PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE SCHOOLING OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract

This study explores the association between special educational needs (SEN) and the level, mode, and intensity of parental involvement in Hungarian schools. Anchored in the principles of child-centered education and inclusive collaboration, the research investigates whether families of SEN students engage differently compared to their non-SEN counterparts, particularly when additional socio-economic disadvantages are present. A literature review revealed limited comparative analysis between SEN and non-SEN groups, prompting a focus on existing studies that examine parent-school relationships, primarily from the adult perspective. The empirical component utilizes a secondary analysis of the National Assessment of Basic Competences (NABC) database, drawing on longitudinal student-level data from the 2015 (Grade 6), 2017 (Grade 8), and 2019 (Grade 10) cohorts. A refined dataset tracks students on an uninterrupted educational path, allowing analysis of parental involvement indicators derived from five items in the background questionnaire. Findings suggest that while parental involvement generally

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declines over time, the decline is steeper among students with multiple disadvantages than those with SEN alone. Support with homework stands out as the most sustained form of involvement, although it remains limited for families with lower educational capital. Contrary to assumptions, SEN students receive substantial parental attention through secondary school, highlighting the potential for constructive alliances between teachers and families. However, PTA meeting attendance is markedly lower among parents of disadvantaged learners. The data also emphasize that students classified as both SEN and socioeconomically disadvantaged (LOW SES) exhibit the highest dropout risk, stressing the need for targeted interventions.

Keywords: SEN, parental involvement, disadvantage
Discipline: education

Absztrakt

Tanulmányunk a sajátos nevelési igényű (SNI) gyermekek és a szülők magyarországi iskolákban való részvételének szintje, módja és intenzitása közötti összefüggéseket vizsgálja. A gyermekközpontú oktatás és az inkluzív együttműködés elveire épülő kutatás azt vizsgálja, hogy a SNI gyermekek családjai eltérő módon vesznek-e részt az iskolai életben, mint a nem SNI gyermekek családjai, különösen akkor, ha további társadalmi-gazdasági hátrányok is fennállnak. A szakirodalom áttekintése alapján megállapítható, hogy az SNI és a nem SNI csoportok közötti összehasonlító elemzések száma korlátozott, ezért a kutatás elsősorban a szülők és az iskola közötti kapcsolatokat vizsgáló, elsősorban felnőttek szemszögéből készült tanulmányokra összpontosít. Az empirikus rész az Országos kompeteniciamérés (OKM) adatbázis másodlagos elemzését használja, a 2015-ös (6. osztály), 2017-es (8. osztály) és 2019-es (10. osztály) kohorszokból származó longitudinális tanulói szintű adatokra támaszkodva. Az összekapcsolat adatbázisban nyomonkövethető a töretlen tanulási úttal rendelkező diákok tanulmányi pályája, lehetővé téve a háttérkérdőív öt eleméből származó szülői részvétel mutatóinak idősoros elemzését. Az eredmények arra utalnak, hogy míg a szülői részvétel általában csökken az idő múlásával, a csökkenés a többszörösen hátrányos helyzetű diákok körében meredekebb, mint a kizárólag SNI diákok körében. A házi feladatokban való segítségnyújtás tűnik a leginkább tartós részvételi formának, bár az alacsonyabb oktatási tőkével rendelkező családok esetében továbbra is korlátozott. A feltételezésekkel ellentétben a SNI diákok jelentős szülői figyelmet kapnak a középiskolában, ami rámutat a tanárok és a családok közötti konstruktív együttműködés lehetőségére. A szülői értekezleteken való részvétel azonban jelentősen alacsonyabb a hátrányos helyzetű tanulók Az adatok azt is hangsúlyozzák, hogy az SNI és a hátrányos helyzetű diákok mutatják a legmagasabb lemorzsolódási kockázatot, ami célzott beavatkozások szükségességét hangsúlyozza.

Kulcsszavak: SNI, szülői bevonódás, hátrányos helyzet
Disciplines: neveléstudomány

One of the main questions of our study is whether the need for special education is associated with a different level of parental involvement or a different mode or amplitude of involvement. Educational institutions must place the interests of the child at the centre of their practices while maintaining realistic expectations of parents and taking into account their initial circumstances in order to foster meaningful collaboration. Although challenges may arise throughout the process, the long-

term benefits for all stakeholders make this a valuable and future-oriented investment (Varga Nagy et al., 2022).

