

Lived Experience of Special Education Teachers on Effective Communication for the Families of Learners with Special Educational Needs

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of Special Education teachers in communicating with families of learners with special educational needs, focusing on strategies, challenges, and relational processes that influence trust-building. Grounded in the Two-Way Communication Model, a descriptive-phenomenological design was employed to understand how teachers perceive and manage communication in inclusive education settings. Data were collected from thirteen Special Education lead teachers using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaires, and document analysis during the school year 2025-2026. The data were analyzed using the simplified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen (SCK) method, encompassing bracketing, horizontalizing, clustering, textural/structural descriptions, composite description, and verification to ensure rigor and depth. Findings revealed four key themes in effective communication practices: consistent and transparent communication, active listening and empathy, cultural sensitivity and adaptation, and family involvement and collaboration. Teachers emphasized the importance of regular updates, emotional responsiveness, and culturally responsive strategies in building trust and sustaining engagement with families. They also described their roles as communicators, cultural mediators, and collaborative partners. However, challenges such as language barriers, emotional sensitivity in interactions, and differing parental expectations were identified, requiring adaptive and reflective communication approaches. The study concludes that communication in special education is fundamentally relational and reciprocal, aligning strongly with the Two-Way Communication Model. Strengthening teacher competencies in emotional intelligence, cultural responsiveness, and collaborative practices is recommended to enhance family engagement and improve outcomes for learners with special educational needs.

Keywords: Lived experiences, effective communication, families, special educational needs

INTRODUCTION

The educational process depends on three essential stakeholders: families, schools, and communities, whose collaboration is essential for achieving positive educational outcomes. Strong family-school communication forms the foundation of student success, as it strengthens partnerships, supports student development, and creates a more responsive and supportive learning environment (Al-Hamad et al., 2023). When these three stakeholders work together effectively, they contribute to improved academic achievement and more holistic student development. In this regard, communication is not merely an exchange of information but a key mechanism for building trust, shared responsibility, and continuity in learning.

For students with disabilities, understanding how teachers communicate with families is especially important in improving academic, emotional, and developmental outcomes. Effective communication helps prevent misunderstandings, fosters genuine partnerships, and creates a stable emotional environment for both students and their families. Through consistent and meaningful interaction, teachers and parents can collaboratively respond to learners' individualized needs, ensuring that support is aligned across home and school contexts. This collaboration becomes even more critical in special education, where students often require continuous, coordinated intervention and support systems.

This study addresses a gap in the existing literature by exploring how Special Education teachers create and maintain effective communication with parents through their daily lived experiences. Parent involvement is widely recognized as a strong predictor of student success, with evidence showing that students perform better academically, socially, and behaviorally when parents are actively engaged in their education (UNESCO, 2021; Madsen & Madsen, 2022). Despite this, ineffective communication between parents and teachers continues to pose significant challenges, particularly in contexts such as the Philippines, where limited communication often hinders the ability of teachers to address individual learner needs effectively (Kaireen & Ching, 2024). Additionally, differences in expectations, perspectives, and communication styles between parents and teachers remain underexplored, despite being a recurring source of misunderstanding (Means, 2023). In Bahrain, trust is emphasized as a central element of successful school-home partnerships and is strengthened through consistent, transparent communication practices.

Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of Special Education teachers regarding effective communication with families of learners with special educational needs. Drawing from the researcher's own professional experience, the study aims to identify the challenges teachers encounter, examine the strategies they use to overcome communication barriers, and highlight practices that strengthen family-school collaboration. Ultimately, the findings are intended to contribute to improving communication practices in special education and supporting the academic, emotional, and social development of learners with special educational needs, while also enhancing teacher-parent relationships.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

Foundations of Trust in Special Education

To support children's growth and development, teachers must establish effective communication channels with parents and guardians. Such communication builds trust, strengthens relationships, and allows both parties to share insights about student learning and development, ultimately fostering collaboration that benefits students (Raising Children Network, 2024). Personalized approaches that consider students' backgrounds and needs further enhance understanding and support.

Communication is the foundation of trust in education. Regular discussions about students' progress, abilities, and learning goals enable teachers and parents to work together toward improved academic performance and well-being (Hofferber, 2024). Early communication also sets the tone for a positive and lasting school-family relationship.

Trust is strengthened when schools maintain open policies, consistent communication, and respectful engagement with families. Teachers must also be sensitive to emotional nuances in communication to ensure interactions remain supportive and meaningful (Graham-Clay, 2024). When parents feel heard and valued, their trust in schools increases.

Effective communication skills, including active listening, further enhance parental trust. Research shows that strong teacher communication contributes to increased parental confidence in schools and is closely linked to teacher effectiveness (Hamm, 2023).

Overall, trust developed through consistent and meaningful communication creates a strong foundation for collaboration between schools and families. This partnership improves students' academic outcomes, emotional well-being, and overall school experience, enabling them to succeed more effectively in the long term.

Communication Strategies for Engagement

In special education, effective communication between parents and teachers is essential for ensuring that students with special needs receive appropriate academic, emotional, and social support while fostering collaboration (Alias, 2024). Research highlights the importance of clear, consistent, and personalized communication, as families differ in their preferences—ranging from texts and emails to phone calls and video meetings. Recognizing and using parents' preferred communication methods strengthens relationships, while frequent updates are especially important for children with disabilities (Shamash et al., 2022).

