Exploring Parental Strategies and Perceptions in Supporting Kindergarten Learners with Intellectual Disability: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

This study explored parental strategies and perceptions in supporting kindergarten learners with intellectual disability (ID). A qualitative research design, was used specifically a case study methodology, to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the parental strategies and their perceptions in supporting their children. The research took place at Butuan City Special Education Center. This method allowed the researchers to gather detailed, non-numerical information through observations, interviews, and looking at documents. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with regular teachers, SPED teachers, and parents of the learners. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data. The findings revealed that learners with intellectual disabilities face significant challenges in expressive and receptive communication, emotional regulation, and social interaction, often leading to social isolation. Parents expressed concerns about their children's lack of self-confidence and difficulties in social situations. Delays in language processing and an overdependence on family members were noted, limiting the child's independence and social interaction ability. Temper tantrums frequently occurred under the theme of behaviors at home or in public, especially in unfamiliar or overwhelming environments. Parents employed strategies focused on social skills development, often based on their intuition or past experiences, and some sought collaboration with support groups for guidance and emotional support. A major challenge identified was the lack of defined, problem-focused interventions, leaving many parents uncertain about the effectiveness of their approaches. Despite their commitment, parents felt ill-equipped, highlighting the need for accessible, practical tools, shared experiences, and structured support programs to enhance their confidence and capability in supporting their child's social development.

I.INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is an approach that ensures all children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have equitable access to learning opportunities in mainstream settings. It promotes a supportive environment where learners, including those with intellectual disabilities (ID), can thrive. Educators adapt teaching methods, curricula, and classroom settings to cater to diverse learning needs. This approach enhances social integration, reduces discrimination, and fosters a sense of belonging among all students (UNESCO, 2020). In the Philippines, this global vision is reinforced through Republic Act 11650, the Inclusive Education Act, which mandates equal educational opportunities for learners with disabilities. The law highlights the importance of inclusive learning environments and sufficient support for learners with ID. Additionally, the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (RA 7277) ensures that individuals with disabilities can access appropriate educational programs, including special education services.

In early childhood, particularly at the kindergarten level, the social development of children with ID is a critical concern. Key social skills—such as communication, cooperation, and emotional regulation, are essential for successful interactions with peers and adults. While schools play an important role in fostering these skills, parental involvement at home is equally vital. Parents of children with ID often serve as primary advocates and support systems, shaping their children's social behaviors and helping them navigate challenges. However, the extent and nature of their strategies and how they perceive their child's development and school support remain under-researched, especially in the Philippine context. Understanding these parental roles is essential for developing holistic support systems that bridge home and school efforts (Hartley et al., 2023)

Literature reveals several gaps in the study of social development in children with ID. There is limited longitudinal research on their social growth from early childhood through adolescence. Furthermore, studies exploring these children's specific social difficulties in inclusive environments are sparse. Despite strong legislative backing, inclusive practices often face implementation challenges, particularly at the classroom level. Teachers may struggle to address diverse behavioral needs and facilitate positive peer interactions. In the Philippines, and specifically in schools like Butuan City Special Education Center in the CARAGA Region, challenges persist in fully realizing inclusive education. While schools demonstrate a commitment to inclusion, limitations in resources, teacher training, and systematic monitoring hinder adequate support for the social development of children with ID. The Department of Education (DepEd) has taken steps to institutionalize inclusive education, notably through Memorandum Order No. 21, s. 2019. Despite this, gaps remain in school-parent collaboration. Parents often face uncertainties about how best to support their child at home, primarily when schools do not provide adequate communication, guidance, or feedback on social progress. Understanding parents' perceptions of their child's social development and the support received from schools is crucial in creating aligned and effective strategies.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three theoretical foundations: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) – Highlights how different environmental systems (family, school, society) interact to influence a child's development. This theory helps identify the role of parents and their interactions with schools in shaping social development. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) – Emphasizes the importance of social interaction, guided learning, and cultural tools in cognitive and emotional development. It underpins the role of family and structured support in enhancing social skills. Gestalt Theory – Focuses on the holistic nature of perception and learning, supporting the idea that social development is influenced by the overall educational and familial environment, not isolated experiences.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study applies Bronfenbrenner's ecological lens to examine how parental strategies and school support systems influence the social development of children with ID. Qualitative data gathered through interviews can inform targeted interventions by identifying challenges and support mechanisms. This approach ensures that any strategies developed are grounded in the lived experiences of families and reflect the sociocultural context of learners in Butuan City.

