

Engaging Parents of Students with Disabilities with School to Enhance Student Learning: A Mixed-Methods Research Approach

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Abstract

The engagement of parents with schools plays a crucial role in fostering the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream educational settings. The effectiveness of any inclusive education environment hinges significantly on the communication between teachers and parents. This research aims to assess the actual level of parental involvement in the education of students with disabilities and explore the dynamics that either enhance or impede the relationship between schools and families of such students. Employing a mixed methods approach, the study utilized 331 questionnaires and conducted interviews with nine special education teachers. The findings revealed varying degrees of parental involvement, influenced by factors like school culture, parents' educational background, and their attitudes and expectations regarding their own abilities and their children's learning capabilities.

Keywords: *inclusion; inclusive education; parents involvement; students with disability; mixed methods.*

Introduction

The engagement of parents with schools is pivotal for promoting the inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream educational settings. The success of any educational environment, especially in terms of inclusion, relies significantly on effective communication between teachers and parents, extending to the broader community. Effective inclusion necessitates implementation both within the school and in society at large (UNESCO, 2005; Tutt and Williams, 2015). The positive impact of parents' involvement is evident in improved attitudes, attendance, and behavior of students with SEN, along with enhancements in their mental health (Christenson, 2004). Additionally, parents' active participation in the education of their children with SEN contributes to improved parent-teacher relationships, a positive school climate, and heightened teacher morale. This involvement empowers parents, fostering their confidence and satisfaction, while simultaneously increasing their interest in their own education (de Boer and Munde, 2015). Collaborative efforts between teachers and parents of students with SEN are crucial to overcoming potential barriers and ensuring the success of inclusive practices.

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Literature Review:

Parental involvement, as defined by Mitchell (2014, p. 81), entails parents actively engaging in regular two-way and meaningful communication, encompassing student learning and various school activities. The significance of parental involvement has been a focal point in discussions on inclusive education practices, as highlighted by Braley (2012) and McDermott-Fasy (2009). Pomerantz et al. (2005) emphasized the positive impact of parental involvement on children's learning, asserting its role in enhancing the home environment. A longitudinal study in the US found a correlation between parents' involvement in activities supporting children with SEN and their academic achievement (National Center for Special Education Research, 2007). Review-based studies, including Cox (2005) and Pomerantz et al. (2007) and Lambert et al. (2022), underscored the significant role of parental involvement in the academic success of disabled children.

The effects of parental involvement are evident in students with SEN, manifesting in improved attitudes, attendance, and behavior at school, along with enhancements to their mental health (Christenson, 2004). Furthermore, parents' active participation in the education of their children with SEN positively influences parent-teacher relationships, the school climate, and teachers' morale. This involvement leads to increased confidence and satisfaction among parents, simultaneously enhancing their interest in their own education (de Boer and Munde, 2015). Numerous global studies over the years, such as those by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), Al-Kahtani (2015), and others, have consistently highlighted similar rationales for parental involvement in a child's education. These studies have detailed various ways in which parents can engage in their children's education and how such involvement positively impacts student outcomes.

Recognizing the pivotal role of parental involvement in fostering the inclusion of students with SEN, it's evident that the relationship between parents of these students and schools is a central focus in laws, regulations, and international agreements related to disability. Notably, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (2004) in the US emphasized parents as overseers of education, instrumental in achieving educational equality and inclusion. The IDEA and its amendments articulate the belief that effective education for children with disabilities involves strengthening the role and responsibility of parents, ensuring their meaningful participation in their children's education at school and at home (Javier, 2005, p.40). The legal framework, especially within the IDEA (2004), provides explicit rights to parents, granting them the freedom to join groups making educational decisions and participate in articulating their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP, a crucial component for students with SEN, is developed through collaborative meetings between parents and a multidisciplinary team, fostering family-school partnerships (Javier, 2005). In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Chapter Three of the RSEPI emphasizes the importance of increasing parental participation in their children's education and outlines their right to be members of the multidisciplinary team around the child (Al-Kahtani, 2015). It is imperative, therefore, to explore whether Saudi special education teachers recognize the significance of parental involvement, considering it a valuable source of information and key to their child's success, and whether they actively encourage such participation in alignment with the RSEPI.

