

# Exploring the Collaboration between Parents of Children with Learning Difficulties and Teachers in Inclusive Education.

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Received: 01 March 2023; Revised: 11 March 2023; Accepted: 16 March 2023; Published: 18 April 2023

## ABSTRACT

Collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers is a fundamental principle to bring inclusive education into practice. Parents and teachers are the main stakeholders with whom children with learning difficulties interact on a daily basis. This research was conducted to explore the existing collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers in inclusive education. It is a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis is used to construct themes from the collected data. The study found that informal meetings were more preferable than formal meetings. There are three types of collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers: direct collaboration, indirect collaboration, and passive collaboration. Despite the importance of collaboration between parents and teachers, the decision to keep children with learning difficulties in mainstream classes still depends on their eligibility to be included.

**Keywords:** Collaboration, parents of children with learning difficulties, teachers, inclusive education, mainstream class

## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN MALAYSIAN PRACTICE

Inclusive education has been promoted since 1948 by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Save the Children, 2016). In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education (2013) conceptualized inclusive education as a program where children with special educational needs (SENs)<sup>[1]</sup> attend the same classes as typical children in public mainstream schools. Mastropieri and Scruggs (2004) mentioned that “most children with mild disabilities, including those with learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, speech and language disabilities, and serious mental disabilities are currently served in general education classroom,” (p. 16). The term “children with learning difficulties”<sup>[2]</sup> is used in the education policy by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (Zalizan & Manisah, 2014). This paper is also using the term “learning difficulties” instead of “disabilities” connoted that the performed difficulties by individuals is social constructed, but not the individuals itself (Whittaker & Kenworthy, 2002).

The Malaysian Education Act(1998) introduced inclusive education and the requirement for schools to provide education for children with learning difficulties (Zalizan & Manisah, 2014). The Ministry of Education has published the Inclusive Education Programme Guideline Bulletin as a reference for mainstream schools to implement inclusive education (Special Education Division, 2013; 2018). However, schools are not obligated to follow the guideline for implementing inclusive education (Lee, 2010).

The Malaysian Education Act 1996 (1998) defined inclusive education as a concept originating from ‘special education’ and also required for children with learning difficulties (Zalizan & Manisah, 2014). In Malaysia, the government includes children with special educational needs in mainstream schools for

primary and secondary education in addition to special schools and programs (The Ministry of Education, 2008; Nurul, 2016). Then, inclusive education is implemented. Inclusive education is implemented through two types of programs: the Fully Inclusive Program<sup>[3]</sup> and the Partially Inclusive Program<sup>[4]</sup>. Based on the Asia Community Service in Malaysia, inclusive education refers to the notion that all children can access and enjoy all aspects of schooling with their diverse abilities (Inclusive Preschool Education in Malaysia, 2007).

According to Hehir, Grindal, Freeman, Lamoreau, Borquaye, and Burke (2016), there are four different concepts to describe the type of education. The four types of education have been discussed by putting them into Malaysia's education system context, simultaneously complementing the practice of inclusive education mentioned in the Guideline Bulletin published by the Special Education Division (2018). The concept of inclusive education used in the current practice in Malaysia is much closer to the third type of education, which is the integration concept. Only children with learning difficulties who have passed the standardized evaluation test by assigned teachers are eligible to be transferred to mainstream class (Special Education Division, 2013;2018). In this situation, the inclusive education system does not change to enhance the inclusion and learning of children with learning difficulties but looks at which and how the children with learning difficulties could achieve to adapt to the inclusive education system. Hence, the term 'mainstream class', is used in the entire paper instead of using the term 'inclusive class'.

This research aims to explore the existing collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers in inclusive education. The study has been conducted among parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers within the context of primary integrated school in Kuching district, Sarawak, Malaysia. It was found that there are three types of collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers, which are the direct collaboration, the indirect collaboration and the passive collaboration.

As parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers are the fundamental stakeholders in the school life of children in general (Ravn, 1998; Wanat, 2010; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012), it is essential to study the collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers in the practice of inclusive education, given that children with learning difficulties are expected to adapt to the inclusive education system in the Malaysian mainstream education system.

## THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

As collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers is considered to be the cornerstone for successful implementation of inclusive education (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2004), there is a need to investigate this area further. However, no previous research has explored this topic, and thus, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers in the context of inclusive education. Limited research that contributes to limited knowledge as reference for parents and teachers could be inferior and be lacking of understanding about the existing phenomenon.

