

Special School vs Mainstream School: Parents' Perspective on School Choice for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract: This study aimed to discover the experience of choosing a school among parents of children with disabilities in Indonesia and found out their opinion about the current school placement of their children. This study applied the quantitative -survey study Data were collected using a questionnaire. Parents from one mainstream school and one special school in Indonesia completed the questionnaire. Results from the questionnaire were analyzed manually. This study revealed that parents from the mainstream school were influenced by mixed factors, compared to parents from the special school, which mainly based on the instrumental-academic perspective. Regarding key persons, parents in the mainstream and special school were majorly making their own decision or supported by family. It is also found that parents were satisfied with the current school placement, even though the process of choosing school is not easy. Some suggestions for practice and further study are also discussed.

Keywords: School Choice; Parents; Students with Disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

The educational system in Indonesia has given parents the authority to choose the most appropriate schools for their children (Asadullah, 2018; Paskaran & Yassin, 2020). Particularly for children with disabilities, there are two school settings which are mandated by Law Number 8/2016 on People with Disabilities in Indonesia namely, mainstream school and special school (Ministry of Education and Culture of Republic of Indonesia, 2018).

In choosing a school, there are two major value perspectives which grounded parental choice: the instrumental-academic and the intrinsic-personal social (Bagley, Woods, & Woods, 2001). In the instrumental-academic perspective, parents are more academic-centered in choosing a school (Bagley et al., 2001). This perspective might include the quality of the head teacher and teachers, school's academic reputation, facility, atmosphere, and management (Bagley et al., 2001). The intrinsic-personal social value perspective is more child-centered, which focuses on the children's development, social experiences and relationships at school (Bagley & Woods, 1998). The value perspective might consist of the child's happiness, the child's preference, caring approach to the child, and the child's friends/sibling being there (Bagley & Woods, 1998). Besides these two value perspectives, another factor that possibly influences parents' choice of school is the proximity of the school, which is the convenience/nearness for travel (Bagley & Woods, 1998).

A number of studies have investigated the factors that influence parents' choice of school for their children with disabilities. A study by Jenkinson (Jenkinson, 1998) in Australia showed that parents in the mainstream school were driven more by the intrinsic-personal social values such as child's friends attend school, while in a special school, parents were made decision highly based on the instrumental-academic values, such as better qualified teachers. A similar finding was reported by Runswick-Cole (Runswick-Cole, 2008), which reported that parents

chose a mainstream school because it would improve their children's social experience. Furthermore, more recent research studies also revealed the same findings that the special school was mainly chosen based on the instrumental-academic perspective such as specialist staff and facilities (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014; Primadata, Soemanto, & Haryono, 2018). A slight difference finding from a study which utilized a questionnaire in the UK showed that parents were choosing a mainstream school because of the nearness of the school (Bagley et al., 2001).

Regarding the key persons who helped parents to decide the appropriate school for their children, a research study among parents both in mainstream and special school settings reported that educational authority and persons from child's previous schools were the most influential key persons (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014). In contrast, current school staff was the most influential stakeholder that made parents choosing the mainstream school (Bagley et al., 2001). Concerning parents' views on the current school of their children, a study by Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014) showed that students with disabilities feel included in the school community both in the mainstream and special school, even though parents wanted more time to develop each child's need. In terms of parents' satisfaction, it was reported that parents in mainstream school and special school were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" (Jenkinson, 1998).

The school choice policy may provide parents and children with a huge range of choices of schools that matches their needs and preferences (Vaughn & Witko, 2013); however, the process of choosing a school could be challenging and stressful for parents (Bagley et al., 2001; Mann, Cuskelly, & Moni, 2015). Moreover, this school choice policy might further disadvantage children with disabilities as it may encourage mainstream school to exclude children with disabilities (Howe & Welner, 2002; Scott & Holme, 2016; Waitoller, Nguyen, & Super, 2019; Schafer & Khan, 2017). Besides these issues, choosing a school is a vital step that may influence children's further development (Agbenyega & Tamakloe, 2014; Streer, 2018; Auðardóttir & Kosunen, 2020; Nelson, 2020).

