# Empathizing with parents and teachers for educating children with special learning needs

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**Abstract.** It's difficult and demanding to raise a child with exceptional learning needs. The inclusion of children with exceptional learning needs in all facets of their educational journeys must be a priority for society in this dynamic environment. To incorporate as many children on the learning spectrum as possible, the learning methodologies should be varied. Parents and instructors may face a variety of difficulties with the children, which may have a serious effect on their mental health. Parenting children with learning disabilities requires a high level of competence as well as access to resources, knowledge, and help. But in developing countries, these resources and services aren't always available. Here, the main focus is on the challenges that parents encounter. The challenges, coping strategies, and significant insights that parents of children with learning problems shared were the focus of this study. The qualitative study combined a qualitative research approach. The convenience and snowball sampling technique was used to get in touch with parents, special educators, and psychologists of children in India who have exceptional learning requirements. In addition to feeling worn out and having to take on more caregiving responsibilities, the parents also experienced learning difficulties in their daily lives, and some even experienced financial difficulties. The parents' coping strategies also included creating a support network, establishing regular and scheduled activities for their children, and embracing and staying hopeful. The paper's conclusion suggests design interventions to get over obstacles when working with kids who have special needs and establish a supportive teaching and learning environment for all-around development.

**Keywords:** special education, learning, parents, teachers, challenges

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# 1 Introduction

Learning is an integral part of any human. But the capacity and pace to learn can vary from one individual to another. There are various cognitive and psychological factors that are attached to it. The attention needs to be laid on the learners that are not supposedly on the same pace as most of the others. Inclusivity in the society is much required for which steps have been devised too. Attention to details and improvisations has been made a part of various institutions but not made affordable for the mass. When it comes to children they are supervised and are directed at each step, making it essential to train professionals like teachers to equip them in dealing with uniqueness of each child. The parents at the same time need acceptance and right direction to make the child learn considering their strengths and weaknesses. The gaps can be bridged with simple steps and right improvisations.

### 1.1 The objectives of this paper are:

1. To understand challenges of special educators and psychologists while interacting with parents having special children.
2. To understand challenges faced by parents while interacting with children having special needs.
3. To propose design interventions to overcome challenges while interacting children with special needs.

## 2 Literature Study

### 2.1 Child development and early learning

The young children respond to all the actions directed at them as well as react to the words too. The behavior of the children depends more on the early cognitive development. The demonstration of knowledge by children is limited these days because of the conflicting demands on their attention, limited abilities and irregular behavioral aspects. The rapid development of a child in terms of language they learn, the way they mimic people around, developing problem solving skills and critical thinking can be observed through experiential observations and experiments. [1] The learnings based on play and inclusivity can be a very important tactic to encourage children being involved and help raise all round abilities after a certain age. [2] As we are progressing, the education system is being expected to provide a more holistic development towards learning. To help a child thrive in the system, ultimately the society will have to join hands and to reach the full potential the changes will have to be equipped well. [3] The natural curious behaviour of the children can challenge the educators but idea of including play to learn is developmentally appropriate. Along with play therapy and teaching practices need modification in the early years to advance the goals of learning. [2, 4] The challenge that comes along learning through play are regarding the assessments and answerability. There is a gap in developing instruments and consistency while measuring the gains associated with learning through play [5] A few nations are working on creating curricular frameworks with a greater emphasis on academic subjects, goals that can be quantified, and learning outcomes in order to improve accountability and guarantee school preparedness. [6,7] The output children yield in learning is not actually what they experience in person but it is what they have learnt from the people around. The idea can be about the conceptual learning that comes naturally, providing the environment and how each one interacts to grow. [8] There are seen and unseen behaviors, that account for self-contained explanatory theories. The boundaries that we set to the disciplinary issues, leaves less to no space for the innovation or divergence to newer aspects. [9] The complex information can be using visual aids to make it convenient to understand. Further when the language used for communication is simplified it lowers the anxiety levels, and enhances understanding. Learning can be made convenient and more interesting when it is tailored to each student's particular needs and abilities. [10] There are developmental learning difficulties that affect many children, restricting them of the experiences in classroom learning and creating hindrances in many other

aspects of their life. There have been researches that reveal the altered neural networks of the children with developmental difficulties. While there have been interventions and considerations, there are benefits of integrating remedies within the other activities to encourage motivation and improvisations. [11]

