

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION

Subin Jung Karki, Jigme Sherpa, Khila Nath Luitel

Abstract

This study explores the critical role of parental involvement in the education of children with special needs, with a focus on the challenges and opportunities within the context of Nepal. Grounded in Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the research highlights how the collaboration between parents, schools, and external stakeholders significantly impacts the academic, social, and emotional development of children with special needs. A qualitative research design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with three parents to gain in-depth insights into their experiences, challenges, and strategies. The findings reveal that while parents recognize the importance of their involvement, systemic barriers such as societal stigma, limited training opportunities, financial constraints, and inadequate access to centralized therapy centers hinder their ability to participate fully. Despite these challenges, parents demonstrated resilience by leveraging informal methods, such as self-directed learning and school interactions, to support their children. The study underscores the need for structured training programs, accessible resources, and stronger partnerships between parents, educators, and policymakers to address these gaps and foster an inclusive educational environment. The research concludes that parental involvement is indispensable for the holistic development of children with special needs but requires a multi-stakeholder approach to overcome existing barriers.

Key words: parental involvement, special needs education, inclusive education, educational collaboration.

Background of the Study

Inclusive education for special needs students is an important component of their inclusion into society. Despite the other conditions that school must create, in order to fulfill the rights for education of children with disabilities, the role of parental engagement is crucial to realize inclusive education (Balli, 2016). Parental involvement plays a pivotal role in shaping the educational outcomes and overall development of children with special needs. This involvement extends beyond traditional academic support, encompassing emotional encouragement, advocacy, and collaboration with educators and therapists. Parents serve as the primary support system for their children, ensuring that the unique needs of each child are met effectively. In the realm of special needs education, this partnership becomes

even more critical as it directly impacts the child's ability to thrive in both academic and social settings (Hill, 2022).

The unique challenges faced by children with special needs often require tailored educational approaches that cannot be adequately implemented without active parental participation. Parents are deeply familiar with their child's strengths, weaknesses, and triggers, making them an invaluable resource for educators. This collaborative effort enables schools to design individualized education plans that cater to the specific needs of the child (Eden, 2024). By actively contributing to the educational process, parents help bridge the gap between home and school, fostering consistency in learning and behavior management.

Research consistently highlights the positive impact of parental involvement in the academic achievements and social development of children with special needs. Studies show that when parents are engaged, children display improved communication skills, increased self-confidence, and better adaptability in inclusive or specialized educational settings. Moreover, parents' advocacy efforts ensure that schools and institutions prioritize accessibility and inclusivity, creating an environment where children with special needs feel valued and understood.

In the context of Nepal, Constitution of Nepal (2015) establishes education as a fundamental right and delegates the responsibility for managing education for children with disabilities to local governments. However, this decentralized approach has led to inconsistencies in implementation, leaving marginalized groups, including children with disabilities, facing significant barriers in accessing education. The National Education Policy (2019), which includes both inclusive and special education, fails to adequately distinguish between the two, resulting in contradictions with the Inclusive Education Policy (2017) and non-compliance with international commitments such as Article 24 of the CRPD. Despite Nepal's commitment to the Incheon Declaration and SDG 4, resource limitations, inadequate infrastructure, attitudinal barriers, and insufficient teacher training remain significant hurdles. While the government has set targets for quality and equitable education in its Fifteenth Plan, effective policy implementation at the grassroots level, investment in infrastructure, and addressing societal stigma are critical areas requiring immediate attention to translate policy commitments into tangible outcomes for inclusive education (Sapkota, 2024).

Parental involvement in special needs education is crucial for fostering inclusive learning environments, yet challenges such as inconsistent policy implementation, inadequate resources, and societal stigma highlight the need for collaborative efforts between parents, educators, and policymakers to ensure equitable access to quality education for children with disabilities.

