Parental Experiences in Seeking Inclusive Educational Placements for their Special Needs Children: A case from Pakistan

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Abstract

Parents of children with special needs are a unique breed of strong individuals. Raising a child with a special need is an enervating condition on its own. Educating a gifted child becomes a greater challenge as parents are doubly stretched. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study describes the experiences of four parents of two special needs children studying in a mainstream inclusive school in grade five and grade six. In-depth interviews of parents were conducted to describe the process of seeking inclusive placements for their children and their subsequent experiences in such a school setting. The findings are broadly categorized into four phases: The initial trauma-diagnosis of the condition; Behind closed doors: Seeking an inclusive placement; Opening of door: In an inclusive placement; Moving forward: The future of inclusion. The overarching themes congealed from all phases of findings pointed to a range of impediments in finding inclusive placements, compounded stress in locating and hiring of qualified resource teachers, and partial satisfaction with the fractured supports and services received in the inclusive setting despite benevolent attitudes of the school administration.

Keywords: Inclusion, special needs children, resource teachers, parental experiences

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Introduction

The right of children with special needs to study in regular schools and to be part of regular classes is wrought with challenges. Parental aspirations, proficiency of teachers, resources and policy have affected how this prerogative is applied (Bryer, Grimbeek, Beamish, & Stanley, 2004). According to UNICEF (2003), 70% of the children with incapacities, including mild retardation can attend regular schools given the school setting is accessible and the establishment willingly provides accommodations.

The early 1980s saw a decade that witnessed the beginnings of inclusion in the United States and Europe as a special education initiative for gifted students (Ferguson, 2008). The Salamanca Declaration on Inclusive Education for special needs children by UNESCO (1994) followed by the Dakar Framework (UNESCO, 2000) advocated and imposed legal as well as ethical obligations for implementing full inclusion for all children regardless of their disability (Rahman, 2011). Today, more than two decades later, the new educational discourse gravitates around making inclusive practices available to 'everybody, everywhere and all the time' (Ferguson, 2008) making inclusive education a human right that makes good scholastic and social sense (Shahzadi, 2000).

The cognitive theory of child development by Vygotsky acts as a seamless framework for explaining the positive impact of educational inclusion which involves placement of children with special needs within mainstream classrooms alongside their peers for most of the school day (Bryer, Grimbeek, Beamish & Stanley, 2004;Swick & Hooks, 2005) to afford 'shared meaningful learning experiences'(Giangreco & Doyle, 2000).

Ostensibly, all countries are moving in the same direction, but at a different pace given the contingent and practical difficulties as ends and motives vary (Peters, 2003). Conclusively, inclusion carries a different meaning in different contexts with comparable yet distinct perspectives of both parents and teachers within the developing and developed nations of the world. In Pakistan, the first *National Policy for Persons with Disabilities* was approved fairly recently in 2002 leading to a National Plan of Action (NPA) in 2006 which served as a leap forward in the history of special education as it conceptualized a move towards an inclusive system of education for children with special needs (Bhatti, 2007).

However, not much groundbreaking work has been done as yet revealing a stark disparity between rhetoric, policy formulation and service implementation. Lack of precise legislation protecting the rights of special needs children to gain access into regular schools further exacerbates the problem. Despite a few scattered examples of good practice schools, the concept is fairly avant-garde and still in its embryonic stages in Pakistan and the sole practitioners of educational inclusion appear to be NGOs and the private sector.

Previous international research has surveyed the perceptions, views and expectations of inclusion among a wide range of stakeholders (Bryer, Grimbeek, Beamish & Stanley,2004). However, teachers, administrators and educators have been the focus and not parents. Inclusion of parental experiences has only recently attracted attention in the discourse.

The main objective of this phenomenological study is to understand the perceptions of parents that motivated them to choose an inclusive educational placement for their special needs child, and to describe their range of experiences in seeking and obtaining such a placement. It aims at constructing a just picture of their trials and tribulations, satisfaction and discontent with the supports and services provided to their children by the teachers and school. This study is guided by the following research question:

What are the experiences of parents regarding inclusive educational placements of their children with special needs?

