Participation of Families in Inclusive Education in the First Cycle of Basic Education:
A Systematic Review

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Abstract
Family participation in school has proven to benefit a child's self-esteem, equality in inclusive education, and a more enriching and equitable educational environment. The present study aims to deepen the understanding of the participation of families in the process of Inclusive Education in the first cycle of Basic Education, intending to conceptualize participation, involvement, and the barriers and facilitators of this process. Based on a Systematic Literature Review methodology, a search was conducted in the Scopus and ERIC databases using the keywords: participation, school, family, and inclusion. The eligible criteria for the inclusion of studies were articles or book chapters (blogs, whole books and abstracts were excluded); open access; published between 2017 and 2022; written in Portuguese, Spanish or English; addressing the points of Inclusion Education, family, participation, involvement, and school. The selected studies were analyzed according to the PRISMA Statement. Studies showed that family participation is essential for school success and the inclusion process to facilitate children's cognitive, and socio-emotional development. To encourage collaboration and participation of families in inclusive education processes, teachers promote extracurricular activities and interaction, create inclusive spaces, and seek resources that foster participation. Inclusion is more successful when there is good communication between family and school. Among the barriers hindering this participation are: prejudice, socioeconomic difficulties, lack of time and family interest, lack of communication and the perception of the education profession.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Family, Inclusion, Participation, Special Educational Needs (SEN)

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Introduction

Inclusive education (IE) is a process that aims to ensure the right to education for all individuals, regardless of their diversities, disabilities, or socioeconomic and cultural disadvantages. As Ainscow and Miles (2009, p.1) point out, IE aims "to eliminate social exclusion, which is a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity of race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability". Therefore, the goal of IE extends beyond school inclusion and encompasses the social inclusion of every person, promoting their overall development and the development of society as a whole. Implementing interventions that focus on individuals' and groups' life projects is essential, allowing for their development within the school and the social context (DGCS, 2015). In addition to providing equal access and participation, schools should provide educational opportunities that enable all students to realize their full potential and become valuable about the importance of this partnership (Arce, 2019; Odongo, 2018).

Over the last few years, several studies have shown the importance of family participation in IE projects. Family participation is one of the fundamental dimensions that enrich the student's school and social experience. Besides establishing a strong and positive relationship between school and family (Bellido-Calla, 2021; Sousa & Pereira, 2014), this relationship is also associated with equal communication values (Garcia & Rios, 2014).

Family participation refers to the multidirectional interaction and communication between the school and the family, to support family members both socially and emotionally, teaching them the necessary skills and contributing to children's development in various ways (Kahraman, 2018). Family participation is essential for improving school cultures, policies, and practices. Family participation in the educational environment helps develop children's self-esteem, improves school performance, and develops positive attitudes towards other families (Gondoya, Navasa & Duchia, 2020).

In addition, family participation entails the involvement of families in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of their children's education in collaboration with educators and other stakeholders. It is based on the recognition that families are essential partners in their children's education and have a unique understanding of their needs and strengths (Arce, 2019). This participation in school becomes more relevant in IE, fundamentally linked to social equity, justice and freedom, central components of democratic societies (Stavroussia, Didaskaloua & Green, 2021).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognizes that families are the primary caregivers of children with disabilities and that they have the right to participate in their children's education. UNESCO (2009, p.15) defends "the participation of families in all aspects of their children's education, including planning, implementation, and evaluation."

IE represented a radical change in the way we think about education, not only concerning students with some difficulty or Special Educational Needs (SEN), but to everyone. This includes not only the school as an institution for teaching and sharing knowledge, but also the families, as it is in this context that children develop their concept of diversity. So, supporting and including families is one of the responsibilities of the inclusive school (Doménech & Moliner, 2014).

