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## Parents' views on inclusive education for children with special educational needs in Russia

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### ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on exploring parents' views of inclusive education for children with special educational needs (SEN) in Russia. First, we bring parents' voices to the forefront, exploring their points of view on inclusive education for their SEN children. Second, we deepen the current understanding of what aspects are important— from a parental perspective— in the provision of education for children with SEN in an inclusive school context. The research was designed as an exploratory study, and data were gathered by means of a qualitative online questionnaire. Using thematic analysis, two main themes were identified: parental views on inclusive education for children with SEN and important factors in the provision of education for children with SEN in an inclusive context. The results show that parents' opinions about inclusive education for their children with SEN reveal obvious tensions. The findings point to teacher proficiency, parental involvement and humanity as being essential to the education of children with SEN, allowing them to evolve and thrive in inclusive school settings. Russia needs to increase its focus on parental involvement in fostering inclusive education and strengthen adequate preparation of teachers to improve the education provided for children with SEN in an inclusive context.

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## Introduction

Since the UNESCO Salamanca Statement was adopted in 1994, the vision of inclusion and inclusive education has been a guiding principle in many Western countries (Hanssen and Khitruk 2021; UNESCO 1994, 2021). Following this international trend towards inclusion, many Eastern European countries have acknowledged that inclusion is key for securing equal educational rights for all and for accepting diversity (Ainscow 2021; Hanssen, Hansén, and Kristina Ström 2021; Hanssen and Khitruk 2021; Kutepova et al. 2021; UNESCO 2021). The Russian Federation, for example, recently legalised the right to inclusion through its adoption of the Federal Law of Education (FLE) in 2012 (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012).

However, equal educational opportunities for all, especially for children with SEN, are not yet fully provided in Russia (Kutepova et al. 2021). Several studies have indicated that

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the gap is linked to a lack of teacher competence in inclusive practices and to their attitude towards the education of children with SEN in an inclusive context (Amiridze 2012; Furyaeva and Furyaev 2016; Nazarova 2015; Skudnova and Pashkova 2017). The gap is also associated with Russian society's unpreparedness and hesitation towards implementing inclusive education (Alekhina 2016; Khusnutdinova 2017; UNESCO 2021). Furthermore, several researchers and representatives of the defectological school have stated that inclusive education is inefficient and that the introduction of inclusive education in Russia's current system comes with the risk of leaving children without qualified SEN assistance (Kutepova et al. 2021; Lubovsky 2017; Malofeev 2011, 2018).

Given these concerns and the complexity of mapping how inclusion may be implemented at the societal and practical levels, it is surprising that the opinions of the parents of SEN children are absent from this discussion.

A notable number of researchers have explored the notion that parents affect their children's lives. The literature indicates that parental support can significantly benefit a child's learning, self-esteem and attitude towards lifelong learning (Ceglowski and Bacigalupa 2002; Hill, Tyson, and Bromell 2009; UNESCO 2021). Furthermore, numerous studies have demonstrated positive links between parental support and children's academic, learning, social and behavioural outcomes (Falkmer et al. 2015; Hill, Tyson, and Bromell 2009; Murray, McFarland-Piazza, and Harrison 2015). As such, parents are seen as important actors in the school context and should be involved in designing and developing inclusive education (UNESCO 2021). However, research-based knowledge that specifically considers parents' views on the development of policy and practice for inclusive education in Russia is still sparse (Alekhina 2017; Avdeeva 2016). Therefore, our first aim is to bring to the fore parents' voices, exploring their perspectives on inclusive education for their children with SEN.

Furthermore, based on the literature, we know that there are many factors that need to be optimised to allow for children with SEN to thrive and develop through inclusive school systems. These features include a) the teachers' ability to provide these children with appropriate, special needs education (SNE) in an inclusive school context; b) the organisation of SNE in an inclusive context; c) parental involvement; and d) the acceptance of children with SEN by teachers and society in general (Grunt 2019; Karabanova 2020; Kantor and Mazur 2019). However, the literature on the type of education that parents deem s best suited for children with SEN in an inclusive school setting is also extremely sparse (Alekhina 2017; Avdeeva 2016). As such, the second aim of this article is to address this lack of research directly.

