

Exploring Teachers' Perceptions of Parent-Teacher Partnership to Support Learners with Intellectual Disabilities in Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

The study explored teachers' perceptions of parent-teacher partnerships for enhanced access to equitable education for learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream primary schools. A qualitative case study was utilised to collect data from 8 teachers who taught in mainstream primary schools. Data was sourced through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that while various challenges hamper effective partnerships between parents and teachers in mainstream primary schools, a certain level of teamwork exists between parents and teachers, with more opportunities – yet to be fully explored – to strengthen this partnership further. Hence, a need to harness various strategies to improve parent-teacher relationships to create a more functional environment that meets the needs of learners with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: parent-teacher partnership, intellectual disabilities, support, primary school

INTRODUCTION

With many countries adopting inclusive education policies as a foundation for attaining a more just society (Ainscow, 2020), children with intellectual disabilities are increasingly receiving education in mainstream primary schools. Thus, their integration requires a holistic inclusion approach that acknowledges the significance of collaborative support in enhancing higher academic and social functioning levels. Support from a team of parents and teachers has been identified as significant for improving the quality of education for learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014; Bailey, 2017; Paris, 2016). According to Owen (2016), parent-teacher partnerships contribute to a favourable teaching and learning environment, hence such partnerships are essential for intellectually impaired learners. Children with intellectual disabilities are characterised by significant deficits in both cognitive and adaptive functioning, with the extent to which these defects

manifest ranging from mild to severe (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2010).

These children's unique intellectual and adaptive characteristics often present several challenges to the teaching and learning process, making it fairly complex. Thus, for improved education outcomes, parents and teachers should join forces and recognise each party's distinctive but equivalent role in supporting the education of learners with intellectual disabilities (Owen, 2016). Martinez (2015), however, warns that the partnership between teachers and parents generally faces challenges, as both partners prefer to work in isolation, leading to the needs of learners with intellectual disabilities not being fully addressed. Therefore, this study explored mainstream teachers' perceptions of parents' contribution to teacher-parent partnerships for enhanced educational outcomes for learners with intellectual disabilities.

The Inclusion of learners with disabilities in regular education schools in Lesotho has been adopted in various legislation and policy frameworks that require educational institutions to provide access to education without restrictions. While these frameworks indicate collaborative partnerships between schools and families as essential in ensuring positive education outcomes for learners with disabilities, the roles of parents and teachers are not well defined, thus causing role confusion which, in turn, negatively affects access to education for children with intellectual disabilities. Parental involvement in most schools in Lesotho is through school annual general parents' meetings where parents get the opportunity to voice their opinions about the handling of education by their children's schools. According to the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (2021), parental involvement in Lesotho is also largely through school management boards, where parents are represented by three members who they nominate. However, Ralejoe (2021) indicates that the school boards possess restricted powers on key educational decisions as most of these are controlled centrally.

Research on parent-teacher partnerships has not received much attention in Lesotho despite the growing global policy interest and research in this area. Studies that exist have focused mainly on the education of typical learners, leaving a gap in the parent-teacher partnership in the education of learners with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities (Ralejoe, 2021; Teba-Teba & Thabane, 2016). According to MOET (2022) children with intellectual disabilities constitute the highest number of

learners with disabilities enrolled in regular primary schools in Lesotho, with data showing that there are 9612 out of 17302 learners with intellectual disabilities (Ministry of Education and Training, 2023). However, despite being the largest group of disabilities enrolled in mainstream schools, their inclusion is characterised by various challenges such as teachers' lack of knowledge, negative attitudes, and lack of resources, which impede meaningful access and participation in education, leading to lack of progress from one grade to another and a high drop-out rate (Mosia & Tseeke, 2021; Tseeke & Rakolobe, 2024; Tseeke, 2024). Accordingly, inclusion strategies such as collaborative partnerships between stakeholders play a crucial role in safeguarding positive education participation of learners with intellectual disabilities.