Language and cultural diversity also pose significant challenges in communication. Teachers often need training to communicate effectively across cultures, as meaningful communication goes beyond translation and requires cultural understanding and clarity (Piller et al., 2021). Graham-Clay (2024) emphasizes that information should always be clear, structured, and regularly shared, requiring commitment and mutual understanding from both parents and educators.

Technological tools have greatly improved school–family communication. Digital platforms such as email, learning systems, IEP meetings, and video calls enhance accessibility, speed, and consistency compared to traditional methods (Madsen & Madsen, 2022). These tools also help maintain communication when face-to-face interaction is limited, supporting stronger collaboration between schools and families.

Effective communication is especially critical for students with hearing impairments, where strong parent–teacher collaboration directly improves learning outcomes (Obwaka & Kimani, 2024). Teachers should actively ask parents about their preferred communication methods, for example, through Google Forms, while early school-year interactions, such as emails and meetings, help establish trust (Tutt, 2021).

Inclusive communication strategies are also essential for diverse families. Translation tools like Google Translate can improve access, but schools must also address “monolingual” systems that limit understanding for non-native speakers. Creating multilingual school resources can significantly improve accessibility and engagement (Piller et al., 2021).

Overall, effective communication in special education is the foundation of trust, collaboration, and student success. When communication is consistent, culturally responsive, and supported by accessible tools, families become more engaged and better able to support learning. This partnership ultimately enhances academic achievement, emotional well-being, and opportunities for students with special needs to reach their full potential.

Cultural Competence and Its Impact on Effective Communication

Sociocultural experiences, such as origin, social class, gender identity, and lived experiences, are key aspects of diversity beyond race and ethnicity. Teachers must recognize these differences to build inclusive learning environments, supported by cultural competency training and professional development that strengthen relationships with families and improve student advocacy.

Open and respectful communication with families helps bridge cultural and academic expectations, encouraging collaboration that supports student development (Krishnan, 2023). Because culture shapes communication styles and educational expectations, teachers must show cultural respect to build trust and encourage parental involvement.

Cultural respect can be demonstrated through appropriate greetings, awareness of traditions, and sensitivity in interactions. When teachers understand these cultural elements, they communicate more effectively and better understand parents’ perspectives.

Teachers who value cultural roles often build stronger relationships with families, as respect fosters trust and engagement (Sijda, 2025). Using culturally relevant examples and acknowledging traditions such as holidays also strengthens communication and supports student participation (Hamdan & Coloma, 2022).

Overall, culturally responsive teaching and communication are essential for building strong school–family relationships. When educators respect and understand cultural diversity, they create inclusive environments that promote trust, equity, and improved academic and personal outcomes for students.

Challenges and Barriers to Effective Communication

Communication is the foundation of human relationships, enabling individuals to connect, share ideas, and understand one another across cultural, linguistic, and economic differences. As Kamal et al. (2023) note, it is central to comprehension and social connection, making it essential in all areas of life.

However, poor communication leads to misunderstanding and conflict. In special education, complex language and jargon often exclude parents from decision-making, leaving them feeling intimidated or disengaged (Thurlow et al., 2022). Limited time and insufficient preparation among teachers further weaken collaboration and trust (Daniel, 2024; Mwirichia, 2021).

Language barriers also create major challenges, as many families do not receive information in their home language (Tutt, 2021). Graham-Clay (2024) emphasizes that building trust and understanding requires educators to actively engage with parents' perspectives. Technology tools such as translation apps can help reduce these gaps in communication.

In addition, technological, cultural, emotional, and logistical barriers continue to affect communication quality. While digital tools have improved access, they also bring challenges such as uncertainty and reduced confidence among parents and teachers (Ginting & Jani Natasari, 2022; Whiteleather, 2021). This highlights the need for clearer and more inclusive communication practices.

Clear, simple, and direct communication is therefore essential in building strong parent-teacher relationships (Sijda, 2025). When families feel informed and respected, they are more likely to engage actively in their child's education.

Overall, effective communication is not just information exchange but the foundation of trust, inclusion, and collaboration in education. In special education, it is especially vital for bridging gaps between schools and families, enabling stronger partnerships and better academic, social, and emotional outcomes for students.

Collaborative Approaches to Problem-Solving

Bahrain increasingly recognizes the importance of strong family-school relationships, now a key Ministry of Education priority (Al-Mahdi & Bailey, 2022). This is especially important in special education, where collaboration between parents and teachers improves students' academic, emotional, and developmental outcomes (Graham-Clay, 2024). Regular updates through emails, newsletters, and reports help keep parents informed and involved in their child's progress (Sijda, 2025).

Families often struggle to navigate school systems, IEP meetings, and communication with educators. Creating inclusive and supportive school environments helps families feel more confident and engaged, particularly those with children who have disabilities or language needs (Hinkle, 2021). Such environments promote participation and trust.

Partnership models like Family as Faculty show that involving families directly improves teacher understanding and student outcomes. When parents have an equal voice in decision-making, students with disabilities perform better (Aspland et al., 2021). Collaboration between teachers and parents also supports learning at home and school, including for children with autism (White, 2021).

