REDUCING THE GAP IN INCLUSIVE PRACTICE. USING SCHOOL AND FAMILY COLLABORATION TO INCREASE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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Abstract:

Inclusion for people with special needs and disabilities is globally recognized as a priority. The purpose of this article is to emphasize reducing the gap in all educational contexts of Special and Inclusive Education through using School and Home Collaboration to Increase Student Achievement. This is a literature review on best collaboration practices and highlights about the importance of acceptance of the child with a disability by parents and teachers. This theoretical and applicable framework is intended to provide a tool for inclusion in action. Through this work, we aim to help build capacity and skills to create strong partnerships with families and teachers that make everyone feel respected and empowered in an inclusive education and learning process. Practical implications: The call for supporting teachers' professional development in engaging with families still applies today (Willemse et al., 2018). The study emphasizes the need for continuous support to all - teachers and families. It promotes one model called "ACCESS" (https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/ihdsc/path-program/path-perspectives/how-build-strong-family-school-partnerships) as a quick guide on inclusion in action using school and families collaboration.

Keywords: special and inclusive education, special educational needs, family of a child with disabilities, family and school collaboration, student achievement, inclusive practice, inclusion in action

Highlights:

- To increase student achievement in special and inclusive education,
- To emphasize reducing the gap in all inclusive educational contexts,

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- To underline the importance of acceptance of the child with a disability by parents and teachers,
- To create best collaboration practices for all professionals (teachers, leaders, educators, tutors, instructors, etc.),
- To use school and home collaboration and to promote a quick guide for creating collaborative relationships.

1. Introduction

Generally, inclusion for people with special needs and disabilities is globally recognized as a priority in all educational contexts of Special and Inclusive Education (https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-4-article-24-right-inclusive/ https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/article-24-education/ https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org.eca/files/IE_summary_accessible_220917_0.pdf/). Really, the impact of parental involvement on student academic achievement has been recognized by teachers, administrators, and policy-makers who consider parental involvement to be one of the integral parts of new educational reforms and initiatives (Wilder, 2013). Nevertheless, families and schools are two of the central living environments of children. Their collaboration is therefore seen as an important factor in education, having a high impact on learning outcomes, motivation, and children's health (Paccaud et al., 2021).

Basically, the family can be characterized as a system of relationships among its members, while at the same time being part of broader social systems. Cultural values, goals, and the characteristics of a specific environment create a dynamic situation and constitute a composition of variables with active interactions. The needs of the family and parents are shaped according to the overall stage of the family's development, as well as in relation to the awareness of the existence of learning difficulties in their child (Panteliadou, 2011).

However, families raising a child with disabilities and/or special needs present some common characteristics in their organisation and functioning compared to the families of children without disabilities. At the same time, the families of children with disabilities have distinguishable dynamics. They present their own rules of organization; however, these do not render them dysfunctional (Tsambarli & Tsimbidaki, 2020).

Specifically, knowing and understanding students' communities, families, and lived experiences is vital to bridging this divide and supporting achievement for all students, including those with disabilities (Kea et al., 2025). Every year, the number of children with disabilities and special needs increases in the world. The relevance of this topic is determined by the issue of inclusive education, which has become increasingly important in recent years (Elmira & Negmatzhan, 2022) in order to reduce the gap in inclusive education.

Focusing on inclusive practice (Florian, 2014; Russell & Loughran, 2007; KaplanToren & Brown, 2025; Ioannidi, 2023; Ioannidi, 2022), *"inclusion, equality, and well-being for all, especially for people with special needs and disabilities, is globally recognized as a priority. At the same time, there is an urgent need to create digital training environments for people with special educational needs and disabilities"* (Mitsea et al., 2023). One of the most important goals that schools can undertake is to develop healthy partnerships with families. A truly collaborative school can be achieved only through active and positive partnerships with families (Johnson et al., 2004).

1.1 Aim

Given that the literature on barriers to parental involvement in education has been surprisingly widely read (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018), the aim of this article is to emphasize reducing the gap in all educational contexts of Special and Inclusive Education, through using School and Home Collaboration to Increase Student Achievement in Special and Inclusive Education. This is a literature review on best collaboration practices and highlights about the importance of acceptance of the child with a disability by parents and teachers. This theoretical and applicable framework is intended to provide a tool for inclusion in action. We are interested in creating a guide of values-based competencies and stable steps between teachers and parents.

