

WHAT'S HOLDING BACK: A LOOK AT PARENTAL DENIAL IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study investigates the phenomenon of parental denial in special education by investigating the experiences of fifteen (15) parents whose children are presently enrolled in programs for children with special needs. Eight (8) distinct themes emerged from in-depth interviews, casting light on the factors contributing to parental denial. Emotional conflicts, financial difficulties, and limited access to essential resources characterized the family dynamics. Parental acceptance was significantly influenced by cultural and societal beliefs, with community superstitions, a lack of comprehension about disabilities, and social stigmas presenting formidable obstacles. Parental denial was exacerbated within the special education system by inaccessible services and communication gaps. The study not only adds to the existing literature on parental denial in special education but also provides practical implications. Gaining a deeper understanding of parental perspectives, promoting improved communication, and customizing support systems can benefit educators. Policymakers are urged to consider the study's findings when formulating inclusive policies, thereby ensuring that children with special needs are provided with accessible and supportive environments. By addressing the complex issues surrounding parental denial, this research significantly contributes to the development of a more inclusive educational environment, thereby enhancing the educational experiences of children with special needs.

Keywords: Parental denial, Special education, Special education system, Phenomenological study

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increased recognition of the importance of parental involvement in special education programs. Research has shown that the success of special education programs depends upon parents' involvement and a parent actively taking part in his child's education is more likely to see positive outcomes (Elliott & Roach, 2014, McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Others found that parental participation in a child's education improves performance and creates a compelling learning environment, which is essential for disabled students' success (Steinberg, 2009; Rudney, 2005). According to Hornby & Lafaele's (2011) study, parental participation improves the interaction between parents and teachers and creates a more conducive learning environment for kids. Meanwhile, Moroni et al. (2015) asserted that as parents are a child's first and most essential mentor, their connection in their education would accelerate and simplify knowledge, subsequently leading to greater academic achievement.

However, despite the importance of parental involvement, there are still barriers that prevent some parents from being fully engaged and supporting special education.

Special education is an important part of the educational system because it provides necessary services and assistance to children with disabilities or special needs. Special education allows children with mental, physical, or developmental abilities to be given the support they need to fulfill their goals successfully and hopes to make significant progress (Turnbell et al., 2003). In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) contributes to the required educational interventions for students with special disabilities through its Special Education (Sped) program. DepEd's Sped program takes a comprehensive approach to meeting the requirements of students with special needs. This program guarantees that students with disabilities access high-quality education by addressing their particular and distinctive learning needs (Gaytos, et.al, 2010). However, despite the benefits of special education, many Filipino parents still resist acknowledging or accepting that their child has a disability, often referred to as parental denial. This parental denial can take many forms, from outright rejection of a diagnosis to a reluctance to seek support or accommodations for their child.

One of the most significant barriers is parental denial. Parental denial happens when parents opt not to embrace the fact that their child has a disability or deny the severity of their child's condition. Logsdon (2022) highlighted that this denial frequently stems from a deeply rooted distress that their kid will suffer in a lifetime or get excluded by other people, which is typically a parent's most horrible nightmare. Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) reported that this parental denial can lead to a lack of engagement in special education programs, which can negatively affect the child's academic and social development).

In the study of Law et al. (2013), one of the most significant impediments to early recognition and diagnosis of developmental impairments is parental denial. The results of their study unraveled that parents often delayed seeking treatment for their child because of their fear of stigma, humiliation, and guilt, resulting in a delay in the initiation of intervention services. Similarly, Agbenyega and Quansah (2015) found that parents' lack of awareness of special needs was a major contributing factor in denial, resulting in delayed diagnosis and inadequate assistance for children with special needs. This is in line with the findings of (Ruskuss & Gerulaitiss, 2010; and Blacher & Hatton, 2007), who posited that a lack of information or awareness hinders parents from actively participating in their children's education.

