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Inclusive Education And Special Needs Education: Family And Community Involvement In Children's Education

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Abstract

Inclusive education and special needs education are complementary approaches in ensuring that every child can access, participate in, and benefit from meaningful learning. Inclusive education emphasizes the removal of barriers to access, participation, belonging, and achievement, while special needs education provides more specific and individualized supports according to the characteristics and educational needs of children. This article aims to examine the relationship between inclusive education and special needs education and to analyze the role of families and communities in supporting children's educational participation, particularly in early childhood. A narrative literature review was conducted by examining recent international journal literature on inclusive education, early intervention, family-school partnerships, parental involvement, and cross-sector collaboration. The literature indicates that inclusion is not achieved merely by placing children with special needs in regular classrooms; meaningful participation requires individualized support, responsive teaching, accessible environments, and coordinated collaboration among schools, families, professionals, and communities. Families contribute through parenting, communication, learning support at home, decision-making, advocacy, and coordination of resources. Communities strengthen inclusion through social acceptance, accessible services, professional networks, and opportunities for participation. The review also identifies persistent barriers, including limited teacher preparation, weak communication, unequal access to services, stigma, and fragmented cross-sector coordination. Therefore, inclusive education should be developed as an ecological partnership in which the child remains the central focus and family knowledge is recognized as an important source for planning, implementing, and evaluating educational support.

Keywords: inclusive education; special needs education; family engagement; school-community partnership; early childhood

1. Introduction

Education is a right for every child, including those with disabilities, developmental delays, diverse learning needs, or other conditions requiring service adjustments. In the context of early childhood education, fulfilling this right is particularly crucial, as the early years of life lay the foundation for a child's subsequent development, learning readiness, health, and participation. Contemporary literature views inclusive education not merely as a policy of placing children in regular classrooms, but as a systematic effort to create an environment where all children feel accepted, participate meaningfully, receive support, and thrive according to their potential [1], [2].

While the terms "inclusive education" and "special needs education" are often used in close association, they emphasize different aspects. Inclusive education refers to an educational system's orientation toward reducing barriers and ensuring the presence, participation, and development of all learners. In contrast, special needs education focuses on providing specific support for children who require adjustments, individualized services, particular teaching strategies, or professional assistance. In best practice, special needs education is not positioned as the antithesis of inclusion but rather as a source of support that enables meaningful inclusion to occur [2], [3].

Family and community involvement constitutes a vital part of this relationship. Children do not develop solely within the school environment; learning experiences are shaped by interactions among home, school, healthcare services, the social environment, and policy frameworks. Research on parental involvement regarding children with disabilities indicates that parents possess crucial information about their child's needs, strengths, priorities, and

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Vol. 1, No. 1, September 2026, pp. 140-146

development, whereas schools provide pedagogical expertise and learning structures [4]. Consequently, the family-school relationship should be established as a partnership rather than a unidirectional interaction where the school merely conveys information to parents.

In early childhood education, the importance of such partnerships is particularly pronounced, as early-stage interventions and support often require a multi-sectoral approach. Systematic reviews of family-centered care demonstrate that this approach positions the family as an active partner in decision-making and the implementation of support for the child [3]. Meanwhile, studies on cross-sector collaboration indicate that services for children with special educational needs and disabilities require coordination among education, health, and social services, as well as other professional fields [5].

Against this backdrop, this article aims to discuss: (1) the concepts of inclusive education and special needs education and the relationship between them; (2) forms of family involvement in the education of children with diverse needs; (3) contributions from the community and across sectors; and (4) strategies to strengthen family-school-community partnerships in early childhood education. The discussion synthesizes international literature to provide a conceptual foundation for educational practices that are more responsive and child-centered.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Inclusive education and special needs education

Inclusive education has evolved from the concept of the right to equal education into a broader understanding encompassing access, a sense of belonging, participation, support, and development. Nelis, Pedaste, and Šuman indicate that the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood settings must be understood at multiple levels: the child, the teacher, the family, the institution, and the state [2]. This framework emphasizes that the success of inclusion cannot rest solely on the classroom teacher, as factors such as family, school organization, policy, and professional support are interconnected.