Families can provide important information to facilitate the work of education professionals. Therefore, establishing constant contact between the family and the school is of great interest. Family-school relationship requires effective communication and a high level of educational involvement, which allows for positive results in the child's learning (Bagceli, 2018). Moreover, connecting school and family builds a solid relationship between the two environments, promoting trust, mutual knowledge and information exchange, providing opportunities and developing new skills. It is important to emphasize that a child's first social and cognitive learning takes place in the family context, being the first school of human and social values of relationship and coexistence (Acre, 2019; Gondoya, Navasa & Duchia, 2020).

Families can play an essential role in school meetings, activities and projects. However, family participation should go beyond attending meetings, activities, or school groups. school leaders must ensure that families have an active voice, more effective participation and establish a cooperative partnership (Erol & Turhan, 2018).

On the other hand, school is seen as a place of learning and socialization, so the close relationship between family and school is essential. In this way, family participation is important in the educational process of their children and, consequently, to the establishment of harmonious relationships and promoting the interconnection between both (Bellido-Cala, 2021).

This systematic literature review presents studies that describe family participation in IE. We also aim to analyze which barriers and facilitators education professionals identify in implementing inclusion, and to what extent, and how, family participation in IE can be promoted. We also intend to discuss the concept of participation and IE, understand the barriers/benefits to those processes, and identify facilitators of good practices in IE.

Methodology

Despite the increasing recognition of the importance of IE, there is still limited scientific literature on strategies to promote family participation in this process. This literature review aims to fill this gap by providing a deeper understanding of family participation in the context of primary education. The review seeks to identify barriers, benefits, and examples of good practice in this setting.

Based on the literature review findings, this study aims also to develop family participation strategies specifically tailored to the context of the first cycle of basic education. These recommendations aim to fill the literature gap and provide practical tools for effectively promoting inclusion in school projects in Portugal and Brazil.

The project team searched the Scopus and Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) databases using the keywords listed in Table 1. The selection criteria for the studies were as follows: (i) articles or book chapters (excluding blogs, full books, and abstracts); (ii) open-access articles/book chapters; (iii) published between 2017 and 2022; (iv) written in Portuguese, Spanish, or English; (v) addressing the topics of inclusive education, family, participation, involvement, and school (Table 1). The research also conducted searches in English, Portuguese, and Spanish. However, keyword combinations were only searched in English. The article survey was carried out between September and October 2022.

Involvement (AND) school (AND) inclusion (AND) family
participation (AND) parents (AND) inclusive (AND) school
education (AND) family (AND) inclusive (AND) school,
participation (AND) inclusion (AND) school (AND) family
involvement (AND) family (AND) school (AND) inclusion
inclusion (AND) involvement (AND) family (AND) school.

Table 1: Search string in English.

The researchers defined the following inclusion criteria: i) addressing the concept of participation; ii) discussing the school-family relationship in IE; iii) examining facilitators for family participation; iv) identifying barriers to or benefits of family participation.
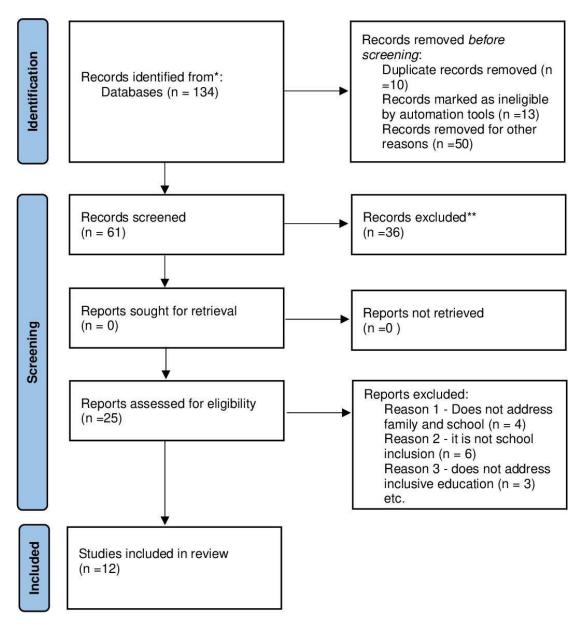

Figure 1: Flow diagram showing the decision process that led to included studies.

