

PARENTAL ATTITUDES OF CHILDREN WITHOUT NEURODEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS AND INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN)

Sofia Campos
Escola Superior de Saúde-IPV-Viseu-Portugal
sofiamargaridacampos@gmail.com

Flávia Pinto
Universidade de Coimbra-Portugal
flavianicolapinto@gmail.com

Manuela Ferreira
Escola Superior de Saúde-IPV-Viseu-Portugal
mmcferreira@gmail.com

Ana Paula Cardoso
Escola Superior de Educação de Viseu-IPV-Portugal
a.p.cardoso62@gmail.com

Célia Ribeiro
Universidade Católica Portuguesa-Viseu-Portugal
cribeiro.crb.ucp@sapo.pt

Paula Couceiro
Universidade de Coimbra-Portugal
apcouceiro@fpce.uc.pt

Abstract

Over the last decade there has been a development on the inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream education. The general objective is to analyze the attitudes of parents of children without neurodevelopmental disorders regarding the inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs. Methods: This is a comparative and correlational study and aims to: Characterize and analyze the possible differences in attitudes of parents of children without neurodevelopmental disorders regarding the inclusion of children with SEN considering the three disorders. The results revealed that parents of children without neurodevelopmental disorders tend to show positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN. It was found that the type of disturbance and the description that is made of children with SEN have an influence on parental attitudes, which show more positive attitudes towards Hearing Impairment, followed by Trisomy 21, and Behavioral Disorder. Conclusions: Sensitizing parents of children without neurodevelopmental disorders plays an essential role in the messages they convey to their children promoting inclusion.

Keywords: Children without Neurodevelopmental Disorders

Introduction

In Portugal, efforts have been made to follow the inclusion policies of children and young people with SEN, and this progress is a positive factor for all, allowing the development of rich and profitable school communities (Correia, 2003). However, it is important to stress that the inclusive movement can only succeed if, in the first place, citizens understand it and accept it as a principle whose benefits reach everyone (Correia, 2008). Although the acceptance of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream schools is a widely supported goal, implementing inclusion in daily practice is sometimes challenging (Ferguson, 2008). For Omote, Oliveira, Baleotti, and Martins (2005), the insertion of a child with SEN in a regular class is only administratively determined, meaning that this child may not be welcomed and included by teachers and colleagues, and nor does it guarantee a quality education that is appropriate to the needs of each individual.

In this sense, Rodrigues (2003) reinforces the fact that there are factors in schools that are directly related to “resistance to change” and that can compromise the inclusion process. Since the school should not be just a place to study and get good grades, but a place to learn to live (Sampaio, 2012), we believe that, in general, the advantages of the inclusive philosophy seem to outweigh its obstacles. Despite the shortcomings in the system, students with SEN currently receive a more adequate education compared the one they had received until now.

With the success of the inclusive movement in mind, changes are required. These must be made up of not only material and human resources, but also of the attitudes of all those who are directly or indirectly involved. Thus,

it is essential to make a theoretical approach to them (attitudes), namely with regard to the attitudes of parents of children with typical development, which are the object of study in the present investigation.

The study of the concept of attitude dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, and remains lacking a conceptual definition that is universal (Pinheiro, 2001). However, it was possible to eliminate many of the definitions that were found to be inaccurate or inadequate, through the developments made over time (Lima, 1996). Despite the discrepancy between the various definitions of the concept of attitude, Lima (1996) says that among them there are three common points: they refer to subjective practices; they are always associated with an object; and always have an evaluative component, the latter being its main characteristic.

In Allport's (1935) approach, cited by Pinheiro (2001), about attitudes, these are considered a state of mental representation, which is organized through experiences and exerts a dynamic influence on the responses of individuals to all objects and / or situations with which it relates.

With various definitions as a starting point, it was possible to realize that attitudes could be a resource to explain human action, believing that they were responsible for a behavioral disposition to react to certain realities, in the presence of certain stimuli, inserted in certain social contexts (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). According to Gaad (2004), attitudes drive our behavior.

As individuals or as a group, what we believe in and how we feel about a particular subject, will largely determine what we will do about it. Thus, we can affirm that the more favorable the subjective attitudes and norms in relation to a behavior and the greater the perceived control of it are, the stronger the intention of people to perform that behavior will be (Ajzen, 1991).