The following exploratory sub-questions shall be used as a guide to give impetus to the research:

1. What is the significance of parental perceptions in the academic placement of their child with a special need?

2. What are the parents' expectations of academic inclusion and how have they been affirmed or reformed by their experiences?

Literature Review

Review of literature reveals that parents are found at a variance over the utility of educational inclusion anxious about the safety and protection of their child's interest. Grove and Fisher (1999) and Elkins, van Kraaynenoord & Jobling (2003) identified a range of diverging views amongst parents regarding the placement of their special needs children in academic settings. It was collected that while most

parents prefer and endorse inclusive placements, few also favor individual placements (Groove & Fisher, 1999).

Understanding parents of gifted children requires acquaintance with the narratives of their past and present struggles (Ferguson & Ferguson, 1987) as parental experiences do not occur in a vacuum rather they fluctuate along the continuum due to the inimitable aspects of their lives contexts (Jacobson & Engelbrecht, 2000). It is their distinct perceptions and values that inform their choices for their children with special needs and shape their experiences of inclusion (Ryndak, Storch and Hoppey, 2008) equally dependent on the kind of supports and environment the child receives in school. Concomitantly, demographic variables such as socio-economic status, level of education, age, previous experience with inclusion and type of disability (Boer, Pillji, & Minnaert, 2010) apart from cultural contexts, and societal institutions are also key determinants in informing their decisions regarding the educational placement of their gifted children (Jacobson & Engelbrecht, 2000).

Studies pertaining to certain communities in Pakistan (Akhter, 1994), India (Narumanchi & Bhargava, 2011) and Bangladesh (Rahman, 2011) confirm the role played by customs and beliefs on parental choices. Collectively, these studies revealed that where parents are not literate, the birth of a disabled child is still thought of as a curse, as a punishment from God/gods and regarded with fear and superstition. The belief that such children are a burden on society is reflected in their decision of educating or not educating them, and their subsequent choice of educational placement (a regular school versus a special needs school).

Notwithstanding predominantly, most parents hold positive attitudes towards the inclusion of their children in mainstream settings as they feel that interaction with typical children promotes positive role models (Soodak & Erwin, 2000), fosters friendships, and facilitates acquisition of academic, social, verbal, and motor skills (Bennet, Deluca & Bruns,1997). In addition, it is strongly felt that higher standards in regular academic classes kindle their child's learning abilities profusely ((Narimuncha & Bhargava, 2011).

In their study of parents of children with disabilities in the United States regarding the benefits of inclusion, Swick and Hooks (2005) concluded that children realize their maximum potential if they are exposed to situations that do not place rigid limits on potential learning and socializing. An analysis of statistics of Canada 2001 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) on people with disabilities by Timmons and Wagner (2008) also confirmed the hypothesis that where educational services are structured to guarantee inclusion, parents are more likely to

report their children in good physical and social health, and perform well academically regardless of the type and severity of the disability.

Seeking and gaining inclusion are two aspects of one process marked by impediments for parents of children with special needs ranging from educational segregation, inapplicable curriculum, inappropriate supports and services, and above all social rejection (Kluth, Biklen, English-Sand, & Smukler, 2007). Putatively, due to its esoteric nature, the struggle of parents in gaining access to inclusive settings for their challenged children demands empirical investigation.

As the trend toward inclusion gains momentum, a major concern of parents is safeguarding supports and services for their children (Elkins, Van Kraaynenoord & Jobling, 2003). Dynamics as lack of customized instruction by teachers (Janus, Kopenchanski, Cameron, & Hughes, 2008; Boer, Pijli, & Minnaert, 2010) and mediocre quality of teaching due to inadequate training (Leyser & Kirk, 2004), also become substantial concerns as students with disabilities bring educators a challenge to make their practices more compliant (Giangreco, 2007). Parents also identify strong administrative leadership as a vital prerequisite to implementing excellence in any inclusive school (Kluth, Biklen, English-Sand & Smukler, 2007).

