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PARENTAL DENIAL OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN) IN PRESCHOOL SETTING: A CASE STUDY

^{1*}Aznan Che Ahmad, ²Salizawati Omar ¹Sivabala Naidu & ¹Ranjit Singh Gill

¹Quest International University, No.227, Jalan Raja Permaisuri Bainun,
30250 Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia

²Sekolah Kebangsaan Permatang Tok' Kandu, Jalan Kampung Pertama,
13500 Bukit Mertajam, Penang, Malaysia

**Corresponding author: aznan.cheahmad@qiu.edu.my*

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ABSTRACT

Parental denial of children with special educational needs (SEN) in preschool settings poses significant challenges to early intervention and inclusive education. While parental acceptance can facilitate timely support, many caregivers struggle with denial, often influenced by social stigma, fear of judgment, and skepticism toward professional assessments. This qualitative case study examines parental reluctance through semi-structured interviews conducted with three mothers from a preschool in North Malaysia. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in parental responses and perceptions. The findings reveal two overarching themes: denial and social stigma. The respondents justified their child's behaviors by comparing them to family members, rejecting educators' concerns, and resisting formal diagnoses due to fear of labeling. Skepticism toward teacher assessments and personal doubts about SEN indicators further contributed to their hesitation. Moreover, social stigma played a critical role, as external pressures from extended family and community perceptions discouraged them from seeking professional evaluations. This avoidance of intervention delays critical support, potentially impacting a child's developmental trajectory. The findings underscore the importance of equipping early childhood educators with the skills to engage sensitively with parents, recognize signs of denial, and foster trust in professional assessments. Addressing these barriers requires psychoeducational programs, parent support initiatives, and public awareness campaigns to foster informed decision-making. Strengthening collaboration among parents, educators, and healthcare providers is crucial to bridging the acceptance gap. By promoting a more supportive and well-informed environment, families can be empowered to navigate their child's needs confidently. Ultimately, this study contributes to early childhood education by highlighting the need for culturally responsive engagement strategies and systemic support structures that enable timely identification and intervention for children with SEN, thereby enhancing their educational experiences and long-term well-being.

Keywords: Parental denial, parental acceptance, special educational needs (SEN)

INTRODUCTION

The Landscape of Inclusive Education and Parental Challenges

Inclusive education promotes every child's right to access learning opportunities, regardless of ability or background. Globally, this principle is central to education reform, and Malaysia has echoed this commitment through the *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025*, which targets 75% of students with special educational needs (SEN) to be enrolled in mainstream classes by 2025. As of June 2019, the Ministry of Education Malaysia registered 87,574 SEN students, with increasing participation in inclusive programmes across preschool, primary, and secondary levels.

Despite these efforts, children with SEN continue to face social, emotional, and academic challenges that require coordinated support from educators and families. UNICEF estimates that 240 million children globally live with disabilities, and they are 49% more likely to have never attended school compared to their peers. In Malaysia, while inclusive education programmes are expanding, stigma and limited awareness still hinder full participation.

Parental acceptance or denial of a child's condition plays a pivotal role in shaping their educational journey. Acceptance is rarely immediate; many parents struggle with emotional stress, social judgment, and skepticism toward professional assessments. This study explores how parents of preschool-aged children respond when early signs of SEN are identified by teachers and recommended for further assessment. Understanding the root causes of parental denial is essential for improving early intervention and inclusive strategies.

Emotional Readiness, Cultural Beliefs, and Parental Self-Efficacy

Parental denial is not merely a cognitive response; it is deeply emotional. Many parents experience a process akin to the stages of grief: denial, frustration, guilt, and eventual acceptance. Emotional readiness is as critical as factual understanding (Alqahtani et al., 2022). Without clear and empathetic communication, parents may delay seeking help even when signs are evident.

Cultural and religious beliefs also shape parental responses. In some families, disabilities are viewed as divine tests or punishments, which can complicate acceptance (Ahmad & Ismail, 2021). Social judgment and financial strain, as seen in studies from the Philippines (Pinili et al., 2025), further intensify the emotional burden.

Teachers often serve as the first observers of developmental concerns, yet not all are trained to navigate sensitive conversations (Nwide & Smith, 2024). In communities where disability is associated with shame (Norani, 2018), parents may downplay concerns to avoid stigma. Parental self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to support their child is another key factor. Ishak and Saad (2020) found that access to workshops and supportive professionals increased parental engagement, while isolation and misinformation led to resistance.