2. The importance of acceptance of the child with a disability by parents and teachers: A theoretical perspective

In reality, increased parental stress is strongly related to the severity of disabilities. Parents' coping strategies and social support issues add to the complexity of this relationship (Efstratopoulou et al., 2022). Mainly, the nature, characteristics, and severity of a disability play a significant role and carry considerable importance for the structure and functioning of the family system. A family with a child with special needs does not operate as an autonomous system. Individuals from the extended family, friends, and other social service systems emerge as key contributors (Tsimbidaki, 2007).

Here, the literature highlights the necessity of communication and comes to emphasize that the best results are achieved when parents and teachers from the field of special and integrated education are based on a true collaborative relationship. Summarizing the review, the findings indicate that communication is a continuous contact and exchange of information. The mother is the key person who comes in contact with the professionals. Professionals don't testify with certainty whether the parents are cooperative. However, they indicate satisfaction with the fact that parents follow their instructions and advice. They communicate with parents on a regular basis, even though a specific workplace doesn't exist, and they mention many efforts and actions for effective communication. The main communication axis is the child with special educational needs itself. Also, they refer to various boundaries in the communication process and, at the

same time, they suggest effective ways aiming to resolve these difficulties (Tsimbidaki, 2022).

At this point it is appropriate to mention some suggestions from the literature, such as parental involvement in the education of learners with disabilities, change of teachers' attitude, specialized training for all persons handling learners with disability, establishment of positive home-school working relationships, proper legislation on handling people with disabilities, civic education on human rights and development of a policy framework to guide school-home collaborations (Oranga, Obuba & Boinett, 2022).

On the other hand, according to Widyastono (2024), research results showed that the obstacles faced by parents include physical barriers and non-physical obstacles. Non-physical obstacles include administrative obstacles, difficulty accessing information and funds, and lack of human resources. Physical obstacles include a lack of facilities or infrastructure that are affected by the conditions and needs of children. Parental needs consist of bodily needs and non-physical needs. Non-physical issues include the need for transparent sources of information, the need for sufficient human resources, the need for a forum for parents of special needs children, and the need for parenting workshops/seminars. Physical needs include media, learning resources, and worksheets adjusted to the child's abilities. This study is expected to provide valuable insights for policymakers and education practitioners in their efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

In this context, teachers play a crucial role, taking into account the importance of positive collaboration with parents and implementing different support methods, starting with overcoming their own biases toward diverse parental ideas and attitudes (Panteliadou, 2011). According to Hallahan et al. (2022), teachers are responsible for assessing students' academic strengths and weaknesses, referring students for evaluation, communicating with parents, and collaborating with other professionals to identify and maximize the abilities of students with special educational needs.

Overall, when stakeholders are more unified in carrying out family engagement practices, children benefit from the positive influences they provide, including the support they receive from peers and families, which helps them thrive academically and emotionally both in and out of school (Tran, 2014). Acceptance of the child and a focus on their strengths with realistic expectations, both from the family environment and from educators, promote the child's progress and development. According to Heward (2011), successful collaboration between parents and teachers benefits professionals, parents, and children alike. Collaboration between the school and the family is increasingly privileged as one of the means to promote educational success and perseverance (Deslandes, 2019).

On this basis, data were analysed using a template analysis. The analysis showed that, although coordination and collaboration can be observed in the partnership, the most common level of co-work is cooperation. Furthermore, the findings show that at each level of co-work, the agentive roles of parents are affected by equality of condition,

including: access to resources, recognition of expertise and acknowledgement of authority (Gerdes et al., 2020).

Thus, worldwide school districts must not only see strengthening family, community, and school collaboration as essential to their work, they must select evidence-based strategies to ensure the greatest outcomes. While evidence-based family and community collaboration strategies exist, a myriad of challenges often get in the way of implementing sustainable approaches that improve student outcomes. Through this work, we aim to help build capacity and skills to create strong partnerships with families and teachers that make everyone feel respected and empowered in an inclusive education and learning process (https://connectedandengaged.fhi360.org/collaboration-introduction/familycommunity-rationale-for-fcc/).

