



PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUSION: THE ROLE OF PARENTS OF TYPICALLY DEVELOPING STUDENTS IN SHAPING AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

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Abstract:

This study explores the perceptions of parents of typically developing students regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream primary education. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 parents from five primary schools. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' attitudes and experiences. The findings reveal ambivalent parental attitudes. While parents widely recognize the social and emotional benefits of inclusive education—such as the development of empathy, acceptance of diversity, and enhancement of social skills—they simultaneously express concerns related to the adequacy of support structures, teacher preparedness, and potential impacts on academic outcomes. Furthermore, factors such as prior contact with individuals with disabilities and the level of parental awareness were found to positively influence attitudes toward inclusion. The study highlights the importance of strengthening school–family collaboration, enhancing parental awareness, and ensuring adequate institutional support as key conditions for the effective implementation of inclusive education. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on inclusive education by providing qualitative insights into the perspectives of parents of typically developing students, a group that remains underexplored in existing research.

Keywords: parents' perceptions, inclusive education

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a fundamental principle of contemporary educational policies, as it promotes equal access to learning for all students, regardless of their individual characteristics, abilities, or difficulties. This approach is grounded in human rights and the concept of social justice, as articulated in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994),

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which emphasized that schools must adapt to the needs of all students and not the other way around. Within this framework, inclusive education is understood as a process of increasing participation and reducing exclusion within schools (Ainscow *et al.*, 2006). More specifically, the co-existence of students with and without disabilities in the same school environment contributes to the development of co-operation skills, enhancing social interaction and collaboration (Fernandez-Villardón *et al.*, 2020; Dell’Anna *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, it fosters acceptance by promoting positive attitudes toward diversity (Rademaker *et al.*, 2020; Lin *et al.*, 2025). It contributes to the development of empathy, respect, and social skills (Kirana *et al.*, 2025; Mezzanotte, 2022). Students have the opportunity to interact daily, understand others’ needs, and develop positive attitudes toward diversity, which strengthens the creation of an inclusive school culture (Slee, 2011). However, the implementation of inclusive education is neither simple nor one-dimensional; rather, it is a complex and multifactorial endeavor that requires coordination and collaboration among various stakeholders. In particular, its effective implementation largely depends on school leadership, which is called upon to create a supportive and democratic school environment, as well as on teachers, whose attitudes and teaching practices play a decisive role in promoting inclusion (Pirchio *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, educational policy and the institutional framework guide and support such practices, ensuring the necessary structures and resources for the equal participation of all students (UNESCO, 2020; Mezzanotte, 2022). Additionally, the contribution of the family is equally important, as school–parent collaboration enhances the coherence of educational interventions and better responds to students’ needs (Nadgouda *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, inclusive education requires a holistic approach and the synergy of all stakeholders involved.

2. Literature Review

Inclusive education is widely regarded as a fundamental principle of contemporary educational policy, and parents represent a key socializing influence in shaping children’s attitudes and behaviours toward diversity. Within Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework (1979), the family represents a core microsystem that directly shapes children’s developmental trajectories, affecting both cognitive and socio-emotional skills. In the context of inclusive education, parents’ attitudes, values, and perceptions toward disability and diversity are transmitted to their children and influence how they interact with their peers in the school environment, shaping either attitudes of acceptance or attitudes characterized by prejudice and stereotypes (Pirchio *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, active parental involvement in school life has been recognized as a critical factor in enhancing both academic achievement and students’ social adjustment (Epstein, 2011). Research confirms that school–family collaboration contributes to the creation of a cohesive support framework, strengthening students’ sense of belonging, emotional security, and active participation in the learning process (Nadgouda *et al.*, 2023). Equally important, at the level of educational policy and practice, parental participation is

considered essential for the development of inclusive cultures and practices, as the success of inclusion presupposes synergy between school, family, and the wider community (UNESCO, 2020; Mezzanotte, 2022). Thus, the family does not merely function as supportive but constitutes a key pillar in promoting acceptance of diversity and social inclusion within the school environment.

Despite their significant contribution, international literature indicates that parental attitudes are not uniform but show considerable variability. Specifically, studies have shown that although many parents express generally positive or neutral attitudes toward inclusion, their views are influenced by factors such as the type of disability, level of knowledge, and personal experience with individuals with disabilities (Paseka & Schwab, 2020; Kárpáti & Miklósi, 2025). Additionally, parents' perceptions vary depending on the school context and the level of support provided, which may either strengthen or limit their trust in inclusive education (Sharma *et al.*, 2022). Demographic factors, such as educational level, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics, also appear to play an important role (Christopoulou *et al.*, 2023). Finally, research highlights that parents express a wide range of views—from strong support due to social benefits to reservations related to resources and educational quality (Paccaud *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, parental attitudes toward inclusion are the result of a multifactorial process and cannot be considered homogeneous.