Problem statement

The lack of consistent and meaningful parental involvement in special needs education poses significant challenges to the overall development and academic success of children with special needs. Despite evidence highlighting the positive impact of parental engagement on educational outcomes, many parents face barriers such as limited knowledge of special education processes, time constraints, emotional stress, and inadequate support from schools. These challenges create a disconnect between home and school environments, often resulting in inconsistencies in the child's learning and behavioral management. Addressing this gap is critical to ensuring that children with special needs receive holistic and effective educational support, making it imperative to explore strategies that promote and facilitate active parental involvement.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore the role and significance of parental involvement in the education of children with special needs, with the aim of identifying the factors that influence parental engagement and its impact on the academic, social, and emotional development of these children. The study seeks to examine the challenges faced by parents in participating effectively in their child's education and to evaluate strategies that can enhance collaboration between parents, educators, and support services. By doing so, the study aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations for fostering meaningful parental involvement, ultimately contributing to improved educational outcomes and overall well-being for children with special needs.

Literature review

Theoretical review

The Ecological Systems Theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner provides a comprehensive framework for understanding parental involvement in the education of children with special needs, emphasizing the interconnected systems that influence a child's development. At the core is the microsystem, where direct interactions between parents, children, and educators occur, highlighting the importance of consistent parental support and advocacy. The mesosystem focuses on the collaboration between home and school environments, which is crucial for addressing the unique needs of special needs children. The exosystem, encompassing broader societal influences like educational policies and resource availability, indirectly impacts parental involvement. Additionally, the macrosystem, shaped by cultural values and societal attitudes toward inclusion and disability, affects how parents perceive and engage with their child's education. Finally, the chronosystem reflects the evolving nature of these interactions over time, as family circumstances and the

child's developmental needs change (Hyassat et al., 2024). This theory underscores the need for a holistic and collaborative approach to fostering effective parental involvement in special needs education.

Review of Article

Balli (2016) explored the role of parental involvement in achieving inclusive education for children with special needs, focusing on 32 parents from seven schools in the Korça region of Albania. The objective was to evaluate the extent of parental engagement in school life, their satisfaction with special needs assessment procedures, and their representation in decision-making processes. Utilizing snowball sampling, the study recruited participants through a referral method, and data were analyzed using qualitative methods. Findings revealed that despite legal frameworks like the Law on Pre-University Education emphasizing the importance of parental involvement, parents were not sufficiently engaged in school activities to ensure the full inclusion of their children in regular education. This lack of involvement highlights the need for schools to foster better collaboration with parents to uphold the educational rights of children with disabilities, who rely on their advocates to support their inclusion and development.

Blok et al. (2007) examined the initial experiences of parents with the recently amended system for admission to special education in the Netherlands, which aims to enhance parental involvement by allowing parents to choose between inclusive education at mainstream schools and segregated education at special schools. Interviews were conducted with over 100 couples to assess their perspectives on the new regulations. The findings revealed that the system has been partially successful, with approximately half of the parents expressing dissatisfaction with the level of involvement it allows. Additionally, many parents highlighted a need for greater support, particularly during the special needs assessment process. These findings are significant in informing ongoing discussions about the desirability and potential strategies for increasing parental involvement in special education, contributing to the broader efforts to improve educational outcomes for children with special needs.

Yatim & Mohd. Ali (2022) reviewed parental advocacy for students with special needs, focusing on challenges, barriers, and advocacy strategies to understand how parents advocate for their children. Articles related to advocacy were identified from SCOPUS and Web of Science (WoS) databases, covering a 10-year period from 2010 to 2021, with 80 studies selected through the PRISMA flow chart process (60 from SCOPUS and 20 from WoS). Findings highlighted barriers such as inadequate information, negative perceptions, language and cultural differences, insufficient knowledge, stereotypes, discrimination, and socioeconomic disparities. Key advocacy strategies included effective communication with special schools, sharing

knowledge and purposes, and providing professional services to support schools. The study emphasized collaboration between parents and schools as a vital medium for ensuring the educational needs and rights of students with special needs are met. It concluded that creating a conducive and meaningful learning environment requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders, underscoring the importance of collective efforts in advancing special needs education.