The common way of viewing collaboration between parents and teachers in education is through the lens of parental involvement in their children's school life (Tawie, 2008). This research is focused on examining parental involvement in terms of meetings and communication between parents and teachers, which can help both parties better understand a child with learning difficulties. Therefore, collaboration is effective when there is engagement and interaction through communication (Daniels, 2011). Daniels (2011) views horizontal learning as effective learning, in which stakeholders of vulnerable children, such as parents, teachers, and professionals from different areas of expertise, come together and communicate across their boundaries of knowledge. As this concept is applied to communication between parents of children with

learning difficulties and teachers in inclusive education, these two stakeholders can gain a better understanding of the children's learning difficulties, the education system, and inclusive education practices (Daniels, 2011).

The communication between parents of children with learning difficulties could take place through formal or informal means (Ciriello, 2004). Formal meet-ups typically involve meetings organized by the Parent-Teacher Association [5] formally to facilitate discussion between parents and teachers about a child's performance in school (Tawie, 2008). In the context of inclusive education, the JPPKS [6] is responsible for arranging formal meetings that bring together parents of children with learning difficulties, class teachers to discuss and monitor the progress of students who are enrolled in fully or partially inclusive programs within mainstream classes. Examples of formal meetings include "*Hari Permuafakatan*" and the Year-End meeting. "*Hari Permuafakatan*" is a day set aside for parents to meet with teachers at school to discuss and review their child's academic progress and development (Tawie, 2008; Kapok, 2018).

Informal meetings mean that parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers communicate with one another apart from meetings set up by the Parent-Teacher Association. Either one party can take the initiative to contact the other party whenever they are available. Informal meeting is more preferable as it enables the school and parents to communicate freely and flexibly (Blackman, Powers, Edwards, Wegmann, Lechner & Swick, 2016). According to Mastropieri & Scruggs (2004), collaboration in inclusive education involves co-teaching between school teachers who are teaching children with learning difficulties in a mainstream class, as well as co-teaching between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers.

In a nutshell, to better understand the social environment of children with learning difficulties in inclusive education, this research study attempted to explore the collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers in inclusive education.

### **Implication of Parent-Teacher Collaboration towards Children with Learning Difficulties**

The collaboration between parents and teachers has direct and indirect implications for the practice of inclusive education (Magumise, 2017; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2004; National Early Childhood Intervention Council, 2012; Yadav, 2016). An active collaboration relationship between teachers, parents, and different types of professionals, such as speech therapists and occupational therapists help to "establish reciprocal partnerships with parents and involve families in all aspects of their children's care and education", (Winter, 2007, p. 4). Parents and teachers involve actively in the care and education of the children. Additionally, positive collaboration between parents and teachers has the potential to positively influence their children's self-esteem, study at home, communication skills, and expression of everyday experiences at home (Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, & Polychronopoulou, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to examine the collaboration of parents and teachers in inclusive education.

However, limited research has been conducted on the parent-teacher collaborative partnership in inclusive education in Malaysia. While some studies have explored the challenges faced by teachers in teaching children with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms, there remains a lack of research on the collaborative partnership between parents and teachers (Adams, Harris, & Jones, 2016). As Yadav (2016) notes, there are often gaps in this relationship, both within families and between parents and teachers, which can impact the needs of the children. Given that both parents and teachers are key stakeholders in the inclusive education system and have a significant influence on children with learning difficulties (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2004), it is crucial to understand and improve this partnership. Thus, this study aims to contribute new knowledge to the phenomenon of the existing collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers in inclusive education within integrated primary school.

## Ecological System Theory

This research adopts Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory to understand the important influence of parents and teachers on children with learning difficulties in inclusive education. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), human development is explained through a model that describes an individual's ecological system. This theory explains that our context, culture, and history are interconnected and contribute to our knowledge of development (Darling, 2007). Parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers in inclusive education who are involved in the immediate environments of the children's home and school are part of the microsystem in the children's ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Since this study focuses on the collaboration between parents and teachers, the mesosystem is the specific concept used to shape the framework of the study as it involves interactions between microsystems, in this case, the parents-teachers relationship (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Thus, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory explains how the ecological environment, particularly the collaboration between parents and teachers, can help children with learning difficulties to experience phenomena and shape their understanding of the natural world.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs the qualitative research method. Six teachers (one male and five females) and five parents (one father and four mothers) of children with learning difficulties age between 7 to 12 years old (that currently studying in the mainstream class of the integrated primary school) were interviewed face to face. These participants were selected through purposive sampling from a public integrated primary school in Kuching District, Sarawak, Malaysia. Purposive sampling method is used because the category of participants is specifically referring to the parents and teachers related to children with learning difficulties whom currently studying in mainstream classroom.