## 2.2 Slow Learners and their requirements

An intrinsic part of a nation's development is education. The parents firmly believe that they should be providing a joyful and healthy learning environment to their child. Whereas a teacher contributes to the effectiveness in the classroom, that can contribute in making this a reality. However, there could be a variety of reasons, which can create hindrances in accomplishing this. [13] There are a some decisions that make the learning experience varied like the educational institute's selection, and working through the concerns regarding the day to day practices. [22] These decisions can be based upon the ability of the child to perform academically in the institutions. There are a variety of learners, broadly categorising them seems like the following: Quick learners, Average Learners and slow learners. These could be based on the knowledge gap that they have while learning, psychological lacks, memorising issues and other external challenges. If we discuss in detail about the slow learning children, they need extra assistance in each step. [13, 19] Slow learners are children who need special attention and strategies to cope up. There could be some factors that influence this like family structure, cultural backgrounds, economic factors, poor school facilities or genetic factors as well. There is a need for accommodations in terms of facilities, structures and systems that need inclusion in order to meet the requirements for these special learners. [14]

## 2.3 Role of special education and teachers

Teaching is definitely a demanding profession. The roles of teachers have become more demanding as the global standards expect the outcomes from learning to have a holistic development in terms of skills, knowledge making it a crowded curriculum overall [4] Identifying slow learners in the mainstream setup is an essential task for the teachers to create a foundation for developing strategies to support them. There will be a blended learning environment in the classroom based on the child's requirements and level of insight of the teachers. The identifications and strategies are to be executed by the teachers but special educators play a very important role in helping them develop the same. It is about the collaboration of teachers, parents, special educators and school counsellors. [15, 20] Words of encouragement, building support systems, interactive sessions help in developing individualized learning plans to boost the performance of children. It also encourages them to come at par with the other learners in the mainstream setups. The research also yielded and raised some important points as to how teachers have adopted methods in classrooms to help the children. They used peer learning methods, providing extra time, maintaining a record of their progress, reward system in terms of conversations. [15] In order to increase the learner's overall performance, teachers must practice patience, be progressive in their thoughts, and inspirational. The children classified under moderate learners, slow learners as some of them will not be able to adjust to the teachings taught in the classroom as well as their peers. On their own merits, a good understudy can receive good grades with little effort on the teacher's behalf. Since the teachers have to deal with these kinds of problems in the classroom, various approaches should be taken with the intention of assisting in achieving good grades and graduating successfully. When compared to their peers, ease-back learners should receive more attention and practice. [16]

### 2.4 Role of parents

A child has a natural need to bond with the parents, to make them feel secure both emotionally and psychologically, children who experiences care and has been given a helping hand at most of the steps would increase the chances of having a secure attachment pattern. [17] This key factor of attachment helps the child despite the hardships in severe situations. [21] The young minds have a feeling of protection, having a positive impact on their mental health too. It has shown through research that parents who are aware and displaying positive attitude makes the child's journey easy [17, 21] The process of identifying the special needs in children also has an impact on the parents journey both emotionally and physically. Parents have a major role to play in facilitating safety, quality and inclusivity of children with special needs. [22] It came to the notice through this research that mothers were able to devote more time to the children in comparison to the father. The fathers were only able to spend quality time on the weekends. Also, when they showed positive behavior in accepting the conditions it made the situation easier to cope up with. [21] There are a few decisions that need the attention of both the parents, when it comes to the decisions of educational requirements, selection process of school, raising concerns regarding the practices definitely has an impact in the later stages of a child's life. [22]

## 2.5 Role of psychologists

Psychology as a subject has been a part of the major contribution in providing solutions for special needs. It works on the perspectives of considering all the stake holders as a part of the system. [24] Collaboration amongst all in relation to the child increase the social interaction and aspects related to it. Assistance of the psychologist to the parents helps them effectively to deal with various situations and the stress that comes along. [21]

