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Leadership and Inclusion in Special Education

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of relational leadership practices on fostering meaningful and equitable parent and caregiver engagement in Alberta's special education programs. It explores how school leaders can employ relational leadership to bridge systemic gaps between home, school, and community, ultimately enhancing student outcomes through collaboration, trust, and shared responsibility. Drawing on Uhl-Bien's Relational Leadership Theory, this research investigates how leadership dynamics, such as interdependence, mutual influence, and contextual adaptability, can support inclusive and equity-focused educational practices. Highlighted are barriers to parental engagement, including socioeconomic and cultural challenges. Emphasized is the importance of shifting from a deficit-based view of parent involvement to a strengths-based, relationship-driven approach. By integrating relational leadership principles into school policies, professional development, and systemic support structures, this paper provides actionable recommendations for school leaders to create more inclusive, collaborative, and trust-based special education environments.

Keywords: Special education, relational leadership, inclusion, engagement, involvement, trust, communication, equity, Alberta Education,

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Introduction

Schools, families, and communities must collaborate to ensure the success of all students, particularly those in special education programs. This capping paper explores the role of educational leadership in fostering meaningful and equitable parent and caregiver engagement in Alberta's special education landscape. It examines how school leaders can move beyond traditional models of parental involvement to create authentic partnerships that empower parents as key decision-makers in their children's education. Central to this study is an investigation into how relational leadership principles, rooted in trust, shared responsibility, and contextual adaptability, can bridge systemic gaps between home, school, and community.

This work critically examines the challenges and barriers within special education, including gaps in inclusion, systemic inequities, parental agency, and relational practices between educators and families. Drawing on Uhl-Bien's (2024) Relational Leadership Framework, the research highlights how leadership strategies emphasize collaboration and mutual influence can foster more equitable and inclusive educational environments. By addressing systemic barriers and reimagining the role of parents as engaged partners, relational leadership has the potential to enhance student outcomes and strengthen the school-community relationship.

Purpose

The purpose of this capping project is to critically evaluate and synthesize current literature on inclusion, equity, and parent engagement in special education through a relational leadership lens, emphasizing trust, collaboration, and mutual respect as drivers of effective educational practice. By examining relevant strategies, frameworks, and best practices, this project provides evidence-based recommendations Alberta's educational leaders can use to

enhance professional development, refine practices, and achieve equitable outcomes for all students.

Statement of Positionality

I was raised in a household where the politics and realities of education were regular topics of discussion. My father, as a principal, trustee, and later a superintendent, and my mother, as an educational assistant working primarily with children with special needs, shaped my early understanding of the complexities of schooling, leadership, and inclusion. Through my exposure to various educational environments and the deeper conversations I engaged in from a young age, I developed a foundational perspective on education that continues to inform my professional practice.

I acknowledge my privileged position as a white, able-bodied, English-speaking, cisgendered male of European descent, raised in a middle-class family. This privilege has afforded me societal and institutional advantages that are not equitably accessible to the diverse families and students I serve as an assistant principal in an elementary school. My perspectives on inclusive education are shaped by my administrative role, my background as a classroom teacher in special education programs, and my personal experiences navigating the education system.

With an awareness of my potential biases, I strive to approach my research and practice with humility, actively seeking to listen to and learn from marginalized voices. I recognize that systemic inequities, rooted in socioeconomic status, race, language, and disability, continue to shape educational access and opportunities. Through ongoing reflection, I aim to use my position ethically and responsively, acknowledging both the power and responsibility that come with educational leadership. My goal is to foster equitable relationships with all stakeholders, parents,

caregivers, educators, and students, while remaining critically aware of how my background influences my perspectives, interpretations, and decision-making processes. By explicitly stating my positionality, I seek to engage in transparent, reflexive, and ethical leadership practice throughout this work.

Method

To explore how relational leadership principles, rooted in trust, shared responsibility, and contextual adaptability, can bridge systemic gaps between home, school, and community a synthesis of the literature was conducted. To conduct this review, I utilized educational databases such as ERIC, ProQuest, Education Research Complete (EBSCO), and JSTOR. My literature review included search terms such as parent involvement, parent participation, parent engagement, family involvement, family participation, and family engagement, alongside special education, special needs, disabilities, and leadership. Additional keywords: relational leadership, inclusion, support, equity, partnership, and agency, were integrated to refine the scope of the analysis.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Uhl-Bien (2024) posits a relational leadership theory framework that merges two perspectives, an entity and socio-constructivist perspective. The entity perspective views leadership as embedded within an individual or a hierarchical role and is more traditional in its view of power, authority and decision making. The socio-constructivist perspective is more relational and collaborative and creates shared meaning and goal orientation within social and cultural context. This framework illuminates how our current traditional perspective on leadership, as an entity perspective, can be understood as we look to evolve into a more

relational or socio-constructivist perspective describing more complex and dynamic organizational processes.

This work is described by Uhl-Bien as post-LMX as it asks, “how the relationships of leaders and followers better explain or help direct leadership research” (Uhl-Bien, 2024, p. 159), but in a “more sociological or social-psychology orientation” and looks at the complex entwining nature of social dynamics. The foundation of relational leadership theory describes the distribution of leadership power, set within the context of specific situations and goal orientations, and is fostered by a collaborative process building agency for all parties involved. As Uhl-Bien (2024) described best, “Relational Leadership Theory is the study of both relationships (interpersonal relationships as outcomes of or as contexts for interactions) and relational dynamics (social interactions, social constructions) of leadership” (p. 150).

