

*International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*  
Vol. 23, No. 12, pp. 448-462, December 2024  
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.23.12.23>  
Received Aug 29, 2024; Revised Oct 13, 2024; Accepted Dec 30, 2024

# What's Holding Back? An Examination of Parental Denial in Special Education

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**Abstract.** This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study explores the phenomenon of parental denial of special education by examining the experiences of fifteen (15) parents whose children are currently enrolled in programs for children with special needs. From the in-depth interviews, eight (8) distinct themes emerged, illustrating the factors that contribute to parental denial. Family dynamics were shaped by emotional conflicts, financial difficulties, and limited access to necessary resources. Cultural and societal beliefs, including community superstitions, misunderstandings about disabilities, and social stigmas, significantly influenced parental acceptance. Within the special education system, parental denial was further compounded by inaccessible services and communication gaps between parents and educators. This study not only adds to the limited literature on parental denial of special education but also offers practical recommendations. By gaining insight into parental perspectives, fostering better communication, and tailoring support systems, educators can more effectively assist families. Additionally, policymakers are encouraged to use these findings to inform the development of inclusive policies, ensuring that children with special needs have access to supportive educational environments. This research contributes to creating a more inclusive educational system that enhances the learning experiences of children with special needs.

**Keywords:** parental denial; phenomenological study; special education; special education system

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the critical role that parental involvement plays in special education (SPED) programs. Research consistently shows that the success of such programs depends significantly on active parental engagement. Parents who are actively involved in their child's education tend to experience better outcomes (Elliott & Roach, 2006; Studies further reveal that parental participation enhances academic performance and fosters a positive

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learning environment, which is crucial for students with disabilities (Rudney, 2005; Steinberg, 2009). According to Hornby and Lafaele (2011), parental involvement strengthens the relationship between parents and teachers, creating a more supportive atmosphere for students. Similarly, Moroni et al. (2015) emphasize that parents, as their children's first mentors, play a pivotal role in accelerating learning and boosting academic achievement. Despite the proven importance of parental involvement, several barriers prevent some parents from fully engaging in and supporting SPED programs.

Special education is a vital component of the educational system, providing essential services to children with disabilities. It ensures that children with mental, physical, or developmental challenges receive the support they need to achieve their goals and make meaningful progress (Childress et al., 2013). In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has implemented a SPED program aimed at addressing the unique needs of students with disabilities (Gaytos et al., 2010). This program ensures that these students have access to quality education that is tailored to their specific needs. However, despite these initiatives, many Filipino parents still struggle to accept that their child has a disability, a phenomenon often referred to as parental denial. This denial can manifest in various ways, ranging from rejecting a diagnosis to being reluctant to seek support or accommodations for their child.

Parental denial is one of the most significant barriers to parental involvement in SPED. It occurs when parents refuse to acknowledge their child's disability or downplay the severity of their condition. Beduya (2023) notes that this denial often stems from a deep-seated fear that their child will face lifelong challenges or social exclusion—an outcome that most parents dread. Furthermore, Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) explain that parental denial can lead to disengagement from SPED programs, negatively influence the child's academic and social development.

In their study, Law et al. (2013) identified parental denial as a major obstacle to early diagnosis and intervention for developmental disabilities. Their findings revealed that many parents delay seeking treatment due to fears of stigma, shame, and guilt, which leads to delays in receiving necessary services. Similarly, Agbenyega and Quansah (2015) found that parents' lack of awareness regarding special needs contributes to denial, resulting in delayed diagnosis and insufficient support for children with disabilities. This is consistent with research by Ruskuss and Gerulaitiss (2010) and Blacher and Hatton (2007) who argue that inadequate information and lack of awareness prevents parents from fully participating in their child's education.

Socioeconomic factors also play a role in parental denial of SPED. According to Raguindin et al. (2020), many Filipino students with special needs are unable to attend school due to financial constraints or a lack of access to educational institutions. This is supported by Oranga et al. (2020) who found that most parents of children with disabilities, particularly those with academic challenges, are financially disadvantaged and lack the resources to meet their children's

educational needs. As a result, such parents disengage from their child's education, further perpetuating the issue of parental denial.