Although strong partnerships improve student outcomes, barriers such as stress, workload, and miscommunication still exist between parents and SPED teachers (Pilapil et al., 2024). Misunderstandings about roles and responsibilities can weaken collaboration (Al-Mahdi & Bailey, 2022). Therefore, consistent and meaningful communication is essential to build trust and engagement (Sijda, 2025).

Overall, effective communication and strong family-school partnerships are vital in special education (Al-Hamad et al., 2023; Alias, 2024; Madsen & Madsen, 2022; Tutt, 2021). When families and educators collaborate with mutual respect and shared responsibility, students with special needs receive stronger academic, emotional, and social support, leading to better overall development and success.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the Two-Way Communication Model, which emphasizes interaction, feedback, and mutual understanding between participants. This model is highly relevant to the lived experiences of Special Education teachers in fostering effective communication with families of learners with

special educational needs. In special education, communication goes beyond simply providing updates or instructions to parents; it involves listening to parents' concerns, acknowledging their emotions, encouraging their participation during Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, and adapting communication strategies based on their responses. These practices reflect the core principle of the two-way communication model, where teachers and families collaboratively build understanding and make decisions together. As a result, meaningful home-school partnerships are developed through continuous interaction rather than one-way information exchange.

Furthermore, the Two-Way Communication Model highlights the importance of feedback and adaptability, which were evident in the teachers' lived experiences. Teachers adjusted their communication approaches when parents were hesitant, emotional, or unresponsive by simplifying language, using translation tools, arranging informal meetings, and focusing on strength-based discussions. These strategies demonstrate that effective communication is dynamic, empathetic, and responsive, particularly in sensitive discussions about a child's development.

Yahya et al. (2024) further emphasized that two-way communication strengthens trust and transparency, while Bhasin (2021) and Chatzinikola (2022) highlighted the importance of using various communication channels such as phone calls, emails, text messages, and face-to-face meetings to maintain strong collaboration between schools and families. Ultimately, the Two-Way Communication Model provides a strong foundation for understanding how meaningful dialogue fosters trust, cooperation, and stronger educational partnerships in special needs education.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework showing the relationship between Special Education teachers and the families of learners with special educational needs on effective communication. The Conceptual Framework is built in the Two-Way Communication Model, which stresses reciprocal contact between the sender and the recipient to ensure feedback and mutual comprehension. To promote cooperation and enhance educational results, Special Education teachers must negotiate communication difficulties with the families of Learners with Special Educational Needs, and this model is very important to them.

Statement of the Problem

This study endeavored to find evidence of the lived experience of Special Education teachers on effective communication for the families of Learners with Special Educational Needs. The study addressed the following central research questions:

1. What specific communication strategies do Special Education teachers find most effective in building trust with families of learners with special educational needs?
2. How do Special Education teachers perceive their role in facilitating open communication and trust-building with families, and what training or support do they believe is necessary to enhance these skills?
3. What challenges do Special Education teachers encounter in establishing effective communication with families, and how do they address these challenges?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a descriptive-phenomenological (Husserlian) research design to explore the lived experiences of special education teachers in communicating with families of learners with special educational needs. This approach is suitable because it focuses on how teachers perceive and make meaning of their communication practices in supporting parental involvement in special education.

Husserlian phenomenology describes lived experiences without preconceived assumptions, using bracketing (epoché) to ensure the researcher sets aside bias and captures authentic participant voices (Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994). This method is appropriate for examining communication in special education, as it involves emotional, ethical, and professional dimensions, and allows for deeper insight into complex social interactions (Narayanan, 2024).

By analyzing teachers' narratives, the study identifies key themes and provides insights that can inform policy and improve inclusive practices. Overall, the descriptive phenomenological design is appropriate as it captures the essence of teachers lived experiences and supports meaningful interpretation of communication practices in special education.

Population and Sampling

The participants in this study were recruited from Britus International School, Special Education, consisting of all thirteen (13) Special Education lead teachers. After receiving authorization to conduct the study, the researcher used total enumeration through purposive sampling to include the entire population, reducing selection bias and ensuring that findings represent the group as a whole (Canonizado, 2021).

Eligible participants were Special Education lead teachers with at least one year of experience who serve as the main contact for parents regarding students' academic, behavioral, and developmental progress, and who maintain regular communication through newsletters, phone calls, emails, and meetings. Qualified participants were invited to take part in face-to-face interviews scheduled at mutually agreed-upon times and locations.

Research Instruments

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with lead teachers, validated by two subject matter experts and one qualitative research specialist. This approach allows flexibility while ensuring alignment with the study objectives and is widely recognized for generating rich qualitative data through a balance of structure and open-ended exploration (Pin, 2023). Content validation was conducted to assess the clarity, relevance, and organization of the interview questions using expert judgment (Paredes et al., 2021).

Data were collected to gain a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences (Knott et al., 2022). Triangulation was applied using focus groups, interviews, questionnaires, and communication documents between teachers and parents. From the 13 participants, five were selected for focus group discussions based on their willingness to participate and teaching experience ranging from three to ten years.