## 2.6 Role of collaborative efforts

The research has put focus on the collaborative efforts of the major stake holders in the life of a child for their development; parents, teachers, psychologists and special educators. [20, 23] It is essential to collaborate in order to formulate special education services and implementation of programs. If they meet with the requirements of the children's needs, the collaboration can progress to inclusive education too. [20, 23] Challenges always emerge, but if the bond is nurturing it anchors trust, motivation and a great psychological environment. Creating an inclusive environment and collaboration is influenced by some crucial factors including funds and diagnosis, procedures for communication, practical collaborations, considerations to inclusions. [18, 23] Requirements usually include services like training the professionals to enhance skills from time to time. Understanding the setting, attempting to experiment with the process of extensive learning in a mainstream set up. [19] Making special learning needs a part of the mainstream education can be challenging but necessary and need of the hour. The ultimate goal is to motivate the stake holders to modify the learning parameters, improvising the strategies and cultivating a positive surrounding for the child. [18, 23]

## 2.7 Design intervention for children

The attention spans of the children are short, and they have trouble focussing. The early understanding of how tools work most likely are developed to stop the spread of false information or improper usage of items, which can obstruct technology. [27] The results includes, being drawn to the products with intriguing combinations, functionalities, structures, and appearances. Based on the needs of children's intellectual growth at various levels, as well as on consumption, entertainment, and improving interactive experiences, the focus on intelligence aims to develop the brain and hand in tandem with the puzzle effect. Product design should encourage children's thinking, foster their capacity for imaginative and creative thought, and reflect creativity and imagination. Additionally to the above having the child as a co-designer broadens the mindset and the opportunities along with the constraints. This process of co-designing could be an essential part to accomplish desired results. The cognitive growth of the child should be taken into account by designers, which further can help modify the techniques so that they can be viewed as useful communication tools rather than barriers. [25, 26, 28] While designing for children apart from co-designing opportunities, comfortability, convenience, safety concerns, and other factors should be considered in products; larger focus area should be placed on the intricate design, market demands, and production costs. The communication between designers and children being a part of the process can be beneficial but challenging. Both the participants will be viewing the design and situation from the type of experiences that they have come across in their lives. The ultimate product/ ideation should be away from complications and details in the designs should not create fatigue for the target user, it should be flexible cultivating interest and conscious learning. [25, 26]

Through the literature studied there are multiple gaps that can be addressed in order to create a congenial environment for special learning needs. Though the needs are varied but there are a few systems that can be taken into account. There is a need to have personalized learning plans for children who are identified in the classrooms as slow learners. There is further a need to have continuous teacher training programs to equip them well for handing these children in the classroom set up without making them feel isolated. The inclusivity would not only be due to the special educators but in the classroom set ups as well. Though there are existing programs that suggest the same but are not in regular practices. Along with the teachers there should be awareness programs as well for parents to make them aware about the conditions and sensitize them towards the same. Along with academics there should be experiential learning for children to enhance their sensory developments in the institutional setups.

## 3 Methodology

Personal Interview based study with phenomenological approach was conducted with 25 participants; special educators, psychologists, parents of children with special needs and teachers. All participants belong to Delhi NCR, India. The interaction was conducted through online mode and in-person interview. The interaction with each participant was conducted separately. The special educators had a varied experience in teaching children, psychologists had been dealing with children as well as educating the parents regarding the problems faced by children as well helping them understand the coping mechanisms that could work well with the regulating the behavioral challenges.

A semi structured questionnaire-based interaction was conducted with the individuals to understand the challenges, coping mechanisms as well day to day interactions with the children. The study conducted was qualitative and was framed in order to go deep into the aspects which need attention. It also helped in understanding the scope of research further.

In order to understand the gaps found through literature, it was important to have conversations and discussions for the understanding of the challenges faced by the stake holders. The stake holders were requested to share their experiences, opinions, methods modified/ adopted, their daily observations that impact the child in one manner or the other.

Content analysis was carried out with the primary data that was collected through interviews with the stake holders. This has been mentioned in the next section and table 2.0 and 3.0

**Table 1.0:** Tabular representation of research methodology

| Type of Research | Qualitative Research |
|---|---|
| Method of Data Collection | In-depth interviews (online and in-person) |
| Tool of Data Collection | Semi-structured questionnaire |
| Target Respondents | Psychologists, Special Educators, parents and teachers in Delhi-NCR |
| Sampling Technique | Convenience and Snowball Sampling |

| Sample Size | 25 (10 psychologists; 5 parents; 5 teachers; 5 special educators) |
|---|---|