Research Gap

Despite extensive research highlighting the importance of parental involvement in special needs education, significant gaps remain, particularly in the context of Nepal. Most studies fail to address the unique socio-cultural and economic barriers parents face in low-resource settings, such as limited awareness, societal stigma, and inadequate school support (Balli, 2016; Sapkota, 2024). Additionally, there is a conflation of inclusive and special needs education in literature, with minimal exploration of parental experiences specific to specialized education. The lack of research on effective collaboration models between parents, educators, and policymakers further underscores the need for targeted interventions (Yatim & Mohd. Ali, 2022). Bridging these gaps requires a focus on lived parental experiences, grassroots realities of policy implementation, and context-specific strategies to foster meaningful engagement in special needs education.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the perspectives of parents on their involvement in the education of children with special needs. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, challenges, and strategies associated with parental engagement. Through interviews and thematic analysis, the study aims to capture the nuances of parental involvement and its impact on the child's development. The study involved three parents of children with special needs, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in experiences and backgrounds. These participants were chosen based on their active involvement in their child's education and their willingness to share their experiences. Each participant provided informed consent and was briefed on the purpose and scope of the research. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in a conversational format to allow participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences. The interviews focused on key areas such as the nature of parental involvement, challenges faced, strategies employed, and the perceived impact on the child's development. Each interview lasted approximately 10-15 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accuracy in data capture. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that identifies, organizes,

and interprets patterns (themes) within the data. Themes were developed to reflect recurring patterns related to parental involvement, challenges, and strategies.

Data Analysis Summary

Knowledge

The respondents demonstrate varying levels of understanding of special needs education. Respondent 1 perceives it as distinct from formal education, tailored to the physical and mental growth of children, highlighting its specialized nature. Respondent 2 emphasizes the integration of life skills alongside academics to cater to children's day-to-day and future needs, showcasing a practical approach to education. In contrast, Respondent 3 possesses only basic knowledge, which suggests a gap in awareness that could hinder effective parental engagement. This disparity underscores the need for enhanced awareness and education programs targeting parents, particularly those with limited exposure to special needs education.

Experience

Each respondent reflects on unique experiences shaped by their circumstances. Respondent 1 notes significant progress in their child's development due to therapies and stakeholder support, indicating the positive impact of collaborative efforts. Respondent 2 describes early childhood challenges, including financial constraints and career disruptions, emphasizing the importance of time management and balancing responsibilities. Respondent 3 highlights delays in their child's mental growth, with therapy serving as a catalyst for improvement. These diverse experiences underline the complexity of raising children with special needs, where external support, personal resilience, and tailored interventions are essential.

Association in School

Active involvement in school activities is a common thread among the respondents. Respondent 1 and Respondent 3 are deeply engaged in their child's education, with Respondent 3 even changing schools to find the best fit. Respondent 2 participates during routine interactions such as drop-offs and pickups, which, while less formal, still reflects an effort to stay connected. The findings suggest that parental association with schools is critical for fostering a supportive educational environment. However, the level of involvement varies, indicating a potential need for schools to encourage more structured engagement.

Coordination with School Regarding Development

Effective coordination between parents and schools is evident across all respondents. Respondent 1 utilizes direct communication, stakeholder

interactions, and feedback to stay informed. Respondent 2 relies on daily interactions during pickups and drop-offs, reflecting a more informal but consistent approach. Respondent 3 prioritizes personal contact and regular feedback from teachers. The varying modes of coordination highlight the importance of flexibility in communication strategies to accommodate diverse parental needs and schedules. Schools can further strengthen this collaboration by offering regular updates and opportunities for meaningful dialogue.