To ensure accuracy and credibility, participant transcript review and member checking were used, allowing participants to verify interview transcripts and interpretations via email (Delve, 2023; Lindheim, 2022).

Data Gathering Procedures

Ethical approval was obtained from the ERC before data collection. After approval, all Special Education lead teachers at Britus International School were invited to participate using total enumeration and purposive sampling. Participants provided written informed consent after being informed of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was ensured through pseudonyms and secure data handling (Narayanan, 2024).

Data collection tools were validated through consultation with the supervisor, two subject matter experts, and one qualitative research specialist, and were piloted prior to use. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and document review as part of methodological triangulation to ensure credibility and depth. Five teachers participated in focus groups (3–10 years' experience), while eight engaged in individual interviews to provide more detailed personal accounts.

Individual interviews followed a semi-structured guide with open-ended and probing questions to ensure consistency while allowing depth of response. Sessions lasted approximately 40–60 minutes and were conducted face-to-face, with audio recording used when permitted or otherwise supported by detailed note-taking.

Questionnaires provided structured data for comparison, while communication documents between teachers and parents were reviewed to validate reported experiences.

Triangulation was used to compare findings across interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and documents, strengthening credibility and reducing bias. Data were transcribed promptly and analyzed thematically to identify patterns and differences, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of teachers' lived experiences. All data were kept confidential, with identities protected through pseudonyms and secure storage, and will be destroyed after publication.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Data was collected using a recording device for interviews because it allowed the researcher to listen to them multiple times; however, due to participants' personality and culture, and the individual refused to be recorded, they were asked for a detailed note-taking or participant-approved partial recording. It was also transcribed within the week of the interview, and it ensured that the interviewees' comments were reported correctly.

Audio recordings were safely transcribed using a free software program, and qualitative analysis techniques, including mind mapping and coding, were performed using HyperResearch software.

The initial reading sought the overarching meanings of the thick data collected through interviews and observation during the subsequent readings, details regarding content, and issues that were searched for.

The study used thematic analysis following practical considerations.

Balance Subjectivity and Objectivity: While interpretation is an integral part of qualitative research, it is essential to ensure that personal biases are not introduced during the process of developing themes (Williams, 2024).

Validation of Themes: Review the transcripts and verify the themes to ensure they accurately reflect the data (Williams, 2024). After the data were collected, it was transcribed by research transcription, adviser's transcription, and external transcription.

Transparency: Record the decisions made throughout the coding and theme development process to strengthen the credibility of the research (Finlay, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In response to the research gaps identified in earlier studies, the researcher embarked on a qualitative study to capture the authentic strategies of the participants. The researcher gained important insights by using interviews as the main technique of gathering data. The results, analyses, and interpretations derived from the collected data are thus presented in this chapter. The conversations are organized according to certain study topics, each of which is backed up by participant interview responses and focused group discussions. The thematically grouped responses offer a clear and well-organized summary of the major data collected.

Specific Communication Strategies that Special Education teachers find most effective in building trust with families of learners with special educational needs

Specific communication strategies are currently employed in special needs education classes by teachers who effectively build trust with families of learners with special educational needs. The views and opinions of the participants about the communication strategies are made public. Thus, this part provides a detailed description of these encounters.

Themes

Consistent and Transparent Communication Active Listening and Empathy Cultural Sensitivity and Adaptation Family Involvement and Collaboration

Theme 1: Consistent and Transparent Communication

Special needs education requires open, honest, and reliable communication to build trust between teachers and parents. Such communication helps reduce student anxiety while enabling both parties to work together effectively in providing individualized and timely support. When communication is clear and consistent, it strengthens relationships among stakeholders and ensures that students with disabilities receive appropriate educational assistance. In this context, communication functions not only as information sharing but also as a key mechanism for building trust and collaboration in special education settings.

The findings suggest that trust is developed through structured, consistent, and proactive communication practices. Teachers who help regular updates parents feel informed, reassured, and actively involved in their child's educational progress. This continuous flow of information reduces uncertainty and strengthens parents' confidence in the teacher's commitment and professionalism. As communication becomes more transparent and dependable, it fosters stronger emotional security for families and enhances cooperation in supporting the learner's needs.

Participants highlighted the importance of frequent and transparent communication in building trust. Athira stated, "Building trust starts with consistent and proactive communication. I usually send weekly updates via email or phone calls... sharing both positive feedback and any concerns" (t.1, p.2, lines 14–25).

Similarly, Ensa explained, "We give parents daily feedback — updates, photos, short reports on their child's day. It helps parents gain confidence and trust because they see what's happening" (T.1, p.4, lines 68–75). Bu Ali added, "On Teams, I try to post pictures and videos almost every day showing how their child is doing... It opens the door for better conversations later" (t.1, p.7, lines 210–220).

Likewise, Miss THH noted, "From the very beginning of the school year, I make sure to post daily updates about what we've done in class... It reassures parents that I'm attentive to their child's needs" (t.1, p.9, lines 270–280). These responses reflect how consistent communication practices build parental trust and engagement.