From a practical perspective, inclusive education entails adapting environments, methods, communication, play equipment, materials, assessments, and interactions to enable child participation. These adaptations vary from child to child. For instance, a child with a hearing impairment may require communication support; a child with a motor impairment might need physical access and assistive devices; and a child with attention regulation challenges may require activity structuring and behavioral support. The guiding principle is not to standardize support, but to provide support that is proportionate to the child's specific needs.

Special needs education serves to provide knowledge, strategies, and services tailored to individual requirements. This approach may involve needs assessments, individualized learning plans, relevant therapies or interventions, assistive technology, environmental modifications, and expert support. The challenge lies in ensuring that specialized support does not lead to unnecessary segregation. Research on inclusion implementation in low- and middle-income countries suggests that access to a regular classroom does not automatically equate to inclusion; limitations regarding resources, teacher training, facilities, materials, and policies can still restrict children's participation [6].

Thus, the relationship between inclusive education and special needs education is complementary. Inclusive education provides the value framework and systems that ensure participation, while special needs education offers specific support to address individual barriers. Both must be integrated into instructional planning and services for children so that differing needs do not become grounds for limiting learning opportunities.

Vol. 1, No. 1, September 2026, pp. 140-146

2.2. The family as a partner in a child's education

The family constitutes a child's immediate environment and possesses contextual knowledge that is not always available to teachers. In a systematic review regarding developmental disabilities, Acar, Chen, and Xie found that parents play a crucial role in early intervention services and early childhood special education, including by providing information that helps determine priorities and subsequent support measures [3]. Such knowledge may encompass the child's habits, communication style, responses to the environment, strengths, interests, and behavioral changes.

Family involvement can take several forms. First, families create a home environment that is safe, responsive, and supportive of independence. Second, families communicate regularly with teachers regarding the child's development and needs. Third, families extend learning experiences through simple activities at home. Fourth, families participate in decision-making concerning educational goals and strategies. Fifth, families act as advocates when the child requires access to services, assistive devices, or additional support.

Evidence regarding parental involvement interventions also indicates that programs designed to enhance parental participation can benefit parents, children, schools, and communities, although the quality of evidence and outcome measures vary across studies [7]. These findings serve as a reminder that family involvement cannot be measured solely by attendance at school meetings. Meaningful involvement must provide space for families to contribute to the processes of planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

Partnership also requires equitable communication. Research on teacher-parent meetings within the context of inclusive preschool education shows that a true partnership is not always realized; in some practices, teachers still view their professional perspectives as more accurate than those of parents [8]. These findings highlight the importance of shifting communication from an advice-giving model to a two-way dialogue. Teachers need to listen to the family's experiences, while families need to receive clear explanations regarding learning goals and strategies.

2.3. Community and cross-sector collaboration

The education of children with special needs does not occur in a social vacuum. The community plays a role in shaping accepting attitudes, providing opportunities for interaction, reducing stigma, and supporting access to resources. In inclusive education, a welcoming community environment enables children to participate more broadly in social activities, play, public services, and community life.

Cross-sector collaboration becomes increasingly important when a child's needs span multiple domains. Castro-Kemp and Samuels found that collaborative practices for children with special educational needs and disabilities can range from multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary to transdisciplinary approaches, encompassing regular meetings, informal discussions, joint assessments, school-based services, and the use of video conferencing [5]. These models demonstrate that coordination need not always take the form of large meetings; routine communication and clear referral mechanisms are also integral parts of collaboration.

In the context of early childhood, support may involve classroom teachers, special education teachers, psychologists, therapists, health professionals, social workers, and families. Olusanya and colleagues emphasize that early childhood development strategies for children with disabilities require family involvement, inter-agency coordination, a trained workforce, performance indicators, funding, and monitoring systems [9]. Therefore, the community is not merely a recipient of inclusion programs but an integral part of the ecosystem that provides opportunities and support.

Community collaboration can also be realized through service centers, organizations for persons with disabilities, parent communities, higher education institutions, health agencies, and businesses that provide child-friendly access or facilities. Such cooperation must be directed toward the concrete needs of children and families, rather than being limited to ceremonial activities.