Consequently, the parent's socioeconomic status may also contribute to the parental denial of special education. According to Mori (2015) as cited by Raguindin et al. (2021), a large percentage of Filipino students of special education were unable to attend school due to either financial constraints or a lack of access to educational institutions. This can be supported by Oranga et al. (2020) study wherein they reported that most parents of learners with disabilities, counting those with academic disabilities, tend to be financially poor and have no means of meeting their children's educational needs, resulting in parental lack of interest in their children's education.

Aside from the parent's lack of knowledge and socioeconomic status, other research revealed that teacher factors and school environment may also form a barrier to the parents' involvement in special education. On the other hand, Mugo et al. (2010) found that the primary obstacle to parental denial of special education is that the majority of teachers and other school personnel have been educated in an individual-centered model of offering services that seldom includes

parents. Furthermore, Reinke et al. (2011) notice that certain aspects of the school environment, such as prejudices and unfavorable parental impressions, are unwelcoming to parents. As a result, parents may believe that well-being interferences for their disabled offspring descend outside of the scope of school roles (Reinke et al., 2011), limiting their engagement in their child's health interventions at school.

Subsequently, cultural beliefs and social values may also lead to the parent's denial of special education. Mwangi and Orodho (2014) asserted that the main issues that parents face when educating their disabled children are stigma, negative attitudes from members of society, and parental ignorance. For David (2015), he stressed that in the Philippines stigma and cultural views about disabilities are often the factors that deter parents from openly identifying their child's condition and obtaining specialized schooling. Furthermore, the special education system itself has a vital role in parental denial of special education. For instance, in Africa, a deficiency in laws and established legal structures that would allow parents of disabled children to advocate for their rights was identified as an obstacle to their active engagement in their children's education. In the Philippines, the state of public special education (SPED) portrays a sad reality (Gaytos et al., 2020). According to the authors, the special education system is confronted with difficult difficulties that are essentially systemic, resulting in parental refusal of special education. Lack of financing, irrelevant and unresponsive curriculum, mass emigration of SPED teachers, outdated learning tools, and a lack of support from school officials are among the issues.

Moreover, several studies have shown that a lack of facilities and resources prevents Filipino parents from enrolling their disabled children in special education. For instance, Roces (2017) revealed in her study that many regions in the Philippines face resource allocation issues for special education, resulting in a dearth of educated experts, adapted resources, and accessible materials. Because of this scarcity, parents are hesitant to enroll their children in special education programs. This is similar to the findings of Allam and Martin (2021), who investigated the concerns and obstacles faced by special education (SPED) teachers when educating students with learning disabilities in the City Division of Ilagan Isabela, Philippines. According to the findings of the study, lecture halls for youngsters with learning incapacities in the Division of Ilagan as a whole have deprived learning settings to upkeep the SPED.

Additionally, geographical disparities may also affect parents' involvement in their children's special education. Geographic barriers frequently impede access to special education programs, with urban areas having better access than rural and remote locations (Lansang, 2013). This disparity discourages parents who live far from specialized schools or centers. MacKay et.al. (2016) reported that parental denial can negatively impact children's academic and social progress.

Despite the potential negative consequences of parental denial, there is still a limited understanding of the factors that contribute to parental denial in special education. While some studies have identified certain factors that may contribute to parental denial, such as cultural beliefs or lack of knowledge about disabilities (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012), more research is needed to fully understand the complexity of this issue. Additionally, there is a need for research that explores effective strategies for addressing parental denial in special education. Some studies have explored the use of parent education programs or parent-teacher

collaboration to address parental denial (Elliott & Roach, 2014), but further research is needed to identify the most effective strategies for different types of parental denial.

Thus, this paper aims to examine the factors that contribute to parental denial, how these factors influence parental denial, and what strategies can be drawn for addressing and overcoming parental denial in special education. Moreover, this study will also contribute to the existing literature on parental denial in special education and provide recommendations for educators, parents, and policymakers to address and overcome denial.