3. Applicable framework: School-Family Collaboration - Best Practices

Therefore, strong cooperation between school and family is the cornerstone for identifying learning difficulties and implementing specialized intervention strategies for the child's academic and social challenges. Teachers should formally identify areas of need and specific action steps (Rossetti et al., 2017).

Key principles of effective communication include acknowledging what is shared between parents and teachers, active listening, asking appropriate questions, offering encouragement, and maintaining focus. Dialogue is a conflict-resolution approach in which both sides strive to understand each other's perspective. The most common methods of school-family communication include meetings, written messages, and phone calls. Teachers also utilize classroom bulletins, websites, and email to communicate frequently and effectively with families (Heward, 2011).

At this stage in the argument, αdvocates of inclusive education believe in the right of all learners to education and the many benefits it delivers. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward inclusive education are instantly reflected in their classroom activities and practices (Mouchritsa, 2022).

For example, indicative signs that require attention, as Mitsiou mention (2004):
- Difficulty in reading,
- Spelling and copying texts,
- Difficulty in spatial and temporal orientation,
- Difficulty concentrating,
- Difficulty in word accentuation,
- Omission or addition of letters, syllables or words,
- Confusion of words that sound or look similar,
- Confusion of letters regarding their orientation,
- Confusion of words with similar or identical meanings, e.g., black-dark,
- Poor coordination of movements,
- Misinterpretation of verbal instructions,
- Difficulty remembering and following a sequence of verbal commands,

- Difficulty completing a task.

Any counseling intervention should be based, among other factors, on recognizing the difficulties parents face at personal, family, and social levels, as well as on the need to educate professionals in interpersonal relationships, communication and the recognition and management of their personal challenges in accepting both their role and the concept of diversity. The goals of a Counseling Intervention are (Kontopoulou, 2004):

a) Identifying the needs of the family and creating a positive environment for the child's development.
b) Helping parents understand and accept their children's differences and fostering positive interactions among them.
c) Strengthening cooperation between family and specialists.
d) Discussing the child's developmental prospects.

Afterwards, the stages of a counseling intervention are:

a) Case evaluation,
b) Defining the objectives of the counseling intervention,
c) Implementation of the counseling intervention,
d) Evaluation of results.

In all cases, counseling within the framework of cooperation between educators and parents of children with special needs should align with the parents' request for ongoing information, guidance and psychological support (Kontopoulou, 2001).

Since the primary objective of special education today is to develop a collaborative relationship between school and family, children significantly benefit from joint cooperative efforts between educators and parents.

The characteristics of such a collaborative relationship include (Tsimbidaki, 2007):

- Active participation of all parties in decision-making and implementation,
- Equal roles and responsibilities,
- Acceptance and contribution to all services,
- Distribution of obligations and rights.

At the school level, indicative practices that educators can implement include (Panteliadou, 2011):

- Systematic collection of information on family needs and preferences,
- Development and distribution of materials regarding rights, responsibilities and school practices,
- Inviting parents to participate in school activities and decision-making related to their child's education,
- Frequent communication and feedback.

On an individual level and within the teacher-parent collaboration, the following is recommended (Panteliadou, 2011):

- Providing information on ways to support children with learning and adaptation difficulties at home,
- Establishing a stable communication method,
- Timely communication at the onset of a problem,

- Respect, attentive listening, and encouraging parents to observe a school lesson,
- Discussing expected behaviors of the child, etc.

It is remarkable that through a cooperative, communicative and productive relationship between school and family—the two fundamental pillars in a child's life—the child feels emotional stability and security, increasing learning opportunities that begin at school and continue at home. Furthermore, they gain access to more services. Likewise, teachers better understand the child's needs and parents' expectations, collect more information to tailor their educational programs effectively and enhance appropriate child behaviors both inside and outside the school setting. This synergy between communication and collaboration also benefits the family by providing information on the child's progress, counseling, psychological support and practical assistance, which, in turn, supports the child. In this basis of strengthening the cooperative connection between family and school, parental involvement can take place through (Tsimbidaki, 2007):

a) Written communication via school reports, information leaflets (in multiple languages, recognizing the multicultural nature of society), and educational materials for teachers.
b) Participation in school organizations and parent-teacher groups.
c) Engagement in school program planning and the school council.
d) Involvement in governmental planning related to education.
e) Participation in child evaluations and intervention programs.