The variations in parents' attitudes toward inclusive education are not random, but arise from a set of factors that influence the way they perceive both the nature of disability and the effectiveness of inclusion. One of the most important factors is the level of parents' information and knowledge. Specifically, parents who are adequately informed about the benefits of inclusive education and have access to reliable information tend to adopt more positive attitudes, whereas a lack of information is often associated with reservations, doubts, or even negative perceptions (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). At the same time, parents' personal experiences play a decisive role, as direct contact with individuals with disabilities or the involvement of their children in inclusive school environments appears to enhance understanding, empathy, and the acceptance of diversity (de Boer *et al.*, 2010).

Furthermore, the broader cultural and social context within which parents live and are socialized significantly influences their attitudes, as prevailing social values, stereotypes, and cultural perceptions of disability vary from country to country and from community to community (UNICEF, 2013). In societies where diversity is viewed positively, and equality is promoted, parents appear more receptive to inclusion, in contrast to environments where stigmatizing perceptions prevail. Finally, particularly important is the way in which parents themselves interpret disability, that is, whether they consider it as a deficit or as a form of human diversity. According to Oliver (1996), the transition from the medical model of disability to the social model contributes to the adoption of more positive attitudes toward inclusive education. Therefore, parents' attitudes are shaped through a dynamic interplay of individual, social, and cultural factors.

Understanding these factors is particularly important for the effective design of educational policies and interventions. Strengthening cooperation between school and family constitutes a critical element for the success of inclusive education. Through actions of information, awareness-raising, and active parental participation, a supportive environment can be cultivated that will promote the acceptance of diversity and enhance inclusion (Ainscow, 2020).

Therefore, the investigation of parents' perceptions is not merely a research interest, but a necessary prerequisite for shaping policies that respond to the real needs of the educational community. Through understanding their attitudes, it is possible to design targeted interventions that will improve school-family collaboration and substantially contribute to the promotion of an inclusive school for all students. Despite the growing body of research on inclusive education, the perspectives of parents of typically developing students remain relatively underexplored, particularly through qualitative approaches that allow for an in-depth understanding of their experiences. Much of the existing literature focuses either on teachers or on parents of children with disabilities, leaving a gap in understanding how families of typically developing students perceive inclusion and how these perceptions influence school culture. Additionally, there is a lack of context-sensitive qualitative studies that capture the complexity and ambivalence of parental attitudes. Addressing this gap is essential, as parents constitute a key stakeholder group whose attitudes can significantly influence the success of inclusive practices.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate parents' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, what they consider to be the benefits, and what challenges arise from its implementation. In order to address the aim of the research, the following questions were posed:

- 1) What are parents' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities?
- 2) What benefits and difficulties do they identify?
- 3) What is their attitude toward the attendance of students with disabilities in the same classroom as their children?

3. Material and Methods

The present study adopts a qualitative research approach, aiming at an in-depth understanding of parents' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding inclusive education. The choice of qualitative methodology is considered appropriate, as it allows for the exploration of complex social phenomena and the emergence of the subjective meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Creswell, 2014). Through this approach, the aim is not only to record views, but also to understand how these are formed and how they influence parents' attitudes toward inclusion. Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study, in line with established guidelines for social research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior

to data collection, participation was voluntary, and individuals were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Data collection was conducted through interviews lasting approximately 30–45 minutes in a quiet and comfortable setting; all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Thematic analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed a priori. Coding was carried out manually, with particular attention to consistency and transparency throughout the analytical process, while repeated readings and cross-checking of codes enhanced the reliability of the findings.

3.1 Sample

The present study involved 25 parents of typically developing students attending five different primary schools located in an urban and semi-urban area of a specific geographical region. Of these, 18 were women, and 7 were men, aged 35–47. In terms of their educational level, 3 individuals had completed compulsory education, 8 were high school graduates, 10 were university graduates, and 4 were graduates of other institutions (e.g., vocational training institutes). The sample was selected with the aim of capturing as fully as possible a range of different experiences and perceptions related to the phenomenon under study, while at the same time maintaining a degree of homogeneity that facilitates comparative data analysis. In qualitative research, sample size is not determined on the basis of strict numerical criteria, but is directly associated with achieving so-called “data saturation,” that is, the point at which further data collection does not lead to the emergence of new themes, concepts, or interpretations (Guest *et al.*, 2006). More specifically, the concept of saturation refers to the repetition of responses and the consolidation of interpretive categories, indicating that the data already collected are sufficient for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Guest *et al.*, 2020; Roberts *et al.*, 2026). In addition, empirical studies have shown that in research with relatively homogeneous samples and clearly defined research objectives, saturation may be achieved even with a relatively small number of participants, usually between 9 and 17 interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Therefore, the sample size of the present study is considered adequate, as it meets the qualitative criteria of sufficiency and reliability, ensuring that the analysis is based on data that have reached a point of saturation and that no further expansion of the sample is required in order to draw valid and substantiated conclusions.

