

## **Does the Availability of Information Matter for Parents' Attitude Towards Children with Special Needs?**

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## Does the Availability of Information Matter for Parents' Attitude Towards Children with Special Needs?

**Abstract** - This research assesses parents' attitude towards children with special needs based on the availability of information regarding inclusive preschool education programs. The research was conducted with 268 parents of pre-kindergarten children from inclusive preschools in Jakarta and Depok. Of these, 118 parents received information regarding inclusive education programs from their children's school and 150 parents received no such information. A PATCH (Parent Attitude Towards Child with Handicap) survey was conducted to quantify attitudes towards children with special needs among parents of non-special needs preschool children. A significant difference was observed between the attitudes towards children with special needs of those parents who received information and those who did not. Parents who received the information exhibited more positive attitudes than parents who did not receive information.

Keywords: inclusive kindergarten, parent attitude, special needs student

### Introduction

Every child, including those with special needs, has the equal right to go to school and receive a quality education. The Republic of Indonesia's Ministry of Education Regulation No.17 (2009) states,

*"Inclusive education is an education system that provides opportunities for all students who have abnormalities and have the potential for intelligence and/or special talents to attend education or learning in an educational environment together with students in general."*

Inclusive education programs, which start from early childhood, have the primary goal of providing services to children with special needs, in order to develop their social competencies from an early age (Guralnick, 1990). Social competence includes the ability to resolve conflicts, build friendships, interact with others and achieve interpersonal goals (Guralnick & Neville, 1997). Inclusive education programs seek to achieve these goals within early childhood education settings, where the development of social competence is developed in children both with and without special needs. Research shows that early years' inclusive education programs can have positive impacts, such as supporting friendships between children with and without special needs through everyday interactions (Koster et al., 2009) that mediate social skills and promote the acceptance by children of their special needs peers (Meyer & Otrsky, 2015; Stahmer, Carter, Baker & Miwa, 2003). In addition, early years' inclusive education programs promote independence in children with special needs (Rafferty, Boettcher, & Griffin, 2001).

The implementation of inclusive education faces a number of challenges including the unpreparedness of schools and teachers to organize inclusive education. As a result, some schools have refused to accept students with special needs. In addition, many children with special needs continue to receive negative treatment from those around them. Low

acceptance by peers causes children with special needs to experience such negative treatment as bullying, being ignored, or being shunned (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012). According to DEC from CEC and NAECY (2009), quality inclusive education should build positive social skills, friendships, development and learning for all children. Parental involvement in the implementation of early childhood inclusive education is very important, and collaboration between families, specialists and schools is vital to the implementation of quality inclusive education (NAECY, 2009). Parents' attitudes towards children with special needs have a greater influence on the attitudes of early years' children than on children aged 11–12 years (Katz & Chamiel, 1989). Parents also play an important role in directing children's behavior. Parental attitudes can influence a child's development, such as the ability of the child to socialize and build friendships (Grusec, 2011). In other words, early childhood attitudes are closely related to parental attitudes.

Summers (1977) defines attitude as a tendency to respond to an object even though it has not been realized in the form of action on the object. Attitudes towards an object are realized through three components, namely affection, cognition and behavior (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998). According to Ajzen and Fishbein (1977), attitudes better predict an individual's behavior when based on actions previously taken, targets, context and time. Research has shown that attitude change can be influenced by cognitive responses based on how much information is received (Maio & Haddock, 2014). The way that individuals process and judge information influences their attitudes towards the subject (Petty & Krosnick, 1995).

Research shows that parents of children both with and without special needs believe that inclusive programs can have a positive impact on all children (Hilbert, 2014). However, some parents are concerned that in a mixed class of children with and without special needs, those without special needs do not receive sufficient attention from the teacher, learning is slow paced and insufficient resources are available (Rafferty et al., 2001). According to Green and Shinn (1994), the attitudes of parents with these concerns can be changed when they are provided with information about the services their children receive, and not just about what they will learn (Dembinsky & Mauser, 1977), academic progress or behavior (Leyser, 1988). Information about special needs reduces misconceptions about early education inclusion programs (Hilbert, 2014). Parents and schools need to share information and coordinate inclusive education support services (Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron, & Hughes, 2008). However, not all pre-schools provide parents with sufficient information about children with special needs or inclusive education programs.

