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A Portrait of Family Support in Special Needs Schools: A Descriptive Exploration of Students with Intellectual Disability and Autism

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Abstract

Abstract. Family support is an important factor in supporting the development and educational success of children with special needs. However, research examining family support based on teachers' perspectives is still relatively limited. This study aims to describe family support for children with special needs in one of the special schools based on the categories of students with Intellectual Disabilities and Autism. This study used a quantitative descriptive approach. The research participants consisted of 30 students with special needs. Data were collected using a family support scale adapted from the theory of Friedman et al. (2010), which includes five dimensions: informational, appraisal, instrumental, emotional, and social support. Data analysis was carried out using descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies, percentages, average values, and standard deviations. The results showed that family support in general was in the sufficient category, with a percentage of 66.7%. The instrumental support dimension had the highest mean value (M = 21.100; SD = 3.93), while social support had the lowest mean value (M = 16.47; SD = 2.87). Across all dimensions of family support, the majority of students were in the sufficient category, which indicates that families have provided support in various aspects, but it is not yet optimal. These findings emphasize the importance of strengthening cooperation between families and schools to improve the quality of support provided to children with special needs so that it can support academic, social, and emotional development more optimally.

Keywords: family support, children with special needs, intellectual disability, autism, special needs school

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right for every individual, including children with special needs, guaranteeing access to adaptive, dignified instructional services (Ministry of National Education, 2011). Diverse physical, intellectual, social, and neurodevelopmental characteristics—such as those observed in children with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders—demand curricular modifications, customized caregiving strategies, and structured behavioral support (Mangunsong, 2011). In navigating daily learning and functional adaptive development, the multifaceted challenges faced by children with special needs cannot be resolved by formal institutions alone; rather, they require the intensive involvement of the child's immediate ecological system.

Among various ecological determinants, the family serves as the primary microsystem and the most decisive foundation underpinning child development (Kelana, 2022). The quality of family interaction and acceptance directly correlates with a child's capacity for emotional regulation, interpersonal relationship building, and functional independence (Dunst et al., 2007). Nevertheless, raising a child with special needs often demands high psychological resilience. Families are confronted with demanding psychosocial adjustments, future-oriented anxieties, societal stigma, and substantial financial burdens resulting from ongoing medical care, behavioral interventions, and specialized educational resources (Miranda, 2013; Shorey et al., 2020).

Within this dynamic, family support serves as a vital protective factor. Adequate family support has been empirically demonstrated to enhance communicative competence, emotional stability, learning motivation, and overall subjective well-being (Zuna et al., 2010). Conversely, deficits in familial involvement and acceptance elevate the risk of frustration, diminished self-efficacy, classroom adaptation difficulties, and escalating disruptive behavioral issues (Lei & Kantor, 2020).

This study adopts the conceptual framework of Friedman et al. (2010), which delineates family support into five integrative dimensions: informational, appraisal, instrumental, emotional, and social. Informational support entails the provision of knowledge, guidance, and actionable advice regarding child management. Appraisal support is reflected in positive affirmation, acknowledgment of incremental progress, and respect for the child's inherent dignity. Instrumental support encompasses tangible assistance through financial resources, learning materials, adequate nutrition, allocated time, and transportation. Emotional support involves warmth, unconditional affection, and empathy that cultivate psychological safety. Meanwhile, social support facilitates the child's integration into broader community settings and peer friendship networks (Friedman et al., 2010).

Empirical evidence indicates that families generally endeavor to fulfill these five dimensions, particularly through affective care (Nani et al., 2010; Sidik, 2014). Nonetheless, the quality of actual support varies considerably due to disparities in socioeconomic status, disability literacy, parental acceptance, and caregiver burden (Arfandi et al., 2014; Ilias et al., 2019). This discrepancy is particularly evident in special education school (Sekolah Luar Biasa / SLB) environments. While teachers observe some parents who are proactive in communicating and supervising homework, other parents remain passive or transfer the entire educational responsibility exclusively onto the school.

The critical role of family support in special education highlights an emerging methodological need. Most prior research has relied predominantly on parental self-reports (Sidik, 2014; Shorey et al., 2020). Self-report methodologies are inherently susceptible to social desirability bias, wherein parents tend to report idealized parenting practices while underreporting daily challenges. Consequently, an alternative, more objective evaluative perspective via classroom teachers is warranted (Azad et al., 2018).

