

The Involvement of Parents of Special Needs Students in Schools in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: The communication between parents of special needs students and the students' teachers is considered as the most important part of the students' educational journey. However, since Saudi Arabia has not yet built a strong educational system that provides students with best educational services that grants their success inside and outside schools, it is still not clear of the parents of special needs are involved in their children's education. Therefore, this study was done to get a deep understanding of the experience of special education teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from teachers' perception about the parents' involvement on their children education. The result of the study was revealed as that teachers' success of their communications with parents in relation to their understanding of the level of education the parents possessed. The teachers also positive to that parents' participation varies based on their child disabilities as well as the academic and social activities when provided in the school and not.

Keywords: Special needs students, special education teachers, parents, Involvement experience, elementary schools.

1 Introduction

Developing positive and quality communication between special education teachers and the parents of students with special needs benefits parents, students, and teachers. For parents, regular and informative communication and interaction with their children's school can positively affect the extent and quality of their efforts at home to support their children's learning. For example, parents benefit from increased school involvement as teachers can provide ideas on how to work with children at home, and by becoming familiar with the school's academic program and how it works. For students, the quality of communication between their special education teachers and parents benefits them by increasing motivation to learn, improving behavior, supporting regular attendance, and a developing more positive attitudes toward homework and school in general.

For teachers, the communication between both groups motivates them to provide children with the best possible educational experience. In addition, through improved communication with parents, teachers can learn more about student needs and home environments; this information provides instructors with valuable insight they can apply toward better serving their students in special education programs. Additionally, when teachers take the time to involve parents in their children's learning, parents perceive

that to mean that the teachers have their children's best interests at heart and that the teachers themselves are skilled in their field. Additionally, parental involvement means additional oversight of teachers in the schools.

While there is a great deal of research regarding certain positive impacts of increased parental involvement, there is a gap in the research regarding the impact of such improved communication on the academic achievement of students with special needs. This study seeks to establish a connection between a positive relationship involving regular communication between parents and teachers/schools and how this causes student academic and social needs to be better met, with improvements in student performance academically and behaviorally both at school and at home. High levels of communication with school/teachers means that parents are well aware of their students' progress and struggles. As a result, parents can take steps to fill in the gap at home that might be impacting their children's success, such as confirming that assignments are completely on time and ensuring that students adequately prepare for testing and assessments. Moreover, this study will lead to greater understanding between parents and teachers regarding the roles all can play to achieve success for students. With improved communication, teachers can become aware of factors in the home that might create difficulties for students at school; on the other hand, parents are better able to understand the education their children are receiving which allows them to help better motivate children through better

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practices at home. Therefore, our research question was: how do special education teachers perceive the quality of communication between themselves and the parents of students with special needs?

2 Literature Review

Every society has its own definitions and understanding of concepts related to the field of special education and of people with disabilities, whether physical or cognitive. According to Cottrell (2014), in the United States, the definition of Specific Learning Disability (SLD) has not substantially changed since the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 even though various amendments have been passed over the years – such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004. Traditionally, the relationship between school and home has played a basic and central role in most educational philosophy. The social, educational, and economic traits of a child's home, school, and life in general have a decisive role in shaping human personality. Communication between home and school is important for the creation of cooperation and integration between the two institutions so as to embrace the process of education (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Therefore, parental involvement plays an important role in the academic achievement of the student. The researchers possess over a decade of experience in the special education field and so the authors have seen first-hand situations where there is a lack of communication with families of students with learning disabilities and the impact this can have. This communications problem has a negative effect on any student – even those in a general education program; however, the problems created are especially severe when a child has learning disabilities. One major contributor to low performance levels in students with learning disabilities is that these children tend to have memory issues (Knight, 2018; O'Rourke, Connelly, & Barnett 2018). This means that to be successful, it is important that what is learned during the day at school is revisited at home in order to strengthen retention of the work. The importance of the family role in the success of a child's individual educational program (IEP) cannot be stressed enough. A study by Jeynes (2007), explored the effects of parental involvement in the academic achievement of students as related to the race and socioeconomic status of the parents.