## Research context

Russia's main political, social and economic task is to comprehensively protect youth and family (The Russian Government 2014). Moreover, Russia has developed policies for creating and improving a high-quality national education system, and education is among the state's priorities (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012). The main document that regulates all education in Russia, including the SEN structure, is the FLE (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012).

In 2012, Russia officially began inclusive education development. Here, the term inclusion has received normative consolidation and has been recognised as an overarching principle in education (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012). The FLE clearly highlighted the right to inclusive and antidiscriminatory education for all, including children with SEN (Art. 2; Art. 5; Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012). Moving towards developing the country's educational sector in line with an inclusive ideology and acceptance of differences and diversity, Russia ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2012. Furthermore, the National Action Strategy for Children in 2012–2017 was approved by the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated 1 June 2012 (No. 76).

Russia also initiated several efforts to move towards a more inclusive form of education. The overall aim was to minimise the number of special schools and develop the country's educational sector to be in line with inclusive ideology. Guided by the state programme Accessible Environment 2011–2015, several actions were undertaken in the country, such as improving schools' physical accessibility, adapting learning environments to appeal to all users and providing additional equipment to enable access to mainstream education (The Russian Government 2011; UNESCO 2021). As a result, 140,000 children among the 250,000 with SEN receive SNE while attending inclusive schools or classes for mixed groups at general schools (Pension Fund of the Russian Federation (PFR) 2019). National education plans and programmes have also been developed for educating children with various types of difficulties and are being used in their education (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012).

Reforms have also been introduced in relation to teachers' qualifications and the competences required to teach all learners. Russia has integrated inclusion-related topics into teacher education but still lacks a strategic approach to the professional development of prospective teachers for working in inclusive environments (Hanssen, Hansén, and Kristina Ström 2021). With federal standards lacking clear requirements, pedagogical universities are under no pressure to introduce inclusive education courses (UNESCO 2021).

Furthermore, additional teacher education (144 hours of in-service training) is mandatory once every three years for everyone with a teacher education, and a training certificate is required for attestation (Art. 47; Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012). Still, the concept of inclusion is seldom discussed or defined during such training (UNESCO 2021). Taken together, these conditions render teachers ill prepared to work in an inclusive environment. This challenge is further exacerbated by prevailing teachers with competences in inclusion in big cities, such as Moscow or Saint-Petersburg, rather than in regions. In line with the critics of the UNESCO report (2021), some researchers have pointed out that teachers often feel unprepared to accommodate or address the diversity of children in a general school setting (Kutepova et al. 2021; Khusnutdinova 2017). Here, teachers who have positive beliefs about their ability to teach children with SEN in inclusive settings are more willing to accept responsibility for such students compared with teachers who feel they lack the necessary skills (Kutepova and Suntsova 2018; Kutepova et al. 2021).

Despite Russia's efforts to remove institutional barriers and include children with SEN in general schools, the system remains largely unchanged (Hanssen and Khitruck 2021;

Kutepova and Suntsova 2018; UNESCO 2021). According to the Pension Fund of the Russian Federation (PFR 2019), in Russia, 250,000 children with SEN receive SNE. Among these, 40,000 are still educated at home, and about 70,000 are educated at special or boarding schools, being limited to learning alongside their peers in local community schools. Special or boarding schools often act as residences for children with hearing and/or visual impairment, severe speech disorders, disorders of the musculoskeletal system, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders, severe multiple developmental disorders and so forth (Art. 23; Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012). As such, these children study and live in isolation from their families, whom they visit on holidays or weekends. There are also special schools organised in a similar fashion to general ones, where students arrive at school in the morning and return home in the afternoon (Kutepova et al. 2021); instruction in such schools is provided by specialists according to Adapted Basic Educational Programmes, which are legislated educational programmes adapted to the education of children with SEN (Kutepova et al. 2021; Federal State Educational Standards 2014a, 2014b). Despite the parallels between these special schools and general school settings, students with SEN remain isolated from their peers (UNESCO 2021).