Aside from the parent's lack of knowledge and socioeconomic status, other research revealed that teacher factors and school environment may also create barriers to parents' involvement in SPED. On the other hand, Mugo et al. (2010) found that the primary obstacle to parental denial of SPED is that the majority of teachers and other school personnel have been educated in an individual-centered model of offering services that seldom include parents. Furthermore, Reinke et al. (2011) noted that certain aspects of the school environment such as prejudices and unfavorable parental impressions are unwelcoming to parents. As a result, parents may believe that well-being interferences for their disabled offspring descend outside the scope of school roles (Reinke et al., 2011), limiting their engagement in their child's health interventions at school.

Subsequently, cultural beliefs and social values may also lead to the parent's denial of SPED. Mwangi and Orodho (2014) assert that the main issues that parents face when educating their disabled children are stigma, negative attitudes from members of society, and parental ignorance. David (2015) stressed that in the Philippines, stigma and cultural views on disabilities are often the factors that deter parents from openly identifying their child's condition and obtaining specialized schooling. Furthermore, the SPED system itself plays a vital role in parental denial of SPED. For instance, in Africa, a deficiency in laws and established legal structures that would allow parents of disabled children to advocate their rights was identified as an obstacle to parents' active engagement in their children's education. In the Philippines, the state of public SPED portrays a sad reality (Gaytos et al., 2020). According to the authors, the SPED system is confronted with significant difficulties that are intrinsically systemic, resulting in parental refusal of SPED. Lack of financing, irrelevant and unresponsive curricula, mass emigration of SPED teachers, outdated learning tools, and a lack of support from school officials are among the issues.

Moreover, several studies have shown that a lack of facilities and resources prevents Filipino parents from enrolling their disabled children in SPED. For instance, Singh (2023) revealed in her study that many regions in the Philippines face resource-allocation issues for SPED, resulting in a dearth of educated experts, adapted resources, and accessible materials. Because of this scarcity, parents are hesitant to enroll their children in SPED programs. This is similar to the findings of Allam and Martin (2021) who investigated the concerns and obstacles faced by SPED teachers when educating students with learning disabilities in the City Division of Ilagan, Isabela in the Philippines. The study's findings indicate that lecture halls for children with learning disabilities in the Division of Ilagan generally lack the necessary support to effectively accommodate Special Education (SPED) needs.

Additionally, geographical disparities may also affect parents' involvement in their children's SPED. Geographic barriers frequently impede access to SPED programs, with urban areas having better access than rural and remote locations

(Lansang, 2013). This disparity discourages parents who live far from specialized schools or centers. McKay et al. (2016) reported that parental denial can negatively influence children's academic and social progress.

Despite the potential negative consequences of parental denial, there is still limited understanding of the factors that contribute to parental denial of SPED. While some studies have identified certain factors that may contribute to parental denial such as cultural beliefs or lack of knowledge about disabilities (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012), more research is needed to understand the complexity of this issue fully. Additionally, there is a need for research that explores effective strategies for addressing parental denial of SPED. Some studies have explored the use of parent education programs or parent-teacher collaboration to address parental denial (Elliott & Roach, 2014), but further research is needed to identify the most effective strategies for the different types of parental denial. Hence, this paper aims to examine the factors that contribute to parental denial, how these factors influence parental denial, and what strategies can be drawn for addressing and overcoming parental denial of SPED. Moreover, this study will contribute to the existing literature on parental denial of SPED and provide recommendations for educators, parents, and policymakers to address and overcome this denial.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What factors contribute to parents denying that their children have special needs?
2. How can the SPED system provide better support to help parents and children with special needs to overcome barriers to acceptance and assistance?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The study is anchored on the family systems theory, since it approaches human behavior by examining family relationships and the context(s) in which they are embedded (Watson, 2012). From 1946 to 1959, Dr. Murray Bowen studied and worked at the Menninger Clinic and the National Institute of Mental Health to establish a scientific explanation of human behavior (Pollard, 2021). Family systems theory holds that comprehending a family requires examining it as a whole, according to Hammond and Pearson (2015). Bowen's Family Systems Theory relies on two main ideas. The first is that families are systems that may be researched and monitored using systems theory, and the second is that emotion dominates family development (Pollard, 2021). Combining these two primary elements describes the family system as an emotional unit in which each member has an impact on the others. Bowen's Family Systems Theory stresses that families are systems in which changes in one aspect influence other interrelated elements (Kaplan et al., 2014). Thus, when one family member alters their behavior, it often produces stress or worry, resulting in the other members reacting positively or negatively. The family system theory also holds that researchers and users of the model are interested in both internal and external family system dynamics (Pollard, 2021).