According to Emerson et al. (2012), partnerships between parents and teachers promote comprehensive development of learners' educational and social outcomes. Thus, this study explored teachers' perceptions of parent-teacher partnerships for enhanced access to education for learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream primary schools in Lesotho. In particular, it focused on the nature of the partnership and the challenges encountered in providing support for enhanced education outcomes for learners with intellectual disabilities. The study also aimed to understand collaborative strategies that can be used to strengthen this partnership for improved access to education for learners with intellectual disabilities. This study might shed light on the significant role parent-teacher partnerships play in the education of children with disabilities and how embracing the partnership may change the education landscape of these learners, including those with intellectual disabilities. The finding might also challenge all stakeholders, especially parents and teachers, to reconsider their responsibilities and participation in learners' education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Bio-ecological theory, which defines human development as a continuous process that is influenced by stimulus in the environment, as well as interactions and existing bi-directional relationships between an individual and players in different contexts (Etteka & Mahoney, 2017). This theory perceives children's development in terms of interactions between the children and systems that surround them directly (family, teachers, and peers) and indirectly (school district decisions, government services, and funding).

Within the theory, the microsystem level encompasses particular environments that children inhabit, such as the home and school environments, and at the mesosystem level where there is communication amongst the microsystems which comprise the reciprocal relationships between the school and home environment. Thus, strengthening the bi-directional relationship between the parents and teachers at the mesosystem level can promote constructive behaviour among these partners for learners with intellectual disabilities (Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016). Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) argue that collaborative relationships between groups of people supporting the education of children in schools are significant aspects of inclusive education that should be encouraged and safeguarded.

Teacher-Parent Partnership in Supporting Learners with Intellectual Disabilities

Literature on parent-teacher partnerships indicates that this partnership has experienced a notable transformation over the years (Vasarik, Stebler & Reusser, 2018) from schools and teachers solely making major decisions on children's education without consulting parents, to schools and teachers being more welcoming to all parents and giving them a platform to share ideas on implementation of education policies for learners with disabilities (Minke, 2014). According to Ramsey and Algozzine (2006), the primary aim of this partnership is to maximise the learner's full potential. In this relationship, parents and teachers are perceived as authorities in their respective settings; home and school settings (Olsen & Fuller, 2012). As education implementers, teachers are distinctively situated to recognise educational matters and facilitate collaboration between parents and teachers (Aouad & Bento, 2020), while parents' responsibility is to ensure the growth and academic achievement of learners at home (Cramer, 2006).

Hendersen and Mapp (2002) argue that effective learner outcomes are easily achieved when teachers and parents are aware of their responsibilities in the partnership, as this can open doors for the sharing of information that may assist schools in providing efficient and meaningful educational experiences for learners with intellectual disabilities. However, Garbacz and McIntyre (2016) warn that, in reality, establishing and maintaining partnerships is extremely challenging. While teachers often indicate a lack of structure, time, and support for establishing effective partnerships with parents, and parents' lack of knowledge and skills on how to effectively communicate with teachers about their children's needs

(Mosia & Tseeke, 2021; Murray, Ackerman-Spain, Williams & Ryley 2011), parents complain about teachers' lack of willingness to collaborate with them (Murray et al., 2011).

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Supporting Learners with Intellectual Disabilities

The needs of children with intellectual disabilities call for parents and teachers to work together to support these children's education (Lerner & Johns, 2011). While the partnerships are essential for improved inclusion, Margaritoiu and Eftimie, (2011) indicate that they often present challenges. According to Durisic and Bunijevac (2017), the partnerships tend to be uni-directional, with teachers regularly sending information to the family without receiving any response, and vice versa. Thus, Abel (2012) emphasises that two-way communication between families and teachers is essential as it improves the provision of support to address the learner's educational needs. In addition, these partnerships can be complicated by differences in opinions on how each partner contributes to the learner's education. On the one hand, parents outline teachers' unwillingness to communicate and collaborate as a significant problem (Starr & Foy, 2010) and, on the other hand, teachers believe that factors such as parents' lack of obligation, their low levels of education, hostility with teachers, and lack of time contribute to low levels of parental collaboration (Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017).