The following research questions will guide this study:

1. What are the factors contributing to parental denial of children with special needs?
2. How can the special education system better support parents and children with special needs to overcome barriers to acceptance and support?

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Family systems theory as it approaches human behavior by examining family relationships and the context(s) in which they are embedded (Watson, 2012). From 1946 until 1959, Dr. Murray Bowen studied and worked at the Menninger Clinic and the National Institute of Mental Health to establish a scientific explanation of human behavior (Pollard, 2021). Family systems theory holds that comprehending a family requires examining it as a whole, according to Hammond and Pearson (2015).

Bowen's Family Systems Theory relies on two main ideas. Families are systems that may be researched and monitored using systems theory. The second argument is that emotion dominates family development (Pollard, 2021). Combining these two primary elements describes the family system as an emotional unit where each member impacts the others. Bowen stressed that families are systems in which changes in one aspect influence other interrelated elements (Kaplan et al., 2014). Thus, when one family member alters their behavior, it often produces stress or worry, and others react positively or negatively. The Family System Theory also holds that researchers and users of the model are interested in both internal and external family system dynamics (Pollard, 2021).

Method

Research Design

The research design for this study was a phenomenological approach. Teherani et al. (2015) defined phenomenology as a research approach that aims to describe the essence of a phenomenon through the point of view of individuals who have experienced it. The purpose of phenomenology, according to them, is to convey the significance of this experience—both what was experienced and how it was experienced. Phenomenology is a suitable research scheme for this study because it consents the investigator to explore the lived experiences of parents who have children in special education and exhibit signs of denial.

Instrument

The researcher was the study's principal instrument. Yin (2011) highlighted that qualitative research anticipated and intended the researcher to be the primary data collector and analyst. This study used semi-structured interviews. Magaldi and Berler (2020) outlined a semi-structured conference as a probing strategy grounded on guide questions and customized to the

primary subject that provided a broad pattern. Gaytos, et al., (2020) noted that phenomenological research generally used semi-structured in-depth interviews with small groups. Researchers may learn what it was like to witness phenomena from various people's viewpoints.

Participants

The study participants were parents of children currently enrolled in special education programs, displaying clear signs of denial. This denial was evident in the parents' actions, such as delaying their children's diagnosis and postponing enrollment in special education schools. The participants who met the specific criteria were chosen using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, according to Campbell et al. (2020), is the range of individuals with distinct traits and data to answer the study question, aim, and objectives during an inquiry. In this study, a minimum of 25 participants were invited however, only 15 participants gave their consent to undertake the research. The study was conducted in the province of Misamis Occidental, Northern Mindanao.

Data Analysis

The data from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2014), is a qualitative method for discovering patterns and themes in data. This analysis will consist of a thorough evaluation of the interview transcripts in order to discover general patterns and themes connected to the research topics. In this paper, the use of thematic analysis will enable the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the study participants and identify any emerging themes. Additionally, the researcher's reflexivity was integral to the study design, ensuring self-awareness and acknowledging personal biases throughout the research process (Brown, 2019).

Ethical Consideration

Respecting participants' rights and well-being requires ethical research. The study examined these ethical issues: People or their representatives approved a procedure (DeRenzo et al., 2020). Throughout the study, the researcher remained mindful of their own positionality and biases, maintaining a reflexive journal to document personal reflections and challenges encountered during the research process (Taylor, 2019).

Results and Discussions

Factors Contributing to Parental Denial

Eight themes emerged from the participants' responses to the factors that contribute to parental denial of special education.

