

# Parental Involvement and Education of Children with Intellectual Disabilities in Saudi Arabia

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## Summary

This research aims to increase understanding of family participation in special education programs, to gain a deeper understanding of the programs themselves, and to determine the consequences of the research findings. It addresses the opportunities for families to participate in their children's learning journey and focuses on enhancing the experience of families participating in the education of students with intellectual disabilities. This study interviews four teachers of students with intellectual disabilities, and three important themes emerge from their discussion of whether parents should participate in special education programs for their children. The findings of this study have several important implications for future practice.

**Keywords:** *intellectual disabilities, parental involvement, Saudi Arabia, special education.*

## 1. Introduction

According to Bakken and Obiakor (2016), the ideal form of parental involvement in the education of their child is the dynamic, continuing engagement of the family. This engagement includes the right of families to access appropriate schools, and to decide the extent of their participation. Parents do not only participate in their children's learning journey at school, but also in activities at home. The involvement of families in the education process is crucial for effective student learning (Jafarov 2015). Moreover, some researchers believe that family involvement can affect children's education skills positively (Roberts and Webster 2020). Many governments around the world encourage the active involvement of families in their children's education, and Goodall and Vorhaus (2011) explained that this is the result of a social interest that requires the development of attitudes and structures within the family unit.

It is widely believed that children who have the unconditional love and support of their parents will try their hardest to achieve good academic standards. The role of parents is not limited to their own children's achievement, but also extends to the improvement of the school's performance (Lara and Saracosti 2019). Indeed, proper parental involvement in education is a positive sign

of good quality schooling (Đurišić and Bunijevac 2017). However, despite the ongoing improvement of the academic progress of children with intellectual disabilities (ID), there remains a considerable gap between the theory and the practice that may be due to the different levels of parental involvement from child to child.

While the issue of parents attending their child's public school has been of increasing concern around the world, only limited previous research considered the opportunities and challenges involved in the participation of parents of students with ID. Although these studies generally acknowledged that parental participation is beneficial to the overall performance of such students and the school, it found that problems remain with parents' absolute participation in their children's education. For instance, Viola and Daniel (2017) studied the role of parental involvement in the professional progress of youths with ID engaged in certain skills training institutions in Zambia. The study determined that the factors affecting the likelihood of parents participating in their children's education were income, education level, and expectations. In addition, the study found that professional progress is also affected by the degree of parental participation, and whether their involvement is enthusiastic and encouraging. This implied that the parents of children with ID should participate in the education of their children, to promote the children's development.

Meanwhile, the study conducted by Djirackor (2017) focused on understanding the role of parents in teaching their children with ID cards in Ghana. The authors found that parents of children with ID play four main roles in their children's education: monitoring their progress, notifying school authorities about their living conditions, paying the school fees, and providing educational materials to their children. The study found that parental involvement affects the academic performance and practical skills of children with ID more than it does children without ID and concluded that schools can institute policies and create obstacles for parents in their children's education, and that effective parent-teacher

collaboration and education is essential for parental involvement. The key implication of the study was the importance for a school to consider a parent's opinion when a child with ID is present in a classroom.

In the same year, Chisembe (2017) published a study concerning parental participation in a personal education program in Lusaka, Zambia, studying the various influencing factors, and finding that some parents failed to participate in the plan, claiming they were unaware of its existence. The study reported that the factors affecting parents' participation in school activities included barriers in communication between the school and the parents, the busy work schedules of the parents, the principals imposed on the parents, and the parents' own education background. Moreover, some of the parents believed that they should not interfere with the work of teachers, and there was also a lack of cooperation between the parents and the teachers. This study aided in creating individualized education programs that made it easier for parents to track their child's progress, and easier for teachers and students to achieve their education goals. There are now several programs that help parents to fulfill their children's needs, and that support the children in developing their own unique personality. The study sought to educate professionals, to prevent the use of ambiguous terminology during meetings with parents and provided recommendations for developing a national policy concerning Individualized Education Programs (IEP) that are optimal for students, which included the need for discussions to take place at a time and date that is suitable for parents, and the need for the government to develop policies to encourage student self-monitoring of the IEPs.

