

Article

Parental Involvement in Inclusive Education: Impact on Learning Outcomes of Children with Disabilities

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Article History

Received: 25-06-2026

Revised: 31-07-2026

Accepted: 15-08-2026

Published: 23-08-2026



DOI: [10.63960/sp.2026.aesip.1.1.18](https://doi.org/10.63960/sp.2026.aesip.1.1.18)

Abstract:

Parental involvement is widely regarded as a modifiable, high-leverage factor in the education of children with disabilities, yet its treatment in inclusive-education research remains fragmented across disability categories, national contexts, and disciplinary traditions. This paper presents a narrative synthesis of theoretical and empirical literature examining how parental involvement shapes the learning outcomes of children with disabilities educated in inclusive settings. Anchored in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Epstein's framework of six types of involvement, and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of the parental involvement process, the review draws on meta-analytic, systematic-review, and disability-specific empirical studies to show that parental involvement is consistently associated with gains in academic achievement, communication, adaptive behaviour, and social-emotional functioning among children with disabilities, although effect sizes and involvement forms vary by disability type, family socio-economic status, and school responsiveness. The paper then examines the parent-, child-, teacher-, and system-level barriers that disproportionately constrain the involvement of parents of children with disabilities, and reviews evidence on family-professional partnership and parental self-efficacy interventions as mechanisms for mitigating these barriers. The Indian policy landscape, framed by the National Education Policy 2020 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, is used to illustrate the persistent gap between inclusive-education policy rhetoric and classroom-level practice. The paper concludes that treating parents as co-educators structurally embedded within curriculum planning, individualized education programmes, and school accountability systems rather than as passive recipients of information, is essential if inclusive education is to fulfil its transformative promise for children with disabilities.

Keywords: Parental Involvement, Inclusive Education, Children With Disabilities, Learning Outcomes, Family-School Partnership, Special Educational Needs, Ecological Systems Theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education, understood as the enrolment and meaningful participation of children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers in mainstream classrooms, has become a central commitment of international and national education policy over the past three decades. The 1994 Salamanca Statement first articulated inclusion as a global policy norm, and the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities subsequently framed inclusive education as a

binding human right rather than a discretionary pedagogical option (United Nations, 2006). Yet the movement of children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms has not, by itself, guaranteed improved learning outcomes. A substantial body of research now indicates that the quality of a child's inclusion — and, by extension, the academic, communicative, and social-emotional benefits that accrue from it — depends heavily on factors outside the classroom, among which parental involvement figures prominently.

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Parental involvement has long been established as a robust correlate of academic achievement in the general school population. Meta-analytic work spanning several decades and hundreds of primary studies has repeatedly found moderate-to-strong positive associations between parents' engagement in their children's schooling and measures of achievement, motivation, and school behaviour (Castro et al., 2015; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005, 2007). What is less settled, and considerably less synthesised, is how this relationship operates for children with disabilities — a population for whom involvement is simultaneously more consequential and more constrained. Parents of children with disabilities are typically required by law to participate in individualized education programme (IEP) planning, therapy scheduling, and multidisciplinary case conferences, placing on them a burden of involvement that goes well beyond the homework supervision and school-event attendance studied in general-population research (Gaspar & Sahay, 2025; Trainor, 2010). At the same time, these parents frequently encounter structural, attitudinal, and informational barriers — including diagnostic uncertainty, professional gatekeeping, and their own unaddressed caregiving stress — that reduce the frequency and effectiveness of their involvement relative to parents of non-disabled children (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

This paper synthesises the available theoretical and empirical literature to address a straightforward but under-consolidated question: what do we know about the relationship between parental involvement and the learning outcomes of children with disabilities in inclusive settings, through what mechanisms does this relationship operate, and what does the evidence suggest schools and policy systems should do about it? The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical frameworks that have historically been used to conceptualise parental involvement. Section 3 states the review's objectives, and Section 4 describes the methodological approach taken. Section 5 presents the findings thematically, moving from general achievement evidence to disability-specific findings, mechanisms, barriers, and partnership interventions, before situating the discussion within the Indian policy context. Sections 6 through 9 discuss implications, limitations, future research directions, and conclusions.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Three complementary frameworks underpin most contemporary research on parental involvement and are used here to structure the review.