At the beginning of our study, we review the literature to ground our empirical work. We found not much research in the literature review specifically comparing the two groups. We therefore examine studies that focus mainly on the relationship between parents of children with special educational needs and their schools. These studies approach parental involvement from different perspectives. Most studies focus on the adult perspective, looking at parents or teachers, fewer examine the child/student perspective.

However, research on parental involvement of children with disabilities often takes a surprisingly different approach to parental involvement than that of mainstream students. Some of the literature we have reviewed suggests that the zero step in parental involvement is for the parent to allow their child to attend school or contribute to their child's schooling. For students with neurotypical development, schooling is no longer an issue or is becoming less of a problem in most education systems worldwide. However, for students with disabilities, particularly those with multiple disabilities, it is still not entirely clear in many countries around the world that they can attend school. In Cambodia, unfortunately, the participation of children with disabilities in school is a significant challenge, due to several factors, one of which is the harassment experienced in the integrated education system. Students with disabilities often face negative attitudes from their peers, which can discourage them from attending school, causing severe psychological trauma and preventing them from learning and developing. There is also a widespread belief, particularly in rural communities, that children with disabilities are not able to understand, which can seriously stigmatise students. However, in an interview study with parents of students with disabilities in Bhutan, parental responsibilities included transporting the student to and from school, highlighting the importance of schooling (Ravet & Mtika, 2024). So the first distinction is that parental involvement in school, if we take Larocque's definition of parental involvement as investing in the student's education (Larocque et al., 2011), then the starting point of parental involvement is much "earlier" than for typically developing children, because schooling itself can be interpreted as parental involvement. Of course, it cannot be generalised to all children whose parents do not want them to attend school. It is more common in the Global South and especially in the case of severe disabilities. However, this problem may also arise in Hungary, where parents (often out of necessity) choose to have their children study in an individualised curriculum (Bodonyi & Pazonyi, 2022). Of course, it is important to remember that there may be significant differences between countries, as the structure of systems and the attitudes of parents and professionals may differ (Murray et al., 2018).

It is not easy for parents to raise a child with a learning disability, even if he or she does not have a blatant disability. In most cases, SEN status will be apparent before school, while SILBD status will only become apparent in the first few years of schooling or even later. The diagnostic process is often experienced positively by parents because the particularities they perceive in their child are given a name. However, it also leads to confusion about the diagnosis (Pentyliuk, 2002).

Just as the type and extent of a child's disability is very much a factor in the situation of families, it is also important for parents' school inclusion. However, it is important to note that families of children without special educational needs are also linked by characteristics that in some respects predict similar problems and joys (e.g. type of settlement, parents' world view, or social status, nationality), and that in the case of families of children with special educational needs, this can be compounded

by one more factor, namely the type of problem. In interviews with parents of children with autism, Casillas and colleagues found that although they studied Hispanic and non-Hispanic American families, who had many differences, yet reported very similar problems, all reported a belief in their self-efficacy, challenges, stress and coping (cooping), and goals and expectations (Casillas et al., 2017).

Some of the factors affecting the intensity of involvement are amplified. Families from low socio-economic backgrounds do not have sufficient resources to access the full range of support for their child or to provide them with specific support. Similarly, other contextual variables affect children's access to school and development. One of the most significant of these is the type of settlement, because access to remedial education and appropriate schooling is much weaker in rural areas (Brussino, 2020). It is also clear from Jigyel et al.'s research that parent-to-parent interaction is more common in urban regions, even though these opportunities are important because they strengthen parents' social capital and reduce stress (Jigyel et al., 2019).

Stanley emphasises the importance of parental advocacy, which stresses that parents were already seeking strong advocacy opportunities in the first half of the 20th century to ensure that their children with special educational needs had appropriate opportunities. In this context, parents are among the founding members of many associations, and it is more natural for them to represent their children's interests in the health, education or social welfare systems. Therefore, they can be more involved in school, often advocating for the child's interests (Stanley, 2015). In a qualitative study of low-status African American mothers whose children had various disabilities, she finds that from the moment the child is born, or the moment parents perceive that something is wrong, a process begins that encourages the parent to make a strong effort to advocate for the child's interests in the health and education systems. This advocacy can be individual or group, with peer parents (Stanley, 2015).

Involvement is not only about representing the child's interests, but also positively impacts parents. Parents who have a child with special needs often experience greater stress because they are often confronted with the fact that their child does not fit into the education system. However, parental involvement can reduce this stress because parents involved in their child's school activities have reduced anxiety about their child's future (Reio Jr. & Fornes, 2011).

