

Parents of Learners with Special Educational Needs: Challenges in the Education System

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Abstract

This study intends to identify the challenges faced by the parents in schooling their children with special educational needs placed in the inclusive classroom. The study utilized a Descriptive-Qualitative research design using the phenomenological research approach. Data were collected from eight parents of learners with special educational needs (LSEs) through in-depth interviews. The qualitative thematic analyses guided by Hycner's framework was employed to analyze the data gathered. The parents' accounts revealed that the dominant challenges were inadequate learning resources that support the special educational needs of the LSEs; social exclusion; attitudinal barriers; limited support from shadow teachers; communication gap with teachers; and principals' role modeling. The components that parents believed crucial for promoting the LSEs development and the wellbeing of their family include supportive professionals and a positive educational setting.

Keywords: *challenges, special educational needs, inclusive education, parents*

INTRODUCTION

Parents frequently have dreams of a typical, healthy infant even before the baby is born. The cliché, "we don't care about the child's gender, what's more essential is that the child is normal and healthy," is one that we hear from parents all too frequently. When the longed-for child is discovered to have special needs, it can be distressing. Parents lament the loss of their hopes and dreams for their child for a while. [1]-[2]. Not long enough, they begin to dream new dreams [1]. Sending their special needs child to school is one approach to inspire new dreams in them. Children with special educational needs are better prepared to develop lifelong skills through school, enabling them to realize their full potential, thrive, and live independently.

Special educational needs are defined as a restriction in the capacity of a person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition [3]. From the National Council for Special Education [4] an individual has special educational needs if his/her ability to be involved and benefit from education is restricted due to a permanent physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability. That is, children with special educational needs experience learning difficulty and require special educational arrangements. A child has a learning difficulty if he/she has a hard time learning than the majority of the children of the same age [5] or they may have a disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of the educational facilities provided for other children [6].

The Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice [7] suggests that there are four (4) different areas of needs – cognition and learning needs; social, emotional, and behavioral needs; communication and interaction needs, and sensory and/or physical needs. An individual may fall into one particular need or a combination of the wide spectrum of special educational needs. Children with cognition and learning needs have difficulty with learning, thinking, and understanding or who have developmental delays. On the other hand, pupils with social, emotional, and behavioral needs are those with challenging behaviors. They may have incredibly low self-esteem and lack confidence, withdrawn or isolated, and have

immature social skills or present challenging behaviors. Conversely, children with communication and interaction needs may have difficulty in relating to others, expressing ideas, or understanding what others are saying, included too in this category are the children with autistic spectrum disorders. On the contrary, children with sensory and/or physical needs have a range of significant visual or hearing difficulties and/or with physical disabilities which impede their learning in school and their ability to take part in the curriculum.

Many of the schools at present caters to children with special educational needs where some of them go to special schools and few are integrated in a general education setting. In the 1994 Conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain, participants assert that special schools alone can never achieve the goal of Education for All (EFA).

Likewise, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) contends that educating children, youth, and adults with special needs must be educated within the regular educational system [8]. Hence, the concept of Inclusive education was embraced. Offering inclusive education contributes to the attainment of sustainable development goal number four (4) which is to provide a quality and equitable inclusive education and support lifelong learning for all. The policy on Inclusive Education is the reaffirmation of the right to education of every individual as enshrined in the 1984 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a renewal of the pledge made by the world community at the 1990 World Conference on Education for All [9]. Taken from the policy guidelines of UNESCO [8], inclusion is a measure of educating all children by addressing and responding to their diverse educational needs. Moreover, Inciong, et.al [10], described Inclusive Education as the process by which a school accepts children with special needs for enrolment in regular classes where they can learn side by side with peers. Hence, schools should be prepared to accommodate the educational needs of learners including those with special educational needs. Despite the endeavors put in to effectively implement inclusive education, research shows that still there are many challenges encountered concerning the matter. Some of these challenges identified by the teachers, principals and education officials are lack of facilities [11]; unavailability and/or inadequate material and financial resources [11]- [14]; classroom environment; efficacy of administration; teachers' competency [11]-[13], [15]; educators' workload; negative attitude towards LSENs [13], [16]; large class size [11], [12], [14], [17]-[19]; lack of time; lack of trained teachers, and lack of knowledge [12], [14], [17], [18]; an environment which is not conducive for the learners with disabilities and that most schools are distant to learners with disabilities [11], [13], [14], [17].

