

ACCEPTANCE OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN INCLUSIVE SETTINGS THROUGH ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM THEORY

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Abstract

Parental acceptance of children with special needs is a crucial component in the success of inclusive early childhood education. This study aims to explore the factors influencing the acceptance process using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving three mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) enrolled in an inclusive playgroup at Nurul Jannah, Bandung. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, then analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's procedures. The findings reveal that family pressure, marital conflict, and emotional fatigue hinder the acceptance process. In contrast, strong support from the nuclear family fosters faster acceptance and proactive involvement in therapy and education. Interactions within the family microsystem appear to be the most influential factor in shaping parental responses. These results suggest that parental acceptance is not merely a personal matter but a product of complex social dynamics within ecological systems. Therefore, intervention strategies must be systemic, involving both family and broader social environments. The study recommends future research to examine the roles of mesosystem and macrosystem actors, and to apply longitudinal approaches to observe changes in parental acceptance over time.

Keywords

Acceptance, Ecology, Inclusion, Parents, Special Needs.



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INTRODUCTION

In the context of early childhood education, parental acceptance of children with special needs (ABK) is a critical issue in realizing effective inclusive education. Inclusive education seeks to provide equal learning opportunities for all children, including those with special needs, in one integrated educational environment. The success of inclusive education is not only determined by the readiness of educational institutions, but also greatly influenced by parents' attitudes and involvement in supporting children's learning processes (Bahdanovich Hanssen & Erina, 2022; Carew et al., 2019). This multidimensional acceptance encompasses emotional, cognitive, and social aspects influenced by complex environmental contexts. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory becomes a relevant framework for understanding how various social systems—microsystems (family and school), mesosystems (interactions between environments), and macrosystems (culture and policy)—affect the acceptance process (Muhibbin & Suharsono, 2025).

Although inclusion policies have been formally implemented in various educational institutions in Indonesia, the reality shows that parental acceptance still faces various challenges. Various studies report that parents often experience confusion, rejection, and even stigma from the immediate environment when they first find out about their child's condition (bandungbergerak.id, 2025). The acceptance process does not occur linearly but rather through complex psychological stages—from rejection, guilt, to acceptance—strongly influenced by social support or pressure. This phenomenon shows that the problem of acceptance is not merely an internal problem of the individual, but is the result of dynamic interaction with the wider social environment. In this context, ecological systems-based analysis becomes essential to identify intervention points that can support parents in adapting and accepting their child's condition (Kristiana & Widayanti, 2021).

Various previous studies have raised the importance of the role of the environment in shaping parents' acceptance of ABK. Research (Hidayah & Ruhaena, 2020; Rizky, 2023; Sutrisno, 2024) shows that parental acceptance goes through complex emotional stages and is strongly influenced by social support. A study (Khaleel et al., 2021; Paccaud et al., 2021; Shutaleva et al., 2023) emphasizes the importance of active involvement and effective communication between parents and educational institutions in forming positive attitudes towards inclusive education. Research (Basharpoor et al., 2022; Elshanum, 2024; Lebuda et al., 2020) highlights the role of parenting styles and parents' emotional responses as key factors in shaping children's self-concept and adaptation in the educational environment. (Sholikhah, 2023; Transuinitri & Fridari, 2025; Yulianti, 2019) added

that positive relationships between parents and teachers can increase parental confidence and speed up the admissions process. In addition, (Boyle et al., 2020; Kozleski & Proffitt, 2020; Paseka & Schwab, 2020) revealed that community culture and collective values greatly influence parents' attitudes towards children with special needs. These findings suggest that psychosocial and structural factors play an important role in the admissions process, but have not been fully integrated into a systemic and interconnected framework.

Although there have been many studies that have addressed parental acceptance of ABK, most of them still focus on individual and emotional aspects, with a fragmentary approach. Research that comprehensively examines acceptance within the ecological systems theory framework, especially by integrating the three primary levels (micro, meso, macro) in the context of inclusive early childhood education in Indonesia, is still minimal. In addition, most previous studies did not explicitly address transgenerational roles, such as the dynamics between parents and grandparents, that were found to influence the speed and quality of admission significantly. Thus, this study offers novelty in two aspects: first, the comprehensive use of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theoretical framework; Second, an in-depth exploration of relational dynamics in the transgenerational family microsystem that has not been explored much in previous local studies.