2.1. Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory conceptualises child development as the product of nested and interacting environmental systems — the microsystem (home, classroom), mesosystem (the interaction between home and school), exosystem (parental workplace, community disability services), and macrosystem (cultural attitudes and national policy toward disability). Applied to inclusive education, this framework directs attention to the mesosystem — the quality of the link between

family and school — as the proximal site where parental involvement operates, while also insisting that this link cannot be understood independently of exosystemic factors such as parents' access to respite care, employment flexibility, and disability-specific community resources, and macrosystemic factors such as the legal architecture of a country's disability and education policy (Gaspar & Sahay, 2025).

2.2. Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement

Epstein's (1995) framework operationalises parental involvement into six overlapping categories: parenting (establishing supportive home conditions), communicating (school-to-home and home-to-school information exchange), volunteering, learning at home (supporting homework and learning activities), decision-making (participation in school governance and, in special education, in IEP and placement decisions), and collaborating with the community. The framework has been widely applied in general education, but recent scholarship cautions that its categories were derived largely from studies of non-disabled populations and may not map cleanly onto the involvement patterns of parents of children with disabilities, for whom decision-making and specialised forms of learning-at-home support (e.g., delivering therapeutic exercises) occupy a disproportionately large share of involvement effort relative to volunteering or general communication (Gaspar & Sahay, 2025).

2.3. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) model of the parental involvement process explains why parents become involved and how that involvement translates into student outcomes. The model proposes that involvement decisions are shaped by parents' role construction (their belief that involvement is part of the parental role), their sense of efficacy for helping their child succeed, and the invitations for involvement they perceive from the school, the teacher, and the child. Subsequent refinement and scale-development work confirmed these constructs empirically and extended the model to include parents' perceived life context — the time, energy, and skills available to them (Walker et al., 2005). This third dimension is especially salient for parents of children with disabilities, whose available time and energy are frequently consumed by therapy appointments, medical management, and advocacy work, and whose sense of efficacy can be undermined by the specialised, often unfamiliar nature of disability-specific pedagogy (Gaspar & Sahay, 2025; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Taken together, these three frameworks suggest that parental involvement in inclusive education should be understood not as a single behaviour but as a multidimensional, ecologically embedded process whose form and intensity are shaped jointly by parents' psychological orientation, the school's invitational practices, and the broader legal and cultural context in which the family lives.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This review pursues four objectives:

1. To synthesise empirical evidence on the association between parental involvement and the academic, communicative, and social-emotional outcomes of children with disabilities in inclusive settings.
2. To identify the mechanisms and forms through which parental involvement is theorised to influence these outcomes.
3. To examine the barriers that disproportionately constrain the involvement of parents of children with disabilities, relative to parents of non-disabled children.
4. To evaluate the evidence for family-professional partnership and parental self-efficacy interventions, and to consider the implications of this evidence for inclusive-education policy and practice, with particular reference to the Indian context.

4. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a narrative literature review methodology, appropriate for synthesising a body of research that spans multiple disability categories, methodological traditions (meta-analyses, systematic reviews, qualitative studies, and cross-sectional surveys), and national contexts, and for situating this evidence within a policy discussion rather than testing a narrow, pre-specified hypothesis. Sources were identified through targeted searches of peer-reviewed databases and journal repositories, prioritising (a) meta-analyses and systematic reviews of parental involvement and academic achievement in general-population and disability-specific samples, (b) primary empirical studies examining parental involvement in the context of autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disabilities, and intellectual disability, and (c) theoretical and policy literature on inclusive education frameworks and the Indian regulatory context. Priority was given to studies published from 2015 onward, supplemented by foundational theoretical works that remain the field's primary points of reference. As a narrative synthesis rather than a systematic review with pre-registered protocol, the paper does not claim exhaustive coverage of the literature; its aim is conceptual integration rather than quantitative pooling of effect sizes.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Parental Involvement and Academic Achievement: The General Evidence Base

