

BETWEEN ACCEPTANCE AND ANXIETY: Parents' Sociocultural Beliefs toward Inclusive Education in Eastern Aceh

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Parents' sociocultural beliefs; Inclusive education; Educational acceptance; Aceh

History:

Received (24 January 2026)

Revised (28 January 2026)

Accepted (30 January 2026)

ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has been widely promoted as a rights-based educational reform aimed at ensuring equitable access for learners with disabilities within mainstream schooling. Despite strong policy commitments, the implementation of inclusive education often remains fragile, particularly in socioculturally and religiously grounded contexts. This study explores how parents in Eastern Aceh, Indonesia, construct meanings of disability and inclusive education through their sociocultural and religious belief systems, and how these beliefs shape their educational decisions. Employing a qualitative design, this study conducts a secondary thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with parents of disabled and non-disabled students collected during a multi-site research project in Eastern Aceh. The data were reanalyzed using a sociocultural framework to foreground parental meaning-making processes that have not been previously examined. Thematic analysis reveals four dominant patterns: disability as divine destiny or moral test, parental anxiety over social exposure and stigma, protection-oriented educational choices, and limited trust in schools' capacity to support inclusive practices. The findings indicate that while religious interpretations often foster acceptance of disability, they may simultaneously constrain parental advocacy and normalize educational exclusion. Inclusive education, therefore, is mediated not only by institutional readiness but also by deeply embedded belief systems that regulate parental expectations and engagement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has increasingly been positioned as a moral, legal, and pedagogical imperative within global education discourse. Rooted in principles of equity, participation, and social justice, inclusive education seeks to ensure that learners with disabilities are educated alongside their non-disabled peers within regular schooling environments (Istiarsyah et al., 2024; Ainscow et al., 2006; UNESCO, 1994). International policy frameworks consistently emphasize access, accommodation, and institutional readiness; however, empirical research demonstrates that the translation of inclusive ideals into practice remains uneven, particularly in socioculturally diverse and non-Western contexts (Slee, 2011).

In Indonesia, inclusive education has been formally endorsed through national legislation and regional regulations, positioning regular schools as primary sites for educating students with special needs. Despite this policy commitment, studies continue to report persistent challenges related to teacher preparedness, infrastructure, and institutional coordination (Muchsin et al., 2022; Istiarsyah et al., 2019). Beyond these structural concerns, inclusive education is embedded within cultural systems of meaning that shape how disability itself is understood and responded to at the community and family levels (Shakespeare, 2013, pp. 67–69).

Parents occupy a central yet paradoxical position in inclusive education. While they are commonly framed as partners in educational processes, research frequently reduces their role to logistical support or compliance with school policy. Such approaches overlook the fact that parental beliefs actively shape educational decision-making, particularly in contexts where disability is interpreted through religious, moral, or communal frameworks rather than biomedical or rights-based perspectives (Shakespeare, 2013, pp. 13–16; Slee, 2011, pp. 63–67).

In Aceh, Indonesia's only province governed by the formal implementation of Islamic law (Sharia), sociocultural and religious values play a decisive role in shaping everyday understandings of misfortune, health, and difference. Disability is often framed as *takdir* (divine destiny), *ujian* (a test from God), or *amanah* (a trust to be safeguarded). Research on religious meaning-making in Acehnese society suggests that such interpretations may foster emotional acceptance while simultaneously discouraging social critique or institutional demand-making (Manan et al., 2023; Satria et al., 2024). Acceptance, therefore, does not automatically translate into advocacy for educational rights.

Previous studies conducted in Aceh have documented the structural and institutional limitations of inclusive education, including limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and weak policy enforcement (Normawati et al., 2024; Muchsin et al., 2022). Complementary research has also shown that religious belief systems strongly influence community responses to illness, disability, and crises in Aceh, shaping help-seeking behavior and social expectations (Manan et al., 2021, 2023; Satria et al., 2024). However, empirical inquiry into how parents specifically construct

inclusive education, predominantly on how they interpret its risks, moral implications, and social consequences for their children, remains limited.

An earlier qualitative study examining inclusive education in Eastern Aceh provided a broad overview of perspectives from multiple educational stakeholders, including students, teachers, administrators, and parents (Judijanto et al., 2025; Muchsin et al., 2022). While parental voices were present, they functioned primarily as supplementary data supporting systemic and institutional analysis. As a result, parents' belief systems were described rather than analytically foregrounded, leaving the sociocultural logic guiding parental acceptance, hesitation, or resistance toward inclusive schooling insufficiently explored.