Attitudes of teachers and educators are found to be positive overall, but there appears to be a confusion of roles between general education teachers and paraprofessionals. Accountability of teachers also remains unclear, as responsibilities and duties are ill-defined and unequally shared. A similar scenario is witnessed in Pakistan. There is hesitance regarding the importance of inclusion in regular school settings and confusion about service delivery by educators (Shahzadi, 2000) including cynicism of teachers to include special children in mainstream schools fearful of failure due to lack of requisite training and institutional support. A study conducted in Ireland (Henry, Casserly, Coady & Marshall, 2008) revealed the same results as a study carried out in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2011). Educators espoused insufficient funding, inadequate knowledge and limited professional coaching as deterrents to good practice.

Conclusively, the impacts and outcomes of inclusion, whether positive or unyielding vary with individuals depending on the severity of the condition and the level of supports provided. Educators also contend not all children thrive in regular schools. Some may even do better in special needs schools. A recent case study of a child with considerable developmental delays in South Africa (Jace & Marossa, 2009) reflects this paradigm. The child showed academic consistency as well as

overall improvement of self-esteem when shifted from a mainstream to a special needs school.

On the whole, parents are keen to educate their special needs children in mainstream schools in order to provide them a normal childhood, and are generally optimistic about their future (Majid & Khan, 1994) with the disability not branded as a limiting factor (Akhter, 1994).

Methodology

A phenomenological approach is the theoretical approach most often associated with qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) and as it has been employed successfully in educational research(Bourke, 2007). The researchers have used this approach to understand meanings in events and human interactions through the study of phenomena as people experience them. This approach aims to unearth, how particular people in given contexts make sense of a phenomenon.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was employed for the selection of participants as it suited the demands and rigor of the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Morse, 1991). Families who were willing to freely articulate their experiences as they relate to the phenomenon under investigation were selected for the undertaking (Patton, 1980). In phenomenology, Dukes (1984) recommends studying 3 to 10 subjects. A purposeful sample of two parents (that is four participants in all) of two children with a special needs at primary level were chosen from a private mainstream school that professedly nurtures an inclusive environment. Both the affected children were teenage boys. Ahmer, aged thirteen, suffering from epilepsy, was in grade five (having lost on prime academic time earlier on due to delayed school placements). Abrar, also thirteen, and a student of grade six suffered from Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The parents belong to well to do families of Karachi and were safely in the age bracket of 30s to late 50s.

Measures/Procedures

The school acted as the intermediary; it identified the participating parents in keeping with the requirements of the researchers. Initial contact was established with them to explain the nature of the study and to convince them to participate. Once their verbal consent was made available, the researchers were allowed to step in. The

researchers contacted them through telephone to repeat the same process of explanation and extending the invitation to the research study.

Research ethics were followed by taking a written consent from each participant whereby they were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and a choice to decline participation at any point of the research. Their anonymity was also guaranteed by giving pseudonyms to each of the children to protect their identity. An interview protocol and consent form was prepared carefully for the parents, with empathic language and carefully selected wordings bearing the unique nature of their participation. It was emailed to them prior to the interview to breed familiarity with it and to avoid any unpleasantness and discrepancies later on. Along with this, two observation checklists were prepared based on literature review that was used while observing the activities of the teachers, resource teachers, and the two participants.

Data Collection:

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and classroom observations in the school yard during morning assemblies, lunch breaks and sports time. Interviews with the parents were conducted at a time prescribed by the participants at a venue of their choice and lasted from sixty to ninety minutes. Two classroom observations of teachers, resource teachers and the two children under study were also conducted to triangulate the data; each observation was spaced two weeks apart.

Data analysis

Data were collected through a voice recorder, but mostly through memoing which was transcribed manually first as quick memos and then rewritten as reflective journal notes which was done within the week of interviewing. The initial reading was to seek the overarching meanings of the thick data collected through interviews. During the subsequent readings, details regarding content and issues were searched for. This process continued till finally the data were organized and reorganized into common patterns, themes and categories till it collapsed into common categories and themes following Menen's thematic analysis (Menen, 1998).