The association between parental involvement and academic achievement is among the most replicated findings in educational research. Fan and Chen's (2001) meta-analysis of the topic found a moderate overall correlation between parental involvement and achievement, with parents' aspirations and expectations for their children emerging as the strongest sub-component. Subsequent meta-analytic work by Jeynes (2005, 2007) confirmed this relationship across elementary and secondary levels and across

racial and socio-economic groups, while a later, more methodologically comprehensive meta-analysis by Castro et al. (2015), synthesising 37 studies conducted between 2000 and 2013, found that the parental involvement practices most strongly associated with achievement were those involving general supervision of learning activities, high academic expectations, and the maintenance of ongoing communication with the school about the child's progress. Ma et al.'s (2015) meta-analysis extended these findings to early childhood and early elementary populations, reporting that the benefits of parental involvement were evident from the earliest years of schooling and were not confined to any single achievement domain. This general evidence base establishes the theoretical plausibility of a similar relationship for children with disabilities, while also cautioning that the specific forms of involvement that matter most may differ by developmental stage and, as the following section shows, by disability type.

5.2. Disability-Specific Evidence

A smaller but growing body of research has examined parental involvement specifically among families of children with disabilities. Fernández Cerero et al. (2024), in a qualitative study of 42 parents of secondary school students with autism spectrum disorder in Spain, found that parental involvement was central to students' academic performance and school adjustment, with parents describing themselves as *de facto* co-educators who compensated for gaps in specialised classroom support, though they also reported that the intensity of the involvement required left many feeling professionally under-supported and emotionally exhausted. Guo and Keles's (2024) systematic review of parent-involved interventions for children with specific learning disabilities identified sixteen distinct interventions across fifteen eligible studies and found that such interventions produced both immediate and durable gains in reading and writing performance, generalised across contexts, although the review also noted a striking evidence gap for children with mathematics difficulties and for social-emotional outcomes relative to academic ones.

Evidence from preschool and early-intervention contexts points in a similar direction. Xu et al. (2022), developing a survey instrument to measure the activity participation of children with disabilities in inclusive preschool settings in China, identified parental attitude as one of four core dimensions — alongside learning participation, life participation, and teacher support — that jointly determined the extent to which young children with disabilities were meaningfully included in classroom activities, indicating that parental orientation toward inclusion operates as an antecedent condition for participation rather than merely a downstream consequence of it. At a broader regional level, Koly et al.'s (2021) systematic review of parent-mediated intervention programmes for children with neurodevelopmental disorders in South Asia found consistent evidence that training parents to deliver structured, therapist-designed activities at home produced measurable gains in children's communication and adaptive functioning, and argued that parent-mediated models are particularly cost-effective in low- and middle-

income contexts where specialist provision is scarce — a finding with direct relevance to the Indian setting discussed in Section 5.6.

Not all evidence is uniformly positive, however. Trainor's (2010) qualitative analysis of parent participation in special education processes in the United States found that the cultural and social capital available to families shaped both the form their involvement took and how favourably it was perceived by schools, such that culturally normative but less "visible" forms of support (for example, informal advocacy within extended family and community networks) were often undervalued by educators relative to formally recognised participation in IEP meetings. This finding is echoed in Gaspar and Sahay's (2025) recent conceptual analysis, which argues that existing involvement frameworks — including Epstein's — were derived from general-education populations and inadequately capture the distinct, often more intensive and more emotionally weighted forms of involvement that characterise parenting a child with a disability, including navigating diagnostic and eligibility processes, coordinating across multiple service providers, and managing the disproportionate involvement burden that still falls on mothers in many households.

5.3. Mechanisms and Pathways of Influence

The mechanisms through which parental involvement is thought to influence learning outcomes for children with disabilities operate at several levels. At the level of the child, involvement is theorised to build academic and social self-efficacy through modelling, reinforcement, and direct instruction — the same pathways identified in the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) model for the general population, but often requiring adaptation for children with communication, sensory, or cognitive impairments. At the level of the home-school relationship, involvement functions through the communicating and decision-making dimensions of Epstein's (1995) framework, most visibly through parents' participation in IEP development, where their first-hand knowledge of the child's functioning, preferences, and history complements professionals' clinical and pedagogical expertise. At the level of the broader system, sustained parental involvement has been shown to improve continuity of intervention across settings and over time, since parents are frequently the only stable link between early-intervention services, school-based special education, and any private therapeutic support a family accesses (Koly et al., 2021).