A total of 134 titles were retrieved (76 from the Scopus database and 58 from ERIC). After removing duplicates, title and abstract screening, we could identify 61 studies potentially relevant to the topic. The full-text screening of such articles led to excluding 36 studies that did not match the inclusion criteria. The remaining 12 articles were comprehensively read, analyzing their objectives, methodology, and results.

Results

Appendix 1 summarizes the 12 articles in this review, showing the following data: title, keywords, link, objectives, methodology, instruments, and main results of each study (Appendix 1: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10028438). Ten studies were written in English and two in Spanish.

Regarding geographical diversity, the studies were conducted in various parts of the world, particularly in countries such as Turkey (3 out of 12) and Spain (2 out of 12). Three studies were conducted on the African continent, specifically in Ghana, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Two studies were conducted in the United States of America, one in Ecuador, and one in China. Despite this geographical diversity, most articles analyzed were written in English, with two in Spanish.

The eligible studies demonstrated a predominance of qualitative methodology (4 out of 12 articles). Only two studies used documentary analysis, reports, or observations, and one employed action research as its methodology. Regarding instruments, most studies employed questionnaires (7 out of 12) and semi-structured interviews (3 out of 12).

Concerning the sample, the studies analyzed involved the participation of parents (2 out of 12), teachers (4 out of 12), and both teachers and families (5 out of 12).

Concepts of Participation

The studies define participation as a multidirectional interaction and communication between the school and the family (Assefa & Sintayehu, 2019; Kahraman, 2018). The goal is to provide social and emotional support to family members, teach them necessary skills, and contribute to children's development in various ways (Kahraman, 2018).

Active family participation is intrinsically linked to school activities and tasks, as well as to the academic success of each child. It involves how families interact with, facilitate, and contribute to their children's academic success. As Na et al., (2018) highlighted, family participation plays a crucial role in children's academic, cognitive, social, and emotional development. These authors categorize participation into four distinct types: family discussion, family supervision, communication with the school, and school involvement.

Family participation can be improved through two different approaches. The first involves activities or tasks carried out by parents at home related to their children's education, such as helping a child with homework or supervising their reading. Additionally, parents can get involved in activities at their children's school, such as participating in Parents Association programs or volunteering at the school (Appiah-Kubi & One, 2019).

Furthermore, this participation also encompasses actions such as being responsive to the child's needs, using assertive and affectionate communication, demonstrating the value of

education, participating in parent-teacher meetings, or volunteering. Therefore, family participation is not limited to the behavior and actions of families in schools but also includes partnerships and interactions with families to benefit students' learning and development (Arce, 2019).

Recent studies (Haciibrahimoglui, 2022; Schuck, Simpson & Golloher, 2022) also highlight the importance of family participation as a significant social resource for children to cope with stress during the transition from pre-school. It is a strong and reliable determinant of school adaptation. This involvement is positively correlated with school performance and family satisfaction (Table 2).

Interestingly, one study uses the word "involvement" in the article's title (Assefa & Sintayehu, 2019); however, the authors address parents' involvement and participation in their children's education throughout the article. These authors define parental involvement as the family's collaboration in their children's educational processes and experiences, which includes activities associated with school, such as parent-teacher meetings, volunteering at school, and activities carried out at home, such as helping with homework and encouraging the child to improve performance (Assefa & Sintayehu, 2019).

Using concepts	Articles
Participation	6
Involvement	4
Participation and Involvement	2

Table 2: Using concepts.

The study by Rueda and Fernández (2018) presents a scale of family participation that consists of four levels:
- **At Level 0**, family participation is limited to receiving simple information. At this stage, families are only informed of the decisions made by the school, with little opportunity to express their own opinions. Family participation is essentially superficial, as there are no spaces, channels, or mechanisms for them to make their voices heard.
- **At Level 1**, participation involves consulting families. At this stage, families are informed and consulted, but have limited influence on decisions related to the school's actions. Therefore, family participation is mainly symbolic.
- **At Level 2,** there is a collaboration between the school and families. Families' voices are considered when planning actions, but their participation is directed by the school and guided by its objectives. In this scenario, family participation is considered partial.
- **At Level 3**, participation evolves into true school-family collaboration. At this level, the school and families act as co-responsible parties, mutually promoting and collaborating to overcome barriers and transform the school into a more inclusive environment. Families feel empowered and significantly involved. Therefore, family participation is characterized as full, representing true co-responsibility.