Findings

The two parents interviewed were very vocal about voicing their opinions as they felt that 'lending their voice' might usher a positive change in the practices of the educational fraternity. The research findings of interviews of parents are organized under four phases (a) The initial trauma: Diagnosis of the problem, (b) Behind closed doors: Seeking an inclusive placement, (c) Opening of doors: In the

mainstream school and (d) Moving forward: Towards the inclusive utopia. Each category signifies a distinct phase in the quest of parents attempting to mainstream their special needs child. Each phase is wrought with its unique implications.

The Diagnosis of the problem phase is one where parents found out about the nature of the disabling condition. This phase is marked by feelings of shock and frustration, anger and confusion and a concomitant denial of the situation. Their eventual acceptance of the issue moved them to granting the same childhood to their gifted child as any other ordinary one, thus, initiating the phase of Seeking inclusion in an educational environment. The foci here are their search for educators who would understand their child's uniqueness and grant admission to them in a regular school. The trouble they met with and how the educational journey of their child came to a standstill or got aborted temporarily marks this phase. The final phase of Opening of doors relates the experiences in the mainstream setup. It encompasses their current experience from the time the child enrolled to each day as it unfolds. How they perceived the placement, and their contentment and dissatisfaction with the support and services provided by the school are included here. The Moving Forward phase voices their concerns that need immediate redress and recommendations for improvement in services thereof.

The initial trauma-diagnosis of the condition

Although not a part of the research question, as the interviews progressed and as the stories unfolded, this phase emerged as an important link to the larger research question; the outlook of the parents towards the disability became a focal determinant of the future course of schooling of their children. Parents' frank admissions about the diagnosis of their child's condition and their candid reactions documenting their feelings of helplessness in the face of the enormous discovery are marked here.

Shock and denial: The academic journey of each child began at 18-24 months as is the norm in Pakistan. The issues surfaced approximately at the same time for both children at around three and a half to four years of age. Till then all the developmental milestones were on time so suspicion was not aroused easily. Both families went through the process of denial, shock and subsequent acceptance on discovering an exceptional illness afflicting their child. Ahmer's issue emerged at four years of age when he started having periodic seizures. Diagnosed with epilepsy after six months, he was kept on medications as his condition demanded it. Teary eyed, Ahmed's mother recollected:

"We could not fathom what was happening to us.... was it real? It hit us really hard as he is our youngest, and the other siblings are absolutely fine. Initially, I was in complete denial, and wanted to keep it clandestine as I was afraid.... I wanted to protect him in any way possible."

Abrar's condition was discovered in a similar fashion. The teachers at Abrar's kindergarten pointed out that something was wrong. A short attention span, repetitive speech, and the inability to carry on a conversation that would cohere was what triggered their concern. Lack of proper diagnostic institutions for assessing the needs of children with developmental issues prompted them to seek help abroad. Abrar's mom stated:

"Under the impression that it might be a psychological concern, we arranged for our child's diagnosis while on a family vacation abroad. However, a detailed diagnosis confirmed Autism Spectrum Disorder which is a milder form of autism. My initial reaction was clearly of shock. Inconsolable, it took me some time to come to terms with reality."

Social rejection: The vicious circle of complaints from the school began as both children unequivocally lagged behind, unable to keep up with school attendance and academic rigor. Behavioral issues started surfacing also as the young and vulnerable children felt a strangeness with self and could not comprehend the endless trips to the doctors suddenly and the range of medicines to be had. As one parent put in:

"All of them cut off instantly; first the phone calls stopped, then the playmates stopped visiting his house and calling him over to their place for their play trysts. My child instantly felt a gap; he figured that something was greatly amiss. This also triggered his behavior issues as he started seeking attention forcibly through rebellion."

Eventual acceptance: Acceptance of the condition is an eventuality that parents arrive at conclusively with the passage of time. In retrospect, the mothers felt they could have dealt with it more stolidly, but the confusion at that time was too inhibiting to do so. Abrar's mom stated:

"Time has taught me to deal with life as it comes. I am more accepting and accommodating. I feel no discomfiture. I am quite complacent with my life, although there are times when I lose my patience."

Unflinching family support. As both parents had other children, older and younger, emotional and physical support from their families became an invaluable aid to

enable them to focus their attention to their gifted child while not leaving the other children unattended. Where both the fathers were found to be understanding and supportive, the extended families also demonstrated extreme sensitivity in providing support beyond their calling.