This research addresses a critical gap by focusing on the dual lens of parental strategies at home and their perceptions of school support. It aims to explore how parents of kindergarten learners with ID actively support their children's social development and how they view the effectiveness of school interventions. Insights from this study will inform educators, policymakers, and support professionals in designing collaborative, inclusive practices that genuinely respond to the needs of children with intellectual disabilities.

II.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a case study methodology, to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the parental strategies and perceptions in supporting kindergarten learners with intellectual disability (ID). The research took place at Butuan City Special Education Center. This method allowed the researchers to gather detailed, non-numerical information through observations, interviews, and looking at documents. The study involved specific regular teachers, SPED teachers, and guardians who were closely involved with these kindergarten students with intellectual disabilities at the school during the 2024–2025 school year. This specific selection of people was chosen because they had the most relevant knowledge and experience about the student's social development. The main tool for gathering information was a semi-structured interview guide. This guide was carefully validated and tested. It contained key questions to explore the participants' views on the topic. The interviews were recorded to make sure the responses were accurately captured.

The information's gathered were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method helps to find and understand patterns in the qualitative data about the social development of students with intellectual disabilities. Important parts of the interviews were labeled with short phrases or keywords to analyze the data effectively, making it easier to organize the information for deeper understanding.

Once the responses were organized, the researchers looked for repeating ideas or themes across different responses. These themes were then visually mapped to show how they connected. This approach made sure the data analysis was thorough and well-organized. The coding process involved reviewing responses several times to ensure consistency and accuracy in finding patterns. Each theme was then analyzed to determine its importance to the study's questions.

III.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Parents' Perceptions on their child's social development and the support

This section presents a thematic analysis of parents' perceptions regarding their child's social development and the types of support they require. It also explores the strategies parents use to foster their child's social development at home.

Table 1 presents the thematic Analysis of the parents' perceptions on their child's social development and the support they needed.

Table 1 *Thematic Analysis of the Parents' Perceptions on their child's social development and the support they receive from the school.*

Participants	Code	Category	Themes	Description
Parents' Perceptions P1 ,P2,P4 P6	• Lacks self-confidence • Unable to communicate desires • Unable to communicate feelings	Understanding emotions	Emotional dysregulation	Parents of the learners with intellectual disability are aware of the social dysfunctionalities of their respective children which spring from their cognitive and emotional deficiencies. At home and in public places, they are aware of the observed lack of confidence with other people which resulted to overdependence of the child to parent and sibling whom they trust to understand their conditions. Temper tantrum is a common way of attracting attention to on wants.
P2,P3,P4	• Fear of rejection • Uncomfortable with others • No eye contact when spoken to	Response to social interaction	Social Isolation Social skills deficiency	
P4 P2,P3,P4,P6	• Difficulty to play with others • Friendly but unable to start interaction			
P4 P3	• Unable to follow instructions • Does not understand turn taking • Cannot be trusted to run errands	Execution function	Language Processing delay	
P5,P6 P5 P2,P6	• Feeling safe with parents and siblings • Easily overwhelmed with people outside home or noisy places	Behaviors at home or at public places	Overdependence family members	
P1 P2,P3,P4,P5	• Easily gets mad or cries when wants are not met		Temper tantrums	

Data shows that under parents' perception there are six (6) themes were generated from the keywords and coded data. The generated themes are the following, Emotional dysregulation is under the category of Understanding emotions, themes like Social Isolation, Social skills deficiency, are under category of Response to social interaction, the theme Language Processing delay, is under category of Execution function Overdependence on family members, is under and Temper tantrums mare themes under the Behaviors at home or at public places.