Therefore, this research was conducted to determine how the attitudes of parents of non-special needs children towards children with special needs are influenced by the availability of information regarding children with special needs and pre-school inclusive education. The research sought to establish if attitudes are more positive when such information is made available. The results of this research can inform guidelines to improve parental attitudes towards pre-school inclusive education.

## Method

This research was conducted with parents of non-special needs children who attend inclusive preschools in Jakarta and Depok. Questionnaires were distributed to parents by teachers or other school staff who entrusted them to students during class. Prior to questionnaire distribution, parents were informed in a letter of the purpose of the study. Parents completed their questionnaires in private and returned them to the teacher either directly or via their child. The questionnaires used a Likert-type scale to survey parental attitudes of parents towards children with special needs. Of 271 returned questionnaires, 268 were complete. Respondents consisted of 118 parents of students from schools that provided information on inclusive education programs and 150 parents of students from schools that did not provide such information. Those schools that provide information did so by attaching the label “inclusive” to the school name and organizing meetings to inform parents about the school’s inclusive education program. The principal of each inclusive school provided the researchers with details of the information that had been made available to parents. This was a descriptive survey which used an accidental sampling technique.

The Parent Attitudes Toward Child with Handicaps (PATCH) measurement tool was used to measure parental attitudes towards children with special needs. The PATCH measuring instrument consists of three aspects, namely affection, cognition and psychomotor. Each aspect consists of 10 items with a balanced number of negative and positive items. The score on this measuring instrument uses a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). PATCH was adapted from the Bahasa version and, when tested on 310 parents of non-special needs children in inclusive primary schools, had a reliability of 0.917 (Aini & Kurniawati, n.d). This measuring instrument was also adapted to parents of non-special needs kindergarten students with a reliability of 0.926. Pallant (2016) states that a reliability value above 0.7 indicates a good scale, and is better at 0.8 and above. Therefore, this scale has high reliability. Data were analyzed to compare attitudes of parents of non-special needs children towards special needs children, based on the availability of information about inclusive education programs. Data were quantitatively analyzed using a non-parametric test.

## Results

The results of the descriptive statistics reveal that parents’ attitudes towards children with special needs had a mean score of 2.98 (SD = 0.30). This signifies that parents’ attitudes toward children with special needs were positive. However, there was a significant difference between the attitudes of parents who were provided with information and those who were not. Parents who were provided information by their children’s school exhibited more positive attitudes. In this group, a far greater number of parents (N = 96, 81.35%) had experience interacting with children with special needs, compared to those who did not (N = 22, 18.64%). In comparison, among the group of parents who did not receive information about inclusive education and children with special needs, 94 parents (62.67%) had experience interacting with children with special needs, while 56 (37%) did not. In both groups, the attitudes of parents of non-special needs children were more positive when they had experience interacting with children with

special needs ( $p < 0.05$ ). No significant differences were found between the two groups based on interactions with teachers, parental educational attainment or number of children.

Table I. Parents attitudes towards children with special needs according to availability of information about inclusive education programmes and children with special needs

Group	N	M	SD	Sig.
Group 1 (parents from school which provide information)	118	3.08	0.32	
Group 2 (parents from school which do not provide information)	150	2.90	0.26	0.00

\*Significant differences according to the frequency of parents' contact with persons with special needs.

As Table 1 shows, significant differences were found between the attitudes of parents who received information from their child's school and those parents who did not ( $p < 0.01$ ). The attitude of parents who received information was more positive than the attitudes of parents who did not.