Factors Contributing to Themes Parental Denial	
Family Dynamics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Parents encounter emotional struggles 2. Parents experience financial challenges and stress 3. Parents Limited Access to Resources
Cultural and Societal Beliefs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Community's Superstitious Beliefs and Misconceptions of Disability 5. Lack of Understanding of the Nature of Disability 6. Social Stigmas and Discrimination to Children with Special Needs
Special Education System	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Inaccessibility and unavailability of Special Education Services 8. Parent-Teacher Communication Gaps and Lack of Support

Family Dynamics

Three themes emerged for family dynamics as a factor that contributes to parental denial: (a) Parents encounter emotional Struggles; (b) Parents experience financial challenges and stress, and (c) Parents Limited Access to Resources. The relationship between parents and their children, communication patterns, and family structure are some of the factors that contribute to family dynamics.

Parents encounter emotional struggles

This theme elicits that parents have faced emotional struggles upon learning about their child's special needs. Parents often experience shock, grief, and a profound sense of loss regarding their expectations for their child's future. These responses underline the diverse emotional struggles experienced by parents upon learning about their child's special needs. Feelings of devastation, disbelief, sadness, and anger often lead to an initial phase of denial.

"At first, it was difficult for us to accept. We felt overwhelmed with emotions, but we gradually learned to cope". (P1) "We experienced a range of emotions, from sorrow to frustration. Denial was a natural response; we wanted our child to be 'normal'." (P5)

These responses underline the diverse emotional struggles experienced by parents upon learning about their child's special needs. Feelings of devastation, disbelief, sadness, and anger often lead to an initial phase of denial. This conveys an emotional journey experienced by parents when confronted with the reality of having a child with special needs. Studies have shown that when parents learn that their child has disabilities, they feel a wide range of emotions. Anger, anxiety, and shock are common emotions felt by parents. Some parents would even ask themselves "Why us?" (Downey, 2016). The emotional overwhelm expressed in the phrase can distort reasonable judgment. In this condition of heightened emotion, parents may deny the need for specialized education, therapies, or support services. Denial can delay finding appropriate educational resources and interventions for their child, which could hinder their

progress. Cauda-Laufer (2017) found that raising a disabled child is exhausting, emotional, and difficult. Staats et al. (2015) agree that parenting a disabled child can be stressful and harmful.

Parents experience financial challenges and stress

Financial challenges emerge as a significant barrier, intensifying parental denial. Financial concerns can lead parents to delay seeking professional diagnoses and assessments for their child's special needs.

"Financially, it was very hard for us. The medical expenses, therapies, and special education drained our resources, adding to our stress." (P3)

"We had to reduce spending on all aspects, including essential needs, in order to cover the costs of our child's therapies." (P7)

The substantial financial burden mentioned in the statement can lead parents to deny the need for special education services. Due to the high costs associated with therapies, medical expenses, and specialized education, parents might resist accepting that their child requires these services. This denial could result from the fear of further financial strain, leading them to avoid seeking appropriate support. Parental rejection of special education can be influenced by structural, environmental, cultural, and perceptual barriers (Mckay et al., 2004). It is impossible to deny that raising a disabled child is more expensive than raising a typical child. These costs may be incurred as a result of medical equipment and supplies such as wheelchairs, medical care and caregiving, private education, learning equipment, or customized transportation.

Parents' Limited Access to Resources

Limited access to resources can result in inadequate information and awareness about the available special education services and interventions. Parents might be unaware of the benefits of specialized education or the rights of their children to access these services. Lack of information can lead to denial, where parents might underestimate the importance of special education in their child's development.

"Access to specialized healthcare was limited. We had to travel long distances for therapies and consultations. Financial constraints made it even more challenging." (P14)

"Even when we manage to access services, there is a lack of trained professionals. We worry about the quality of care our child receives." (P12).

Parents of disabled children need resources to meet their children's special needs. These resources include their child's doctor, school teachers, and therapist (Downey, 2016). Access to these resources e.g. healthcare and rehabilitation services for children with disabilities is critical to improve their health and welfare. However, access to services remains limited, particularly in many settings in developing nations with limited resources (Asa et al., 2021). Parents' inadequate knowledge and access to resources influence their decision-making, leading them to deny their children the necessary specialized education. According to the Republic of Kenya (2008), a lack of access to meaningful and usable information has been recognized as a major obstacle to individuals with disabilities and their families obtaining assistance. Many parents have no or limited knowledge of financial or personal assistance procedures, and they are unaware of what pre-schools, primary/secondary schools, or any post-school programs can provide their children (Odongo, 2018).