Prior permission was obtained from the District Education Department to carry out research in government primary school area. The selected school is used to trace out target participants in a Chinese primary school (SJKC[7]), which is the only one identified as an integrated school among all SJKC schools in Kuching District. The school was selected as agreed and recommended by the Special Education Division of the Ministry of Education. This school has an integrated special class within the school compound, which is named as Integrated Special Class program, Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (PPKI), and also known to be having at least five years of experience in practicing inclusive education. This study was not intended to discuss much on the development of the children, but the collaboration relationship between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers.

Participants were interviewed individually according to their convenience. An interview guide has been used as the instrument to guide the conversation. researcher explored the data by asking participants the kind of feelings they might get while building the parent-teacher collaboration, the frequency of meeting parents or teachers and the changes they found after the meetups. The researcher conducted the interview session after confirming with the participants for time and place that they felt convenient and comfortable to meet up at. The interview sessions were conducted with participants in a few different places. The teachers were interviewed during morning school time which they have free periods.

To facilitate open and honest responses, open-ended questions were used during the interviews to allow participants to freely share their perceptions. The study focused on exploring the experiences of participants in the parent-teacher collaboration relationship when practicing inclusive education. One of the questions used to explore these experiences was, "Do you have formal or informal meetings with parents/teachers?" Participants were then asked to provide details on the frequency of these meetings if they answered in the affirmative, or to share why they did not have such meetings if they answered in the negative. Additionally, participants were asked the questions "What do you usually discuss with parents/teachers?" and "Have you noticed any changes after discussions or meetings?" to further explore their experiences in the parent-

teacher collaboration relationship.

The participants of the study, which are parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers were given labels of simple codes to describe compiled information in the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The alphabet ‘P’ represents the parent whereas the alphabet ‘T’ represents the teacher. Table 3.1 shows the code information.

Coding for Parent	Coding for Teacher
Code: (Alphabet P)(numbering)-parent Example: P1-mother / P3-father	Code: (Alphabet T)(numbering)-job scope Example: T1-counselling teacher

The demographic description of the parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers are shown in Table 2.1 and Table 2.2 respectively.

Participant	Range of Age (years)	Education Levels	Relationship with the child	Occupation	Diagnosis of the children with LD (own child)	Experience of living with child(ren) with LD (app. Years)
P1	40-49	Unified Exam Certificate	Mother	Account clerk	Down Syndrome	13
P2	30-39	SPM	Mother	Patient Personal Caretaker	ADHD	11
P3	40-49	Degree	Father	Engineer	Autism	10
P4	30-39	SPM	Mother	Housewife	Mild-Autism	12
P5	30-39	Diploma	Mother	Accountant	Autism	8

Table 2.1 Demographic Description of Parents of Children with Learning Difficulties

Participants	Gender	Range of Age (years)	Diagnosis of the child(ren) with LD (in mainstream classroom)	Specialization	Teaching Experience (app. Years)	Experience of working with child(ren) with LD (app. Years)	Position in School
T1	Female	40-49	More than one type	Counselling	19	9	Counselling Teacher
T2	Female	40-49	Down Syndrome	Bahasa Cina	23	3	Class Teachers
T3	Female	50-59	ADHD	Bahasa Melayu	26	5	Class Teachers
T4	Female	30-39	Autism	Science	6	1	Class Teachers
T5	Male	30-39	More than one type	Special Education	9	9	Head Teacher of PPKI
T6	Female	30-39	Mild-Autism	Mathematics	13	2	Class Teachers

Table 2.2 Demographic Description of Parents of Teachers



## FINDINGS

### *The Existing Collaboration*

It is common for parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers to prefer informal meetings to discuss their child's problems and find ways to improve. They often run into each other in school areas such as corridors outside of the classroom, the school canteen, and the school car park before or after classes. Although sometimes they might bump into each other in coincidence, they just chat whatever related to the children and get both sides better understanding about the children. They also contact each other through mobile phone messaging or phone calls to inform and chat about any matter related to the child with learning difficulties. Parents and teachers disclosed:

“我只是偶尔碰巧在走廊看到老师的时候，就会跟老师聊几句，谈谈我的儿子咯。”

“I do meet some teachers in coincidence at corridor sometimes and chat with them, mostly talk about my son.”

(Participant P1\_mother)

“有，[跟老师之间]会配搭。肯定要配搭。平时都有。只要在学校遇到老师就都会谈起的事情。我们算是很常见面咯。我们也会在空节课的时候可以安排在课室里见面咯。嗯...[见面时会谈的他的学习的经历咯... Ar, 他的进展咯... 我们都会谈。好的有谈，不好的也谈。Ar.”