Classroom teachers occupy a strategic position within the educational mesosystem through their daily intensive interaction with students and regular communication with families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Azad et al., 2018). In the operational context of special schools, teacher evaluations of family support do not stem from mere speculation about private domestic life; rather, they are systematically derived from three factual sources: (1) Daily classroom behavioral observations of the student, encompassing physical readiness, availability of learning materials, self-care independence (e.g., eating and dressing), and peer social interactions; (2) Written communication records in daily home-school liaison books detailing homework completion and developmental progress; and (3) Face-to-face consultative sessions and periodic interviews conducted during the formulation and evaluation of Individualized Education Programs (IEP).

Through the triangulation of these data sources, teacher observations reliably capture the behavioral manifestations of home-based family support in a balanced and objective manner. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to describe the profile of family support for students with special needs (specifically intellectual disabilities and autism) in a special education school from the perspective of classroom teachers, utilizing the five functional dimensions established by Friedman et al. (2010). The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence for educators and practitioners to strengthen family-school partnerships and optimize the potential of children with special needs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Family Support

The conceptual framework of family support is firmly rooted in family systems theory and social developmental psychology. Friedman et al. (2010) conceptualized family support as a dynamic, lifespan transaction wherein family members mutually exchange instrumental, emotional, informational, appraisal, and social resources. Informational support involves providing advice, guidance, suggestions, and relevant information that assist individuals in resolving challenges and navigating developmental demands. Appraisal support is characterized by recognition, constructive affirmation, acceptance, and positive feedback that enhance an individual's sense of self-worth and competence. Instrumental support encompasses tangible and practical assistance, including the provision of financial resources, access to healthcare services, adequate nutrition, transportation, physical assistance, and consistent caregiving time.

Emotional support entails unconditional warmth, empathy, a sense of security, active listening, and affection that foster affective well-being. Meanwhile, social support refers to the facilitation of social integration, reciprocal interpersonal networks, and active engagement in community life. In the context of children with special needs, these five dimensions operate synergistically as essential protective factors (Zuna et al., 2010). Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the family serves as a fundamental microsystem that directly intersects with the school environment (mesosystem). A supportive home environment equips children with adaptive resilience, behavioral regulation, and communicative stability, whereas the absence of adequate support magnifies developmental vulnerabilities (Dunst et al., 2007; Lei & Kantor, 2020).

2.2. Family Support in Special Education Contexts: Intellectual Disability and Autism

The special education environment represents a decisive setting where family support tangibly influences students' academic progress, behavioral adaptation, and daily functioning at school. Children with developmental and cognitive impairments, particularly those diagnosed with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders, confront complex and distinct developmental challenges (Mangunsong, 2011). Children with intellectual disabilities require sustained guidance in daily living skills, structured and repetitive concrete instruction, as well as adaptive behavior training to reinforce competencies taught in the classroom. Conversely, children on the autism spectrum necessitate structured environmental predictability, sensory accommodations, and targeted social communication modeling (Shorey et al., 2020). Within special education schools (SLB), family support manifests in observable behaviors at school as well as parent–teacher collaboration. This support includes routine home-based learning assistance, the provision of learning materials and nutritional needs, adherence to therapy regimens, and intensive communication via daily communication books and Individualized Education Program (IEP) evaluations. Nonetheless, sustaining comprehensive family support often imposes substantial strains. Primary caregivers frequently experience heightened parenting stress, financial burdens associated with specialized interventions, social stigma, and limited developmental literacy, which can compromise the family's capacity to deliver all five support dimensions equitably (Algood et al., 2013; McStay et al., 2014; Ilias et al., 2019).

2.3. Gaps in the Evidence Base

Although the literature examining family support and parental involvement among children with special needs has expanded considerably, several fundamental gaps remain in the extant scientific discourse. First, previous investigations have relied almost exclusively on parental self-reports (Sidik, 2014; Shorey et al., 2020). Parent-reported measures carry inherent vulnerabilities to social desirability bias, which frequently yields an overestimation of actual supportive behaviors and obscures routine caregiving barriers. Second, empirical inquiries evaluating family support through the perspective of external professionals—specifically classroom teachers—remain scarce, particularly within the Indonesian special education landscape. Classroom teachers occupy a strategic position within the educational mesosystem (Azad et al., 2018). Through direct daily interactions with students and periodic communication with parents, teachers can observe tangible behavioral manifestations of family support, ranging from self-care independence, emotional stability, and task preparedness to parental responsiveness during IEP consultative meetings. Third, existing studies in special education schools often conceptualize family involvement as a unitary construct or conflate it with general socioeconomic status, leaving the specific distribution across Friedman's five dimensions insufficiently examined. This descriptive quantitative study was designed to bridge these gaps by delineating the profile of family support across the informational, appraisal, instrumental, emotional, and social dimensions through the observational lens of special education classroom teachers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Participants

