn from typical children and are accepted by all. Elaborating on this, parents suggested that an inclusive setup would help only for activities like art, music, singing, and sports and emphasised that separate classes should be held for academics. More responses from fathers (n=12) than mothers (n=7) emerged in favour of separate classes. Parents' suggestions included facilities for seating arrangement and mobility; having less number of children with special needs per class; help to be provided to children with special needs by typical children. Reasons given by a few parents who favoured special schools, were the availability of trained teachers and a need based programme for children with special needs. Thus, overall views on a programme for children with special needs also indicated the inclination of the parent group towards inclusive setup over a special school or segregated setup.

Responses from experts were similar to those of parents. According to the experts, factors responsible for the programme for a child with special needs would be based on the assessment to understand the needs of the child and on the general condition of children with special needs. The experts' preference for the kind of programme was an Indian model and not the Western idea of inclusive setup.

They laid emphasis on context specific curriculum including vocational training, and catering to children from different social backgrounds and all economic classes. Further, there was a mention of utilising context specific tests and using local materials to work with children with special needs. Experts considered that parents of children with special needs should be trained to provide the same services to the child at home as that given at the centre, so that continuous and uniform inputs are available for the child. Teachers need to have a better understanding of needs of children with disabilities through special education inputs at the undergraduate level. Further, it was suggested that an inclusive setup should have a multidisciplinary team consisting of a psychologist, psychiatrist, counsellors, and teachers, to ensure early diagnosis and provision of a need based programme. Facilities such as seating arrangements, lifts, inclined planes instead of steps, are a requirement to make the set up more convenient for children with special needs, which was in congruence with parents' responses. A few positive responses from experts in favour of special schools indicated that such schools would provide all the necessary equipment under one roof, along with individual attention, and specially trained staff. Hence, both experts and parents had similar perceptions about a programme for a child with special needs, with experts laying stress on the parental role in training, teachers being trained and a team approach to the intervention programme for children with special needs.

c) Awareness and reactions towards a child with special needs in class

Parents at the time of admission, were aware that there would be a child with special needs in the class of their child. Parents acknowledged that children with special needs also have the right to be in a school attended by their child, and stressed the need for acceptance, providing equal rights and taking care of children with special needs. Parents stated that there are more advantages than disadvantages in an inclusive set-up, which reinforces and explains the positive attitude of parents for inclusion.

d) Description and explanations

A range of responses emerged, when parents were asked to describe a child with special needs. The responses were categorised under mental functioning, physical functioning, emotional stability, and special attention to children with special needs. There were more responses from mothers, in terms of mental functioning and physical functioning. However, the fathers' responses tended to

describe children in the terms of requirement of special attention and emotional stability. A majority of responses indicated that extra care and attention is required by the child with special needs. Mental functioning of the children was described in terms of 'retardation', slow grasping, slow learners, and 'mentally challenged'. Other related responses were in terms of behaviour inconsistencies, general deficits like cannot convey needs, cannot respond to questions, and the difference seen in their walking, talking and eating habits. In relation to children with physical disability, other interesting responses were 'hefty body,' 'cannot run,' and a response from fathers that children who are physically disabled are not children with special needs. Certain other responses of parents indicated that children with special needs were emotionally unstable and were violent, could not express their emotions and were stubborn.

Experts described the child with special needs in technical terms. Terms that defined a child with special needs were: 'not at par with the developmental milestones', 'required physical, social, psychological help'. Further, if the child deviates from the standards set, then he/she would be one with special needs. The responses of experts showed that children with special needs require a different curriculum for them to fit into the regular school, and that society in general cannot meet their specific needs. Other responses provided by experts were that all abilities of the children with special needs are not affected and therefore those abilities can be fostered.

Experts' responses were more in terms of development and education while parents' responses focused on extra care, attention, helping the children emotionally, and socially adjusting to and accepting the children with special needs.

Experts suggested that the areas that need to be fostered in children with special needs according to priority are: (a) independence in activities of daily living, (b) social integration in public places like shopping malls and railway stations, (c) concept learning according to their capability, (d) contribution as an earning member of the family. Experts also mentioned providing socialization skills for appropriate behaviour in society.

Reasons for birth of a child with special needs have been categorised into biological reasons, environmental reasons and religious reasons. The biological reasons include congenital factors and complications during pregnancy. More responses from mothers and fathers were in terms of biological reasons, like

the cord being entangled at birth or any other injury, inappropriate medicines, no nutritious food to mother during pregnancy, hormonal problems, heredity problems, and emotional stress in the mother. Interestingly, family environment with strict parents and incorrect rearing practice was also reported as a cause for birth of a child with special needs.

More mothers of older children indicated that birth of a child with special needs could be a punishment for wrong deeds in the present life. Other beliefs that emerged were: not following restrictions on mothers during pregnancy, like eating meat, facing a snake and exposing oneself to an eclipse. More fathers reported that there could not be religious reasons for the birth of a child with special needs.

DISCUSSION

There are noteworthy trends that have emerged in terms of gender, age and differences between opinions of parents and experts.

In literature, parental views towards inclusion and special needs have been both positive and negative. However, the present study reveals that there is overall a positive attitude towards children with special needs, showing that there is acceptance. The positive attitudes are with reference to understanding the child with special needs, helping and adjusting with them, emotional support reflected by sympathy, pity, and providing them equal rights. Both mothers and fathers show a positive approach with reference to social and emotional adjustments, peer acceptance, and understanding that differences exist between people. The emergence of positive reactions in parents can be attributed to various factors: (a) the children with special needs had mild to moderate disabilities, or had physical disabilities, (b) the parents had selected this school by choice or had an option to withdraw, but the fact that they continued with the school shows that they were satisfied.

The parents indicated that they were apprehensive about the inclusive setup only in terms of combined academics. Parents were concerned about the effect on academics as their children would get disturbed, while on the other hand the children with special needs would not be able to meet the standards of typical children. Therefore, parents suggested separate classes for academics.

Perceptions about religious reasons for the birth of a child with special needs emerged only from the mothers of older children. The parents were graduates and

from a particular socio-economic background; this might have influenced their responses. In addition, the parents of typical children were exposed to children with special needs; they were familiar with the sight of children with special needs in the school promoting full inclusion. These factors may have had an effect on the responses of the parents who did not give religious reasons. Helping, caring, adjusting was highlighted by parents, which can be attributed to the rearing of children in the Indian culture where characteristics of helping, caring, and sympathy are imbibed by children from a young age. There is usually an attitude of charity and helping behaviour towards people deemed less fortunate, which can be the reason for such attitudes to emerge from parents of typical children.

Therefore, parents of typical children reflected a positive attitude towards inclusion, but suggested separate classes for academics; while experts also mentioned that education was one of the basic needs for the child with special needs to become independent. Both groups believed that inclusion was beneficial to the children and to the society.

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