Cultural and Societal Beliefs

Three themes emerged for family dynamics as a factor that contributes to parental denial: (a) community's superstitious beliefs and misconceptions of disability; (b) lack of understanding of the nature of disability; and (c) social stigmas and discrimination against children with special needs.

Community's Superstitious Beliefs and Misconceptions of Disability

In a society where superstitious beliefs play a substantial role, parents often grapple with not only the practical aspects of their child's special needs but also the weight of societal judgments and spiritual interpretations. The idea that disabilities may be caused by past actions or curses complicates parenting. Denial may help parents avoid social judgment and isolation by avoiding their child's special needs. The family uses denial to avoid community criticism.

"Superstitious beliefs played a significant role. People in our community had misconceptions about disabilities. Some thought it was a result of past actions or curses." (P10)

"Superstitions and myths surrounded us. Some believed disability was a punishment, leaving us more difficult and in denial." (P7)

Different cultures view disability causes differently (Omu & Reynolds, 2012). Families may not seek identification because they believe disability is a curse from the gods or a devilish possession, humiliating and hiding the disabled child (Kiare, 2004). Parents may deny their disabled children special education due to public perceptions of disabilities. Disability is still seen as a curse, witchcraft, or contagious (Bii & Taylor, 2013). Filipinos often attribute disabilities to gaba, a divine being's curse, usually God, or namaligno, a belief that a supernatural or mystical figure caused a person's illness (Abad, 2013). Disability misperceptions can have serious consequences for disabled people and their families. Fear and misinformation about disability have discouraged parents from enrolling their disabled children in school (Odongo, 2018).

Lack of Understanding in the Nature of Disability

The lack of understanding within the community results in social isolation and judgment. Parents, feeling isolated, often deny their child's special needs to avoid further alienation. This lack of understanding hampers open discussions and parental acceptance.

"Our community had deep-rooted traditional beliefs about disabilities. There was a lack of understanding, leading to isolation" (P12)

"People lacked awareness about disabilities. Instead of understanding, there was judgment, making it hard for us to talk openly about our child's needs." (P6)

When the community lacks understanding, parents fear judgment and criticism. This fear leads to denial, as parents might hide their child's condition to avoid social isolation. Due to a culture of silence around disabilities, parents find it hard to seek help and support. Most people are uncomfortable approaching disabled people (Dianito et al., 2021). Lack of interaction with PWDs or preconceived notions about them may be to blame (American Psychological Association, 2000). Since then, society has struggled to accept and understand disabled people. Misconceptions about disabled people often fuel negative attitudes. Some people worry that disabled people need medical care and are contagious (Nikolarazi et al., 2005). Moreover, Babik and Gardner (2021) suggested that inadequate or inaccurate information about special

needs people may lead to judgment and prejudice. Disability seems to define an individual's identity and social life in Asian countries like the Philippines.

Social Stigmas and Discrimination to Children with Special Needs

Social stigmas and discrimination that emerged from this study created a hostile environment for both parents and children with special needs. Denial, in this context, becomes a shield against the painful reality of societal rejection. By denying their child's special needs, parents may attempt to protect them from the harsh judgment of society.