Studies show that parents' engagement in supporting the education of their children is lacking, especially in developing individualised education plans because they do not fully comprehend their roles in educating children with intellectual disabilities (Al-Herz, 2008). Moreover, research shows that teachers often do not perceive parents as their equal partners. For instance, Bezdek and Turnbull (2010) found that teachers preferred parents who were not fully involved in learners' education. In Braiden, Bothwell and Duffy (2010), some professionals blamed parents for not following through with their suggested forms of support at home, while others did not facilitate the support due to a lack of time, knowledge, and skills. Furthermore, parent-teacher partnership is sometimes compromised by the language barrier, as teachers may use educational jargon that parents are unaccustomed to (Barclift, 2010). In addition, teachers report that parents' inconsistent school meeting turnout, lack of understanding of children's needs, and unrealistic expectations are some of the challenges they encounter working with parents (Minke, 2014).

Strategies to Enhance Parent-Teacher Partnerships

According to Epstein and Jansorn (2004), school-based teacher-parent partnerships are essential for increased parental involvement and advocacy. Research demonstrates that parental participation in school is strongly linked with school invitations (Anderson & Minke, 2014). Thus, for increased parental contribution, teachers should motivate parents to be involved in their children's education through the dissemination of information about the child's strengths and weaknesses, the roles of teachers, parents, and other stakeholders.

Research outlines outreach programmes as significant in developing effective interactions between parents and teachers to fortify their partnerships (Bezdek et al., 2010; Fantuzz, McWayne, Perry & Childs, 2004). In addition, to strengthen the partnership, Olmstead (2013) states that technology can be used as a possible strategy to improve communication through sharing information about the learners' needs. According to Kocayörük (2016), schools must recognise the unique talents of the parents they serve to foster successful parent-teacher partnerships. This is because every parent has something to contribute. Moreover, schools could collaborate with community members to identify and access the exceptional skills and talents of parents and use such skills to engage parents in school activities for enhanced access to education for learners with intellectual disabilities (Olmstead, 2013). Other strategies such as teacher-parent conferences (Bezdek et al., 2010), home visits by teachers, and monitoring of school and home learning activities (Anderson & Minke, 2014) and parents classroom volunteers (Kocayörük, 2016) can all strengthen parent-teacher partnerships for successful education outcomes for learners with intellectual disabilities (Kocayörük, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed qualitative case study research to explore teachers' perceptions of parent-teacher partnerships for improved education access for children with intellectual disabilities. The qualitative approach was used because it provided a platform to explore the meanings teachers attach to their opinions of parent-teacher partnerships within a mainstream education setting (Patton, 2015). In addition, it provided an opportunity for an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions of how parents collaborated with teachers to facilitate support for positive education outcomes for children with intellectual disabilities in school (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007). The eight participants were

purposively sampled from two primary schools, five from School 1 and three from School 2, which enrolled children with intellectual disabilities in Maseru district (Kumar, 2012). All teachers were selected based on having a learner/s with intellectual disabilities in their classes (Creswell, 2012).

In-depth face-to-face interviews were used to gather data from the eight teachers, letting them share their perspectives on collaborative experiences with parents in supporting learners with intellectual disabilities (Creswell, 2014). An interview guide enabled the researcher to cover the main topics and categories of the study while remaining flexible and open enough to follow up on topics that the participants brought up while being interviewed (Rossman & Rallis, 2015). Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed (Creswell, 2014). The transcripts were sent to the participants to check and confirm whether their views were properly reflected (Merriam & Tidsell, 2016).

Data Analysis

Data was analysed through an inductive thematic process using Braun and Clarke's (2006) and Clarke and Braun's (2017) six-step process. The process involved data familiarisation, generation of codes, identification of themes, review of themes, defining and naming of themes, and writing of the final report. Through this approach, data was rigorously examined, revealing different opinions and common patterns (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Through repeated readings, themes emerged, and the data was categorised accordingly. The findings were then integrated and summarised. To maintain ethical standards, the researcher explained the nature and purpose of the study and assured participants of confidentiality and anonymity through pseudonyms. Following the explanation, participants gave their written and verbal consent to participate in the study (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Limitations

Data was collected from two mainstream primary schools in Maseru district. Therefore, the findings may only be applicable to schools in this area due to the small sample size. The findings cannot, therefore, be generalised as an accurate reflection of all schools in Maseru district and Lesotho.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study's findings revealed three key categories from the teachers' interviews: the nature of parent-teacher partnerships, challenges of parent-teacher alliances, and strategies to enhance teacher partnerships.