5.4. Barriers to Parental Involvement

Hornby and Lafaele's (2011) explanatory model, though developed for the general population, organises barriers into four levels that map with particular clarity onto the disability context: parent and family factors (including parents' own educational history, socio-economic pressures, and — for parents of children with disabilities — grief, diagnostic overshadowing, or unaddressed caregiving stress); child factors, in which the model explicitly names learning difficulties and disabilities as a source of reduced or altered parental involvement, since disability can generate both heightened parental anxiety and reduced

parental confidence in their ability to help; parent-teacher factors, including differing constructions of the parental role, language and communication mismatches, and asymmetries of professional authority that can silence parental input in case conferences; and societal factors, including the availability of transport, childcare for siblings, and workplace flexibility, which are frequently more constrained for families managing a child's ongoing medical or therapeutic needs. Gaspar and Sahay (2025) add a further layer specific to special education: procedural complexity itself acts as a barrier, since navigating eligibility determination, individualized planning, and periodic review requires a form of bureaucratic literacy that is unevenly distributed across families by education level and English-language or majority-language proficiency.

5.5. Family-Professional Partnerships and Capacity-Building Interventions

A parallel strand of research has examined interventions designed to strengthen family-professional partnerships and parental self-efficacy directly, rather than treating involvement as a fixed parental trait. Hohlfeld et al.'s (2018) systematic review of parenting interventions for parents of young children with neurodevelopmental disabilities found that structured training programmes — typically combining psychoeducation about the child's condition with coached practice of specific facilitation strategies — produced measurable gains in parental self-efficacy, which the authors identify as a proximal mechanism through which such interventions are likely to translate into improved child outcomes, although they note that the evidence base linking efficacy gains directly to measured learning outcomes remains thinner than the evidence for efficacy gains alone. Koly et al.'s (2021) South Asian review similarly found that parent-mediated intervention models, in which trained parents deliver structured developmental or therapeutic activities at home under professional supervision, were both effective and scalable in resource-constrained settings, suggesting a viable model for expanding inclusive-education support where specialist personnel are in short supply — a condition that characterises much of the Indian school system (Gaspar & Sahay, 2025; Koly et al., 2021).

Collectively, this evidence suggests that family-professional partnership is not merely a courtesy extended to parents but an active, trainable component of the intervention system itself, and that schools and disability services that invest in building parental capacity and confidence rather than assuming families either possess or lack the disposition to be involved are more likely to see that investment reflected in children's outcomes.

5.6. Policy Context: Global and Indian Perspectives

Internationally, the shift toward viewing parental involvement as a systemic entitlement rather than a discretionary courtesy is reflected in legal frameworks such as the U.S. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which mandates parental participation in IEP development, and in the broader normative architecture established by

UNESCO's Salamanca Statement and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), both of which frame inclusive education as inseparable from family and community participation.

In India, the legal and policy foundation for inclusive education rests on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (Government of India, 2016), which entitles children with disabilities to free education in an inclusive environment and mandates individualized support, and the National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020), which reaffirms this commitment and calls for teacher training, flexible curricula, and the deployment of resource support for children with special needs. Both instruments position parents as intended partners in the inclusion process. However, empirical and policy-analytic literature suggests a persistent gap between this legislative intent and school-level practice: infrastructural shortfalls, a shortage of teachers trained in inclusive pedagogy, and low levels of awareness among parents themselves about the entitlements available to them under the RPWD Act and NEP 2020 continue to limit the extent to which parental involvement can function as intended within Indian inclusive classrooms. This pattern is consistent with the broader international finding that legal entitlement to involvement is a necessary but not sufficient condition for meaningful partnership; without systemic investment in parental capacity-building of the kind reviewed in Section 5.5, and without school-level practices that actively invite rather than merely permit parental participation, policy commitments to inclusive education risk remaining aspirational rather than operative — a concern that resonates with the broader literature on the school's role in inviting, rather than passively awaiting, parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Walker et al., 2005).