Despite the acknowledged importance of parental involvement, several factors act as barriers to such engagement. One significant factor is parents' beliefs regarding inclusion-related factors, influencing the extent to which they participate in their children's education (Elkins et al., 2003; Bradshaw et al., 2004; Salend, 2008). Research in New Zealand revealed that parents who perceive themselves as unable to assist their children academically tend to abstain from school processes, driven by a belief in their incapacity to effect positive change (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Similarly, Rock (2000) argued that, despite parents' willingness to engage, some feel inadequate in understanding their child's educational requirements compared to teachers, leading to hesitancy in participating in their child's education. In Saudi Arabia (KSA), Al-Twajjri (2007) proposed that a

significant hindrance to parental involvement is the lack of understanding of their capacity to contribute positively to their child's education, often stemming from low parental educational levels, where parents feel insufficiently proficient to support their child's learning (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Al-Kahtani, 2012; Al-Dosari and Pufpaff, 2014; Lambert et al., 2022).

Another critical issue affecting parental engagement is the parent's perception of their child's potential to learn. Some parents believe their child's ability and intelligence are fixed, diminishing the perceived impact of their involvement in education (Al-Dosari and Pufpaff, 2014). Additionally, socio-cultural definitions of disability can hinder parental involvement, as parents may feel stigmatized by their child's disability, leading to social isolation and emotional stress (Norris and Collier, 2018). Collaborating with schools helps parents overcome such barriers, providing knowledge and education through events like parent evenings, meetings, and workshops. These forums not only enlighten parents about their children but also offer opportunities to share concerns and experiences, fostering a sense of community and alleviating feelings of isolation (Dakwa et al., 2014; Hornby, 2011).

While some researchers attribute the problem to parental factors, others argue that school culture and teachers' attitudes play a significant role in encouraging or hindering parental involvement in their children's education. A family study conducted by Francis et al. (2015) in the United States emphasized the impact of a positive school culture, grounded in inclusive beliefs, values, and attitudes. Such a culture contributed to respectful and caring behaviors among all school members, fostering a commitment to meeting the needs of students in general education. This commitment, in turn, helped parents of students with SEN feel a stronger sense of belonging in the school community. Mittler (2012) argued that teacher attitudes toward parental involvement are pivotal in promoting or hindering effective partnerships. Teachers, as argued by Bæck (2010), have a defining role in shaping the nature of the relationship between home and school, with their interest, attitudes, and competence crucial for the success of home-school cooperation.

Furthermore, Cramer (2006) emphasizes the vital role of teachers in providing support to parents, offering resources, overseeing educational plans, and encouraging parents to effectively fulfill their role as educators. This collaborative approach is crucial because coordinated collaboration between teachers and parents is challenging to promote and maintain when these entities function in isolation (Braley, 2012). Actively communicating decisions, sharing ideas, planning Individualized Education Program (IEP) initiatives, and discussing methods to enhance student performance require ongoing communication between teachers and parents (Taylor et al., 2009). Given these demands, communication should take various forms and not be restricted to a one-dimensional approach (Taylor et al., 2009).

Another impediment to parental involvement lies in the limited knowledge or support that many school professionals possess to effectively engage with families, particularly those deemed hard to reach (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Hill and Taylor, 2004). Additionally, low expectations on the part of teachers regarding the value of parents in promoting students' learning negatively impact involvement. Some teachers may discourage parental participation due to undermining the value of parent contributions, creating barriers to involvement (Al-Kahtani, 2015). Wolfendale (2013) highlights a common mistake where teachers assume an expert posture in the parent-teacher relationship rather than adopting a collaborative stance. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) argue that parental involvement diminishes when not perceived as appreciated by staff, leading parents to be discouraged from engaging in their child's education, fearing that their contributions are neither wanted nor required.