This omission is significant. Research on inclusive education consistently shows that parental anxiety, particularly fear of stigma, bullying, and social labelling, can lead to protective strategies that limit children's participation in regular schooling (Slee, 2011, pp. 63–67). In contexts where parents also lack trust in schools' capacity to accommodate disability, inclusive education risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive, existing at the level of policy without meaningful enactment.

From a sociocultural perspective, disability is not merely an individual condition but a socially constructed category shaped by dominant moral narratives, religious interpretations, and community norms (Shakespeare, 2013, pp. 29–32). In religious societies, these narratives often humanize disability while simultaneously naturalizing exclusion. Understanding inclusive education, therefore, requires attention not only to institutional readiness but also to the belief systems that regulate parental expectations and educational choices.

Despite extensive policy support for inclusive education in Indonesia, implementation remains uneven, particularly in socioculturally and religiously grounded regions such as Aceh. Existing studies in Aceh have largely emphasized institutional readiness, teacher competence, and infrastructural constraints, with limited attention to how parental belief systems shape engagement with inclusive schooling.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how parents in Eastern Aceh construct meanings of disability and inclusive education through sociocultural and religious frameworks, and how these constructions influence educational decision-making. By foregrounding parental perspectives, this study contributes to a more contextualized understanding of inclusive education in Sharia-based regions, where belief systems play a central role in mediating policy implementation.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do parents in Eastern Aceh interpret disability within religious and cultural frameworks?
2. What belief-driven anxieties and expectations do parents hold toward inclusive education?

3. How do these sociocultural beliefs shape parental support, hesitation, or resistance toward inclusive schooling?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Inclusive Education: From Policy Ideals to Sociocultural Realities

Inclusive education has long been promoted as a rights-based and socially just approach to schooling, aiming to ensure that learners with disabilities are educated alongside their non-disabled peers within mainstream environments. Internationally, this commitment was formalized through the Salamanca Statement, which framed inclusion as a systemic reform rather than mere physical placement (UNESCO, 1994). Subsequent scholarship emphasized that inclusive education requires transformation across curriculum, pedagogy, school culture, and community engagement (Ainscow et al., 2006).

However, more than two decades after Salamanca, inclusive education continues to face significant implementation gaps. Ainscow et al. (2019) argue that despite global consensus, inclusion often remains rhetorical, with exclusion persisting through institutional routines and social attitudes. Slee (2011, pp. 145–147) further contends that inclusive education frequently operates as a symbolic policy, while schools continue to reproduce forms of marginalization through subtle practices and unchallenged norms.

In non-Western and developing contexts, inclusive education is shaped not only by resource constraints but also by sociocultural belief systems that influence how disability is perceived and managed. Mariga et al. (2014, pp. 2–4) challenge the assumption that inclusion fails primarily due to limited resources, demonstrating that attitudinal and cultural barriers often pose greater obstacles than material shortages. These insights suggest that inclusive education must be examined beyond institutional readiness, taking into account the cultural environments in which schools and families are embedded.

2.2. Inclusive Education in Indonesia and Aceh

Indonesia has formally adopted inclusive education through national legislation and ministerial regulations, encouraging regular schools to accommodate students with special needs. Despite this policy endorsement, empirical studies consistently report uneven implementation across regions, marked by inadequate teacher preparation, limited learning accommodations, and weak institutional coordination (Muchsin et al., 2022), not to mention administrative tasks dedicated to them (Kamarullah, Istiarsyah, et al., 2024). Varied needs for students with disabilities also requires efficient differentiated instructions in the class (Muksalmina et al., 2024). These challenges are particularly evident in peripheral and rural areas.

Aceh presents a distinctive case due to its special autonomy and the formal implementation of Islamic law. While provincial regulations explicitly support inclusive

education, institutional readiness varies significantly, especially in Eastern Aceh. Schools often struggle to reconcile inclusive mandates with practical constraints, resulting in partial or symbolic inclusion (Alshamri, 2020).

Beyond institutional limitations, Acehnese society is characterized by strong religious and communal orientations that shape interpretations of education, health, and social difference. Research on social responses to crisis and vulnerability in Aceh shows that religious belief systems play a central role in meaning-making processes (Manan et al., 2023). Similarly, studies on health-seeking behavior reveal a preference for traditional or spiritually grounded practices, reflecting deeply rooted cultural logics (Satria et al., 2024). These findings are directly relevant to inclusive education, as disability is often interpreted through similar religious and moral frameworks.