The right to SNE for children with SEN is statutory and regulated by the MESRF (Art. 42; Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012). Each child's needs are assessed by multiple government services and professionals from the fields of medicine, pedagogy and psychology via the Psychological–Medical–Pedagogical Commission (PMPC). In collaboration with parents, the PMPC provides guidance on which educational programme and education placement school are best suited to each child; however, parents have the right to refuse these recommendations (Art. 44; Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012). As pointed out by UNESCO (2021), this interdisciplinary multiple government service, as well as increased cooperation with parents, has been an important step towards a more inclusive system.

A successful move towards inclusion presupposes parental involvement in their children's learning (UNESCO 2021). Only in 2012 did the Russian educational policy accept parents (or legal representatives of the child) as a part of the educational process, emphasising their important role in the child's SNE (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012). The FLE orients educators and parents towards a joint partnership directed at children's development and SNE (Art. 41; Art. 42; Art. 44; Art. 66; Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012). The FLE also outlines the appropriate requisites for carrying out various forms of SNE, encouraging parents to become involved in their child's education. There is, however, a lack of clarity and specificity in terms of further parental rights, responsibilities and involvement in developing educational goals and standards towards inclusive education of children with SEN, as shown in Alekhina's (2017) study. Additionally, Alekhina (2017) showed the contradictions between the rights that are assigned to parents and extent of their participation in changing practices and conditions for the inclusive education of children with SEN; the findings suggest that at the government level, clear policies that allow for strong, supportive, respectful and meaningful involvement of parents in developing inclusive education for children with SEN are still needed.

Because Russia is a large country and approaches towards inclusive education on the different levels of the educational system move slowly, numerous associations, networks

and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) have been formed to develop parental involvement capabilities and promote inclusion in education (UNESCO 2021). These organisations also play a fundamental role in the demand for a good quality education. For example, NGOs support families with children with SEN, developing parent awareness of various aspects of inclusion and in independently monitoring legislation implementation. Moreover, various associations help disseminate information about inclusive education in regions, provide professional support and share good practices (Vserosijskaja Organizacija Roditelej Detej- Invalidov 2021; UNESCO 2021, 138).

## Design and method

Online social communities and social media websites (e.g. Facebook) are popular arenas for discussion and interaction between people with similar interests. These platforms made it possible to follow the discussions held by national NGOs, networks and associations for parents with children with SEN. The subject most frequently discussed on these online platforms was the inclusive education of children with SEN from a parental point of view.

The authors developed a methodology and design targeting parents with children with SEN, ultimately encouraging them to participate in the study, which consisted of semistructured interviews. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and full lockdown changed our plans. As such, to obtain extensive data in a relatively wide and flexible way, *an exploratory qualitative questionnaire* was chosen.

For the purposes of the current study, ‘to explore’ means to pilot the preliminary research to clarify the exact nature of the problem chosen for the study. More specifically, the exploration was a means of becoming familiar with parents’ opinions on what inclusive education for their children with SEN should consist of and parents’ points of view on the aspects they deemed important in providing an education for children with SEN in an inclusive school context. As a result, a new discussion framework was identified (Hanssen 2018; Stebbings 2001). A qualitative online questionnaire, called ‘The Point of View’, was developed and used as to collect the data. The instrument contained six main questions, all of which required text responses (Rivano Eckerdal 2013). The questions were formulated in accordance with the study’s research questions and, for example, asked the following: describe what kind of education is appropriate for your children from your point of view and why; please list the key experiences of the organisation of inclusive education for your child; (...) key experiences of your involvement in the educational process of your child; (...) key experiences or challenges associated with inclusive education of your child; and (...) key experiences of provision of education for your child in an inclusive context. The study did not explore any factors such as children’s age, kind of SEN or the needs of the children and their families; therefore, this information is beyond the scope of the present research. However, background variables of the participants, such as gender (females, males) and place of residence (region, city), were included. Because we wanted to gather the parents’ points of view, a rough criterium was established: parents had to have children with SEN in primary and secondary school (grades 1–11). The questionnaire took approximately 20–30 minutes to complete.

Research was conducted online, and a link to the online questionnaire ‘The Point of View’ was distributed by national NGOs, networks and associations to the parents of

children with SEN via social media websites (Facebook) and WhatsApp groups and via the web forum 'Sovremennoje Detstvo (Современное детство)<sup>1</sup>'.