On the other hand, Home-based support the theme generated is Emotional skills development strategies, this is under the category of Building Up self-esteem and Building up emotional regulation. These findings were strengthened during the conducted interview of the parents. The parents of children with intellectual disabilities have shared various observations about their children's social development. Many described their children as shy, reserved, and emotionally sensitive when in the presence of other people. One parent shared,

"Mubati siya og kahadlok basta naa sa daghang tawo
, mas komportable siya kung kami ra sa balay,"
*(*He/She tends to be shy or fearful when around many people;
he's/ her's more comfortable when it's just us at home)

highlighting the child's social withdrawal and emotional dependence on familiar family members. Some parents expressed concerns about their child's limited ability to express themselves. One parent said,

"Dili man siya moistorya kung naa siyay gusto, usahay maghilak ra,"
*(*He/ She doesn't speak up when he wants something; sometimes he just cries)

indicating struggles with expressive communication, often leading the child to cry when needs are not understood. Furthermore, difficulties in understanding social rules such as turn-taking were also observed. One parent commented,

"Lisod kaayo niya sabton ang paghulat sa iyang turn, gusto niya siya dayon pirmi,"

*(*It's very hard for him/her to understand waiting for their turn; they always want to go first.)

revealing challenges with impulse control and group interaction. These observations are supported by Balagtas (2023), who emphasized that children with intellectual disabilities typically exhibit delays in social competence, particularly in peer-related social behaviors and emotional understanding. Likewise, Cook et al,. (2021) found that such children often show limitations in both socio-emotional regulation and perspective-taking, making it difficult for them to engage appropriately in social contexts. Müller, Hofmann, and Egger (2022) also confirmed that limited communication skills contribute significantly to behavioral challenges and difficulties in peer interaction, thereby highlighting the necessity of early interventions that address both language and social development. Addressing the social development challenges of learners with intellectual disabilities requires a holistic and collaborative approach. Teachers play a critical role, not just as educators, but as facilitators of emotional and social growth. They often need to go beyond academic instruction to provide personalized attention and guidance. Patience, empathy, and creativity are essential traits that help in reaching and understanding these learners. Support from parents and guardians is equally vital, as learning does not stop at the classroom door. Regular communication between home and school can ensure consistency in approaches and reinforce positive behavior. Interventions such as social stories, peer buddy systems, and emotion recognition games can create meaningful learning experiences. Training and workshops for teachers also equip them with updated strategies to handle diverse needs in an inclusive setup. Ultimately, creating a nurturing environment where learners feel accepted and understood paves the way for better social outcomes.

The table 2 presents the thematic analysis of the strategies do Parents employ to support their child's social development at home.

Table 2 *Thematic Analysis of the strategies do Parents employ to support their child's social development at home.*

Participants	Code	Category	Themes	Description
Home-based support P1,P6	• Training the child of simple household chores • Eating with family members • Introduce to visitors	Building Up self-esteem	Emotional development strategies	The parents of ID learners have employed strategies that they believe are helpful to remediate the deficient socio-emotional and cognitive states of their child. These strategies are focused on identified challenges experienced by the child in school and at home, or in public places. Looking at
P2	• Giving encouraging words to improve self-confidence			
P2 P3	• Playing board games for the child to learn about wins and losses • Train how to handle anger in a positive way	Building up emotional regulation		
P4	• No child talk at home			
Parents P	• Sibling helps in developing reading ability • Training on answering simple questions • Role playing to train speaking skills • Training on eye contact during conversation	Building up confidence in speaking	Social skills development	
P1	• Playing nursery rhymes • Reading picture books • Training on toy sharing	Building up Positive social interaction		
P2,P3,P6	• Training on turn taking • Watch educational videos on YouTube to train on basic social interactions • Playing online social stories			
P2,P5	• Monthly meeting /session with teacher • Convene with the teacher once a week	Building up parent-teacher cooperation	Collaboration with support groups	
P2,P3	• Meets teacher during PTA meetings • Meets teacher every two weeks			
P3,P2,P2,	• Frequent sessions with teacher but not deep about social development			
P5,P5	• Use social media for communication with teachers			
P2, P2			Undefined Problem-focused Intervention	
	• Do not know how to help the child effectively • Do not know how to motivate the child to respond to home-based reinforcement	Ineptitude of Parents		
Challenges				
P1,P3,P6	• Limited quality time with child			
P2,P6	• Child is only son, no other playmate at home • Lives far, few neighbors			
		Absence of local peers		

The findings show 2 (two) themes generated from keywords of the coded data. The themes were generated are social skills development and Collaboration with support groups, and one (1) theme from the challenges which is the Undefined Problem-focused Intervention. These findings were reinforced by the parents during gathering of data. The parents interviewed shared a variety of strategies they use to support their child's social development at home. Many are intentional in helping their children build confidence in speaking.

