

Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose. This study explores parental attitudes toward inclusive education in urban Lithuanian general education schools, focusing on their expectations and concerns about schools' readiness to support children with special educational needs. **Methodology.** A quantitative survey was conducted with 267 parents from schools in a major Lithuanian city. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions to assess parents' knowledge, attitudes, and concerns regarding inclusive education. Data were analyzed statistically to identify trends and relationships with socio-demographic factors. **Findings.** Most parents supported inclusive education, though this support was often conditional on the availability of additional resources, such as specialized staff and adapted infrastructure. Many expressed uncertainties about schools' readiness, pointing to insufficient teacher training and systemic or cultural barriers. The results reveal a gap between policy and practice in implementing inclusive education. **Originality.** This study adds to the international discourse by providing insight into the early-stage development of inclusion in Lithuania. It underscores the importance of parental attitudes and highlights the need for improved teacher training, infrastructure, and collaboration among stakeholders to promote effective, stigma-free inclusion.

Keywords: special needs, inclusive education, children, special needs.

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Introduction

The State Education Strategy (2013-2022) stresses that education must be accessible and provide equal and most favorable opportunities to develop individual skills and meet special educational and study needs, to provide effective pedagogical and psychological assistance to pupils experiencing learning difficulties, and to achieve this goal, it is necessary to ensure the priority of the use of education among victims of social exclusion, human trafficking and risk and special education for groups of people with needs, in order to achieve a balance between overcoming social exclusion

and developing gifted persons (<https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.463390>).

Inclusive education has become a central focus of global education reform efforts, aiming to address systemic exclusion of marginalized learners (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). UNESCO (1994) emphasized that schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. According to Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), inclusive pedagogy seeks to extend what is ordinarily available to everyone, rather than providing additional

support only to those perceived to have difficulties. Moreover, Booth and Ainscow's (2002) Index for Inclusion delineates essential dimensions for advancing inclusive school development, encompassing the cultivation of inclusive school cultures, policies, and practices. The Index serves as a practical guide for schools to examine and transform their existing norms – encouraging reflection on current beliefs and practices, identifying barriers to participation, and prioritizing development areas to foster equitable learning opportunities for all students.

For a long time, society could only care for children with special needs - to provide them with refuge from a cruel world in which such children would not have been able to live with dignity or find their place in a world full of standards. At the beginning of the XIX century, the first systematic attempts arose to educate children, who today are called mentally retarded or have behavioral and emotional disorders. Children with special needs are mostly exposed to their parents and educational institutions. Inclusive education is perceived as an attempt to meet the social needs of all students and create conditions for them, the opportunity to influence their school situation (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014, cit. from Magnússon, Göransson & Lindqvist, 2019).

In recent years, there has been growing interest in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which offers a framework for designing learning experiences that accommodate individual learning differences (Meyer et al., 2014). UDL principles emphasize providing multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement to make learning accessible for all. This model aligns with inclusive values by proactively addressing diversity in the classroom, rather than reacting to perceived deficits in individual learners.

Therefore, today the biggest problem is not children with special needs, but how they

are able to integrate into society or how they are received by society. Such children often feel uncomfortable, are called special children and therefore find it difficult to find classmates, because they feel exceptional, they experience psychological trauma, in frequent cases, and bullying. In Lithuania, as in all countries of the world, there are children with intellectual or physical impairments that cause the child's mobility limitations. In society, the opinion that children with disabilities are powerless and unable to learn has been formed to this day. The ability of children with special needs to learn and develop is complicated by the parents of healthy children who do not want their child to learn with a child with special needs. Therefore, the problem is common - the intolerance of society to children who are different.

According to the data of Statistics Lithuania in Lithuania (2024), the number of children with a disability for the first time varies around 1800 cases per year. This figure has remained largely unchanged in recent years. However, another trend is emerging – an increasing proportion of the disability identified for the first time in children consists of mental and behavioral disorders, most of which are accounted for by various developmental disorders (autism). Mental and behavioral disorders were the cause of 34 per cent of children's disability cases in 2008, compared to 58 per cent in 2017, and in 2019, compared to 2018, they grew to 15.3 thousand. The main cause of disability in children is mental and behavioral disorders, congenital defects in the formation, deformities and chromosomal abnormalities, and diseases of the nervous system (<https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/socialine-integracija/neigaliuju-socialineintegracija/statistika-2>). There are currently over 2000 families raising children (who have mental and behavioral disorders). In the next 5-10 years, there will be at least 10 thousand such families. Accordingly, it will consist of 30-50 thousand family

members of children (parents, brothers and sisters, other close relatives), (Zebrauskas, 2019). This topic is one of the most relevant for society of our time, since inclusive education does not work fully, and children with special needs are still socially excluded and cannot be educated and develop together with everyone.

