Parent's Involvement in the Education of their Children who have Intellectual Disability: Perception and Knowledge

Fawaz Alhossyan[1]

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the knowledge and attitudes of parents with children who have intellectual disabilities (ID) regarding special education and inclusive education programming. The study employed a qualitative approach that involved semi-structured interviews with four parents of children with intellectual disability who are attending private and public special education schools in Saudi Arabia. The findings indicate parents have diverse and generally positive opinions regarding different aspects of the education and educational services their children who have intellectual disability. Through the coding and analysis of their responses to the 20 interview questions, four themes emerged, which were: Information and Knowledge About Special Education and Inclusion, Communication, the Individualized Education Program (IEP), and Assessment and Instruction. The parents also indicated a desire for stronger communication practices between school and home to better support their students with disabilities. Based on the results, it is recommended that further research on the communication processes between school personnel and parents/caretakers be conducted to identify best practices for achieving good communication for the benefit of students with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: *Parents, Involvement, Intellectual Disability, Inclusive Education.*

Introduction

In the past two decades, education for students with disabilities has evolved to become more comprehensive and inclusive, in part through the provision of a range of services and accommodations. Moreover, education stakeholders and policymakers around the world have come to recognize that inclusive practices ensure the greater integration and success of those with disabilities, which has significant positive effects on society (Soodak & Erwin, 1995). To protect the rights of students with disabilities and their parents in the educational process, it has often been necessary to implement different laws and regulations. Among these, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004 of the United States is often referenced as a guide to implementing education for students with disabilities (Overton, 2016). When discussing the issue of comprehensive education for this student population, it is necessary to also safeguard and encourage parental participation in the educational process, especially when developing educational plans, as researches have shown parental involvement to be critical to success for all students, including those with disabilities (Ferguson, 2008; Hattie, 2009; MacKichan & Harkins, 2013).

Although parental participation has consistently been found to be positive, it does vary for both parents and school when the student has disabilities (Lehman, 2018). Therefore, given the rise of more inclusive educational practices, especially in the 21st century, the topic of parental participation and its impact in the educational process has received even greater attention over the last 10 years. The findings of different researchers on this topic has allowed different education stakeholders, such as school administrators, to make positive changes within schools to better facilitate parents' participation (Lehman, 2018).

As part of the Law on Persons with Disabilities, schools are mandated to include parents in the development of the Individualized Education Program (IEP), as doing so supports student success through such practices as early intervention (Afolabi, 2014; Lehman, 2018; Vanderpuye, 2013). Researchers have also found that greater parental involvement is beneficial to all students but it is especially useful in reducing the challenges students with disabilities face in school (Leyser & Kirk, 2004). The findings of many studies confirm a correlation between the level of parental involvement and students' academic achievement

---

[1] Associate Professor, Department of Special Education, College of Education, Majmaah University, Al Majmaah, 11952, Saudi Arabia, Email: Fu.alhasiany@mu.edu.Sa

(Ibrahim & Jamil, 2012; Washington, 2011). Furthermore, parental involvement has been found to directly and positively affect the academic achievement of students with disabilities (Peiffer, 2015; Thornton, 2015). For example, a study conducted by Bariroh (2018) investigated the effect of parents' participation on the motivation of their students with disabilities. The results indicated there is a correlation between the level of parental participation and students' motivation and related academic achievement. In contrast, studies found that some parents of students with disabilities were not involved in their children's learning (Monadjem, 2009; Williams et al., 2002).

Purpose of the Study

This study endeavored to expand upon the existing literature on the effects of parental involvement on students with disabilities by exploring the knowledge and attitudes of such parents regarding inclusion and inclusive education.

Research Questions

To accomplish the study objectives, the following research questions were established.

- What are the opinions of parents of students with disabilities regarding inclusive education?

- What are the challenges/obstacles parents of students with disabilities face when their children are being educated in an inclusive educational setting?