Nature of the Parent-Teacher Partnerships

The findings revealed that a certain degree of positive partnership between parents and teachers existed. Teachers reported that although there were no documented rules and regulations governing the partnership between teachers and parents, both stakeholders appeared to have a common objective of supporting a learner with intellectual disabilities to learn effectively. This was evident through parents' attendance and participation in various school programmes such as parents meetings, one-on-one teacher-parent-learner conferences, and home visits, aimed at enhancing access to education for all learners with intellectual disabilities.

Although we do not have a set of rules governing our partnership, teachers, and parents do meet on different occasions to talk about issues that affect the school and learners and how best we can work together to improve learners' education and the school in general.

All participants reported that, in addition to schools' general annual meetings, the teachers held regular one-on-one teacher-parent-learner conferences to share information about the education issues that affected learners with intellectual disabilities. Teachers noted that these types of meetings were much more effective – compared to the general meeting with all parents – as attention was focused on one learner's needs. They stated that most parents were receptive and eager to discuss academic and social issues that affected their children and suggest strategies for improving education access for these learners. In addition, they noted that these conferences encouraged trust and mutual respect between teachers and parents as the knowledge shared about a learner's needs was focused on their context.

We sometimes have one-on-one meetings with both the parent and learner, especially when the learners are encountering too many challenges, to discuss these barriers and how such learners can be assisted.

Some teachers reported that occasionally, especially when the learner with intellectual disability's performance and attendance was bad, they visited the learner's home. Participants indicated that home visits helped them to identify appropriate home and school support services or strategies as they better understood factors that influenced the learner's development and might contribute to their poor academic performance and attendance.

We also do home visits especially when the learners' social and academic experiences are poor to understand environmental factors that may contribute to the learner's poor performance. The knowledge gathered helps us to provide appropriate support for the learner, leading to improvement in the learner's academic performance and parents' participation in their children's education.

The findings revealed that while there are no written goals and rules to monitor parent-teacher partnership, a certain level of partnership exists between parents and teachers as evidenced by collaborative activities such as meetings and home visits between these partners. Sharing valuable information about factors that affect the learner not only leads to enhanced access to education by learners with intellectual disabilities but also strengthens the trust and mutual respect between these stakeholders (Luter, Mitchell & Taylor, 2017). In addition, the partnership leads to improved support of the entire teaching and learning process, resulting in safe and friendly learning environments for learners with intellectual disabilities. Lunga (2024), however, cautions that attending school functions on its own does not mean the existence of parent-teacher partnerships but that these stakeholders need to work as a team to support and address all learning barriers faced by learners with intellectual disabilities. In addition, a lack of written goals and rules might result in disagreements which could negatively impact the learner's education outcome (Cox-Kocayörük, 2016). Thus, the presence of well and clearly stated goals between parents and teachers results in successful outcomes for learners with intellectual disabilities (Patton, 2010).

Challenges of Parent-Teacher Partnership

The findings revealed that teachers valued parent-teacher partnership for its desired advancement of learners' education and development. However, they identified various challenges such as parents'

limited understanding of the child's disability, parental communication, and responsibility. Most teachers indicated that a lack of parents' understanding of the nature and degree of the child's intellectual disability not only hampered parents' efforts to implement teachers' recommendations about skills development at home but it also impeded teachers from administering appropriate intervention support services specific to an individual child's needs. This, they indicated, threatened the parent-teacher partnership as there was always a likelihood of disagreements about appropriate intervention strategies for the child.