These findings are supported by Pergolizzi-Wentworth (2025), who emphasizes that clear and structured communication systems are essential for building trust and encouraging active parental participation in the educational process. The study highlights that regular and transparent updates help parents feel more confident and involved in their child's learning. Similarly, Roldán et al. (2021) found that effective collaboration is strengthened through frequent communication, teacher commitment, and a welcoming school environment. Their study further shows that when teachers maintain open communication and demonstrate responsiveness to students' needs, parental trust increases, leading to stronger home-school partnerships and improved outcomes for students with special needs.

Theme 2: Active Listening and Empathy

Active listening and empathy are essential competencies for teachers in special education, particularly when engaging with parents of learners with special needs. The findings indicate that these two practices are central to building trust, strengthening communication, and supporting collaborative problem-solving between home and school. When teachers listen attentively, allow parents to fully express their concerns, and respond with understanding rather than immediate solutions or defensiveness, parents feel acknowledged and respected. This validation positions parents as knowledgeable partners in their child's development and strengthens the relational foundation necessary for effective collaboration.

The findings suggests that active listening and empathy are not simply interpersonal skills but professional tools that directly influence the quality of home-school partnerships. Teachers who consistently demonstrate patience, emotional sensitivity, and reflective listening create a safe communication space where parents feel comfortable sharing challenges. This is particularly important in special education, where parents often experience advocacy fatigue due to the ongoing demands of supporting their children. Empathetic engagement helps reduce emotional burden, improves openness, and encourages sustained involvement in the educational process.

Participants in the study reinforced these ideas through their lived experiences. Athira explained, “Active listening without judgment is very important. When parents feel heard and not judged, they begin to trust more” (1, p.2, lines 27–35).

Mahmoud emphasized the importance of confirming understanding by restating parents’ concerns, noting that parents value being heard rather than being instructed. Darra highlighted that consistent updates combined with genuine care gradually build trust over time, while Bu Ali stressed the importance of listening carefully to parents’ concerns without judgment in order to better support the child both at home and in school. Collectively, these responses show that empathy and active listening are consistently linked to stronger trust and communication.

These findings are supported by Ampofo (2025), who found that teacher empathy significantly contributes to student mental health, classroom participation, and improved communication between families and schools. The study further emphasizes that empathetic teachers create emotionally safe learning environments that encourage parental engagement and student involvement, recommending that teacher training programs prioritize the development of empathy and listening skills.

Similarly, Chatzinikola (2021) highlights that active listening is a foundational element of effective two-way communication, serving as the first step in building cooperative relationships between teachers and parents. The study further explains that when teachers actively listen, parents become more engaged in their children’s education, teachers gain deeper insight into student needs, and stronger home–school collaboration is achieved.

Theme 3: Cultural Sensitivity and Adaptation

Special educators must be culturally responsive and willing to change their behavior in response to the unique characteristics of the families they work with. True respect for cultural values and tradition among educators makes trust, engagement, and an authentic model of inclusive classroom environments where learners’ identities are respected on par with their academic needs possible.

Communication approaches must therefore be sensitive to each family’s beliefs about disability, cultural norms concerning authority and privacy, and how families prefer to communicate. Relatively effective cultural responsiveness in this situation will involve the development of a relationship based on rapport, active listening, respect and gaining knowledge about each.

Culturally responsive teaching has become increasingly significant in the field of inclusive education, particularly for Learners with Special Educational Needs. According to Paculan and Maguilang (2024), better learning results, increased student engagement, and a stronger sense of belonging in the classroom might result from teaching strategies that are in line with students’ cultural backgrounds and life experiences. Athira made mentioned:

Since I’m an expat and don’t speak Arabic, I usually ask my Arabic-speaking assistant to translate... to ensure parents fully understand and feel comfortable. (Athira, t.1,p.3, lines 60–70)

Furthermore, Cher and Darra reiterated respectively;

Cultural sensitivity is definitely key. I make sure to respect their values and listen carefully to their concerns. (Cher, t.1, p.8, lines 240–250)

Different cultural backgrounds tayo dito sa Bahrain... some parents prefer face-to-face meetings because it feels more respectful and personal. (Darra, t.1,p.6, lines 190–205)

Students who are supported and respected by their teachers grow to be motivated, while maintaining cultural awareness. When teachers are culturally insensitive, they don’t understand and respect the culture of our students." Communication barriers remain, including the fact that students did not attend to basic needs by a teacher whom they may not trust and lack of interest for participation to discussions in class. This could lead to a lack of rapport between the teacher and student (Fortunato, 2025)

Theme 4: Family Involvement and Collaboration

Special educators must be culturally responsive and willing to adjust their behavior in response to the unique characteristics of the families they work with. Genuine respect for cultural values and traditions among educators strengthens trust and engagement, and supports the creation of inclusive classroom environments where learners' identities are valued alongside their academic needs.

Communication approaches must therefore be sensitive to each family's beliefs about disability, cultural norms regarding authority and privacy, and preferred ways of communicating. Effective cultural responsiveness in this context involves building relationships grounded in rapport, active listening, respect, and continuous learning about each family's background.