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The research design for this study followed the phenomenological approach. Teherani et al. (2015) define phenomenology as a research approach that aims to describe the essence of a phenomenon through the point of view of individuals who have experienced it. The purpose of phenomenology, according to Teherani et al. (2015), is to convey the significance of this experience—both what was experienced and how it was experienced. Phenomenology was a suitable research scheme for this study because it allowed the investigator to explore the lived experiences of parents who have children in SPED and who exhibit signs of denial.

#### **3.2 Instrument**

In this study, the researcher played the central role as the principal instrument, which is consistent with Yin's (2012) assertion that in qualitative research, the researcher is expected to be both the primary data collector and the analyst. The researcher's involvement extended beyond merely facilitating the study by actively engaging with the participants and ensuring that the data collection process was both thorough and reflective of the participants' experiences. As the investigator, the researcher was responsible for creating an environment that was conducive to open dialogue while actively listening and making real-time decisions during the interviews to deepen the exploration of the subject matter.

To collect the data, semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary tool. According to Magaldi and Berler (2018), semi-structured interviews follow a flexible approach, using a set of guide questions but allowing the researcher to adapt the conversation based on the participant's responses. This strategy enabled the researcher to probe deeper into specific areas of interest, ensuring that the nuances of parental denial of SPED were fully explored. In line with the phenomenological framework of the study, the interviews were designed to uncover the lived experiences of the participants. Gaytos et al. (2020) emphasize that semi-structured, in-depth interviews are particularly suitable for phenomenological research, because they facilitate a deep understanding of how individuals perceive and make sense of phenomena.

Through these interviews, the researcher sought to capture the diverse perspectives of 15 parents whose children were enrolled in SPED programs. By fostering a safe and trusting environment, the researcher was able to elicit rich, detailed narratives that provided insight into the emotional, cultural, and systemic factors contributing to parental denial. The researcher's role also involved constantly reflecting on the data, identifying emerging themes, and ensuring that the participants' voices were authentically represented in the analysis. This active, immersive engagement with the research process underscored the critical role of the researcher as both a facilitator and interpreter of the phenomena under investigation.

#### **3.3 Participants**

The study participants comprised parents of children currently enrolled in SPED programs who were displaying clear signs of denial. This denial was evident in

the parents' actions such as delaying their children's diagnosis and postponing enrollment in SPED schools. The participants who met the specific criteria were chosen using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, according to Campbell et al. (2020), is the selection of a range of individuals with distinct traits and data in order to answer the study question, aim, and objectives during an inquiry. In this study, a minimum of 25 individuals were invited; however, only 15 individuals gave their consent to participate in the research. The study was conducted in the province of Misamis Occidental, Northern Mindanao.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, according to Clarke and Braun (2014), is a qualitative method for discovering patterns and themes in data. The analysis in this study consisted of a thorough evaluation of the interview transcripts in order to discover general patterns and themes connected to the research topics. In this research, the use of thematic analysis enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the study participants and to identify any emerging themes. Additionally, the researcher's reflexivity was integral to the study design, ensuring self-awareness and acknowledging personal biases throughout the research process (Fletcher-Brown, , 2019).

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

Respecting participants' rights and well-being requires ethical research. The study examined the following ethical issues: Participants were debrief and given the chance to know the study all about prior to the interview process (DeRenzo et al., 2020). Throughout the study, the researcher remained mindful of their own positionality and biases, maintaining a reflexive journal to document personal reflections and challenges encountered during the research process (Reflexivity and Positionality in research: Researcher identity and the research process, 2022) To ensure the study's credibility, the criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1983) were applied. These included carefully selecting suitable methods for participant selection and data analysis. Additionally, participants were given their interview transcriptions to review and verify (Stahl & King, 2020). Peer debriefing was also employed to validate the study's findings.