However, the level of inclusion is influenced not only by social status, place of residence or other parent characteristics, but also by the child's level of disability. Parents of children with disabilities who have children with severe developmental disabilities are less likely to be involved in supporting their children at home with homework and other educational tasks because parents do not have high expectations of their child (Jigyel et al., 2019).

Choice of school can also be an important predictor of engagement, as it can be seen as an indicator of commitment to school. In cases where a child is born with a disability, or it becomes clear later that something is not normal in the child's development, this can create difficulties for parents, which stigmatising attitudes in the environment can also compound. This can be helped if the child is placed in a majority school (Pető, 2003).

If the student was already diagnosed at the start of school, the parents decide to choose an inclusive/inclusive institution for their child when choosing a school. Making this decision is not an easy task, and in most cases, the decision is supported by a specialist service or other professional. A systematic literature review of the school choice of parents of children with autism by Gabriella Koltai and colleagues found that parents feel abandoned and stressed by this process, and would need more support from a professional (Koltai et al., 2021).

In other words, the purpose and impact of parental involvement are different and more intense for the families of the children concerned. As the students have special needs, for the institution to deal with them appropriately, the parents' advocacy and help may be needed, increasing the parents' sense of competence, thus reducing stress. At the same time, the teacher's information from the parent may be more valuable to the teacher. Cooperation between teachers and parents is an important factor for all students, but it is imperative in cases where the student is experiencing difficulties in learning or schoolwork. Teachers can benefit from gathering information about students from parents, as in their case, developing an individual development plan is most useful (Adams et al., 2016). In the interviews with parents, the lack of information shows how important this topic is for parents (Varga Nagy et al., 2022).

In many cases, parental involvement does not mean equal involvement of parents. For typically developing children, maternal involvement is more common (Kim & Hill, 2015). For parents of affected children, it is even more typical that the burden of parenting is not equally shared between parents in many cases. In rural areas, the burden of caring for the child falls much more on the mother, while in urban areas it is more evenly distributed (Jigyel et al., 2019). This is a big problem because mothers are left to cope with the task independently, so their stress levels are higher. At the same time, fathers cannot participate in care and school-related tasks due to their work commitments.

Although the role of fathers in children's lives is undisputed, research shows that fathers tend to be absent from parental involvement. This is even more the case for children with special educational needs, despite growing evidence that actively involved fathers positively influence their children's academic achievement and mental and emotional well-being. Research shows that although fathers spend much less time with their disabled children, they need to be as involved in their education and are just as anxious about the future as mothers.

Linder and Chitwood (1984) conducted a pioneering study on fathers' involvement with disabled children. They found that the majority of fathers spend less than 20 hours a week with their disabled child. Regarding the division of parental responsibilities, mothers bore the brunt of dealing with parenting issues and problems. However, 80% of fathers believed that the child's upbringing and support were a shared responsibility between parents and school. The study results suggest that fathers with children with disabilities are committed to their children's education, and 85.7% would like to participate in training and support programmes (Linder & Chitwood, 1984).

Socio-economic background is a very important factor. Research shows that parental educational attainment and socio-economic status play a key role in parental involvement: parents with lower levels of education and less financial stability tend to be less active in their children's education. The results of Tan (2017) and Jæger and Karlson (2018) show that although financial status is not a negligible factor, the cultural capital of the family, which is also related to educational attainment, plays an even more important role in involvement (Jæger & Karlson, 2018; Tan et al, 2020) Li and Fischer also highlight the importance of socioeconomic status when examining home-based parental involvement, as they have found a strong relationship between socioeconomic background and the level of parental involvement (Jæger & Karlson, 2018; Li & Fischer, 2017).

Material and methods

Our empirical work is based on the national competency measurement databases. Our analyses used a constructed National Assessment of Basic Competencies (NABC) and created a Longitudinal Database (NABCLL). In Hungary, between 2008

and 2019, the NABC assessment was conducted every year in grades 6, 8, and 10 using the same methodology. Data were collected through a full-population survey of all eligible participants. The Hungarian Educational Authority (Oktatási Hivatal - OH) is the data controller and organizer of the assessment. Students have individual assessment IDs so that we can link their data across successive assessments. In 2020, the assessment was canceled due to the COVID lockdown, and in 2021, OH released a research database without individual IDs. In 2022, the OH switched to an online measurement system and expanded the areas of competence measured: in addition to reading and mathematics, foreign language, history, and science measurements were also included. The set of questions in the parental background questionnaires also changed, which altered the structure of the entire research database. It means that it could no longer be linked to data from previous years. For this reason, we chose the last year for which a time series for grades 6-10 could be followed, i.e., 2015, as the base year for our research.