Culturally responsive teaching has become increasingly important in inclusive education, particularly for learners with special educational needs. According to Paculan and Maguilang (2024), aligning teaching strategies with students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences leads to improved learning outcomes, higher engagement, and a stronger sense of belonging in the classroom. Athira made mentioned:

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"Different cultural backgrounds tayo dito sa Bahrain... some parents prefer face-to-face meetings because it feels more respectful and personal" (Darra, t.1, p.6, lines 190–205).

These findings are supported by Fortunato (2025), who states that students who feel respected and culturally understood by their teachers tend to be more motivated and engaged in learning. Conversely, when cultural sensitivity is lacking, communication barriers increase, trust is weakened, and students may show reduced participation and interest in classroom discussions. This highlights that cultural responsiveness is essential for maintaining strong relationships and effective communication in special education settings.

Special Education teachers' role in facilitating open communication and trust-building with families

Teachers in special education revealed their roles in facilitating open communication and building trust with the families of learners with special educational needs, and stated the training and support they needed in enhancing their skills.

Themes

Communicators and Relationship Builders Cultural Mediators and Sensitivity Practitioners Learners and Collaborators

Three key themes were identified: Communicators and relationship builders, cultural mediators and sensitivity practitioners, learners and collaborators, supporters and advocates for families, and empowered collaborators and partners.

Theme 1: Communicators and Relationship Builders

Special education teachers function as relationship developers who establish communication channels to connect learners with special educational needs to their families for emotional support. Teachers function as communicators through their practice of sharing information directly with specific groups while establishing effective dialogue between students, their families, and school staff. Relationship builders among teachers create dependable environments that support learners' development, resilience, and overall well-being.

Participants emphasized consistent, multi-channel communication and emotional sensitivity. Athira mentioned:

“If a parent doesn’t respond to messages, I keep reaching out via different channels like email, phone calls, or Teams messages... I make sure my messages are supportive and non-judgmental.” (Athira, t.2, p.1, lines 13–15)

“Communication notebooks, paper notes, phone calls, and face-to-face meetings.” (Athira, t.2, p.1, lines 19–20)

Moreover, Ensa and Bu Ali expressed:

“Even with the challenges, I make sure to share something every day — maybe a short note or a picture. Even small updates matter.” (Ensa, t.2, p.2, line 40)

“I share both the challenges and the progress; it always gives hope. I invite parents to share what works at home and ask for their ideas on managing behaviors.” (Bu Ali, t.2, p.5, lines 164–166)

The findings suggest that communication in special education is continuous, relational, and emotionally grounded. Teachers do not simply transmit information; they actively maintain contact, sustain engagement, and adapt communication strategies when challenges arise. This persistence strengthens trust, encourages parental involvement, and supports both academic and emotional development of learners with special needs.

These findings are supported by Mann et al. (2023), who found that parents view teacher communication as essential for building trust through regular contact, recognition of student progress, and empathetic listening. The study also shows that when teachers actively involve parents in planning and decision-making, student academic performance and emotional stability improve. In addition, Alpha School (2025) emphasizes that strong teacher–family cooperation enhances classroom management and contributes to the development of students’ social skills, self-confidence, and communication abilities.

Theme 2: Cultural Mediators and Sensitivity Practitioners

Special Education teachers function as cultural mediators and sensitivity practitioners through their deliberate efforts to bridge linguistic and cultural differences while fostering trust and open communication between families, learners, and schools. This role emphasizes respecting cultural identities and integrating them into communication and classroom practices to support inclusion.

Participants highlighted culturally responsive communication strategies. Ali mentioned:

“Speaking in Arabic during conversations helps the dialogue feel warm and natural.” (Ali, t.2, p.5, line 167)

Furthermore, Thasni and Darra also expressed:

“Respect is the most important. You must respect their culture, their way of thinking. And listen—really listen—to what they say, without rushing.” (Thasni, t.2, p.4, lines 116–118)

“Instead of telling them they’re wrong, I try to understand their view and explain what we do in a way that connects with their values.” (Thasni, t.2, p.4, lines 129–130)

“I use translation apps sometimes, simple language, and visuals... I also offer flexible meeting times... Most importantly, I try to build trust by showing respect and patience.” (Darra, t.2, p.4, lines 142–144)

The findings indicate that culturally responsive communication strengthens trust and promotes meaningful engagement between families and schools. Teachers who acknowledge cultural differences and adapt their communication practices are better able to create respectful, inclusive, and supportive relationships with parents and learners.

These findings are supported by Gaspar et al. (2025), who explain that culturally responsive practices strengthen home–school partnerships by valuing families’ cultural backgrounds and integrating them into classroom

learning. The Aditya Birla Integrated School (2025) further emphasizes that respecting cultural differences and adapting teaching approaches enhances inclusion, strengthens parental involvement, and improves student learning experiences.

Theme 3: Learners and Collaborators

Special Education teachers function as learners and collaborators by continuously improving their skills, engaging in professional development, and working cooperatively with learners, families, and colleagues. They remain open to feedback and actively adjust their communication and teaching practices to better meet diverse student needs.