Although not explicitly stated, Uhl-Bien’s (2024) work alludes to six characteristics that define this framework. Interdependence and mutual influence, collaboration and shared responsibility, building trust, engaging in meaningful dialogue, contextual adaptation and flexibility, and empowering others. These characteristics of relational leadership can be applied to Loreman’s (2007) pillars of inclusion, and the product and process of equity in the context of special education in Alberta. Before discussing how these variables are utilized in the context of current practice, presenting the research and evolution of special education, student placement, inclusion, and equity, may assist in creating a foundation for recommendations.

Special Education

“Special education refers to the education of students with mild, moderate, or severe disabilities and those who are gifted and talented” (Alberta Education, 2004, p. 1). Special education programs were introduced to Canadian Schools in the 1960s (Lupart, 2000). These

programs offered a variety of options for students with exceptional needs across a large spectrum. In the 1980s “decreased funding, limited resources, rising expectations, increased accountability, and calls for equity” (Lupart, 2000, p. 2) created a new call for educational reform. This reform was integral in creating more inclusive and equitable education and was the push for public schools to “assume greater responsibility by creating special classes for children with exceptional needs in regular schools” (Lupart, 2000, p. 4). It was at this time that individualized program and education plans were starting to become more common, and schools were having to address specific needs within their schools.

Creating individualized education programs and plans is foundational to the discussion surrounding student equity in schools. This process allows parents, teachers and administrators to discuss student centered education and more equitable practices in the classroom. Tottle’s (1998) case study examined the process of individualized program plans with results that stated that teachers “valued the IPP as an information document, a tool which provides them with a greater understanding of student’s strengths, needs, and learning styles” (p. 71), but at the same time it “did not increase the effectiveness of their teaching”. The process of creating these documents and engaging all partners in dialogue about the student and their needs seemed to be the most beneficial part of the process.

The evolution of special education has created a conceptual problem regarding student placement and inclusion. The terms inclusion, inclusive education, and inclusive practices are terms that are used interchangeably within research. In the following section I hope to provide more clarity in regard to these terms and the research surrounding them.

Student Placement in Special Education

The placement of students in special education classrooms or in ‘regular stream’ classrooms is an extremely important decision that affects the future of a child’s education. This decision is most commonly made by teachers, administration and parents. In Alberta Education’s (2004) Standards for Special Education it states that regarding placement, school boards must:

- a. ensure that educating students with special education needs in inclusive settings in neighbourhood or local schools shall be the first placement option considered by school boards, in consultation with parents, school staff and, when appropriate, the student
 - b. determine the most enabling placement in a manner consistent with provincial special education policies, in consultation with parents, and based on current assessment data.
- (p. 10)

Students may be identified and placed in special education programs at any point in their educational journey. “A comprehensive, individualized assessment, [and] a specialized assessment completed every two to five years” (Alberta Education, 2012, p. 1) are part of the identification and placement process. It is also noted, although some students may not meet the criteria to be coded, they “may still benefit from special education programming” (p. 1). At the start of 2022/2023 there were over 118,000 students identified with special education codes (Government of Alberta, 2025, Table 3). This accounts for over 15% of students in Alberta schools.

The definition of inclusion seems to vary, leading these standards into subjective territory. The first decision regarding placement is in relation to physical proximity of a school. The next decision is based on a more subjective assessment of “most enabling placement” in accordance with the remaining special education policies. The subjective nature of ‘most

enabling placement’ is where challenges often arise. Multiple parties including parents/caregivers, teachers, administrators, and occasionally students, decide where to place the student, but parents and caregivers have the final say in choosing the best option for their child. As student placement varies and is essentially the decision of parents and caregivers, the education system needs to support students in a variety of settings and contexts.

In the discussion of the physical placement of students, generally speaking there are two routes. The first route is a segregated model where students are placed in separate rooms based on coding labels. The second route is “inclusion” in which students are supported in ‘regular stream’ classrooms. Loreman (2014) describes how “the maintenance of both systems is expensive and inefficient” (p. 55). Canadian school boards are very similar in their curriculum, policies, and approach to education; although, “how boards approach the learning conditions and placements of identified students across the province vary significantly” (Brown et al., 2016, p.112, as cited in Parekh & Brown, 2019). Student placement is tied to the concept of inclusion, which may look different in each school and district. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the process of student placement, we need to understand inclusion in current practices.

Defining Inclusion

The term inclusion has taken on diverse—and at times contradictory—interpretations (Ainscow et al., 2006; Jahnukainen, 2011; Massouti, 2019; Irvine et al., 2010; Lemons et al., 2024). As Massouti (2019) states, “inclusive education continues to be a contested concept with practices that are contextually situated” (p. 165). Similarly, Jahnukainen (2011) notes that, too often, inclusion is treated as a matter of placing students in regular classes without necessarily providing the specialized supports they may require. Florian (2014) further emphasizes that genuine inclusive practice should involve curriculum adaptations tailored to individual needs,

rather than a blanket assumption that placement alone ensures equitable outcomes. Yet, in Alberta Education (2004), inclusion is explicitly defined not simply by where students are seated, but by how instruction and support services are effectively delivered in neighborhood schools (p. 1). For inclusion to function as envisioned by Alberta Education, it must be framed by ongoing, reflective consideration of equity, communication, and context.

