



KAPET

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Ansvarig utgivare: Martin Grimberg Löfgren

Redaktör: Ann-Britt Enochsson (e-post: ann-britt.enochsson@kau.se)

Redaktionssekreterare: Anna Nissen (e-post: anna.nissen@kau.se)

Adress: Karlstads Pedagogiska Tidskrift, Institutionen för pedagogiska studier, Karlstads universitet, Universitetsgatan 2, 651 88 Karlstad.

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Two different stories? Parents' and teachers' views on children's special support in school

Abstract

Home-school collaboration supports students' achievements, learning, and development, according to prior research. This article aims to explore parents' and teachers' views on children's special education needs and special support, focusing on the degree of agreement between the two parties. It also aims to explore the extent to which parents' views on special support for their children match their experiences of contact with teachers. The present study is based on questionnaires to teachers and parents of 476 children, aged 8-10 years, who were identified as needing extra adaptations or special support. The results show that teachers consider about twice as many students to be in need of special support than parents do, and that both teachers and parents consider more boys than girls to be in need of special support. There is also a correlation between parents' satisfaction with their child's support and their level of satisfaction with communication with the child's teacher. Finally, good contact between teachers and parents is associated with a consensus about the children's need for support.

Keywords

Special needs, special support, parent-teacher communication

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Introduction

Parent involvement in school is generally regarded as an important element of effective education, (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Cooperation¹ between school and home supports the student's achievements, learning and development (Sandberg & Ottosson, 2010; Tveit, 2014). According to the Swedish curriculum (Lgr 22), schools are obliged to continuously collaborate and communicate with parents on students' situation in school, and on their wellbeing and progress, while at the same time respecting students' integrity. Home and school are the two main arenas for upbringing, fostering, and educating a child, and children constantly move back and forth between the arenas. A major difference between these two arenas may be described in terms of different interests, where teachers' interests are universal while parents' are particular (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). Teachers are responsible for all children, while parents are likely to see to the best

¹ In this article, I use "collaboration" when referring to teachers and parents working together towards a shared goal concerning a student's schooling. Other scholars, cited in the text, use the term "cooperation" when discussing teachers and parents working together.

interest of their child, which may cause tensions in the relation between parents and teachers. Due to issues of distance between teachers and parents, frequent contact is no guarantee for solid mutual relations (Hargreaves, 2001). Hargreaves identifies sociocultural, moral, professional, physical and political issues of distance, which lead to divergent views and values between parents and teachers in relation to education. According to Hargreaves, this requires that teachers redefine teacher-parent relationships as a core rather than peripheral part of their work.

Inclusive education for children in need of special support particularly requires partnerships between educators, parents, other professionals, and the community as a whole (Connor & Cavendish, 2018; Epstein, 2010; Lynch & Irvine, 2009). Although home-school collaborations are important for inclusive education, research has identified problems experienced by parents to children with special education needs (Reupert et al., 2015). Discrepant views regarding the child's needs are the main subjects of conflict between teachers and parents within the area of special education (Tveit, 2014), where challenges may be particularly difficult to handle.

An essential prerequisite for collaboration between parents and teachers is that there is a degree of consensus between the two parties concerning opinions about the child's learning, development, needs and wellbeing, but also mutual expectations on communication and collaboration. Consensus in these matters supports continuity for the child. In this article, the aim is to study parents'² and teachers' views concerning children's special education needs and special support, emphasising the degree of consensus between the two parties. Further, the aim is to investigate relationship between parents' appraisal of children's special support and their experiences of teacher contact. The following questions are addressed:

- How do parents and teachers assess students' need for support in school?
- How do parents and teachers evaluate students' given support in school?
- Are there differences in parents' and teachers' assessments and evaluation of students' need for support related to students' gender?
- To what degree is there consensus between parents' and teachers' assessments and evaluation?
- To what degree do parents' satisfaction with given support align with their satisfaction concerning their contact with the children's teacher?

Special support in the Swedish school system

According to The Swedish Education Act (SFS:2010:800), all students are entitled to guidance and stimulation to support their learning and personal development, based on

² In this article, a parent refers to a biological or adoptive parent or another guardian who have custody of a child, and who thereby has parental responsibility of the child.