Previous paragraphs have shown that there were several studies on the topic of parent's choice of school; however, several gaps still exist. Firstly, even though parents' satisfaction and views are interconnected, there has not been a study that examined both of these aspects. Secondly, there is a gap of knowledge on the topic of parents' choice of school from Asian countries such as Indonesia, as the majority of the studies were done in European Countries and Australia. The only study about parents' choice of school in Indonesia was done by Primadata et al. (Primadata, Soemanto, & Haryono, 2018), yet this study only involved parents in a mainstream school. Therefore, this study is important as it covered all the aspects of parent's choice of school (i.e., factors, key person, parents' current view and satisfaction) and gathered data from both parents in the mainstream and special school in Indonesia.

Therefore, this study aimed to discover the experience of choosing a school among parents of children with disabilities in Indonesia and found out their opinion about the current school placement of their children. This study explored three research questions. First, what are the essential factors that influenced parent to choose either a mainstream or special school? Second, who are the key persons who helped parents during the process of choosing a school? Third, how are the parents' satisfaction and views on current school placement?

METHOD

Design

This study used the quantitative-survey design to obtain parents' perspective. Survey could be defined as the quantitative methods to collect data from a pool of respondents through giving multiple questions (Ponto, 2015). This design was chosen as it was appropriate to answer this study's questions effectively. It also has been applied by a similar previous study by Mu'azzam Ab Halim and Tahar (2022).

Instrument

This study used a questionnaire to gather data. The questionnaire was adopted from the questionnaire developed by Bagley et al. (Bagley et al., 2001) This questionnaire was chosen as it provided a comprehensive option of factors affecting parents' school choice. It was also used by another previous study (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014). There were four parts in the questionnaire. The first part comprised of the background information. The second part was about factors affecting parents' school choice. In this part, some factors were blended or deleted from the original version. This process was done through the discussion between the researchers. Some factors were deleted from the original version because it did not suit with the Indonesian con-text. There were 35 options on the original version, while in this study, there were 27 options only. On the third part, which was about the key persons, some deletions were also made to fit with the Indonesian context. For example, there were some parties that were not common in Indonesia. Overall, from the 18 options on the original version, there were only 13 options on the questionnaire used in this study. The last part of the questionnaire was completely new. In this part, parents rated their satisfaction and explained their views about the current school of their children. The questionnaire was translated into the Bahasa Indonesia by the author. This questionnaire was then piloted on two parents from a mainstream school in Indonesia. Both of them commented on the instruction on part 2 and part 3, which were confusing. Thus, revisions were made for the final version of the questionnaire.

Procedure

A questionnaire was distributed to parents in one mainstream school and one special school in Indonesia. These schools were recommended by the author's colleague in Indonesia who said that parents at these schools were cooperative. The questionnaire was distributed to parents during school time while they were waiting for their children in the waiting area outside of the school. Parents were given a chance to complete it on the same day or submitted it later on the next day. The response rate was one hundred per cent as all parents (80 parents from a mainstream school and 20 parents from a mainstream school) submitted the questionnaire on the same day.

Participants

Of the 100 questionnaires, 80 were completed by mother, and 20 was completed by father. The children were aged between 7 to 12 years. Children's category of disabilities is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Demography of participants

Category	Total in mainstream school	Total in special school
Deaf	0	10
Intellectual Disability	0	30
ADHD	10	0
ASD	15	10
Speech and Language Disorder	15	0
Behavioural Emotional & Social Difficulties	10	0

Data Analysis

Data from the questionnaire were analyzed by using the Microsoft Excel sheet. Parents' responses on each indicator from part 2 to part 4 of the questionnaire were added up. Some indicators on each part which received the most total of responses were selected to be presented in this section. Except, for part 4 on the aspect of parents' current views, all of the parents' responses are presented in this paper. Findings are presented and also discussed under subheadings as follows. Therefore, this study aimed to discover the experience of choosing a school among parents of children with disabilities in Indonesia and found out their opinion about the current school placement of their children. This study explored three research questions. First, what are the essential factors that influenced parent to choose either a mainstream or special school? Second, who are the key persons who helped parents during the process of choosing a school? Third, how are the parents' satisfaction and views on current school placement?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Essential Factors that Influenced Parents' Choice of School

