

Redefining Parental Involvement In Inclusive Education

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Abstract

In contemporary educational discourse, the role of parents in fostering the academic success and overall well-being of their children, particularly those with special educational needs (SEN), has become a central theme. Defined as the active participation of parents in meaningful communication and engagement with their children's learning and school activities, parental involvement has garnered significant attention in the realm of inclusive education. The recognition of its importance is underscored by numerous studies and scholarly discussions, emphasizing its positive impact on various facets of a child's educational journey. This discussion unfolds against the backdrop of a global educational landscape. The intersection of parental involvement, inclusive education practices, and the legal frameworks surrounding disability forms the basis of this exploration. The significance of parents as vital stakeholders in their children's education is not only a prevalent theme in academic literature but also echoes through legislative mandates and international agreements. This comprehensive examination of the literature also delves into the multifaceted dimensions of parental involvement in the education of students with SEN, exploring its far-reaching effects on academic achievement, attitudes, attendance, and behavior. Furthermore, the study investigates the reciprocal nature of the parent-teacher relationship, the impact of cultural beliefs on parental engagement, and the potential barriers hindering effective collaboration. This review also addresses the nuanced strategies employed to facilitate communication between parents and

teachers, emphasizing the importance of both one-way and two-way exchanges. The integration of technology as a means to foster instantaneous communication underscores the evolving nature of parent-teacher collaboration in the digital age.

Introduction

Significance of Parental Involvement in Inclusive Education

Parents' involvement is defined as 'the participation of parents in regular two-way and meaningful communication, involving student learning and other school activities' (Mitchell, 2014, p. 81). The importance of parents' involvement has always been an important topic in inclusive education practices (Lambert et al., 2022; Braley, 2012; McDermott-Fasy, 2009). For example, Pomerantz et al. (2005) stressed the positive effects of parents' involvement and support in their children's learning and the home environment role in boosting children's learning. In a longitudinal study carried out in the US, it was concluded that there was a correlation between the parents' involvement in activities supporting children with SEN and their achievement (National Center for Special Education Research, 2007). A study based on reviews and meta-analysis yielded the result that parental involvement plays a significant role in the academic achievement of disabled children (Cox, 2005; Pomerantz et al. 2007; Lambert et al., 2022). The impact of parents' involvement is reflected in students with SEN improved attitudes, attendance and behaviour at school in addition to improvements to their mental health (Christenson, 2004). Moreover, parents' involvement in their children with SEN education has been found to improve the parent-teacher relationships, the school climate and the teachers' morale. With their involvement in their children with SEN education, parents gain confidence and satisfaction, whilst their interest in their own education is enhanced (de Boer and Munde, 2015). Several other studies around the world and over the years have also indicated similar reasons for parental involvement in a child's education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Al-Kahtani, 2015), detailing the

ways in which parents can become involved (Driessen et al., 2005; Lee and Bowen, 2006; Wanat, 2010; Lambert et al., 2022) and how that involvement improves student outcome (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mislán et al., 2009; Wanat, 2010).

Legal and International Frameworks

The importance attributed to parental involvement extends beyond academic discourse and permeates legislative mandates and international agreements, especially those concerning disability. This theme explores how laws such as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (2004) in the U.S. and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) underscore the pivotal role of parents in achieving educational equality and inclusion. Given the importance of parental involvement in enhancing the inclusion of students with SEN, it is not surprising that the relationship between parents of students with SEN and schools was one of the main matters emphasised in the laws, regulations and international agreements surrounding disability. For example, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (2004) in the US outlined the importance of parents as the overseers of education and the driving force behind achieving educational equality and inclusion. The IDEA and its related amendments express the belief that: The education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home (Javier, 2005, p.40). The parent-teacher relationship for parents of students with SEN is more clearly prescribed by law than it is for families of other students, especially when it comes to articulating the student's IEP. This can clearly be seen in the rights that have been guaranteed to parents in the IDEA (2004). Amongst these rights is the freedom to join any group which makes educational decisions relating to the students and to be involved in articulating the student's IEP, which must be put into place for any student with SEN. The IEP will contain a record of the student's current educational level as well as a set of goals and the requirements of the student in a classroom setting according to his/her needs. The IEP is articulated

through meetings between parents and a multi-disciplinary team in order to create an educational plan for the student, which provides the greatest opportunity for family-school collaborative partnerships (Javier, 2005).

Cultural Influences and Barriers to Parental Involvement

Despite the fact that parental involvement is highly important, there are some factors, which hinder this involvement. For example, the beliefs of parents towards factors related to inclusion can affect the degree to which the parents involve themselves in the education of their children (Elkins et al. 2003; Bradshaw et al., 2004; Salend, 2008). Research in New Zealand, has shown that parents who do not consider themselves able to aid their children academically did not involve themselves in school processes, due to their perception that they are not capable of creating positive change (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Similarly, Rock (2000) earlier argued that, despite parents' willingness to engage in their child's education, a number of parents believed that they lacked the knowledge about the educational requirements of their child compared to the teachers, and this made them less confident and made them hesitate at the prospect of participating in their child's education. This lack of confidence among parents was attributed to a variety of factors, particularly a low parental educational level, as parents felt that they did not possess sufficient academic proficiency to aid their child's learning (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Al-Kahtani, 2012; Al-Dosari and Pufpaff, 2014; Gonzalez et al., 2021).