In this way, we addressed all parents involved in the groups; hence, sample selection was based on the participants who answered the questionnaire. The data were gathered from April 16–24, 2020 (because it was exploratory preliminary research), and a total of 60 informants (N = 60) submitted completed forms.

Most parents participating in online discussion forums in Russia are women, and this was reflected in the fact that 100% of the participating informants were women. Geographically, the informants were spread across Russia but lived primarily in large cities and had children with SEN in school (grades 1–11).

Ethical requirements were met by assuring the participants of their anonymity and confidentiality. Confidentiality was secured by excluding information that would make it possible to recognise the participants.

## Analysis

In the current study, the data consisted of texts produced by the parents of children with SEN. The texts were analysed using a thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The authors became familiar with the qualitative responses, made a list of preliminary codes and themes and met to develop an agreement on final themes. The process was as follows: the authors examined the initial codes and organised all of these codes into subthemes; the subthemes were then reviewed and modified; and the main themes developed. The main themes were *parental views on inclusive education for children with SEN and features for the proper provision of education for children with SEN in an inclusive context*.

## Results

The findings were organised according to the identified themes and described through quotations from the respondents' qualitative responses. Quotations were typical for each theme across the sample, and all respondents were represented in the description of the findings.

### *Parental views on inclusive education for children with SEN*

The first theme focuses on parents' experiences of inclusive education for their children with SEN.

All parents (60) shared a clear view that education for their children with SEN should be in accordance with FLE standards for inclusivity. A closer look shows that most were expecting their children to be accepted and socialised in general schools; they also expressed frustration over the fact that it is still very complicated to include children with SEN in general schools in Russia, despite the country's relatively clear inclusion policy. For example, one parent stated the following:

The only thing I want is an accessible and inclusive education for my child! I am frustrated that this has still not been realised. Through inclusive education, my child can be socialised in society so that they do not feel uncomfortable or different among 'normal' children.

The statements from some parents (50) confirm that accessible inclusive education is important and that it should be suitable for each child, that is, with individual routes that help them adapt to real life:

Inclusive education should take into consideration my child's knowledge and abilities. Moreover, an accessible environment is strongly needed so that my child can study in a class with everyone and on an equal footing with everyone.

Furthermore, several parents (10) expressed the importance of recognising inclusive education as an *equal* right of all children, highlighting children's rights to codetermination:

The child should also decide [. . .] whether he will study in the general classroom – [. . .] he can choose individual education or home education.

A significant number of parents (56) were appreciative of individual forms of education within certain inclusive contexts and wanted to see even more of a focus on children's individual development and specialised support:

The child must have an individual development plan and form necessary personal, social, household and educational skills in accordance with his capabilities. It is necessary to assess the individual capabilities of the child and form classes or small groups based on these capabilities.

Moreover, a few statements (4) pointed out that special schools and home education were seen as positive learning environments:

To master basic skills such as reading, writing and counting, as well as behaviour in society and obedience to the general requirements of decency, the individual approach is essential [this can be taught], for example, in a calm home environment.

### ***Features for the proper provision of education to children with SEN in an inclusive context***

In the parental responses, we identified several key aspects for the provision of education for children with SEN in an inclusive school context.

#### ***Teacher proficiency***

The most important prerequisite to the provision of adequate education for children with SEN in an inclusive context is *teachers' ability* to do so. Most parents (59) who answered the questionnaire felt that teachers lacked adequate knowledge and experience for working with children with SEN in inclusive settings. In other words, the parents experienced difficulty relying on professionals. This was expressed in various ways, and one example is the following statement:

There is a serious lack of teachers that are properly educated . . . truly PREPARED (not just passing two-month courses) teachers who really know how to convey material to children with SEN for UNDERSTANDING and FORMATION of speech are needed. Teachers should also be able to understand children and the essence of their pathologies. I also believe that teachers should improve their qualifications for working with children with SEN every year.



However, according to one parent, the proficiency of the teachers was adequate. This parent was satisfied with the support measures chosen for their children's specific needs. Nevertheless, most parents (59) called for different support methods to develop their children's learning and social skills. Based on the statements, teachers were seen as lacking the skills needed to present material based on the child's peculiarities of individual ability and to use the child's strengths. In addition, the parents stated that there was a lack of proficiency among teachers in terms of individualising the educational process, adapting learning material and establishing communication between the child with SEN and their peers:

[The] teacher must know HOW to find an approach to such children, be able to attract [their] attention, build their speech in such a way that the child with SEN understands their explanations. The teacher must invent ways to convey the essence of information to the child, must make colourful materials, understand how a child who does not understand the meaning of many words and concepts could understand what they are trying to convey to them.