Bibliometric evidence further indicates that Indonesian inclusive education research remains predominantly school-centered, focusing on pedagogy, teacher competence, and policy analysis, while family and community belief systems receive comparatively little attention (Kamarullah et al., 2024). This imbalance underscores the need to broaden analytical perspectives beyond institutional domains.

2.3. Parents and Inclusive Education: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Decision-Making

Parents are widely recognized as key stakeholders in inclusive education, yet their roles are often narrowly conceptualized. Much of the literature frames parents as collaborators who support school programs or comply with institutional decisions, implicitly assuming alignment between parental expectations and inclusive education policies (Hornby, 2011, pp. 3–6). Such approaches tend to overlook how parental beliefs actively shape educational choices.

A substantial body of research demonstrates that parental attitudes significantly influence the success of inclusive education. De Boer et al. (2010), in their review of parental attitudes toward inclusive education, found that parents' acceptance is strongly shaped by concerns over social interaction, emotional safety, and perceived school readiness. Fear of stigma and peer rejection often leads parents to adopt protective strategies that limit children's participation in inclusive settings.

In many contexts, these concerns are intensified by cultural norms surrounding disability. Goffman's (1963, pp. 92–94) seminal work on stigma highlights how social labeling produces shame and identity management strategies, particularly within tightly knit communities. For parents of children with disabilities, schooling decisions are therefore not purely educational, but deeply social and moral, involving considerations of family reputation, community judgment, and emotional well-being.

2.4. Sociocultural and Religious Constructions of Disability

Disability studies scholars have long emphasized that disability is not merely a medical condition, but a socially constructed category shaped by cultural narratives and moral interpretations (Shakespeare, 2014). In religious societies, disability is

frequently interpreted through theological frameworks that attribute difference to divine will, moral testing, or spiritual purpose.

Miles (2002) argues that religious interpretations of disability often produce ambivalent outcomes: while they may encourage compassion and acceptance, they can also naturalize exclusion by framing disability as fate rather than a social issue requiring institutional response. Comparative studies in the Global South similarly demonstrate that religious and cultural beliefs significantly influence parental expectations of education for children with disabilities (Danseco, 1997; Ghai, 2019, pp. 1–5).

Research conducted in Aceh aligns with these observations. Religious meaning-making has been shown to shape community responses to illness, crisis, and vulnerability, promoting acceptance while discouraging social critique or institutional demand-making (Manan et al., 2023). In the educational context, such beliefs may lead parents to accept disability as *takdir* or *ujian*, while simultaneously limiting expectations for inclusive schooling.

2.5. Parents as Cultural Mediators at the Family-School Interface

Recent scholarship increasingly recognizes parents as cultural mediators who negotiate between family beliefs and institutional expectations. (Hornby, 2011, pp. 23–26) emphasizes that effective inclusive education depends on meaningful school–family partnerships that acknowledge parents' values and worldviews. When schools fail to engage with parental belief systems, inclusive education risks becoming fragile or contested.

Studies in inclusive education further indicate that parental anxiety and protectionism are not merely personal responses but socially produced reactions shaped by stigma, institutional mistrust, and cultural norms (Lalvani, 2013). In contexts where schools are perceived as ill-equipped to support disability, parents may prioritize emotional safety over social participation, reinforcing educational exclusion despite inclusive policies.

2.6. Gaps in the Literature and Positioning of the Present Study

Taken together, existing literature reveals several gaps. First, inclusive education research in Indonesia remains largely institution-centered, with limited attention to parents' sociocultural belief systems. Second, studies involving parents often prioritize surface-level attitudes or participation metrics, rather than deeper processes of meaning-making. Third, in Aceh specifically, empirical research has yet to foreground parents as cultural actors whose beliefs actively mediate inclusive education implementation.

Recent bibliometric analyses confirm that sociocultural perspectives remain underrepresented in inclusive education scholarship (Kamarullah, Hasrina, et al., 2024). Addressing this gap is critical for advancing inclusive education in religiously

grounded societies, where policy compliance alone is insufficient to ensure meaningful inclusion. Responding to these gaps, the present study repositions parents as central analytical subjects in examining inclusive education in Eastern Aceh. By foregrounding parents' sociocultural and religious belief systems, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of inclusion that integrates policy, culture, and lived experience.

3. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a secondary thematic analysis approach. The analysis focused on semi-structured interview data obtained from parents as part of a larger, funded qualitative project examining inclusive education in Eastern Aceh, Indonesia. While the broader dataset has partially informed prior publications, the present study constitutes a distinct analytical inquiry by specifically examining parents' sociocultural beliefs and meaning-making processes related to disability and inclusive education. These aspects have not been previously analyzed through a sociocultural or belief-oriented theoretical lens.

Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for this study as it allows for in-depth exploration of subjective meanings, values, and culturally embedded interpretations that shape educational decision-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the context of inclusive education, parental beliefs are socially constructed and deeply intertwined with religion, culture, and community norms, requiring interpretive rather than positivist approaches.

3.1. Research Context and Participants

The study was situated in Eastern Aceh areas, covering three regions: Langsa (LA), Aceh Tamiang (AT), and East Aceh (EA). These regions are characterized by strong religious traditions and evolving implementation of inclusive education policies. Participants consisted of parents of both disabled and non-disabled students whose children were enrolled in regular or inclusive schools within the study areas.

Parents were originally recruited through purposive sampling during the primary data collection phase, based on their direct involvement in their children's educational trajectories. Their inclusion enabled access to lived experiences, belief systems, and expectations regarding inclusive education, particularly in contexts where disability is often interpreted through moral, religious, and communal frameworks.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the informants

<i>Code</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Domicile</i>	<i>Schooling decision</i>	<i>Reason for the decision</i>
P01	35	F	Housewife	LA	Inclusion	Belief in social integration
P02	38	F	Trader	LA	Inclusion (conditional)	Proximity to school
P03	45	M	Farmer	EA	Exclusion	Fear of stigma

P04	36	F	Private employee	EA	Inclusion	School recommendation
P05	51	M	Civil servant	AT	Exclusion	Perceived lack of teacher support
P06	46	M	Entrepreneur	AT	Exclusion	Child's emotional distress
P07	39	F	Housewife	EA	Inclusion (conditional)	Religious acceptance
P08	37	M	Fisherman	LA	Exclusion	Bullying concerns
P09	56	M	Farmer	EA	Exclusion	Limited trust in school

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the parent informants included in this study. To maintain confidentiality, participants are identified using coded initials (P01–P09). The informants represent a diverse range of occupations and domiciles across the three regions.

The column “Schooling Decision” indicates parents’ primary educational choices for their children at the time of data collection. “Inclusion” refers to enrollment in regular or inclusive schools, while “Exclusion” denotes parental preference for special schools, home-based learning, or restricted participation in mainstream classrooms despite the availability of inclusive options. Several informants are categorized as “Inclusion (Conditional),” reflecting parents’ acceptance of inclusive education only when specific social or emotional conditions were perceived as safe for their children.

The final column outlines parents’ self-reported reasons for their schooling decisions, highlighting factors such as religious acceptance, fear of stigma, perceived teacher competence, and concerns over children’s emotional well-being. These demographic characteristics provide essential context for understanding the belief-driven patterns discussed in the Findings section.

3.2. Data Collection

The data analyzed in this study were derived from semi-structured interviews conducted in 2020 as part of an ethically approved and institutionally funded research project on inclusive education in Eastern Aceh. Informed consent was obtained from all participants during the initial data collection, and confidentiality was ensured through the anonymization of personal identifiers. For the present study, only interview transcripts involving parents were purposively extracted and reanalyzed.

The original study primarily examined institutional readiness and stakeholder perspectives, and the parental interview data were only partially reported. This study therefore employed secondary qualitative analysis to revisit these underexplored parental narratives with a distinct analytical focus on sociocultural and religious meaning-making. Secondary analysis was considered appropriate because the dataset contained rich, context-specific accounts directly relevant to the present research objectives, and because reanalysis enabled a theoretically focused examination without additional data collection.

The reanalysis adhered to ethical standards for secondary qualitative research, as the data were reused for a new research purpose without altering participant

anonymity or violating the scope of the original consent (Heaton, 2008). Guided by a sociocultural framework, the parental interviews were subjected to thematic analysis to identify belief-driven patterns influencing engagement with inclusive education.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Initial code generation
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

The analysis was theory-informed, drawing on sociocultural perspectives of disability and parental belief systems. Coding focused on parents' narratives related to religious interpretations of disability, stigma, anxiety, protection, trust in schools, and expectations toward inclusive education. Rather than quantifying responses, the analysis emphasized meaning patterns, contradictions, and culturally salient expressions.