Bridging the Acceptance Gap in Early Childhood Education

While inclusive education policies are in place, there is limited research on how parental denial unfolds in early childhood settings, particularly in Malaysia. Most studies focus on school-aged children or institutional frameworks, leaving a gap in understanding the emotional and cultural dynamics that influence parental decisions during the preschool years.

This study addresses that gap by examining parental responses to teacher-identified SEN indicators in a preschool in North Malaysia. By focusing on semi-structured interviews with three mothers, and analyzing the data through thematic analysis, the research offers nuanced insights into denial, stigma, and the barriers to early intervention.

The findings aim to inform educator training, parental support programmes, and policy development that are culturally responsive and emotionally attuned. Ultimately, this contributes to strengthening inclusive practices in early childhood education and ensuring that children with SEN receive timely and appropriate support.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims to explore the reasons why some parents struggle to accept recommendations from preschool teachers to seek assessments for their children. Specifically, it focuses on understanding the emotional, cultural, and informational factors that lead to parental denial when early signs of special educational needs (SEN) are observed in a preschool setting.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What emotional factors influence parental denial when preschool teachers recommend assessments for children showing early signs of special educational needs (SEN)?
2. How do cultural and religious beliefs shape parents' responses to teacher-identified indicators of SEN in a preschool setting?
3. What role does access to information and understanding of SEN play in parents' decision-making regarding professional assessments for their children?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to gain in-depth insights into the experiences of parents whose preschool children were referred for potential special educational needs (SEN) assessment. The aim was to explore the emotional, cultural, and informational factors contributing to parental denial.

Participants and Selection Criteria

Three mothers of preschool children aged 5 to 6 were purposively selected from a northern state in Malaysia. These participants were identified with the assistance of preschool teachers and health personnel from the Ministry of Health, based on observable delays in the children's development and behavior. Selection criteria included:

- i. The child had been informally referred by a preschool teacher for further assessment.
- ii. The mothers had not yet pursued formal diagnostic evaluation.
- iii. The mothers were willing to participate in a recorded interview.

Data Collection

Each mother engaged in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a quiet, private room within the preschool compound, ensuring a comfortable and non-threatening environment. Open-ended questions were used to elicit parents' initial reactions, beliefs, and concerns upon receiving recommendations for assessment. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to participation, each mother received a written information sheet outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained, including permission to record the interviews. The mothers were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reporting to protect their identities. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

Data Analysis

Using thematic analysis, the researchers reviewed the transcripts to identify recurring patterns and themes in the parents' responses. The analysis focused on capturing emotional reactions such as concern, confusion, and denial, as well as cultural and informational influences. Two major themes emerged, each supported by subthemes and illustrative quotations (see Table 1).

Table 1: Themes identified through interviews with mothers

Theme	Subtheme	Quotations
1. Denial	Attributing behaviors to familial patterns	<p>"Did anyone in your family share similar traits, influencing your belief that it wasn't a special needs issue?"</p> <p>"Did you ever consider that your child's developmental path might be different?"</p>
	Distrust in educators' assessments	<p>"Your child's teacher suggested that you bring your child to see a doctor for a check-up. How did you feel about it?"</p> <p>"Have you ever considered an independent professional's assessment?"</p>
	Fear of labeling	<p>"What makes you deny referring your child for a check-up?"</p> <p>"What concerns you most about a formal diagnosis?"</p>
	Selective interpretation of child's abilities	<p>"Did you ever feel like the school misunderstood your child's behaviors?"</p> <p>"Do you think the school environment differs from home interactions?"</p>
	Denial rooted in personal doubt	<p>"What are your thoughts on your child's behavior at school?"</p> <p>"Do you think the school might be right in their concerns?"</p> <p>"Do you think behavioral differences could be more visible in structured settings like classrooms?"</p>
Theme	Subtheme	Quotations
2. Social stigma and fear of judgment.	Influence of family pressure	<p>"How did your extended family react when you discussed concerns about your child's development?"</p> <p>"Does your family's opinion affect your willingness to seek help?"</p>
	Community perception and social pressure	<p>"Were you ever afraid of how the community would perceive your child's diagnosis?"</p> <p>"Have you seen cases where a diagnosis led to positive support instead of judgment?"</p>
	Avoidance due to stigma	<p>"Did you hesitate to bring your child for further check-up because of societal stigma?"</p> <p>"What would make you feel more comfortable about seeking professional guidance?"</p>
	Alternative beliefs in child development	<p>"Do you believe your child needs special support?"</p> <p>"How do you respond when teachers express concern reading your child having special needs behavior?"</p>
	Resistance to external intervention	<p>"Have you ever considered consulting a specialist despite your reservations?"</p> <p>"Do you feel external pressure from educators or professionals to take action?"</p> <p>"Has anyone ever explained the benefits of early intervention to you?"</p>

FINDINGS

The interviews revealed that the mothers' responses to teacher-initiated concerns about their children's development were emotionally layered and did not follow a linear path from concern to action. Their reactions ranged from firm rejection to gradual, partial acceptance of the possibility that their child might have special educational needs (SEN). Two overarching themes emerged from the data: denial

and social stigma and fear of judgment. These themes are discussed below in relation to the three research questions.