For a successful collaborative relationship, effective behaviors are required, including sincerity, dialogue, encouragement, clear boundaries, trust, and mutual sharing of knowledge, experiences, responsibilities and rights.

In total, it is important to note that "*some families will not need or want additional support but that identifying those who are struggling, and providing tailored support, should represent a priority for education, health and social care during the coming weeks*" (Asbury et al., 2021).

Family engagement is essential for education systems' transformation, and families and schools must have a shared understanding of what a good quality education looks like. In this way, an educational system is improving, and it is transformed through the following goals - achievements (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/collaborating-to-transform-and-improve-education-systems-a-playbook-for-family-school-engagement/):

a) Improve the attendance and completion of students,
b) Improve the learning and development of students,
c) Redefining the purpose of school for students,
d) Redefining the purpose of school for society.

Furthermore, on inclusion in action, we propose a source (How to Build Strong Family-School Partnerships), and we describe a model called "ACCESS" (https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/ihdsc/path-program/path-perspectives/how-build-strong-family-school-partnerships). As stated:

Families bring unique experiences and backgrounds to the school community, and when schools implement equitable and inclusive policies that support and welcome families, these partnerships can flourish. Effective two-way communication is key to building and maintaining strong family partnerships. Schools should adopt communication systems that empower caregivers and foster trust. Also, it's essential to be timely, clear, and solution-focused. Whether through newsletters, pictures, videos, or face-to-face conversations, schools should provide multiple communication options and always lead with positive feedback before discussing challenges (https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/ihdsc/path-program/path-perspectives/how-build-strong-family-school-partnerships).

The ACCESS model is an excellent guide for conversations with families (https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/ihdsc/path-program/path-perspectives/how-build-strong-family-school-partnerships):

- **A**void assumptions: Get to know families without making assumptions about their needs or preferences.
- **C**ommunication preferences: Ask families how they prefer to communicate (e.g., email, phone, in-person).
- **C**heck documents: Ensure all communications are clear, concise, and free of jargon. Offer translations when needed.
- **E**nd with contact information: Always provide a way for families to follow up or ask questions.
- **S**ensitivity to family context: Be mindful of each family's unique situation.
- **S**potlight the positive: Start communications by highlighting student strengths and progress.

Building strong family partnerships is a continuous process that requires schools to be intentional, inclusive, and responsive to families' needs. By implementing equitable policies, addressing cultural and linguistic mismatches, and creating opportunities for collaboration and communication, schools can foster a supportive environment where families and educators work together to ensure student success. Strong family-school partnerships are key to creating thriving learning communities, and when families feel valued and heard, students benefit the most (https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/ihdsc/path-program/path-perspectives/how-build-strong-family-school-partnerships).

Supporting teachers and parents, when educators and families are partners in children's social and emotional development, educators gain insight to better support students and families gain an ally in supporting the social and emotional skill-building they already engage in with their children (https://schoolguide.casel.org/focus-area-2/collaborate/connect-collaborate-with-families/).

3. Conclusion

Parents of children with disabilities face many challenges and have various needs related to their children's difficulties (Markodimitraki & Kypriotaki, 2021). As Kirk et al. (2021)

mention, children and families are inextricably linked, and specialists should take into account the family's priorities for goals and services. It is a fact that the literature underlines the case for improving opportunities for children with disabilities to achieve their full potential and thrive, including through inclusive early childhood development intervention (Smythe et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the existing research emphasizes that social support plays a critical role in influencing the life satisfaction and well-being of parents of children with special needs. Understanding the positive correlation between social support and parental satisfaction can provide a valuable basis for the development of interventions and support programs to help families with such children address the challenges they face more effectively. In this context, strengthening social support networks and tailoring support programs for parents may be an important strategy for improving the overall quality of life of families (Sardohan Yildirim et al., 2025).

Finally, it is very fundamental to offer adequate training to teachers to create inclusivity (Biza & Giannakou, 2024; Goel & Bhardwaj, 2023), because family-school-community partnerships are a shared responsibility and reciprocal process whereby schools engage families in meaningful and culturally appropriate ways and families take initiative to actively support their children's development and learning (https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/training-technical-assistance/education-level/early-learning/family-school-community-partnerships). The call for supporting teachers' professional development in engaging with families still applies today and it is current (Willemse et al., 2018; Hannon & O'Donnell, 2021).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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