The longitudinal database is more favourable for our research because it allows us to examine the same student population through three measurements, allowing us to filter out anomalies that could arise from cross-sectional studies (e.g., the change in the proportion of SEN students in our database is not due to there being more or fewer diagnosed students in another grade, but instead to the fact that some of the same students received new diagnoses or dropped out).

The database used for this research was created by merging student-level data. Our baseline year was the 2015 NABC measurement in Year 6, where Year 6 students were the base. As a first step, we merged the student, site and institution databases, and then repeated this step for the 2017 grade 8 and 2019 grade 10 databases. We then compiled a database using the individual identifiers of Year 6 students to track students' achievements and backgrounds over four years in the case of an unbroken learning pathway.

Sample

Our initial database contains 91956 students, and the final merged data from three different years contains 104110 rows, i.e., the number of students with measurement IDs. The discrepancy between the two numbers indicates that our response gap will be high for many questions. The construction of the database is based on the fact that students who appear in one of the three years with their identifiers are included, i.e. they may have dropped out, repeated a class, and thus dropped out or entered our database. This is a problem that we cannot address. However, for this study, we have designed a database that includes only students who have followed an unbroken learning path, i.e. only those who have measurement data in all three years (non-response may still occur in this case, of course, as the data in the background questionnaire may still be incomplete). The NABC uses a population sample, i.e. all students have measurement identifiers for their year groups. In this period, the survey was still paper-based and took place on a single measurement day, meaning that if a student were absent on that day, his/her data would be missing. Since we are talking about students with SEN, it is important to note that in special schools, no NABC is written, and only those students with integrated education are for whom the principal does not request an exemption (Technical descriptiton).

It is important to note that the classification of a student as SEN or as having multiple disadvantages is not voluntary but centrally recorded, so this data is reliable, and there should be no non-response from respondents for this question. National statistics usually record a pupil in a single category, the one with the most characteristic symptoms, while in the NABC category system, it is common for a pupil to be recorded in more than one category. In

the case of SEN, it is well below one per cent that someone is recorded in more than one category.

Tools

In this study, we used a scale based on the NABC background questionnaire and conducted a secondary analysis of this data. The background questionnaire includes five questions that can be interpreted as indicators of parental involvement (Epstein, 2018). These include helping with homework, talking about what has happened at school, discussing what you have read, helping with homework, and attending a parent-teacher conference. The NABC measures all five variables on a four-point frequency scale. Parents complete the background questionnaire on paper with their students.

Procedure

In this study, we used descriptive statistics. First, we examined the distribution of students and their responses to the background questionnaire. Then, we used the SPSS 22 statistical program for the analysis.

Results

The socio-cultural background of the students is relevant to our research topic. The Table 1 shows the proportion of SEN, students with integration, learning and behavioural difficulties (SILBD) and low SES students in the given year groups. We can observe that their proportion is steadily decreasing.

Table 1. Number and proportion of pupils with SEN, SILBD and low SES students in the NABCLL 1 database. Source: NABCLL

Diagnosis	Vol.6., 2015		Vol. 8., 2017		Vol.10, 2019	
	Main	%	Main	%	Main	%
Any SEN	5427	5,9	5275	6	3757	4,5
Any SILBD	8568	9,3	7729	8,8	4284	5,1
Low SES	9282	10,1	6761	7,7	3045	5,6

Of course, there is also the question of the overlap between the two categories. The data in the Table 2 shows that SEN pupils are overrepresented among disadvantaged pupils.

Table 2. Proportion of SEN pupils in non-severely disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged groups (%). Source: NABCLL

Diagnosis	Vol. 6., 2015		Vol. 8., 2017		Vol. 10, 2019	
	No LOW SES	LOW SES	No LOW SES	LOW SES	No LOW SES	LOW SES
Any SEN	5,4	10,4	5,6	11,1	4,4	6,2

*** Significant difference: chi-square sign. p<0.001.

Based on the data in the table, the percentage of pupils with SEN in grade 6 in the total population is 5.9 (see previous table), if we calculate the percentage based on social background, it is distributed in a ratio of 1:2, i.e. the percentage of pupils with SEN in the group of pupils with multiple deprivation is twice as high as the percentage of pupils without deprivation. At higher grades, however, the proportion of non-disadvantaged SEN pupils does not decrease to the same extent, i.e. it is more likely that pupils from deprived groups are crumbling and disappearing from the database. The proportion of SEN pupils who are not severely disadvantaged is 4.2%, while the figure for the severely disadvantaged group is 11%.