To enhance analytical rigor, verbatim excerpts were retained to preserve participants' voices and contextual meanings. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis, particularly in recognizing how dominant religious and cultural discourses in Aceh shape parental perceptions of disability and schooling.

3.4. Ethics

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through credibility, dependability, and transparency. Credibility was strengthened by prolonged engagement with the original dataset and the use of rich, illustrative quotations. Dependability was addressed by applying a systematic and replicable analytical procedure. Transparency was maintained by explicitly distinguishing this study's analytical focus from prior publications derived from the same project.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of parental interviews. The analysis generated four interrelated themes that explain how parents' sociocultural and religious belief systems shape perceptions, emotions, and decisions regarding inclusive education in Eastern Aceh. Figure 1 illustrates the overall thematic structure and relationships among themes, while the excerpts below provide empirical evidence grounding the analysis.

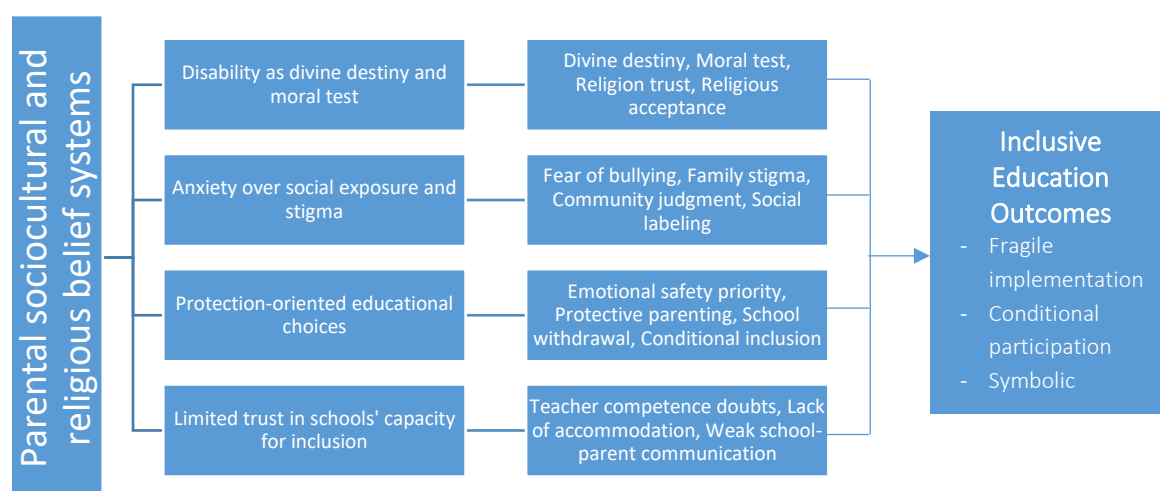


Figure 1. Parents' sociocultural and religious beliefs shaping perceptions and decisions regarding inclusive education in Eastern Aceh.

Based on Figure 1, the subsections below display themes generated from the interview analysis. They suggest the relationships between parents' sociocultural beliefs, emotional responses, educational decisions, and inclusive education outcomes by presenting related interview excerpts and bold keywords.

4.1 Theme 1: Disability as Divine Destiny and Moral Test

A dominant theme across interviews was the construction of disability as divine destiny (*takdir*), moral test (*ujian*), and religious trust (*amanah*). Parents frequently framed their children's disabilities as matters of faith rather than social or educational issues. This belief-oriented framing encouraged acceptance and patience but simultaneously reduced expectations for institutional intervention. One informant explained:

E1: *"From the beginning, we believe this is already takdir. If we keep asking why, it means we are not sincere. This is ujian from Allah, and our duty is to accept it."* (P03).

Similarly, an informant emphasized the notion of responsibility as a religious obligation:

E2: *"This child is an amanah. Whether the school can support him or not is secondary. What matters is that we take care of him properly as parents."* (P07)

Taken together, E1 and E2 illustrate how religious acceptance functions as a moral framework that prioritizes personal endurance over institutional accountability. While such beliefs foster emotional resilience, they also normalize limited educational expectations, positioning inclusive education as optional rather than obligatory.

4.2 Theme 2: Anxiety over Social Exposure and Stigma

Despite religious acceptance of disability, parents expressed strong anxiety related to social exposure, stigma, and community judgment. Fear of bullying and labeling emerged as a central concern influencing schooling decisions.