## 4. Results and Discussions

### 4.1 Factors Contributing to Parental Denial

Eight themes emerged from the participants' responses to the factors that contributed to parental denial of SPED.

**Table 1: Factors Contributing to Parental Denial**

Factor	Theme
Family Dynamics	1. Parents encounter emotional struggles
	2. Parents experience financial challenges and Stress
	3. Parents' limited access to resources

Factor	Theme
Cultural and Societal Beliefs	4. Community's superstitious beliefs and misconceptions of disability
	5. Lack of understanding of the nature of disability
	6. Social stigmas and discrimination against Children with Special Needs
Special Education System	7. Inaccessibility and unavailability of special education services
	8. Parent-teacher communication gaps and lack of support

#### 4.1.1 Family Dynamics

Three themes emerged for family dynamics as a factor that contributes to parental denial: (a) Parents Encounter Emotional Struggles; (b) Parents Experience Financial Challenges and Stress, and (c) Parents Limited Access to Resources. The relationship between parents and their children, communication patterns, and family structure are some of the factors that contribute to family dynamics.

##### 4.1.1.1 Parents Encounter Emotional Struggles

This theme elicited that parents faced emotional struggles upon learning about their child's special needs. Parents often experienced shock, grief, and a profound sense of loss regarding their expectations for their child's future.

"At first, it was difficult for us to accept. We felt overwhelmed with emotions, but we gradually learned to cope" (P1).

"We experienced a range of emotions, from sorrow to frustration. Denial was a natural response; we wanted our child to be 'normal'" (P5).

These responses underline the diverse emotional struggles experienced by parents upon learning about their child's special needs. Feelings of devastation, disbelief, sadness, and anger often lead to an initial phase of denial. This conveys the emotional journey experienced by parents when confronted with the reality of having a child with special needs. Studies have shown that when parents learn that their child has disabilities, they feel a wide range of emotions. Anger, anxiety, and shock are common emotions felt by parents. Some parents even ask themselves, 'Why us?' (Downey, 2016). The emotional overwhelmingness expressed in the phrase can distort reasonable judgment. In this condition of heightened emotion, parents may deny the need for specialized education, therapies, or support services. Denial can delay finding appropriate educational resources and interventions for their child, which can hinder their child's progress. Cauda-Laufer (2017) found that raising a disabled child is exhausting, emotional, and difficult. Staats et al. (2015) agree that parenting a disabled child can be stressful and harmful.

#### 4.1.1.2 Parents Experience Financial Challenges and Stress

Financial challenges emerged as a significant barrier, intensifying parental denial. Financial concerns can lead parents to delay seeking professional diagnoses and assessments for their child's special needs.

"At first, it was difficult for us to accept. We felt overwhelmed with emotions, but we gradually learned to cope" (P1).

"We experienced a range of emotions, from sorrow to frustration. Denial was a natural response; we wanted our child to be 'normal'" (P5).

"Financially, it was very hard for us. The medical expenses, therapies, and special education drained our resources, adding to our stress" (P3).

"We had to reduce spending on all aspects, including essential needs, in order to cover the costs of our child's therapies" (P7).

The substantial financial burden mentioned in the above statements can lead parents to deny the need for SPED services. Given the high costs associated with therapies, medical expenses, and specialized education, parents might resist accepting that their child requires these services. This denial could result from the fear of further financial strain, leading them to avoid seeking appropriate support. Parental rejection of SPED can be influenced by structural, environmental, cultural, and perceptual barriers (McKay et al., 2004). It is impossible to deny that raising a disabled child is more expensive than raising a typical child. These costs may be incurred as a result of medical equipment and supplies such as wheelchairs, medical care and caregiving, private education, learning equipment, or customized transportation.

#### 4.1.1.3 Parents' Limited Access to Resources

Limited access to resources can result in inadequate information and awareness about the available SPED services and interventions. Parents might be unaware of the benefits of specialized education or the rights of their children to access these services. Lack of information can lead to denial wherein parents might underestimate the importance of SPED in their child's development.

"Access to specialized healthcare was limited. We had to travel long distances for therapies and consultations. Financial constraints made it even more challenging" (P14).

"Even when we manage to access services, there is a lack of trained professionals. We worry about the quality of care our child receives" (P12).