Emotional Factors Influence Parental Denial When Preschool Teachers Recommend Assessments for Children Showing Early Signs of SEN

In response to the first research question: *What emotional factors influence parental denial when preschool teachers recommend assessments for children showing early signs of SEN?* the findings suggest that emotional resistance was deeply embedded in the mothers' narratives. All three mothers expressed some form of denial, often rooted in personal comparisons and protective instincts. Rather than accepting their child's behaviors as signs of developmental concern, they frequently drew parallels to family members who had exhibited similar traits but eventually "turned out fine." For instance, one mother recalled how her sibling had spoken late as a child but grew up without any issues, leading her to believe her son was simply following a similar developmental path. This comparison provided emotional reassurance that nothing was seriously wrong.

Defensive responses were also common. The mothers often questioned the teachers' observations, suggesting that educators misunderstood their child's personality or exaggerated the issues. One mother described her son as merely "strong-willed," while another expressed doubt about the teachers' expertise, stating that she felt defensive and believed the teacher might not truly understand her child. Positive behaviors observed at home were frequently cited as counter-evidence to school-based concerns, reinforcing the belief that the child's challenges were situational rather than developmental. A particularly strong emotional barrier was the fear of labeling. The idea of receiving a formal diagnosis felt frightening to the mothers, who worried that such a label would follow their child through school and into adulthood, potentially limiting future opportunities.

Cultural and Religious Beliefs Shape Parents' Responses to Teacher-Identified Indicators of SEN in a Preschool Setting

The second research question: *How do cultural and religious beliefs shape parents' responses to teacher-identified indicators of SEN in a preschool setting?* revealed that cultural norms and family expectations played a significant role in shaping parental reactions. Extended family members often dismissed the teachers' concerns, reinforcing cultural beliefs that children develop at their own pace and discouraging professional intervention. One mother shared that her parents refused to believe anything was wrong, while another recounted how relatives told her she was "just worrying too much" and advised her not to listen to outsiders. These familial voices made it difficult for the mothers to trust professional advice and contributed to their reluctance to pursue assessments. Additionally, some mothers attributed their child's behavior to parenting style rather than developmental issues. One mother believed her child's challenges stemmed from a lack of discipline, while others felt that stricter routines and firmer parenting would eventually resolve the problems. These beliefs reflect a cultural tendency to interpret behavioral concerns through the lens of family values and traditional child-rearing practices, rather than considering developmental explanations.

The Role That Access to Information and Understanding of SEN Play in Parents' Decision-Making Regarding Professional Assessments for Their Children

The third research question: *What role does access to information and understanding of SEN play in parents' decision-making regarding professional assessments for their children?* highlighted the impact of limited awareness and uncertainty. The mothers expressed skepticism toward the teachers' qualifications and questioned the validity of their observations. One mother admitted to repeatedly questioning the educators' expertise, suggesting a lack of trust in institutional knowledge. Furthermore, the mothers often used positive behaviors observed at home as evidence that contradicted school-based concerns. For example, one mother noted that although the teacher reported her son had trouble socializing, he played well with his siblings at home. This discrepancy reinforced the belief that the child's challenges were context-specific and not indicative of a broader developmental issue. Rather than agreeing to evaluations, the mothers frequently requested more time, indicating a lack of urgency

and limited understanding of the benefits of early intervention. Despite efforts by schools to support early identification, the mothers felt pressured and unprepared to make decisions, underscoring the need for clearer communication and accessible information about SEN.

To provide a clearer representation of the thematic structure, Table 2 summarizes the main themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews, supported by direct excerpts from the participants. It illustrates how each mother expressed denial and concern about social stigma in distinct yet overlapping ways, and how emotional, cultural, and informational factors intersected in their decision-making. As shown in Table 2, while the mothers' expressions of denial varied in tone and intensity, they consistently reflected deeper concerns about societal judgment and institutional labeling. These thematic patterns offer a foundation for further exploration of how cultural norms, personal histories, and systemic factors shape parental responses in early childhood contexts.