### *Parental involvement*

The second key aspect when educating children with SEN in an inclusive school context was *parents' views* on cooperation with teachers and their *involvement* in their children's education.

All parents (60) said that they would like to be more involved in their children's educational process. The parents were open to dialogue and willing to cooperate in various ways with teachers:

I am ready and I am open to cooperation [...], but parents are practically excluded from the education of their child. The school must cooperate with the parent in continuous work on the education of the child with SEN. I can help teachers better understand my child! I can share my knowledge about my child's development, help to complete the teacher's assignments [...] I can contribute by cooperating, preparing individual training programmes, and finding consultants and training webinars for the teacher.

However, there were also statements reflecting parents' frustration over the notion that a lack of parental involvement, when combined with teachers' lack of proficiency, may negatively influence a child's opportunities for short- and long-term development. The following statement, for example, shows that the parent would very much like to help their child not only with homework, but also with the whole educational process:

The union of a parent and a teacher should be constant and fruitful, but it is not like that. Now I help by explaining everything to my child, absolutely everything, including topics in ALL subjects they should learn in school. I make materials, draw diagrams, invent ways and methods to make my child understand the school programme, but it's very hard [...]. I need to do it because the school is not as interested in a child's progression and results as much as parents are. And I am in a hurry because I know that in the next lesson at school there will be new homework and new topics, and it will also take us a lot of time and effort to make it through (it is sad that the child cannot remember everything, because of his pathologies). I'm not just doing homework with my child. I am fully engaged in his education!

In addition, despite the desire to be more involved – and even when doing so – the parents still expressed a common view highlighting the need for help in supporting their

children through the educational process. Most of the parents (55) at times felt excluded and characterised their situation as helpless, despondent and exhausted:

The composition of a school environment that can be accessed and used to the greatest extent possible by children with, for example, cerebral palsy, autism, hearing problems or visual impairments, is totally absent. In our town, there is also a lack of accessibility to transport, so all parents have not only to teach their children, but also be their assistants, drivers and so on, and it is 24/7 ... it is a frenzied load on parents, so many cannot bear it.

### *Acceptance of children with SEN*

The third aspect that parents deemed as important to the provision of education for children with SEN in an inclusive school context was *understanding* and *acceptance* of their children – by teachers and society in general.

All parents (60) wished for their children to have the right to participate in and play a role in society. The parents wished for their children to be valued and feel welcomed by teachers:

I want my child to be accepted by society and to be a fully-fledged individual who enjoys a learning process in which there is no discrimination and no restrictions. I want the child to be like all other children. [I want this] so that he will have a chance to continue his studies after school, a chance to study a profession in which he may get a real job and provide for himself later in life on his own.

A majority (58) highlighted issues surrounding teachers' personal qualities, beliefs and views concerning the acceptance of children with SEN as individuals and equal members of the same space, sharing the same opportunities and activities:

There is a great lack of interested, loving teachers! An understanding and emotional attitude is completely absent. Not all teachers understand that my child is not at all worse than a "normal" child and is, in many ways, even better.

There seems, however, to be a variation in how teachers accept children with SEN. As the below statement makes clear, some parents (2) observed great acceptance of their children, claiming that teachers looked for ways to understand their children, engage with them and provide a great deal of care:

Our teacher works one hundred percent with the children of our class! I am happy with everything.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The current article's starting point was, first, to look at parents' opinions and explore their points of view on inclusive education for their children with SEN. The second aim was to deepen the understanding of what aspects parents deemed important to the provision of education for children with SEN in an inclusive school context.