Benefits of Family Participation

Studies show that family participation is crucial for improving school cultures, policies, and practices promoting inclusion and enhancing children's self-esteem, performance, relationships, and development (Gondoya, Navasa & Duchia, 2020; Rueda & Fernández, 2019). The analyzed studies highlight the importance of active family participation in IE, to ensure that every student gets the necessary support to reach their full potential (Belido-Cala, 2021; Hacıibrahimoğlu, 2022). This participation promotes equal opportunities, diversity, and inclusion and creates a more enriching and equitable educational environment.

It is essential to emphasize that establishing effective collaboration and communication between parents and the school positively impacts the academic success of all students (Erol & Turhan, 2018). When education professionals value family participation, they gain a crucial educational partner. Family involvement provides valuable information that enhanc*es* the work of educators, allowing a deeper understanding of students' talents, challenges, expectations, and perspectives, as well as those of their families. Thus, family participation is crucial for optimizing students' learning and performance, regardless of their SEN (Rueda & Fernández, 2019). Moreover, collaboration between the school and families ensures consistent support in various environments, such as the classroom and the home, and promotes a more unified and effective learning experience (Hacıibrahimoğlu, 2022). This cooperation, with sharing information, strategies, and resources, directly benefits the development and learning of students with SEN.

Therefore, the active participation of families in IE is crucial for the academic success and well-being of students with SEN and enhances the educational experience of the entire school community. It promotes equality, inclusion, and quality of life for students, families, and education professionals while also improving the academic performance of all students, regardless of their specific needs.

Barriers

Regarding barriers to family participation in education, some studies have shown that certain schools have asymmetrical family-school relationships (Appiah-Kubi & Amoako, 2020; Bellido-Cala, 2021; Erol & Turhan, 2018). Teachers have all the professional information in these relationships, while parents are passive recipients. Consequently, communication between schools and families is often limited, maintaining a predominantly one-way flow of information (Erol & Turhan, 2018). Parents are frequently seen as helpers in occasional activities, like Halloween, rather than being regarded as equal partners in the planning and implementation of educational projects (Bellido-Cala, 2021).

This power imbalance restricts family participation, placing them in a passive role of receiving information and adjusting their behavior to meet the school's demands (Erol & Turhan, 2018). It is worth noting that this trend towards "traditional education," which grants the school unilateral power, has been consistently observed in multiple studies conducted in various world countries. Specifically, studies have been conducted in countries such as Spain, Turkey, and Kenya, highlighting the prevalence of this trend across different cultural and geographical contexts (Appiah-Kubi & Amoako, 2020; Bellido-Cala, 2021; Erol & Turhan, 2018).

Eight studies addressed families' barriers faced when engaging in their children's school activities effectively (Table 3). The main barrier highlighted is related to the financial difficulties that many families face. Acre (2019) points out that these financial difficulties can generate various inequalities, which, in turn, jeopardize families' participation in their children's education. Additionally, these families often struggle to access essential services for their children's well-being due to social stigma, poverty, and a lack of knowledge about available resources and services. These economic difficulties unconsciously hinder their children's education (Appiah-Kubi & One, 2019; Odongo, 2018).

Barriers cited	Articles	Number of citations
Socio-economic status	7	17
Autocratic leadership	3	9
Lack of communication	2	5
Prejudice stigma	3	9
Teacher Attitude	4	4
Family perceptions	2	3
School administration	1	1

Table 3: Barriers cited in the articles.