Here, is where the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985) comes to play. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985) states that when one intends to predict a person's intention in relation to a certain behavior, three variables must be taken into account: the attitude towards a specific behavior, the subjective norms, and the perceived behavioral control.

The attitude towards a specific behavior is understood as the degree to which the performance of the behavior is positively or negatively valued. Subjective norms are determined by the subject's normative beliefs and consist of the subject's perception of social influences. In other words, it is not only about the perception that "I" have in relation to the opinion of others about what "I" should or should not do, but also "my" motivation to live up to the expectations of others.

As for the perceived behavioral control, it refers to the perception that each person has of their own ability to perform a certain behavior, this, being determined by the presence of factors that can facilitate or hinder the performance of that same behavior.

In regards to parental attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream education, and taking into account the three-dimensional model mentioned above (affection, cognition and behavior), we can define the attitudes of parents of children with typical development as follows : the cognitive component reflects their beliefs towards inclusive education, such as the rights of children with SEN to be educated in mainstream schools; the affective component reflects feelings, such as concerns about the effect of including a child with SEN in your child's classroom; and the behavioral component reflects the intentions to act in a particular way, such as inviting a child with SEN to your child's birthday party (de Boer & Munde, 2014).

Explicit and / or implicit messages and the parents' attitudes and behaviors, are essential to the success of inclusive education, given their potential impact on their children's attitudes and behaviors, and their potential influence on both the school's and teachers' responses and on the educational policies (Freitas, Arroja, Ribeiro, & Dias, 2015). Therefore, the role of parents is preponderant as co-builders of the educational system, at a political and social level, through their involvement and the complementarity they can have in educational intervention, and in the way they convey messages to the school and to their children. (Barbosa, Rosini, & Pereira, 2007; Batista & Emuno, 2004). When parents are reactive to inclusive education, there is a tendency to negatively influence their children's attitude and behavior (De Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2012), and it is in this sense that, increasingly, the involvement and support of this group of parents is considered a significant facilitator of inclusive education (Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001).

The Study

Following this train of thought, if parents demonstrate negative attitudes towards inclusive education, it is possible that this position has a negative influence on the construction of their children's attitudes towards peers with SEN (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010), possibly leading to a compromised inclusion process. Hereupon, the present study is part of a comparative and correlational methodology, and its main Hypotheses: Hypothesis 1: Parents have more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of a child with Hearing Disability compared to a child with Trisomy 21 or with a Behavioral Disorder, and have less positive attitudes towards a child with a Behavioral Disorder when compared to a child with Hearing Disability or with Trisomy 21. Hypothesis 2: Parental attitudes are more positive owing to the positive description of the child with SEN compared to a neutral description. Hypothesis 3: Previous contact with SEN is associated with more positive attitudes compared to its absence. Hypothesis 4: In the presence of previous contact with SEN, parents who have regular contact show more positive results compared to those

whose contact is sporadic. Hypothesis 5: Higher levels of optimism are significantly related to more positive attitudes. Hypothesis 6: Taking into account the Five Factor Model, it is expected that higher scores on the factors Agreeableness, Extraversion, Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness are associated with more positive attitudes, and that higher scores on the Neuroticism factor are related to less positive attitudes. The convenience sample consisted of 147 subjects, fathers and mothers of children between the ages of 6 and 10 years old from the 1st cycle of Basic Education of the Group of Schools in the Center-North of Portugal. The Protocol used consisted of four questionnaires: a Sociodemographic Questionnaire, the Children with difficulties at school questionnaire (Nota et al., 2014; Portuguese version, Pinto, 2016), the Revised Life Orientation Scale (LOT-R) (Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994; Portuguese version, Laranjeira, 2008), and the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1989; Portuguese version Lima & Simões, 2000). The procedures were carried out with the collaboration of the class teachers of the selected schools. We chose to contact parents through teachers and students as it is the most effective way to access the desired sample.

After receiving the consent of the General Directorate of Education and the Director of the School Group, the investigation was initiated through a brief presentation of the objectives of the study to the school coordinators and the teachers of the selected classes. 250 questionnaires were distributed to the 6 schools, and a similar number of versions were handed out to the selected classes (63 Male Neutral versions, 67 Female Neutral versions, 53 Female Positive versions, 67 Male Positive versions), taking into account the number of students in each one of the classes. There were 4 occurrences with regard to the existence of twin brothers in the selected classes. In these circumstances, the questionnaires were delivered as follows: in one of the classes, two questionnaires were given to the brothers, one of which was answered by the father and the other by the mother. In the remaining cases, only a questionnaire was delivered for both the children.