Factors Affecting Parental Involvement

Other insight into the relationship between parent/student cultural traits and parental involvement in the school community is provided by a 1997 study by Grolnick et al. This study identified a set of factors that affect parental involvement. According to Grolnick et al., these factors can be divided into three levels: 1) the individual level; 2) contextual level or family context; and, 3) institutional effects or attitudes and practices of teachers. The first category refers to how parents view themselves and how that viewpoint impacts their level of involvement in their

children's school. The importance of this category is supported by the work of other researchers who referred to parental thoughts and beliefs about themselves as one set of such characteristics (Goodnow 1984; Gurney, 2018; Paseka & Schwab, 2020).

In the second category of context, it is noted that parental behavior cannot be taken out of the context in which the parent(s)/family live (Belsky, 1984; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Jigyel et al., 2018; Widyawan et al., 2020). The reality is that if a family has a difficult home setting – for example, both parents need to work and/or they live in an area with a high crime rate -- parents might have less time to devote to things such as parent-teacher meetings, attending school activities, and making sure their children are adequately preparing for classes. If teachers and schools can be mindful of these issues and take steps to make it easier for parents to be involved, this can help parents become more aware of problems their children face at school and to take steps to address these problems at home in order to support better success for them (Grolnick et al., 1997).

The third level, institutional effects, refers to those elements on the school side such as the “attitudes and practices of teachers” (Grolnick et al., 1997). This level is very relevant to how important communication between parents and the school can be as it is very much the role of the school/instructor to initiate opportunities to improve or strengthen that communication. Since teachers are considered the primary point of contact between parents and schools, clearly the attitudes of the individual teacher toward parental involvement is going to be a strong factor. Obviously, teachers tend to differ regarding the level of parental involvement to support and whether or not such involvement is an effective strategy for enhancing children's educational progress (Epstein & Becker, 1982; Johnson & Pugach, 1990). So even though teachers may believe that parents are willing to help in their children's education, it is important that they involve parents in a way that effectively uses everyone's time. It is also important to consider that in some situations, having parents work on certain school-related issues at home can create conflict between the parent and child. Additionally, some parents simply do not wish to or are unable to commit to such intensive, at-home work with their children (Epstein & Becker, 1982).

Parents of students with disabilities were at the forefront of the 1975 passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Similarly, parents were very much involved in the 2004 passage of IDEA, that amended the EAHCA with certain provisions that protect the rights of guardians of students with disabilities and recognized these guardians as needing equal rights in the process of customizing curriculum to the needs of their students. Clearly, as noted by Burke and Sandman (2015), the level of involvement of parents in their children's schools is definitely a factor that continues to be a concern. Moreover, family participation is one of the central tenets of the IDEA (2004) as it specifically advocates for the inclusion of families as active partners with their children's educational

teams (Conroy, 2012). The involvement of parents not only affects the achievement of students, but also helps schools to find appropriate solutions for children and to implement those solutions more successfully with the support of the family.

A study found that in order to create a successful family-school partnership, it is important and essential that the school provides opportunities for parents and teachers to engage in collaborative efforts so as to address challenges students face both home and school (Azad et al., 2016). Therefore, the need for developing and establishing sustained communication between parents and teachers appears to be a strong factor in solving student problems. The authors further stated that family and school partnerships, that include active parent/teacher communication, have been shown to have great impact on developing student success in and out of school. Similarly, Murray, McFarland-Piazza, and Harrison (2015) noted strong links between parental involvement and positive results in children's social-emotional and education outcomes and investigated parental involvement in both pre-school and K-12. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate the connection between parental participation in pre-school versus elementary school. The research analyzed parent interviews and questionnaires collected by a Longitudinal Study of Australian Children in 1979. In addition, the study aimed to investigate the strategies teachers use to keep better involve parents in their children's studies. The results showed that parents participate more during the pre-school years and that involvement tends to decrease as children age and move into elementary school. Specifically, parents showed lower participation in classroom activities, excursions, and communication in the schools. Notably, the study found that strategies to involve parents must be directed and maintained in order to keep parents more involved.

Domina (2005) did another study to investigate whether parental involvement has a long-term impact on student success. The researcher used data from a National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in 1979 to create growth-over-time models of the types of activities that parents participated in with achievement tests and the behavior problem index and compared this data to student outcomes in the long run. The study sample was comprised of 12,686 American children and young adults, between 14- and 22-years of age in 1979. The data collected included: family background, labor market experience, and educational history. The goal was to analyze the influence of parental socioeconomic characteristics on their children's educational development. The researcher picked 1,445 elementary school students in the 4th-grade or younger in 1996. The results of the studies showed that parental involvement did not seem to improve student achievement on its own but that it did seem to correlate with a reduction in behavior problems.