Inclusion and Integration.

Inclusion and integration are often used interchangeably, but inclusion implies much more than just the physical placement of individuals in a classroom. Inclusive education practices should focus on all participants within education, not just on special education practices. Ainscow et al. (2006) describes a complex set of values associated with inclusion, but argues “a broad commitment to equity, and other inclusive values, and the sorts of supportive conditions... might lead schools in a more inclusive direction” (p. 166). Ainscow et al. (2006) does not give a clear definition of equity but does go on to explain “the development of inclusive practices, which embody a distinctive set of values, cannot be a merely technical exercise” (p. 170). The creation of inclusive values, ones that permeate more than just the structure of the special education department, is key to developing an equitable environment for all.

Loreman (2007) states inclusive education should have “no segregated classes, and full membership in the regular classroom” (p. 23). This belief focuses on the physical environment more than the values and practices associated with inclusion. Loreman’s (2014) continued work found “international evidence on the outcomes of inclusive education seems to demonstrate that at the very least it is not less effective than segregated forms of education” (p. 56). Florian (2014) created a model to research the pedagogical side of inclusive education called the “inclusive pedagogical approach in action” (p.289). This model addresses analyzing inclusive

teaching practices, apart from student placement. Florian (2014), like Massouti (2019), agreed “the idea [of] inclusion is contextual” and “different forms in different places has contributed to the problem of conceptual muddle” (p. 293). The context seems to be the most important part of this process. Understanding the specific factors that contribute to successful inclusion and equity for each child in school is an important but complex topic to discuss. Communication is necessary as these factors will evolve and change constantly.

Inclusion in Action

Ainscow et al. (2006) discuss the issue of inclusion in six different ways of thought: 1) Inclusion in regards to the categorization of students with ‘special education needs’; 2) Inclusion as a response to disciplinary exclusions; 3) Inclusion as about all groups vulnerable to exclusion; 4) Inclusion as the promotion of the school for all; 5) Inclusion as ‘Education for All’; and 6) Inclusion as a principled approach to education and society. In examining these six ways of thinking Ainscow et al. (2006) concluded inclusion in education involves a commitment to certain broadly defined values and is a process of putting values into action. Leaders need to focus on promoting inclusion as “more than an issue of physical placement” (Irvine et al., 2010, p. 79), it is integral to foster a holistic inclusive environment that looks to support the child as equitably as possible. Instead of looking at inclusion as a set of boxes that need to be checked off and meet local standards, we need to define successful inclusion that involves actions that move a student towards achievement, success, and belonging in their community, while considering the context of their educational profile.

Supporting Inclusion.

Loreman (2007) describes “Seven pillars of support” within inclusive education: Developing positive attitudes, supportive policy and leadership, school and classroom processes

grounded in research-based practice, flexible curriculum and pedagogy, community involvement, meaningful reflection, and necessary training and resources. The first pillar *Developing Positive Attitudes* is integral in the administrative processes as it regards the “hiring of new teachers with positive attitudes towards inclusion” (Loreman, 2007, p. 24). This is necessary to support the change we seek in inclusive education; teachers will implement inclusive education practices and be a central node in communications and relations. The second pillar is *Supportive Policy and Leadership* is focused on the creation of supportive inclusive policies and leadership is a crucial component. Pillar three, *School and Classroom Processes Grounded in Research-Based Practice* continues the work of pillar one and two; concreting the attitudes, policies and leadership decisions in the classroom. Pillar four manages the contextual nature of inclusion and equity as it frames *Flexible Curriculum and Pedagogy* and the importance of differentiating educational pedagogy for each child. Pillar five references the stakeholders in the educational community, appropriately labeled as *Community Involvement*. This pillar emphasizes the importance of creating positive relationships that engage parents, leaders and other stakeholders to support common goals. The sixth pillar, *Meaningful Reflection*, creates flexibility and is a necessary tool in the process as it supports continuous improvement in teaching practices and policy implementation, while supporting self-awareness breeds a continuity and evolution within the context of each situation. This is discussed as a “climate of reflection to analyze and question all aspects of the inclusive experience” (Loreman, 2007, p. 32). The final pillar is *Necessary Training and Resources*. This pillar speaks to the entire structure of teacher training and resources as we redistribute them in a more inclusive based model. Each of these pillars is as important as the rest in regard to research of inclusive practices, most specifically from the perspective of senior administrators and policy makers. It is clear these pillars assist in providing

guidelines that can make a positive difference for students, but as this work is far from black and white, we still need to apply modifications and practices within the context of what is best for each individual child and their unique needs.

Equity and Equality

Clarification of the terms equity and equality is important in this review. Generally speaking “semantic confusion may signal that all identified inequalities are considered inequitable” (Hutmacher, 2001, p. 7), but as he further stated, there is a large body of literature that would state otherwise; in regards to best practices we must understand there is a “normative-ethical issue of the fair attribution/acquisition of resources, advantage or disadvantage on the other” (Hutmacher, 2001, p. 10).

