

A Qualitative Study of Parental Perceptions of Inclusive Education in Kazakhstan: The View of Three

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Kazakhstan is presently undergoing a number of developments in the education system. One of the main reform directions includes the development of inclusive education. The problem is that the reform lacks a focus on increasing social awareness about inclusive education (Zholtayeva et al., 2013). This qualitative-interview based study aims at exploring parental perceptions about the inclusion of children with special needs at the mainstream schools. The results of this study make important revelations about the parental understandings of the policy, their attitudes and possible challenges schools face when implementing the inclusive education practices.

Keywords: inclusive education, parental view on inclusive education, education for special needs.

Introduction

Kazakhstan is currently implementing a number of initiatives and reforms in the education system with a purpose of developing inclusive practices. In the State Program of Education Development of Kazakhstan (2011-2020), the government provides a number of goals directed toward improving the inclusive education policies in the country (MoES, 2011). This national document sets the direction, as well as clarifies the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in implementing education policies at all levels. Inclusive education suggests equal access to the quality education at all levels; and consequently, stipulates the provision of access to education by all children irrespective of their socio-economic background, geography, language and ethnicity group, gender, race, age and nationality. Currently, achievement of social equality through increasing the equal access to quality education for children with disabilities and with special educational needs remains as one of the major social as well as educational issues in Kazakhstan (OECD, 2014). The problem is that the policy lacks a focus on increasing social awareness of the society about inclusive education (Zholtayeva, Stambekova, Alipbayeva & Yerzhanova, 2013); and particularly, few is known about addressing the inclusion from the context of parental perspectives and attitudes. Understanding and studying the perspectives of parents about the implementation of inclusion is important since successful development of inclusive education depends on a number of factors, including the parental awareness about the policy (Zholtayeva et al., 2013). Parents are the ones, who are responsible for their children's education and development, and they decide where for their children to study; and in this way, they play a role in assessing the effectiveness of different school programs. Parents can also work in collaboration with schools; and support the development of inclusive education policies and practices. Worth noting is that the parental support of inclusive policies may depend on their perspectives, and general awareness about inclusive practices (Duhaney & Salend, 2000). All this helps to understand that it is essential to examine the parental perceptions about inclusive education in Kazakhstan, and apply this knowledge in further enhancing the effectiveness of the policy implementation. The main purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of parents about inclusive education in Kazakhstan. The study focuses on the following research questions: 1) what are parents' perceptions and attitudes towards inclusive education? and 2) what are the possible challenges parents think schools face, while integrating inclusive education practices?

Literature Review

The review of the literature indicates that perceptions of parents about inclusive education vary; while some view integration of children with special needs to the mainstream schools as a positive policy initiative, others feel that their children would receive less attention during the lessons if children with disabilities are integrated (Duhaney & Salend, 2000). For instance, Reichart, Lynch, Anderson, Svobodny, Di Cola and Mercury (1989) studied perceptions of parents of children without disabilities, and conducted a number of interviews with twelve parents. The findings suggest that respondents viewed the contact among children with and without disabilities as the one promoting positive social relationships especially when the setting was integrated, parents found that integration increased the understanding of children about each other's diversity better (Reichart et al., 1989). Similarly to Reichart et al., (1989) the findings of Gilmore, Campbell and Cuskelly (2003) indicated positive respondents' attitudes towards the inclusion of children; specifically, the inclusion of pupils with Down syndrome to the mainstream schools. They investigated the attitudes of 2053 people and 538 teachers about the educational inclusion of children with the Down syndrome, and both groups demonstrated quite good knowledge and positive attitudes

towards inclusion. However, despite the recognition of the positive aspects of inclusion, only 20% of respondents believed that the regular classroom was the best option for children with indicated syndrome. Importantly, researchers highlighted the importance of increasing the parental awareness about accepting the diversity at schools. Specifically, Duhaney and Salend (2000) in their study on parental perceptions of inclusive education specified several benefits that parents may find in inclusive environments. These benefits included “social cognition, such as greater awareness of other children’s needs, pro-social personal characteristics (for example, more responsiveness and helpfulness to the needs of classmates with disabilities), and greater acceptance of human diversity (like more likelihood of feeling comfortable with classmates and others with disabilities, and less likelihood of holding prejudices and stereotypes about people who look or behave differently)” (Duhaney & Salend, 2000, p. 123).