- What factors do parents of students with disabilities perceive as being helpful in enabling them to participate in their children's education?

Method

Research Design

The current study employed a qualitative design that utilized semi-structured interviews with parents of children with intellectual disabilities (ID). Qualitative design allows the researcher to obtain in-depth data from a small number of participants (Fylan, 2005). An advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they allow participants to respond to the open-ended questions with stories about their real-life experiences (Wengraf, 2001).

Setting and Participants

The researcher sent an email with a short survey to 30 of the parents in Saudi Arabia, which asked questions regarding the individual's child/children including: age, number of children, type of disability (if any), and specifically whether the parent has a child with ID. At the end of the questionnaire, the parent was asked whether they would agree to be interviewed for the study. Once all the responses were received and reviewed, Four parents were selected as they met the inclusion criteria (see Table 1); these comprised three mothers and one father of a male child with ID currently in primary school. After that, these four parents were individually contacted via phone to coordinate and explain the interview protocol. Once the interview time had been set, each participant was contacted individually to conduct the semi-structured interview began. The interviews lasted approximately 45 min each.

Table 1. Demographics Data Provided by the Four Study Participants

Participant #	Gender	Child's education level	Type of disability
Participant 1	F	Primary School	ID

Participant 2	F	Primary School	ID
Participant 3	F	Primary School	ID
Participant 4	M	Primary School	ID

Note. ID = Intellectual disabilities.

Instruments and Data Collection

Survey

In order to identify potential participants for the study, a questionnaire was designed to obtain demographic data from 30 parents of students with ID. Each respondent to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria to be invited participate in the study. Four parents who met the conditions were selected. After that, parents were contacted via telephone to coordinate and explain the interview protocol. 4 were selected: three mothers and one father. Of the 30 parents sent the questionnaire, 15 returned the survey and of these, 4 met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the study. The data obtained from the survey responses of these four participants is presented on Table 1.

Interview

Once the four participants had been identified, the author conducted a 20-min phone conversation with each parent to discuss the study and schedule the phone interview. The interviews lasted approximately 45 min for each participant (see Table 1). To protect the privacy of the four parents, they were each assigned a number and the numbers were used throughout the research to protect their confidentiality. Participants 1–3 are female and Participant 4 is male. All four of the parents have a male student with ID enrolled in a private and primary special education school. The nine semi-structured interview questions were developed using the information obtained from the parents through the survey and with reference to the established research questions, the nine semi-structured interview questions were developed. Those interview items were:

- Tell me about your experiences as a parent of a child with a disability

- When and how did you come to understand that your child experiences academic obstacles that differ from his peers?

- What are your perspectives on including student with disabilities into general education schools?

- Do you participate in the educational process with your child? If yes, how do you participate? If the answer is no, what are the obstacles?

- How do you evaluate your child's experience in the educational process in general?

- Do you think it is necessary for your child to study with his peers without disabilities in school?

- How do you communicate with the school? How does the school communicate with you? Do you think this communication effective? Tell me about your experiences related to communication with the school

- Do you participate in your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP)? Are you informed about it? Tell me about your experience regarding the IEP

- Do you have anything to add?

Research Procedures

Prior to beginning the study, the researcher obtained contact information from school for families that include children with disabilities. Using this information, the parents in each family were contacted via email and provided with an initial questionnaire designed to obtain preliminary information about the parents and their children with disabilities to determine whether the parents met the inclusion criteria to participate in the study. Of the 30 surveys distributed to parents, 15 responses were received, which were then read and analyzed to identify a manageable number of parents to invite to participate in the study interviews. Four individuals who have children with ID, as indicated in their survey responses, were identified who both met the inclusion criteria and who had indicated a desire to participate in the study.

After obtaining signed and completed consent forms from each of these four parents, the researcher held 20-min phone calls with each to describe the structure of the study and schedule the interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission; the parents were assured that the recordings would be to support the research and analysis only and that no one besides the researcher would access them. During the interview, the researcher answered all of the participants' questions and used notes to record important information.