Behind closed doors-seeking an inclusive placement

Self-advocacy: Before finding an inclusive placement, the parents' primary preoccupation was educating themselves about the illness and its impacts, attending conferences and meetings with people who could affect a change; thus reeling for support from all concerned quarters to help their children.

Parental perceptions behind mainstreaming: Safeguarding the interests of their child became the guiding principle in gearing up efforts to socially include their child in the educational arena. Putting them through the ordinary school experience was considered the best gift for their children as it enabled them to move a step closer to leading a normal, happy childhood just like their other siblings. They are cognizant of and fully understand and accept their child's strengths and limitations, and do not push the school or make any unnecessary demands; wishing only to see their children as independent individuals with emphasis on the acquisition of social skills more than academic goals.

Negative attitudes of practitioners and parents of typical children: The parents encountered many encumbrances, faced discrimination, sustained pressure and negative attitudes in order to do what was best for their child. There were many school administrators who were outright un-accepting and unsupportive of mainstreaming. These practitioners were rigid and bent on dictating their terms to parents rather than listening to them; some even suggested home schooling which they equated to seclusion for their children. Seasoned practitioners in the field of special education actually used derogatory terms for other special children in the presence of these parents. A mother recollected the time they had nowhere to turn to as their son was thrown out of school pressurized by the parents of typical children.

Decision regarding the optimal placement: Unflinching in their efforts, the many bad experiences on the way only made them more determined to explore an educational setup that would cater to their child's unique gifts. As the condition of both children was not severe, mainstreaming was unquestionably decided for as a sustainable option to cater to their growing intellectual, developmental, social and emotional needs.

After being denied enrollment by many schools, they were redirected to the few schools that would readily absorb their children. The current school was finalized as it seemed carefully built on the brass tacks of inclusive philosophy harnessed by the principal who was found actively working in this field.

Opening of door-in an inclusive placement

An empathic school culture: Parents' unflinching obstinacy earned their child gainful inclusion in a diverse school. They feel that the school provides their child with much needed regimentation and discipline in addition to the stimulus to learn. They applaud the efforts of this institution to at least introduce the concept and feel that the environment is conducive and commend the staff for being cooperative and for harboring positive attitudes.

A mixed bag of experiences: Where one family was optimistic, the other felt let down and seemed to have given up hope for betterment. Abrar joined the school in grade two and is in grade six currently following a lower grade content level equivalent to grade three or four in the core subjects. He follows the Individualized Education Plans (IEP'S) by his mother in tandem with the resource teacher. Simply put, they are the daily or monthly lesson plans. Science, history, and literature classes he is involved with the multisensory activities that are carefully designed to include diverse learners. Although not assigned the regular academic content, he is an active participant of group activities. Notwithstanding, despite the uninterrupted continuum of the inclusive placement, the parents sense marginal improvement. Evidently, inclusion has still not taken off for them.

> *"Although his socialization and behavior has significantly improved, there is no evidence of academic growth or learning of concepts. He is still in the same place where he started."*

Contrary to their beliefs, Ahmed's family feels optimistic regarding the future of their child feeling he is moving from strength to strength. He commenced schooling in this school from grade three and is currently thirteen years of age sitting in grade five with same-aged peers but follows the content of grade two or three. His parents were quite optimistic and felt he was moving in the right direction. In school, he is part of the PYP Primary Years Program (PYP) in social studies, science and history, but for English, Urdu and Math, he follows a simplified content. Just like Abrar, he also actively participates in group tasks, research assignments, arts and crafts and social activities. On the whole, his progress was described as slow yet sustained and measurable.

No collaboration between stakeholders: Minimal collaboration between the two important stakeholders, parents and the school was a major source of trepidation for them. There was no feedback from the school or teachers; Individual Education Planswere made by the parents and resource teachers in isolation of the school authorities.

Lack of teachers' accountability: The lack of accountability of class teachers towards the inclusive learners was felt sadly lacking. The current school practice was to delegate the entire responsibility of such learners upon their resource teachers who in turn were also not held accountable to the school contributing to a vortex of ill-defined goals, redundant activities and a quagmire of failed delivery of services.