Participants emphasized the importance of training and collaboration. Athira revealed:

“Regular training on family engagement, especially cultural competence and communication skills, would help a lot... Support networks where teachers share experiences and strategies would also be valuable.” (Athira, t.2, p.5, lines 24–26)

Furthermore, Thasni, Bu Ali and Ensa added:

“Teachers definitely need training in cultural sensitivity and trauma-informed communication... Multilingual resources help a lot too.” (Thasni, t.2, p.3, lines 99–102)

“Training on cultural sensitivity and managing difficult conversations would be very helpful... Having resources in multiple languages... would make a big difference.” (Bu Ali, t.2, p.5, lines 178–181)

“I’d say professional training and support groups. Joining support groups really helps because you get to hear different parents’ perspectives and challenges. That makes it easier to understand them and communicate more effectively.” (Ensa, t.2, p.5, lines 49–50)

The findings suggest that collaboration and continuous learning are essential for effective communication in special education. Teachers who engage in training, peer support, and reflective practice strengthen their ability to manage complex communication challenges and improve partnerships with families and colleagues.

These findings are supported by Alsudairy (2024), who found that collaborative training and co-teaching practices improve communication, strengthen teamwork, and enhance inclusive learning environments. Basister et al. (2025) further emphasize that teacher collaboration and professional growth foster innovation, improve problem-solving, and strengthen both academic and social outcomes for learners with special needs.

Challenges Special Education teachers encounter in establishing effective communication with families, and how they address these challenges

Effective communication with families, and how do they address these challenges?

Inevitably, teachers who have the opportunity to teach learners with special educational needs encounter difficulties in effective communication with their families and in addressing it. In teaching learners with special educational needs, establishing effective communication brings challenges.

Themes

Communication Barriers and Culturally Responsive Communication Emotional Sensitivity and Compassionate Communication Parental Expectations and Reframing the Teacher’s Role

Theme 1: Communication Barriers and Culturally Responsive Communication

Communication in special education is often complicated by language differences, cultural misunderstandings, limited access to resources, and structural power imbalances between teachers and families. These barriers can

prevent clear understanding and reduce meaningful participation of parents in their child's education. As a result, communication becomes uneven, especially when families and educators do not share the same linguistic or cultural background, making collaboration more difficult and sometimes strained.

Participants' responses highlight how these barriers are experienced in daily practice and how teachers attempt to address them through adaptive strategies. Athira stated, "Language and cultural differences often cause misunderstandings, making discussions about sensitive topics more complex" (Athira, t.3, p.1, lines 33–35). She also shared that while she has learned basic Arabic greetings to build rapport, she relies on an Arabic-speaking assistant for important messages and meetings to ensure accuracy.

Similarly, Ensa explained that "The main difficulty has been language barriers... I ask our teaching assistants or admin staff to help translate... Parents really appreciate that — it makes them feel understood and respected" (Ensa, t.3, p.2, lines 67–70). Cher added that she simplifies language, uses visuals, and seeks translation support when needed, noting that "Active listening and empathy are key... Overly technical or formal language can confuse or intimidate parents, so I avoid that" (Cher, t.2, p.7, lines 246–247; 251–254). These accounts show that teachers rely heavily on simplification, translation, and empathy to bridge communication gaps and maintain trust.

The findings suggest that communication barriers in special education are not only linguistic but also relational and cultural in nature. Teachers who are flexible, patient, and willing to adjust their communication styles are more successful in building trust and encouraging parental engagement. However, when such adaptations are inconsistent or unsupported, misunderstandings can still arise, limiting effective collaboration between home and school.

These findings are supported by Al-Ahmed (2025), who identifies parent-related, teacher-related, and institutional barriers as key factors affecting communication, including language differences, cultural gaps, and varying educational backgrounds of parents.

Similarly, Paculan and Maguilang (2024) emphasize that differences in cultural expectations and communication styles can weaken trust if not properly addressed, highlighting the importance of teacher sensitivity and adaptability. They further argue that culturally responsive communication requires continuous reflection, training, and adjustment from educators to ensure inclusive and effective engagement with families. Together, these studies confirm that overcoming communication barriers in special education depends on culturally responsive practices that prioritize understanding, flexibility, and mutual respect.

Theme 2: Emotional Sensitivity and Compassionate Communication

Emotional sensitivity and compassionate communication are essential in special education because discussions with families often involve stress, uncertainty, and strong emotional reactions. Teachers frequently encounter parents who may feel overwhelmed, defensive, or in denial about their child's needs, especially when discussing behavior, diagnosis, or progress. These emotional dynamics can make communication more complex and require teachers to respond with patience, empathy, and emotional control to maintain constructive relationships and support collaboration.

Participants described how emotional reactions from parents influence communication and how they intentionally adjust their responses to maintain trust.

Athira shared that "Parents get emotional or defensive discussing sensitive topics like behavior or progress" (Athira, t.3, p.1, lines 33–34). She explained that she responds by allowing parents to express their feelings first, acknowledging their emotions, and then gently redirecting the conversation toward progress and next steps, stating, "I let him speak first... acknowledged his feelings by saying, 'I understand this is hard,' then focused on small achievements and next steps" (Athira, t.3, p.2, lines 37–39).

Mahmoud noted that "Parents in denial about their child's condition can be difficult to engage with" (Mahmoud, t.3, p.3, line 98), but emphasized patience and encouragement, focusing on strengths and hope.