Analysis of the Data

Each of the four parents was cooperative and enthusiastic about participating in the research. All the parents also willingly provided additional information in response to the different interview questions. Descriptive coding method was used to categorize the data. This included organizing the interview data using a table and then indicating the main themes next to the data/text. After this, the identified main themes were further generalized, and the interview data was analyzed by transcribing the results, coding, categorizing, and using descriptive analysis (see Table 2; Creswell, 1994).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the reliability of the data obtained through the interviews, the interview questions were reviewed by a panel of experts and following the interviews, member check was employed by sending each participant a transcript of their interview so that they could confirm their responses had been correctly recorded (Creswell, 1994). The review panel included 5 professors with doctorates in special education to ensure that the interview questions reflected the true spirit of the research questions. In addition, triangulation was employed by asking the same question in more than one way to ensure the consistency of the parents' answers (Creswell, 1994).

Table 2. Examples from the Coding of the Interview Data

Coding Label	Sample Quote	Notes
Inclusion	"I believe that students with intellectual disabilities, regardless of the degree of their disability, should study in general education schools so that they can integrate with regular students" (P3).	Through data analysis, the researcher noted that participants had different opinions about special education or inclusive education.
IEP	"I have never heard of an IEP before and I may bear some responsibility, but I suggest that a regular meeting be held with the school in which the IEP procedures are explained in detail" (P4).	The researcher noticed that the participants lacked a lot of information about the IEP.

Assessment and instruction	"I think that the homework given to my child is heavy and needs more time and continuous explanation. Also, I always wonder if there is another way of evaluation other than tests" (P1).	Some participants expressed their desire to engage in the assessment and instruction process.

Results

After analyzing the results, the researcher identified several main themes. The first was about basic information about special education and inclusion in general. The second involved communication with teachers and school administrators. The participation level of the parents in their children's IEP was the third theme. Finally, the fourth theme was about attitudes of parents toward assessment and instruction used with their students with ID. In the following section theme is discussed and explained separately (see Table 3).

Table 3. Themes That Emerged from the Interviews

Theme	Title
Theme 1	Information and Knowledge About Special Education and Inclusion
Theme 2	Communication
Theme 3	Individualized Education Program (IEP)
Theme 4	Assessment and Instruction

Theme 1: Information and Knowledge About Special Education and Inclusion

The parents differed in their understanding of the basic principles of special education and the concept of inclusion. In this context, Participant 1 said, "Inclusion is when a student studies with all students in a regular school." This definition of inclusion was confirmed by another parent (Participant 2), who added that she does not differentiate between special education programs in general and inclusion as an independent process within the framework and space of the school; this parent also said, "I don't think there are big differences between special education and inclusion. In my opinion, students with disabilities should study with [their peers without disabilities] in regular schools."

Similarly, Participant 3 stated that there is no point in students with disabilities studying in a separate special education school and noted that these students should attend general education schools and study alongside their peers without disabilities. When Participant 3 was asked howher son could be integrated into a public general education school given his ID, she responded that she does not know what instructional practices and methods are available to allow for the inclusion of students with ID into general education schools and classrooms or to provide such children with appropriate education. Participant 3 added, "I believe that students with intellectual disabilities, regardless of the degree of their disability, should study in general education schools so that they can included with regular students." The fourth participant also stated that it is better for students with ID to study in general education schools. Participant 4 added that he feels the education of these students should then be supplemented with private lessons and additional programs that are offered in special centers. In addition, this participant also believes there is no point to dedicated special education schools for students with disabilities, stating, "The presence of special schools will reinforce the idea of social isolation and will make my son isolated from people and students."