3.2 Data Collection

For the selection of participants, purposive sampling was used, as it allows for the selection of individuals who possess specific characteristics and experiences related to the topic under investigation (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate for the present study, as participants were selected based on criteria such as their involvement in school life, their availability to participate, and whether or not they had experience with inclusion, in order to ensure a variety of views and experiences.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, which constitute a flexible and effective tool for the in-depth exploration of perceptions and experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The semi-structured interviews were based on a predetermined guide of topics while at the same time allowing the freedom for further development and elaboration of responses.

The thematic areas covered were the following:

- their attitudes toward disability and diversity,
- experiences from the school environment regarding inclusive practices,
- their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of inclusive education,
- their concerns and expectations regarding their children's attendance in inclusive schools.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using the method of Thematic Analysis, which constitutes one of the most widely used techniques in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method allows for the identification, organization, and interpretation of recurring themes within the data. For a more reliable analysis of the data, the following procedure was followed: Through multiple readings of the transcribed interviews, an effort was made to become familiar with the data. This was followed by an initial coding in order to produce a first recording and grouping of significant elements and meanings. Subsequently, after processing the initial groupings, thematic categories were developed through the connection of related data. In order to ensure the coherence and validity of the thematic categories, revision and finalization of themes were carried out. Thematic analysis provides the possibility of systematic processing of the data, while at the same time preserving the complexity and depth of the participants' experiences.

Overall, during the design of the research, an effort was made to ensure the validity and reliability of the results through careful sample selection, the use of appropriate data collection methods, and systematic analysis. In addition, before conducting the present study, basic ethical principles were considered, as in qualitative research, where personal experiences and views are collected, ethical issues acquire particular importance (Creswell, 2014). Thus, participants were informed in advance about the purpose of the research, the data collection process, the use of the information, and their rights (Orb *et al.*, 2001), in order to provide their consent to participate. They were assured that the principles of anonymity and confidentiality would be strictly maintained and that the information collected would be used exclusively for research purposes and would not be disclosed to third parties (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Finally, as noted earlier, they were informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences. This principle strengthens participants' autonomy and constitutes a fundamental element of research ethics (Israel & Hay, 2006).

4. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews led to the identification of recurring patterns, which were organized into four main thematic categories reflecting the parents' perceptions and attitudes toward inclusive education.

4.1 The Prevalence of Ambivalent Parental Attitudes

The primary overarching finding of the study was the prevalence of ambivalent attitudes among parents toward inclusive education. While the majority of participants expressed strong ideological support for the philosophy of inclusion, recognizing the importance of equality and diversity, this positive stance coexisted with deep-seated reservations regarding its practical execution. This ambivalence reflects a distinct tension between theoretical alignment and real-world concerns, as evidenced by the participants' statements:

"I agree with inclusion in theory, but in practice, it can be challenging." (Parent 13)

"I think it's the right approach, but I still have some concerns." (Parent 17)

"It's a positive idea, but it depends a lot on how it is implemented." (Parent 24)

This coexistence of positive beliefs and practical concerns highlights the multifaceted nature of parental viewpoints. Rather than rejecting inclusion, parents conditionally accept it, with their approval heavily dependent on the quality of school preparation and the availability of necessary support mechanisms.

4.2 Perceived Social and Emotional Benefits

Parents identified significant benefits arising from inclusive education, particularly concerning the social and emotional growth of typically developing students. A centrally discussed benefit was the cultivation of empathy, as daily exposure to peers with diverse needs encourages children to develop a deeper sense of understanding and social respect:

"I believe that when children interact with classmates who have different needs, they become more understanding and empathetic." (Parent 7)

"Inclusive classrooms help children learn to respect differences from an early age." (Parent 4)

Furthermore, participants emphasized that inclusion enhances key socialization and collaboration skills. Coexistence within a heterogeneous classroom prepares students to function effectively in a wider, diverse society:

"It's important for children to grow up knowing that everyone is different, and that's okay." (Parent 15)

"Children learn how to co-operate better when they are in a diverse environment." (Parent 11)

"I think it prepares them for real life, where they will meet all kinds of people." (Parent 6)