Some parents know so little about their child's disability and the degree of such disability and this makes it difficult for us as teachers to help with the necessary and appropriate resources and support. This sometimes causes conflict between us on how the learner can be helped.

All teachers emphasised the importance of consistent communication between parents and teachers. Nonetheless, they reported that communication between these two stakeholders was infrequent; occurring as and when the learner encountered social and academic challenges. Teachers reported this, as a deterrent to parent-teacher partnerships because it made the teachers' job difficult. Teachers felt that information sharing should be an ongoing practice to check the child's progress. Thus, teachers hoped for more proactive communication from parents.

I believe ongoing open communication between parents and teachers is necessary as the sharing of information will help both parties to discuss home and school intervention services that are needed for the learner to access education access and positive outcomes for this learner.

Teachers raised concerns that while some parents constantly called, sent emails, and visited schools for one-on-one sessions with the teacher, others skipped scheduled parent-teacher meetings citing lack of time and resources such as transport. This worried teachers because it hampered effective communication and collaboration. In addition, some teachers perceived most parents as believing that education is confined to the school environment and that it was entirely the duty of teachers and school staff. This view stemmed from the fact that some parents barely participated in a variety of school-related activities such as attending learners' extracurricular activities, helping them with homework, or

responding to teachers' notes about the learners' strengths and weaknesses, resulting in reduced prospects for partnership and support.

Some parents do not even bother to reply to our letters about their children's progress, forcing us to decide on what is right and wrong for their children.

Parents' illiteracy was identified as another problem that hampered parent-teacher partnerships. Some parents experienced challenges assisting their children with schoolwork because they barely went to school.

Because of illiteracy, most parents, even when they want to, find it difficult to help their children with schoolwork, as some cannot read and write. This leaves us with all the responsibilities of deciding what is right and not right for this child.

While research indicates that parent-teacher partnership has a considerable impact on learners' development and accomplishment (Mautone, Marcelle, Tresco & Power, 2015; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013), the findings of this study suggest that there may still be a substantial need for both parents and teachers to work on building and sustaining their communication and relationship strategies. Teachers reported that parents visit the schools mainly when there are challenges that directly affect their children and only during the yearly general meeting, leaving teachers with the primary responsibility of determining and implementing intervention support programmes appropriate for children with intellectual disabilities. This negatively impacts the learners' education success as there needs to be continuity of skills development from the school to the home environment. Consequently, Muller and Kerbow (2018) state that schools must encourage and clarify the value of parent-teacher partnership to both parents and teachers and create a welcoming environment where parents of children with intellectual disabilities can Freely Engage with Teachers About Learners' Strengths and Weaknesses. In Fact, Epstein (2011) reported that partnership between parents and teachers results in increased learner skills and talent development.

In addition, the findings of this study corroborate Feasley's (2017) assertion that most parents who are reluctant to participate in their children's education are illiterate and do not place a high value on education. According to Epstein (2015), the learners' positive academic performance requires input

from both parents and teachers. Hence, it is essential to strengthen and empower parents with skills and understanding to enable their involvement in their children's education. However, Cooper (2015), warns that excessive parental participation in the learners' education could result in conflict between teachers and parents as parents are not professionally trained to handle educational matters.

Strategies for Improved Parent-Teacher Partnership

Teachers' perceptions on how parent-teacher partnership can be improved for enhanced access to education for children with intellectual disabilities were sought and teachers outlined various strategies including parent and teacher training on partnership strategies, use of technology for improved communication, and establishment of support groups.

All teachers noted the importance of training parents and teachers on collaborative strategies to support learners with intellectual disabilities in improving parent-teacher partnerships. Participants indicated that training can equip both partners with the knowledge and skills they need to work as a team on an equal basis to support learners with intellectual disabilities.

Training programmes on collaboration can equip parents and teachers with the skills they need to work together and share ideas on how best the child can be accommodated both at home and school.

Teachers further pointed out that technological tools such as mobile phones and emails could be used to enhance communication between parents and teachers. This, they indicated, can reduce travel costs which most parents outlined as a barrier that impairs their involvement in the learners' education.