Authors such as Carlisle et al. (2005) and Friend and Cook (2017) advocate for teachers and school members to recognize the importance of the family-school relationship and

establish collaborative and interactive relationships with parents on an individualized basis. Epstein (2011) suggests that direct and explicit encouragement by teaching staff significantly enhances parents' contributions, as teachers with positive and encouraging attitudes tend to receive more frequent and useful support and involvement from parents. Peña (2000, p.52) asserts that the best teachers are those who "make the parent feel more welcome." This research aims to explore the relationship between parents and special education teachers in mainstream inclusive schools in KSA, gathering information from special education teachers on the role of parental involvement in their children's education, the activities promoting parental involvement conducted by the school, and the challenges hindering parental engagement.

Effective parent-teacher relationships are crucial for school success, relying on teachers being skilled communicators. Graham-Clay (2005) suggests several strategies for effective communication between parents and teachers, encompassing both one-way and two-way exchanges. One-way communication involves teachers providing information on school initiatives, activities, and achievements through newsletters, website posts, calls, or notes to the family home. Two-way communication entails reciprocal information exchange during phone calls, parent evenings, and on-site parent activities, with parent conferences being a common form of face-to-face communication in many schools (Graham-Clay, 2005). Written communication, including letters, home-to-school notebooks, or emails, is considered an efficient means of fostering exchanges between parents and staff (Hall et al., 2003). School planners or homework diaries facilitate one-way or two-way communication, allowing teachers to share information about academic progress with parents regularly, particularly beneficial for academically struggling students who can receive additional support at home (Hall et al., 2003; Cramer, 2006; Gonzalez et al., 2021). Two-way communication through these means is critical to enable parents to provide feedback on teacher comments (Davern, 2004). Integration of technology, with its various applications, can further facilitate instantaneous communication from teachers to parents (Sykes, 2014). Teachers should actively combine one-way and two-way strategies to maximize information sharing with parents, promoting more effective parental involvement, and enhancing inclusion (Hall et al., 2003).

A review of existing strategies for enhancing parental involvement is particularly relevant in this research within the Saudi context, as it aids in improving family-school relationships and ultimately enhances inclusive education for students with SEN, contributing to the development of inclusive schools. Collaboration between teachers and parents of students with SEN is essential to overcome potential barriers. Existing evidence suggests that effective inclusive education and the achievements of students with SEN have increased through parent-school collaboration. However, as acknowledged earlier, empirical evidence about teacher-parent collaboration, its impact, and any contemporary, independent evidence about inclusion in KSA is limited. Therefore, this research places specific emphasis on teacher-parent collaboration as a key factor in enhancing the inclusion of students with SEN in KSA.

Methodology:

A mixed methods approach, incorporating questionnaires and interviews, was employed to comprehensively investigate parents' involvement with schools to enhance their children's learning. This strategy, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the research problem and eliminate data gaps that might hinder a thorough exploration of obstacles to inclusion (Gill et al., 2008; Sandy and Dumay, 2011; Thomas, 2017). The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods provided a comprehensive exploration of parents'

involvement with schools, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and facilitating a more robust response to the research questions.

Data Collection:

1. Questionnaires:

Advantages: The questionnaire, chosen for its ability to yield a sizable and diverse sample, facilitated data collection from a geographically broad area, ensuring a larger and more generalizable dataset (Robson and McCartan, 2016; Cohen et al., 2017).

Sample: A total of 331 special education teachers participated, providing insights into mainstream schools with inclusive programs.

2. Interviews:

Semi-structured Approach: Employing semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility in gathering information, enabling modifications to questions based on both researcher discretion and participant responses (Robson and McCartan, 2016; Thomas, 2017).

Advantages: This method allowed for the discovery and elaboration of information important to participants, potentially overlooked by the researcher (Gill et al., 2008; Robson and McCartan, 2016; Thomas, 2017).

Sample: Nine special education teachers, considered key informants due to their close proximity to inclusive environments, were interviewed.

Sample and Procedures:

500 questionnaires were distributed among special education teachers working in schools with inclusion programs, with a 66% response rate (331 returned questionnaires).