Parents of disabled children need resources to meet their children's special needs. These resources include their child's doctor, school teachers, and therapist (Downey, 2016). Access to these resources ([.g., healthcare and rehabilitation services for children with disabilities] is critical to improve the child's health and welfare. However, access to services remains limited, particularly in many settings in developing nations with limited resources (Asa et al., 2021). Parents' inadequate knowledge of and access to resources influence their decision-making, leading them to deny their children the necessary specialized education. According to the Odongo (2018), the lack of access to meaningful and usable information has been recognized as a major obstacle for individuals with disabilities and their families to obtaining assistance. Many parents have no or limited knowledge of financial or personal assistance procedures, and they are unaware of what pre-school,



primary/secondary school, or post-school programs can provide for their children (Odongo, 2018).

#### 4.1.2 *Cultural and Societal Beliefs*

Three themes emerged for Cultural and Societal Beliefs as a factor that contributes to parental denial: (a) Community's Superstitious Beliefs and Misconceptions of Disability; (b) Lack of Understanding of the Nature of Disability; and (c) Social Stigmas and Discrimination Against Children With Special Needs.

##### 4.1.2.1 *Community's Superstitious Beliefs and Misconceptions of Disability*

In a society where superstitious beliefs play a substantial role, parents often grapple with not only the practical aspects of their child's special needs but also the weight of societal judgments and spiritual interpretations. The idea that disabilities may be caused by past actions or curses complicates parenting. Denial may help parents avoid social judgment and isolation by avoiding their child's special needs. The family uses denial to avoid community criticism.

"Superstitious beliefs played a significant role. People in our community had misconceptions about disabilities. Some thought it was a result of past actions or curses" (P10).

"Superstitions and myths surrounded us. Some believed disability was a punishment, leaving us more difficult and in denial " (P7).

Different cultures view the causes of disability differently (Omu & Reynolds, 2012). Families may not seek identification because they believe disability is a curse from the gods or a devilish possession and may humiliate and hide the disabled child (Christopher, 2007). Parents may deny their disabled children SPED because of public perceptions of disabilities. Disability is still seen as a curse or witchcraft or considered contagious (Bii & Taylor, 2013). Filipinos often attribute disabilities to *gaba*, the curse of a divine being, usually God, or to *namaligno*, the belief that a supernatural or mystical figure caused a person's illness (Abad, 2013). Disability misperceptions can have serious consequences for disabled people and their families. Fear and misinformation about disability have discouraged parents from enrolling their disabled children in school (Odongo, 2018).

##### 4.1.2.2 *Lack of Understanding of the Nature of Disability*

The lack of understanding within the community results in social isolation and judgment. Parents, feeling isolated, often deny their child's special needs to avoid further alienation. This lack of understanding hampers open discussions and parental acceptance.

"Our community had deep-rooted traditional beliefs about disabilities. There was a lack of understanding, leading to isolation" (P12).

"People lacked awareness about disabilities. Instead of understanding, there was judgment, making it hard for us to talk openly about our child's needs" (P6).

When the community lacks understanding, parents fear judgment and criticism. This fear leads to denial, and parents may hide their child's condition to avoid social isolation. Because of the culture of silence around disabilities, parents find it hard to seek help and support. Most people are uncomfortable approaching

disabled people (Dianito et al., 2021). Lack of interaction with persons with disabilities (PWDs) or preconceived notions about them may be to blame (American Psychological Association, 2000). Society often struggles to accept and understand disabled people, and misconceptions about disabled people often fuel negative attitudes (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). Some people worry that disabled people are contagious and need medical care (Nikolarazi et al., 2005). Moreover, Babik and Gardner (2021) suggest that inadequate or inaccurate information about special needs people may lead to judgment and prejudice. Disability seems to define an individual's identity and social life in Asian countries such the Philippines.

#### *4.1.2.3 Social Stigmas and Discrimination Against Children With Special Needs*

Social stigmas and discrimination create a hostile environment for both parents and children with special needs. Denial, in this context, becomes a shield against the painful reality of societal rejection. By denying their child's special needs, parents may attempt to protect them from the harsh judgment of society.

“Society can be harsh. Our neighbors sometimes look at our child differently. It's challenging to fight against those stereotypes” (P6).