“Yes, I do collaborate [with teachers]. It is a must. We chat whenever we bump into each other in school and talk about V's matter. It is quite often we meet. We also purposely meet up in the classroom during free periods. Erm... [When we meet, we talk about] during class lesson ah...his learning experience lo... Ar, his development lo... We talk all about it. The good ones or not good ones, we talk about it. Ar.”

(Participant P2\_mother)

The finding indicated that collaboration exists between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers in several situations in the mainstream class. The first situation of collaboration between the parents and teachers is when both parties have direct interaction and communication. There were circumstances that parents and teachers communicate with each other before any issue encountered on the children with learning difficulties in the mainstream classroom.

*“When my boy has just started studying in this school (mainstream class), I prepared a list of ways to handle my boy when he is behaving aggressive and passed the paper to the teacher. The teacher has tried out those ways and found out to be helpful to handle him in the classroom.”*

(Participant P5\_mother)

*“When this student (son of participant P5) has just enrolled into my class, his mother passed me a paper that have listed the ways to handle his son's behaviour in the classroom. I have paste it on the teacher's table in the classroom, so other subject teachers can follow the same way on handling this child. Those ways helped us so much that we know him better. As we all teachers are using the way to handle his behaviour, his behaviour has changed and we are not feeling helpless about how he might interrupt the teaching and learning session in the classroom.”*

(Participant T4\_class-teacher)

However, there were also situations where parents and teachers only began to collaborate when they encountered behavioural or academic performance issues with the child with learning difficulties during the teaching and learning session in the mainstream class. In these cases, the parents and teachers would communicate with each other to discuss the issues and work together to find solutions to improve the child's performance.

"I do not talk to parents often. I only meet them when there is a problem about their child. Mostly about learning problem and behavioural problem. The purpose of meeting them is to help their children."

(Participant T4\_class-teacher)

"[I] seldom talk to parents in school. But we do meet-up sometimes. The parents of the special child [with learning difficulties] who's in my class is kind and respectful."

(Participant T6\_class-teacher)

Secondly, there is a situation when both parties communicate with one another through a mediator. In this finding, the mediator is the school counselling teacher who acts as an intermediary between the parents of children with learning difficulties and the class teacher. She talks to the parents when the class teacher is unsure about how to communicate with them and also relays the thoughts and feelings shared by the parents back to the class teacher.

"他[那孩子]就是会有一个心理辅导老师啊, 就是那个 L老师。她会作中间人, 这样...  
也会去帮, 跟我们、跟他[那孩子]谈。Ar. 他好像...Tsk, 比如说他这一个星期里面...  
因为这样的小孩, 他会有脾气。你知道吗? 突然间这个星期里面他为什么会不开心啦...  
他的脾气上升啦..."

次数很多、什么的, 她就会去辅导他。问他: '你是不是有心事' 咯... 这些咯。'还是你有什么东西, 想要  
表达啦, 你不会讲' 啊... 这些啦... Ar.  
她都会咯。她就作中间的。对, 遇到这样的状况, 她会问我, 也会问老师。然后她就会去辅导他。嗯。"

"He [the child] has a counselling teacher ah, it's that Teacher L. She acts as a middle-person, like that... She also helps, talk to us and the child. Ar. He's just like...Tsk, For example in this week... Because children like him has temper, you know? Suddenly in this week why did he feel unhappy la... His temper got rise up la.. Quite frequent, something like that, she will counsel him, ask him, 'Is there any problem' lo... Something like that lo. 'Or is there something that you want to express but you don't know how to do' ah... These stuffs. Ar. She be the middle-person. Ya, when we have this kind of issue, she will ask me and class teachers, then she counsel him. Ng."

(Participant P2\_mother)

"[Sometimes], I can hardly communicate with the parent. Especially when she refused to share more about her child to me. Glad that at last we have our counselling teacher who deal our issue. Now it's not that complicated."

(Participant T6\_class-teacher)

Lastly, there are parents and teachers may avoid communication and collaboration with each other, as they fear it may be troublesome or burden the other party. Parents and teachers shared:

“嗯，我有大概讲咯。但是因为我本身不是很喜欢要求太多，因为我也很怕，Erm...给老师压力，或者老师觉得我很烦，这样...”

所以我有些东西我可能只会，Tsk，要求讲一下。如果老师有做就做，如果没有的话，我也是...没有咯，这样咯..

其实我很少。我甚至喜欢我的孩子独立。我很少会去打扰老师，因为可能我也很怕。因为自己的孩子是这样，然后我会很怕说，...Er..老师会不开心。他们真的，会接受我的孩子，我就已经很好了，这样子...

如果我可能要求太多的话，‘你要多注意我的孩子’啊，还是什么的，就会总觉得说，给老师更多压力的话har..

