

## Collaboration with Families of Children with Disabilities in Qatar: A Parent's Perspective

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities in regard of the components of true collaboration practices in different educational institutions. As well as to solicit their understanding of the important components of collaboration that might improve services. A model based on the work of Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson and Beegle (2004) was adopted having six original domains including communication, knowledge, respect, trust, equality, commitment, a seventh domain of advocacy was added. A sample of 163 parents of families with disabilities was interviewed and a survey was collected accordingly, validity and reliability of the tool were checked in addition to an exploratory factor analysis, which confirmed the previous model.

Results showed a great need for collaboration between families and school personnel especially teachers, all components are important and need to be addressed; still communication and equality were the major components of collaboration that needs to be addressed to achieve proper collaboration. Further analysis showed some differences according to other variables, like educational institute type, further implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** Collaboration; Families; Children with disabilities; Qatar

### Introduction

The practices of collaboration and interactions between schools and parents of students with disabilities constitute the understanding of the collaboration concept. It is important for all parties to consider the impact of the quality of these practices on how parents would react to improve their children's educational outcomes. This interaction is dependent on many factors including parents' awareness of their rights [1] and the interactive role of the school represented by the administration and teachers. Accordingly, school-parent collaboration would be characterized by these aspects. Recently in Qatar, school-parent partnership is experiencing new prospects whose outcomes may provide a wider vision of special education practices and implementations [2]. It might provide valuable information about the characteristics of the interactions between the education professionals and the parents. Moreover, the use of this application may shift the partnership to different levels. Hilado et al. [3] recommended that both administrators and parents develop a broader understanding of parent involvement to enhance the children education.

### Literature Review

#### Parents of children with disabilities

Literature has been quit generous in relation to issues of collaboration of families with schools and to provisions of service delivery to students with disabilities [4,5]. Allen et al. [6] sees "the family as the unit of attention, and organizes assistance in a collaborative fashion and in accordance with each individual family's

wishes, strengths, and needs" (p. 64). This was mainly based on the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities education Act in 1975 (PL 94-142) and later on in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) where parents' consent and participation is the core of the family centered model, therefore family-school collaboration is evident and endorsed in both federal legislations and the public as well.

Furthermore, family participation depends of the role offered and given through schools and school personnel, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler [7] mentioned that families and parents playing an active role through collaboration with schools and actively participating have higher level of satisfaction especially issues related to child education and program structure.

Therefore, active collaborative between schools represented by both teachers and administration in addition to families are needed to help building a safe positive environment, suitable for the empowerment and decision making of the child's future life [8].

#### Policies and laws

The policies and laws in Qatar which delineate partnership and parental involvement are important aspects of special education. Policies in Qatar state that school-parent partnership should be based on a clear knowledge of all parties' responsibilities and the roles they play. Moreover, the policies define the school's principle mission as enlightening parents about their rights and tasks. According to AESN, an important task of the administration and school staff work is building proper and close collaboration with parents, clarifying the different roles and responsibilities of both sides [9]. Furthermore, the laws define the schools' duties to develop respectful positive environment that promotes effective partnership, where parents can

actively interact to support their children at school and at home. In addition, the policies emphasize the importance of involving parents in their children's education. It is important that parents are closely involved in all aspects of their child's education if the child has additional educational support needs [9]. Additionally, policies outline guidelines that schools should follow to inform parents of the services provided, rights and responsibilities, staff members, accommodations, diagnosis procedures and results, as well as meetings dates and agendas. Besides that, schools should encourage parents to attend all meetings, provide information about child needs, keep progress records, ask questions about the provided services discuss and approve decisions, and follow the complaint protocols and procedures [10].

### Partnership concept and framework

The concept of partnership is wide and varied in ways that affect the interactions between the parent and the school. Thus, reaching a unified concept of partnership is essential in developing a foundation for positive conditions in which schools and parents can mutually benefit interchangeably to support the students with disabilities learning. Furthermore, applying a well-structured framework by all schools and professionals will provide equal opportunities for all parties to interact and profit. Turnbull [5] suggested partnership as a relationship in which professionals and families agree to build on each other's resources and expertise, as appropriate, for making and implementing decisions from which students will benefit directly and other family members and professionals will benefit as well.

Nowadays, the new family- school- community model have changed majorly, depending on new definitions of the family and its components. The new model has included a more comprehensive comprised of parents ( mothers and fathers), grandparents, single parents, foster parents and officially everybody living and providing care for the child and fostering his school achievement and success [11].