Problematic questions - what are the opportunities for children with special needs to study in general education schools? What are the main obstacles to inclusive education for children with special needs?

The object of the study was the inclusive education of children with special needs from the point of view of the opinion of parents.

The aim of the study: to analyze the opinion of parents about the inclusive education of children with special needs, in general education schools.

The tasks of the study: 1. Based on the analysis of scientific literature, to discuss the situation of children with special needs. 2. Using quantitative research methods to reveal the attitude of parents to the inclusive education of children with special needs. 3. Based on the results of a quantitative study, to provide opportunities for the education of children with special needs in general education schools.

Inclusive education and challenges faced by children with special needs

While inclusive education is widely recognized as a human right and a cornerstone of equitable schooling (UNESCO, 1994; Ainscow & Miles, 2008), its implementation continues to face significant barriers, particularly for children with special educational needs (SEN). These children often experience not only academic marginalization, but also social exclusion, emotional distress, and systemic neglect. The complexity of their needs demands an education system that is flexible, responsive, and rooted in universal design principles.

Inclusive education is not simply about placing students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. It is about transforming educational systems to accommodate diverse learners equitably (Florian, 2014). However, the reality in many countries – including Lithuania – is that inclusion remains partial and often superficial. Classrooms may lack assistive technologies, trained specialists, and adapted curricula. Research by Forlin and Chambers (2011) shows that teachers often feel unprepared to meet the needs of students with autism spectrum disorders, emotional and behavioral difficulties, or complex learning disabilities. These findings are consistent with Lithuanian data, where many educators report insufficient pre-service and in-service training to handle diversity in their classrooms (Galkienė, 2021).

Beyond structural issues, cultural and attitudinal factors significantly influence the success of inclusive education. The persistence of deficit-oriented thinking – where students are labeled based on their impairments rather than their potential – undermines the ethos of inclusion (Slee, 2011). In practice, children with SEN are often seen as “the other,” which leads to increased instances of bullying, peer rejection, and teacher bias. Parents of typically developing children may oppose inclusion due to fears of slowed academic progress, reinforcing exclusionary practices (de Boer et al., 2010). These attitudes are rooted in societal narratives that position disability as an individual problem rather than a failure of the system to accommodate diversity (Shakespeare, 2006).

Teacher efficacy plays a central role in the successful implementation of inclusive education. According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), teachers often express positive attitudes; however, the principle of full inclusion (“zero reject”) is not widely accepted. Teachers’ attitudes are predominantly influenced by the nature and severity of the child's disability rather than by

the teacher's age or experience. Additionally, the educational environment, particularly the availability of physical and human support, is a significant factor. School leaders also play a critical role: inclusive leadership that fosters a collaborative, reflective school culture is essential for change (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Unfortunately, many school systems lack coherent policies that prioritize inclusion at all levels of decision-making.

To advance inclusive education meaningfully, countries must adopt a whole-school approach that integrates inclusive values into pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and school culture (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers one such framework, enabling educators to design flexible learning environments that accommodate diverse learner profiles (Meyer et al., 2014). Moreover, inclusive education should be understood within the broader context of social justice and human capabilities (Terzi, 2010). This approach reframes inclusion not as a remedial effort but as an ethical imperative that expands children's real opportunities to flourish.

In Lithuania, as the national statistics indicate, the prevalence of developmental disorders among children is increasing (Statistics Lithuania, 2024). Although policies emphasize equity and inclusion, actual school readiness varies greatly between urban and rural areas. Many inclusive efforts remain reliant on individual teachers' motivation rather than systemic planning. Comparative research suggests that countries with strong inclusion outcomes (e.g., Finland, Italy) invest consistently in teacher education, interprofessional collaboration, and family-school partnerships (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018). Lithuania could benefit from aligning its strategies with such evidence-based models.

