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Inclusive education: perspectives, experience, and the ways of including parents of children with developmental disabilities²

Extended summary

The paper analyses the perspectives of the parents of children with developmental disabilities within inclusive education. To understand better the position of the parents in this process, a review has been made of the key specificities of these families, the challenges and difficulties they face, problems in functioning, and their expectations regarding the education of their children. When parents have a child with developmental disabilities, their emotional reactions are strong, as is the need to adapt and take on new, specific roles that the parents of children with typical development do not have to take. Their parental experience is often marked by the lack of information and a scantier parental support network. Moreover, a negative response of the environment, in terms of prejudice, rejection or excessive pity, is also an additional burden which limits their social inclusion. Parental expectations regarding the education and development of their children with developmental disabilities are not uniform and they are often out of sync with the children's real abilities. Too high expectations can lead to excessive demands and frustration, while too low expectations result in overprotection and limiting the child's independence. Both patterns affect the parent-child relationship, as well as their development. A positive approach is observed in parents who realistically accept the child's abilities, value their efforts, and affirm every achievement. Research shows that parents' expectations depend on several factors – the type and severity of the developmental disability,

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the level of education of the parents, and the socioeconomic status of the family. The lowest expectations are held by parents of children with severe intellectual disabilities, autism or multiple disabilities, whereas the expectations are somewhat higher among the parents of children with specific learning difficulties. Parents with lower education and socioeconomic status also have lower expectations compared to parents with higher education and better financial status. When it comes to the experiences of parents of children with developmental disabilities in the process of inclusive education, literature review shows that they are complex and often marked by ambivalent attitudes. On the one hand, parents have positive expectations regarding the benefits of inclusion for their children, but at the same time they experience a sense of insecurity due to insufficient support from the school and the education system as a whole. Research shows that parents of children with disabilities are largely supportive of inclusive education, but that their attitudes depend on various factors such as age, gender, and the level of education of the parents. Younger parents, parents with higher levels of education, and female parents have more positive attitudes that are most often based on the belief that regular schooling can foster academic achievement, cognitive stimulation, and the development of social skills in their children. However, despite the perceived benefits, parents express numerous concerns and point to serious challenges in implementing inclusive education. They perceive the negative attitudes of some teachers, the lack of resources, inadequate support systems at the school level, as well as insufficient involvement of parents in the educational process. Consequently, parents increasingly rely on additional support outside the school, including private teachers, speech therapists, psychologists, and other professionals. The paper particularly emphasises the importance of constructive cooperation between family and school as one of the key factors in improving the quality of inclusive education. High-quality involvement of the parents of children with developmental disabilities in school activities facilitates the process of socialisation of the children with developmental disabilities and encourages their progress. Parents, as primary caregivers, possess specific information about the potential and difficulties of their child, which makes them irreplaceable partners in the educational process. Research indicates that the involvement of the parents of children with developmental disabilities in the educational process has numerous positive effects. Parental involvement contributes to pupils' academic progress, better discipline, greater motivation to learn and continue their education, as well as the development of social and emotional skills. When parents actively cooperate with the school, they not only support the child's development, but also gain new knowledge, skills, and self-confidence in their parental role. Similarly, owing to cooperation with parents, teachers receive important information about the child, adapt individual educational plans more easily, and improve their professional competencies. In order for this cooperation to develop, it is necessary for schools to inform and encourage parents to get involved, but also to respect the specificities and differences in the functioning of the families. For high-quality and sustainable cooperation, it is important to build trust between parents and the school, provide various forms of communication and support, and connect the school with the wider community. The school should develop flexible cooperation mechanisms, as well as the awareness of the entire school team about the importance and effects of adequate communication with parents. Apart from strengthening the competencies of the school staff, it is necessary to build a network of

cooperation with the local community and institutions in order to provide permanent support to parents and students.

Keywords: challenges of parenthood, educational aspirations, cooperation between schools and parents of children with developmental disabilities, inclusive education, school and society support

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