4.3 Educational Concerns and Challenges

Despite acknowledging these socio-emotional advantages, parents articulated substantial concerns regarding the academic and structural realities of inclusive classrooms. One prominent concern related directly to the quality and pace of instruction. Some parents feared that managing a highly heterogeneous student body might inadvertently slow down learning delivery or diminish academic progress:

"I am worried that my child might not progress as quickly academically." (Parent 12)

"The level of teaching might drop if the teacher has to focus more on students with additional needs." (Parent 21)

Additionally, the perceived complexity of classroom management emerged as a major source of parental anxiety. Participants repeatedly questioned whether a single educator could successfully balance diverse learning paces without leaving some students behind:

"I'm not sure if teachers are adequately trained to handle such diverse classrooms." (Parent 14)

"It's a difficult task for one teacher to manage so many different needs at the same time." (Parent 19)

4.4 The Critical Role of Support Structures, Information, and Prior Experience

The final theme underscores the decisive impact that external resources, institutional readiness, and parental awareness have on shaping attitudes. Parents firmly stated that effective inclusion cannot succeed without concrete systemic elements, including specialized staff, targeted teacher training, and appropriate classroom resources:

"Inclusion can work well, but only if there are enough teachers and proper support in the classroom." (Parent 3)

"If there were specialists available, I would feel much more confident about inclusion." (Parent 10)

"It's not enough to just place students together; the system needs to support them."
(Parent 23)

The data also revealed that a parent's personal familiarity with disability and their overall level of information acted as catalysts for building trust. While specialized knowledge and prior contact diminished fear and dismantled prejudices, a lack of information consistently bred insecurity and negative stereotyping:

"When parents understand inclusion better, they are more likely to support it." (Parent 8)

"Before, I had doubts, but after learning more, I feel more positive about it." (Parent 16)

"Awareness changes the way we see things and reduces fear." (Parent 20)

Hence, information plays a vital role in dismantling prejudice, deepening the understanding of inclusion principles, and fostering its acceptance.

4.5 Proposed Thematic Model of Parental Attitude Formation

The interplay of these four themes culminated in the development of a conceptual thematic model illustrating how parents' attitudes toward inclusion are dynamically formed. At the core of this model lies the concept of structural ambivalence, which is generated by the continuous friction between ideological acceptance (social benefits) and practical concerns (educational quality).

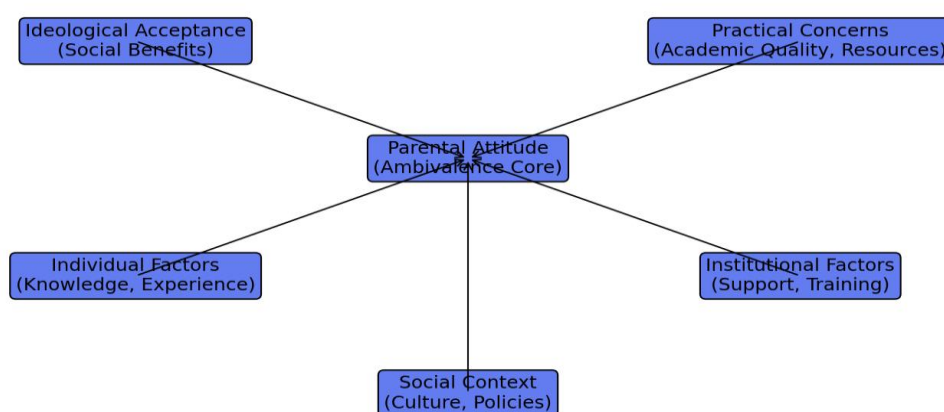


Figure 1: Proposed Thematic Model of Parental Attitude Formation

As visually represented in the study's framework (Figure 1), at the core lies parental ambivalence, which emerges from the interaction between ideological acceptance of inclusive education and practical concerns related to its implementation.

This central attitude is further shaped by individual factors, such as parental knowledge and prior experience, as well as institutional conditions, including the availability of support structures and teacher preparedness. Additionally, broader social and cultural influences operate as contextual forces that indirectly affect parental perceptions. Consequently, rather than holding static views, parents appear to navigate a fluid continuum of attitudinal positions—ranging from high support to strict reservation—resulting in evolving levels of acceptance based on the perceived quality of school execution.

4.6 Discussion

The present study provides important insights into the complex and context-dependent nature of parents' attitudes toward inclusive education. The findings indicate that parental perceptions are not unidimensional; rather, they are characterized by a form of structured ambivalence, where support for the principles of inclusion coexists with concerns regarding its practical implementation. This ambivalence reflects a tension between ideological endorsement of equity and diversity and pragmatic considerations related to educational effectiveness.