Vol. 1, No. 1, September 2026, pp. 140-146

3. Methodology

This article employs a narrative literature review approach. The primary sources consist of international journal articles addressing inclusive education, special needs education, early childhood education, family engagement, family-school partnerships, family-based interventions, and cross-sector collaboration. Literature was selected based on relevance to the article's focus, recency of publication, and the accessibility of bibliographic information. The articles utilized primarily date from the 2021–2024 period, with particular attention paid to systematic reviews, scoping reviews, mini-reviews, and relevant empirical studies.

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, key concepts regarding the meaning of inclusion and special needs were identified. Second, findings were categorized based on the roles of families, schools, and the community. Third, a conceptual synthesis was performed to formulate partnership strategies applicable to children's education, particularly in the context of early childhood education. As this article constitutes a literature review, no primary data were collected from children, families, or schools.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Inclusion as meaningful participation, not merely placement

Synthesis results indicate that a primary issue in inclusive education is the tendency to equate inclusion with the simple placement of children with special needs in regular classrooms. Nelis et al. demonstrate that the implementation of inclusion requires access, a sense of belonging, social integration, participation, support, and child development [2]. This means that a child who is administratively placed in the same classroom does not necessarily experience inclusive education if they are unable to engage in activities, communicate, play, or build social relationships with their peers.

In the context of early childhood education, meaningful participation can be observed through opportunities for children to choose activities, play with peers, follow classroom routines, express their needs, receive assistance when required, and demonstrate developmental progress. Teachers need to employ flexible assessment methods and avoid applying a "one-size-fits-all" standard of success for every child. Individualized support can be provided without removing a child from shared learning experiences, provided that such support is integrated into classroom activities.

Findings from studies on inclusive education implementation in low- and middle-income countries highlight the importance of teacher training, resources, materials, facilities, policies, and partnerships [6]. This is highly relevant to the development of inclusive education, as schools often face limitations in translating the principles of inclusion into practice. Consequently, efforts to enhance teacher capacity must go hand-in-hand with strengthening support from families and the community.

4.2. The role of the family at each stage of education

Families should be positioned as partners from the needs-identification stage, rather than being involved only when problems arise. Information from the family can help teachers gain a more comprehensive understanding of a child's developmental patterns and needs. Conversely, schools can help families understand learning objectives and provide realistic strategies for implementation at home.

A family-centered approach emphasizes that the family is an integral part of the decision-making process. McCarthy and Guerin demonstrate that family-centered care in early intervention is linked to processes and outcomes for both the child and the family, and is influenced by contextual factors that determine how services are delivered [4]. In an educational setting, this principle can be applied by establishing shared goals, clearly defining roles, and ensuring families understand the rationale behind each strategy.

Family involvement also needs to be flexible. Not all families possess the same time, resources, educational background, access to transportation, or capacity to attend school in person. Therefore, schools can offer various

Vol. 1, No. 1, September 2026, pp. 140-146

communication channels, such as face-to-face meetings, communication logs, digital messaging, scheduled consultations, and documentation of the child's progress. Musendo et al. highlight the need for context-specific parental involvement interventions, particularly given that the majority of existing evidence originates from high-income countries [7].

Table 1. The role of family and community in supporting inclusive education

Actor	Key role	Example of practice
Family	Provides information, emotional support, home-based learning, and advocacy	Developmental communication, home learning/play routines, participation in setting individual goals
Teacher/School	Provides adaptive learning, assessment, communication, and service	Activity modifications, assistive tools, periodic meetings, referrals, and monitoring
Professional	Providing expertise and recommendations tailored to the child's needs	Psychological consultation/therapy, multidisciplinary assessment, teacher and family training
Community	Creating a social environment that is accepting and accessible	Joint play activities, child-friendly facilities, anti-stigma campaigns
Government/institutions	Ensure policies, resources, training, and service systems	Funding, regulation, referral systems, monitoring, and human resource development

4.3. Strategies for strengthening family-school-community partnerships

First, schools need to establish a planned communication system. Communication should not occur only when a child faces difficulties but should become a routine focused on development. Second, schools need to formulate educational goals in collaboration with families. These goals may encompass communication, independence, social-emotional skills, motor skills, language, cognition, and adaptive skills, tailored to the child's needs.