Methodology

Design. This study employed a quantitative survey design to explore parents' attitudes toward inclusive education for children with special educational needs (SEN) in Lithuanian general education schools. Quantitative research was selected due to its suitability for collecting standardized data from a relatively large population and for identifying trends and generalizable patterns in parental attitudes (Creswell, 2014). The design was non-experimental and cross-sectional, using structured questionnaires as the primary data collection tool.

Participants. The sample consisted of 267 parents from a public general education school in Panevėžys City, Lithuania. Participants included both parents of children with SEN and those whose children do not have special needs. A purposive convenience sampling approach was used, targeting parents from a school that recently implemented inclusive education practices. The demographic breakdown included 91.1% female and 8.9% male respondents. Though the sample size is modest, it aligns with previous studies exploring stakeholder attitudes in similar educational contexts (de Boer et al., 2010).

Data Collection. Data were collected between April and December 2024 via a self-administered paper-based questionnaire distributed through school-parent communication channels. The survey was anonymous and voluntary. Completion time was approximately 15 minutes. The school administration facilitated the distribution but did not have access to completed forms, ensuring privacy and non-coercion.

Research Instrument. The questionnaire was developed based on a review of relevant international and Lithuanian literature (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; Galkienė, 2021; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). It included:

- Closed-ended Likert-type items measuring attitudes toward inclusion, perceived readiness of schools, and

preferences regarding placement of children with SEN.

- Open-ended questions to capture qualitative nuances in opinion. The questionnaire underwent face validation by two experts in inclusive education and was piloted with 5 parents to ensure clarity and relevance, demonstrating acceptable face validity prior to data collection.

Data Analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages) and inferential statistics (Chi-square test) to examine the distribution of responses and identify significant patterns. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS (v. 27). Open-ended responses were coded manually to identify emergent themes related to barriers, concerns, and suggestions for improving inclusive education.

Ethical Considerations. The research was conducted in full accordance with established ethical research guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Written permission and informed consent were also obtained from the participating school prior to data collection.

Results

When analysing the possibilities of children with special needs to be educated in co-educational schools, it was noted that until recently such an opportunity was not known to many parents and was available to children. Today, many schools are ready to conduct inclusive education for children with special needs. For this, classes, relaxation rooms, computer equipment, visual arrangement of the premises are prepared, so as not to create difficulties in the mobility of children at school. Analysis was showed that while schools have made infrastructural improvements (e.g., adapted classrooms, computer equipment, sensory rooms), 25% of parents indicated that the school environment could still be better adapted for inclusive education (Figure 1). The chi-square (χ^2) analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in the distribution of parents' responses regarding the adaptation of the school environment for inclusive education ($\chi^2 = 38.29$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that most respondents (57.1%) did not answer the question, which may suggest a lack of information or uncertainty on the issue. This result suggests that parents' opinions are not evenly distributed, with some categories – particularly "Did not respond" – being chosen significantly more often than expected.

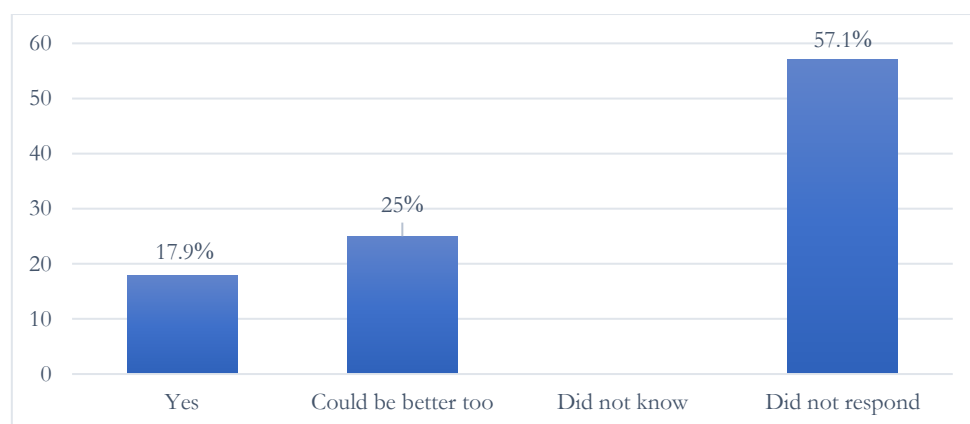


Figure 1. Parents' opinions on the suitability of the school environment for children with special needs

