

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE PERCEPTION OF PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract.

The subject of the article are the attitudes of parents of students with disabilities towards inclusive education in schools and integrated classes in a large city (N=67). The purpose of the studies was to learn about the structure of parents' attitudes and differentiating variables. As a result of the application of exploratory factor analysis (EFA), two types of attitudes were distinguished: neutral and positive. The education of parents turned out to be the only differentiating feature of attitudes. Parents with higher education more often adopt a positive attitude towards inclusion. The conclusions from the studies formulate recommendations regarding cooperation between school and family in activities for the inclusion in school.

Keywords: inclusive education, attitudes of parents, student with disabilities

1. Introduction

Inclusive education means educating students with special educational needs in mainstream schools. In most countries, this issue is regulated by law. However, its implementation in practice is not easy because it requires overcoming socio-cultural barriers and the activity of many entities (Seitz, Auer & Bellacicco, eds., 2023). The engagement depends on the attitudes that people adopt towards inclusion. The attitudes are dispositions to certain individual reactions and behaviors. They are shaped by knowledge and beliefs, emotions and a system of values, and behavioral intentions (Oppenheim, 1992).

The analysis of the literature indicates that in empirical studies related to attitudes towards inclusion, the most attention is paid to teachers, and less attention is paid to parents of students with disabilities. The most important role in schools is of course played by teachers because they are the ones who initiate all educational processes. However, the effectiveness of institutional activities depends significantly on cooperation with parents, on the involvement of parents in the teaching and learning of their children and on their attitude towards the assumptions and implementation of inclusion in school. The importance of parents of students with disabilities for the

effectiveness of inclusive policies and the small number of studies on this group were the premises for our own studies.

Studies reviews

Studies of the attitudes of parents of students with disabilities towards inclusive education are conducted in many countries around the world. They are mainly based on opinion questionnaires. A global report prepared for UNESCO proves that regardless of the country, parents are favorable towards inclusive practices, although they assess their knowledge of them low and doubt the skills of teachers to teach all students together. It has been found that many variables influence attitudes and their image is inconsistent. Educational qualifications, age, gender, level and type of disability and the age of the child as well as the educational environment (public/private) are indicated (Opoku, 2020).

As Anna Zamkowska states, summarizing a review of Polish and international reports, parents' attitudes are "diverse, but generally positive and neutral. Parents point to both the benefits resulting from it, mainly of a social nature, and numerous gaps in educational support. Noticing the shortcomings, however, does not mean a negative attitude towards the idea of inclusion, but rather an expression of parents' dissatisfaction with the current conditions of its implementation" (2019, p. 50).

The latest Polish studies in this area, conducted among parents of preschool children with disabilities, show that they adopt rather positive attitudes. Some parents express doubts as to whether preschool teachers provide effective individual and specialist help to their children. A significant percentage of surveyed parents report a lack of knowledge about special education and inclusive education, expecting support from the kindergarten in this area (Barłóg 2022, p. 22).

Methodological assumptions

Studies issues: What are the attitudes of parents of students with disabilities towards inclusive education and its implementation in integrated schools? What individual variables differentiate parents' attitudes?

Method: The lack of Polish standardized tools prompted the construction of an original attitude scale. The final version of the scale included 28 items, selected from a wide pool of statements subjected to analysis and expert selection. The set of opinions used statements appearing in available studies of teachers and parents as well as in the literature on the subject. The statements referred to three dimensions of attitudes and various aspects of inclusive education. A 5-point Likert-type scale was used.

Form: online

Sample: the parents of students with disabilities from 1st - 8th grades of an integrated school and of integrated classes (7 classes); a total of 8 schools in a large city (N=67). The research sample consisted mostly of women (97%), over 35 years of age, with higher education (85.1%), usually with two children (70.1%), of a different school age. The main reason for choosing an integrated school/class for one's child with a

disability was the expectation that he or she would receive professional help in this facility (38.8%).

Statistical methods: calculations were performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0 and Jasp 0.19.3 programs.

Studies results

Psychometric properties of the scale

In order to verify the structure of the tool, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. Based on the scree plot and the measurement of the factor loading value, a 2-factor structure of the questionnaire was distinguished, which explained a total of 44.0% of the variance. As a result of qualitative/content analysis, it was assumed that the statements making up factor 1 reflect a neutral/formal attitude towards inclusive education, while the statements making up factor 2 reflect a positive/subjective attitude.

The neutral attitude was made up of 12 statements. The average score expressing the degree of agreement with the statements was 3.42 (a "rather high" level). It can be called "formal" because the opinions focus on the activities of the school and teachers, emphasizing the social importance of the implementation of inclusion. The highest scores were given to the level of integration, parent cooperation and communication with parents.

