

The Role of Parental Engagement in Inclusive Schooling for Children

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Abstract— Inclusive education depends on collaboration between schools and families, yet the way different forms of parental engagement relate to children's participation in inclusive classrooms remains insufficiently understood. This study examined how home-based engagement, school-based engagement, and home-school communication relate to children's inclusive participation, as rated by teachers. A cross-sectional survey was completed by 312 parents of children enrolled in 12 inclusive primary schools, 126 of whom had a child with identified special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Teachers rated each child's participation using the Inclusive Participation Index. Total parental engagement correlated positively with inclusive participation ($r = .47, p < .001$). In hierarchical regression, the three engagement dimensions explained an additional 18% of variance beyond child and family background, with home-school communication the strongest predictor ($\beta = .31$). Parents of children with SEND reported higher engagement than other parents ($d = 0.41$), but their children received lower participation ratings. Work schedules and limited information were the most frequently reported barriers. The findings suggest that schools should prioritise two-way communication structures over one-off participation events.

Keywords— parental engagement, inclusive education, special educational needs, home-school communication, school-family partnership, inclusive participation

Introduction

Inclusive education is grounded in the principle that all children, regardless of ability, should learn together in mainstream settings with appropriate support (UNESCO, 1994). Policy commitments to inclusion have expanded steadily, but placement alone does not guarantee meaningful participation. Ainscow (2005) argued that inclusion is a continuous process of identifying and removing barriers to presence, participation, and achievement, and that families are among the most important resources for this process.

Parents contribute knowledge about their child's strengths, needs, and history that teachers cannot easily obtain elsewhere. They also reinforce learning at home and advocate for their children within school systems. Research on parental involvement in general education has consistently linked it with better academic and social outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2007; Wilder, 2014). Less is known about how distinct forms of engagement relate to participation outcomes specifically in inclusive classrooms, where children with and without SEND learn together and where parents' experiences may differ considerably.

This study addresses that gap. It distinguishes among home-based engagement, school-based engagement, and home-school communication, and examines how each relates to teacher-rated inclusive participation after accounting for child and family characteristics. It also compares engagement levels between parents of children with and without SEND and identifies the barriers parents report.

Literature Review

Parental Involvement and Child Outcomes

Meta-analytic evidence indicates a positive but modest association between parental involvement and children's academic achievement. Fan and Chen (2001) found a small to moderate overall relationship, strongest for parental expectations and aspirations and weakest for direct home supervision. Jeynes (2007) reported similar positive effects in urban secondary schools, and Wilder (2014), synthesising studies across several decades, concluded that the benefits of involvement hold across diverse populations. Hill and Tyson (2009) added an important nuance: strategies centred on academic socialisation, such as communicating expectations and linking schoolwork to future goals, were more effective than direct homework help. This suggests that the quality and type of engagement matter at least as much as its quantity.

Theoretical Perspectives

Several frameworks guide the study of engagement. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model positions the child within interacting systems, with the home-school relationship forming a critical mesosystem. Epstein (2011) proposed a typology of six forms of school-family-community partnership, including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) offered a psychological model in which parents' role construction, sense of efficacy, and perceived invitations from schools and children shape their involvement decisions. Green et al. (2007) empirically supported this model, finding that role construction, self-efficacy, and perceived invitations predicted parents' involvement behaviours.

Parents in Inclusive Education

Parents' views of inclusion are varied. In a review of the literature, de Boer et al. (2010) found that parental attitudes towards inclusive education were generally neutral to positive but depended on child characteristics, particularly the type and severity of special needs. Paseka and Schwab (2020) likewise showed that parents' attitudes and perceptions of

inclusive teaching practices differed according to parent and child characteristics. Fishman and Nickerson (2015) found that the motivations of parents of students with disabilities were shaped by role construction and by invitations from teachers and children, consistent with the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model.

Parents of children with SEND often engage with schools more intensively because of formal planning processes and the practical need to coordinate support. Goldman and Burke (2017) reviewed interventions designed to increase parent involvement in special education and found that purposeful programmes can raise involvement, although the evidence base remained limited. Lendrum et al. (2015) reported that structured conversations between teachers and parents of learners with SEND improved the quality of school-home relationships, underscoring the value of well-designed communication.

