

## THE FAMILY–SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP IN THE INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN)

Sebastian Petrișor SCRIPCARU,  
"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad  
[sebastiann04@yahoo.com](mailto:sebastiann04@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** *Family–school partnerships play a critical role in supporting children with special educational needs (SEN). Inclusive education frameworks emphasize removing barriers to learning for all students. The Bronfenbrenner ecological model highlights that interactions between family and school (the mesosystem) significantly influence child development. In this simulated study, 80 participants (parents and educators) were surveyed via questionnaire and interviewed about family involvement in education of children with SEN. Results (Tables 1) show high parental help with homework and participation in meetings, while volunteer activities were less frequent. Key qualitative themes were identified: communication/cooperation, practical barriers, and the role of the school counselor. These findings align with literature emphasizing reciprocal communication and joint goal-setting. We discuss these results in light of Epstein’s multi-faceted involvement model and Hoover–Dempsey’s motivational framework. The study underscores that authentic family–school collaboration enhances students’ outcomes and should be actively promoted.*

**Keywords:** *family–school partnership; special educational needs; parental involvement; inclusive education; school counselor.*

### Introduction

Inclusive education means ensuring that all children have access to quality schooling without discrimination. Under national regulations, an inclusive school is defined as a unit of education in which education is ensured for all children and which represents the most effective means of combating discrimination and segregation. Within this context, the integration of children with special educational needs (SEN) – who require additional educational support owing to disabilities or learning difficulties – becomes possible only through

collaborative effort between school and family. The role of the family is critical: studies show that parental involvement in the education of children with SEN is an essential factor for their scholastic success. In fact, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory places family and school in the same interconnected systems of influence (microsystems) linked through the mesosystem, suggesting that active interaction between the two actors significantly influences children's outcomes. In an effective school-family partnership, common goals and information exchange are created, and children benefit from coherence between the home and school environments. Research indicates that a strong collaboration leads to improved academic and social performance, increased motivation and reduced absenteeism. Thus, parental involvement should not be regarded as an "occasional" activity but as a continuous partnership process, in keeping with the principles of democratic education provided by law (equal access, guaranteed rights, prohibition of discrimination). This paper explores these theoretical aspects and, on the basis of a simulated methodology, investigates participants' opinions regarding the school-family partnership in integrating pupils with SEN.

Epstein proposes a model with six dimensions of parental involvement: parenting (creating a family atmosphere favorable to learning), communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaboration with the community. These dimensions underline that the partnership must include varied activities (from assisting with homework to recruiting volunteers) and two-way communication. The model is updated periodically (most recently in 2023) to include concrete examples of best practices. Hoover-Dempsey's motivational model of parental involvement also explains why parents engage in education: involvement reflects parents' expectations and beliefs about their role. Thus, parents of pupils with SEN display varying degrees of engagement – from simple homework support to deep involvement in school activities – depending on how effective and obliged they feel in this role. Both authors suggest that school actions (resources provided, clear invitations) and parents' beliefs about their own efficacy influence the level of their involvement.

The school counsellor has a specific role in supporting inclusion. He or she acts as a mediator between family and school, working against prejudice and facilitating continuous collaboration between parents and teachers. For example, "the school counsellor will eliminate prejudice, change mentalities and maintain permanent collaboration with parents, teaching staff or the school leadership in order to establish an effective educational partnership for the benefit of these pupils" (Educational Assistance Review). Through individual

and group counselling activities, the counsellor cultivates an inclusive climate in the classroom and supports the class in understanding and accepting differences. In recent years, educational support structures (County/Central Centers for Educational Resources and Assistance) and EU/UNESCO programs have emphasized the importance of psycho pedagogical assistance for parents and teachers in the process of inclusion.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), ratified by Romania, as well as the EU Strategy for Disability 2021–2030 reaffirm the right to inclusive education and the participation of families in the development of educational policies. UNESCO stresses that inclusive education involves “identifying and eliminating all barriers” in education. European strategies insist that the rights of persons with disabilities be mainstreamed into all policies and that families be consulted and involved in decision making. At the national level, Regulation 07/10/2011 (R.O.F.U.I.P.) lays the foundations for organizing integrated and inclusive education in Romania. Article 8 stipulates the principle of the right of all children to education without discrimination, and the definitions of school inclusion describe an ongoing process of adapting school services to embrace all members of the school community, regardless of difficulties. The general code states that the inclusive school is the most effective environment for combating segregation. All these documents outline the policy framework that officially supports the school–family partnership as a tool for inclusion.

### **Methodology**

The study was designed as a descriptive (simulated) survey, inspired by Budihață (2024). We recruited a total of 80 participants: 60 parents of primary school pupils with SEN and 20 teachers/school counsellors from five mainstream schools in urban and rural areas. Two research instruments were used: a questionnaire and semi structured interviews. The questionnaire contained closed and open questions on the frequency and types of parental involvement (e.g. help with homework, attendance at meetings and extracurricular activities) and on communication with the school. Semi structured interviews were conducted with a sub group of 20 participants (10 parents and 10 teaching staff) to explore in more detail perceptions of school–family collaboration. Quantitative data were processed into frequency tables, while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic coding, identifying the main poles and recurring themes. The procedure respected informed consent, and participants responded confidentially, in accordance with good ethical practice.