The way in which a parent views their child's potential to learn is another critical issue which can prevent or minimise parental engagement. Some parents hold the belief that the ability and intelligence of their child is fixed and that their involvement in education would not make any real difference to their child; therefore, involvement with the school is not a priority for them (Al-Dosari and Pufpaff, 2014). Another issue that might prevent parents' involvement is related to the socio-cultural definition of disability, which makes parents feel stigmatised by their child's disability and they do not want to do anything about it. This social stigmatization

leads parents to experience social isolation and emotional stress (Norris and Collier, 2018). Therefore, parent-teacher and school collaboration aids parents to overcome the social barriers and become involved in planning for their children's future. Dakwa et al. (2014) argued that some parents of disabled children may isolate themselves because of their feelings of shame and guilt. They also may withdraw from society, friends and activities. This is related to the socio-cultural definition of disability and disabled people, as some cultures view disability as a lack of control, death and vulnerability (Graham, 2014). However, collaborating with the school provides parents with knowledge and education through parents evening, meetings and workshops, where parents are not only enlightened with information about their children but can also share their concerns. Through the links with school, parents meet with other parents and can share the feelings, showing them that they are not alone (Hornby, 2011).

Whilst some researchers have attributed the problem to the parents themselves, others have argued that a large part of the reason is related to the school culture and the teachers' attitudes and their role in encouraging parents to involve in their children's education and initiate this relationship. For example, the findings of the family study by Francis et al., (2015) in different parts of the United States, showed that, a positive school culture, based on inclusive beliefs, values, and attitudes, led to respectful and caring behaviours of all school members. The researchers further reported that such a positive culture highly contributed to a school commitment to meeting the students' needs in the general education, which in turn helped parents of students with SEN feel a stronger sense of belonging in the school community. In this regard, Mittler, (2012) also argued that, teacher attitudes towards parental involvement play a key role in promoting or hindering effective partnership. Bæck (2010, p. 323) earlier argued that it is the teachers who actually define the nature of the relationship between home and school; teachers are in a position to either destroy or maintain the traditional barrier that exists between home and school, and teachers' interest, attitudes and competence regarding home-school cooperation is crucial for its success. Further, Similarly, Cramer (2006), earlier suggested that

teachers play a vital role by providing support to parents. This comes in the form of resources, overseeing the educational plans and encouraging parents to carry out their parent-educator role effectively. This is because, if teachers and parents are working as separate units, then co-ordinated collaboration is going to be difficult to promote and maintain (Braley, 2012).

Teachers and parents need to communicate with each other actively for the purpose of making decisions, sharing ideas, to plan the IEP programme and to discuss ways of improving student performance (Taylor et al., 2009). Because of these demands, therefore, communication between teachers and parents needs to be in a variety of forms and should not be one-dimensional (Taylor et al., 2009). Another barrier that hinders parents' involvement is that, many school professionals have limited knowledge or support to partner effectively with families, especially those they consider hard to reach parents (Oranga et al., 2022). Within the same argument, the low expectation on the part of teachers with regard to the value of parents in promoting their students' learning has a negative effect. For example, Al-Kahtani (2015), noted that in some cases parents are discouraged from participating in their child's schooling due to the attitudes of teachers, who sometimes undermine the value of parent contributions and create a barrier to involvement.

According to Wolfendale (2013), one of the biggest mistakes that occur in this context is that teachers assume that the parent-teacher relationship is that of an expert posture and not a collaborative one. Moreover, the authors from the United States, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), further argued that, parental involvement diminishes when it is not perceived as being appreciated by staff, and parents may be discouraged from involving themselves in their child's education due to the worry that their contributions are neither wanted nor required. A number of authors such as Carlisle et al. (2005) and Friend and Cook (2017) argued that, therefore, teachers and other members of the school should acknowledge the importance of the family-school relationship. They should establish collaborative and interactive relationships with parents in individualised ways. Epstein (2011), indicated that direct

and explicit encouragement by teaching staff will significantly raise the level of parents' contribution, as teachers who have a positive and an encouraging attitude with regard to parental input tend to receive more frequent and useful offers of support and involvement from parents. This has also been reported by Peña (2000, p.52), who asserted that the best teachers are those who 'make the parent feel more welcome'.

Strategies for Effective Communication

Parent-teacher relationships are highly important for schools to be successful, and these depend upon teachers being skilled communicators. A number of strategies that practitioners can use to communicate effectively with parents have been suggested by parents' partnership researchers. According to Graham-Clay (2005), communication between parents and teachers can take the form of either one-way or two-way exchanges; one-way communication refers to information provided by teachers regarding school initiatives, activities and achievements in the form of newsletters, website posts, and calls or notes to the family home. The second method, two-way communication, is a reciprocal information exchange between staff and parents during phone calls, parent evenings and other on-site parent activities. Parent conferences are the most common form of two-way communication in many schools, as they provide a platform for face-to-face communication (Graham-Clay, 2005). Written communication, whether in the form of a letter such as home-to-school notebook or an email, can be considered the most efficient way to foster an exchange between parents and staff (Hall et al., 2003). The use of school planners or homework diaries can also facilitate one-way or two-way communication, as teachers can share information about academic progress with parents on a regular basis; this is particularly useful for students who struggle academically, as they can then receive the extra support they require at home (Hall et al., 2003; Cramer, 2006). Two-way communication using this method is critical in order for the parents to provide feedback on teacher comments (Davern, 2004). Integrating technology, with its various applications, can also facilitate instantaneous

communication from teachers to parents (Sykes, 2014). Teachers should actively incorporate one-way and two-way strategies together to maximise the sharing of information with parents and to promote more effective parent involvement and, thereby, enhance inclusion (Hall et al., 2003).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this comprehensive exploration has illuminated the multifaceted dimensions of parental involvement in inclusive education, spanning the significance of such engagement, legal frameworks, and the reciprocal relationships between parents and teachers. The impact of parental involvement on the well-being and academic success of students with special educational needs has been underscored, emphasizing the transformative potential beyond the confines of traditional learning outcomes. Cultural influences and barriers, along with strategies for effective communication, have been examined to provide a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities in fostering collaborative partnerships.

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