However, what is lacking in the literature are empirically based studies examining the challenges to inclusion and full participation of the children with special educational needs in the regular classroom settings identified by the parents or guardians of the child with special educational needs. The researcher contends that other than the teachers' and principals' challenges in the implementation of Inclusive education be explored. It is also important to identify the challenges of the parents schooling their children with special educational needs included in the inclusive classroom because parental experiences provide a different view in the implementation of Inclusive education and may propose mechanisms on how inclusion can be achieved.

RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

Challenges in Parenting a Child with Special Needs

Parenting a child with special needs poses significant challenges that demand additional investments of time, awareness, and education. The nature of these challenges varies greatly from one child to another, as the term "special needs" encompasses a wide range of conditions, from mild learning disabilities to more severe behavioral issues. Obtaining accurate diagnoses is crucial for parents to adopt appropriate methods and engage in suitable activities for their child.

According to the College of Allied Educators (2018), two prevalent challenges faced by parents of children with special needs are identified. The initial difficulty revolves around the influence on the dynamics within the family unit. Raising a special needs child often necessitates an immense amount of

time, energy, and resources, which can strain other familial relationships. The marriage may suffer from a lack of attention, while siblings may exhibit jealousy and act out. It is vital for parents to recognize the importance of prioritizing their spouse, maintaining a healthy relationship, and nurturing the sibling bond. Open communication and shared understanding among family members greatly contribute to fostering patience and empathy. Additionally, having a child with special needs also carries social implications.

In many instances, children with special needs necessitate specialized education that separates them from their peers. This circumstance can significantly impede the child's socialization and also isolate the parents from other parents facing similar challenges. Consequently, both the parents and the child with special needs may experience negative emotional and psychological effects. To mitigate these difficulties, it is advisable for parents to seek out support groups within these specialized programs, enabling them to connect with individuals undergoing comparable experiences.

Furthermore, as indicated in the study conducted by Daniel et al. (2021), parenting a child with a disability is a demanding task as it affects not only the child coping with the impairment but also the family shouldering the responsibility of their care and support, as well as the broader external environment in which the disability manifests (Tali, 2002; Abosi, 2007). The caregiver often makes significant personal sacrifices, devoting considerable time to the care of the disabled child. In many instances, parents find themselves unable to participate in social activities, and some may even experience heightened levels of stress or succumb to feelings of depression.

The presence of developmental disabilities in children significantly contributes to the emergence of parenting stress within families (Tali, 2002; Dyson, 1997). These families commonly face multiple demands on their resources, leading to heightened levels of stress (Brett, 2002). This elevated stress negatively impacts their perception of family functioning (Dyson, 1997). Furthermore, Brett (2002) emphasizes that families with children having developmental disabilities are particularly vulnerable to problematic parent-child relationships, which can hinder child development and necessary interventions.

Grobler (2012) provides an overview of challenges experienced by parents caring for children with learning disabilities. They often feel a constant sense of guilt, suspecting themselves of being responsible for the disability through genetics, prenatal stress, or alcohol abuse. Apart from addressing fundamental needs, children with disabilities necessitate specialized facilities and services to ensure their well-being. Consequently, parents of these children often encounter physical exhaustion and emotional strain as they devote additional attention to their care

Numerous researchers, including Baker, Blacher, Crnic, and Edelbrock (2002); Baker, McIntyre, Blacher, Crnic, Edelbrock, and Low (2003); and Orsmond, Krauss, and Seltzer (2004), have argued that behavioral problems play a crucial role in predicting parental stress among children with disabilities. These behavioral challenges are frequently observed in individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Gadow, DeVincent, & Azizian, 2004). Moreover, these behavioral difficulties, in combination with social and cognitive struggles, pose specific obstacles for parents (Koegel et al., 1992). Lecavalier and colleagues conducted a study examining parents of children with autism and found that parental assessments revealed a reciprocal relationship between behavior problems and stress over an extended duration (Lecavalier, Leone, & Wiltz, 2006).