We can use social media platforms to communicate with parents about their children's education strengths and weaknesses instead of either partner having to travel for information about the child's progress.

The establishment of support groups or programmes for both parents and teachers was also cited as one of the strategies that could help strengthen parent-teacher partnerships. Teachers stated that schools – in collaboration with community leaders – could encourage and organise teachers' and parents' support

groups at school and in communities where these partners can connect and exchange ideas about similar and different experiences. They stated that this will provide in-depth knowledge about intellectual disabilities and support strategies appropriate for learners with these disabilities, thereby improving the partnership between parents and teachers. One of the teachers opined:

I think the use of support programmes where teachers and parents share information about the learners' challenges and triumphs can reinforce the partnership.

The findings of this study corroborate a report by Gross and John (2003) that training of parents and teachers on collaboration strategies can result in effective partnerships as they can acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively work together in promoting access to education for learners with ID. Similarly, Blacher and Hatton (2007) state that additional coaching of parents can equip them with skills that enable them to provide learners with opportunities for continuity and practice of skills learned at school. The findings further identified support groups as another strategy that can be used to enhance parent-teacher partnerships. Such groups provide a platform for parents and teachers to exchange information and learn from each other through their varying experiences of supporting children with intellectual disabilities, thus empowering them to contribute effectively to the education of children with intellectual disabilities. The importance of support groups is highlighted by Hollingworth et al. (2009) who indicate that parents require more support through information sessions and support groups.

While home and school visits are highlighted by research as major factors that can improve parent and teacher partnership (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), the findings of this study suggest that sometimes – to reduce the financial costs incurred during these visits – technology can be used to help parents and teachers communicate with ease and share information about the learners' academic and social experiences both at home and school. The importance of establishing effective communication channels to improve parent-teacher partnerships is supported by Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, which outlines a framework for parental involvement (Kocayörük, 2016). According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), a child's development is affected by the interaction within the microsystem between family members and teachers, thus certifying the significance of parent-teacher partnership in the education of children with intellectual disabilities. This suggests that parents and teachers – as children's

key support systems – have a special role to play in the general welfare of learners; even more so for those with certain forms of disability who often require extra care and support.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study explored teachers' perceptions of parent-teacher partnerships for enhanced access to inclusive education for learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream primary schools in Lesotho. Including these learners in mainstream primary schools highlights the significant role of parents and teachers in impacting successful inclusive education for learners with intellectual disabilities. The findings revealed that although a range of challenges may impede effective partnerships in mainstream primary schools, hindering access to education for learners with intellectual disabilities, a certain level of collaboration exists between teachers and parents. There are opportunities – yet to be fully explored – to strengthen this partnership further. Various strategies need to be harnessed to improve parent-teacher relationships to create a more functional environment that meets the needs of learners with intellectual disabilities. The findings highlighted strategies such as training programmes for both teachers and parents, support groups for information sharing, and the use of technology for improved communication as essential for fostering a trusting, respectful, warm, and effective collaboration between parents and teachers. The findings are consistent with Kocayörük (2016) and Olmstead (2013) that a range of approaches can be adopted to improve parent-teacher partnership in schools to support learners with intellectual disabilities to learn and achieve to their full potential.

While these findings represent the insights of a small sample of primary school teachers, the results provide a lens through which to motivate schools and parents to engage in discussions on collaborative strategies and productive parent-teacher partnerships (Olmstead, 2013). From the findings, it could be concluded that while the parent-teacher partnership is embraced for its positive influence on education outcomes for learners with intellectual disabilities, it is a task that not only necessitates an understanding of the learner's strengths and weaknesses in school and home environments but also the commitment of resources, time and energy as well (Mortier, Hunt, Desimpel & Hove 2009). The findings show the partnerships between parents and teachers in primary schools that enrol learners with intellectual disabilities from teachers' perspectives in Maseru district. Thus, research that explores parents' views on this partnership is needed to provide a balanced view of both stakeholders. In addition, research is

necessary to explain the impact various types of partnerships have on the learning experiences of learners with intellectual disabilities.

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