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their specific conditions. In addition, children have rights to receive support in order to achieve goals set in the curriculum. According to the act, there are two different levels of special needs education: *extra adaptations* and *special support*. Extra adaptations refer to minor efforts, which in most cases are possible for teachers and other staff in school to arrange within mainstream education. Such adaptations might include helping the child to plan and structure his or her studies, making specific schedules, providing additional training in reading or mathematics, or giving access to digital aids. Extra adaptations do not require formal decisions, but should be documented and evaluated. If a student is at risk of not achieving goals, despite extra adaptations, he or she may need special support. Special support is provided for a longer period of time and is more extensive than extra adaptations. Special support calls for an investigation and a formal decision by the principal. Furthermore, an action programme is required with information on the child's specific needs, planned measurements and interventions, and information on evaluation. Examples of special support are special teaching groups and students' assistants who follows a student throughout most of the school day.

In this article, no distinction is made between the two levels, and the use of 'special support' will include both levels. The reason for this is that in the survey to parents where data was collected, no difference was made between the two levels. For formal reasons, aiming at reducing administration and at speeding up processes in providing support to children, the distinction between extra adaptations and special support is regulated in The Swedish Education Act (SFS:2010:800). In many cases, parents will not be familiar with the Act, its definitions and distinctions; consequently, it would not make sense to discriminate one kind of adaptation from the other in the survey.

Parental involvement in previous research

Benefits and barriers in teacher-parent collaboration

Home and school are the two most influential contexts for young children's learning and development (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). In their study, Galindo and Sheldon examined school and family connections and their relationships to students' achievement. Their findings confirmed that family involvement is important for students' achievement. In its turn, family involvement is to a large extent a result of schools' efforts to engage parents in their child's schooling and education, the researchers argue. Partnership between home and education requires a high level of cooperation, and 'implies an equal relationship between parents and teaching professionals in all aspects of education', according to Visković and Višnjić Jevtić (2017, p. 1569). Competence for cooperating with parents should, according to the researchers, therefore be recognized as a central element in teacher's professionalism.

Hakyemez-Paul et al. (2018) acknowledge the value of collaboration between parents and teachers to provide opportunities for the parties to learn from each other.

Nonetheless, on occasion ‘educational institutions and families fail to collaborate’ (p. 260), and the gap between ambitions and practice tend to cause poor quality in these relations. The authors conclude that, although teachers in many cases are expected to cooperate with parents, teacher-parent relationships might be a challenge for both parties. In a case study by Van Laere et al. (2018), parents to underprivileged children positioned themselves as subordinated in relations to educators. The discourse on parental involvement is, according to these researchers, characterized by a ‘democratic deficit’ in which parents are rarely involved in determining the goals of parental involvement. Parents in this study were eager to know about their children’s experiences. However, they sometimes gave evidence of powerlessness. Hedlin (2019) studied Swedish preschool teachers’ views of their interaction with the children’s parents. The results showed that the staff supported collaboration and that they prevented conflicts by welcoming parents’ opinions. The teachers stressed their efforts to meet expectations and demands from parents regarding their children. Yet, they also met expectations and demands from parents regarding the whole group of children, and opinions about how the teachers should conduct their tasks. Since various policy documents encourage parental involvement, the preschool teachers considered the increased demands from parents reasonable.

Although parental involvement is generally regarded as an important element of effective education, there seems to be a gap between rhetoric and reality (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Extensive research reports on the value of cooperation for all parties: educators, parents and children. Hornby and Lafaele point to a substantial collection of theoretical models and practical guides that aim at developing parental involvement in school. Yet, reality shows a different picture. In order to clarify and elaborate on the barriers of parental involvement, the researchers have developed a model addressing four areas of factors acting as barriers. The four areas are individual parent and family barriers (current life contexts, parents’, perceptions of class, ethnicity, and gender); child factors (age, learning difficulties, and disabilities); parent–teacher factors (differing agendas, attitudes and language) and societal factors (historical, demographic, political, and economic issues). The model may elucidate why there is a gap between rhetoric and reality, and thus contribute to further development of the practice of parental involvement in education, the authors argue. Sandberg and Ottosson (2010) concluded that the factors that, according to parents and teachers, made cooperation more difficult were lack of time, attitudes, language, and cultural differences. All three groups (parents, teachers, and other professionals) gave evidence that consensus between the parties was important for cooperation. Another study about barriers preventing parental involvement was performed by Al-Dababneh (2018), who found that an important barrier was the lack of parental awareness of the importance of their own role in their child’s education programme.