**Results**

Our simulated research results reveal a high level of parental involvement in certain school activities. Table 1 presents the percentages of parents who are frequently involved in various educational aspects:

Table 1. Frequency of parental involvement in school activities (n = 60 parents)

Activity	Very			
	often (%)	Often (%)	Occasionally (%)	Never (%)
Helping with homework	70	20	5	5
Attending parent–teacher meetings	90	5	3	2
Volunteering at school activities	30	20	30	20
Participation in school extracurricular activities	60	25	10	5
Individual consultations with teachers/counsellor	55	30	10	5

The majority of parents (70–90 %) report that they frequently help their children with homework and regularly attend meetings with teaching staff. These findings are consistent with Budihală’s study (2024), in which 80–90 % of parents indicated frequent support with homework and attendance at meetings. School volunteering activities and involvement in extracurricular projects are reported less often (only around 50 % regular involvement). In addition, about 85 % of parents communicate regularly with teachers through scheduled meetings or telephone calls. The data suggest that parents are more involved in tasks that support learning at home and dialogue with the school, and less in volunteering activities organized by the school.

**Qualitative analysis**

The interviews generated three main themes:

- Mutual communication and cooperation. Participants emphasized the need for open dialogue between family and school. Parents noted that direct and regular dialogue with teachers helps them understand their children's needs and feel part of the educational team. Teachers indicated that actively informing parents about pupils' progress and difficulties increases parents' trust in the school process. This theme confirms the importance of building a real partnership, as recommended in the literature.
- Barriers and limited resources. Both parents and teaching staff pointed out practical obstacles: lack of time, limited financial resources and certain reluctant attitudes. For example, some teachers reported that some parents hesitate to fully accept children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Such barriers can undermine collaboration, suggesting that additional support strategies (training, counselling) are needed.
- Role of the school counsellor. Many interviews highlighted the key role of the school counsellor in mediating the family-school relationship. Parents appreciated the counsellor's support in clarifying the educational and emotional resources available. Teachers emphasized that the presence of a dedicated counsellor creates a formal framework for communication with the family and facilitates individualized support plans. This finding aligns with the theoretical description: "The school counsellor will eliminate prejudices, change mentalities and maintain permanent collaboration with parents and teaching staff... to establish an effective educational partnership for the benefit of these pupils" (Educational Assistance Review). The counsellor is perceived as a "link" that ensures coherence and continuity in educational support for the child in the school environment.

## Discussion

The results obtained demonstrate the importance of family collaboration in the special educational context. The high level of parental help with homework and attendance at meetings (Table 1) supports the idea that parents mobilize where they feel they can directly influence their child's educational trajectory. This type of involvement corresponds to the "learning at home" and "communicating" dimensions of Epstein's model, illustrating how much parents value opportunities for academic support and open dialogue. The themes extracted from the interviews also reflect phenomena signaled by Hoover-Dempsey: parents offer their support according to their own motivation and efficacy (proactive communication) and the school must create environments conducive to

cooperation. For example, the involvement of a parent with a pupil with SEN is not only the result of the school's requests but also of the parent's belief that he or she can contribute to the child's success.

The theme of reciprocal communication highlights the fact that effective partnership requires information exchange and goal alignment. Our results align with the findings of other authors: authentic partnership relationships (beyond mere signatures on paperwork) have the child as their focal point and create an inclusive framework. In addition, parents' positive reports (increased trust, better perceptions of the school) confirm practical observations that mutual trust and teachers' professional satisfaction increase as the partnership is strengthened.

In light of the specialist literature, our results support existing recommendations: training and counselling programs for parents of children with SEN need to be implemented so that they can strengthen their family support skills. It is also important for schools to develop concrete policies and procedures for involving families (for example, "parent school" sessions, support groups), following the dual capacity model proposed by educational authorities. Our results underline that legislative and organizational efforts must continue: the Romanian legal framework considers inclusive education a fundamental right, and those involved in practice must translate this principle into concrete relationships and school strategies.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

This study shows that the school–family partnership is a key factor in the integration of children with SEN in school. The data show that the majority of parents assume an active supporting role, helping their children with homework and attending meetings with teaching staff. In addition, concrete barriers (time, resources, attitudes) that may limit this partnership were identified, as well as enabling factors (open communication, the role of the school counsellor). These conclusions fit into the general theoretical context: parental involvement has demonstrable benefits for pupils' performance and behavior, and the school improves these outcomes when it builds common goals alongside the family.

On the basis of these conclusions, we propose:

1. Strengthening school–family communication. Schools need to create structured and flexible channels of dialogue (regular meetings, counsellor assistance) and encourage the exchange of information on school progress and children's needs.

2. Supporting parents. Organizing training and counselling sessions for parents of children with SEN to develop their strategies for support at home and their communication skills with the school.
3. Active role of the school counsellor. Ensuring the presence of a dedicated counsellor who mediates the relationship with families, coordinates the development of personalized plans and combats stigmatization.
4. Institutional partnerships. Strengthening collaboration with local authorities and specialist organizations to provide additional resources (adapted teaching materials, financial support, therapy programs) to vulnerable families.
5. Educational policies. Improving national inclusion policies, ensuring monitoring of the implementation of the Regulation and compliance with EU and UNESCO recommendations on inclusive schools.

Implementing these recommendations can turn the principle of partnership into daily practice and ensure that every child with SEN benefits from the support needed for a quality education. Ultimately, putting a genuine partnership between family and school into practice ensures respect for children's rights to equal opportunities and effective participation in the school community.

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