Based on the background and gaps described, this study explores the processes and factors that influence parental acceptance of children with special needs in the context of inclusive early childhood education, using the case study approach and the theoretical framework of the Bronfenbrenner ecological system. This research will explore how parents' experiences are influenced by interactions in microsystems (family and teachers), mesosystems (relationships between home and school), and macrosystems (cultural norms and state policies). Through a thorough understanding of the dynamics between these systems, it is hoped that this study can contribute to developing inclusive education policies, a model of teacher-parent collaboration, and community-based interventions that are more sensitive to the needs of families with children with special needs.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the dynamics of parental acceptance of children with special needs in the context of inclusive early childhood education (Hadi, 2021). The qualitative approach was chosen because it thoroughly explores parents'

subjective experiences, values, and meanings in the admissions process. The design of the case study provides a space to analyze phenomena holistically in real-life contexts, particularly in the social and cultural environment that influences parental decisions and attitudes. The subjects of this study are three mothers who have children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and attend school in the Nurul Jannah inclusive play group in the city of Bandung. The selection of subjects was purposively based on the criteria of active involvement in childcare and education and their willingness to share their experiences in depth. The context of the research site is also deliberately chosen (purposive site selection) to ensure the representation of inclusive educational practices at the PAUD level.

The data in this study is sourced from primary data in the form of in-depth interviews with the three main subjects, as well as secondary data obtained through field observation records and supporting institutional documents. The primary data collection technique uses semi-structured interviews with question guides structured based on the framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, covering three main domains: microsystems (children's relationship with parents and teachers), mesosystems (home-school interactions), and macrosystems (cultural values and educational policies). Each interview lasts about 60 minutes and is recorded with the consent of the participants, then transcribed verbatim. The data analysis was done thematically with an inductive approach, following the thematic analysis procedure according to Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis stages start from thoroughly reading the data, open coding to identify the initial categories, and developing key themes that reflect the deep meaning of the participants' experiences. The validity of the data was strengthened through source triangulation techniques (interviews, observations, and documents), triangulation techniques (interviews and member checking), and repeated examination of findings by researchers. With this approach, this study seeks to produce a complete contextual understanding of the factors that shape parents' acceptance of children with special needs in an inclusive education system.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of parental acceptance of children with special needs in the context of inclusive education, this study explores the main themes that emerged from in-depth interviews with three mothers who have children with Autism

Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The analysis was carried out based on the framework of the Bronfenbrenner ecological system, especially at the microsystem level, which includes direct interaction between mothers, children, couples, and extended families. The data obtained are categorized thematically and summarized in Table 1, which contains the main themes, relevant subjects, narrative quotes to represent the participants' experiences, and the implications of each theme on the admission process.

Table 1. Thematic Findings of Parental Acceptance in Ecological Systems

Main Theme	Related Subjects	Key Narrative Quotes	Implication
Pressure from the extended family	AM, AH	"When will this child be able to talk?", "My parents are embarrassed if the child screams."	Adding stress, slowing down the acceptance process
Lack of emotional support	AM, AH	"I fight with my husband a lot."	Family relationships are disrupted
Positive support from family	IL	"I was asked to quit my job to focus on therapy."	Accelerating uptake, intervention-seeking initiatives

Remarks: The table above shows the main themes from the interviews with three mothers with children with ASD. The data reflect a direct relationship between the quality of support in the microsystem and the level of parental acceptance.

The results of the study show that the process of parental acceptance of children with special needs, especially with ASD, is greatly influenced by dynamics in ecological systems, especially at the microsystem level. In these findings, the pressure from the previous generation (the subject's biological parents) became a significant source of stress that prolonged the rejection phase. AM and AH revealed that they often receive negative comments or unrealistic expectations from the child's grandparents, which creates feelings of guilt, shame, and frustration. This reinforces the finding that acceptance does not depend solely on the mother as an individual, but is the result of complex social interactions.

In addition to social pressure, the lack of emotional support from the partner is also an obstacle to the acceptance process. AM, for example, describes an increasing conflict with the husband due to the burden of care that is not divided equally. This phenomenon suggests that role imbalances in the nuclear family can weaken the mother's capacity to accept and respond positively to the child's needs. In ecological systems, this suggests that failure to build a supportive microsystem risk having more profound psychological consequences, both for mother and child.

On the other hand, IL subjects show a different pattern. She received active and concrete support from her extended family, including motivation to quit work to focus on child therapy. This support speeds up the admissions process and encourages active involvement in the search for professional services. IL also stated that he was not too affected by negative comments from the social environment, as he felt "strengthened" by his closest support. This shows that a positive microsystem can be a psychological buffer and strengthen parental resilience.

Overall, the findings indicate that the success of parental acceptance of children with special needs is inseparable from the quality of interaction and support structure in their immediate scope. Positive acceptance patterns depend heavily on the extent to which the nuclear family and extended family can create an inclusive, affirmative, and stigma-free environment. Therefore, interventions that focus only on the individual (mother) without touching the broader social microsystem risk failing to create a sustainable, long-term impact.