Parental cooperation in special needs education

Sandberg and Ottosson (2010) studied parents', preschool teachers', and other professionals' experiences of cooperation regarding children in need of special support. Their empirical material was organised into four categories: consensus, communication, support, and the exchange of knowledge. Communication was described as a prerequisite for cooperation according to parents and preschool teachers. Parents and teachers of students with special educational needs were interviewed by Tveit (2014). The aim was to study deliberative principles in teachers' and parents' dialogues. Results gave evidence that deliberative principles are vital in parents' and teachers' communication, but that school regulations do not promote the parent–teacher meeting as a democratic arena. Furthermore, the participants in the study stressed the importance of good relations and informal in parent–teacher cooperation. Jigyel et al. (2018) studied communication and collaboration between parents of children with special education needs and their teachers. In the study, 26 parents (13 fathers and 13 mothers) were interviewed. The results showed that parental involvement in school was minimal. None of the fathers and only a few of the mothers reported consistent communication and collaboration with school. Almost all parents reported that they had not received any formal feedback about their children from teachers. Occasionally informal feedback was given to parents, generally concerning behaviour problems or learning difficulties. Jigyel et al. concluded that schools should empower parents and find strategies to encourage parents' involvement for a positive collaborative relationship.

There are many benefits associated with partnership working with children who have special education needs. Yet, in practice, it is frequently proven difficult (Connor & Cavendish, 2018; Pinkus, 2005). Parents often report that liaising with professionals about their children during special education needs assessments is stressful and alienating. Teachers, on the other hand, often report difficulties in working collaboratively with parents. In Pinkus' study, parents' experiences were collected over a period of two years through in-depth interviews and observations of school meetings. Analyses revealed that there was little understanding of how the partnerships should strategically function in the special education context. In particular, four obstacles were identified: coming to consensus about the purpose of the partnership, reaching clarity as to who was in the partnership and why, enabling equal power distribution between the partners, and implementing transparency and accountability mechanisms for monitoring the partnership.

Conclusions of previous research

In sum, prior research supports the value of parental involvement in school, which is motivated by democratic aspects and parents' rights, but first and foremost for the benefit of children's learning, development, and wellbeing. However, practice shows obstacles on all levels, including unequal power relations, communication deficits, and

conflicting interest. This article aims to contribute knowledge to the field on parents' and teachers views on children's special education needs and special support, emphasising the degree of consensus and the correspondence between parents' appraisal of children's special support, and their experiences of teacher contact and communication.

Method and material

The data in this study has been generated within the project 'Social and Physical Development, Interventions and Adaptation', SOFIA. SOFIA is a prospective longitudinal study of approximately 2000 children, starting at age 3-5. The project started in 2010, and its overarching aim is to understand norm breaking behaviour, its developmental trajectories, and the risk and protective factors of the various trajectories. Furthermore, SOFIA aims to acquire knowledge on children's development in order to improve efforts in professional practices working with children. Many other aspects of human development are also studied. The study is carried out in a mid-sized Swedish community (approx. 90 000 inhabitants) on about 140 classes at some 25 schools.

Up until 2018, questionnaires were answered by parents, teachers, and principals at four occasions ('waves') in years 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2014. In the fifth and sixth waves in 2018 and 2021, students themselves for the first time answered questionnaires, along with parents, teachers and principals. Active consent for participation was solicited from parents of 2,121 children (83.4% of the initial target population). Both internationally well-validated scales/instruments and questions developed specifically for the SOFIA-study were included. In terms of data quality, the SOFIA-study has been successful regarding attrition. Across all six waves, the response rate was over 90% among preschool/school staff, approximately 70-80% of caregivers, and at waves five and six over 70% of the children in the still eligible sample participated.

The present study is cross-sectional and based on data from the fourth wave of the SOFIA-study, with questionnaires on children's health and development concerning 2,121 preschool children, born 2005-2007. The questionnaires were answered by preschool teachers and parents in 2015, when the children were 8-10 years old. Teachers carried out questionnaires on 1829 (86.2%) children and parents carried out questionnaires on 1654 (78%) children. The focus of the present study is on teachers' and parents' responses regarding children who, by either parents or teachers, were assessed to be in need of extra adaptations or special support, a total of 476 children. Questions of interest concerned assessments of the child's/students' need for support, quality of support provided, but also questions about communication and collaboration between teachers and parents.