Schools that are willing and able to educate children with special needs needed not only to clean up the school environment, but also to complete specialists who can work with such children. This required special knowledge to work with persons with special needs, it required psychological preparation, skills for organizing employment, subject, educational and special literature, textbooks, programs. Regarding professional readiness, only 21.4% of parents recognized that educators and specialists were adequately prepared to work with children with

special needs. This highlights a gap in training and pedagogical resources. The chi-square (χ^2) analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in the distribution of parents' responses regarding specialists' preparedness ($\chi^2 = 56.32$; $p < 0.001$), indicating a clear predominance of the "no response" category. This suggests that most parents either lack a clear opinion or are not sufficiently informed on this issue, and that the responses are unevenly distributed across all categories (Figure 2).

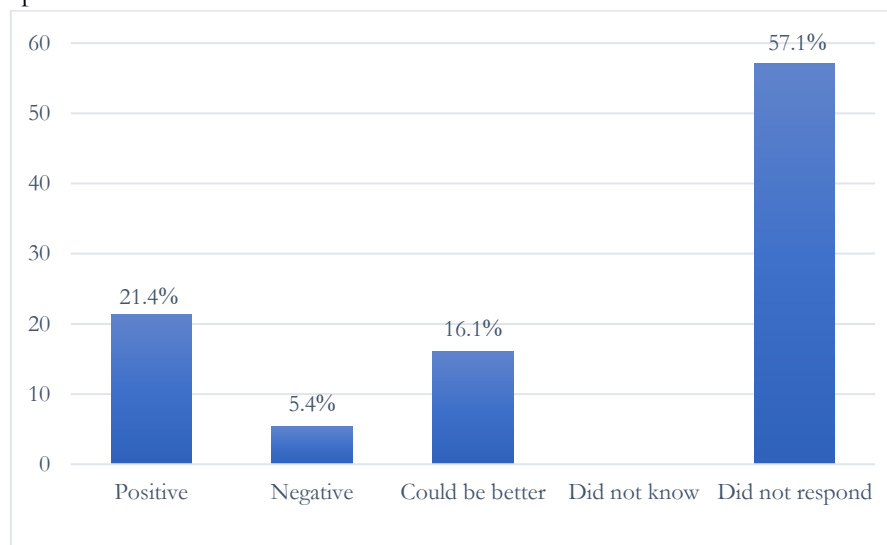


Figure 2. Parental evaluation of educators' readiness to support children with special needs

One of the aims of the study was to determine how parents of typically developing children perceive the inclusion of children with special educational needs in general education schools. The results showed that 20.5% of parents fully support, while 48.2% partially support inclusive education (Figure 3). This indicates that the majority of respondents have a favorable attitude toward inclusive education. To

assess the statistical significance of the distribution of responses, a chi-square analysis was conducted, which revealed a statistically significant difference among the responses ($\chi^2 = 37.02$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that respondents' views on inclusion are not uniform, yet a significant proportion support the principles of inclusive education.

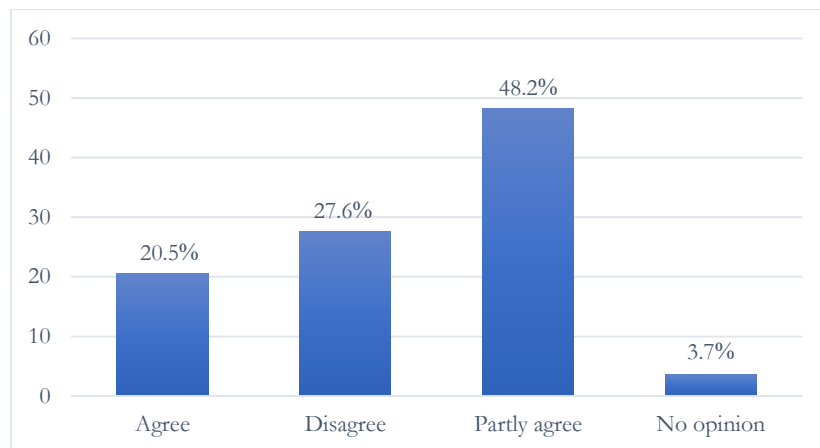


Figure 3. Parental attitudes toward inclusive education of children with special needs