This study utilized a quantitative approach with a univariate descriptive design to delineate the profile of family support among students with intellectual disabilities and autism in a state special education school in Banda Aceh. A purposive sampling technique was used based on the following inclusion criteria for teachers: (1) active classroom teachers, (2) possessing at least 1 year of teaching experience assisting the evaluated students, (3) engaging in intensive daily interactions in the classroom, and (4) granting informed consent. A total of 13 classroom teachers participated to evaluate 30 students with special needs. The sample size (N = 30) met the minimum threshold for descriptive statistical analysis in restricted special populations (Roscoe, 1975; Gay et al., 2012).

3.2. Instruments and Measurement

The instrument employed was a family support scale adapted from the conceptual framework of Friedman et al. (2010) and modified from Thaibah et al. (2020). The scale comprises 26 items measuring five dimensions: informational support, appraisal support, instrumental support, emotional support, and social support. Items were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale: Always (SL = 5), Often (SR = 4), Sometimes (KD = 3), Rarely (JR = 2), and Never (TP = 1).

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted from May to June 2026. To mitigate observational bias regarding private domestic settings, teacher assessments were constructed through the triangulation of three empirical sources: (1) direct observation of students' daily classroom behaviors (self-care independence, nutrition, learning materials, and affective regulation), (2) communication records documented in daily home–school communication books between parents and teachers, and (3) periodic interviews and consultative discussions conducted during the formulation and evaluation of Individualized Education Programs (IEP).3.4. Data AnalysisData analysis was performed using univariate descriptive statistics, encompassing the calculation of minimum scores, maximum scores, mean values (M), and standard deviations (SD) across all dimensions as well as the total score. Furthermore, the empirical scores were categorized into three levels (Good, Moderate, Poor) using norm-referenced criteria derived from the theoretical mean and theoretical standard deviation of the scale.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

This study was conducted at a special education school providing services for children with special needs in Banda Aceh City. The school accommodates students with diverse special needs, including intellectual disabilities and autism. Data were gathered from teachers directly involved in classroom instruction and student assistance, providing an objective opportunity to observe the support provided by families.

Respondent characteristics encompass teacher positions, student gender, types of special needs, severity levels, and grade levels. A total of 13 classroom teachers participated, assessing 30 students with special needs.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents and Students

Characteristics	**Category**	**Frequency (*N*)**	**Percentage (%)**
Teacher Position	Classroom Teacher	13	100.0
Student Gender	Male	20	66.7
	Female	10	33.3

Type of Special Needs	Intellectual Disability	18	60.0
	Autism	12	40.0
Severity Level	Mild	12	40.0
	Moderate	14	46.7
	Severe	3	10.0
	Profound / Extreme	1	3.3
Grade Level	Grade 1 Elementary	7	23.3
	Grade 2 Elementary	3	10.0
	Grade 3 Elementary	3	10.0
	Grade 4 Elementary	11	36.7
	Grade 5 Elementary	6	20.0
Total Students		30	100.0

Based on Table 1, all participating respondents were classroom teachers (100.0%). Regarding the students observed, the majority were male (n = 20; 66.7%), while female students accounted for 10 individuals (33.3%). In terms of disability types, students with intellectual disabilities comprised 18 individuals (60.0%), and students with autism numbered 12 individuals (40.0%).

Concerning severity levels, most students were in the moderate category (n = 14; 46.7%), followed by mild (n = 12; 40.0%), severe (n = 3; 10.0%), and profound/extreme (n = 1; 3.3%). By grade level, the largest proportion observed was in Grade 4 ($n = 11; 36.7%), whereas the fewest were in Grades 2 and 3 (n = 3; 10.0% each). Additionally, teacher ages ranged from 26 to 54 years, with a mean age of 38.3 years, reflecting diverse teaching backgrounds and extensive experience in assisting children with special needs.