In a more recent study conducted by Ayoola and Edegbai (2019), the parents of children with ID were found to have an impact on their children's school performance, and it reported that there are many ways in which parents must help and motivate their children with ID. A new study suggested that parents of children with ID should seek to meet the needs of their children, and that the school administration should provide sufficient teaching materials to adapt to the situation of such children, to help them to learn and to apply the techniques that will aid them in achieving excellent academic results. It also found that parents have a considerable impact on their child's academic performance. Meanwhile, the study by Dodge (2018) recommended that the parents of children with ID should be involved in developing an IEP. While the parents included in the study acknowledged that the teachers concerned had followed the state guidelines on the matter, they made little mention of the parent-teacher relationship, indicating that measures to strengthen the partnership between the school and the parents can improve the experience of parents and teachers in

developing an IEP. This study contributed to positive social change by education professionals by providing information to support the development of IEPs to improve the education outcomes of students with ID.

In another study, Almaliki, Alqabbani and Alnahdi (2021) explored the ways in which learners can be helped to achieve education goals that are defined according to learners' needs and skills. It found that one of the most important factors for promoting successful transition planning is the involvement of parents. The parents involved in the study cited several reasons for their lack of inclusion in the transition planning process, such as lack of time and lack of knowledge of the transition process. However, the schools concerned made little effort to engage the parents. While parents played a role in helping their children to transition, the teachers exhibited a lack of interest in including them in planning their children's transition, hence it was left for the parents to help their children plan for their future. Moreover, the study found that schools sometimes do not give parents the information they need to support their children with ID.

To supplement current knowledge of the matter of supporting students with ID, Martinez, Conroy, and Cerreto (2012) explored the ways in which parents obtain information, and the impact of the inclusive general education experience from kindergarten to the end of middle school on parents' wishes and expectations for postsecondary education. When the parents concerned were asked about the transition process, they displayed a low degree of knowledge of the matter, and that they were provided with minimal information. The findings showed that students with high parental involvement in their education and their transition plans had higher success rates in school. This implied that the opportunity for postsecondary education should be available widely, and that improvement is required in the ways in which information about postsecondary education is shared. The study's findings also indicated that teacher education programs would be enhanced by including information about potential careers in public service and personal and social education.

## 2. Method

This research aims to increase the overall understanding of family involvement in the education of children with ID, to gain a deeper understanding of the special education programs in this area, and to determine the consequences of the findings of this study. Specifically, this research seeks to determine the opportunities for families to participate in their children's learning journey, focusing on enhancing the experience of families participating in the education of students with ID.

To promote understanding of the benefits of parental participation in the special education programs implemented in the field of the education of children with ID, and a clearer understanding of such programs, this study employed semi-structured interviews to obtain a detailed description of the study's subject (Saunders et al. 2019). In total, four teachers of students with ID were interviewed; the participants were deliberately selected as their experiences were appropriate to the study's subject. The participants were all men from Saudi Arabia. The interviews were audio recorded, and each interview lasted approximately one hour.

The interview schedule was determined in advance and was informed by the literature review. Part, one gathered demographic data about the teacher participants, while part two addressed the parental involvement in the education of their child, and part three focused on the challenges preventing parents from participating in the education of their children. The questions were supplemented by additional questions that gave the participants the opportunity to describe various aspects of their answers in more detail. In addition, follow-up interviews were also conducted with the teachers.

According to Braun and Clarke (2014), there are five stages of the research process. In the present study, once the interviews were completed, the data was transcribed and then analyzed according to a specific framework consisting of six main levels of analysis. It should be noted that the evaluation of the interview data was primarily conducted in the original language, after which only certain passages were translated into English, to prevent accidental changes to the meaning (Merriam and Grenier 2019). The main themes that emerged from the data were examined holistically before establishing the final themes.