Similarly, Thasni and Bu Ali described remaining calm during emotionally charged conversations, using simple and positive language, listening carefully, and focusing on small improvements to build trust. Diana added that trust is strengthened by actively listening without judgment and celebrating small wins. These responses highlight that emotional regulation and empathy are central to effective communication in difficult situations.

The findings suggests that emotional sensitivity is not only a communication skill but also a relational strategy that helps reduce tension and build trust between teachers and families. When teachers acknowledge emotions, remain calm, and focus on strengths, parents are more likely to feel understood and supported, which encourages openness and cooperation. In contrast, when emotional concerns are not handled carefully, misunderstandings and mistrust can increase, weakening collaboration between home and school.

These findings are supported by White (2021), who found that teachers and parents of children with special needs often experience emotionally intense interactions, particularly when families are coping with diagnoses such as autism spectrum disorder. The study highlights that limited training in emotion-focused communication can hinder effective collaboration and increase misunderstanding.

Similarly, Herndon (2021) emphasizes that emotional tension, fear, and stress within families and school environments can lead to mistrust and reduced willingness to communicate. However, educators with strong social-emotional skills are better able to manage their own emotions, respond empathetically, and create supportive communication spaces that improve family engagement and collaboration.

Theme 3: Parental Expectations Reframing the Teacher's Role

A major challenge in special education is parental expectations and the need to redefine the teacher's role in order to build balanced and collaborative relationships with families. Many parents tend to view teachers as sole experts or authority figures rather than equal partners, which can create power imbalances and limit meaningful collaboration. These differing expectations, priorities, and communication styles may result in one-sided relationships that hinder trust, understanding, and student progress.

Participants highlighted how these expectations influence communication and how teachers intentionally work to reframe their role. Athira noted, "Some parents may be used to the teacher as authority..." (Athira, t.1, p.1, line 14). Ensa added, "Parents might think teachers can fix everything" (Ensa, t.3, p.2, line 52). Mahmoud explained that some parents become defensive or in denial, which complicates communication, and emphasized the importance of reminding families that "we're not 'fixing' their children overnight but supporting their growth step by step" (Mahmoud, t.3, p.3, lines 85–87).

Thasni shared that she consistently promotes collaboration by saying, "Let's work together, instead of acting like I know everything," and emphasized shared decision-making: "We make goals together, not just teacher deciding" (Thasni, t.3, p.4, lines 125–128).

Similarly, Bu Ali observed that parents sometimes worry when teachers appear as the only experts and stressed that collaborative communication helps parents feel "respected and included, not like they're being told what to do" (Bu Ali, t.3, p.6, lines 207–212). These responses reflect a clear shift toward partnership-based communication.

The finding suggests that redefining the teacher's role from sole expert to collaborative partner is essential for effective special education communication. When teachers actively involve parents in decision-making and emphasize shared responsibility, trust is strengthened and communication becomes more balanced. This shift also reduces misunderstandings and helps parents feel valued and empowered, ultimately improving student support and engagement.

These findings are supported by Estrada (2023), who found that mismatched expectations between parents and teachers often lead to one-sided communication, reduced collaboration, and lower student outcomes. Similarly, Witte et al. (2021) emphasize that strong communication between families and teachers enhances parental involvement and improves both academic and social-emotional development of learners. Furthermore, the

Arkansas State University (2025) study highlights that effective collaboration requires teachers to adopt empathetic, flexible, and strengths-based communication approaches, positioning parents as co-experts in their children's education.

CONCLUSION

The findings confirm that effective communication in special education is relational and based on continuous interaction between teachers and families. Trust is built not through one-way reporting but through ongoing dialogue, emotional responsiveness, cultural awareness, and collaboration. Participants showed that communication becomes meaningful when it is consistent, adaptive, and sensitive to the diverse needs of families, reflecting the core principles of the Two-Way Communication Model.

Teachers were found to act as active partners rather than sole information providers, adjusting their communication to address emotional concerns, language barriers, and differing parental expectations. This flexibility highlights that communication in special education is dynamic and co-constructed, requiring mutual understanding and shared engagement between teachers and parents to support learners effectively. Overall, the results strongly support the Two-Way Communication Model. Trust and cooperation develop through reciprocal communication, not unilateral exchange.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that special education schools strengthen structured yet flexible communication systems that support continuous two-way interaction between teachers and families. Schools should provide multiple communication channels such as messaging platforms, scheduled meetings, progress updates, and visual or translated materials to accommodate diverse linguistic and cultural needs. Regular and consistent communication protocols can help ensure that parents remain informed, reduce misunderstandings, and strengthen trust. In addition, schools should institutionalize practices that encourage teachers to maintain proactive contact with families rather than only communicating when issues arise, ensuring that communication remains supportive, transparent, and ongoing.

It is also recommended that professional development programs be enhanced to focus on emotional intelligence, active listening, cultural responsiveness, and collaborative communication strategies. Training should equip teachers with skills to manage emotional conversations, address parental expectations effectively, and build partnership-based relationships with families. Schools may also consider establishing peer support systems and collaborative learning communities where teachers can share experiences and strategies for engaging families of learners with special educational needs. Strengthening these competencies will promote more inclusive, empathetic, and effective communication practices, ultimately improving family engagement and learner outcomes.

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