Theme 2: Communication

Regarding the quality of communication with teachers and school administrators, participants in general expressed positive views regarding communication with personnel in school administration. For example, Participant 1 spoke about efforts by school administrators to enhance communication with her family. This participant also indicated that their child's teachers communicate with them regularly and well, using modern means of communication, Participant 1 said,

The school is constantly communicating with us and asking us about the obstacles we face. The school principal calls us and enquires about my child's academic status. Also, the school teachers communicate with us through the notebook and by creating communication groups via WhatsApp application.

Participant 2 made similar comments and indicated that all the staff at their child's school interact and communicate with them in a good and positive way. She also noted that the school administration keeps them well-apprised of different school-related issues, saying, "The director is in constant contact with us, if there is a trip or school cancellation due to weather conditions, they call the registered number and inform us." Other participants agreed with this view and indicated they do not feel they encounter problems with communicating with the school. Participant 4 raised an interesting point regarding parental responsibility, saying, "The school administration is the one who looks for us in the event of our child's absence. They communicate with us by phone and via WhatsApp messages on an ongoing basis, which makes us feel constantly and reassured."

Theme 3: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

This theme arose out of comments the participants made during the interviews that indicated they do not fully understand the main principles of the IEP. For example, Participant 1 indicated that although she had heard about the IEP, she had not had the opportunity to participate in the IEP process yet. Her comments indicated that she wants to participate in her child's IEP as she feels this would help his progress. Participant 1 said:

I always hear about the Individualized Education Program and [have] read some of the models that my child brings. And I am always wondering about what the Individualized Education Program is and can I participate in it and go into the details that will enable me to help my child and help the school.

The second participant said that she had previously communicated with the school's administration about the IEP, but that the IEP process was not explained to her and no additional information was provided. When we asked the participant if they had asked the school about the individual educational program, they answered in the negative, which also indicates a shortcoming on the part of some parents regarding not asking and inquiring, As Participant 2 said:

I had found some forms [that came home with] my child that said, "Individualized Education Program." The teacher had previously contacted me about the program, but did not explain my role in this program, which makes me want to participate in this program and help my child with intellectual disabilities.

The responses of Participants 3 and 4 to the questions on the IEP were similar two those of the other two parents. Although both indicated interest in the IEP and concern about it, they did not have complete information about it. They also noted that they feel their lack of participation in and/or understanding of the IEP is related to other pressures they experience in their daily lives. As Participant 3 said:

I take a big part [of the responsibility for] my lack of knowledge about the IEP because I can't concentrate due to the pressures that are building up. I have financial, educational, and family pressures and so I may have forgotten to ask the school about the IEP and how to participate in it. The school made the effort and I think it is unfair to make them bear the responsibility [for my lack of participation].

Participant 4 made similar comments and asserted that he will ask the school in the future about how the IEP works. He also made a suggestion that he believes it would be good for the school to hold an online meeting because, as he said, "I have never heard of an IEP before and I may bear some responsibility, but I suggest that a regular meeting be held with the school in which the IEP procedures are explained in detail."

Theme 4: Assessment and Instruction

Participants' opinions varied regarding the assessment and education processes that take place in their children's schools. Some parents expressed concerns regarding how their child with ID is assessed and educated. For example, Participant 1 stated that she believes she should be part of the assessment processes that take place in schools and wants to know more about the ways in which these are implemented with her child. She also questioned whether there are other mechanisms for assessing those with ID that would be more appropriate or useful than the testing that is currently in place. Participant 1 also noted that she believes the homework and assignments her child with ID receives are too challenging and time-consuming for him, stating: "I think that the homework given to my child is heavy and needs more time [to complete] and [requires] continuous explanation. Also, I always wonder if there is another way of evaluation other than tests."

Another topic that arose during the interviews was the specialized curricula that the Saudi Ministry of Education has established for students with ID. Although the participants stated that they feel these curricula are well-constructed and useful, Participant 2 noted that she is not sure that the recommended curriculum for students with ID is implemented at private special education institutes. Similarly, Participant 3 said:

The Ministry has provided a wonderful curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities. It is an excellent curriculum that provides all the required skills and contains many pictures and knowledge that my child needs, but I am not sure if this curriculum is applied to private schools.