Moreover, parents of children with disabilities confront numerous additional challenges. These challenges encompass the financial and time constraints associated with medical treatments and therapeutic interventions, restrictions on social activities, feelings of parental loss and grief, and the need to adjust family goals and aspirations (Lecavalier, Leone, & Wiltz, 2006). Studies suggest that there is a lack of sufficient support services available to parents of children with autism, which could aid in their coping with stress (Whitaker, 2002). However, there is a dearth of research examining the specific difficulties faced by parents of children with disabilities, particularly in the context of Nigerian parents caring for their disabled children.

This research is of great significance, given that Nigeria is a developing country with a high incidence of disabilities, limited healthcare facilities, and minimal government support for parents in the care of their disabled children. The objective of this study is to examine the challenges faced by Nigerian parents in

raising children with disabilities and offer recommendations to governmental and non-governmental organizations on strategies to alleviate the stress and difficulties experienced by these parents. Furthermore, recommendations will be provided from a developmental social work perspective to enhance practitioners' understanding of the experiences of parents who care for children with physical disabilities.

The lives of families raising children with special needs are typically more challenging compared to families with typically developing children. The presence of a child with special needs can have negative effects on family dynamics and psychological well-being (Ohaeri, 2003). Upon learning about their child's special needs, families often experience a range of reactions, which can be explained by the staging model. This model categorizes the temporal and psychological development that parents undergo as they strive to return to their pre-stress psychological state (Ardic, 2010).

The stages identified in the staging model include shock, rejection, depression, complex emotions, guilt, anger, negotiation, acceptance, and adjustment. The presence of a child with special needs prompts parents to reassess their life expectations. Additionally, challenges such as caregiving responsibilities, disruption of daily routines, shifts in family roles, financial difficulties, reduced household income, and the need for special physical arrangements and equipment at home can arise depending on the child's disability (Ohaeri, 2003; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1995). These additional needs impose further financial burdens on the family. The strain can even lead to marital dissolution (Damiani, 1999). Behavioral problems exhibited by the child in the home environment, the lifelong care needs of the child, treatment difficulties, reduced social support, decreased family satisfaction, and limitations on leisure activities can all contribute to parental stress and depression (Allen, Ciambrone, & Welch, 2000; Sari & Altıparmak, 2008; Trute & Hiebert Murphy, 2002; Ohaeri, 2003).

Studies examining these issues have indicated that parents of children with disabilities experience higher levels of anxiety, emotional distress, low self-esteem, stress, and additional health problems compared to parents of typically developing children (Hastings & Brown, 2002). Furthermore, research suggests that parents of children with special needs have lower levels of life satisfaction (Cho & Kahng, 2015), marital adjustment (Ince & Tüfekci, 2015), parental self-efficacy (Altındag Kumas & Sumer, 2019), and family resilience, particularly among mothers (Altındag Kumas & Sumer, 2019).

Research Objective

The objective of the study is to identify the challenges faced by the parents in schooling their children with special educational needs included in the inclusive classroom.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed the Descriptive-qualitative research design, which is described by Rahi [20] as a research design that illustrates what exists concerning variables and/or conditions in a situation. Under this research design, the phenomenological research approach was utilized to identify the commonality in the lived experiences of parents schooling their children with special educational needs included in the regular classroom focusing on the challenges encountered. The approach was deemed appropriate for the study since it allowed the parents to reflect and share their experiences in schooling LSENs.

The qualitative thematic analyses guided by Hycner's [21] framework was employed to analyze the data gathered. This involved the following: identification of potential themes, recognizing meanings pertinent to the objective of the research, and classification and reporting of themes and meta themes. From the analyses, themes associated with challenges faced by the parents in schooling LSENs in the regular classroom setting were identified.

The study included eight (8) participants that were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The criteria for inclusion were: has a child with special educational needs placed in an inclusive classroom; stays in the school campus for the entire class duration of the learner with special educational needs

(LSENs) placed in the regular class; willing to participate and available to take part in the interview. The participants' profile is shown in Table 1.