Training Participated

All respondents acknowledge the value of training but express differing experiences. Respondent 1 emphasizes its importance for parents, teachers, and students alike, while Respondent 2 highlights challenges in accessing timely training opportunities. Respondent 3 reflects on training sessions focused primarily on nurturing and treating the child. The responses reveal a need for accessible, comprehensive, and practical training programs tailored to the unique challenges faced by parents of children with special needs.

Challenges

The challenges faced by parents span family dynamics, societal perceptions, and logistical hurdles. Respondent 1 highlights a lack of family support, societal stigma, and difficulties in school admissions, while Respondent 2 points to financial constraints, delayed interventions, and the unavailability of centralized therapy. Respondent 3 struggles with the need for constant personal attention and social integration for their child. These challenges underscore systemic issues, including the need for societal awareness, financial support, and improved accessibility to specialized services.

Assistance and Resources

The availability of resources varies significantly among respondents. Respondent 1 benefits from governmental and organizational support, whereas Respondent 2 highlights disparities in access to resources between Nepal and other countries, with financial constraints being a major barrier. Respondent 3 relies primarily on the current school's support. These differences reveal the critical role of accessible resources in empowering parents and enhancing their involvement in their child's education.

Perception on the Impact of Parental Involvement

All respondents agree on the positive impact of parental involvement, but their emphasis differs. Respondent 1 quantifies the potential benefits, asserting that 100% parental involvement can significantly improve outcomes. Respondent 2 stresses the role of parents in ensuring proper attention and involving family

members, while Respondent 3 highlights the insufficiency of school efforts alone. These insights reinforce the consensus that parental involvement is indispensable for the holistic development of children with special needs.

Activities Performed by Parents

Parental activities vary based on individual understanding and access to resources. Respondent 1 adapts activities based on training, focusing on understanding the child's needs. Respondent 2 uses internet resources to create routines and involve the child in outings and fun activities. Respondent 3 focuses on home teaching, observing gradual progress. These efforts reflect parents' commitment despite challenges, indicating a need for structured guidance to enhance their effectiveness.

Evaluation of School

Respondents share positive views on their schools' contributions but highlight limitations. Respondent 1 appreciates governmental and organizational efforts, while Respondent 2 acknowledges schools' roles but stresses the necessity of parental involvement. Respondent 3 recognizes significant progress due to the current school's support. These evaluations suggest that while schools play a pivotal role, their efforts must be complemented by active parental engagement to achieve optimal outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal varied levels of parental understanding and involvement in the education of children with special needs. While some parents demonstrate a deep understanding and actively participate in school activities and therapy, others have only a basic awareness, limiting their engagement. This aligns with Balli (2016) and Yatim & Mohd. Ali (2022), who emphasize the critical role of parental knowledge and advocacy in achieving meaningful inclusion. However, the study also highlights gaps in parental awareness, especially in Nepal, reflecting the unique socio-cultural and resource limitations of low-income settings, as discussed in the literature.

The challenges faced by parents, including societal stigma, lack of centralized therapy services, financial constraints, and limited family support, are consistent with findings in global studies. For instance, Hyassat et al. (2024) and Yatim & Mohd. Ali (2022) identify similar systemic barriers, such as stereotypes and inadequate resources. In Nepal's context, these issues are exacerbated by the lack of coordinated policy implementation, aligning with critiques in Sapkota (2024), which underline the necessity for grassroots-level solutions to address these systemic gaps effectively.

The positive impact of parental involvement is universally acknowledged by the respondents, who note improvements in their children's mental growth, social integration, and academic performance. This observation resonates with research by Hill (2022) and Blok et al. (2007), which underscore the critical role of parents in enhancing educational outcomes. However, the findings also reveal that school efforts alone are insufficient, emphasizing the importance of collaborative partnerships between parents and schools to support children's holistic development.

Training opportunities and resource availability emerged as significant concerns. While parents expressed the need for more accessible and practical training, they often resorted to self-directed learning, such as internet research, to fill gaps. This finding supports Eden (2024), who highlights the importance of training and external support in empowering parents. However, the lack of institutionalized training programs and resources in Nepal underscores the need for targeted capacity-building interventions tailored to local challenges.