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

The evidence reviewed here supports several practical implications for schools and policy systems seeking to make inclusive education transformative rather than merely accommodative. First, involvement frameworks and school policies should be adapted, rather than simply extended, to reflect the distinct forms of involvement — procedural navigation, therapeutic co-delivery, and intensive advocacy — that characterise the experience of parenting a child with a disability (Gaspar & Sahay, 2025). Second, schools should treat parental self-efficacy as a trainable outcome in its own right, investing in structured capacity-building and parent-mediated intervention models of the kind shown to be both effective and cost-efficient (Hohlfeld et al., 2018; Koly et al., 2021), rather than treating variation in parental involvement solely as a matter of parental motivation or capacity. Third, addressing the barriers identified by Hornby and Lafaele (2011) requires coordinated action at the parent, teacher, and system levels simultaneously — teacher training in inclusive communication, simplified and translated procedural guidance for IEP and eligibility processes, and structural supports such as flexible meeting scheduling — rather than interventions targeted at parents alone.

Finally, in contexts such as India, where legal entitlement to inclusive education and parental participation already exists on paper, the priority for policy implementation is closing the awareness and capacity gap between what the RPWD Act and NEP 2020 promise and what parents are equipped to claim and exercise at the school level.

7. LIMITATIONS

This review has several limitations. As a narrative rather than systematic synthesis, it does not follow a pre-registered search protocol or report pooled effect sizes, and the selection of studies, while purposive, is not exhaustive. The disability-specific evidence base itself remains unevenly distributed, with autism spectrum disorder and specific learning disabilities considerably better represented in the literature than intellectual, sensory, or physical disabilities, limiting the extent to which conclusions can be generalised across the full range of disability categories encompassed by inclusive education. Much of the underlying empirical evidence, particularly the disability-specific studies discussed in Section 5.2, is drawn from qualitative or small-sample designs that support rich description of parental experience but limit causal inference about the magnitude of impact on learning outcomes. Finally, the Indian policy discussion in Section 5.6 draws primarily on policy-analytic and secondary literature rather than large-scale, nationally representative empirical data on parental involvement, a gap that is itself indicative of the broader evidence need identified in Section 8.

8. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Three directions for future research follow from the gaps identified above. First, there is a need for large-scale, quantitative studies — including meta-analyses specific to disability populations — that can establish effect-size estimates for the relationship between parental involvement and learning outcomes across disability categories, comparable to the general-population meta-analyses reviewed in Section 5.1. Second, longitudinal research is needed to clarify the direction and durability of the relationship between parental involvement and outcomes for children with disabilities, since most existing studies are cross-sectional and cannot establish whether involvement drives improved outcomes, is itself driven by early signs of a child's progress, or reflects a reciprocal process. Third, and especially pertinent to the Indian and broader South Asian context, there is a clear need for context-specific empirical research examining how parental involvement operates under conditions of resource constraint, linguistic diversity, and uneven policy implementation, building on the parent-mediated intervention evidence reviewed by Koly et al. (2021) to test whether such models can be scaled within government school systems.

9. CONCLUSION

Parental involvement is not incidental to the success of inclusive education for children with disabilities; it is one of its structural preconditions. The evidence reviewed here indicates a consistent, though variably sized, positive relationship between parental involvement and the

academic, communicative, and social-emotional outcomes of children with disabilities, operating through mechanisms of role construction, self-efficacy, and school invitation that are well described by existing theoretical models but that require adaptation to reflect the distinct intensity and form of involvement disability parenting demands. Realising the

transformative potential that inclusive-education policy promises — in India and elsewhere — will depend on treating parents not as passive recipients of professional decisions but as structurally embedded co-educators, supported by schools and systems that actively build, rather than merely assume, their capacity to be involved.

DECLARATIONS

Author(s) Contribution

All the Author(s) work equally to prepare the manuscript.

Uses of AI Acknowledgement

All content, arguments, citations, and conclusions were reviewed, fact-checked against original sources, and edited by the author(s), who take full responsibility for the accuracy and scholarly integrity of the final manuscript.

Funding Information

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable; this article does not report new

empirical data. All sources synthesised in this review are cited in the reference list and are publicly available through their respective publishers.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Clinical Trial Registration (if applicable)

Not Applicable

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate

This study is a narrative literature review and did not involve the collection of primary data from human participants; it therefore did not require formal ethical approval.

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