Nine teachers expressing interest in interviews were visited in their schools. Face-to-face interviews were conducted during breaks in meeting rooms.

Consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

Data Analysis:

1. Quantitative Analysis:

Statistical Tools: The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for coding and analysis.

Descriptive Statistics: Mean, frequency, percentage, and standard deviation were computed to analyze the quantitative dataset.

2. Qualitative Analysis:

Thematic Analysis: The qualitative data, derived from interview transcripts, underwent theoretical thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six guiding steps (2013).

Resulting Themes: Two primary themes emerged - parents' level of involvement and factors influencing parental involvement with schools.

Findings:

Quantitative Findings:

Table 1. The overall teacher's responses to the survey statements for the aspect of parent's involvement with school

Aspect	Mean	Standard Deviation
Staff perceives that communication with parents of students with	1.65	.85

SEN is insufficient.		
Parents appear to disregard the daily reports from teachers, including items such as the homework notebook.	1.60	.76
Teachers believe that parents of students with SEN lack sufficient cooperation.	1.61	.81
Parents of students with SEN seem reluctant to inquire with teachers about how they can contribute to their children's learning at home.	1.71	.94
Limited participation of parents in school programs designed to assist them in supporting their children's learning is observed.	1.78	.97
While parents of students with SEN are content with including their children in mainstream schools, the level of cooperation is deemed insufficient.	1.77	.72

As illustrated in Table 1, more than half of the teachers (55%) express the belief that the 'parents of students with disabilities accept including their children in mainstream schools and are content with it.' However, the data reveals a notable contrast, with the majority of teachers reporting an insufficient level of collaboration and parental involvement with the school. Specifically, 56% strongly agree, and 32.3% agree that 'parents of students with SEN are not collaborating enough with teachers.' Furthermore, a significant portion of teachers (54%) concurred that parents do not give due consideration to the daily reports, such as the homework notebook, produced by the teachers. Regarding the remaining three statements in this section of the questionnaire (items 16, 17, and 18), the overall means are $M = 1.71$ ($SD = .94$), $M = 1.78$ ($SD = .97$), and $M = 1.77$ ($SD = .72$), respectively. These values fall within the range of agreement based on the study's standard criteria. In summary, the total mean score for this aspect, which is $M = 1.69$ ($SD = .52$), strongly indicates agreement that parental involvement with the school poses a significant obstacle, as per the study's established standards.

Qualitative Findings:

The research yielded two principal themes, namely, the level of parents' involvement and the factors influencing their engagement with schools.

Parents' Level of Involvement:

Special education teachers were questioned about the extent of communication between the school and families, the nature of this communication, its utility, and its frequency. Across various districts, the majority of teachers observed that parents generally expressed a positive inclination toward including their children in mainstream schools. However, while parents were willing to enroll their children in mainstream education, their collaborative engagement and involvement with the school were often perceived as inadequate. A significant number of teachers reported that parents did not actively contribute to enhancing their daughters' educational achievements, stating, for instance, that "parents do not help us improve the level of their daughters' educational attainment" (S.T1). Some teachers noted that parents only communicated sporadically, typically "when there is an event or parents' meeting" (S.T3). Conversely, positive experiences were also shared, with one teacher mentioning the creation of a WhatsApp group for information exchange, describing it as "very useful" (S.T5). Overall, special education teachers consistently expressed the view that parents could play a more substantial role in supporting the education of students with disabilities. When asked about the reasons behind the perceived lack of collaboration, teachers identified various factors, which are detailed in the subsequent theme.