“Society can be harsh. Our neighbors sometimes look at our child differently. It's challenging to fight against those stereotypes.” (P6)

“The social stigma is suffocating. Our child is often excluded from community events, reinforcing the feeling of isolation.” (P11)

Negative attitudes are a major obstacle to inclusive education (Adoyo & Odeny, 2015). Negative social opinions can shame families, causing them to hide their disabled children. Due to stigma or bad attitudes, disabled children are sometimes hidden or excluded from social activities. Additionally, disabled children are sometimes excluded from school. The community's negative view of disability discourages parents from enrolling their disabled children in school (Bi & Taylor, 2013). Fear of stigma and prejudice often leads parents to hide their disabled children indoors rather than to include them in the family. These negative views of disability are caused by a lack of understanding and awareness, societal misconceptions about disability causes, and discrimination reinforcement (Odongo, 2018).

Special Education System

Two overarching themes emerged for the special education system as a factor that contributes to parental denial: (a) inaccessibility and unavailability of special education services; (b) parent-teacher communication gaps and lack of support

Inaccessibility and unavailability of Special Education Services

The inaccessibility and unavailability of specialized services intensify parental denial. When parents struggle to find suitable services, it reinforces their sense of helplessness and increases the likelihood of denying the severity of their child's condition. Frustration and exhaustion often lead to avoidance, making it difficult for parents to face the reality of their child's special needs.

“Finding appropriate special education services was a challenge. There were limited options available, and many were not tailored to meet our child's specific needs.” (P7) “The lack of accessible services made it incredibly frustrating. We often had to travel long distances, making it difficult to consistently attend sessions, which affected our child's progress.” (P11)

Parents' difficulties finding acceptable and accessible special education services stem from limited options. Traveling long distances and not having services tailored to their children's needs frustrated parents. The real battle for disabled people begins when they leave home (Geronia, 2017). The Philippines is current in its infrastructure for PWDs, but it needs improvement. Building designs create accessibility issues for disabled people, such as self-closing doors with heavy return springs, uneven surfaces, and a lack of ramps. The special education system struggles with funding, irrelevant and unresponsive curriculum, mass

emigration of SPED teachers, outdated learning tools, and school officials' lack of support, which leads to parental refusal (Gaytos et al., 2020). Special education programs are more accessible in cities than in rural and remote areas due to geographic constraints (Lansang, 2013).

Parent-Teacher Communication Gaps and Lack of Support

When parents feel disconnected from their child's educational progress and lack the necessary support, it deepens their denial. The absence of clear communication and guidance leaves parents questioning their ability to cope with their child's special needs.

“At times, educators lacked awareness of our child's specific requirements. Their limited understanding added to our sense of isolation, leaving us feeling as though we were navigating this journey alone.” (P9)

Parents complained about minimal teacher involvement and a lack of resources to help their child's learning. Parental isolation and uncertainty about how to support their child result from a lack of collaboration between parents and teachers. Some parents/families may fear the school system and feel they can't help their impaired children (Odongo, 2018). Most parents were unhappy with how instructors and other children treated special needs children (Thwala et al., 2015), suggesting the government should instruct them. Many parents of disabled children, especially those in isolated places, lack communication and support from other parents. Thus, the lack of support structures and regulations to safeguard and promote disabled children's rights may cause parents to refuse special education (Tigere & Makhubele, 2019).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Parental denial in the face of special needs exemplifies the extreme emotional and societal challenges faced by families. This conflict is exacerbated by family dynamics, societal misconceptions, and the limitations of the special education system. The pervasive denial is frequently the result of overwhelming emotions, exacerbated by financial burdens and the weight of social judgment. It is essential to comprehend these nuanced factors to design effective interventions.

To combat parental denial, individualized interventions are required. Coupled with financial assistance initiatives, parental counseling programs can alleviate emotional distress and reduce financial burdens. At the community and institutional levels, education campaigns should debunk falsehoods, nurturing understanding and empathy. Investments in specialized teacher training and accessible services can simultaneously reconcile existing gaps, empowering parents to embrace their children's unique requirements rather than deny them. By eliminating societal stigmas and bolstering support structures, we can cultivate an environment in which parental denial is replaced by acceptance, thereby nurturing healthier relationships and brighter futures for these children.

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