Findings

Regarding the characterization of the sample, with regard to the role played by the subjects ($n = 145$), 125 mothers (85%) and 20 fathers (13.6%) stand out, with their age ($n = 142$) varying between 23 and 53 years old, with an average of 38.70 and a standard deviation of 5.08. In relation to academic qualifications, the highlight is the completion of Secondary Education (12th grade) with 21.8% of the subjects ($n = 32$) and the achievement of a higher degree (Licentiate, Master, Doctorate, and Post-Graduation) with 53, 1% of the subjects ($n = 78$). Regarding the age of the children, in relation to the first born child ($n = 143$), the age (in years) varies between 5 and 25 years old, with the average age of the first child being 10.81 years ($SD = 4.106$), with 4 omissions. Regarding the second born child ($n = 104$), the average age (in months) is 88.24 ($SD = 48.301$), varying between 0 and 264 months (equivalent to 22 years), and 2 omissions were recorded. As for the age (in months) of the third born child ($n = 21$), it goes from 3 months to 132 months (equivalent to 11 years), with an average of approximately 7 years (81.86 months; $SD = 36.189$). Finally, as for the age of the fourth born child ($n = 3$), it varies between 4 and 9 years old, with an average of 6 years ($SD = 2.646$).

Taking into account Hypothesis 1 formulated for the study of attitudes, the results indicate that it is possible to observe different attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN, with regards to the type of disorder. Thus, parents of children with typical development have more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with hearing impairment, followed by a child with Trisomy 21, and finally by a child with Behavioral Disorder, thus corroborating Hypothesis 1. In response to the second hypothesis, an attempt was made to analyze and compare the possible differences in the attitudes of the parents of children with a typical development depending on the type of description that is made of the child, whether it is neutral or positive. The results obtained showed that these parents demonstrate more positive attitudes towards the positive descriptions of each of the disorders (Hearing Impairment, Trisomy 21 and Behavioral Disorder), compared to the neutral descriptions of the same disorders. Hypothesis 2 is then corroborated. In Hypothesis 5, it was possible to verify a positive and significant correlation between optimism and hearing impairment for the Social Acceptance factor and for the Total, suggesting that higher levels of optimism are associated with more positive attitudes for the referred factors of Hearing Disability. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was, in part, corroborated.

Regarding the relationship between parental attitudes and personality traits, in the correlational analysis performed, it was possible to verify that individuals with lower scores in the Neuroticism trait had more positive attitudes in the Social Acceptance of children with Hearing Disability and in the Academic Performance of children with Behavioral Disorder.

Individuals with higher scores in the Trait Agreeableness, showed more positive attitudes towards Social Acceptance, both of children with Hearing Disability and of children with Trisomy 21, and also for the total of the Behavioral Disorder. In turn, individuals with higher levels in the Conscientiousness trait showed more positive attitudes towards the Social Acceptance of children with Hearing Disability. Given that low levels of Neuroticism correspond to greater adaptation and emotional stability, and that high levels of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness correspond to qualities such as compassion and trust, respectively, these results partially corroborate Hypothesis 6, and for the rest of the traits there were no statistically significant differences for any of the factors in each of the disturbances.

Discussions/Conclusions

As previously mentioned, the scarcity of studies carried out in the context of the attitudes of parents of children with typical development towards the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN), namely in the national context, was the main driver for the execution of the present investigation. It was in this sense that we sought to analyze the influence that some variables such as the type of description that is made of the child with SEN (neutral or positive description), the existence of previous contact with SEN and its frequency (regular or sporadic), as well as the relationship between attitudes with optimism and personality traits have in the inclusion process.

Taking the objectives previously proposed for this study, and the contribution of conceptual references that support and prove the importance of studying the attitudes of parents of children with a typical development in view of the inclusion of children with SEN, the results obtained will be discussed below, in order to verify whether they are consistent with the results obtained in other investigations carried out in this area.