Equity is not simply measured. The literature looks at a vast number of variables and contexts contributing to equity in certain systems and Hutmacher (2001) describes how “there is no generally agreed-upon theory of education systems and educational equality and equity from which a coherent system of indicators could be derived” (p. 20). The literature in equity is complex and vast, but Alcott et al. (2018) describe “five desirable properties for equality of condition measures” (p. 38). These properties are formed from indicators of equality but are applied to an “equality of condition measures, impartiality measures and redistributive or meritocratic measures” (Alcott et al., 2018, p. 38). The five properties discussed are: “meritocracy, minimum standard, impartiality, equality of condition and redistribution” (Alcott et al., 2018, p. 52). The measures are complex and context driven, but they describe how researchers can contribute to the data through an “analytic sequence”. The sequence they discuss is as follows: “Identify the equity dimensions of interest, summarize observable characteristics by equity dimension, analyze overall outcome distributions, analyze outcomes by equity

dimension, and estimate main effects of interest, overall and stratified by equity dimension” (Alcott et al., 2018, pp. 77-78). By using this sequence, leaders can assist in identifying the equitable factors that will assist individuals in the specific context they are held in.

Relational Leadership in Inclusive Education

Inclusive education relies heavily on the role of leadership in fostering a culture of equity, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Loreman (2007) emphasizes the importance of supportive policy and leadership in establishing effective inclusion. School leaders are responsible for not only advocating for inclusive policies but also embedding inclusive practices into the daily operations of a school. Alberta Education (2025) reinforces this by stating one of the key principles of inclusive education is to “understand learners’ strengths and needs - Meaningful data is gathered and shared at all levels of the system - by teachers, families, schools, school authorities and the Ministry - to understand and respond to the strengths and needs of individual learners” (para. 4). This principle underscores the necessity of a leadership approach that fosters collaboration, trust, and shared decision-making in supporting students with diverse needs.

Relational leadership naturally aligns with the demands of inclusive education as it “does not restrict leadership to hierarchical positions or roles” (Uhl-Bien, 2024, p. 133). Instead, it recognizes all stakeholders, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members, must take on leadership roles in supporting student success. This collaborative approach is particularly crucial in the development of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or Individualized Program Plans (IPPs), where input from multiple perspectives strengthens decision-making and ensures students receive the tailored support they need.

Parents, as primary educators, play an integral role in shaping their child(ren)'s educational experience. Schools, acting “in loco parentis” (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2023, p. 27), must work alongside families rather than in isolation. Relational leadership shifts the focus away from traditional top-down authority and toward partnership-driven solutions, ensuring that leadership influence emerges through relationships and interactions rather than rigid structures. This shift, though challenging within hierarchical institutions like schools, is necessary to reframe leadership as an inclusive, dynamic, and participatory process. As Uhl-Bien (2024) articulates, leaders should ask: “How do people work together to define their relationships in a way that generates leadership influence and structuring?” (p. 153).

Irvine et al. (2010) highlight two critical supports principals can leverage to foster inclusive environments: Knowledge of available supports and professional development opportunities (p. 82), which extends beyond material resources to the ability to connect with experts and relevant networks for guidance; and, the necessity of communication and collaboration (p. 85), ensuring that inclusive practices are not imposed but co-constructed through meaningful dialogue among stakeholders.

Relational leadership, therefore, provides a practical framework for enhancing collaboration between parents, teachers, and administrators. By emphasizing shared leadership roles and participatory decision-making, it creates more equitable conditions for inclusion, particularly in the development of IEPs and support structures. However, implementing this model requires overcoming the barriers formed from deeply ingrained authoritative leadership structures that often centralize decision-making power. Breaking these barriers is possible when leaders have the autonomy and resources to support inclusive efforts. Schools with site-based budgets have greater flexibility in allocating resources to inclusion, allowing leaders to directly

influence student outcomes through targeted support and staffing decisions (Irvine et al., 2010). Furthermore, Lambrecht et al. (2020) emphasize that school leaders impact student outcomes indirectly by shaping the systems and supports underpinning inclusive education. When leadership prioritizes inclusion and proactively allocates resources, schools are more likely to achieve their inclusion goals and sustain meaningful, equity-driven educational environments.

Utilizing Relational Leadership in Special Education

Relational Leadership Theory offers a transformative perspective for educational leadership, particularly in special education, by shifting away from traditional hierarchical structures and placing emphasis on the relational processes that enable leadership to emerge from everyday interactions. As Uhl-Bien (2024) explains, “Relational Leadership Theory focuses on the relational processes by which leadership is produced and enabled” (p. 150). This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how leadership is not solely confined to formal roles but is cultivated through ongoing social interactions and shared responsibilities.

Trust and Communication

A central tenet of relational leadership is the focus on the interactions shaping leadership, which challenges the conventional view that leadership is strictly a top-down process. Uhl-Bien (2024) highlights this disruption of the typical structure, noting “structuring is that leadership not only occurs through the managerial role, but also in the ‘disruptions’ of daily interaction patterns that effect change in structure” (p. 156). This idea resonates strongly through parent engagement in special education, where fostering trust and open communication between educators, parents, and students can create a more inclusive, supportive learning environment. In this, leadership is not just about decisions made in formal meetings but also about how communication is fostered on a day-to-day basis. Effective communication helps create a shared understanding, manage

expectations, and build trust, all of which are key to developing strong relationships in the context of special education.

The relational approach requires a shift in mindset, leadership becomes about the quality of interactions, rather than compliance with authority. Uhl-Bien (2024) states “variables that are used should truly capture a relational understanding, and methodologies should provide richer insight into process and context than has been offered by traditional leadership approaches” (p. 157). In special education, this means focusing not only on formal structures and policies but also on how parents and teachers interact on a day-to-day basis to ensure decisions are made collaboratively and inclusively. Trust, built through these everyday interactions, is fundamental for fostering the parent-school partnerships necessary for inclusive educational practices.