Therefore, the stated purpose of this qualitative case study is to examine from the teachers' perspective, the communication experience of parents of special needs students with their students' teachers at an elementary school

in Saudi Arabia. At this stage in the research, 'communication' is defined as anything that aids in the exchange or transfer of information between teachers and parents in order to support student learning and student progress.

The results of the literature review, which examined the research in Arab countries, were varied and differed regarding results. For example, the Sartawi study (1992), found a positive, cooperative relationship between deaf education teachers and the parents of their students, which was manifested in the treatment of these students by their teachers. In another study, by Al-qarni (2010), the results indicated a positive relationship between the level of communication between parents of students with special needs and special education teachers in institutes and programs for the deaf and hard of hearing in Riyadh.

Another series of studies found poor communications between special education teachers and parents of students with special needs. Among these studies is one by Alsada (1990), which found that some schools included in the research did not practice professional methods for fostering a cooperative relationship between parents and students. Furthermore, Al-Hazmi's (2009) study found that it is important that teachers maintain good communications with parents of students in the three categories of intellectual, autistic, and ordinary disability. The results of the study confirm the need for parents of children with intellectual disabilities – such as Down syndrome - to support the work done with their children in school at home. Hawsawi and Al-Qahtani asserted that certain differences between teachers and parents – such as socio-economic status - that create obstacles in communications between teachers and parents of students with intellectual disabilities. This study also distilled results into the dimensions of students, administrators, educators, and family/parents. In the area of communications between administrators and parents, there were significant differences in the success of communications when the parents possessed only a secondary education or less (Hawsawi & Al-Qahtani, 2015).

3 Methodologies

Research Design

This research employed a case study design as the research method to collect data on the quality of parental involvement in their children's schools. Yin defined the case study as, "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (1984, p. 23). The case study method was chosen to obtain a deep understanding of the experience of special education teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia regarding parental involvement in schools, and to investigate the quality of the relationship between the two parties.

Theoretical Stance

The constructionism theory depends on the views of special education teachers where it does not give a wrong answer (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). We applied it to our study because our study does not depend on right or wrong answer, but it depends on the points of view of the special education teachers, who we have interviewed in our study. An example was mentioned by Crotty in which he explained that the meanings of things are constructed by human beings as they experience these things (p. 43). Applying this example to our study, special education teachers, who have interviewed, were asked questions in which depended on a constructed answer where it did not

have a right or wrong answer. Therefore, the questions depended also on the experience of special education teachers and their point of view in the communication between them and the parents of special education students. Constructionism theory relies upon the idea that there are varieties of effective answers and that learners should shape their own education (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). For the study, the authors incorporated this theory into their investigations; the study did not depend upon right or wrong answers but rather on the point of view of the special education teachers that participated in the study. Crotty (1998) stated that human beings construct the meanings of things as they experience these things (p. 43). Applying this example to the study, the researchers interviewed special education teachers and asked questions that would result in a constructed response where there was no right or wrong answer. Therefore, the questions also depended upon the experience of the individual special education teacher and that instructor's point of view regarding communications with the parents of special education students.

Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

Participants were teachers who work in the Unaizah school district in the special education program. All participants hold at least a bachelor's degree in special education and have no less than five years of experience working with special education students. In addition, the participants were between the ages of 25- and 40-years of age, based on the demographic data obtained from the Ministry of Education (2016). The study sample consists of nine special education teachers; the interviews were between 30 to 45 minutes for each participant. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed to be coded to capture concepts, opinions, differences, and/or any information relevant to the study. The coded data were analyzed in order to determine emergent themes using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used in the study to assist the researcher in the search insight (Boyatzis, 1998). It is a process of encoding qualitative information that researchers will have from interviews. The data analysis software ATLAS-TI was used for this research.

4 Results

The study focused on three themes based on the participant

data collected, as indicated below.

Parental Participation Relates to Parental Level of Education

This theme examined how the study subjects, the teachers, viewed the success of their communications with parents in relation to their understanding of the level of education the parents possessed. It must be noted that it took a little bit for the participants to feel comfortable enough with the interview process before they could express their experiences about communicating with parents; however, as the interviews proceeded, they became more open about their experiences and shared more information. One subject noted that he felt communications are more successful when the parents of a student are highly educated themselves. He described such parents as: "highly motivated;" "willing to help their children;" "willing to learn;" and, "willing to provide support for the school." On the other hand, all participants noted problems when the parents of their special education students have a low level of education, and observed that these parents expressed, "shame regarding their child's disability;" were "not willing to learn about their children's educational progress;" and, "blamed the school for any lack of progress."