因为我不想说，Ar..所以我就不要。我宁愿就从我孩子这里得到答案。问他先，‘今天有发生什么事情’、‘怎样怎样啊’。不知道的，我才去学校问，这样...”

“Erm, usually I talked to teacher briefly. But I don't like to request too much as I will worry, Erm...give teacher pressure, maybe teacher will thought that I am troublesome, like that... So, for some things, maybe I can only, Tsk, say a bit. If teacher follows then they will do it, if not, I also...just like that lo.. Actually, I seldom. I even like my child to be independent. I seldom interrupt teacher, because I will also worry. As I child is like that, I am worry that, Er...teacher will be unhappy. They really, accept my child. I think that is good enough, like that... If I request too much and say, ‘You have to pay more attention on my child ah,’ or anything else. I feel that this will make teachers feel pressured. I don't want it to be like this. Ar.. I prefer to ask my child instead. Ask him, ‘What had happened today?’, ‘How and how’. If he doesn't know, then only I go to school and clarify, like that...”

(Participant P4\_mother)

“如果他们有什么，我会...能够，我能够解决的，我通常都不会说，随便就找家长。因为我明白孩子的父母亲的心情，因为普通的孩子我们也都是这样。遇到我们老师可以解决的，我们都是自己解决。除非我觉得某些特殊的東西的时候，在他们[家长]来接送，只要我有看到，他真的是发生一些东西，比较严重的，我就会当场跟他[家长]讲。我通常是这样。我也不会说...Er...一点一点就报告啦。因为我觉得...er... 公平 lar... ‘因为你的孩子是特殊’，就一点一点报告，我觉得... 因为其实普通孩子也是总是有问题。Ar. 我是 fair and square。除非你真的是...比较严重的，我才会找家长。如果，像 JR 有一次比较严重，他会骂...不好听的话。甚至有一次考卷，上面也是写不雅的字。所以，我就觉得蛮严重的。这样的话，因为我觉得他本身是一个很单纯的孩子，做么他突然间会变成这样子的时候，我有找家长谈。严重到这样子我就找家长谈。特地约一个时间跟他谈咯。就是互相的配搭。”

“If they have anything, I will...can, as long as I can settle it, I usually won't say, simply find parents. Because I understand parents' feelings, as well as normal children [without learning difficulties], we also like that. As we teachers can settle, we settle it ourselves. Unless there are some special cases, when they [parents] come pick them up, as I bump into them, and there were serious matter happened, I will tell them on the spot. I usually am like that. I also won't say...Er...Report just because of small matter. Because I think...er... being fair lar... ‘Because you child is special’, then report for small matter, I think...actually normal children [without learning difficulties] also always have problem one. Ar. I am fair and square. Unless you really...more serious, then I will find parents. Like there were one, JR scolded...bad words.



*Even in an examination, he wrote bad words on the paper. So, I think it was serious. As I know he was a naive child, how come he wrote such a thing. I approached the parent. It was serious enough that I approach the parent. I purposely arrange a time and talk to the parent lor. We collaborate with each other.”*

(Participant T3\_class-teacher)

Also, in this third situation of collaboration, apparently, both parties preferred not to meet up with each other due to having had miscommunication in the past. They were unable to reach a compromise or understanding about the child, which resulted in a failure to develop a collaborative strategy.

“I seldom get to talk to class teacher in school. For the first-half year [my son started studying in mainstream class], the class teacher talked to me quite often to discuss about my son’s development and progress. After a mid-term school holiday, as the teacher started to let go a little bit and expect my son to do things independently, my son did not make it, everything [seemed to be] different by then. Even during recess time, I can hardly bump into the teacher. [It has been] even difficult to meet up subject teachers. Hence, for now, I can hardly know or discover how is my son’s progress or how was his performance in class.”

(Participant P3\_father)

*“[I can] hardly communicate with her. Especially when she refuses to share more about her child to me.”*

(Participant T6\_class-teacher)