### 3. Findings

This section discusses the main results of this research project under three subsections: the expectations of parental participation in education, the reality of parental participation in education, and what is being done to provide for parental participation in education.

#### ***Parental involvement in education: Expectations***

This section evaluates the teacher participants' expectations of parental involvement in their children's education. Participant A noted that he was disappointed by the lack of parental involvement in his experience, indicating that his expectations were not met. He explains that "Approximately 48 students [in my school] have disabilities, and if we indicate that parents are involved in

school activities, it disappoints me to say that it is only true in one out of 48 cases".

Conversely, Participant B articulated a very different sense of expectation, as he did not have a high level of expectation in terms of parents' involvement in their children's education. He noted that "Most of them [parents] do not work in the education system, and thus this constitutes an obstacle to their knowledge of the importance [of their involvement]". This view reflected the findings of the study conducted by Brown (2008), who determined that cultural challenges are a key barrier to parental involvement in their children's education.

Nevertheless, some of the teachers in the present study had a high expectation of parental involvement in their children's education, because of the benefits it would achieve. Participant E was particularly passionate about parents' presence at "extra-curricular activities", arguing that it not only "enhances the students' self-confidence, and makes them socially integrated", but it also "increases the student's effectiveness and motivation". Participant D held a similarly positive view, noting that parental involvement can, "increase in the child's confidence and the parents' knowledge of their children's capabilities". These views were consistent with some of the educational and non-educational benefits of parental involvement discussed in previous studies. Notably, both Solomon (2005) and Epstein (2018) reported almost identical findings, supported by empirical evidence.

Meanwhile, although Participant C also considered there to be benefits to parental involvement in the education of their children with ID, he was less enthusiastic and believed that their presence merely endowed a "symbolic" benefit, explaining that it means "parents are motivated to participate after the formation of the council in the school environment". This view was also consistent with those reported by other empirical research in this area (Driessen et.al. 2005; Solomon 2005; Epstein 2018). Although the present study was conducted in a different setting from the previous research in this field, it therefore seems likely that the findings of previous studies are valid to the Saudi Arabian context.

#### ***Parental involvement in education: Reality***

This section discusses the reality of parental involvement in the education of their children. Almost all the research participants noted that parents generally had little involvement in their children's school-based activities, and Participant A noted, "It is very rare that parents are involved in school education", claiming that the parents of only one child out of a total of 48 children was involved in school activities. The other three participants echoed this: Participant D noted that there was

only a “low percentage” of parental involvement, Participant B said that it, “Doesn’t exceed five percent” at his school, and Participant E reported that there was zero parental involvement in his experience. Surprisingly, considering the low rate of involvement at most of the participants’ schools, Participant C explained that “the total amount of parental involvement may reach twenty percent in some city schools”.

Participant A discussed the different forms of potential parental participation, some forms of which he considered to be more important than others, explaining that parents did not have much involvement with daily or weekly activities, although they did participate in certain events: “... you can see them getting involved in international activities at malls, like international day disabilities and other international days, and they can also attend sports events”.

Participant D echoed this view, noting that parents participate in “social activities in general, and in particular if requested by the teacher”. He explained that parental involvement in the child’s activities and education from childhood and the diagnosis stage is vital, as is their involvement in everything that matters to the child, as it helps to support the child’s achievements, although the participation of parents in integration programs at public schools “is just ink on paper”.

The form of parental involvement articulated by the teachers aligned with the protective model of education (Đurišić and Bunijevac 2017), as it described a strict division of labor between parents and teachers. It was not possible to assess the school-to-home model (Feiler, 2010) in this context, because the interviewees did not speculate about their students’ home environment. Employing insights from the curriculum entitled model suggested that the parents in this instance were not contributing at all to their children’s education (Đurišić and Bunijevac 2017).