Factors Affecting Parents' Involvement:

The educational level of the family emerged as a major factor influencing parents' collaboration and engagement with the school regarding their children's education. Participants noted that "uneducated parents cannot really realize the need for their child to attend school, let alone communicate actively with the school" (S.T2). Another prevalent issue highlighted by teachers is the low expectations surrounding their children's academic abilities, leading to "little interest in their child's progression" (S.T6). Parents not only exhibit low expectations for their children but also for themselves in terms of their ability to assist in their children's development, with one teacher stating, "parents totally rely on us in everything related to the child's education" (S.T9). Additional factors restricting parents' collaboration with schools, as mentioned by teachers, include transportation challenges (S.T4), the presence of multiple children requiring the mother's attention (S.T3), and the demands of work and busy lifestyles (S.T5). When asked about parents' involvement in forming students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), the majority of teachers reported rare or nonexistent participation. For instance, one teacher mentioned that "parents have never been involved in forming the IEP" (S.T7). Teachers acknowledged their role in this lack of involvement, noting, "it is a joint fault, we neither give them a chance because we get used to making it alone, nor do they ever ask about it" (S.T7). This sentiment was widely shared, with many teachers indicating that they do not invite parents as forming IEPs has become exclusively the responsibility of special education teachers (S.T8).

Discussion:

Exploring the reasons behind the limited parental involvement in this study revealed several contributing factors. A predominant factor highlighted by the majority of participants was the parents' educational level. While previous studies, such as Leyser and Kirk (2004), Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), Al-Kahtani (2012), and Al-Dosari and Pufpaff (2014), have also associated parental education with involvement levels, it is crucial to challenge the assumption that a lack of education equates to a lack of concern for a child. This belief overlooks the potential contributions parents may make to their child's well-being, emphasizing the need to recognize other forms of parental involvement, such as emotional support and guidance (Cooper et al., 2010). Al-Rayes (2005) argued that schools should refrain from automatically assuming that parents' educational background hinders collaboration, advocating for training and support to help parents actively contribute to their child's success.

Another contributing factor is parents' low expectations regarding their children's academic abilities, a finding consistent with prior research (Redd et al., 2004; Fan, 2001; Jeynes, 2005; Jeynes, 2007). Teachers in this study reported that parents often have minimal expectations for their child's learning and believe that their involvement would have little impact. However, a nuanced explanation suggests that the issue may not solely be low expectations but also the occasions for which parents are predominantly invited to the school. For instance, discussing a student's failure to complete homework might not be the most constructive initial point of contact. Aligning with Aguilar's (2015) perspective, it is proposed that schools should inform and involve parents in their child's achievements and progress before addressing areas of concern. Celebrating each accomplishment fosters parental confidence and encourages increased involvement (Darch et al., 2004).

The school culture emerged as a crucial factor influencing parental involvement, echoing the sentiments of Cartledge and Kourea (2008). A welcoming school culture that actively includes and engages parents can strengthen relationships, with the likelihood of increased parental involvement. In this research, teachers perceived a lack of collaboration from parents, yet they did not report putting sufficient effort into fostering

it. This contextually stems from the traditional perception in Saudi Arabian schools where roles of teachers and parents are distinctly separate. Without active encouragement and invitations from the school, parents are less likely to collaborate and engage with the school, emphasizing the need for a shift in the prevailing mindset (Mittler, 2012; Al-Sheikh, 2007).

Conclusion:

The primary challenge in parental involvement identified in this study revolves around establishing a collaborative approach that encourages parents to actively participate in their children's learning within mainstream schools. Despite teachers' perception that parents are content with enrolling their children with SEN in mainstream schools, they view the actual level of parental involvement as insufficient. The analysis of teachers' interviews in the context of parental involvement indicates the presence of several inhibiting factors.

In essence, the findings suggest that various life commitments serve as reasons inhibiting parents' involvement with their children in school. Among these factors, the education level of parents emerged as a prominent correlate with their level of involvement: a lower education level tended to correspond with lower levels of engagement. Additionally, parents' low expectations regarding their child's potential achievements and their own perceived limitations in contributing to their children's education were reported as factors diminishing their level of involvement and collaboration with the school.

While teachers acknowledged some efforts to involve parents, such initiatives were primarily confined to parent meetings and school ceremonies. Notably, there was a lack of evidence supporting awareness programs, training sessions, or activities specifically designed to foster parent-child engagement. In conclusion, the study underscores the need for a more comprehensive and diversified approach to parental involvement, extending beyond traditional events, to address the identified inhibiting factors and enhance collaboration between parents and schools in supporting children with special educational needs.

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