Epstein [12] developed six frameworks including parenting, volunteering, collaboration, communication, decisions making, and learning at home for effective parental involvement that provide schools the opportunity for developing positive outcomes. Turnbull [5] suggested communication, professional competence, respect, commitment, equality, advocacy, and trust as seven principles of successful partnership between professionals and the families of students with disabilities. He also claimed that trust holds all principles together as the most important principle and without it effective partnership with parents and families will no longer exist.

### Partnership role

Partnership is one of the main components of achieving successful learning and achieving educational outcomes for students with disabilities and their families. It would also enables professionals to empower their success in providing optimal services for their students. School-parent positive partnership can positively affect the learning of students with disabilities and enable them to benefit from services provided. Many studies have investigated the relation between the quality of partnership and benefits from the schools, parents and students, as well as the role of partnership in achieving positive learning outcomes. According to NEA [11], the community including schools and parents should work together to promote all students' wellbeing, health, and learning. Schools should be able to respond to students' needs more effectively while parents should get involved

actively including the utilization of community resources. Jeynes [13] worked on a meta-analysis of more than fifty two articles related to urban secondary students; it was found that a strong positive correlation exists between educational outcomes and parental involvement.

### Professional-parents interactions

The collaboration and partnership practices affect the ways education professionals and parents interact. The closer parents work together, the more they help each other. Through an effective partnership, parents can develop a more positive attitude and perception toward themselves and toward their children's education. Parents' self-efficacy includes the belief that parental involvement has a positive impact on student achievement and success at school; accordingly such parents will involve and collaborate effectively with educators [14,15]. Moreover, the way of collaboration has effect on the parents' awareness of their children rights. Besides, schools and professionals are also influenced by the quality of these interactions. Effective partnership supports them in providing more sophisticated efficient services. Building and developing a collaborative partnership allows the IEP team to operate as a cohesive unit [16]. Obviously, schools' implementation and practices have a great impact on determining the quality of the partnership and to what level they can promote effective parental involvement. Staples and Diliberto [16] stated that school-parent partnership is related to the extent to which schools are successful in developing well-structured communication system, building rapport with parents, and provide various opportunities for parental involvement.

In Qatar, partnership in special education is a vast topic to be examined, especially with the changes that are taking place in its educational system. Investigating the impact of some factors that affect the school-parent partnership can provide valuable information to schools and parents to enhance the parental involvement and the quality of the partnership.

To what extent do parents identify collaboration and its underlying components?

To what extent do parents perceive their rights according to school-parent collaboration?

## Method

### Participants

The study sample consisted of 163 families of students with disabilities. Table 1 represents some of the demographics for the sample.

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	115	70.6
Male	48	29.4
Nationality		
Qatari	102	62.6
Non Qatari	61	37.4
Type of Institute		

Public school	82	50.3
SPED non-government Center	38	23.3
SPED government Center	43	26.3
Academic qualification		
High School	19	11.7
Bachelor degree	122	74.8
Graduate school	22	13.5
Age		
25-34	27	16.6
35-44	90	55.2
45-54	30	18.4
55- and more	16	9.8

**Table 1:** Summary of Parents Demographic Information.

## Survey

The survey questions were developed after a thorough review of literature. The survey was based on a model by Blue-Banning et al. [17]. The model originally consisted of six domains and lately the tem advocacy has been added. Table 2 presents all of the main domains with their definitions.

Domain	Definition
Communication	The quality of communication of the members is positive, understandable, respectful, and efficient. The quantity of communication enables effective coordination of information and understanding among all members.
Skills/Knowledge	Members of the professional team demonstrate competence to fulfill their roles. The professional team successfully collaborates with families and adapts instructional approaches to meet the student's individual needs.
Respect	Members regard and demonstrate esteem for each other through their actions.
Trust	Members share a sense of certainty about the other partner's reliability and dependability of character and ability.
Equality	Members perceive equity in decision making and service implementation and seek to ensure that all other members of the partnership feel equally powerful in their ability to influence student and family outcomes and expectations.
Commitment	Members share a presumption about each other's devotion, consideration, and loyalty, including a mutual belief in the pursuit of the committed goals on the behalf of the child and family.
Advocacy	Members inform and challenge institutions to respond to the needs and rights of students with special education needs, as opposed to alienating or antagonizing institutions (Zaretsky, 2003)

**Table 2:** Summary of Collaborative Family-Professional Partnership Dimensions Dimension Definition [17].

## Data collection

A literature review of previous studies of the period from 2001 to 2015 that investigated the school-parent partnership and its impact on the perception of professionals and parents were done. Moreover, a group of meetings were conducted with parents of students with disabilities and school professionals of different grade levels to elicit their opinions about school-parent collaboration related aspects. A total of 38 items and 7 interview question were developed. The survey consisted of two scales, the collaboration scale and another ten items to measure the rights of parents. The first part, measures parents' satisfaction of school-parent collaboration through 28 questions based on the seven domains of partnership of Turnbull [5]. The second part (rights scale), measures parents' understanding of their rights by 10 questions based on the 10 rights which are included in IDEA [18]. The professional interview consisted of the survey and seven open-ended questions.