In general, there was a trend already verified in several studies (Barbosa, Rosini, & Pereira, 2007; Freitas, Arroja, Ribeiro, & Dias, 2015; Narumanchi & Bhargava, 2011; Pinto, 2016; Pinto & Morgado, 2012; Tafa & Manolitsis, 2003), on the expression of positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN in regular education, by the parents of children with typical development. However, some of the authors mentioned above tried to analyze whether the type of the child's disturbance will have any influence on the attitudes of these parents (Barbosa, Rosini, & Pereira, 2007; de Boer & Munde, 2014; Freitas, Arroja, Ribeiro, & Dias, 2015; Pinto, 2016; Pinto & Morgado, 2012; Tafa & Manolitsis, 2003).

In this sense, exemplifying the study by de Boer & Munde, 2014, the authors used the Attitude Survey toward Inclusive Education (ASIE) questionnaire, developed by de Boer, Timmerman, Pijl, & Minnaert (2012), which, like the Children with difficulties at school questionnaire (Nota et al., 2014), uses the description of children with specific SEN, in this case being, children with motor disability, cognitive disability, and PIMD (profound intellectual and multiple disabilities), to see if different types of disturbance will lead to different manifestations of attitudes. The authors concluded that, in fact, attitudes differ depending on the type of disorder, with parents showing more positive attitudes about the inclusion of children with motor disabilities and more negative attitudes towards the inclusion of children with multiple and profound intellectual impairment (PIMD). In the study by Barbosa, Rosini, & Pereira (2007), it was possible to verify that the parents of children with typical development perceive that children with hearing impairment, followed by children with mental disabilities are more likely to belong to a regular school class without having their presence impair the learning process of colleagues with typical development. This, partially corroborates the results obtained in the present investigation, taking into account that here, too, parents showed more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with hearing impairment, followed by children with Trisomy 21.

The progressive changes that have been observed over the last few years in the educational system, namely in the inclusion of children with SEN, are accompanied by a growing interest in the study of the attitudes of those who are directly or indirectly involved in this ever changing system. The inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education is a topic of extreme interest and importance for the construction of a school "which belongs to all, and for all". In general, when we refer to parental attitudes, there is an immediate need to analyze variables commonly investigated, such as gender, age, academic qualifications, and socioeconomic status of parents. However, an attempt was made to advance to the study of variables that, unlike those mentioned, have been less analyzed. Hence the interest to analyze the influence of variables such as the type of educational need of the child, as well as the description that is made of that child and his / her disorder / disability. In addition, it was also sought to understand whether previous contact with individuals with SEN or people with some type of disability would have any impact on the attitudes of parents of children with typical development.

Despite the contribution made by the present investigation to the study of the attitudes of parents of children with a typical development in relation to the inclusion of children with SEN, this work also had some limitations. In this sense, we start by mentioning the sample size, collected for convenience. Right here, the difference between the number of mothers ($n = 125$) and the number of fathers ($n = 20$) responding to the questionnaire was evident. With regard to the versions of the Children with difficulties at school questionnaire (Nota et al., 2014), there was also a significant difference between the number of subjects who responded to the positive female version compared to the other versions, being that this one was only answered by 12 subjects and in the remaining versions the number of subjects was clearly greater, between 40 and 50 subjects per version, making it impossible to analyze parental attitudes towards the gender of the child described. However, we consider that the structure of the Children with difficulties at school questionnaire (Nota et al., 2014) makes a great contribution to the study of parental attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN in regular education, by gender and type of description that is made of each child / disorder. In this sense, there has been a widespread use of the term SEN / disturbance / "disability", to specify the disturbances that were intended to be analyzed, facilitating the parents' response and the interpretation of the results by the researchers.

The parents' personality and psychological well-being, the child's characteristics and the social context are among the factors highlighted as the main determinants that influence the way they deal with their children (Belsky, 1984;

Dessen, 1997), and in the way how, later on, children will deal with those around them. Finally, we consider that it could be advantageous, in a first instance, to raise the awareness and sensitizing of parents of children with typical development, since these parents have an essential role in the messages they transmit to their children and that, consciously or not, they also transmit to other members of the school community. We believe that the results presented here are, in a way, encouraging in view of the social advances of the inclusive movement.

Acknowledgments

This work is financed by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P. Furthermore we would like to thank the Instituto Politécnico de Viseu and CI&DEI for their support.