#### ***Parental involvement in education: Provision***

This section considers the forms of provision that schools should encourage, to facilitate the involvement of parents in the education of their children. The teachers interviewed for this project made some interesting observations in this regard. Participant A believed that the lack of parental involvement in their child’s education is likely the fault of the school, and not of the parent, explaining, “In my view, the activities that the school does, and the parents not being involved, goes back to not sending a request for the parents to attend.” He added that schools should engage actively with parents and use persuasion to achieve a greater parental attendance in lessons, noting, “Most of the families can be persuaded if there is communication with the parents, in [the form of]

correspondence with them, and asking about their situation and the situation of their children, and telling them that there is an educational activity”. This demonstrated that Participant A was sympathetic to the parents who did not attend their child’s school or participate in many activities, a view reflected in the previous literature in which both Feiler (2010) and Epstein (2018) identified communication as a key challenge. As Participant A noted, the age of some parents prohibited them from attending school events, explaining, “... the father may be unable to come, because of his old age, [so I personally sent] videos and pictures so he could participate in the activities and other things. Also, the elder brother could act as the [child’s] guardian.”

Meanwhile, Participant B noted that the school where he worked did not actively encourage the participation of parents in their children’s education, explaining that parents’ “participation and attendance [only occurs] when the teacher requests it, because he knows when their participation is appropriate”, while in contrast, Participant C noted that “the main goal is for parents to be in contact with the school in every small and big way,” and that “the parents’ opinion about the education process” is considered. Nevertheless, the previous literature suggested that this may be a naïve belief, as research in other territories suggested parents’ self-efficacy is often a key constraint that their requested involvement is unlikely to address (Quinn and Barkin 2005). The lack of communication in this area was also cited by Daniel-White (2002), and is a matter that can be considered disappointing, since an effective intervention to address it would not need to be expensive, as it is easy for a school to enhance their communication with parents via letter, email, and social media.

Another reason for the non-attendance of parents at education events was that articulated by Participant E, namely the society-wide prejudice, stigma, and discrimination faced by children with ID, and he explained, “There are many things that contribute to an increase or decrease in the participation rates of parents, including, for example, the guardian’s attitudes towards their son’s disability, which some parents feel [makes them] inferior or deficient,” a matter also discussed by Solomon (2005). Although these negative attitudes are difficult to change at a broad level, it can be argued that schools should make greater efforts to educate parents in this area. For instance, workshops could be provided to educate the participants about their erroneous beliefs, and to give parents the tools necessary to confront their negative perceptions of their children’s ID.

#### 4. Discussion

This study examined the role of parents in raising children with ID in Saudi Arabia, specifically in terms of their involvement in their children's education. It sought to add to the understanding of this matter by employing empirical evidence to comprehend how parental involvement could be improved, and to obtain a broad understanding of special needs education programs. The study used a qualitative method, interviewing four individual teachers, and the results were grouped around three broad themes: the expectations, the reality, and the provision of parental involvement in the education of children with ID.

The results demonstrated that the teachers generally had low expectations of parents attending their classes, the percentage of which was also low. This was very negative, due to the various perceived benefits of parental involvement in their children's education. The teachers believed that various measures could be adopted to improve parental attendance, and these are discussed in the following subsections.

##### ***Learning lessons: Insights into how to increase parental participation***

It is important to consider the consequences for special education programs for young people with ID, considering the findings of the present study, particularly the ways in which schools might make themselves as accessible to parents as possible. While the schools involved in this study were undoubtedly inclusive in terms of accommodating children with ID, as Participant A noted, greater effort should be made to accommodate parents who might themselves have a disability or may be an older person with various impairments. He suggested that in such cases, digital interventions might be employed, such as videos and pictures, in the absence of a parent's physical presence at the school, or that another family member might assist.