## Validity and reliability

The survey has been evaluated by a group of experts in the field within Qatar University, both of the parent survey and the professional interview were reviewed and approved, they were modified according to reviewer's recommendations. Cronbach Alpha Coefficient by using SPSS 23 to measure the items internal reliability on the participants' responses on all questions, Collaboration scale over all reliability was (0.833).

## Settings

The study was conducted through a support group. This group was created to connect professionals, people, and parents of students with disabilities to discuss the rights of individuals and students with disabilities and their families. The members usually share their concerns and some issues that they confront in Qatar regarding the rights of individuals with disabilities. Many issues and conversations were about the services provided in special education in the community, schools, and special education centers.

## Participants

The total of 163 participants completed the survey as the researcher requested the participation of the parents of students with disabilities. The participants were parents of students with disabilities and parents of those who are receiving special education services in schools and special education centers in Qatar. Most of the participants were multinational mothers whose mother tongue is Arabic. The group members are active in recognizing many required enhancements to the services provided for individuals with disabilities in the community and especially at schools. For the interviews, three professionals participated. All participants are working as special education teachers in Qatari schools, providing services to students with disabilities during the current academic year when the interviews were conducted.

## Procedures

All survey and interview questions were reviewed by the researchers to meet the needs of this research; accordingly parents were contacted directly through the group and the survey was disseminated accordingly. Most of the sample was contacted through face-to-face or through telephone, digital copies using google forms were also used in

case certain parents weren't open to direct interview. The interviews lasted from 30 to 45 minutes each.

## Analysis

### Parent's perception of collaboration

The parent survey data were exported coded and entered directly as an excel file. Data cleaning, transformations and all statistical analysis were conducted by using SPSS 23. Frequencies were calculated for all the previous domains and accordingly means were organized in ascending, to this group that equality between families and schools had the highest mean followed up with approximately the same average by communication. The least domain that parents showed as perceived as important was mainly trust with an average of 2.8. Table 3 shows all the different domains with means in ascending order

Domain	Mean	Std. Deviation
Equality	3.2561	0.49764
Communication	3.2255	0.60106
Professional Competences	3.112	0.88939
Advocacy	3.0061	0.55622
Commitment	2.8972	0.68647
Respect	2.8374	0.76605
Trust	2.7991	0.73117

**Table 3:** Summary of means of domains pertaining to collaboration according to parents.

To Support the previous results, further interviews were done with a group of parents to express collaboration at an in-depth. The responses to the interview questions were analyzed by conducting descriptive content analysis.

### Communication

The responses to the communication question show that there are some means of communication used by the school and professionals including letters, phone calls, daily follow-up record book, listening carefully, emails, providing clear information, and using understandable language.

A participant said, "We are receiving daily follow up notes, calls, letters, and writing some notes on books and notebooks, also through the social worker in the school, and meetings" another said "SMS and written reports".

Nevertheless, with the existence of communication there was lack of documented evidences about using of social media and the quality of such communication. Many mentioned about other methods of communication i.e. letters, SMS messages and other methods to substitute for any difficulties in communication.

One said, "My accent is understandable to Qatari people, thus there is no problems in communication", another said "As I said, by sending parents letters and calling them".

This response demonstrates the benefits of open communication and building trusting relationships when collaborating with families to

move forward with service delivery. Similar findings have been noted in previous studies, where the importance of engaging in open conversation as well as listening, learning about the family's culture and taking time to build trust and respectful relationships have been identified as key to effective cross-cultural collaboration between parents and schools [19,20].

### Trust

The participant's responses show that they and the schools they working in, are keeping the confidentiality of information of the students and their families and providing them the most appropriate decisions for the students and their parents. That means there is partly evidence of collaboration that professionals and schools are applying.

A participant said, "Confidentiality is the most important thing that I and the school care about". Another said "I gain the parents trust by offering them the best IEP that matches their children needs".

### Respect

The participant's responses show that the professionals and the schools they working in, are treating the students and their parents with dignity and keeping the parents informed about their children's progress.

One said, "I'm a PE teacher. I support students with disabilities, especially in informing the parents about their children once there is any progress". Another said "I respect the parents by providing them valuable information about their children and by accomplishing my tasks perfectly", and another said "The school administration respects the parents and listens carefully to them".