Various stereotypes exist in society regarding the education of children with special needs, resulting in diverse parental opinions about their integration into mainstream classes. The study revealed that while some parents agree that children with special needs can learn alongside their typically developing peers, their opinions differ on whether they would want their own child to be taught in the same classroom. The research showed that 67.8% of parents

would support inclusive education only if additional assistance – such as an assistant or special educator – is provided. In contrast, only 12.5% of respondents fully supported inclusive education without any additional support. A chi-square analysis indicated a statistically significant distribution of responses ($\chi^2 = 56.71$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that parental opinions are not random and clear preferences emerge (Figure 4).

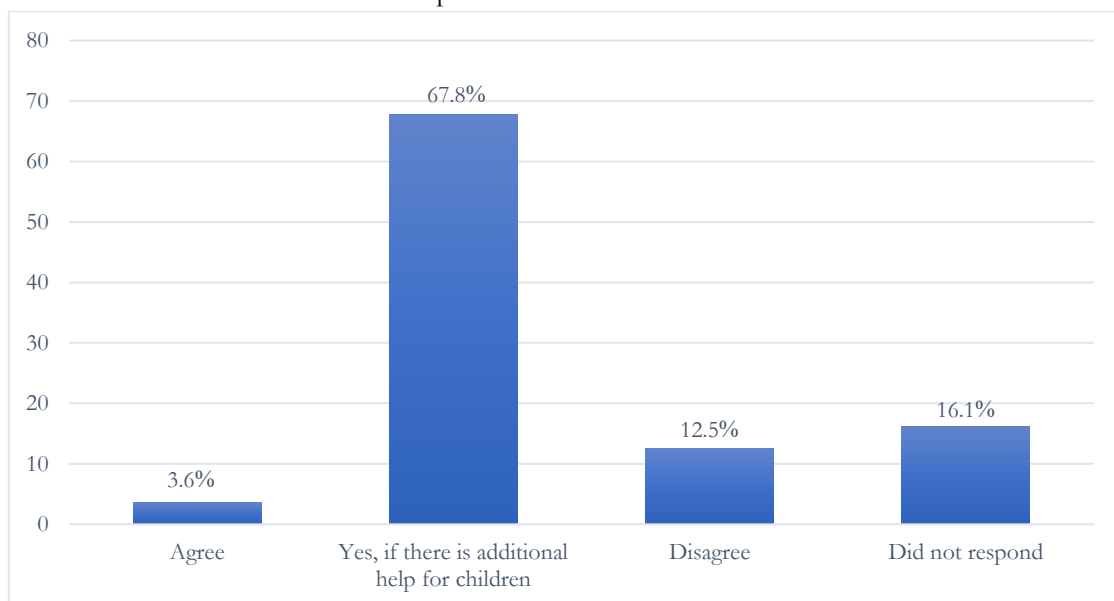


Figure 4. Parents' opinions about having their children study together with children with special needs

To assess whether the distribution of responses regarding the improvement possibilities of inclusive education across the categories (preparation, collaboration, and stereotype reduction) differed significantly, a

one-sample chi-square test was conducted. The results showed that the differences between the categories were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.20$, $p = 0.905$), indicating that all three topics were discussed with similar frequency (Table 1).

Table 1. Improving opportunities for inclusive education for children with special needs

Category	Claim
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Preparation	"<...> it is necessary to prepare better for schools<...>", "<...>there is a shortage of specialists<..>", "<...>there are no methodological tools, and if they are, they do not correspond to the times<...>", "<...>provide social and psychological assistance both for children with special needs, but also for children without special needs<...>"
Collaboration	"<..> to build relationships between parents and children on the basis of tolerance and respect and empathy<..>", "<..> to provide methodological assistance to specialists working with classes in which children with special needs study<..> to assess the amount of wages of specialists working with children<..>"
Reducing stereotypes about children with disabilities	"<...> such children feel greatly excluded<..>", "<..>a small number of tools and methodologies for combating bullying at school<..>", "<..> create a sense of community in the classroom<..>."