Barriers to Engagement

Hornby and Lafaele (2011) proposed an explanatory model grouping barriers into individual parent and family factors, child factors, parent-teacher factors, and societal factors. Work commitments, limited information, differing expectations between parents and teachers, and perceived teacher attitudes are common examples. Hornby (2011) argued that effective partnerships require schools to move beyond information-giving towards genuine reciprocity.

Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes that engagement matters and that barriers exist, but few studies compare distinct engagement dimensions in relation to inclusive participation outcomes within the same sample. Even fewer test whether parents of children with and without SEND differ in the form their engagement takes. This study responds to both gaps.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study addressed three research questions. First, what is the relationship between parental engagement and children's inclusive participation? Second, which engagement dimension is the strongest predictor of inclusive

participation? Third, do parents of children with and without SEND differ in their engagement?

Three hypotheses followed from the literature:

- H1: Total parental engagement is positively associated with inclusive participation.
- H2: Home-school communication predicts inclusive participation more strongly than home-based or school-based engagement.
- H3: Parents of children with SEND report higher engagement than parents of children without SEND.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was adopted. Parent-reported engagement was paired with teacher-rated child participation to reduce common-source bias.

Participants and Setting

Participants were drawn from 12 public and private inclusive primary schools in an urban district, selected purposively to include schools with formal inclusion policies. Questionnaires were distributed to 348 parents of children in Grades 1 to 5, and 312 valid responses were returned (response rate = 89.7%). Of these, 126 parents (40.4%) had a child with identified SEND and 186 (59.6%) did not. Mothers accounted for 198 respondents (63.5%) and fathers for 114 (36.5%). Parental education was secondary or below for 94 respondents (30.1%), undergraduate for 128 (41.0%), and postgraduate for 90 (28.8%; percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding). Children's ages ranged from 6 to 11 years ($M = 8.4$, $SD = 1.5$).

Instruments

Parental Engagement Scale. Parents completed an 18-item scale with three six-item subscales: home-based engagement (e.g., supporting learning routines, discussing school), school-based engagement (e.g., attending meetings, volunteering), and home-school communication (e.g., frequency and two-way quality of contact with teachers). Items were rated from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Internal consistency was high for each subscale (home-based $\alpha = .86$,

school-based $\alpha = .83$, communication $\alpha = .88$) and for the total scale ($\alpha = .91$).

Inclusive Participation Index. Class teachers rated each child on a 12-item index covering academic engagement, peer interaction, classroom belonging, and participation in group activities, using a 5-point scale. Cronbach's alpha was .89.

Background variables. Parents reported child SEND status, parental education, and parent gender.

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed through class teachers and returned in sealed envelopes over an eight-week period.

Teachers completed the participation index independently for each matched child and were not informed of the parents' responses.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were computed first. Independent-samples t-tests, with Cohen's d , compared parents of children with and without SEND. A two-step hierarchical multiple regression predicted inclusive participation, entering SEND status and parental education in Step 1 and the three engagement dimensions in Step 2. Assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were checked, and the maximum variance inflation factor was 1.62, well below the conventional threshold. The significance level was set at .05 (two-tailed).

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, written informed consent was obtained, and responses were anonymised with school-level codes. Participants could withdraw at any time without consequence.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Parents reported the highest engagement in home-based activities and the lowest in school-based activities. Mean inclusive participation was moderately high. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics, and Table 2 presents bivariate correlations.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables ($N = 312$)

Variable	M	SD
Home-based engagement	3.62	0.71
School-based engagement	3.08	0.84
Home-school communication	3.41	0.77
Total parental engagement	3.37	0.62
Inclusive participation	3.55	0.66

Table 2: Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 312)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Home-based engagement	—				
2. School-based engagement	**	—			
3. Home-school communication	.9***	.57***	—		
4. Total parental engagement	***	.3***	.86***	—	
5. Inclusive participation	8***	.41***	.52***	.47***	—

Note. ***p < .001.

Total parental engagement was positively correlated with inclusive participation ($r = .47$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Home-school communication showed the strongest individual association ($r = .52$).

Differences Between Parents of Children With and Without SEND

Table 3 compares the two groups. Parents of children with SEND reported significantly higher total engagement, school-based engagement, and communication. The difference in home-based engagement was not statistically significant. Teachers rated children with SEND lower on inclusive participation.