Third, teachers need to cultivate a reflective and responsive culture. Research by Çelik and Tomris indicates that home-school collaboration in preschool education is a dynamic and complex process; while the involvement of parents and teachers can support the development and learning of children with special needs, challenges exist at various systemic levels [10]. Therefore, schools require procedures to address differing perceptions, maintain confidentiality, and resolve issues collaboratively.

Fourth, professional support needs to be organized through clear referral mechanisms. Families should not have to seek services independently without coordination. Schools can build networks with service centers, healthcare professionals, psychologists, therapists, higher education institutions, and community organizations. Structured cross-sector collaboration can reduce service fragmentation and help all parties understand their respective roles [5].

Fifth, the community needs to be involved in creating an environment that embraces diversity. School activities can create opportunities for community engagement—such as inclusive play sessions, parenting programs, knowledge-sharing classes, exhibitions of children's work, or campaigns promoting acceptance of differences. Such activities not only benefit children with special needs but also help all children learn about empathy, cooperation, and diversity.

Sixth, partnership evaluations need to be conducted periodically. These evaluations can utilize simple indicators such as the frequency of communication, family involvement in decision-making, the implementation of support at home, inter-professional coordination, child participation, and changes in learning barriers. Evaluations should assess not only parental compliance but also whether the school has provided the communication access and support necessary for families to participate.

Vol. 1, No. 1, September 2026, pp. 140-146

4.4. Implementation challenges and their implications

The literature indicates that family involvement is not always straightforward. Differing expectations, stigma, time constraints, economic circumstances, negative experiences with schools, and a lack of information can all influence participation. On the school side, teachers may face heavy workloads, limited training, and resource constraints. Santiago, McIntyre, and Garbacz emphasize that family-school partnerships for children with autism must take into account the context and the nature of the relationship between the family and the school [11].

Another challenge is the tendency to prioritize a professional perspective. Findings by Then and Pohlmann-Rother show that, during meetings with parents of children with disabilities, teachers may prioritize their own perspectives and position parents as recipients of support [8]. If this pattern goes unrecognized, communication can devolve into a hierarchical relationship. Therefore, teacher competence in collaborative communication, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution needs to be part of professional development.

A broader implication is the need to shift from a fragmented service model toward an ecosystem of support. Inclusive education is strengthened when schools, families, and professionals do not operate in isolation. Each actor possesses distinct knowledge; thus, the quality of support improves when this knowledge is integrated for the child's benefit. This approach aligns with the view that supporting young children with disabilities requires family involvement, inter-agency coordination, trained personnel, and monitoring mechanisms [9].

5. Conclusion

Inclusive education and special needs education serve complementary functions. Inclusive education provides a framework to ensure access, a sense of belonging, participation, and the development of all children, whereas special needs education offers more specific support tailored to individual characteristics and requirements. Inclusion should not be understood merely as placing a child in a regular classroom; its success is determined by the quality of the child's participation, support, social interactions, and development.

Families and the community are vital components of a child's educational ecosystem. Families provide contextual knowledge, emotional support, home-based learning, decision-making, and advocacy. Schools are responsible for providing responsive instruction, communication, assessment, and coordination. Professionals and the community strengthen services through expertise, networking, access, and the creation of environments that embrace diversity. Consequently, family-school-community partnerships must be established in a manner that is systematic, sustainable, and centered on the child's needs.

Future efforts to strengthen inclusive education should focus on two-way communication, shared educational goals, individualized support that avoids isolating the child, cross-sector collaboration, teacher competency development, and partnership evaluation. Further research could examine contextual family-school-community partnership models for early childhood education, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Empirical studies in Indonesia are also needed to identify strategies best suited to the diversity of families, cultures, and the characteristics of educational institutions.

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Vol. 1, No. 1, September 2026, pp. 140-146

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