Discussion

The results show that parental acceptance of children with special needs is greatly influenced by the dynamics in the microsocial system, especially relationships with partners, extended families, and the immediate social environment. AM and AH subjects reveal experiences of rejection and pressure from their biological parents (the grandparents of the child), who still expect the child's development to be like that of typical children. This pressure is reflected in the form of repetitive questions, such as "when can the child talk," or feelings of embarrassment when the child exhibits typical ASD behaviors in public spaces. On the other hand, IL subjects show more adaptive responses thanks to the emotional support of their spouses and extended family. These three cases confirm that the process of acceptance not only occurs within the individual but is influenced by the quality of support and pressure from the closest microsystem sphere (Astari et al., 2024; Husni, 2023; Megawati & Maulana, 2024).

From the perspective of ecological systems theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), these findings reinforce the importance of the role of microsystems as the main space for direct interaction between individuals and the environment. The interaction between the mother and other family members is not one-way but transactional. When the mother receives pressure or stigma from the immediate environment, her capacity to accept the child is disturbed. Bronfenbrenner states that the quality and stability of relationships in the immediate environment influence human development. In this context, the mother of an ASD child plays the role not only of a parenting agent

but also of a subject who is subjected to emotional distress from her social system (Lo Bosco, 2021; Papadopoulos, 2021; Shattnawi et al., 2021).

These findings align with the research of (Hidayah & Ruhaena, 2020; Rizky, 2023; Sutrisno, 2024), which explains that the mother's acceptance of ABK is a gradual and emotional process strongly influenced by social support. The study's absence of emotional support contributed to the delayed acceptance phase. In addition, the research of (Huang & Zhou, 2023; Miranda et al., 2019) also showed that mothers of children with ASD tend to experience chronic stress exacerbated by pressures from the social environment, especially when the child's developmental expectations are not met. In this case, this study's findings affirm previous studies by reinforcing that pressure from previous generations (grandparents) is a source of stress that has not been explicitly raised in the local Indonesian context.

In contrast to the other two subjects, IL shows how a supportive microsystem environment can act as a psychological protector (buffer) against social pressure. This reinforces the idea of (Kim et al., 2020; Mzid et al., 2019), who stated that extended family support significantly influences parents' emotional resilience. A study (Suwoto, 2023) found that the perception and support of the people closest to them greatly influenced mothers' positive perceptions of the child's condition. When mothers get validation from their partners and parents, they can better reframe the meaning of the child's condition positively. These findings directly affirm the concept of "proximal processes" in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, namely that consistent and meaningful interactions with those closest to them transform individual development.

However, compared to individualistic approaches in several psychological studies that focus on the mother's toughness as the main factor of acceptance (for example, in (Huang & Zhou, 2023; Miranda et al., 2019)), the results of this study offer a critique of this view. Acceptance is not just a matter of individual resilience, but the result of a relational system that affects each other. Thus, intervention strategies that only target individual mothers without touching the scope of their microsystems, such as children's spouses and grandparents, tend to be less effective in the long run (Ilias et al., 2019; Waizbard-Bartov et al., 2019). These findings emphasize the need for a systemic approach in supporting parents of children with disabilities.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of transgenerational stress, where expectations and stigma are passed down from previous generations, is one of the important findings that has not been widely explained in the inclusive education literature in Indonesia. This expands the perspective of

Bronfenbrenner's theory that ecological systems are not static, but develop historically and across generations (chronosystems) (Maunder, 2022; Tudge et al., 2022). Families that previously had no experience or understanding of neurodiversity tended to use typical child developmental standards as the primary benchmark, which was socially passed on to the mother as a form of pressure (Burakgazi, 2024; Garton et al., 2023; Hayes et al., 2022; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). In this context, acceptance is not only related to information, but also to changes in values and mindsets across generations.

Overall, this discussion shows that the factors influencing parental acceptance of children with special needs are complex interweaving involving emotional, relational, and structural interactions in various social systems. A supportive microsystem speeds up the admissions process and encourages proactive behaviors such as seeking therapy and active involvement in a child's education. Instead, a microsystem complete with stress and stigma reinforces resistance, triggers internal conflict, and prolongs the process of parental adaptation. Therefore, inclusive education policy interventions and practices need to place families not just as targets, but as active partners whose systems also need to be strategically strengthened.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Islamic education faces complex challenges in the form of globalization flows. Parental acceptance of children with special needs in the context of inclusive education is a dynamic process influenced by the interaction between personal factors, family support (microsystem), relationship with educational institutions (mesosystem), and social norms and public policies (macrosystem). The findings show that pressure from extended families, a lack of collaboration between parents and schools, and cultural stigma are significant barriers to the admissions process. In contrast, emotional support from couples and nuclear families accelerates adaptation. Based on these results, further research is recommended to explore the involvement of key actors outside the family, such as teachers and policymakers, with a cross-level and longitudinal approach to design more holistic and sustainable interventions in supporting families with children with special needs.

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