Figure 1 shows that there were mixed perspectives that influenced parents to choose a main-stream school. The most influential factor, which is the school atmosphere (n=45) mirrors the result from the previous study by Jenkinson (Jenkinson, 1998) in which parents emphasized the im-portance of a caring approach towards children with disabilities (Jenkinson, 1998). The second most influential factor is the proximity of the school (n=30). This is consistent with the finding from the study by Bagley et al. (Bagley et al., 2001) which explained that parents from the semi-rural area preferred the nearness of school as it provided children with safety. Indeed, this study was also taken in the semi-rural area. Thus, parents have the same preference. The other most influential factors were the combination of the instrumental-academic perspectives (school staffs) and the intrinsic-personal social perspective (child's friends are/will be there). It can be argued that besides the happiness of their children, parents were still considering the importance of the quality of education to support their child's development (Suhendri & Kawai, 2022; Runswick-Cole, 2008). Another interesting result is as much as three parents were choosing a mainstream school because other schools not acceptable. This finding is not surprising as school choice policy might open the opportunity for the school to reject the student (Agbenyega & Tamakloe, 2014). This is also compounded by the fact that in Indonesia, there has been no policy or law to prevent the school from rejecting children with disabilities (Hamidi, 2016).

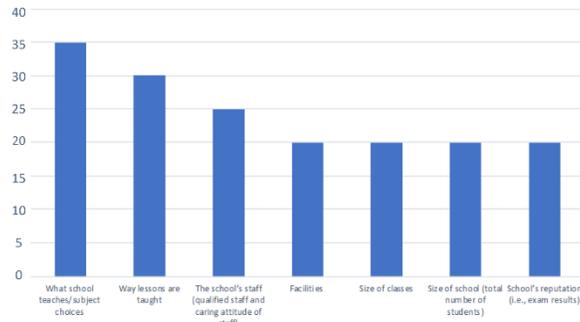


Figure 1. The essential factors influencing parents to choose the mainstream school

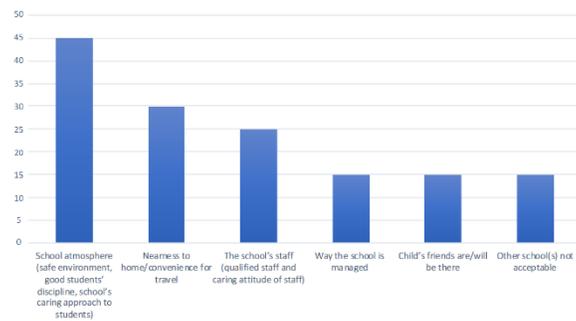


Figure 2. The essential factors influencing parents to choose the special school

Compared to the parents from mainstream school, it seems that parents from the special school were heavily influenced by one perspective only. It can be seen in figure 2, that all of the factors which received the biggest responses were based on the instrumental-academic perspectives. This finding duplicates several previous studies (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014; Primadata et al., 2018; Runswick-Cole, 2008). It was because parents felt that the special school would provide more specialized programs and facilities (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014; Runswick-Cole, 2008). Indeed, Primadata (Primadata, Soemanto, & Haryono, 2018) reported that some parents in Indonesia wanted to pay more for the fees in the special school, as they believe that this school setting is more advanced in terms of the learning model and learning media.

The Influential Key Persons Who Helped Parents Choosing the School

In choosing the mainstream school, figure 3 shows that many parents were made a decision by themselves (n=45), followed by family (n=30). Nearly as influential as family, the educational psychologist also has a role in helping parents to choose a mainstream school. On the lower end, parents' friends, current and previous school staff were the key persons who helped parents. Overall this finding is contrary with the previous studies Bagley et al. (Bagley et al., 2001) and Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014) which reported that parents were discussed with previous or current school staff and educational authority in choosing a mainstream school. This contrast finding might be laid on the lack of support for people with disabilities in Indonesia. A recent report found out that parents and family of people with disabilities lacked support either from the governmental organization or non-governmental organization (Hastuti, Pramana, & Sadaly, 2019). Therefore, in choosing a school, it is highly

based on a personal decision or family support.