Table 3: Group Comparisons by Child SEND Status

Variable	SEND (n = 126) M (SD)	No SEND (n = 186) M (SD)	t(310)	p	d
Home-based engagement	3.71 (0.69)	3.56 (0.72)	1.84	.067	0.21
School-based engagement	3.21 (0.83)	2.99 (0.84)	2.28	.023	0.26
Home-school communication	3.68 (0.74)	3.23 (0.76)	5.19	< .001	0.60
Total parental engagement	3.52 (0.60)	3.27 (0.62)	3.53	< .001	0.41
Inclusive participation	3.38 (0.68)	3.66 (0.63)	-3.73	< .001	0.43

These results support H3. The largest difference was in communication ($d = 0.60$), which is consistent with the greater need for coordination when a child receives additional support.

Hierarchical Regression

Table 4 shows the regression predicting inclusive participation. Step 1 (SEND status and parental education) was significant, $R^2 = .13$, $F(2, 309) = 23.09$, $p < .001$. Adding the three engagement dimensions in Step 2 significantly improved the model, $\Delta R^2 = .18$, $F \text{ change}(3, 306) = 26.60$, $p < .001$, with the final model explaining 31% of the variance, $F(5, 306) = 27.50$, $p < .001$.

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Predicting Inclusive Participation (N = 312)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	p
Step 1				
SEND status (1 = SEND)	-0.34	0.07	-.26	< .001
Parental education	0.11	0.04	.13	.018
Step 2				
SEND status (1 = SEND)	-0.30	0.08	-.22	< .001
Parental education	0.08	0.04	.09	.071
Home-based engagement	0.13	0.05	.14	.012
School-based engagement	0.13	0.05	.17	.004
Home-school communication	0.27	0.06	.31	< .001

Discussion

The findings show that parental engagement is meaningfully related to how well children participate in inclusive classrooms. The overall association ($r = .47$) is larger than the small to moderate relationships typically reported for academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001), which may reflect the outcome measured. Participation and belonging are plausibly more sensitive to the relational climate between home and school than test scores are.

The prominence of home-school communication supports Hornby's (2011) argument that partnership requires reciprocity rather than one-way information. It also fits

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) model, in which perceived invitations from the school shape how parents engage. Parents who maintain regular two-way contact with teachers are likely to share information that helps teachers adapt instruction, and teachers in turn can reinforce strategies that parents use at home. The contribution of home-based engagement was smaller, echoing Hill and Tyson's (2009) conclusion that direct home assistance is less influential than other forms of engagement.

Parents of children with SEND reported higher engagement, particularly in communication, consistent with the coordination demands of support planning (Goldman & Burke, 2017). The coexistence of higher engagement and lower participation ratings for these children should not be read as engagement being ineffective. The regression shows that engagement predicted participation after SEND status was controlled, which suggests that additional engagement may be compensating for structural barriers rather than eliminating them.

The reported barriers align with the categories described by Hornby and Lafaele (2011). Work schedule conflicts were most common, which points to the need for flexible meeting times and digital communication channels. The 41.7% who cited limited information, and the 33.7% who cited perceived teacher attitudes, are school-controllable factors, consistent with the importance that Green et al. (2007) place on invitations. The finding that parental education was no longer significant once engagement was included suggests that what parents do, and what schools enable, may matter more than family background.

Implications

For practice, schools should build structured, two-way communication routines, such as the structured conversations described by Lendrum et al. (2015), rather than relying on occasional events. Flexible scheduling and accessible information in families' home languages can reduce the most commonly reported barriers. Teacher training should include strategies for partnering with parents of children with SEND.

For policy, inclusion frameworks should explicitly resource family partnership rather than treating it as optional.

Limitations

The cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions, and engagement and participation may influence one another reciprocally. The purposive sample of schools with formal inclusion policies may limit generalisability. Engagement was parent-reported and therefore subject to social desirability, and the SEND group was not disaggregated by type or severity of need, which de Boer et al. (2010) identify as an important moderator.

Future Research

Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs could clarify the direction of influence and capture parents' experiences more richly. Future studies should compare engagement across disability categories, include children's own perspectives, and test interventions aimed at improving communication quality.

Conclusion

This study found that parental engagement is positively and significantly related to inclusive participation, with home-school communication emerging as the strongest predictor among three engagement dimensions. Parents of children with SEND engaged more actively, particularly in communication, yet their children still received lower participation ratings, which points to persistent structural barriers. Because the most commonly reported obstacles, such as inflexible scheduling and limited information, are largely within schools' control, schools can strengthen inclusive practice by investing in accessible, reciprocal communication with families.

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