Table 1

Opinions of parents of students with disabilities adopting a neutral/formal attitude towards inclusive education (arithmetic means; the order of statements is consistent with the values of their factor loading, from the highest).

| | Content of the statement | M |
|----|---|----------|
| 1. | I believe that teachers have adequately prepared able-bodied students for contact with disabled peers | 3.27 |
| 2. | The school creates conditions for all students to feel appreciated | 3.51 |
| 3. | The school undertakes various activities aimed at cooperation between parents of able-bodied and disabled students | 3.38 |
| 4. | I feel that I am a partner for the school as a parent, co-deciding on how my child and other students are educated | 3.24 |
| 5. | The school familiarized parents with the assumptions of integrating students with and without disabilities (e.g. meetings for parents were held, brochures with appropriate information were distributed) | 2.88 |
| 6. | Parents of able-bodied and disabled students cooperate with each other in school | 3.68 |
| 7. | All students are treated equally in school, regardless of their abilities | 3.40 |
| 8. | During meetings with parents, the teacher takes up issues of students' integration and encourages parents to integrate | 3.66 |

| | | |
|----|---|------|
| 9. | Teachers are open to cooperation with parents and listening to their opinions | 3.85 |
| 10 | Students with disabilities in school are fully accepted by able-bodied students and their parents | 3.67 |
| 11 | I believe that integration is real. Students with and without disabilities integrate in school | 3.69 |
| 12 | Teachers communicate with parents not only when a child has problems | 3.85 |

The positive attitude consisted of 15 statements. The average score expressing the degree of agreement with the statements that make up this attitude was 4.06 (level "high"). It can be called subjective because the opinions focus on students and their development opportunities, understanding of inclusion and its importance for students. The highest scores were given to understanding the idea of inclusion, one's own involvement and interest in the school's activities.

Table 2

Opinions of parents of students with disabilities adopting a positive/subjective attitude towards inclusive education (arithmetic means; the order of statements is consistent with the values of their factor loading, from the highest)

| | Content of the statement | |
|----|--|-------|
| 1. | I believe that special schools are a good form of education for students with disabilities | 3.,78 |
| 2. | I believe that joint education of students with and without disabilities creates more benefits than problems | 4.18 |
| 3. | Students with disabilities in mainstream schools should not study in special classes | 3.99 |
| 4. | The presence of students with disabilities in school does not affect the level of education of students without disabilities | 4.24 |
| 5. | I believe that students with disabilities do not isolate themselves in the class and want to maintain contact with their able-bodied peers | 3.78 |
| 6. | In my opinion, the social benefits of joint education of able-bodied and disabled students are great | 3.94 |
| 7. | Joint education of able-bodied and disabled students does not lead to conflicts between them | 3.94 |
| 8. | I know and understand the idea of joint education of disabled and able-bodied students and its purposefulness | 4.49 |
| 9. | I deliberately placed my child in the same class with fully-fledged peers. | 4.28 |
| 10 | My child makes friends with able-bodied peers studying in his school and class | 4.09 |
| 11 | Children with disabilities participate in additional and extracurricular activities in our school (trips, disco parties, bonfires) | 4.24 |

| | | |
|----|---|------|
| 12 | Able-bodied students have difficulty obtaining pedagogical and psychological help in school because it focuses on supporting students with disabilities | 3.78 |
| 13 | I am interested in what is happening in school, not only in my child's problems | 4.60 |
| 14 | My child talks about his disabled peers more often in positive than negative terms | 3.69 |
| 15 | Thanks to contacts with able-bodied peers, my child has become more sensitive and willing to cooperate with them | 3.94 |

Spearman correlation analysis has shown that none of the sociodemographic variables: number of children, age of children, gender and age of the parent, motive for choosing the school and experience in contacts with people with disabilities differentiated the attitudes of the surveyed parents towards inclusive education. The only variable that partially differentiated attitudes was education. People with higher education showed a higher intensity of positive attitudes compared to parents with secondary education. No differences were found in the scope of neutral attitudes.

Table 3

Comparison of attitudes of parents of students with disabilities depending on education

| Dependent variable | Secondary (n = 10) | | | | Higher (n = 57) | | | | Z | p | r |
|--------------------|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------------|-------|
| | average rank | M | Mdn | SD | average rank | M | Mdn | SD | | | |
| Neutral attitude | 34.40 | 40.30 | 41.00 | 10.02 | 33.93 | 39.65 | 39.00 | 13.67 | -0.07 | 0.944 | <0.01 |
| Positive attitude | 22.65 | 60.80 | 66.00 | 9.13 | 35.99 | 65.84 | 69.00 | 8.48 | -2.00 | 0.045 | 0.24 |

Summary and conclusions

Parents of students with disabilities present neutral and positive attitudes towards integrated education. They declare above-average and high approval for various dimensions of inclusion in school. Of course, the declarations are usually slightly overstated in relation to real behaviors, but they are consistent with the results of other studies. Both attitudes are internally homogeneous; no significant differentiation was demonstrated due to individual characteristics of parents, except for higher approval of inclusion among parents with higher education.

The studies results have theoretical significance, they enrich knowledge about the group of parents of students with disabilities. The practical significance results from the potential that the attitudes of parents have for the effectiveness of inclusive education. From this perspective, both identified types of attitudes, although significantly different statistically and in terms of content, should be considered beneficial for assessing the effectiveness of actions already taken in this area by teachers. Educational partnership for inclusive education requires further

involvement of parents in co-deciding and initiating actions that support inclusion in schools in its social and individual dimensions.

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