In terms of the first aim, there was some obvious tension between the parents' opinions. On the one hand, inclusive education as an equal right for all children has been highly welcomed and long awaited. On the other hand, several parents justified various forms of segregation, thus expressing scepticism towards inclusive education. This

scepticism points to a lack of focus on the development of individual approaches towards children's learning and cognitive and behavioural attainment (Kutepova et al. 2021). One possible explanation is linked to Russia's history of educational development, in which the establishment of inclusive processes has been marked by national characteristics. We have seen a slow emergence of new ideas concerning certain values and principles of inclusive education at the political and, in part, practical levels (Amiridze 2012; Furyaeva and Furyaev 2016; FLE 2012; Kutepova et al. 2021). The new law (FLE) presenting inclusive education as a guide and priority for developing education in the country has been adopted (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012). Conversely, such new concepts have not yet received the necessary acknowledgement, justification and support on the societal, political or practical levels (Alekhina 2016; Khusnutdinova 2017; Ryapisova 2017). The systems in Russia have not yet made efforts to support local general schools by assisting them in developing their capacity to respond to diversity (Ainscow 2021). Comparatively speaking, the position of SNE is already firmly established, as are the tasks and responsibilities of special schools. This represents strong governance. As such, parents are reluctant to abandon the segregated solution that they believe is the most appropriate for their child's learning and cognitive and behavioural development in favour of a more inclusive system (Hanssen, Hansén, and Kristina Ström 2021).

In terms of the second aim, the features parents wanted to see implemented for children with SEN to thrive and develop in inclusive school systems are scarce. The first feature is linked to teachers' proficiency. Most parents described a situation in which teachers lacked the knowledge and experience required to work with children with SEN and failed to adequately implement or understand the principle of inclusion. Only one parent expressed satisfaction with teachers' proficiency. As such, the parents were forced to choose between ensuring their child's needs (implying placement in special schools, classes or homes) and ensuring their child's right to participate and have the same opportunities as other children. This result is in line with the literature, which has shown that when it comes to inclusion, teachers' knowledge of how to work with students with SEN in inclusive settings is not taken into account as a significant part of their proficiency (Grunt 2019; Karabanova 2020; Kantor and Mazur 2019). It is, however, fair to claim that teachers play a key role in the realisation of inclusion within the education system (Ainscow 2021). Evidence suggests that countries in which teachers have experience working with children with SEN in inclusive settings show higher levels of excellence and more positive attitudes towards students with SEN (Kutepova et al. 2021). This means that without equipping teachers with adequate knowledge and experience of the principles of inclusion, attempts to include children with SEN in general schools might be complicated (Kutepova et al. 2021). As such, the development of competency in terms of 'inclusive readiness' – that is, the development of reflexive abilities, the formation of attitudes towards openness and acceptance and the formation of an empathic understanding of children with SEN – is one way in which teachers may become proficient in providing education and instruction in inclusive settings (Hanssen 2018).

Based on the perspectives expressed by the participants, the second feature lacking from the inclusive education of children with SEN is parental involvement. Even though the FLE orients educators and parents towards a joint partnership (Art. 41; Art. 42; Art. 44; Art. 66; Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2012), most

parents stated that the degree of their collaboration with teachers concerning the educational process for their children with SEN was limited. Our findings have revealed a significant discrepancy between schools' excessive requirements for parents and the capabilities of their children with SEN. In the struggle to meet school requirements, we can assume that parents' involvement in their children's educational processes is extremely high. This was, however, seen as a problem because several parents felt excluded, helpless, despondent and exhausted. These results may stem primarily from the situation surrounding parental involvement and support in Russia in general. Looking at the ongoing debate over parental involvement in Russia, we can see that the development of inclusive education for children with SEN was still founded on experts' opinions, excluding parents' input (Alekhina 2017; Hanssen 2018; Hanssen and Mamonka 2021). Despite the aforementioned claims that parents are important actors in the school context, they are not always seen as equal or competent, nor as potential resources who can contribute to various approaches that promote children's social, academic and behavioural outcomes. Rather, parents are seen as 'receivers' of educational paths for their children with SEN. As such, this one-sidedness in parental involvement contributes to increased asymmetry, and expert dominance may lead to the risk of diminishing parents as active, meaning-making subjects (Alekhina 2017; Hanssen 2018; Hanssen and Mamonka 2021).