Equity and Inclusion: Leadership as a Collaborative Process

Another impactful application of relational leadership theory in special education is its emphasis on equity and inclusion. Uhl-Bien (2024) emphasizes that leadership does not originate from the top managers but emerges from the interactions that constitute the social structure of the organization: “a structuring perspective sees the locus of leadership as not in the top managers and the compliance of followers but, rather, in the interactions that constitute the social structure” (p. 157). This approach supports the idea that in special education, all stakeholders, parents, teachers, students, and administrators, are equally responsible for the leadership of inclusive practices. Leadership should be distributed across these stakeholders, drawing upon the skills and strengths of everyone involved. By making decisions collaboratively and empowering parents to actively participate in the educational process, relational leadership fosters a more equitable environment for students with diverse needs.

Clarke (2018) reinforces this idea by noting relational leadership is context-dependent: “Leadership thus evolves in each specific context and is dependent upon how those involved make sense of the situation” (p. 7). This contextualization is especially significant in special education, where each student’s needs and the school’s resources differ. By recognizing leadership in special education must adapt to context, the school community, the students’ needs, and the family dynamics, relational leadership allows for the flexibility needed to respond to these varying circumstances in a way that is inclusive of all perspectives. Administrator’s support of inclusion may be the single most “significant determining factor in creating effective inclusive settings” (Irvine et al., 2010, p. 72).

Empowering Leadership through Shared Responsibility

Relational leadership theory further supports parental agency by emphasizing shared responsibility and collaborative action. Uhl-Bien (2024) explains leadership is not limited to one person but is instead a distributed process. Clarke (2018) also described this process as “it enables an organisation to draw upon skills and strengths from across the organisation, in the pursuit of leadership activities where knowledge is distributed” (p. 5). In the context of special education, this means parents and educators share the responsibility for planning, decision-making, and supporting the student’s development. This shared leadership fosters a more equitable educational environment by ensuring parents are not merely passive recipients of information but active participants in the process of inclusion.

Through this distributed leadership model, special education programs can better address the diverse needs of students while simultaneously building an environment where parental engagement is seen as a central component of the student’s success. Epstein (2010) highlights the importance of embedding collaboration between school and home, and to look beyond the

signature conferences and activities that occur at a school; a multi-directional communication that utilizes multiple modes to provide more continuity and access for the school-home communication network. Epstein's work also illuminates the importance of shared decision making efforts that look to add or change policies that prioritize parents in short and long term decision making at school, engaging them in whole school and district initiatives over longer periods of time. Hargreaves and Lasky (2004) maintain that distributed leadership, characterized by a shared sense of responsibility, recognition of collective expertise, and a commitment to open collaboration, fosters an emotionally supportive school climate. This emphasis on shared influence and reciprocal support parallels a relational leadership approach, in which leaders actively attend to the social and emotional dimensions of professional relationships. By acknowledging the importance of "emotional geographies" and mutual respect, Hargreaves and Lasky's distributed leadership aligns with relational leadership's focus on building trust and cultivating reciprocal, inclusive partnerships across the entire school community. The relational leadership approach fosters an understanding of inclusion that goes beyond just physical placement in classrooms to include emotional, social, and academic support, which involves parents in meaningful ways.

Applying relational leadership theory to special education enhances equity, trust, communication, and inclusion that are vital for engaging parents and ensuring the success of all students. The relational approach's emphasis on shared leadership, mutual influence, and the disruption of traditional power dynamics help create a more collaborative, inclusive educational environment. Fostering genuine relationships with parents and engaging them as true collaborators can cultivate inclusive decision-making (Francis et al., 2016); viewing families as equal partners, fostering open communication, and empowering parents through shared decision

making correlates with better student outcomes. This approach recognizes the importance of everyday interactions between educators and parents, as these interactions are foundational for building trust, supporting student-centered decision-making, and creating a more inclusive system. By focusing on the relational dynamics shaping the educational experience, relational leadership offers a framework for overcoming barriers and creating a more equitable educational system for students with special needs.

Parent Engagement and Involvement

Cultural and Socioeconomic Barriers

Parental engagement is widely recognized as a key factor in student success, yet it remains unevenly distributed across socioeconomic and cultural lines. Families from historically marginalized communities often encounter systemic barriers hindering their involvement in their children's education. Harris and Robinson (2016) argue "socioeconomic status partially determines the extent to which the message [of important education] becomes a central feature of youths' self-definition" (p. 191). This suggests access to education is not just about enrollment but about the cultural and economic conditions that shape how families perceive and interact with school structures. These barriers are particularly pronounced in special education contexts, where parental engagement is not just beneficial but integral to student success. Many parents of these students feel overwhelmed, disconnected, or under-equipped to advocate for their children effectively. Their engagement is further complicated by institutional power structures that place the onus of participation on parents without offering meaningful support, flexibility, or recognition of their diverse experiences.

Harris and Robinson (2016) highlight how school officials can perpetuate unequal educational experiences inside and outside of classrooms because their actions are informed by

intensely embedded racial and class meanings that reinforce the strength and rigidity of social boundaries (p. 192). This is particularly relevant when examining special education placement and parental agency. Parents with higher socioeconomic status often possess greater access to resources, stronger advocacy skills, and a deeper understanding of educational policies, which enables them to secure better accommodations and support for their children. In contrast, lower-income families, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, often struggle to navigate the complex systems of special education, leaving them at a disadvantage in securing equitable educational opportunities for their children.