Descriptive Statistics of Family Support Dimensions

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Family Support

Support Dimension	**N**	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
Informational	30	10.00	25.00	19.4667	4.14174
Appraisal	30	11.00	25.00	18.8000	3.03315
Instrumental	30	12.00	25.00	21.1000	3.93350
Emotional	30	16.00	24.00	17.4667	5.03596
Social	30	10.00	20.00	16.4667	2.87358
Total Score	30	71,00	126,00	103.3000	16.68605

Based on the descriptive analysis in Table 2, the overall mean score for family support was 103.30 (SD = 16.69), with a minimum score of 71 and a maximum score of 126. Among the dimensions, instrumental support obtained the highest mean score (M = 21.10 \pm 3.93), whereas social support recorded the lowest mean score (M = 16.47 \pm

2.87). Informational support yielded a mean of 19.47 \pm 4.14$, appraisal support was 18.80 \pm 3.03, and emotional support was 17.46 \pm 5.03. These results indicate that family support across all domains generally falls within the moderate/sufficient tier.

Categorization of Family Support

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Students across Family Support

Dimension	Categorization	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Informational Support	Good	5	16.7
	Moderate	18	60.0
	Poor	7	23.3
Appraisal Support	Good	2	6.7
	Moderate	21	70.0
	Poor	7	23.3
Instrumental Support	Good	0	0.0
	Moderate	26	86.7
	Poor	4	13.3
Emotional Support	Good	2	6.7
	Moderate	22	73.3
	Poor	6	20.0
Social Support	Good	5	16.7
	Moderate	20	66.7
	Poor	5	16.7

Table 3 shows that on informational support, most students fell into the moderate category (n = 18; 60.0%), followed by poor (n = 7; 23.3%) and good (n = 5; 16.7%). On appraisal support, the majority were moderate (n = 21; 70.0%), while 7 students (23.3%) were categorized as poor and 2 students (6.7%) as good.

For instrumental support, most students occupied the moderate tier ($n = 26; 86.7%), with 4 students (13.3%) in the poor category and none in the good category (0.0%). On emotional support, the majority placed in the moderate category (n = 22$; 73.3%), followed by poor (n = 6$; 20.0%) and good (n = 2$; 6.7%). On social support, 20 students (66.7%) were categorized as moderate, while the good and poor tiers each accounted for 5 students (16.7%). Across all dimensions, student support profiles predominantly aligned with the moderate level.

Table 4: Frequency Distribution of Overall Family Support

Family Support Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Good	4	13.3
Moderate	20	66.7
Poor	6	20.0
Total	30	10

Table 4 displays the overall family support distribution, where the majority of students were placed in the moderate category (n = 20; 66.7%), followed by poor ($n = 6; 20.0%) and good (n = 4; 13.3%). This finding corroborates that family support for children with special needs in the special education school is perceived by teachers as moderate.

Discussion

This study aimed to delineate the profile of family support for children with special needs in a special education school through the perspective of classroom teachers. The results indicated that overall family support fell predominantly into the moderate category (66.7%). This outcome suggests that based on classroom observations, families actively provide diverse forms of assistance; however, such involvement has not yet achieved optimal levels across all developmental domains.

According to Friedman et al. (2010), family support serves as a core protective resource assisting individuals across informational, appraisal, instrumental, emotional, and social domains. In children with special needs, family support is a foundational factor shaping social, emotional, and adaptive behavioral progression, alongside long-term educational attainment (Zuna et al., 2010). Consequently, the quality of familial involvement directly influences an individual student's capacity to adjust within academic settings and broader societal environments.

The empirical findings demonstrated that instrumental support yielded the highest mean score among all dimensions (M = 21.10$). Instrumental support represents tangible assistance involving physical resources, nutritional needs, learning materials, caregiving time, and transportation to school (Friedman et al., 2010). The higher mean on this dimension highlights parents' direct commitment to securing the basic logistical requirements needed for school attendance. Nevertheless, categorical distributions revealed that 86.7% of students remained within the moderate bracket, 13.3% were classified as poor, and none attained the good category. This pattern illustrates that while families strive to fulfill baseline educational requirements, provisions remain constrained. Families of children with special needs frequently encounter heightened financial demands and intensive caregiving responsibilities, which may restrict their ability to deliver optimal instrumental resources (McStay et al., 2014).