Participant	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Occupation	Relationship with child	Child's age (years)	Child's gender	Child's disability
1	Female	42	Married	Unemployed	Biological parent	11	Female	Autism
2	Female	33	Single	Maintenance	Biological parent	11	Male	Hearing impaired
3	Female	55	Single	Unemployed	Biological parent	12	Male	ADHD
4	Male	67	Married	Unemployed	Foster parent	14	Female	Hearing impaired
5	Female	60	Married	Maintenance	Biological parent	13	Male	ADHD
6	Female	46	Married	Unemployed	Biological parent	13	Female	Cerebral Palsy
7	Female	58	Widower	Unemployed	Biological parent	15	Female	Physical disability
8	Female	44	Married	Teacher	Biological parent	12	Male	Autism

Table 1. Profile of the Respondents

The information gathered through the interview was recorded through hand-written notes, and audio recording. On average, each interview session lasted for 45 minutes and was held in a remote room at the school where their child is enrolled. The participants were interviewed individually. A semi-structured interview guide was prepared to facilitate the interview. This included open-ended questions and probes to explore the participants' perceptions and views regarding their experiences in schooling their children with special educational needs with emphasis on the challenges encountered.

Before the interview, all participants were given a consent form. Confidentiality was observed by assigning codes to every research participant. All responses were treated with anonymity and confidentiality. Permission was also sought from the participants to allow the use of any form of video and audio recording equipment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Responses from the research participants during the interview were consolidated. The challenges were categorized into six themes: learning resources, social exclusion, attitudinal barriers, support from shadow teachers, communication with teachers, and principals' role modeling. All quotations in support of the theme were taken verbatim.

Learning resources

Parents reported on insufficient and inadequate learning resources available to support the children with special educational needs:

“The school has insufficient English Sign Language books and Mathematics books in English Sign Language. I would appreciate if the school can give us these types of book because not only the HI students would benefit but also the parents as well.” (Participant 2)

“The school did not give us any learning materials such as books that contains sign language that can help us lighten the situation. No available references are addressing the matter.” (Participant 4)

“There are no learning resources given to us.” (Participant 5)

These statements suggest that learning materials and/or resources are inadequate. Parents view that the learning materials which cater to the special educational needs of the students are needed to gain an understanding of the various lessons taught and increase the students class participation. A finding that is also expressed by Iwuama [22] and Kanno and Onyeachu [23] . Also, Charema and Perusa cited in Mutembei [24] state that a lack of relevant learning resources is one of the major obstacles for the effective inclusion of learners with special educational needs.

Attitudinal barriers

The majority of the parents disclosed instances of physical bullying and/or emotional bullying. The most frequent attitudinal barrier raised was physical bullying:

“His classmates would always ridicule him. They would make fun of him...make funny grimace. As a result, they scuffle.” (Participant 2)

“My son would often come home with his bag torn apart. Soon, I found out that his classmates did it. Even during flag ceremony especially if the class adviser is not around, his classmates would poke fun at him, they would raise his arms, wrestle his arms. His classmates will only stop the moment they notice my piercing look.” (Participant 8).

“They would often strike the nape of his neck.” (Participant 5)

These accounts suggest that parents witnessed the staring, ridicule, and isolation of their children. This indicates that the learners with special educational needs are denied becoming part of the group. When LSENs are not welcomed and are not successfully integrated into the community, parents of the children with special educational needs get disheartened. This suggests that parents are aware that a sense of belonging is important as this may build friendships and positive self-image as children actively engage with others [25]. From this, teachers and guidance counselors should provide activities that create a supportive, accepting, and caring environment.

Support from shadow teachers

For the child with special educational needs, classroom support is crucial to gainfully access the general education curriculum and demonstrate learning. The persistent classroom support raised was on the support provided by the shadow teachers. Parents reveal that the support from shadow teachers are limited and disappointing:

“I make it a point to approach the shadow teacher to monitor my son’s performance and would request her to keep a note on the outlines, topics or assignments that I need to follow-up or any reminder as the needs arise . Sadly, she always forgets to notify me on that matter.” (Participant 2)

“No learning happens. There is no shadow teacher to help her understand the lessons and participate in class discussion.” (Participant 4)

“He does not have a shadow teacher this quarter because the shadow teacher and I did not go along well.” (Participant 8)

This suggests that the parents believe it is important to employ shadow teachers who are committed to collaborating closely with parents and LSENs in the inclusive classroom, as well as shadow teachers who are not afraid to step up and teach. Listening, understanding, and participating in an inclusive classroom is

more challenging for children with special educational needs hence support from the shadow teachers is significant. The need for shadow teachers that are proactive, with good values, and have a good relationship with parents, inclusive teachers, and the children with special educational needs is also echoed in the study of Sulaiman, Rasit, Torran, and Abdullah [27] .