Impact on Engagement in Special Education

Many school policies and communication practices unintentionally marginalize certain parent groups, particularly those without the time, resources, or educational background to engage with school systems on an institutional level. Many school policies and communication methods are structurally biased and place the blame directly on families. Limited time, lack of childcare, difficulties with transportation, and work schedules are some of the reasons families appear to be disengaged (Epstein, 2010; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Harris & Robinson, 2016; Kim & Sheridan, 2015; Mapp & Hong, 2010). Schools, policy, and leadership need to recognize and proactively address these structural constraints to demonstrate a willingness to engage with parents and foster a more equitable and genuine engagement with families.

This reflects a larger systemic issue in parent-school relationships where schools may unintentionally perpetuate exclusionary practices instead of fostering true engagement. For example, parent involvement is often structured around formal meetings, school-based activities, and administrative paperwork. However, Pushor and Amendt (2018) argue traditional school policies lack a "curriculum of parents" (p. 203), meaning many schools fail to fully integrate

parents into the learning process. This disconnect can lead to mistrust, frustration, and disengagement, particularly among families who may already feel alienated from the education system.

Bridging the Gap: Leadership and Equity-Based Solutions

Addressing cultural and socioeconomic barriers in special education settings requires school leaders to think beyond the typical approach to parental engagement and instead cultivate equitable partnerships where parent voices actively shape policy and practice (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Mapp & Hong, 2010). Studies demonstrate that families often encounter systemic and cultural constraints, like work demands, limited childcare options, and language differences, that make traditional involvement methods unrealistic (Kim & Sheridan, 2015). A relational leadership approach challenges these barriers by prioritizing trust, shared decision-making, and culturally responsive communication (Clarke, 2018). In this context, leaders view parents as genuine collaborators, recognizing that not all families can attend on-site meetings, but may still support learning at home or maintain ongoing dialogue with teachers (Francis et al., 2016). Moving from a deficit-based to a strengths-based perspective means acknowledging that when schools dismantle structural barriers and negative attitudes, parents are far more likely to engage meaningfully, contributing knowledge about their children's strengths and needs (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Kim & Sheridan, 2015). Leadership grounded in equity and inclusion has been shown to foster more comprehensive collaborative planning in Individual Education Programs (Lambrecht et al., 2022). Through equity-focused solutions, such as flexible communication formats, family-friendly policies, and professional development on relational leadership, school leaders enhance parent empowerment, bolster student supports, and create truly inclusive educational environments (Clarke, 2018; Francis et al., 2016).

Building Parental Agency

Parental agency plays a crucial role in shaping student success, particularly in special education, where consistent advocacy, informed decision-making, and collaboration between families and schools are essential. However, many parents find themselves struggling to navigate the educational system, often hindered by insufficient access to information, unclear policies, and systemic barriers that limit their influence (Harris & Robinson, 2016; Kim & Sheridan, 2015; Mapp & Hong, 2010;). DeMatthews and Means-Parker (2024) highlight the need for schools to create opportunities for parents to learn about special education policies and practices, as well as the programs and supports available to them. Without such initiatives, families may feel inadequate in engaging educators and disconnected from their child's education, limiting their ability to engage effectively in discussions that impact student learning and inclusion.

Goodall and Montgomery (2014) conceptualize parental agency as existing along a continuum of involvement and engagement, which reflects the degree of control and decision-making power parents have within their child's education. At one end of the continuum, interactions are school-dominated, with parents participating in ways that are predetermined by school staff, such as attending scheduled meetings or receiving progress updates. The next stage moves toward shared responsibility, where interactions between home and school become more balanced, with two-way communication emerging as a key component of the engagement process. At the highest level of the continuum, parents take on a fully engaged role, where they actively shape their child's learning, advocate for necessary support, and participate in decision-making processes. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) describe this as the "greatest exercise of parental agency," noting that at this stage, "the choice of action and involvement remains with the parent" (p. 405).

The highest level of engagement is also the most effective, as it leads to stronger student outcomes, increased parental confidence, and more meaningful school-family partnerships. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) emphasize parental agency needs to be approached equitably, ensuring “parents and schools can work together with young people to support the best possible outcomes” (p. 402). However, achieving this level of engagement requires intentional efforts from school leaders to create environments where parents are not just informed but empowered. When both parent and school agency are strong, responsibility for student success is shared, resulting in deeper engagement and greater student internalization of the benefits of education. In special education, this is particularly critical, as parents often serve as key advocates in securing appropriate placements, interventions, and resources. Schools must therefore approach engagement as a partnership rather than a top-down process, ensuring families feel valued as equal contributors to their child's learning experience.

Barriers to Parental Engagement and Relationship-Building

While strong school-family partnerships have been shown to positively impact student success, numerous barriers prevent meaningful engagement, particularly among families from marginalized backgrounds, those facing economic hardship, or those unfamiliar with school systems. Hargreaves and Lasky (2004) describe the most important aspect of the parent-teacher relationship as its “moral and emotional” foundation (p. 104). However, when families feel unheard, dismissed, or discouraged from participating, engagement efforts become surface-level rather than transformative.