In this analysis, we do not consider the student's disability or other learning difficulties affecting his or her performance. Our results show that there is a significant difference between NABC scores. In mathematics, there is a minor difference, with a three-year average difference of 190 points, while in reading literacy, there is a difference of 212 points between the two groups (SEN and non-SEN). The difference in reading literacy is relatively stable (217 points in grade 6, 207 in grade 8 and 214 in grade 10). However, the score difference in mathematics is steadily increasing (180 points in grade 6, 194 in grade 8 and 201 in grade 10). This means that the gap is greater in reading literacy,

which is the basis for further learning. There is also a difference in academic averages, which means a deficit of about half a mark for children with SEN.

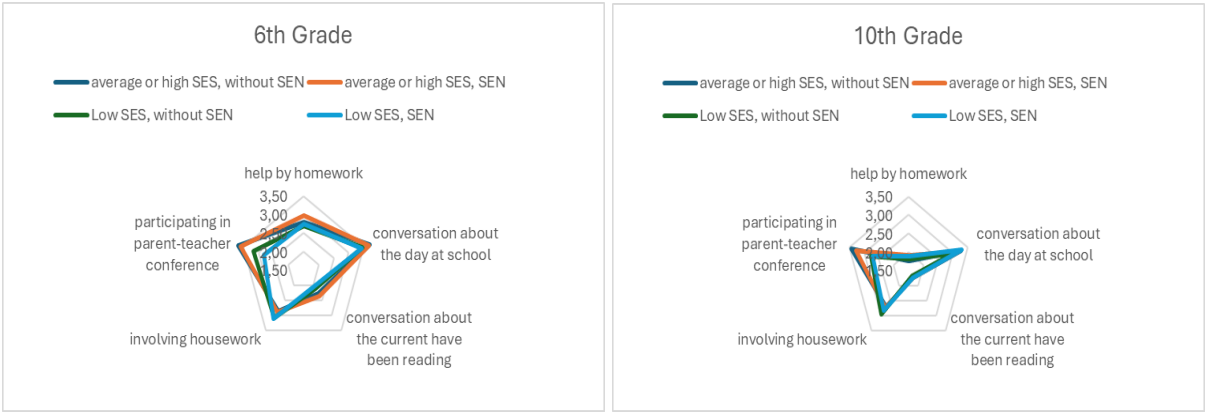
The variables available measure parents' support for learning at home, discussion of what happened at school, discussion of reading experiences, homework sharing and attendance at parent-teacher conferences on a four-point scale. These responses were aggregated into a parent involvement index. Index values (counted separately by grade) range from 1 to 20, with a standard deviation of three, and the mean decreases from 15 to 13 as the grade increases. Thus, on the one hand, it appears that parental involvement is lower for larger students, and on the other hand, the standard deviation is relatively stable. Hence, the decline is uniform across the whole database and for students with unbroken school paths. In general, the correlation between parental involvement and social background is strongest in the sixth grade (β=0.238), with the correlation decreasing in later grades (β=0.195).

The index treats the different types of involvement at the same time. If we look at the difference between the different types of involvement, we can see that the higher value of the index is due to one factor, namely, support for home learning. Not yet in grade 6, but in grades 8 and 10, the data clearly show that the attendance rate at parent-teacher conferences is lower for the pupils concerned. Figure 3 illustrates the differences between the groups and how they vary by grade. For the sake of simplicity, all respondents who were classified in this category in any year group were labelled as having a cumulative disadvantage; similarly, those who were classified as having an SEN in any year group were now classified as having a learning disability.

Discussion

The literature demonstrates, through some empirical analyses and meta-analyses, that the degree of parental involvement is strongly influenced by the socio-cultural background of the family (Bauch, 2001; Dearing et al, 2006; Erdener, 2016; Jæger & Karlson, 2018; Lavenda, 2011; Li & Fischer, 2017). When comparing this association for students with neurotypical and non-neurotypical development, we find a minimally weaker co-occurrence for students from non-neurotypical backgrounds.

Figure 1. In the mixed disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged, SEN and non-SEN groups per 6 6th and 10th year groups. Source: NABCLL.



Although this co-morbidity is not very high, we still have to conclude that the involvement of parents in the group with diagnosed learning problems is not as sensitive to social background and is higher. If we look at the PI index in the cumulatively disadvantaged groups, we obtain significantly lower values, but the difference decreases with age.