Table II. Parents of children in schools that provided information

Demographic	Categorization	N	%
Interaction with Special Needs Children*	Yes	97	81.5
	No	22	18.5
	Never	0	0
	1–2 times a semester	15	12.6
Interaction with Teacher	1–2 times a month	13	10.9
	1–2 times a week	68	57.1
	1–2 times a day	21	17.6
	Missing Data	2	1.7
Level Education	Elementary	1	0.8
	Junior High School	2	1.7
	Senior High School	29	24.4
	1st Diploma	0	0
	2nd Diploma	1	0.8
	3rd Diploma	7	5.9
	Bachelor Degree	62	52.1
	Master Degree	16	13.4
	Missing Data	1	0.8
	Only One	23	19.3
Number of Children	Two	67	56.3
	Three	22	18.5
	Four	4	3.4
	Five	1	0.8
	Missing Data	2	1.7

\*Significant differences of parents' attitudes toward children with special needs.

Among those parents from schools that provided information about children with special needs and inclusive education (Table 2), 81.5% of parents interact with children with special needs. In addition, 57.1% of parents interact with their child's teachers 1–2 times a week. Demographic data reveal that, 52.1% of this group has attained a bachelor degree and parents with two children are most common (56.3%). The only factor which exhibits significant differences in parental attitudes is interaction with children with special needs. In other words, experience of interacting with children with special needs is related to attitudes towards those children.

Table III. Parents of children from schools that did not provide information

Demographic	Categorization	N	%
Interaction with Special Needs Children*	Yes	96	63.2
	No	56	36.8
	Never	1	0.7
	1–2 times a semester	11	7.2
Interaction with Teacher	1–2 times a month	23	15.1
	1–2 times a week	60	39.5
	1–2 times a day	49	32.2
	Missing Data	8	5.3
Level Education	Elementary	1	0.7
	Junior High School	4	2.6
	Senior High School	55	36.2
	1st Diploma	2	1.3
	2nd Diploma	0	0
	3rd Diploma	10	6.6
	Bachelor Degree	70	46.1
	Master Degree	9	5.9
	Missing Data	1	0.7
	Only One	43	28.3
Number of Children	Two	69	45.4
	Three	32	21.1
	Four	3	2.0
	Five	2	1.3
	Missing Data	3	2

\*Significant differences of parents' attitude toward children with special needs.

Among those parents who did not receive information about children with special needs and inclusive education (Table 3), 63.2% have experience interacting with children with special needs and 39.5% interact with teachers 1–2 times per week. The majority of parents have attained a bachelor degree (46.1%) and a majority of parents (45.4%) have two children. The only factor which exhibits significant differences in parental attitudes towards children with special needs is interaction with those children.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In general, the attitude of parents of non-special needs students towards children with special needs is positive (Tafa & Manolistis, 2003). According to the data, significant differences

exist between the attitudes of parents who were given information about inclusive education and those who were not. Maio and Haddock (2014) point out that one factor which influences attitude changes based on cognitive responses is how much information is given. Schools that provide information about inclusive education programs and children with special needs demonstrate to parents that they have prepared a microsystem setting for students with special needs. Therefore, not only do parents of children with special needs have positive attitudes towards such children, so too do parents of non-special needs children. The provision of information is related to parental attitude.

In addition, the findings suggest that experience of interacting with children with special needs leads to more positive attitudes. This is consistent with research conducted by de Boer & Munde (2015), which shows that frequent, interactive and meaningful direct experience with children with special need is linked to parents' attitudes. Other research has shown the same effect on parental attitudes towards children with special needs due to interactive experiences with those children and educational attainment level (Rosenbaum, Armstrong, & King, 1987). In this research, however, neither groups' attitudes were affected by educational attainment.

In conclusion, information about special needs students and inclusive education programs should be provided to the parents of non-special needs students. Schools should provide this information to all parents of children in inclusive pre-school in order to increase positive parental attitudes towards pre-school children with special needs. From this starting point, parents can transfer positive attitudes to their children, in order to help them to be more accepting of their peers with special needs.

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