Table 2 Thematic Summary of Mothers' Responses to Teacher Recommendations for SEN Assessment

Main Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Excerpt	Interpretive Note
Denial	Personal comparisons with family members	"My brother was exactly like this when he was young... very quiet... now he's successful." – Parent B	Past family experiences were used to normalize current behaviors and dismiss concerns.
	Distrust toward teacher observations	"I felt defensive... maybe she just don't understand my child." – Mother A	Emotional resistance was tied to perceived lack of teacher insight or expertise.
	Positive home behaviors as counter-evidence	"At home, he plays well with his siblings." – Mother A	Home context was used to challenge school-based observations.
	Attribution to personality or environment	"Maybe my son just doesn't like the school environment." – Mother C	Developmental concerns were reframed as situational discomfort.
	Fear of labeling and long-term consequences	"I don't want my child labeled... it'll follow him everywhere." – Mother C	Diagnosis was perceived as a permanent and limiting label.
Social Stigma & Fear of Judgment	Family denial and cultural reinforcement	"You're just worrying too much. He's normal." – Mother B	Extended family discouraged professional help, reinforcing cultural norms.
	Concern about community perception	"If people find out... it'll change how they treat him." – Implied across interviews	Fear of social exclusion influenced avoidance of assessments.
	Belief in discipline over diagnosis	"I thought maybe he just needs more discipline." – Mother C	Behavioral issues were interpreted through parenting frameworks rather than SEN.
	Resistance to institutional pressure	"We just asked the teacher to wait and observe more." – Mother C	Parents felt rushed and preferred delaying formal evaluation.

Note. Excerpts are drawn directly from participant interviews. Respondent pseudonyms (Mother A, B, C) are used to preserve anonymity.

As shown in Table 2 above, while the mothers' expressions of denial varied in tone and intensity, they consistently reflected deeper concerns about societal judgment and institutional labeling. These thematic patterns offer a foundation for further exploration of how cultural norms, personal histories, and systemic factors intersect to shape parental responses in early childhood contexts.

DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The emotional and social challenges faced by the mothers in this study reflect what other research has already suggested that denial, fear, and distrust are three pivotal factors shaping parental responses when informed that their child may require special support (Jones & Smith, 2019; Brown et al., 2021). Many parents rely on personal or family experiences to interpret their child's behavior, often leading them to downplay concerns. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), which emphasizes how family beliefs, cultural norms, and immediate environments influence developmental decisions.

A key tension revealed in this study is the difference between how mothers perceive their child at home versus how teachers observe them in school. This divergence can be attributed to contextual and relational dynamics. At home, parents interact with their child in familiar, emotionally bonded settings, often shaped by cultural expectations and family routines. In contrast, teachers observe children in structured environments with peer comparisons and developmental benchmarks, making atypical behaviors more visible. When professional advice challenges these home-based perceptions, parents may turn inward, relying on instinct and personal narratives rather than external assessments. This inner conflict, as supported by Taylor and Williams (2020), contributes to delays in seeking support and reinforces parental skepticism toward educators (Lee et al., 2022).

The fear of labeling emerged strongly in the interviews. Mothers expressed concern that a diagnosis could follow their child for life, affecting not only school placement but also how others perceive and interact with them. This finding echoes Garcia and Chen (2018), who noted that parents often worry about the long-term social consequences of being labeled as "special needs." Social stigma further compounds this fear. The mothers in this study worried that their children would be judged or marginalized, simply for being different. Prior research by Hassan et al. (2023) and Wang and Patel (2021) confirms that cultural views and community norms play a significant role in shaping parental responses to developmental concerns.

In some cases, parents preferred explanations that felt more familiar or socially acceptable such as believing the child simply needed more discipline. This tendency aligns with Miller and Lee (2017), who found that traditional parenting beliefs often lead families to resist the idea of special needs, especially when behavioral issues are interpreted through a moral or disciplinary lens.

These findings suggest that educators and professionals must approach conversations with sensitivity, patience, and cultural awareness. It is not merely about sharing facts, but about building trust, addressing fears, and giving parents space to process difficult realities. Teachers can adopt empathetic communication strategies that validate parental emotions while gently introducing developmental concerns. For instance, using narrative approaches such as sharing classroom anecdotes or highlighting strengths before discussing challenges can reduce defensiveness. Structured family engagement activities, like joint observation sessions or reflective dialogues, help bridge understanding between home and school. These strategies not only foster trust but also empower parents to participate actively in decision-making.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need for early intervention frameworks that are both accessible and culturally responsive. Policies should mandate professional development for educators in family-centered communication and provide clear pathways for developmental screening that respect parental concerns. Additionally, integrating community-based support systems such as parent networks, culturally sensitive counseling, and faith-based outreach can help reduce stigma and encourage earlier engagement with professional services.