The results of the two groups, one group of students with multiple disadvantages and the other group of students with special educational needs, are significant in our study. The parental involvement index is higher in all grades and groups of affected students. The most significant difference between the two groups is observed in grade 10, when it is almost 0.4. This is important because it shows that the PI for affected students does not decrease as much as in the neurotypical student population. As expected, parents are more likely to remain involved in their children's educational journey because they need more support. This is a significant difference that teachers should be aware of. Parental involvement for SEN children is a positive resource that supports children. If we look at students with an unbroken learning path, the difference remains, i.e. the same higher rate of parental involvement, but it is not the 10th grade that stands out, but the 8th grade, and here the difference is most significant in the 8th grade. The NABC measurements are taken in May each year, so in eighth grade, we can highlight parental investment before further education based on our results in cases where students consistently meet the academic requirements expected of them, i.e. they continue to study successfully.

Figure 1 shows that the involvement of parents of SEN children is not uniform. On the one hand, parents are engaged in their child's education, as they help them with home learning, at a higher rate than students who presumably do not need it as much. However, as the grades progress, their engagement with the school decreases, and attendance at parent-teacher conferences, a measure of school engagement, becomes lower among them. The same trend is observed for students with an unbroken learning pathway, with the difference that in all grades, home learning support is higher. However, already in sixth grade, the proportion of parents attending a PTA meeting is lower. When analysing the values of the parental involvement index, it was found that in the eighth grade, this group has a higher value of parental involvement. This is mainly driven by the much stronger support for learning at home (2.2 in the neurotypical group and 2.4 in the study group) and the level of discussion read by the student at home (e.g. because the level of discussion about what happened at school lags behind the group without learning problems). Previous research has shown that attendance at parent-teacher conferences is most strongly associated with student achievement (Bacskai et al., 2024).

In Year 6, the most extensive and dynamically shrinking part of the chart is the discussion of what is being read and support with homework and homework support. A relatively stable part is discussing what is happening at school and attending parent-teacher conferences. The orange and blue lines show the responses of non-disadvantaged students (parents) (orange indicates the responses of mature students), and the grey and yellow lines show the responses of disadvantaged students (parents) (yellow is the colour of those with learning difficulties). It can be observed that the social background is a fundamental determinant of the co-movement of the lines. So, for example, the responses of non-disadvantaged students are closer to each other than the two groups with learning difficulties. We can observe that all forms of involvement are lower for students with multiple disadvantages, except for involvement in homework.

Involvement in housework does not seem to be part of the support for learning and attachment to school. Nevertheless, we include it as a factor of parental involvement because it can be a means of education for work and can support later well-being and, indirectly, school work.

The difference between the grey and blue lines is mainly in attendance at PTA meetings in sixth and eighth grade. The parents of the students concerned are the least likely of the four groups to attend this event. The school attendance of parents of non-disadvantaged pupils is evenly balanced in this respect, with no significant difference. However, it should be added that by grade 10, this activity of parents of pupils with learning difficulties also decreases.

Let us look at the striking differences between the two groups with learning difficulties. The most significant difference is in the support for learning at home, especially in the eighth grade. As we have pointed out earlier, there is a surge in parental energy to support students before admission, especially in the case of learning difficulties. However, this correlation is not evident for students with cumulative disadvantages. It is important to note that for disadvantaged students, there is limited scope for parents to support learning at home. Since our study starts at a higher grade (grade 6), independent learning is established chiefly by this age, and assistance may be needed only in problematic cases. In the sixth and even more so in the secondary school curriculum, a parent with little education cannot provide practical help.

Restrictions

The study's limitations include analysing data from a self-completion questionnaire, which relies on the responses reported. It also only includes data from students with SEN who are integrated into the education system. Even among these data, only the data of those students who completed the competency survey are included.

Conclusions

When examining parental involvement, we found less difference in the intensity of involvement between SEN and non-SEN parent groups than between the SMI and non-SEN parent groups. In this paper, we would like to highlight two factors as suggestions. First, students with multiple disadvantages are considered a more vulnerable group than students with SEN, since they have a higher drop-out rate, as can be seen from the difference between the data from the whole database and the unbroken learning path (NABCLL) databases. Therefore, particular attention should be paid to students who fall into both categories (LOW SES and SEN), as their drop-out rates are several times higher than their Tarean counterparts.

Teachers should also be aware that parental involvement remains high for SEN pupils even in secondary school, which can help teachers to provide more support at home if they can build good alliances with parents.

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