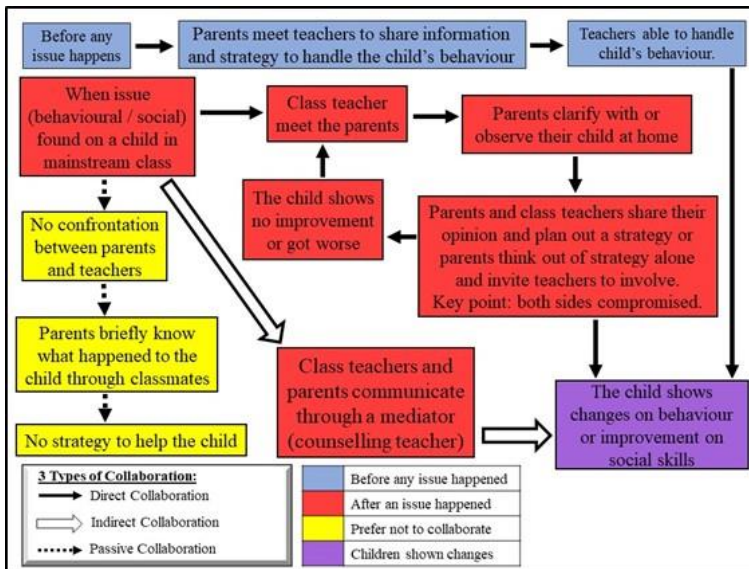
Based on the narrative by the participants, it could be found that collaboration does exist but in different situation and gives different impact to the children with learning difficulties. The narratives of the participants are genuinely translated by using the back-translation technique and are categorized into different types of parent-teacher collaboration.

## DISCUSSION

### *‘Hari Permuafakatan’*

From the overall data on meetups, it could be analysed that informal meetings are more preferred by parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers for their flexibility and spontaneous form of communication. This is parallel to the point highlighted by Ciriello (2004). This could raise another issue to be concerned about, that is the formal meetings set up by either the Parent Teacher Association or JPPKS such as the *‘Hari Permuafakatan’*. In the overall interviews conducted with the parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers, however, *‘Hari Permuafakatan’* was not mentioned as a medium of collaboration for both parties. It seems that *‘Hari Permuafakatan’* is not significant and helpful for the parents and teachers for their collaboration in inclusive education which is unsimilar to the point expressed by Tawie (2008) and Kapok (2018).

### **The Phenomenon of Existing Collaboration between Parents and Teachers**



**Figure 2 The phenomenon of the existing collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers in the mainstream class.**

The phenomenon of existing collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers in the mainstream class is displayed in Figure 2. There are three main routes of collaboration: direct collaboration, indirect collaboration, and passive collaboration.

In mainstream classes, all matters related to children are handled by their respective class teachers. The primary colours blue, red, and yellow represent the different situations presented in the data analysis:

parents and teachers collaborate before any issue happened, after any issue happened, and no collaboration at all. The secondary color purple is used to portray the merging of the same result of two different situations (blue and red) where parents and teachers collaborated and saw improvement in the child with learning difficulties.

After implementing suggested strategies and training, some children showed changes in behaviour and social skills. However, in situations where the suggested plan did not work out, parents and teachers discussed and shared until changes were seen in the child. The yellow boxes portray situations where parents and teachers do not collaborate, resulting in minimal or no improvement in children with learning difficulties, leaving parents and teachers feeling restless and helpless.

With the new inclusive education policy, children with learning difficulties were re-evaluated and allocated back to PPKI for support. The diagram helps to understand better the different situations that occur in the social environment of children with learning difficulties and the impact of parent-teacher collaboration.

### Direct Collaboration between Parents and Teachers

Direct collaboration is one of the main routes of collaboration between parents and teachers in mainstream classes. Typically, class teachers are the first to meet with parents or get approached by parents to discuss their children before or after any issues arise during class lessons. Parents may clarify the issue with their children or observe their children at home, and then they meet with the class teachers, mostly informally, when they bump into each other in the school compound or contact each other through phone calls or messages. Together, they plan out a strategy to help their children or parents may come up with ideas or strategies alone and invite teachers to get involved by sharing the plan and rationale. The most important thing is that both parents and teachers have an understanding of the situation and are willing to compromise on the suggested plan and strategy. This willingness to talk about the children leads to better understanding for both parents and teachers (Magumise, 2017; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2004).

Although direct collaboration may not directly lead to full inclusion of children with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms, which prioritize academic learning and examination systems, it allows parents and teachers to exchange information about the children and understand them better. The benefits of collaboration between parents and teachers in improving the understanding of the children have been highlighted by Adams, Harris, and Jones (2016), as well as Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, and Polychronopoulou (2016).

### **Indirect Collaboration**

In certain situations, parents of children with learning difficulties may prefer to communicate with the mainstream class teacher through a mediator, such as the counselling teacher. When the class teacher discovers that the child with learning difficulties is experiencing emotional difficulties or is exhibiting behaviour that is uncooperative with the teacher or other subject teachers during teaching and learning sessions, the teacher will confront the counselling teacher. The counselling teacher will then arrange a time to listen to the child and understand how they feel. Next, the counselling teacher will meet with the child's parent to clarify their understanding of the child's situation and inform them about the child's performance in the mainstream classroom. After this conversation, the counselling teacher will share the information back to the class teacher.