All of the questions in the survey had closed response alternatives, some of them with open response alternatives. For some of the questions a Likert scale were used. The

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questions with graded responses were sometimes dichotomised in order to present data in a more accessible mode. Analyses were made in three steps. Initially, differing aspects of parents' and teachers' assessments of children's needs for special support in school were examined. In a second step, parents' and teachers' evaluation of given support to children were analysed, with a particular interest in differences between the two parties. In the presentation of these results, descriptive statistics are used. The third step of the analysis concerned collaboration and communication between parents and teachers with a particular focus on how communication between the parties affected parents' satisfaction regarding their children's special support. For that purpose, a nonparametric test of correlation was performed.

Findings

Parents' and teachers' assessments of children's needs for special support

Questions were asked to both parents and teachers about the child's/student's need for special support in school. Teachers reported that 431 students, or 21.3 per cent of the students, needed special support, while the corresponding figure was 241 children, representing 11.3 per cent of parents' reports of their children needing special support (see Table 1).

Table 1

Parents' and teachers' assessment about children's/ students' need for support

Is your child in need of special support?			Is the student in need of special support?		
	Frequency	Per cent		Frequency	Per cent
No	1387	65.3	No	1393	65.6
Yes, the student has special support	206	9.7	Yes, the child has special support	416	19.6
Yes, but the student does not have special support	35	1.6	Yes, but the child does not have special support	15	0.7
Missing	495	23.3	Missing	299	14.1
Total	2123	100.0	Total	2123	100.0

It is important to pay attention to the large number of missing values from both parents ($N=495$) and teachers ($N=299$). Divided in groups by gender, 16.6 per cent of boys and 6.9 per cent of girls were reported by teachers to be in need of support, while parents reported 11 per cent of boys and 3.7 per cent of girls to be in need of support. In 157 cases, teachers reported that individual children were in need of support, while the parent

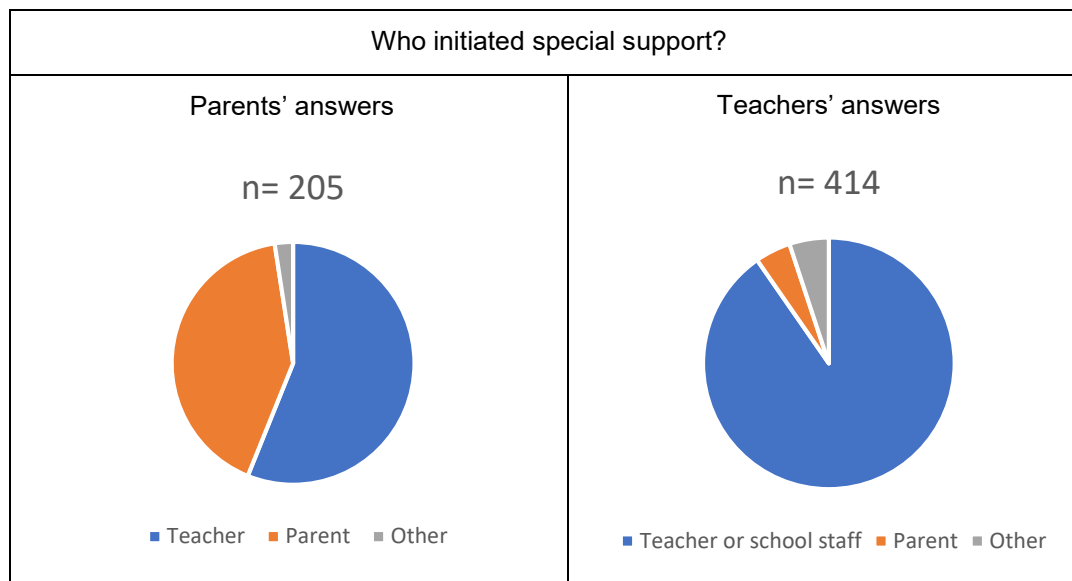
reported that the child did not need special support in school. In 45 cases, the situation was opposite: Parents reported their child's need for support while the teacher did not. Again, when comparing the differences between teachers' and parents' reports, one should bear in mind the number of missing values. Nevertheless, there seems to be a considerable difference between how parents and teachers assessed children's need for support in school. Analysed on a gender basis, the difference between parents' and teachers' reports were larger concerning girls. Parents and teacher answered 'yes' both to the question about the child's/students' need for support, and to the question about the child receiving support in 53.6 per cent of the cases regarding boys, and in 38.5 per cent regarding girls. Hence, the discrepancy between teachers' and parents' reports on this matter was larger concerning girls.