*Dearth of trained resource teachers***:** The most notable source of disquiet for the parents in attempting to mainstream their children was the lack of efficacious resource teachers. Providing the resource teacher was the prime responsibility of the parents and finding one that was tailored to their specifications and a good role model for their child was a mission impossible. Engaging and retaining their services if found efficient is also aborted abruptly as good resource teachers are perpetually hijacked by other needy parents offering greater monetary incentives to them. Interestingly, the absence of the resource teacher from school leads to the inclusive learners absence also as they are not allowed to sit in class or attend school altogether in such a circumstance.

Moving forward-The future of inclusion

Schools could do a lot more if they wanted to but it was deeply felt that they lacked the political will to synergize efforts towards making full inclusion possible. Interestingly, both the families had practical solutions to offer and common sense practices to endorse to act as precursors of change.

Provision of all related services under the aegis of the school: In order to upgrade services, parents were found willing to support the school in all conceivable and unprecedented ways; ready to even inject more personal funds into assisting the school to upgrade supports for their inclusive learners. Parents proposed that schools should go an extra mile by providing an in-house diagnostic service to generate efficacious assessment reports to pinpoint exact and particular needs of their children and to make effective IEP's for them. This would ensure that teachers and parents were on one page

and would not have to rely on conjecture to formulate IEP's that do not help the children realize their maximum potential. Services like occupational therapy and speech therapy were envisioned to be under the umbrella of the school too.

Hiring and training resource teachers: School endorsement of resource teachers and their concomitant training was espoused as a major service for schools to engage in. As they sign a one year contract with the parents confidentially, the resource teachers keep ferreting about for meaty pecuniary recompense. Once on the school payroll they would be held answerable to the school authorities just like other teachers. The result would be provision of standardized services apart from unburdening the parents from the compounded stress of finding good resource teachers. Intentional hijacking of teachers would also be reconciled.

Coordinator for inclusive learners: The appointment of a coordinator to oversee special cases, to keep checks and balances on teachers, to provide guidance to parents and teachers, to negotiate feedback and act as the intermediary between all the stakeholders was pronounced as a priority. Were this door of communication opened, most of the irate issues would dissolve indelibly.

Discussion

The overall structure of the phases presents a temporal framework wherein the parents narrate their exclusive stories about seeking inclusion and the distress faced. The framework of this study is similar to a number of other studies that sought to seek parental perceptions regarding inclusive placements (Kluth, Biklen, English & Smukler, 2007; Swick & Hooks, 2005; Ryndak, Storch & Hoppey, 2008). Most of the findings of this study are consistent with findings of Swick and Hooks (2005). However, in the present study, the trajectory of parental experiences has been described on a continuum to lend it more richness and fluidity as the efficacy of such an enterprise is contestable if parents as fallible stakeholders are left out. As quintessential partners, their love, compassion and aspirations for their children as well as their views must be honored in the multifarious process of education (Porter & Smith, 2011).

Coming to terms with the disability of a loved one is not easy, especially when the affected happens to be your child. Consistent with findings of other researchers, parents proceed through a process of anger and denial, shock and frustration and eventual acceptance. Major and minor lifestyle adjustments are inevitably made to accommodate for their child's special needs while not compromising living a normal life (Swick & Hooks, 2005).

During this crucial stage, the extended family assumes a central role as strength is derived from familial supports. Review of the literature reveals a parallel between the findings of this study and other studies that suggest the need for families with special needs children to receive support from other family members (Ryndak, Storch & Hoppey, 2008). Having an extended network of support provides much needed 'relief time' to the family members braving the burden of supporting a child with dissimilar needs all alone (Ryndak, Storch & Hoppey, 2008). However, dependency on internal family supports could be reduced if structured opportunities were provided by the state. Currently, the onus is on the parents to both advocate for their children and search for need-specific supports.

As propounded by literature review, the uniqueness of parents was found dependent on the varied aspects of their lives (Jacobson & Engelbrecht, 2000). Both families belong to the business community and were of sound financial standing. Their perceptions were fuelled by their socio-economic status, their social standing, level of education and their values. These aspects play an intrinsic role in choosing inclusive educational placements for their children while others might not be mainstreaming their children due to financial constraints and community and cultural pressures.