In conclusion, the emotional landscape of parental denial is shaped by a complex interplay of personal beliefs, cultural norms, and institutional trust. By understanding these dynamics, educators and policymakers can better support families in navigating early childhood challenges with empathy, clarity, and collaboration.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights how complex and personal the journey can be for parents facing the possibility that their young child may have special educational needs. Accepting this is not just about hearing the

facts, it is about managing emotions, navigating cultural expectations, and finding the courage to take the next step.

If we want to create truly inclusive early education systems, we need to do more than just offer support, we need to earn parents' trust. That means offering clear, culturally sensitive information, reducing stigma in schools and communities, and ensuring that families, especially in rural areas, feel heard and supported. Psychoeducation initiatives, parent workshops, and collaboration with community leaders can play a vital role in shifting perceptions and building bridges between families and professionals.

Real change will only come through collaboration. Educators, healthcare professionals, policymakers, and families all have a part to play. Together, we can build a stronger foundation where every child, regardless of ability, has a fair and meaningful chance to grow.

While the findings offer valuable insights, this study is not without limitations. The small number of participants and the focus on mothers from a single state may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should consider expanding the sample to include fathers, caregivers from diverse cultural backgrounds, and families from both urban and rural settings. Longitudinal studies could also help explore how parental perceptions evolve over time and how early interventions influence outcomes. Addressing these gaps will strengthen the evidence base and inform more inclusive and responsive educational policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from both the study's findings and existing research, it is clear that many parents go through a difficult emotional journey when they first hear that their child may have special educational needs (SEN). Their hesitation does not come from lack of love, but often from fear, stigma, or simply not knowing where to begin. With that in mind, here are several practical and compassionate strategies to help parents feel more supported and engaged throughout this process.

Bring SEN Awareness into the Heart of the School

One of the most meaningful ways to help parents is by offering regular, culturally relevant psychoeducation workshops. These sessions do not need to be overly technical, they should focus on real-life examples of child development, what signs to look for, and what kinds of support are available. When parents understand why early intervention matters, they're more likely to feel confident taking that first step.

Create Safe Spaces for Parent Conversations

Sometimes, just knowing that other parents are going through the same thing can make all the difference. Parent support groups, especially when led by empathetic counselors, can give families a safe, non-judgmental space to ask questions, share fears, and offer advice. These connections can help reduce feelings of isolation and create a sense of community, reminding parents that they're not alone.

Help Teachers Speak with Heart, Not Just Facts

Teachers are often the first to notice when something feels "off" in a child's development. But sharing those concerns with parents can be tricky. That is why schools should invest in training for educators on empathetic, culturally sensitive communication. When teachers approach parents with compassion and understanding, not just data, those conversations are more likely to be met with openness rather than defensiveness.

Work Hand-in-Hand with Trusted Community Voices

In many communities, parents look to religious leaders, elders, or respected figures for guidance. By collaborating with these community leaders, schools can help normalize conversations about SEN.

When trusted voices support the idea of seeking help early, parents are more likely to listen and feel less judged.

Make Information Easy to Access—Anytime, Anywhere

Not all families can attend workshops or school meetings. That's where digital tools can make a big impact. A mobile-friendly platform with videos, parent stories, and clear explanations in multiple languages. This can give parents the chance to learn at their own pace, in the privacy of their homes. These resources can gently guide parents toward understanding, without overwhelming them. Each of these strategies plays a part in making the journey toward acceptance a little easier for families. By meeting parents where they are emotionally, culturally, and practically, we can help create an environment where concerns are heard, support is accessible, and children with SEN can truly thrive. It is not just about delivering information, it is about building trust, showing empathy, and walking alongside families as they learn, adapt, and grow.

Limitations and Future Research

This study offers valuable insights into parental denial and its impact on early intervention, but several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small, involving only three mothers from a single government-aided preschool in a northern state of Malaysia. This limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the study focused exclusively on mothers, potentially overlooking the perspectives of fathers or other caregivers who may experience and respond to developmental concerns differently.

Future research should consider expanding the participant pool to include diverse family structures, cultural backgrounds, and geographic contexts, particularly comparing urban and rural settings. Including fathers and extended family members could provide a more holistic understanding of familial dynamics surrounding special educational needs (SEN). Longitudinal studies may also be beneficial in examining how parental attitudes evolve over time and how early psychoeducational interventions influence acceptance and engagement with professional support.

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