“The social stigma is suffocating. Our child is often excluded from community events, reinforcing the feeling of isolation” (P11).

Negative attitudes are a major obstacle to inclusive education (Adoyo & Odeny, 2015). Negative social opinions can shame families, causing them to hide their disabled children. Additionally, disabled children are sometimes excluded from school. The community's negative view of disability discourages parents from enrolling their disabled children in school (Bii & Taylor, 2013). Fear of stigma and prejudice often leads parents to hide their disabled children indoors rather than include them in the community. These negative views of disability are caused by a lack of understanding and awareness, societal misconceptions about disability causes, and discrimination reinforcement (Odongo, 2018).

#### *4.1.3 Special Education System*

Two overarching themes emerged for the SPED system as a factor that contributes to parental denial: (a) Inaccessibility and Unavailability of Special Education Services; (b) Parent-Teacher Communication Gaps and Lack of Support.

##### *4.1.3.1 Inaccessibility and Unavailability of Special Education Services*

Inaccessibility and unavailability of specialized services intensify parental denial. The struggle to find suitable services reinforces parents' sense of helplessness and increases the likelihood of denying the severity of their child's condition. Frustration and exhaustion often lead to avoidance, making it difficult for parents to face the reality of their child's special needs.

“Finding appropriate special education services was a challenge. There were limited options available, and many were not tailored to meet our child's specific needs” (P7).

“The lack of accessible services made it incredibly frustrating. We often had to travel long distances, making it difficult to consistently attend sessions, which affected our child's progress” (P11).

Parents' difficulties in finding acceptable and accessible SPED services stem from limited options. Traveling long distances and not having services tailored to their children's needs frustrated parents. The real battle for disabled people begins when they leave home (Albert & Powell, 2020). The Philippines is current in its infrastructure for PWDs, but it needs improvement. Building designs often create accessibility issues for disabled people such as self-closing doors with heavy return springs, uneven surfaces, and a lack of ramps. The SPED system struggles with funding, an irrelevant and unresponsive curriculum, mass emigration of SPED teachers, outdated learning tools, and school officials' lack of support, which leads to parental refusal (Gaytos et al., 2020). Special education programs are more accessible in cities than in rural and remote areas due to geographic constraints (Krasniuk & Crizzle, 2023).

#### *4.1.3.2 Parent-Teacher Communication Gaps and Lack of Support*

When parents feel disconnected from their child's educational progress and lack the necessary support, it deepens their denial. The absence of clear communication and guidance leaves parents questioning their ability to cope with their child's special needs.

“At times, educators lacked awareness of our child's specific requirements. Their limited understanding added to our sense of isolation, leaving us feeling as though we were steering this journey alone” (P9).

Parents complained about minimal teacher involvement and a lack of resources to help their child's learning. Parental isolation and uncertainty about how to support their child result from a lack of collaboration between parents and teachers. Some parents/families may fear the school system and feel they cannot help their impaired children (Odongo, 2018). In the current study, most parents were unhappy with how instructors and other children treat special needs children (Thwala et al., 2015) and suggested that the government should instruct them. Many parents of disabled children, especially those in isolated places, lack communication and support from other parents. This lack of support structures and regulations to safeguard and promote disabled children's rights may cause parents to refuse SPED (Tigere & Makhubele, 2019).

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Parental denial in the face of special needs exemplifies the extreme emotional and societal challenges experienced by families. This conflict is exacerbated by family dynamics, societal misconceptions, and the limitations of the SPED system. The pervasive denial is frequently the result of overwhelming emotions that are exacerbated by financial burdens and the weight of social judgment. It is essential to comprehend these nuanced factors in order to design effective interventions.

To combat parental denial, individualized interventions are required. Coupled with financial assistance initiatives, parental counseling programs would alleviate emotional distress and reduce financial burdens. At the community and institutional levels, education campaigns should debunk falsehoods and nurture understanding and empathy. Investments in specialized teacher training and accessible services could simultaneously reconcile existing gaps, empowering

parents to embrace their children's unique requirements rather than deny them. Eliminating societal stigmas and bolstering support structures would cultivate an environment in which parental denial is replaced by acceptance, nurturing healthier relationships and brighter futures for these children.

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