The findings highlight systemic gaps in Nepal's special needs education framework, particularly in the availability of resources and training. This reflects a broader issue of policy implementation at the grassroots level. The inconsistency in resource distribution and lack of parental training opportunities reveal an urgent need for reforms to address these disparities. These gaps align with critiques in Sapkota (2024), which emphasize the need for a more cohesive approach to inclusive and special needs education.

Parental advocacy is evident in the findings, as parents make significant efforts to support their children despite limited institutional support. This reliance on informal methods, such as internet-based learning, demonstrates resilience but also points to the need for structured, formalized programs. As noted by Yatim & Mohd. Ali (2022), effective parental engagement requires collaboration between schools and families, supported by targeted training and resources.

Schools are shown to play a critical role in supporting children with special needs, but their efforts are often insufficient to meet all requirements. The findings indicate that schools should foster stronger partnerships with parents to create a more comprehensive support system. This aligns with Yatim & Mohd. Ali (2022), who stress the importance of collective efforts among parents, educators, and policymakers in advancing special needs education.

The cultural context in Nepal presents unique challenges, particularly societal stigma and a lack of family support, which further hinder parental involvement. These challenges are more pronounced in Nepal compared to findings in developed countries, highlighting the need for community-based awareness

programs to address these issues. Moreover, the study calls for a stronger alignment of national policies with international frameworks like the CRPD and SDG 4 to bridge these gaps effectively.

Conclusion

This study explored the role of parental involvement in the education of children with special needs, focusing on the coordination between parents, schools, and external stakeholders. The findings reveal that effective collaboration plays a pivotal role in fostering the academic, social, and emotional development of these children. Parents' active engagement ensures that their unique needs are understood and addressed, bridging the gap between home and school environments. However, barriers such as societal stigma, limited access to resources, and inadequate support systems hinder consistent parental involvement, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to facilitate this collaboration.

The challenges faced by parents in accessing training, resources, and support systems emerged as a significant concern. The lack of centralized therapy centers, financial constraints, and delayed interventions limit parents' ability to actively participate in their child's educational journey. Despite these challenges, parents demonstrated resilience by leveraging informal methods, such as self-directed learning and daily interactions with schools, to support their children. These findings underscore the importance of accessible training programs and a supportive infrastructure to empower parents and enhance their involvement in special needs education.

The study highlights the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to address these gaps and create an inclusive learning environment. Policymakers must prioritize clear, actionable policies that distinguish between inclusive and special education, supported by investments in resources and community awareness programs. Schools should strengthen partnerships with parents, offering flexible and practical engagement strategies to accommodate diverse needs. By addressing these areas, the education system can better support children with special needs, ensuring they receive the quality education and opportunities they deserve for their holistic development.

Reflection

As the author of this study, I have come to deeply appreciate the critical role that parents play in the education of children with special needs. Through this research, I witnessed the resilience and dedication of parents as they navigate the complex challenges of supporting their children in environments that are often not fully equipped to meet their needs. Despite facing societal stigma, financial constraints,

and limited resources, these parents remain steadfast in their commitment to their children's development, which has been both inspiring and humbling.

This journey has also highlighted systemic gaps that require immediate attention. The lack of accessible training, centralized therapy centers, and consistent policy implementation has left many parents to rely on their resourcefulness to support their children. These findings resonate personally, as they illustrate the pressing need for community and institutional support to complement the efforts of parents. It is evident that while individual resilience is admirable, a more collaborative and inclusive approach is essential to create a meaningful impact on the lives of children with special needs.

Through this research, I have not only gained academic insights but also a deeper understanding of the human element in special needs education. It has reinforced my belief that meaningful change begins with empathy, awareness, and action. I hope this study contributes to bridging the gaps in Nepal's special education framework and serves as a call to action for educators, policymakers, and communities to work together in fostering an environment where every child, regardless of their abilities, can thrive.

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