The last feature was an observable lack of understanding and acceptance of children with SEN by teachers and society in general. Only in a few cases did parents experience teachers looking for ways to understand their children, engage with them and provide them with a great deal of care. In all, the picture of understanding and acceptance was bleak. Our results correspond to the findings of several researchers who have claimed that Russian society is still unprepared to implement inclusive education (Alekhina 2016; Khusnutdinova 2017; Ryapisova 2017). Although the country's system has moved towards inclusion, there are still strong remnants of the old system's view of diversity as being negative (Hanssen, Hansén, and Kristina Ström 2021). Children with SEN are not always seen as equal, competent, contributing and creative members of society. Here, practitioners first perceive children as objects of educational activity, at whom a specified activity is directed, as receivers of knowledge and as receivers of prescriptions of regimes; only thereafter are the children seen as potential resources and as contributing and creating subjects (Alekhina 2017; Avdeeva 2016; Hanssen 2018). The consequence has been that the development of acceptance and relationships, if at all considered, is judged from the perspective of training and treatment, and emotional warmth and closeness tend to be restricted (Hanssen 2018).

To conclude, it is worth repeating that in Russia, the challenge is tearing apart the old traditions and structures and building new ideas about inclusion. Yet a basis for the development of ideas concerning inclusive education of children with SEN must be considered to be very fragile (Hanssen, Hansén, and Kristina Ström 2021).

## Limitations

Several limitations should be taken into consideration. Because of the small sample of participants (N = 60), the findings cannot be generalised. In this sense, the study must be recognised as an exploratory one. The survey itself suffered from the disadvantage of

a lack of the participants' physical presence, which could have affected their degree of engagement. Simultaneously, it was not possible for the researchers to influence the responses and outcomes of the process. However, the themes that made up the questionnaire could have been inspiring to different informants and to varying degrees, or they might have required experience or knowledge that some informants did not have (Rivano Eckerdal 2013). Additionally, the answers could have been based on emotional experiences; those individuals who perceived themselves as disadvantaged may have been more likely to participate. Finally, the response rate may have been impacted by the limited period in which the questionnaire could be completed, which was only two weeks.

Nevertheless, with a qualitative questionnaire, we were able to obtain deeper insights into parents' views on inclusive education for their children with SEN. The answers reflect on varying experiences, giving us a broad picture of inclusive education for children with SEN. However, it must be kept in mind that parents' views are subjective and attached to their frame of reference; as a result, they may appear too unilateral by providing an illusory view of exactness. Moreover, the parents' perspectives were formed through their observations of the school and through communication with their child. Regardless, parents still strive to capture features reflective of the conditions in their respective schools.

We sought to make the study reliable and valid by scrutinising the aforementioned aspects as a whole to maximise authenticity, understanding, transparency and honesty (Hanssen 2018). This helps in facilitating naturalistic generalisation, where the reader can recognise their own situation through the findings, so the study may be perceived as useful to the reader's own situation. As such, naturalistic generalisation is about heightening the utility of the study's findings. Nevertheless, it is up to the reader to decide whether the results are beneficial and transferable to other contexts (Cohen et al. 2011; Hanssen 2018).

In conclusion, a number of suggestions can be made. First, to enhance and positively position inclusive education in the country, we recommend that Russia increase its focus on parental involvement as a means of maximising child social and academic development in inclusive contexts. Parents' voices and their potential to influence the content and form of inclusive education are vital. Therefore, there is a need to recognise that parents play a crucial role in aiding inclusive education, and their view being involved as an equal responsibility is an important basis for developing productive and effective strategies to encourage meaningful inclusive education.

At the policy–document level, it is necessary to clearly describe parental involvement as a form of equal cooperation and partnership, with examples being given of mutual responsibilities and ways of working towards fruitful inclusive education of children with SEN.

Second, for developing inclusive education – as well as to enhance the quality of parental involvement – preparing teachers to work in inclusive environments is needed. We argue that politicians, educators and researchers must critically review the construction and content of the programme and curriculum to prepare teachers in Russia; they must incorporate the ability to work with children's various needs in the inclusive context as a standard requirement for future teachers.

Finally, the current paper suggests that researchers address the aforementioned limitations by carrying out similar research and collecting more extensive data to provide a broad picture of parents' opinions on what inclusive education for their children with SEN should consist of.

## Note

1. <https://toipkro.ru/index.php?act=news&id=5001>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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