An aggressive commitment towards providing their children with a normal childhood, and the desire to enable them to reach their potential by providing unrestricted opportunities was evinced by the parents. Parental aspirations were found to be practical and realistic as the focus was on the transmission of basic skills prerequisite for independent survival of their children. The strength and resolve demonstrated by them during the entire process was exemplary as discriminatory attitudes of practitioners and parents of typical children did not deter them from seeking gainful inclusion which was the rightful culmination of their untiring efforts.

Consistent with the ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which proposes that human development occurs as a result of individual interactions with the changing environment in which they live, parents espoused that mainstreaming their children had greatly improved their social skills were better composed in terms of behavior and had acquired new heights of self-confidence. This was possible due to the prolific inclusive learning environment carefully structured to engage the participation of all learners alike. Active interactions with same-aged peers during this prime time in school and the involvement in curricular and co-curricular activities resulted in sustained growth of their intellectual faculties also.

Parents and educators are often at variance with each other as the issues confronting parents and schools are typically seen as multidimensional and entwined. Evidently, schools need to be more involved in providing parental support through school services once a child is part of their system. Nevertheless, this is not always the case as the process of gaining accord between the stakeholders negotiates an array of educational issues based on what is asserted and what is qualified. Consistent with Ryndak, Storch & Hoppey (2008), this study also concluded that in addition to the stress and frustration encountered when seeking inclusive placements, parents continue to feel the same even upon finding such a placement.

Findings of a local researcher (Shahzadi, 2000) were corroborated by classroom observations by this researcher; they revealed hesitance regarding the importance of inclusion and confusion about its delivery. Fear of failure and dread of the outcomes kept most of the classroom teachers distant from the special learners.

Interestingly, both parents detailed similar concrete changes incorporated in the school to make inclusion more beneficial and outreaching. Policy makers and administrators usually share a common myth that inclusion requires large sums of money (Giangreco, 2007). As exclusive partners in education, participating parents were prepared to share the financial burden with the school.

In spite of the fractured supports and services provided by the school, it shall not be unreasonable to pronounce their current experience as quite positive as parents confessed that the inclusive placement afforded opportunities for their child that they could not perceive of in a restricted environment. This finding parallels with those of Narimuncha & Bhargava (2011), Bennett, Deluca & Bruns (1997) and Swick & Hooks (2005).

Conclusion

Although this study has weaved narratives of parents through a qualitative lens, primarily parents of two teenage boys of sound financial standing in an urban setting, an array of general conclusions can be arrived at. As expounded throughout the course of this study, the broadest conclusion to be drawn is that there is no support from schools for parents of children in need of special educational placements. It is an area of special concern that needs to be highlighted to seek redressal. However, as there is negligent research undertaken in Pakistan in this sensitive area, it remains an oblivious issue. The lofty ideals of inclusion propagated by the West are not applicable in our context, and there is an imperative need to have endemic research that is both informative and corrective.

Despite a disparity between parental aspirations of the inclusive placement (what the parents sought to get) and what they actually received in terms of supports and services provided by the school, and mixed emotions oscillating between optimism and pessimism regarding future prospects, parents espoused without reserve that inclusive placements are best placements for children with special needs. Limited competition from other schools inhibits growth as there is no upgrading of practices. Faced with narrow choices, questioning inveterate school practices does not occur as parents are complacent with the fact that they have not been denied inclusion.

Parental demands may even be unreasonable at times as they press for inclusive placements despite the severity of the disabling condition. Nevertheless, taking notice of the experiences of parents may be the needed precursor towards positive change as meeting the goals of inclusion requires collaboration between both schools and parents. This relationship is fostered when the school staff is conscious of the parents' aspirations for the child and when parents are mindful of what the school envisions for the child (Caines, 1998). While all parents are a valuable resource for teachers and schools, their involvement becomes exceedingly indispensable in the case of a child with special needs. By listening to the 'voice' of parents, through reforms in supports and services, and by breeding a better culture of responsible teachers, full inclusion of special needs children may become a near reality.

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