## 4 Finding and Analysis

### 4.1 Major themes that were generated out of interviews with parents

1. Discomfort with labeling – The parents were uncomfortable with the labels provided by the society. With the societal settings like family, friend and other social gatherings they are often considered different, separate and treated not normally. Few members of the society are considerate; However, majority is not congenial.
2. Financial implications – The people taking their children for extra support face financial implications. The education system in today's time is already considered expensive and extra support creates drainage too. There are many stake holders who withdraw their children due to this reason.
3. Schedule building – Majority of parents feel that the child needs a schedule in order to sustain. The schedule should include physical activity as well as sufficient time for them to revise their educational curriculum. Extra-curricular activities sometimes could take a back seat due to the busy packed schedules of children with special learning needs.
4. Acceptance – The stake holders look out to the society in order to feel accomplished and sufficiently carrying out tasks for their child. The acceptance of society still holds utmost importance for the stake holders.

### 4.2 Major themes that were generated out of interviews with psychologists

1. Support system building – The psychologists work in collaboration with teachers, learners and parents working on bridging the gap of information and creating a path of congenial learning environment.
2. Interventions and modifications – The learners are assessed and personalized plan for them can be devised understanding the gaps.
3. Timely Interactions and conversations – Time are one of the essential components when it comes to providing support. If the conversations yield positive responses, they can be converted into positive results which are visible in the learning graph of the child.
4. Formal assessments – Assessments done with the formal tools are to understand the clinical psychological developments of the child according to their age to provide them with required support.

### 4.3 Major themes that were generated out of interviews with special educators

1. Behavior Modifications – The special educators are trained professions who work with the children on one-to-one basis, regularizing their emotions in different situations, ultimately working through a positive change in their behavior.

2. Personalized attention – The personal attention given to the child makes the areas that need support clearer, it helps in devising provisions required for the child
3. Support system building – The special educators work in collaboration with psychologists, learners and parents. They work with children on individual basis and bridge the gap of congenial learning environment.
4. Creating congenial learning environment – The environment that provides a sense of safety, joy and learning is considered as a congenial environment. This can only be created when one understands the proper requirements and considers inclusivity.

Table 2.0: Tabular representation of the theme identification through interviews conducted

| S. No. | PARENTS | PSYCHOLOGISTS | SPECIAL EDUCATORS |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Discomfort with labeling | Support system building | Behavior Modifications |
| 2 | Financial implications | Interventions and modifications | Personalized attention |
| 3 | Schedule building | Timely Interactions and conversations | Support system building |
| 4 | Acceptance | Formal assessments | Creating congenial learning environment |

Based on the data analyzed earlier, the research formulated relationships to describe the study's major attributes. Table 3.0 gives a detailed review of these qualitative correlations.

Table 3.0: Tabular representation of the relationship between various attributes of the study

| S. No | Attribute 1 | Attribute 2 | Impact (Positive/ Negative/ Both) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Stress | Behavior | Negative |
| 2 | Finance | Facilities | Positive |
| 3 | Time | Comfort | Positive |
| 4 | Behavior | Attention | Both |
| 5 | Acceptance | Situation | Both |
| 6 | Labels | Acceptance | Positive |
| 7 | Interventions | Learning | Positive |
| 8 | Support | Learning | Positive |
| 9 | Restrictions | Learning | Negative |
| 10 | Environment | Holistic growth | Positive |

Qualitative correlation 1 – Stress influences behavior in a negative manner when the parent/ teacher loses their temper on the children due to their adamant behavior, which further leads to breakdowns and tantrums.

Qualitative correlation 2 – Finance influences facilities provided in a positive manner when the stake holders are able to get the child with the extra learning assistance apart from the basic education and help the schools provide.

Qualitative correlation 3 – Time influences comfort received in a positive manner when the increased availability with the parents and teachers influences the behavior due to the love, attention and support provided is more.

Qualitative correlation 4 – Behavior influences attention in a positive manner when the energy channelized yields results where the child become congenial and attentive to their surroundings but becomes negative when the child has increased tantrums due to pampering.

Qualitative correlation 5 – Acceptance influences situations in a positive manner when there is increased acceptance, the child feels more comfortable in their environment and learning is improved where as it has a negative impact when the parent shields the condition rather than taking steps for improvement.

Qualitative correlation 6 – Labels influence acceptance in a positive manner where the interventions could be proper and help can be received. Less acceptance sometimes delays the process of learning and improvement.