After analysing the scientific literature and conducting a study, it is noticed that the analysed topic is gaining more momentum, because in society it is becoming relevant due to the growing number of families raising children with special needs, which require special care, attention and help, as well as tolerance and understanding of society.

Discussion

This study explored parental perceptions of inclusive education in Lithuania, particularly regarding the readiness of schools and educators to meet the needs of children with special educational needs (SEN). The results reveal both support for inclusive principles and concerns about their practical application, reflecting broader global trends in inclusive education research.

Most parents in this study supported the general idea of inclusion, yet many expressed that their support was contingent upon the presence of additional assistance in the classroom. These results mirror international findings that inclusive education is often embraced as a concept but hesitated upon in practice (de Boer et al., 2010). Parents often fear that the presence of children with SEN may negatively impact classroom dynamics or their own child's learning progress. These attitudes reflect a lack of trust in the system's ability to adequately support all learners and point to underlying concerns about fairness, effectiveness, and preparedness. Only a small proportion of respondents (21.4%) considered educators sufficiently prepared to work with

children with SEN. This is consistent with studies by Forlin and Chambers (2011), who reported that many teachers feel inadequately trained to support students with diverse needs. In the Lithuanian context, this gap is intensified by recent, top-down policy shifts toward inclusion that have not been accompanied by systematic investments in teacher education and institutional support (Galkienė, 2021). Teachers often lack both the theoretical grounding and practical strategies necessary for effective inclusion (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), which can lead to stress, resistance, and, ultimately, suboptimal educational experiences for students with SEN.

In response to these challenges, international literature promotes frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Meyer et al., 2014), which emphasize proactive curricular design to meet the needs of all learners from the outset. Adoption of such models remains limited in Lithuania, despite growing awareness of their potential benefits.

In addition to systemic limitations, societal attitudes continue to hinder inclusive efforts. The conditional nature of parental support – such as agreement with inclusion only if additional support is present – suggests that disability is still viewed as a problem to be managed rather than a facet of diversity to be embraced. This aligns with the "deficit model" of disability described by Slee (2011), in which difference is pathologized and seen as an obstacle to be minimized.

Moreover, the stigmatization of students with behavioral or emotional challenges, frequently reported in our study, resonates with findings by Rose et al. (2015), who highlight that students with SEN often face bullying and social isolation in mainstream schools. These challenges underscore the need to address inclusion not only through structural reforms but also through cultural change – both within schools and in the broader community.

The study suggests that inclusive education in Lithuania must be underpinned by comprehensive strategies that go beyond policy declarations. First, teacher education programs should prioritize inclusive pedagogy and include practical training for working with students with a wide range of abilities and needs (Florian, 2014). Second, schools must be resourced with specialist support staff and flexible learning materials to ensure all students can access the curriculum meaningfully.

Crucially, parental engagement must be recognized as a foundational element of successful inclusive education. As emphasized by Conroy et al. (2018), effective inclusion is not solely the responsibility of schools or educators – it requires meaningful collaboration with families, especially those of children with emotional and behavioral challenges. Parents must be seen not just as passive recipients of information, but as active partners who contribute to the planning, implementation, and evaluation of inclusive practices at the school level. Their insights, advocacy, and ongoing involvement are essential

for creating responsive educational environments that support all learners, particularly those with special educational needs.

Conclusion

- Inclusive education is understood in the literature as quality education for every child within a general education institution, alongside peers, without discrimination based on disability or other forms of difference. Children with special educational needs have the right to attend the nearest school in their place of residence, to receive teaching methods adapted to their individual needs, to benefit from continuous educational support, and to learn in a safe environment.
- The study results revealed that the majority of parents support the idea that children with special needs can learn together with their peers in general education schools. However, this support is often conditional upon adequate preparation of the school – qualified professionals, adapted physical and psychological environments, and educators’.
- The study revealed that the main opportunities for inclusive education of children with special needs are proper preparation and preparation of the environment and the human factor, cooperation between the school community, parents and children, and reduction of stereotypes about children with disabilities

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Author Declaration

Originality:

The authors confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.