A second matter that might be improved was the communication between the school and parents of students with ID, in order that the parents or the children's guardians are informed about the benefits of their participation in their children's education. The teachers interviewed discussed the many benefits this would engender, including greater confidence and ability on the part of the children, and they believed that if the parents were provided with suitable information, more would be encouraged to attend the school. This information might involve notifying the parents of certain events and requesting their attendance via formal written communication.

Thirdly, the negative perceptions of those with an ID should be addressed, as noted by Solomon (2005). Internationally, increased awareness of disabilities has reduced the stigmatization of disabled individuals, and indeed of the issues that family members of children with disability face. Schools and teachers should tackle this matter directly by initiating a dialogue with the parents of children with ID. If the extant stigma is confronted and more understanding is achieved, this has the potential to promote greater participation rates of parents in their children's education. Wider work regarding these matters should also be conducted within the wider community (Feiler 2010; Epstein 2018).

While the interviews conducted with the teachers as part of this study were valuable and provided important insights into the topic of parental involvement in their children's education, with greater resources, more data collection could be undertaken that would improve the validity of the research findings. First, more detailed interview schedules could be employed, perhaps adding the simple question at the end of the interview, "Is there anything else you would like to add, that perhaps you feel is important and pertinent to our discussion topic, but that you have not had a chance to express?" as this may reveal further pertinent information.

Another improvement might be the use of follow-up questions during the interview. For example, in the interview with Participant D, the interviewer asked about the percentage of parents involved in the activities of the school, to which the participant replied that it was low. This response was unclear and may mean different things to different people. A follow-up question, such as, "if you had to guess a range, what would it be?" would help to clarify the matter. Secondly, the findings of the study would have a greater validity and reliability if a larger interview sample was employed. Due to time and resource constraints, this was not possible for the present study. As well as increasing the number of teacher interviews, this could be complimented by interviewing other important groups, such as parents or the children themselves.

Moreover, the use of interviews could be complimented by other methodologies. For instance, a survey could be administered, to obtain a wider response rate, or observational fieldwork or ethnography might be employed at education events where parents are involved. This would give the data greater depth and interpretive understanding.

## 5. Conclusion

This study found that parental involvement in their children's education can be very positive for a child's education. While parents are encouraged to play with their children, for educational progress to be made, the blanket policies of schools worldwide that establish a framework for parental involvement may not always be successful. Education and other variances mean that parents are not on an equal footing, therefore requesting input from all parents would produce variable results. There is therefore a tension involved when seeking to cater for all cultures and all parents.

In some cultures, it is the norm that the teacher alone oversees educating children. Even when this is not the case, in practice it can be difficult to secure parental participation in all cases, because the circumstances of parents differ. For instance, parents who work may not be able to commit to parent-school activities. Schools are now taking more responsibility in encouraging parental participation, and as a minimum parent should be given instruction concerning how to help their children with their schoolwork.

There are several important changes which need to be made. Those working at schools must act in the best interests of all parents. They should determine which child does not have the appropriate help at home and should compensate for any lack by providing additional support for the child. Schools exist to provide education, and it is ultimately the responsibility of schools, not parents, to ensure that education standards are met. The varying degrees of parental involvement can result in homework and grades being inconsistent across all levels of education, therefore schools should encourage parents to assist in their children's studies, to ensure parity. However, children should not receive mixed messages from their parents and their school, therefore parents must support the curriculum, and not change it.

This might be achieved by providing parents with guidelines and training concerning how to support their children with their homework. Parents should be involved in the education of their children, whether they attend the school or not, and they should be invited to participate in all the school's activities. Ultimately, while the school is responsible for children's progress during the school day, parents are the most important people in their children's lives, as they can enrich them in a wide variety of ways through the experiences to which they expose their children outside of school. Sometimes both parents and teachers place undue emphasis on schoolwork, and this

may threaten the promotion of a fully developed child who has a wealth of life experiences in all areas.

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