Qualitative correlation 7 – Interventions influences learning in a positive manner when an early identification is done. It helps and support given to the children at the initial stages results in a positive change in the long run.

Qualitative correlation 8 – Support influences learning in a positive manner where the child feels safe in the system, receiving the required provisions to improve their skills.

Qualitative correlation 9 – Restrictions influence learning in a negative manner as it leads to less exposure and reduced interventions. Restrictions hold the child back from exploring their skills and learning through other mediums.

Qualitative correlation 10 – Environment influences holistic growth in a positive manner where the child gets all the required support and exposure to enhance their skills. When the environment is congenial it helps the child to be more comfortable in opening up about their learnings.

## 5 Discussion

The purpose of the study was to understand the challenges and coping mechanisms the stake holders face in relation to children with special learning needs. The stake holders include teachers, psychologists, special educators and parents. It is essential to create an inclusive environment for children to excel in their lives well irrespective of the methodology and medium of learning. This environment needs support and collaborative efforts of the society as a whole. The interviews conducted helped get insights about the situations and perspectives. The findings indicate the importance of the support system around the child. The parents along with special educators can create individualized learning plans and methodologies for the child, the psychologists can guide the parents to work through the behavioral difficulties. The results suggests that the labels given to the children make the parents uncomfortable, addressing the difficulties faced by the child in public is still a stigma. Beyond that the financial implications that parents face seems to be a challenge in long term as well as for the people in the society who are deprived of the facilities because of the same. The already existing knowledge gave overview of the problems as well as raised a need to come up with design solutions to make learning fun, along with the secondary research and the primary research conducted has given a few design direction which will be further worked upon.

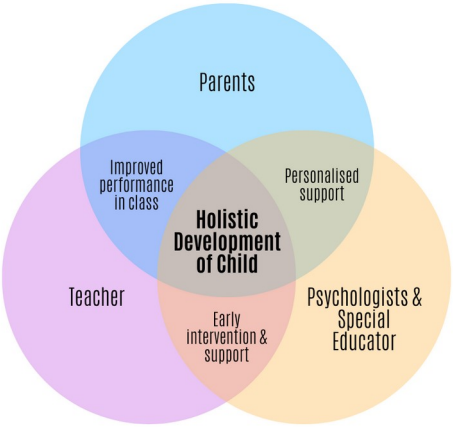


Fig 1.0: Diagrammatically representing the understanding the findings of the given research

The Figure is a representation of how each one influences the learning growth of the child with special learning needs. The interventions at each end will be beneficial at various stages.

## 6 Contribution of the paper

The paper contributes to the insights that need more attention. The semi structured questionnaire helped probing into the factors that contribute to the development of children with special needs. It raises questions on the current trends and understanding of society about the special requirements. Every child is unique but the system being followed still expects them to be confined to the structured and standardized norms of the society. All the stake holders contribute in the development of the child holistically. The paper aims to address the importance of the same and increase awareness about the help that can be provided by the society at large.

## 7 Scope of further interventions

### 7.1 Recommendations for Designers

The designers can work in collaboration with the stake holders that have a major role to play in the field. The designers can support by developing material that works on the universal inclusivity of learners. There can be mobile applications, interactive books, improvised learning games, toys, animations and much more. The interventions already existing can be modified keep in mind the visual elements that work in favor of the learners.

### 7.2 Recommendation for parents/ teachers

The parents and teachers can foster support by being regular with their interactions with the children. Supporting them by words of encouragement, patience and constant reassurance. They can establish routines that include a mix of academic learning, taking them to public places, enrolling them in a physical activity. The routine suggested should include working through multisensory activities and learning programs to keep them engaged and far from getting bored easily.

### 7.3 Recommendation for psychologists/ special educators

The psychologists and special educators play a very important role as they can help the child in providing emotional and psychological support when they are away from their homes. They have to collaborate with other stake holders like family members

and friends which gives them the power to improvise learning strategies and provide personalized support and focus on long term outcomes.

## 8 Limitations of the research

The research conducted had a few limitations that could be further given importance in order to improvise the results and include more population to the study. The stake holders approached were limited in number, convenient sampling was employed. The data collected was qualitative, varied and more concerned with behavioral aspects. The parents were asked limited questions pertaining to the child, which need more attention and detail in order to probe more into the scenarios. Further the research could also be taken in the direction of quantitative analysis for an in-depth study.

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