Participants 3 and 4 agree with this opinion regarding the distinction of intellectual education curricula, but one of the participants indicates that he believes that he needs to obtain guidance courses and programs about the curriculum used, the method of solving activities, continuous explanation by the subject teacher, and the evaluation method followed.

Synopsis of the Findings Regarding the Themes

In summary, during the interviews the participants raised several important points regarding the education of their children with ID. For example, the parents talked about their knowledge of special and inclusive education programs and explained how these programs may seem unclear and therefore they believe that they need guidance and additional information about the most important differences in the specialized programs available to serve their children. Regarding communication, participants expressed satisfaction with the quality of communication with teachers and school administration, which indicates that from their perspectives, the school makes great effort to be open and forthcoming with them as parents regarding their children. Regarding the IEP, participants believe that they urgently need to know more about it and how they can participate in the IEP process so that they can better support their child with disabilities. Finally, regarding curricula and assessment methods, participants expressed admiration for the curricula provided by the Saudi Ministry of Education for students with intellectual disabilities, stating that they feel it is appropriate for their children. However, some of them expressed a desire to have more information regarding how their children are assessed.

Discussion and Implications

In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four Saudi parents of elementary school-aged students with ID to obtain insights into their knowledge of inclusive education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Using the data collected through the interviews and subsequently analyzed, certain main

themes were identified. One important finding is that the answers the participants gave indicate that parents of students with ID need more information about special education programs and practices, and particularly about the IEP process. This indicates that these parents of students with ID exhibit similar issues as parents in other studies. Namely a lack of understanding of the differences between different methods for delivering education to children with special educational needs, which indicates the need for awareness and support programs to explain more about all the services and programs available to the children of these parents. Specifically, this finding is consistent with those of two studies that linked positive parental attitudes with the success and greater inclusion of students with disabilities(Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

In terms of communication, all four participants expressed complete satisfaction with the communication process between themselves and the school administration. For example, one of the parents spoke about the school communicating with them very regularly, sending text messages and other means of communication to ensure that they are fully updated on their child's academic status and to inform them of any developments regarding their student's academic performance. As stated by Participant 1 said,

The school is constantly communicating with us and asking us about the obstacles we face. The school principal calls us and inquires about my child's academic status. Also, the school teachers communicate with us through the notebook and by creating communication groups via WhatsApp.

Regarding parents' IEP participation, the findings indicate that the participants are concerned that they are not involved or knowledgeable enough about the IEP. In addition, some indicated that they had only heard about the program but had not been able to participate as yet. While the parents expressed this concern, they seemed to indicate that they felt it was their fault that they were not more involved due to other responsibilities (Participant 3).This indicates the need for schools and/or the Ministry of Education to provide more information and training, possibly in the form of workshops scheduled for the parents' convenience, regarding the IEP itself and the process by which it is developed.

Regarding the curriculum and assessments used with their children with ID, the participants expressed satisfaction with the curriculum for students with ID at their children's school and indicated that they felt it was designed appropriately. According to Participant 3:

The Ministry has provided a wonderful curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities. It is an excellent curriculum that provides all the required skills and contains many pictures and knowledge that my child needs, but I am not sure if this curriculum is applied to private schools.

However, some participants expressed some concern about how their children are tested and evaluated. In addition, some participants indicated that they feel they need to spend a lot of time with their children explaining homework.

Recommendations for Future Research

In light of these findings, the researcher suggests that more studies be conducted on the communication between schools and families, including methods for improving and supporting such communication. Conducting such research will help to identify the obstacles to good communication and can also help improve the attitudes of parents toward their children's special education programs, which in turn can positively affect their students' academic performance.