In line with previous research, parental support appears to be conditional upon the perceived adequacy of school structures and practices (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Paseka & Schwab, 2020). Importantly, the findings suggest that parents do not fundamentally oppose inclusive education; instead, their concerns are primarily directed toward issues of implementation, such as teacher preparedness, classroom management, and the availability of specialized support. This distinction is critical, as it shifts the focus from attitudinal resistance to systemic readiness.

At the same time, the strong emphasis on the social and emotional benefits of inclusion reinforces its role as a key mechanism for promoting empathy, acceptance, and social cohesion among students. Parents consistently highlighted the value of interaction among diverse learners, supporting theoretical perspectives that underline the role of contact in reducing prejudice and fostering positive intergroup attitudes. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that inclusive environments contribute positively to students' social development and interpersonal skills (Florian, 2014; Dell'Anna *et al.*, 2022).

Nevertheless, concerns related to academic outcomes and instructional quality emerged as a central theme. Parents expressed uncertainty regarding teachers' ability to effectively address diverse learning needs within a single classroom. Such concerns reflect well-documented challenges in the implementation of inclusive education, particularly in contexts where teacher training, resources, and institutional support remain insufficient (de Boer *et al.*, 2010; Nadgouda *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, parental hesitation should be interpreted as an informed response to perceived structural limitations rather than as a rejection of inclusion itself.

A notable contribution of the study lies in the identification of knowledge and prior experience as key determinants of parental attitudes. Increased awareness and

direct or indirect contact with disability were associated with more positive and confident perspectives. This finding supports the view that informational and awareness-raising initiatives can play a crucial role in shaping attitudes, reducing uncertainty, and fostering acceptance (UNESCO, 2020). It also aligns with ecological and socio-cultural perspectives, which emphasize the interaction between individual beliefs and environmental influences in the formation of attitudes.

Furthermore, the ambivalence observed in parental attitudes can be understood within the broader framework of social representations of disability. Persistent cultural beliefs and societal norms continue to influence how inclusion is perceived, often generating contradictions between value-based acceptance and practical hesitation. This suggests that the transition toward a fully inclusive mindset remains incomplete and requires sustained efforts at both the educational and societal levels.

5. Recommendations

The findings of the present study suggest that parental attitudes toward inclusive education are dynamic and shaped by the interaction of individual, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. The identified ambivalence highlights the need to move beyond binary interpretations of attitudes and to consider the conditions under which support for inclusion is strengthened or constrained. From a practical perspective, the results underline the importance of strengthening school capacity through targeted teacher training, the provision of specialized support, and the development of inclusive pedagogical practices. Equally important is the enhancement of school–family collaboration, with a focus on transparent communication, parental engagement, and awareness-raising initiatives that can reduce uncertainty and foster more positive perceptions.

Future research could extend these findings by examining how parental attitudes evolve over time, particularly through increased exposure to inclusive environments. Comparative and cross-cultural studies would also be valuable in exploring how broader social contexts influence perceptions of inclusion, while mixed-method approaches could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between attitudes, experiences, and educational outcomes.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of adopting a systemic approach to inclusive education. Strengthening school resources, enhancing teacher professional development, and promoting meaningful school–family collaboration are essential conditions for addressing parental concerns and fostering trust. In particular, initiatives aimed at increasing parental awareness and engagement may serve as a catalyst for the development of more supportive and inclusive school communities. The study also highlights the pivotal role of parents as active stakeholders in the inclusion process. Their

attitudes, shaped by both experience and context, can significantly influence the implementation and effectiveness of inclusive practices. Addressing their concerns and actively involving them in educational processes constitutes a key step toward the successful realization of inclusive education.

Despite the contribution of the present study, certain limitations are acknowledged that may affect the findings and their interpretation. First, the relatively small sample size, which is characteristic of qualitative research, limits the generalizability of the results to the wider population. However, the purpose of qualitative inquiry is not generalization but the in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the study relies on the subjectivity of participants' responses. Parents may be influenced by socially desirable answers or by personal experiences that vary significantly among them, which may affect the objectivity of the data (Patton, 2015). Finally, the findings have limited generalizability, as the data were collected within a specific social and cultural context. Attitudes toward inclusion may differ in other societies or educational systems (Slee, 2011).

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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The author is a Doctor in Special Education and teaches in the Department of Special Education at the University of Thessaly. Her research interests focus on the multi-level inclusion of individuals with disabilities in educational, professional, and broader social contexts. She has collaborated extensively with general and special education teachers, as well as with organizations representing individuals with disabilities.

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