In contrast to this, the study conducted by Duhaney and Salend (2000) indicated that one-fourth of participants felt that their children received fewer attention during the lessons if children with disabilities were integrated to the mainstream school classrooms. Green and Stoneman (1989) conducted a research about the attitudes of almost two hundred parents regarding integrated programs, and found that generally parental attitudes towards integration become more positive as they find the social interaction of children to be a good life experience. Green and Stoneman (1989) argue that parental perceptions change according to the type of special educational need that might be required. It is noticeable from the literature that parents support the integration of children with physical and sensory disabilities. At the same time, researchers pose concerns about integrating children with severe disabilities, mental retardation, behavior disorders, and with any kind of emotional disturbances. Green and Stoneman (1989) suggest that as a response, professional training of teachers may play an extremely important factor in overcoming this challenge, and enhancing a successful integration of children with disabilities. Overall, the analysis of the literature indicates that perceptions of parents about inclusive education differ; while some perceive the integration of children with special needs to the mainstream schools as a positive policy initiative, others think that their children would get less attention during the lessons if children with disabilities are integrated. Although the general perception of parents of children without disabilities towards inclusive education is positive, some parents have certain concerns. To be more precise, parents of children without disabilities are concerned about the following aspects that need to be taken into account: the effectiveness of the time devoted to each child in the classroom; the effectiveness of the teachers’ instructional practices; the role of the teacher in the inclusive classrooms; the qualification of educators; safety and transportation measures; sufficiency of an appropriate specialist support, including other required resources for integration (Grove & Fisher, 1999; Duhaney & Salend, 2000).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research method. A qualitative approach helps to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences (Creswell, 2007); and thereof, this approach best suited to addressing the research questions, and gaining an insight into parental perspectives regarding inclusive education. Specifically, a qualitative methodology allowed the acquisition of deeper information related to the attitudes, reactions, experiences and perceptions of parents regarding inclusive education (Creswell, 2012). Purposeful snowball sampling was used to recruit parents in the study. Snowball sampling is a form of purposeful sampling that after recruiting one participant allows simplifying the sampling procedure as that participant can recommend other individuals (Creswell, 2012). In this case, the first participant was selected purposefully; the participant had a child without disability in a mainstream school. It was expected that indicated sampling strategy would provide the researcher with an opportunity to recruit parents from different settings, diverse backgrounds, and those who had children with different age groups. The first respondent recommended other individuals with whom he had regular contacts. The nature of the relationship between participants allowed the researcher to stay confident about the willingness of the parents to participate while not dropping out from the study. Finally, three parents were selected, after having signed an informed consent form, which included information about the research, ethical issues and possible benefits: one mother and two father parents agreed to participate in this research.

To collect data, three semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held, each lasting roughly 25 minutes in the respondents’ homes. The semi-structured type of interviews best suited the purpose of this study since they allowed better control of the type of the information received by the researcher, and provided the possibility to lead the conversation, and change questions when this became necessary (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, one-on-one interviews helped the researcher to collect information, and conduct an in-depth analysis of the data. This data collection instrument permitted gathering of detailed information without any outside interruptions. A list of structured questions developed by the researcher prior to the interviews was used; a couple of minor changes took place during the interviews, such as the paraphrasing of the questions and making necessary clarifications. Each

interview was tape recorded and transcribed. To analyze the data, parents' interview answers were grouped and developed into different coding categories (Creswell, 2012). Afterwards, the emerged coding categories were convened under three main themes in compliance with the sub-questions in order to answer the main research questions.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study were organized into three themes in accordance with the following research questions: a) what are parents' perceptions and attitudes towards inclusive education; and b) what are the possible challenges parents think schools currently face, when integrating inclusive education practices. Specifically, during the data analysis the following main themes have emerged with relation to the perception of parents about inclusive education: the parental understanding of the inclusive education, the attitudes of parents, and parental views about possible challenges of implementing inclusive practices at mainstream schools.

Parents' Perceptions of Inclusive Education and Their Attitudes

The results of the study show that two out of three parents are quite aware of inclusive education. Parents understand that inclusive education means the acceptance of children differences in the mainstream schools, including those with disabilities. This is expressed in the following comment:

I think that the idea of inclusive education is that such children [children with disabilities] should be taught in mainstream schools, with ordinary children naturally and thus they will adapt to regular education from an early stage. [Parent 1]

This indicates that parents understand that the early inclusion of children with special educational needs will help their children to adapt better to society. Additionally, Parent 2 thinks that turning our attention to the problems of those in need is one of the best indicators of country's development. However, they feel that society might not be ready to accept all differences among human beings. For example, Parent 3 stated: "Even our society is not ready to accept such children. They begin to look at them [children with disabilities] as something strange, finger pointing, giving loud comments..."