One of the informants described her apprehension:

E3: *"At home he is fine, but at school I cannot protect him. I am afraid other children will laugh, and that will hurt him more."* (P01)

Another parent highlighted the broader social implications for the family:

E4: *"People may not say it directly, but we can feel the judgment. If something happens at school, the family will also be talked about."* (P05)

Excerpts E3 and E4 demonstrate that stigma is not perceived as an individual risk alone but as a collective social threat. Parental anxiety thus extends beyond children's experiences to include family reputation within tightly knit communities.

4.3 Theme 3: Protection-Oriented Educational Choices

In response to perceived social risks, many parents adopted protection-oriented strategies when making educational decisions. Rather than prioritizing integration, parents emphasized emotional safety and psychological well-being.

One informant admitted his decision to withdraw his child from a regular school:

E5: *"Inclusive education sounds good, but if the child comes home crying every day, what is the benefit? I prefer him to feel safe."* (P06)

Another parent described inclusion as conditional rather than absolute:

E6: *"I agree with inclusion, but only if the school really understands the child. If not, it is better to limit his participation."* (P02)

When read together, E5 and E6 reveal that parental support for inclusive education is conditional, dependent on schools' perceived ability to prevent harm. Protection is framed not as resistance to inclusion, but as an ethical response to uncertainty.

4.4 Theme 4: Limited Trust in Schools' Capacity for Inclusion

Limited trust in schools' capacity to implement inclusive practices effectively emerged as another salient theme. Parents questioned teacher competence, availability of accommodations, and the quality of school–parent communication.

A mother expressed disappointment with classroom practices:

E7: *"They say this is an inclusive school, but the teacher treats him the same as others. There is no special support."* (P04)

Similarly, a father emphasized the lack of transparency:

E8: *"The school never explains what plan they have for my child. Because there is no clear communication, we decide by ourselves."* (P09)

Excerpts E7 and E8 highlight how institutional opacity reinforces parental disengagement. When schools fail to demonstrate concrete inclusive practices, parents rely more heavily on personal beliefs and protective instincts.

4.5 Synthesis of Themes

Across themes, parents' sociocultural and religious belief systems operate as a central organizing framework shaping emotions, decisions, and levels of engagement with inclusive education. Religious acceptance of disability (Theme 1) coexists with anxiety over stigma (Theme 2), leading to protection-oriented educational choices (Theme 3), particularly in contexts where trust in schools is limited (Theme 4). As illustrated in Figure 1, these interrelated themes contribute to fragile and conditional forms of inclusive education, where inclusion exists formally but remains unstable in practice.

Therefore, the findings demonstrate that inclusive education in Eastern Aceh is mediated not only by institutional readiness but also by deeply embedded parental belief systems. While faith-based acceptance provides emotional grounding, it may simultaneously constrain advocacy and normalize exclusion when schools are perceived as unsafe or unprepared.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined how parents in Eastern Aceh construct meanings of disability and inclusive education within sociocultural and religious frameworks, and how these constructions shape educational decision-making. By explicitly linking interview excerpts (E1–E8) with thematic model (Figure 1), this Discussion demonstrates that inclusive education in Aceh is mediated through a belief–emotion–decision pathway rather than through institutional policy alone.

5.1 Religious Acceptance and the Paradox of Inclusion in Sharia-Based Contexts

Parents' framing of disability as *takdir*, *ujian*, and *amanah*, as seen as evidences in Excerpts E1 and E2, illustrates how religious belief systems function as primary interpretive lenses in Acehnese society. In E1, the parent explicitly links acceptance of disability to sincerity of faith, while E2 positions caregiving as a religious obligation rather than an educational entitlement. These excerpts exemplify the upper-left pathway in Figure 1, where belief systems serve as the foundational node shaping subsequent responses. Such interpretations resonate with Miles' (2002) argument that religious frameworks often shape responses to disability more powerfully than biomedical or rights-based models in religious societies.

In a Sharia-based context, in this case, Aceh, religious acceptance functions as a culturally sanctioned coping mechanism, allowing parents to normalize disability within faith-based narratives. This aligns with previous findings in Acehnese communities, where religious interpretations have been shown to shape responses to illness, crisis, and vulnerability (Manan et al., 2023; Satria et al., 2024). However, this study reveals a paradox: acceptance grounded in faith may coexist with limited educational expectations. Disability is accepted morally but not necessarily translated into claims for institutional accommodation or educational entitlement.