### Advocacy

The professionals and the schools are providing parents with opportunities that match their children and understanding and providing the fundamental needs of the students and their families. That means there is evidence of collaboration that professionals and schools are applying such advocacy practices.

A participant said, "I'm keeping detailed records of my students and I keep trying to support their parents". Another said "the administration is trying to manage the school environment to the students with disabilities (e.g. applying the safety guidelines and toilet accessibility)".

### Commitment

The responses show that schools and professionals are setting appropriate high expectations and goals for the students with disabilities, going beyond tasks, and implementing high quality IEP. Teachers are usually committed to the special education cause especially that most know that the humanitarian aspects is the leading action of most workers in the field, this commitment is usually guided by the quality of relations either with colleagues, the administration and families as well [23-25].

"I keeping trying my best to support students by offering them high quality education", a participant said. Another said "I'm always there, so parents can find me anytime during my working hours". One added "the most important thing, is to develop the best IEP and implement it well", and "providing high quality instruction is my main task".

These responses refer to the professionals and the schools' efforts in providing high quality services as their main commitment.

### Equality

It is seen that equality of condition that involves the equal treatment and empowerment of individuals with disabilities [26]. Results revealed some evidence of collaboration that professionals and schools are applying, since responses show that they are sharing parents the power, treat parents equally, and providing options.

A participant said, "Options for the students with disabilities and their parents are there all the time" and "I can say that the school treat all the parents and children the same way". Another said "parents have the power in everything related to their children, thus we have to ask them their permissions".

The responses to the equality question are providing valuable information about how schools and professionals applying equality.

### Professional competence

Responses showed that schools providing sufficient professional development opportunities to their staff, internal and external

workshops, and collecting information about the impact of the professional development on the provided services.

One participant said, "Yes! There are many internal and external workshops during the academic year", then he added "we should conduct a research about the students' problems and how these problems have been solved ". Another said "the school keeps asking parent about their satisfaction levels through phone call and surveying them". Another added "even all of us are qualified, but there are many professionals step into the school to providing us trainings".

Responses to the professional competence question show schools are aware of that aspect. There are many evidences about school-parent collaboration that are related to all seven principles.

### Collaboration and parents' rights relationship

For the rights as perceived by parents, the accumulated counted average was (mean=2.95, SD=0.898) which counts for an average knowledge of rights provided by educational institutes.

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
School/ institute request consent before placing my child in special education programs	3.76	1.035
School/ institute shows me my child's school records	3.51	1.239
School/ institute acknowledges my role as an important role in all matters relating to my child	3.2	1.09
School/ institute informs and involves me in special meetings to discuss matters pertaining to my child (diagnosis, assessment, individual educational plan, a place of teaching, etc ...)	2.9	1.336
School/ institute involves me in decisions about my child's situation	2.87	1.293
School/ institute tell me my rights and mechanisms of complaint	2.74	1.275
School/ institute allows me to evaluate programs and service effectiveness provided to my child	2.67	1.365
School/ institute informs me about individuals/ organization responsible for my rights and the rights of my child (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Qatar Foundation, Social and health ministry ...)	2.66	1.353
School/ institute provide me with exercises to better help me deal with my child	2.63	1.223
School/ institute offer neutral views in the case of any objections/ conflict	2.63	1.025

**Table 4:** Summary of means for the rights of parents.

The previous Table 4 shows the second part of the survey which is the rights of parents and how they perceive it. Results showed that most of the educational institutes maintain a good level of communication, respect where consent by families has to be provided in order for services to be provided; most parents acknowledged that they are contacted for the consent. The lowest item scored was the lack of information delivered to families in case of conflict or objection, where institutions should provide further information and references to help parents with their decision.

ANOVA was administered to check for any significant differences due to institute type, three types of institutes information was gathered from, the three were private SPED centers, government SPED schools and public integrated schools. Results showed significant differences among the three institutes; public school had the most positive differences among the three, were all seven components of

collaboration were found significant in comparison with the other two institutes the public and private SPED centers.

### Discussion

Combining that all together would provide valuable information about the study sample and findings. Therefore, the study questions will be discussed to provide answer in the light of the results.

### To what extent do parents perceive their rights according to school-parent collaboration?

The study result shows that there are relationships between parents' satisfactions among the seven principles of partnership, were schools and professionals are satisfying many different practices that promote

the school-parent partnership. It was found that the main focus of schools and professionals lays in all the previous principles with a focus on communication and equality in addition to others principles like commitment, and professional competence. As shown, this level of collaboration affects the partnership levels.