Parental Participation Varies Based on Child's Disability

Regarding this theme, participant responses varied. Again, all participants initially had a hard time verbalizing their feelings when the question was first posed. However, their answers became clearer as they continued and they then gave very clear responses drawn from their field experiences. They noted that communication was hindered when they felt that the parents of their students did not fully understand their children's disabilities. The respondents noted the parents in certain cases expressed: "shame of their atypical child;" "lack of understanding of the special education categories;" and, a "lack of awareness of their child's educational development and potential."

Parental Involvement in School Activities

This theme examined both whether activities that foster parental involvement were offered at the participants' schools and, if activities were offered, how these activities impacted communications with parents. When the question was first posed, there was a reluctance on the part of the participants to clearly respond. When they became more comfortable they were more forthcoming. For this theme, they were divided into two groups: 1) No activities provided; and 2) a lack of provided activities. But the members of both groups noted that they were unaware of how such activities could improve communications.

No activities provided group. The participants in this group expressed frustration with their school districts for not providing support for such activities when they made requests. They mentioned that they felt their school districts showed a "non effective response" when a request was made and noted that "the process for requesting support takes a very long time and then, when it is received, it does not meet our expectations." For example, they noted having requested support for providing accommodations for parents to

improve parental participation and not receiving any as well as asking for a school brochure to be developed and again, never having their request fulfilled.

Lack of activities provided. Although the participants in this group noted that their schools provided some level of activities to improve parental involvement, they noted that those the schools had set up did not seem to improve communications. They expressed clearly that they felt that if such activities were expanded and/or improved, it would in turn improve their ability to implement effective strategies for greater success with such communication tools as parent-teacher conferences. They also noted that they felt that parents were not made aware enough of what such conference time should be devoted to and expressed frustration with parents' wasting time complaining about their students' low grades rather learning about how they could work with their children's teachers to improve their children's educational progress.

5 Discussions

This study found that parental involvement in special education programs is necessary to the successful development of their children's educational goals. Palts and Harro-Loit (2015) studied this phenomenon in a variety of settings; they found that parental involvement has a positive influence on academic progress. For example, time spent on homework versus that spent on leisure activities, such as television viewing, has an important effect on academic learning. These studies involved data obtained on a large group of students in high school or higher education programs; the researchers then examined the direct effects of perceived parental involvement on grades and the indirect effect of such involvement on grades through TV time and time spent on homework. As a result, they found that parental involvement in their children's educational goals has an important, direct, positive effect on grades as it causes increased time spent on homework, which in turn improves grades. On the other hand, the study found negligible impact on students' grades related to parental involvement regarding limiting of TV time. Based on these other findings, this study is focused on examining the effects of the quality of communication between parents of special needs students and special education teachers (Fehrmann, Keith, & Reimers, 1987). Other factors driving this investigation were a perception that communication can be negatively impacted if teachers do not have an understanding of their students' home environments (culture, socio-economic status) and if school staff have not been trained in how to involve parents in their children's education.

Parental involvement is, in the minds of these researchers, the most important factor, however community partnerships with other organizations that support families and schools have also been found to be critical (Epstein, 1995). Therefore, in this study, constructionism theory is labeled as the main strategy to be used with the participants. This theory was chosen through discussion and consensus on the part of the authors as it was agreed that lack of

parent/teacher communication was to be the study focus. Within this overall topic, though, additional factors were considered as contributing such as: 1) that communication success varies based on parental education levels; and, 2) that communication success varies based on school service factors.

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Appendix

Questionnaire Questions:

1. Has parental involvement in their children's education increased or decreased since you began teaching?
2. Do the parents of your special education students participate in school activities at your school?
3. Is there a grade level where you think it is particularly important for parents of special needs students to participate more in their children's school?
4. In what aspects of their children's education do parents indicate to you they are involved?
5. What are the most challenging things about working with parents of special education students?
6. What challenges do you and principals (or other school administrators) face when attempting to increase parental involvement in their children's education?
7. What challenges do parents face when attempting to become involved in their children's education?
8. What does your school do to promote a high level of parental involvement in their children's education?