This paradox complicates inclusive education discourse, which often assumes that acceptance naturally leads to advocacy. In Sharia-based contexts, questioning institutional inadequacy may be perceived as questioning divine will, thereby discouraging parents from demanding change. Similar dynamics have been reported in other Muslim-majority contexts, where faith-based acceptance can unintentionally depoliticize disability and education (Ghai, 2015; Danseco, 1997).

Unlike secular contexts where acceptance may lead to rights-based claims, Excerpts E1 and E2 show that acceptance in Aceh often redirects responsibility inward, toward parental endurance, rather than outward toward schools or policy structures. This nuance is not captured in infrastructure-focused inclusive education studies and represents a key contextual contribution of this research.

5.2 Stigma, Communal Surveillance, and Parental Anxiety in Aceh

While religious acceptance forms the moral baseline, Excerpts E3 and E4 reveal that parental anxiety is shaped by anticipated stigma rather than direct experiences of discrimination. In E3, the fear of ridicule at school reflects concern for the child's emotional vulnerability, whereas E4 highlights anxiety over family reputation within the community. These excerpts correspond directly to Theme 2 in Figure 1, which positions stigma as a mediating force between belief and decision.

Parental anxiety in this study is deeply intertwined with communal surveillance and social visibility, which are characteristic of Acehnese social life. In tightly knit communities governed by strong moral norms, families are continuously evaluated against expectations of propriety and normalcy. Disability, therefore, becomes not only a personal matter but a public one. The anticipatory stigma here shapes schooling decisions even in the absence of overt discrimination. In Aceh, where community opinion (*haba awak gampong*) carries significant moral weight, the fear of social labeling becomes a powerful deterrent to inclusive participation.

Mariga et al. (2014) argue that in many developing contexts, attitudinal barriers rooted in cultural norms pose greater challenges to inclusion than material constraints. The present study extends this argument by demonstrating how stigma operates preemptively, influencing parental decisions before children fully engage with inclusive environments. Inclusive education, therefore, fails not because of explicit rejection, but because of anticipated social risk.

5.3 Protection-Oriented Decision-Making as Moral Responsibility

Excerpts E5 and E6 illustrate how parental anxiety translates into protection-oriented educational decisions, as depicted in Theme 3 of Figure 1. In E5, withdrawal from inclusive schooling is justified through emotional harm (“crying every day”), while E6 frames inclusion as conditional upon institutional understanding. Crucially, these decisions are not framed by parents as resistance to inclusive education, but as ethical responsibility. In Acehese culture, parental duty includes safeguarding children’s dignity (*jaga marwah aneuk*) and emotional well-being. When inclusive environments are perceived as unsafe, protection becomes a moral imperative.

This finding complicates binary categorizations of parental attitudes as supportive or resistant. Instead, it supports Hornby’s (2011) assertion that parental involvement is negotiated through trust and perceived competence. In Sharia-based regions, such negotiations are further intensified by moral accountability before God and community, making protection-oriented choices socially and religiously legitimate. Lalvani (2013) similarly notes that inclusion becomes conditional when emotional safety is not guaranteed. The findings suggest that inclusive education in Aceh is not rejected ideologically but negotiated ethically, with parents weighing religious values, social risk, and institutional trust simultaneously.

5.4 Institutional Trust, Symbolic Inclusion, and Sharia Governance

Limited trust in schools’ capacity as articulated in Excerpts E7 and E8 connects directly to Theme 4 in Figure 1, which shows institutional trust as a critical determinant of inclusive outcomes. Parents’ references to lack of “special support” (E7) and “clear communication” (E8) reveal how symbolic inclusion emerges when policy rhetoric is not matched by practice. In Aceh, schools operate within a governance structure shaped by both national education policy and regional Sharia implementation. This dual governance can create ambiguity in accountability, particularly regarding inclusive education responsibilities.

Slee’s (2011) concept of symbolic inclusion is highly relevant here. Parents perceive inclusive education as existing at the level of discourse rather than practice, reinforced by limited communication, inadequate accommodations, and insufficient teacher preparation. When inclusive education is framed as a policy obligation rather than a lived practice, parents disengage and rely on personal belief systems.