Moreover, 35 parents (14.5%) who claimed that their children needed support reported that the child did not receive support, whereas teachers estimated that less than 15 students (3.4 %) lacked the special support they needed. Teachers' and parents' answers to questions about reasons for children NOT receiving the support they needed were to a large extent similar, for example ongoing investigations, insufficient resources etc. Yet, parents to a higher degree claimed inadequacy regarding school staffs' understanding and/or competence. One single teacher explained the absence of special support with insufficient competence among the staff. Regarding the group of parents who claimed that their children needed support and also received the support needed, there was a strong similarity between how parents and teachers assessed the given support appropriate for the child's needs. Almost 80 per cent of both parents (79.5 %) and teachers (78.5 %) considered the given support adequate (completely, or to large extent), while less than two per cent in both groups reported inadequate support. On the question about who initiated the question about the child's need for special support, the two groups had quite different opinions (see Figure 1): According to teachers' answers, the teacher, or other staff at the school, took actions to initiate special support for a student. Parents, on the other hand, reported they took the initiative for their child to receive special support. It should be emphasized, though, that parents' answers related to 205 children, and teachers' to more than twice as many, 414 children. However, teachers reported that parents initiated special support in 19 cases, while parents reported that they initiated special support for their child in 85 cases. Thus, there seem to be some similarities, but also some major differences in how parents and teachers assess and evaluate children's need for special support in school.

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Figure 1

Frequencies of parents' and teachers' reports about who it was initiating special support

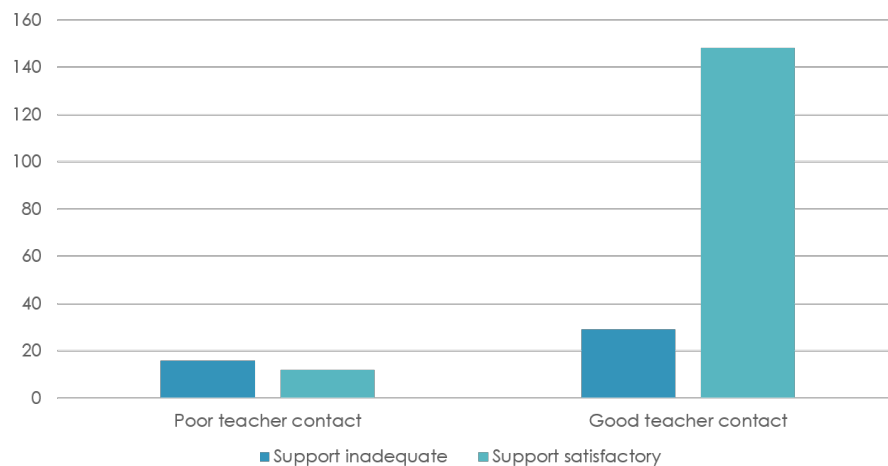


Communication and satisfaction with given support

In order to analyse parents' satisfaction with the given support, an index consisting of five variables was created. These variables concerned to what degree parents evaluated the support to be sufficient, appropriate for the child's needs, and effective in supporting the child's progress, and to what extent parents experienced support from school staff and participated in decisions about their child's support. The reliability of the created index ('parents satisfaction') alpha coefficient was .875, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency. Parents' satisfaction with the given support was correlated with parents' satisfaction with contact with their child's teacher. There was a significant positive correlation between reported satisfaction with the given support to the child's and parents' satisfaction with contact with the teacher ($r_{ho} = 0.443$, $N=196$, $p = 0.0005$). Another way of illustrating the strong relation between parents' satisfaction with given support and satisfaction with teacher contact is illustrated in Figure 2. Twenty-six parents reported insufficient contact with teachers, while 170 parents reported satisfactory, or very satisfactory, contact with teachers. As showed in Figure 2, a large majority of the group of parents who reported good teacher contact were also satisfied with their child's support in school. Hence, there was a strong association between parent and teacher contact, and parents' satisfaction with given special support to their children. Finally, when comparing the group of parents who reported good teacher contact to the group who reported poor teacher contact, there was a difference in consensus between parents' and teachers' opinions about the child's need of support. In 91.7 per cent of the cases in the 'good-contact' group ($N = 156$), parents and teachers agreed on children's need for support, but in the 'poor contact' group of parents, there was consensus between parents and teacher in 71.0 per cent of all cases ($N = 31$).