Regarding emotional support, the majority of students were positioned in the moderate category (73.3%), followed by poor (20.0%) and good (6.7%). Friedman et al. (2010) conceptualized emotional support as manifestations of empathy, unconditional warmth, positive regard, and security. A secure emotional attachment between families and children with disabilities is critical for cultivating psychological adjustment and resilience (Algood et al., 2013). While families exhibit fundamental affection that fosters a sense of security at school, the preponderance of the moderate category underscores the need for more consistent emotional availability and attuned responsiveness toward the child's daily affective cues.

For informational support, 60.0% of students were placed in the moderate tier, while 23.3% were categorized as poor and 16.7% as good. This indicates that families encounter disparities in acquiring specialized guidance concerning diagnostic traits, home-based interventions, and continuing developmental services. Informational support is vital for guiding informed parental decision-making regarding specialized interventions (Friedman et al., 2010). Because

enhanced parental literacy correlates positively with sustained educational involvement (Iadarola et al., 2017), special education institutions should consistently offer targeted educational workshops and practical guidelines for parents.

Appraisal support findings revealed that 70.0% of students were within the moderate category, 23.3% in poor, and 6.7% in good. Appraisal support involves constructive affirmation, unconditional acceptance, and validation of the child's efforts (Friedman et al., 2010). Positive behavioral reinforcement is pivotal for students with intellectual disabilities and autism to build self-worth, motivation, and self-efficacy. Although families offer encouragement, reinforcement practices require more structured and continuous execution in daily routines.

Social support emerged as the dimension with the lowest mean score (M = 16.47$). Most students occupied the moderate tier (66.7%), while good and poor categories each constituted 16.7%. Friedman et al. (2010) stated that social support entails opportunities for meaningful interpersonal connections and community inclusion. The lower scores in this area suggest that children with special needs experience limited opportunities for community engagement beyond the nuclear family. This observation aligns with evidence from Shorey et al. (2020), indicating that families frequently confront systemic barriers, societal misconceptions, and public stigma, which consequently constrain children's social exposure and interpersonal skill development.

In summary, family support received by students with special needs across all five dimensions established by Friedman et al. (2010) remains primarily within the moderate range. Families provide valuable tangible, emotional, instructional, and evaluative contributions; however, significant scope remains for enhancement. From the teachers' vantage point, strengthening familial involvement—specifically in social inclusion and informational literacy—is essential for enhancing classroom engagement, peer interactions, and adaptive functioning.

A central contribution of this inquiry is providing an evaluation of family support anchored in the observational perspective of classroom teachers. Teachers interact with students on an intensive daily schedule, enabling them to evaluate behavioral manifestations, functional self-care skills, academic readiness, and emotional regulation rooted in family involvement. These findings provide empirical ground for special education schools and families to deepen reciprocal collaboration, ensuring comprehensive developmental support for children with special needs.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the profile of family support for students with special needs in a special education school, from the perspective of classroom teachers, generally falls into the moderate category. Families have strived to fulfill their role across the instrumental, emotional, appraisal, informational, and social dimensions; however, the implementation of such support has not yet reached optimal levels in facilitating children's developmental needs. Based on empirical findings, the instrumental support dimension emerged as the most prominent aspect, whereas the social support dimension recorded the lowest mean score and requires more intensive reinforcement. These findings confirm that family involvement is a fundamental factor influencing learning readiness, adaptive behavioral independence, and socio-emotional regulation among children in special education settings.

Implications for practice. Special education schools and families must strengthen collaborative partnerships in a programmed and sustainable manner. Families are encouraged to expand children's social stimulation beyond the domestic sphere and actively maintain two-way communication with classroom teachers through communication books and routine Individualized Education Program (IEP) review meetings. Concurrently, schools need to facilitate psychoeducation programs and parenting support groups to enhance familial literacy regarding the management of special needs at home.

Implications for research. Future studies are recommended to expand the sample size by involving a broader number of students and more diverse special education institutions. Furthermore, subsequent inquiries are encouraged to employ mixed-methods designs and integrate multi-informant perspectives (cross-validation between teachers and

parents) to achieve a deeper qualitative understanding of the socio-demographic factors influencing the dynamics of family support in children with special needs.

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