Structural barriers such as scheduling conflicts, inaccessible communication methods, and bureaucratic complexities further inhibit engagement. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) highlight how “times of meetings and facilities available” are often “a significant barrier to the

active engagement of some parents” (p. 400). In many cases, parents are expected to attend meetings during working hours, creating difficulties for those without flexible employment, reliable transportation, or childcare support.

Technology and access issues also pose challenges, as many schools now rely heavily on digital communication platforms, which may exclude families without internet access, technological literacy, or language support. Francis et al. (2016) describe how the increasing use of email and online portals as primary means of school communication has widened the engagement gap for parents who lack access to or familiarity with these tools.

Cultural and socioeconomic disparities further compound these barriers, as schools often operate within middle-class norms and assumptions about parental availability, communication styles, and engagement expectations. Harris and Robinson (2016) note school officials can perpetuate unequal educational experiences inside and outside of classrooms because their actions are informed by intensely embedded racial and class meanings that reinforce the strength and rigidity of social boundaries (p. 192). This is particularly evident in special education settings, where parents with greater financial resources, higher levels of education, and stronger advocacy skills often secure better accommodations and services for their children, while others struggle to navigate the complex systems required to access these supports.

Mistrust and differing expectations between educators and families further hinder relationship-building and reduce parental confidence in schools. Hargreaves and Lasky (2004) found teachers’ negative relations with parents often stem from feeling that “their purposes are questioned or thwarted, when their efforts are unappreciated, when their status is challenged or denied, or when relationships with parents are disturbed because parents’ treatment of their children appears to teachers to be morally incorrigible or incomprehensible” (pp. 109-110). At

the same time, parents may feel that their concerns, expertise, and cultural perspectives are not valued, leading them to disengage from school communication altogether. These disconnects reinforce the sociocultural gap between parents and teachers, making collaboration more difficult and undermining the emotional foundation necessary for a strong partnership (Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004, p. 117).

Addressing these barriers requires intentional relationship-building efforts, ongoing dialogue, and a shift toward a more equitable, inclusive model of engagement. Schools must move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and recognize that engagement strategies need to be flexible, culturally responsive, and adapted to the diverse realities of families.

Fostering Authentic Engagement and Building Trust

Creating meaningful engagement requires a shift from school-directed parental involvement to a model of shared agency, where families and educators collaborate in decision-making processes. Edwards and Kutaka (2016) emphasize engagement should not be limited to school-led activities but should instead foster a two-way relationship where both parents and educators contribute to student success. Mann and Gilmore (2023) describe how teachers often see parent engagement as participation in mandatory school processes, rather than as a deeply personal investment in the parent-teacher partnership. This perspective often places greater emphasis on parental compliance with school expectations rather than creating opportunities for sharing responsibilities through collaborative problem-solving, shared goal-setting, and meaningful dialogue.

Communication is a foundational aspect of engagement. Epstein (2010) notes “underlying... involvement” is “trusting and respecting” relationships (p. 94). Establishing trust requires more than transparency, it demands active listening, responsiveness, and a commitment

to removing barriers to participation. Kim and Sheridan (2015) describe once trust is formed, communications can shift toward establishing specific tactics that strengthen continuity between home and school, reinforcing educational expectations and experiences. By reframing parental engagement as a relational, equity-driven process, schools can move toward sustained, trust-based partnerships that empower families to take an active role in their child's learning (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Kim & Sheridan, 2015). This shift requires intentional efforts from school leaders to create welcoming spaces for dialogue, ensure that communication is truly reciprocal, and provide parents with meaningful avenues for shared decision-making (Francis et al., 2016; Mapp & Hong, 2010). When trust, respect, and shared responsibility define parent-school relationships, engagement transcends mere involvement and becomes a transformative force, one that strengthens student learning, fosters inclusive practices, and ensures that all families, regardless of socioeconomic status or background, have the opportunity to shape their child's educational experience (Clarke, 2018; Lambrecht et al., 2022).

Discussion

It becomes evident that parent engagement in special education is not simply an addition to student programming; rather, it is fundamental to student success. Parents often face a constellation of cultural, socioeconomic, and systemic barriers that can deter them from becoming fully involved, yet research clearly shows the positive impact of sustained family engagement on academic outcomes. The historical data of unequal access to resources and support persists, reinforcing gaps that disproportionately affect families with fewer economic means or less familiarity with school systems. Within special education contexts, these challenges can be even more pronounced, as parents may struggle to navigate complex individualized programs, education jargon, or procedural issues. By intentionally recognizing

these constraints, schools can shift away from a deficit-based perspective to one that values parents' experiences, seeing them as capable co-collaborators who have integral knowledge of their children's unique strengths and needs.

Critical to this process is the cultivation of trust and reciprocity. As Goodall and Montgomery suggest, parent engagement becomes far more holistic and beneficial to students, when it moves beyond superficial, school-driven checklists. Instead, parents should be empowered as active decision-makers, bringing cultural, linguistic, and experiential resources that teachers and administrators can build upon to enrich classroom learning. In line with Kim and Sheridan's findings, building true partnerships requires repeated, transparent communication and a willingness to adapt traditional modes of school involvement. This may involve rethinking meeting times, offering multiple communication channels, and acknowledging the emotional and practical complexities parents encounter. School leaders can further anchor these efforts by demonstrating that they truly listen to parental concerns and respond with flexible solutions that meet their needs. Such responsiveness not only honors the diverse realities of families but also creates the foundation of trust, leading to deeper, more sustained engagement.