Furthermore, when the class teacher finds it difficult to communicate with the parents of children with learning difficulties, they may confront the counselling teacher and hope that she can intervene in the collaboration between the parents and the teacher. The counselling teacher will then talk to the parent and provide feedback on how the parent thinks about the class teacher.

Although it may be difficult to formulate a strategy or plan to help the child improve, by engaging in this back-and-forth of notifying and sharing information between the class teacher and the parent, the counselling teacher is mediating a two-way communication between them. In this situation, the counselling teacher plays an essential role in the child's social activities by putting herself into the immediate environment in the microsystem of the child, facilitating their learning and adaptation in the mainstream classroom (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

It is interesting to note that the role of the counselling teacher as a mediator can be helpful in situations where direct collaboration between parents and teachers is not feasible. The counselling teacher serves as a bridge between the class teacher and the parent of the child with learning difficulties. This indirect collaboration is important in ensuring that the child's needs are addressed and that the parents are informed about their child's progress in the mainstream classroom.

It is also important to consider the role of the counselling teacher in the microsystem of the child. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the microsystem is the immediate environment in which the child interacts and has direct experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The counselling teacher's role in mediating the child's learning and adaptation in the mainstream classroom places her in the child's microsystem. By being involved in the child's social activities, the counselling teacher can provide support and guidance to the child in navigating the challenges of the mainstream classroom.

Overall, both direct and indirect collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers are important in ensuring that the child's needs are met and that the child is able to thrive in the mainstream classroom. The role of the counselling teacher as a mediator can also be beneficial in situations where direct collaboration is not possible.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

### **Passive Collaboration**

For parents of children with mild learning difficulties who can follow instructions independently and achieve average academic results in a mainstream classroom, they may feel that confronting the class teacher is not preferable as it may put pressure on the teacher. They believe that having their children in a mainstream classroom is a given opportunity provided by the teachers, and therefore, there is no need to confront or talk to the teacher, which could interrupt their work or cause them stress. Parents of children with mild learning difficulties only talk to the teacher when there is a school announcement to clarify on. As this particular child with mild learning difficulties does not exhibit disruptive behavior during class and is able to complete homework given by the teacher, the class teacher does not communicate with the parent regularly.

It is understandable that parents of children with mild learning difficulties may not want to confront the teacher and prefer to maintain a low profile, especially when their child is able to follow instructions and complete homework independently. However, it is still important for parents to communicate with the teacher to ensure that their child's needs are being met and to stay informed about their progress in school.

On the other hand, for parents of children with severe learning difficulties, they may feel inferior that their child cannot follow instructions or complete homework, and may even exhibit disruptive behavior during class. In this case, the class teacher may initially confront the parent to discuss and develop a strategy to improve the child's behavior through certain simple punishments. However, the parent may refuse to collaborate with the teacher and even warn the teacher not to implement such a strategy, or else they may

get sued. At this point, both parents and teachers may feel offended and inferior, making it difficult for them to collaborate. Both parties may feel helpless, and both the parent and teacher may know very little about the child's development. There may be times when the counseling teacher tries to intervene and mediate communication, but it may be challenging for both parties to trust each other again. The collaboration relationship then becomes passive.

As the teacher is being warned not to discipline the child, the child is left sitting in the mainstream classroom regardless of whether they are following the activities and instructions in the classroom. Over time, the child may not learn anything while in the mainstream classroom. Therefore, the parent and teacher may come to the conclusion that inclusive education is not the best choice for the child. Undoubtedly, the parent and teacher face difficulty in determining to what extent the child is ready to be included when inclusive education is initially designed and implemented to bring benefits to children with learning difficulties.

It is important for both parents and teachers to approach such situations with empathy and understanding, and to work together to find a solution that benefits the child's learning and development. Inclusive education is designed to provide opportunities for children with learning difficulties to learn and develop alongside their peers, but it is not always the best choice for every child. It is important for parents and teachers to assess the child's individual needs and abilities and to work together to determine the most appropriate educational setting and support for their child.

### **Impact of Collaboration between Parents and Teachers towards Children with Learning Difficulties**

Collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers is seen as significant in inclusive education because it has a strong impact on children with learning difficulties. Although in some situations, collaboration only happens when there is an issue affecting children with learning difficulties in a mainstream class, this collaboration still brings positive impacts. This is similar to what has been pointed out by Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, and Polychronopoulou (2016), who suggested that collaboration between parents and teachers can influence their children's self-esteem, communication skills, and daily learning. When an issue such as a behavioral problem occurs in a child with learning difficulties in a mainstream class, the teacher talks to the parents of the child, and then the parents take action, and vice versa. Changes and improvements can be seen in the child as a result of the collaborative work between parents and teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Winter, 2007), especially in the context of inclusive education.