Figure 2

Parents' satisfaction with child's support, related to parents' satisfaction with teacher contact, in frequencies



As mentioned previously, in this article no distinction was made between the two levels of support defined in The Education Act (2010:800). The reason for this is that parents may not be familiar with the distinctions in the Act. In the analysis, however, it was possible to compare parents to children receiving extra adaptations with parents to children with special support by selecting cases of children with action programmes. The analysis showed no differences between the groups of parents, neither regarding satisfaction with support, nor regarding satisfaction with teacher contact.

Summary of results

Conclusions drawn from the analysis of the results may be summarised as:

- Teacher estimate that about twice as many students are in need of special support in school than parents do
- Both teachers and parents assess more boys than girls to be in need of special support in school. Teacher estimate twice as many boys compared to girls, and parents almost three times as many boys as girls, to be in need of special support.
- In their reports, teachers and parents agree about a student's/child's need for special support, to a higher degree about boys than they do about girls.
- The given support is evaluated to be appropriate for the child's needs in approximately 80 per cent of all cases by both parents and teachers.
- Teachers report that they, or other staff at school, initiated a student's special support in 90 per cent of the cases, while 40 per cent of the parents estimated that they as parents were the initiators.
- There is a strong correspondence between how satisfied parents are with the support their child receive and to what degree they are satisfied with communication and contact with the child's teacher.

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- Finally, good contact with teachers corresponds with consensus regarding the assessment of children's need for support.

Discussion

This study confirms findings from previous research on the importance of communication and collaboration between teachers and parents of students in general (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2017) and in particular concerning children in need of special support (Sandberg & Ottosson, 2010; Tveit, 2014). This study also concludes that communication and collaboration between the two parties is strongly associated with parents' satisfaction with the special support provided for their child. In addition, teachers and parents are more likely to agree on the student's/child's support needs if the communication between the parties is considered good by the parents. Since no conclusions can be drawn about cause and effect, there could, however, also be a reverse situation, implying that poor communication may depend on different views about the student's/child's support needs.

Previous research has established that power relations and differing agendas between teachers and parents are factors that on occasion work as barriers for collaboration and communication (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Pinkus; 2007; Van Laere et al., 2018). Van Leare found that parents to unprivileged children positioned themselves as subordinate to educators, often masked by the notion of 'partnership'. Unequal power relations in Pinkus' (2007) research were related to the physical environment in which meetings between teachers and parents took place, but also to the way teachers communicated with parents, verbally and in writing. Either parents in Pinkus' research wanted more information about their child's progress and the procedures related to the assessment of special educational needs, or indicated that the information they received was overwhelming and difficult to understand.

Parents often report that contact with professionals in relation to their child's special educational needs assessment is stressful and alienating. In turn, teachers often report difficulties in working with parents (Connor & Cavendish, 2018). From the teachers' perspective, teachers in Hedlin's (2019) study supported collaboration with parents and welcomed their views. However, they tried to meet parents' expectations and demands in relation to the whole group of children, rather than for individual children.

In sum, various obstacles and barriers seem to hinder communication and collaboration between teachers and parents on issues related to students'/children's right to special support in school. This study highlights some important arguments on this matter. The findings of this study show that good communication leads to parents and teachers sharing the same view on the child's/student's need for support, and further promotes parents' satisfaction with the special support offered to their child at school. Thus, there

seems to be much to be gained for teachers and schools if they find strategies to promote parental engagement in positive collaborations, as suggested by Jigyel et al. (2018). The lack of explanatory information about why there is a difference between parents' and teachers' estimations of children's special education needs is a limitation in the present study. Among the four areas of factors acting as barriers proposed by Hornby and Lafaele (2011), further research on societal factors as barriers seems to be of particular interest. For example, to what extent do demographic, political, and economic aspects influence collaboration and communication between teachers and parents? In addition, the impact of families' parents' and children's class, ethnicity, and gender on collaboration and communication is a plausible gap that should be explored in future research.

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