Leadership is the keystone that unites equity-driven policy with meaningful parental participation. Embedding relational leadership principles throughout a school's culture ensures that the pursuit of equity is not merely symbolic. When school administrators adopt a strengths-based lens that sees families as partners in learning, they dismantle the barriers that have distanced families from marginalized backgrounds. This includes shaping professional development for teachers, equipping them with interpersonal skills to conduct empathetic dialogues and align school policies and protocols with family-friendly practices. In turn, parents gain the confidence to exercise agency, share their knowledge, and advocate for appropriate

supports, which is especially critical in the context of special education, where individualized services must be carefully calibrated to each student's needs.

This synthesis highlights that genuine parent involvement in special education is not about adding another task to already overburdened families or teaching staff. It is a reframing of roles and relationships, grounded in empathy and mutual respect, where all parties work toward the shared goal of advancing student growth and success. By prioritizing equity in leadership strategies, schools can celebrate and leverage the assets parents bring. This fosters a cycle of trust, collaboration, and continuous improvement; one in which every parent, regardless of socioeconomic status or cultural background, feels that their voice shapes their child's educational journey.

Recommendations

Addressing the challenges in special education requires a multi-faceted approach that prioritizes professional development, relational leadership, parent engagement, and systemic changes to foster a continuity of inclusion and support throughout a student's educational journey. These recommendations build research-driven strategies to enhance inclusive practices, strengthen communication, and empower educators and families.

Ongoing professional learning is critical for educators and administrators to effectively support inclusive education and relational leadership. DeMatthews and Means-Parker (2024) emphasize the need for structured and continuous professional development that is responsive to the needs of both educators and students. Schools should survey and observe teachers and staff to gain insight into their knowledge, expertise, and areas for growth in relation to inclusive education and parent engagement. Developing professional development plans that prioritize key areas for training, with input from teachers, staff, and school improvement teams, ensures these

efforts align with real needs. Providing support for teachers in creating and implementing IEPs and IPPs for students, creating equitable spaces and time for the stakeholders in these plans to collaborate, and managing resources that can assist teachers, parents, and students in this process would foster relational practices that could increase the success within these plans. Additionally, monitoring and evaluating professional development initiatives ensure they foster meaningful learning and address ongoing challenges.

The educational leadership faculty can strengthen preparation programs by ensuring universities focus on the broader understanding of inclusive schools while school districts provide training in the procedures and processes relevant to inclusive education implementation (Melloy, Cieminski & Sundeen, 2022, p. 376). Developing this alignment will create more cohesive professional learning opportunities that prepare school leaders to support diverse student needs effectively.

Strengthening parent engagement requires moving beyond one-time events and compliance-based interactions to developing lasting, trust-based partnerships. Schools can establish parent support groups that allow families to share experiences, express concerns, and engage in mutual problem-solving (DeMatthews & Means-Parker, 2024, p. 93). Reducing technological barriers by prioritizing in-person collaboration opportunities ensures all families have access to communication tools, fostering more meaningful engagement. Creating welcoming spaces for parent-teacher discussions recognizes the importance of environment and setting in fostering open, honest conversations (Mann et al., 2023, p. 112). Encouraging structured but flexible interactions allow teachers and administrators to engage with parents in both formal meetings and informal check-ins, ensuring dialogue remains continuous and supportive.

Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) describe relational leadership as recognizing the intersubjective nature of life, the inherently polyphonic and heteroglossic nature of relationships, and the need to engage in relational dialogue. Schools must approach parent engagement with this relational mindset, ensuring parents feel valued, included, and heard in their children's educational experiences.

The size and structure of a school community influence the effectiveness of parent engagement. Teachers form relationships with parents over a single school year, whereas administrators are responsible for maintaining continuity throughout a student's entire educational experience. To ensure consistency, implementing structured transition processes allows information, relationships, and best practices to carry over from year to year. Incorporating parent engagement strategies into school-wide policies ensures collaboration efforts persist beyond individual teachers. Using relational leadership strategies encourages shared responsibility in fostering long-term engagement and trust. Additionally, using Boghossian and Lindsay's (2019) strategies from *How to Have Impossible Conversations*, such as calibrated questions, building golden bridges, and understanding moral epistemologies, can help facilitate more productive conversations with parents, especially in challenging or high-stakes situations. Implementing these conversational techniques will assist teachers and administrators in navigating difficult discussions and strengthening relational trust.

Conclusion

The role of leadership in inclusive education is not solely about policies and procedures, it is about relationships, trust, and the shared commitment to student success. Schools must move beyond traditional, hierarchical leadership structures and embrace relational, equity-based models that center collaboration between educators, parents, and students. This shift requires

rethinking how professional development, parent engagement, and inclusive practices are structured within the school system.

By prioritizing professional learning that builds capacity for relational leadership, educators can develop the skills necessary to navigate complex parent-school relationships and foster inclusive environments. Strengthening parent engagement through structured support groups, improved communication methods, and continuity of relationships ensures that families feel empowered as active partners in their child's education. Implementing sustainable engagement practices that transcend individual classroom interactions and persist across a student's educational journey will create stronger, more inclusive school communities. Inclusion is not a static goal, it is an ongoing process that requires adaptability, intentionality, and shared leadership. By embedding relational leadership principles into professional development, school culture, and parent engagement, educators and administrators can create an education system where all students, regardless of ability or background, have the support and opportunities necessary to thrive.

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