As a result, there is cross impact of collaboration practices on making parents more comfortable when they interact with the schools to discuss their children education and related issues. This impact had positive effect on the parents understanding and acknowledgment of their rights and their children right. This is confirmed by the high response between the parents' responses to collaboration questions and rights questions. In addition, the interview results were aligned with the statistical analysis, it showed that the focus were mainly divided between communication and equality, since the most collect schools and professionals collaboration practices evidences. Understanding the parents to their rights is related to the school-parent collaboration level. Communication has been addressed in most research articles as the major factor that reflects proper collaboration, research by Zeidler [20] confirms such result. The other point which was of concern was the second domain that was of great importance for parents, the equality part. Following a review of literature it was not found that other samples have set the same degree of importance to this issue, this can be referred to the nature of families the way that institutes provide services for children with disabilities. The working community sometimes consider as they are the reference of knowledge when it comes to services provided, thus some expectations appear that families do not know anything about their child's disability and accordingly they will be outcast, accordingly schools will have the full control. Currently, most families especially at the information age, we can see that most families have a more advanced knowledge of their child's problem, always reading and searching for proper answers and solutions for problems they face. Thus, families are requesting more rights from the educational institutions, one of those rights are to be treated equally. When equality is achieved both parties can achieve better results with students and better follow will happen in both school and home. More high quality implementation and practices of collaboration will lead parents to perceive their rights more. Finally, the result confirmed the impact of the principles of partnership on the equality, this is aligned the results of some previous results such Turnbull [5] and Sridharan and Simatupang [27].

The current Qatari educational law in the AESN policy dedicated to special education services, section 11 entitles:

"Parents will be expected to communicate effectively with the school, provide relevant information and attend meetings where the educational support needs of their child will be discussed. Schools should ensure that they welcome and invite parents into the school and work closely with them to support their child's learning. The school will inform parents of their rights, share information with parents and support them in helping their child. It is important that schools are supportive of the parents and work to understand their perspective."

Accordingly, families have the right to access all information regarding their child, in addition to consenting families before providing any further services to the child. This was fully manifested through the high response on the first two items of the rights for parents, so families are well oriented that they have this right and it is applied by the different institutes that no action might be taken without informing families of it. This was expected because of the legal ramifications that might occur in case that such information was not explicitly disclosed to the family. On the other extreme it was found

that educational institutions does not provide the appropriate information for the families or how to deal with their children at home, this might be due again to the level of knowledge and participation of families and the degree that they can participate. In conclusion, results are aligned with other studies results that confirm the relationship among partnership principles, like that of Hilado, et al. [3] who found that the administrators who had high flexible definition of parent involvement are more likely to have more positive views of parents and grasp higher levels of involvement as their implementation derived from these understanding. Moreover, Sanchez-Horn [28] found that schools can facilitate parental involvement through their collaboration style, which needs to be addressed later on further research.

### **To what extent do parents perceive their rights according to school-parent collaboration?**

To properly define collaboration and its components, right of parents of children with disabilities has to be addressed, in order to specify the rights and duties. The first provision of IDEA [18] considers parents as the main partner in the service delivery model at the educational institute. Parents are offered a complete coverage of legal rights to participate, evaluate, and authorize all aspects of service delivery for their child. As such, parents should know further into the legal aspects, and should be accordingly offered such help and information from governmental organization represented by educational and social ministries, and in our case schools and centers as educational settings [29-31].

To review such knowledge, results has yielded above average level of knowledge about their rights. It was seen that most schools abide by the legal aspects in related paper work, thus it is expected that most paper documenting the work of the institute and the relation with families is in place and families are well oriented with it. Furthermore, items that addressees either parents participation, or methods of acquiring information about services can all be considered on the average score. This gives a good indicator that parent of children with disabilities have a good level of knowledge of rights, still schools and other educational institutes should provide further feedback about the different organizations providing services for families, either be financial, physical, psychological or social in nature, where every help is highly desirable.

### **Recommendations**

The study provides an overview of the parents' satisfaction levels, how professionals promote the school-parent partnership, and the impact of school-parent collaboration on how parents perceive their rights. Based on the study results, professionals should follow up on all the provided services to ensure high level of the collaboration. School administrators and professionals should be aware of the impact on promoting collaboration and how effective collaboration would support them in providing a higher quality of services. Furthermore, encouraging schools, professionals, and parents to participate in support groups that might enhance the level of collaboration. Home visits and the quality of communication should be considered to implement effective communication. Schools should develop better relation with the community services providers. Finally, using the social networks more widely in communications would facilitate school-parent partnership.

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