According to the direct and indirect types of collaboration, they can have an impact on the social and behavioral aspects of children with learning difficulties. When parents and teachers work together, children with learning difficulties show improvement in behavior and social skills. However, this collaboration may not have a strong impact on the academic aspects, as the mainstream education system often emphasizes strong competition in academic performance. Children with learning difficulties who are not expected to compete may have difficulty being included in mainstream classes (Zalizan & Manisah, 2014; Braunsteiner & Lapidus, 2014).

On the other hand, the concept of inclusive education aims to integrate children with learning difficulties into the education system. Inclusion means making changes to the system, approaches, structures, and strategies to enhance the learning of children with learning difficulties in mainstream education (Hehir, Grindal, Freeman, Lamoreau, Borquaye, & Burke, 2016). However, despite collaboration between parents and teachers, children with learning difficulties may still struggle to fully integrate into the mainstream education system.



As mentioned earlier in the findings, a counseling teacher plays a role as a mediator between parents of children with learning difficulties and class teachers who have collaboration issues in a mainstream class. The positive impact upon the related child with learning difficulties has been shown from the effort of the mediator within this parent-teacher collaboration relationship. However, the counselling teacher may face a burden of workload when dealing with issues in this collaboration relationship since their job is to provide counseling to children without learning difficulties as well.

Regarding the passive type of collaboration between parents and teachers, children with learning difficulties show very minimal changes in different aspects. Moreover, the relationship between parents and teachers, in this case, is often hurtful and unfavorable. Both sides have little knowledge about the child, regardless of the in-home or mainstream classroom setting. This reality contradicts the study by Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, and Polychronopoulou (2016) and UNESCO (2003).

## CONCLUSION

There are three types of collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers: direct collaboration, indirect collaboration, and passive collaboration. Maintaining a collaboration relationship between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers can be challenging, especially when they found it hard to help their children with learning difficulties to adapt the system and learning in the mainstream classroom. The limited academic learning capability of children with learning difficulties can make it challenging for them to participate in academic learning and adapt to the examination-oriented system. It is apparent that the current concept of inclusive education is more focused on integration rather than inclusion. Despite the challenges faced in collaboration between parents and teachers, particularly in helping their children integrate into the mainstream classroom's examination-oriented system, the study found that collaboration relationships and actions taken after communication do bring about improvements in the social learning and behaviour of children with learning difficulties.

## RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER STUDIES

As this is an exploratory study that focuses on the collaboration between parents of children with learning difficulties and teachers in inclusive education among integrated primary schools, the phenomenon of collaboration between parents of adolescents with learning difficulties and teachers in inclusive education in secondary schools was not included. Once children graduate from primary school, they move on to secondary education, and despite having been integrated into mainstream classes in primary school, children with learning difficulties may be assigned to special education classes in secondary school. The experiences of parents of adolescents with learning difficulties and teachers who implement inclusive education in secondary schools are currently unknown. Therefore, future studies should expand the scope of research to cover youth with learning difficulties in secondary schools within the context of inclusive education.

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## FOOT NOTES

[1] Students with Special educational needs mean all children and youth whose needs resulted from disabilities or learning difficulties (UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994).

[2] Throughout the study, the term “children with learning difficulties” is being used because placing the word “children” at front bring out the idea of supporting children-centred pedagogy (UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994). Meanwhile, using the term “learning difficulties” instead of “disabilities” connoted that the performed difficulties by individuals is social constructed, but not the individuals itself (Whittaker & Kenworthy, 2002).

[3] Fully Inclusive Programme is defined as children with SENs learning with children without SENs in mainstream classroom by participating in all academic subjects based on curriculum set and involve in co-curriculum activities designed by mainstream classroom teachers (Special Education Programme, 2018).

[4] Partially Inclusive Programme is defined as children with SENs learning with children without SENs in mainstream classroom in academic or non-academic aspects (Special Education Programme, 2018). Partially Inclusive Education in academic aspects means children with SENs learning in mainstream classroom at least one academic subject and back to PPKI for other subjects whereas for non-academic aspects it means participation of children with SENs within mainstream setting in co-curriculum activities and socialisation.

[5] Parent Teacher Association refers to a committee board formed officially by teachers and parents' representative which they discuss matters of children and have rights to decide the best educational interest for the children (Tawie, 2008).

[6] *Jawatankuasa Program Pendidikan Khas Sekolah (JPPKS)* is responsible for evaluating whether children with SENs are qualified to study in mainstream classes (Special Education Division, 2013).

[7] *SJKC (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina)* refers to the Chinese Government primary school.