When schools fail to demonstrate concrete inclusive practices, parents default to belief-based reasoning and protection strategies. Limited trust accelerates the transition from anxiety to withdrawal, resulting in fragile and conditional inclusion rather than sustained participation. This finding resonates with Ainscow et al. (2019), who argue that inclusion often stagnates when schools fail to build trust with families. In Aceh, where moral authority often rests with religious and community leaders rather than institutions, schools must work harder to demonstrate credibility and commitment.

5.5 Repositioning Parents as Sociocultural Agents

This study advances inclusive education scholarship by repositioning parents as sociocultural agents, not peripheral stakeholders. Unlike earlier research in Eastern Aceh that emphasized infrastructural and institutional challenges (Muchsin et al., 2022), this study foregrounds parental belief systems as explanatory mechanisms shaping inclusive outcomes. By situating parental decisions within religious, cultural, and communal contexts, the study extends sociocultural models of disability into Sharia-based educational settings. It demonstrates that inclusion is not merely implemented but interpreted, negotiated, and sometimes constrained by moral logics external to formal education systems.

The findings suggest that inclusive education in Sharia-based regions requires culturally responsive engagement strategies. Schools and policymakers must move beyond procedural inclusion to address parental concerns about stigma, emotional safety, and moral responsibility. Collaboration with religious leaders and community figures may be necessary to reframe inclusive education as compatible with religious values rather than as a secular imposition. Teacher education programs should incorporate sociocultural and religious literacy to better engage parents. Without addressing belief systems, inclusive education risks remaining symbolic and fragile.

Nonetheless, while this study provides in-depth insights, it relies on secondary qualitative analysis, limiting opportunities for follow-up probing. Future studies could adopt ethnographic or longitudinal designs to examine how parental beliefs evolve alongside inclusive education reforms. Comparative research across Sharia-based regions would also enrich understanding of contextual variations. All in all, inclusive education in Eastern Aceh operates at the intersection of policy, belief, and social practice. Without engaging the sociocultural and religious frameworks shaping parental decision-making, inclusive education will remain a moral ideal rather than an educational reality.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how parents in Eastern Aceh construct meanings of disability and inclusive education within sociocultural and religious frameworks, and how these constructions shape educational decision-making. The findings demonstrate that inclusive education in a Sharia-based context is mediated not only by institutional readiness but also by parents' belief systems, emotional considerations, and levels of trust in schools. Religious interpretations of disability foster acceptance and moral responsibility, yet they may simultaneously constrain advocacy for institutional support. Parental anxiety regarding stigma and social exposure, combined with limited trust in schools' capacity to implement inclusive practices, leads to protection-oriented and conditional engagement with inclusive education.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to inclusive education scholarship by extending sociocultural models of disability into a religiously grounded context. It highlights how belief systems function as active mediators between policy and practice, shaping how inclusion is interpreted and enacted at the family level. By repositioning parents as sociocultural agents rather than peripheral stakeholders, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of inclusive education in non-Western and Sharia-based regions. Then, practically, the findings suggest that inclusive education initiatives should move beyond technical implementation to address parental concerns related to stigma, emotional safety, and trust. Schools need to strengthen communication with families and demonstrate concrete inclusive practices to build parental confidence. From a policy standpoint, inclusive education frameworks in Sharia-based regions should incorporate culturally responsive approaches that engage parents and community actors, including religious leaders, to align inclusive education with local values.

This study has several limitations. As a secondary qualitative analysis, it relied on existing interview data, limiting opportunities for further probing and clarification. The findings are also context-specific to Eastern Aceh and may not be directly generalizable to other regions without considering local sociocultural differences. Hence, future research should explore parental belief systems through longitudinal and comparative designs, particularly across different Sharia-based or religiously influenced regions. Further studies could also examine how school–parent partnerships evolve when culturally responsive inclusive education strategies are implemented. Such research would deepen understanding of how inclusive education can be sustainably realized in diverse sociocultural contexts

DECLARATION

Author contribution statement

Kamarullah contributed to conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, data curation, visualization, and writing (original draft and review & editing), and coordinated the overall research process. Anizar contributed to investigation, validation, and writing (review & editing), particularly from a special education perspective. Rizky Zulida contributed to investigation, data curation, and writing (review & editing) with a focus on practical inclusive education contexts. Lola Adres Yanti contributed to validation and writing (review & editing), providing interdisciplinary insights to strengthen conceptual clarity. Istiarsyah contributed to supervision, conceptualization, validation, and writing (review & editing), offering expert guidance in inclusive education and disability policy. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Funding statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

Data access statement

Not applicable.

Declaration of interest's statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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