Acknowledgment

References

Afolabi, O. E. (2014). Parents' involvement in inclusive education: An empirical test for the psycho-educational development of learners with special education needs (SENs). International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies, 6(10), 196–208. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1075838

Bariroh, S. (2018). The influence of parents' involvement on children with special needs' motivation and learning achievement. International Education Studies, 11(4), 96–114. https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v11n4p96

Creswell, J. W. (2016). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods approaches (3rd ed.). Sage.

Ferguson, D. L. (2008). International trends in inclusive education: The continuing challenge to teach each one and everyone. European Journal of Special Needs Education, 23(2), 109–120. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250801946236

Fylan, F. (2005). Semi-structured interviewing. In J. Miles & P. Gilbert (Eds.), A handbook of research methods for clinical and health psychology (1st ed., pp. 65–78). Oxford University Press. https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/wp.wwu.edu/dist/8/2868/files/2018/04/Fylan-2005-Semi-structured-Interviews-1c47gyp.pdf

Hattie, J. (2009). The black box of tertiary assessment: An impending revolution. In L. H. Meyer, S. Davidson, H. Anderson, R. Fletcher, P. M. Johnston, & M. Rees (Eds.), Tertiary assessment & higher education student outcomes: Policy, practice & research (pp. 259–275). Ako Aotearoa. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255665548_The_Black_Box_of_Tertiary_Assessment_An_Impending_Revolution

Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (1995). Parental involvement in children's education: Why does it make a difference? Teachers College Record, 97(2), 310–331. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146819509700202

Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M. T., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A. S., & Closson, K. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. The Elementary School Journal, 106(2), 105–130. https://doi.org/10.1086/499194

Ibrahim, A. T., & Jamil, H. B. (2012). The nature of parental involvement in the schooling process in Katsina state. Journal of Education and Learning, 1(2), 37–50. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1081345.pdf

Lehman, L. E. (2018). Parental involvement within the special education system [Master's thesis, Bethel University]. https://spark.bethel.edu/etd/393/

Leyser, Y., & Kirk, R. (2004). Evaluating inclusion: An examination of parent views and factors influencing their perspectives. International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 51(3), 271–285. https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912042000259233

MacKichan, M. D., & Harkins, M. J. (2013). Inclusive education: Perceptions of parents of children with special needs of the individual program planning process. Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education, 3(1). https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ejie/vol3/iss1/7/

Monadjem, L. C. (2009). The development of a programme for parental involvement in senior primary school education in Swaziland [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Africa]. https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/1180

Overton, S. (2016). Collaborating with families: A case study approach (Reissue). Waveland Press.

Peiffer, G. D. (2015). The effect of self-efficacy on parental involvement at the secondary school level [Doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh]. D-Scholarship @Pitt. http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/25252/

Soodak, L. C., & Erwin, E. J. (1995). Parents, professionals, and inclusive education: A call for collaboration. Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 6(3), 257–276. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532768xjepc0603_6

Thornton, R. (2015). Parental involvement and academic achievement [Master's thesis, Governors State University]. OPUS. https://opus.govst.edu/capstones/114/

Vanderpuye, I. (2013). Piloting inclusive education in Ghana: Parental perceptions, expectations and involvement [Doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds]. https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/4976/1/Vanderpuye%20I%20-%20Education%20-%20PhD%20-%202013.%20PDF..pdf

Washington, A. (2011). A national study of parental involvement: Its trends, status, and effects on school success [Doctoral dissertation, Western Michigan University]. ScholarWorks@WMU. https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/477/

Wengraf, T. (2001). Interview 'facts' as evidence to support inferences to eventual theorization/representation models. In Qualitative research interviewing (pp. 2–15). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209717.n1

Williams, B., Williams, J., & Ullman, A. (2002). Parental involvement in education (Policy Report No. RR332). Queen's Printer. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/4669/1/RR332.pdf