Communication with teachers

For parents with LSENs, it is important to communicate openly with the teachers to be able to work together to support the child's needs. Feelings of sadness and disappointment were evident in the participants' stories:

“My heart aches (respondent cries) because teachers are unapproachable, not easy to talk to, not welcoming.” (Participant 2)

“I do not have somebody to ask regarding their schoolwork. I wish the teachers were more kind and understanding of our plight.” (Participant 6)

This implies that the majority of the parents view that collaborating with the teachers is necessary not only to ensure that the SENs of their children are addressed but also to provide the best educational experience for their children. The finding that communication and collaboration between teachers and parents are crucial in schooling LSENs also resonated in the study of Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos and Polychronopoulou [28]. Maintaining a positive, open, and sincere teacher-parent partnership is important in guiding and facilitating the child's growth, development, and learning [29].

Ill-mannered principal

The majority of the parents believed that the principals' approach in dealing with them was inappropriate:

“My child has a mild cerebral palsy and has a problem with mobility and with her fine motor skills. She needs assistance in going to the comfort room especially during her menstrual period. The principal failed to consider that my child needs more assistance than regular students. He reprimanded me for staying inside the school campus. He does not accept explanations.” (Participant 6)

“The principal scolded me for staying in the school campus. He is inconsiderate. I stay in the school campus to help my daughter manoeuvre her wheelchair since every subject is taught in a different classroom. There is no teacher assistant in their classroom.” (Participant 7)

This accounts suggests that more principals managing inclusive schools have negative attitudes regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs. This is similar to the study of Praisner [30] who found out that out of the five principals surveyed, only one had positive attitudes towards including students with special educational needs in the regular classroom. Parents opined that principals should take a lead to model pro-inclusion attitudes and behaviors. As Ramirez [31] asserted the administrators' attitude and beliefs are one of the factors that may contribute to the success of an inclusive school.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provided a snapshot of the challenges encountered by the parents in schooling their children with special educational needs in an inclusive classroom. These challenges faced by the parents were inadequate learning resources that support the special educational needs of their children; social exclusion; attitudinal barriers; limited support from shadow teachers; communication gap with teachers; and principals' role modeling. For the inadequate learning resources, it is recommended that teachers handling inclusive classes should reproduce and/or distribute SPED materials to parents especially in sign language. Further, the school should collaborate with private organizations to outsource pertinent instructional materials and other support that may be offered to boost the performance of the students with

special educational needs. A sensitivity and disability awareness training, activities, and programs to reduce social exclusion and mitigate the attitudinal barrier of students, teachers, and administrators are also recommended. About support from shadow teachers, it is recommended that the school must have a provision for a shadow teacher where instructional support and modification is needed. Equally, to improve the communication between parents and teachers, the recommendations are teachers should have training on fostering parent-teacher relationship for the learning and development of the children with special educational needs; teachers should utilize various communication approaches with parents but mindful of practicing the true sense of listening, connecting and empathizing to actively respond to their needs; and organize a quarterly bonding activity where teachers and parents meet to know each other as well as to discuss their needs and concerns. A further study on the roles and challenges of the shadow teacher in providing modifications for the children with SENs included in the regular classroom is also recommended since they play a significant role in the success of the implementation of Inclusive Education. The researcher asserts that multiple voices are necessary to understand the state of Inclusive Education in the Philippines. Schooling a child is challenging more so when the child has special educational needs. Everyone must listen intently to the parents of children with special educational needs so that we can better understand their situation and address their needs. It is vital to work as partners in meeting the learners' needs to ensure that no child is left behind. As an old African proverb would say it takes a village to raise a child. Therefore, the parents and the whole school team should collaborate for the learning and development of every learner including those with special educational needs.

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