A parent said,

"Amo siyang tudluan mutubag og simple nga pangutana,
ginapa-practice namo siya kada adlaw."
*(*We are teaching him/her to answer simple questions; we practice with him/her every day.)

Others incorporate interactive activities like reading picture books and playing nursery rhymes to encourage language use, with one adding,

"Ganahan kaayo siya sa nursery rhymes, makasabay siya usahay, mayo
pud ni para makapraktis siya og tingog."
*(*He/ She really likes nursery rhymes; sometimes he can sing along. This is also good for him/ her to practice using his/her voice.)

These findings reflect those of Landa (2007), who emphasized that structured home-based routines and parent-led language modeling significantly enhance communication skills in children with developmental delays.

To support positive social interaction, some parents facilitate play routines such as turn-taking and toy-sharing. One shared,

"Amo siya tudluan magpa-uban ug dula, ipa-turn taking
para makabalo siya nga dili pirmi siya lang."
*(*We will teach him/her to play with others and take turns so he/she will
understand that it's not always just about him/her.)

Others rely on technology by letting their children watch educational videos or online social stories to simulate social settings. This aligns with Acar et al.,(2021)who found that guided screen-based learning and peer-simulation activities help promote social understanding in children with intellectual disabilities when supervised appropriately. Parent-teacher cooperation also plays a significant role. Many parents meet with teachers regularly, attend PTA meetings, or use social media for updates and consultations. As one parent explained,

"Mag-message ra mi sa teacher kung naa mi pangutana
or update, sayon ra kaayo kung naay problema."
*(*We just message the teacher if we have questions or
updates, it's very easy if there's a problem.)

However, several challenges were also evident. Some parents admitted feeling unsure of how to help:

"Dili gyud ko kabalo unsaon pagtabang sa akong
anak sa balay, usahay murag sayop akong pamaagi."
(I really don't know how to help my child at home,
sometimes it feels like my approach is wrong.)

Others struggled with time constraints or lacked playmates for their only child. One reflected,

"Walay kauban akong anak sa balay,
wala pud silingan nga bata, mao nga murag mingaw siya pirmi."
(My child has no playmates at home,
and there are no other kids in the neighborhood either.)
so he always seems lonely

These insights suggest that while parents are eager to support their children's growth, there is a strong need for more targeted guidance and support programs to empower them with the right tools and confidence.

These findings show that while parents are doing their best to support their children's social growth, many of them are just figuring things out on their own. Without clear guidance, some feel unsure if what they're doing is actually helping or might even be wrong. Even with all their love and effort, challenges like limited time and the absence of other children to interact with at home make

things harder. That's why it's so important to give parents the support they need—simple tools, helpful tips, and real-life examples they can easily apply. Workshops or group sessions where parents can ask questions and share their own experiences could make a big difference. With the right kind of help, parents can feel more confident and capable as they guide their children toward better social skills.

IV. CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that learners with intellectual disabilities face significant communication challenges that hinder their ability to form meaningful relationships with peers and adults. These difficulties often lead to low self-confidence, social withdrawal, and a cycle of limited engagement, further impedes their social development. Parents frequently feel unprepared to address these challenges effectively while actively supporting their children. Teachers acknowledge the importance of creating a supportive and predictable learning environment tailored to these learners' unique social and emotional needs. The findings highlight that supporting the social development of children with intellectual disabilities requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving parents, teachers, schools, and policymakers. Based on these conclusions, several recommendations are made: the Department of Education may use the findings to improve inclusive education policies; intervention programs may be developed to strengthen learners' social skills; teachers should implement evidence-based strategies to meet students' needs better; schools may foster more inclusive and supportive environments; parents may apply practical tools from the study to aid their child's development at home; future researchers are encouraged to build upon the study's theoretical and methodological foundation.

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