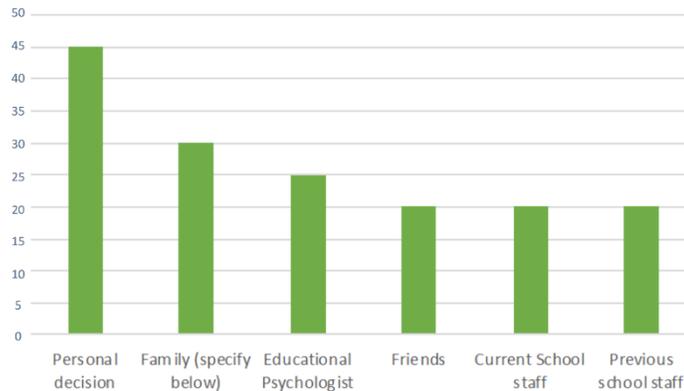


Figure 3. Key persons who helped parents to choose the mainstream school

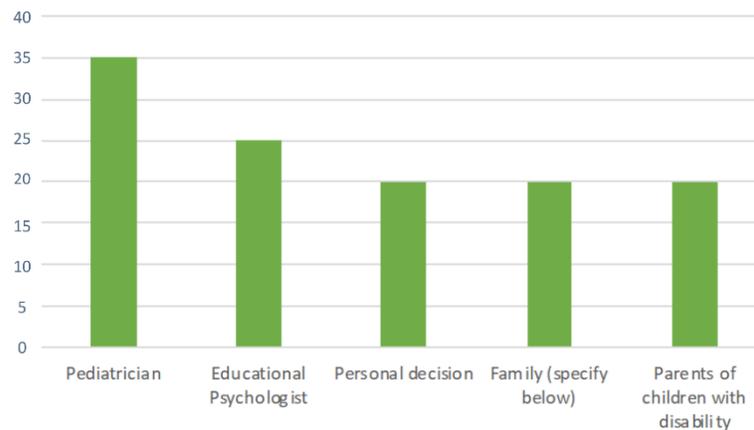


Figure 4. Key persons who helped parents to choose the special school

In choosing the special school, parents were highly influenced by the pediatrician and educational psychologist (see figure 4). Even though this finding refutes the results from the previous studies by Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014) and Bagley et al. (Bagley et al., 2001) this is not surprising. In Indonesia, it is common that experts such as the pediatrician or educational psychologist will suggest the children with disabilities to study at a special school (Garina, 2012). These experts argued that by studying in a special school, children with disabilities would receive special treatment such as speech therapy, or occupational therapy (Garina, 2012). It is obvious that personal decision and family still highly affected parents in choosing a special school. This finding also strengthens the notion of the lack of supports for parents of children with disabilities in Indonesia (Hastuti et al., 2019).

Parent's Satisfaction and Views on Current School Placement

This present study reveals that both parents in mainstream school and parents in special school were at least satisfied (n=90) with the current school placement. Moreover, one parent in the main-stream school rated very satisfied. This finding is consistent with the previous study by Jenkinson (Jenkinson, 1998), which reported that parents either at the mainstream or special

school, were satisfied with their child's current school. Furthermore, this present study shows that parents' satisfaction was influenced by the value perspectives on choosing a school. On the mainstream school, it is evidenced that parents' satisfaction was based on the instrumental-academic (i.e., availability of teacher aid, and appropriate facility and services) and the intrinsic-personal social (i.e., positive school atmosphere, teacher were caring and supporting, and children have developed the social interaction skills). In contrast, parents in the special school were highly satisfied with the instrumental academic values only which comprised of adequate facilities and academic program, and skillful teachers.

Despite the fact that parents felt satisfied with their school choice, parents were still recommending some improvements to the school. Parents from both schools recommended schools to hold out-door activities for the student. They also asked schools to provide learning media in mainstream school and sports equipment and a prayer room in a special school. Particularly in a mainstream school, parents have urged the school to reduce the number of students and also develop other needs of students with disabilities. Indeed, this suggestion was also found in Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi's (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014) study, which showed that parents favoured more time to develop each child's specific need.

CONCLUSIONS

This study focused at exploring the parents' experience in selecting the school for their children with disabilities, and also explored parents' opinion about the current school placement. This study showed that parents from the special school were highly influenced by on the instrumental-academic perspective, contrasted to parents form mainstream school who mainly based on the mixed-factors. In terms of key persons, parents in the mainstream and special school were majorly making their own decision or supported by family. The only experts who were involved in the parents' school choice process were the pediatrician and educational psychologist. It is also found that parents were satisfied with the current school placement. Their satisfaction was reflected in their opinions on satisfying aspects of the schools, yet there were still some improvements to be made for the schools to support their child's development. Based on this conclusion, there are some suggestions either for further study or practice. Further study might investigate the relationship between the disability category with the complexity of choosing the school for parents. Moreover, to get more in-depth insight on parents' choice of school experience, further study may apply the inter-view as the data collection method. Practically, choosing a school is vital, yet it is a challenging process for parents. Therefore, support groups should be initiated to support parents of children with disabilities during this process. Moreover, Indonesia's government should begin to develop the policy on protecting children with disabilities from school's rejection, which is one of the negative effects of the school choice policy.

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