References

- Ajzen, I. (1991). The Theory of Planned Behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), pp. 197-211.
- Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1980). *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Barbosa, A. J. G., Rosini, D. C., & Pereira, A. A. (2007). Parental attitudes toward inclusive education. *Revista Brasileira de Educação Especial*, 13(3), 447– 458.
- Batista, M. W., & Enumo, S. R. (2004). Inclusão escolar e deficiência mental: Análise da interação social entre companheiros. *Estudos de Psicologia*, 1(9), pp. 101-111.
- Boer, A.A., Munde, V.S.(2014). *Parental Attitudes Toward the Inclusion of Children With Profound Intellectual and Multiple Disabilities in General Primary Education in the Netherlands*. *Journal of Special Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466914554297>
- Boer, A.A., Pijl, S.J., Minnaert, A. (2012). Students' Attitudes towards Peers with Disabilities: A review of the literature, *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 59:4, 379-392 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2012>.
- Correia, L. (2003). *Inclusão e Necessidades Educativas Especiais – Um guia para educadores e professores*. Porto: Porto Editora.
- Correia, L. (2008). *Inclusão e necessidades educativas especiais – Um guia para educadores e professores* (2ª ed.). Porto: Porto Editora.
- Ferguson, D. L. (2008). International trends in inclusive education: The continuing challenge to teach each one and everyone. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(2), 109-120.
- Freitas, E. M., Arroja, L. N., Ribeiro, P. M., & Dias, P. C. (2015). Perceção dos pais em relação à inclusão de crianças com Necessidades Educativas Especiais no ensino regular. *Revista Educação Especial*, 28(52), 443–458.
- Gaad, E. (2004). Cross-cultural perspectives on the effect of cultural attitudes towards inclusion for children with intellectual disabilities. *International*
- Laranjeira, C. A. (2008) Tradução e validação portuguesa do Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R). *Universitas Psychologica*, 7(2), 469-476.
- Lima, M. (1996). Atitudes. *Psicologia Social*. Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.Lisboa.
- Lima, M., & Simões, A. (2000). A teoria dos cinco fatores: Uma proposta inovadora ou apenas uma boa arrumação do caleidoscópio personológico? *Análise Psicológica*, 2, 171-179.
- Lima, M., & Simões, A. (2000). *NEO PI-R: Manual profissional*. Lisboa: CEGOC. Lima, M., Magalhães, E., Salgueira, A., Gonzalez, A.-J., Costa, J. J., Costa, M. J., & Costa, P. (2014). A versão portuguesa do NEO-FFI: Caracterização em função da idade, género e escolaridade. *Psicologia*, 28(2), 01–10.
- Omote, S., Oliveira, A., Baleotti, L. R., & Martins, S. (2005). The social attitudes adjustment towards inclusion. *Paidéia*, 15(32), 387–396. doi: 10.1590/S0103-863X2005000300008
- Palmer, D. S., Fuller, K., Arora, T., & Nelson, M. (2001). Taking Sides: Parent Views on Inclusion for Their Children with Severe Disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 67(4), 467–484. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290106700403>
- Pinheiro, I. (2001). *Atitudes dos Professores do 2º Ciclo do Ensino Básico das Escolas do CAE – Tâmega face à inclusão de alunos com deficiência*. Dissertação de Mestrado, Faculdade de Ciências do Desporto e Educação Física - Universidade do Porto, Portugal.
- Pinto, N., & Morgado, J. (2012). Atitudes de pais e professores perante a inclusão. In L. Mata, F. Peixoto, J. Morgado, J. C. Silva, & V. Monteiro (Eds.), *12.º Colóquio Psicologia e Educação - Educação, aprendizagem e desenvolvimento: Olhares contemporâneos através da investigação e da prática - Atas* (pp. 471-491). Lisboa: ISPA - Instituto Universitário.
- Rodrigues, D. (2003). Educação inclusiva – as boas notícias e as más notícias. In David Rodrigues (Org.), *Perspetivas sobre inclusão – Da educação à sociedade* (pp. 89-101). Porto: Porto Editora.
- Sampaio, D. (2012). *Inventem-se Novos Pais*. Leya.

Tafa, E., & Manolitsis, G. (2003). Attitudes of Greek parents of typically developing kindergarten children towards inclusive education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 18*(2), p. 155-171. doi: 10.1080/0885625032000078952.