Parents' Attitude Towards Inclusive Education

Parents generally report positive attitudes regarding inclusive educational initiatives in the country. The responses of parents to the questions related to the benefits of inclusion shows that they see inclusion as being as equally beneficial for children with special educational needs as to those without. They think that inclusion will increase opportunities to develop social competences, and expand the possibility of the acceptance of such individuals in the real world as equal members of society. Additionally, children without disabilities will learn to be tolerant to differences, and to be kind and friendly. For example, Parent 1 stated:

Well, the advantage appears in the period of social adjustment because I think, early adaption to real life will be easier for them [children with SEN] to adapt to their abilities, I think, because they really will catch up, look at their peers, and accordingly they will be likely to want to change something in their lives. If we are talking about children with certain disabilities, so they will be motivated to develop in all means...

In addition to positive social contacts, parents also point out some economic benefits of the inclusion of all children to the mainstream schools. Specifically, parents suggest that the policy will help to unload special schools. However, despite overall positive attitudes, parents expressed their doubts about including all children to the mainstream school setting, and these challenges are discussed below.

Parents' View About Challenges

Despite understanding the importance of inclusive programs in combating discriminatory practices in the educational system, parents still feel that schools are not ready yet to accommodate children with special educational needs. All three parents think that schools are not fully equipped, and lack relevant facilities for children with any form of physical disability. Parents believe that poor infrastructure, large class sizes and the absence of support services may become the main obstacle in achieving meaningful results. For instance, the first interviewee stated the following:

...Neither classrooms nor entryways are ready. They are very narrow. Well, because I have a child enrolled in a mainstream school, I see that schools are not ready to meet those [children with disabilities] children's

needs... There is no special access at schools to accept these children. For instance, to welcome children on wheelchairs... [Parent1]

Parents view lack of qualified teacher assistance and lack of effective education programs as another major drawback to implementing inclusion practices within the mainstream school settings. Parents think that children with disabilities are in need of special support, which is currently inadequately provided. Specifically, children with special educational needs, require involvement of professionals, who will assist with their adaptation, medical treatment and other additional services. Although parents are aware of current medical and psychological support provided at schools, they are not sure if it might meet the needs of all children in facilitating and providing an adequate level of education.

Additionally, parents believe that media could serve as useful tool in promoting communities that would welcome differences and education for all. Parents think that government should not underestimate the importance of media in promoting, and explaining the importance of inclusive education to the society, and increasing its general awareness about the policy. The findings suggest that parents understand that inclusive education is becoming one of the guiding educational policies in the country. They support the initiatives of the government, but they are also critical of the implementation process. This partially aligns with the data in the literature; for example, the findings about the inclusive practices in developed countries have shown that parents generally have positive attitudes towards inclusion, while at the same time being concerned about the quality of instruction, availability of sufficient support and facilities (Green & Stoneman, 1989; Laurel & Spencer, 2000; Duhaney & Salend, 2000; Jelas, 2000; Eleweke & Rodda, 2002). Literature results also revealed that parents have positive perceptions regarding the inclusion of children with physical or mild disabilities rather than those with behavioral or severe disabilities (Duhaney & Salend, 2000; Leyser & Kirk, 2004). Leyser and Kirk (2004) literature analysis suggests that in the worldwide practices there is a tendency for elementary-aged children with disabilities in schools rather than at the secondary level of schools. It is reported that many parents of children with disabilities are questioning the benefits of attending secondary schools as the academic pressure rises significantly.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings suggest that parents are positive about inclusive education in Kazakhstan. Parents support the idea of welcoming students with special needs in the mainstream schools, and also aware about social, emotional and economic benefits that inclusive education can potentially bring. However, as possible challenges, they understand that the society still doesn't have full understanding of the benefits of inclusive education. Parents question the readiness of schools, such as availability of facilities, infrastructure and teachers. Parents are the agents of change as the same as teachers and students are. As one of the main stakeholders, parents are the ones, who decide the place where for their children to study; they also contribute to the implementation of any education related initiatives of the government. When there are overall positive society perceptions, the chances for successful implementation of inclusive education increase, whilst negative perceptions may serve as a barrier for successful execution of the inclusive education policy practices in the country.

Study Limitations

The significant limitation of this study is a small sample of participants. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized. Furthermore, this study based on a single data collection instrument; therefore for further development in this field, it is suggested to gather perceptions from larger population, for example, from the parents of children with special needs, while using different data collection instruments. Finally, studying the perception of other stakeholders could help add additional value to research, and contribute to a more holistic understanding of the issue under the investigation.

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