Another barrier mentioned in the three studies (Arce, 2019; Belido-Cala, 2021; Odongo, 2018) is related to implicit or explicit prejudices. These prejudices unconsciously influence school staff and parents' understanding, actions, and decisions. Odongo (2018) points out that beliefs and prejudices constitute barriers when the school, teachers, and community do not recognize the value of IE for children with SEN and when family members have low expectations about the potential of their children with disabilities. The school's administrative side and bureaucratic structure are also seen as barriers, as they can make families feel undervalued, hindering their participation (Erol & Turhan, 2018).

Appiah-Kubi and One (2020) note that families' negative perception of the school and education professionals, who are primarily responsible for their children's education, is also a significant barrier. Families may sometimes feel unwelcome or limited due to their socio-economic situation. Teachers' attitudes are also mentioned as a relevant barrier, as on certain occasions, they do not consider families valuable educational resources, do not incorporate appropriate participation activities, or do not recognize families' experiences and knowledge (Rueda & Fernandez, 2019).

Another barrier is the lack of effective communication between the school and families. Erol and Turhan (2018) point out that when analyzing the averages of the dimensions of school-family cooperation and school involvement, parents were often not sufficiently involved due to a lack of effective communication with the school. However, when it comes to inclusion, these barriers are even more intense, involving issues of equity, access to education, attitude, stigma, discrimination, taboos, and poverty. This makes it difficult for families to participate in educating their children with SEN (Odongo, 2018).

In the context of families with children with SEN, these barriers become even more pronounced. These families often rely on specialized teaching professionals to solve specific challenges. According to various studies (Schuck et al, 2022; Odongo, 2018), parents often report having to devote significantly more time to funding their children's therapies, which

considerably limits the time they can actively participate in school activities. Some parents also express concerns about undue pressure from professionals to become more involved. One parent shared, "School and therapists expect too much from parents. I have more than one child with SEN, and my husband and I both work full time to pay for therapies for all three kids!" (Schuck et al., 2022, p.214).

Another barrier for parents of children with SEN mentioned is the lack of effective communication between different professionals involved in the child's care, as well as difficulties in establishing direct communication with service providers. These communication difficulties often lead to situations where families with children with SEN feel anxious due to a lack of information, disappointed by the inadequate interventions, or find themselves alone when facing the challenges related to their children's education (Appiah-Kubi & Amoako, 2020; Chadwick & Kemp, 2002).

Participation Facilitators/Promoters

Numerous studies emphasize the importance of establishing a relationship where families are regarded as equal educational community members (Arce, 2019; Hacııbrahimoğlu, 2022; Rueda & Fernández, 2019). This enables collaborative efforts between the school and families as co-responsible parties, promoters, and collaborators in overcoming barriers and transforming the school into a more inclusive environment. As facilitators in promoting family participation, the studies highlight the following:

i) Valuing Diversity and Family Well-Being: It is crucial to value and celebrate diversity, including the diversity of families, recognizing it as a valuable resource for learning. Additionally, it is essential to prevent parents from feeling insecure, undervalued, or neglected (Assefa & Sintayehu, 2019; Kahraman, 2018).

ii) Welcoming Environment and Sense of Community: Ensure that all families, the school administration, and students feel welcome and foster a sense of community within the school (Rueda & Fernández, 2019).

iii) Accessibility to Information: Guarantee that information about the school and the community is accessible to families, including translating important documents into the main languages of the local community and providing interpreters at family meetings if necessary (Rueda & Fernández, 2019).

iv) Recognizing the Strengths of Families: Value and promote the participation of families as partners in their children's education. It is also essential to involve all educational community members in decision-making to promote equity in the school (Hacııbrahimoğlu, 2022; Kahraman, 2018).

v) Collaboration in Learning and Student Involvement: Promote collaboration between professionals and families to support student success. This helps families feel welcome in the school as experts on their children, and equal partners in supporting learning and development (Gondoya, Navasa & Duchia, 2020; Hacııbrahimoğlu, 2022).

vi) Collaboration in School Improvement and Innovation Processes: Encourage all educational community members to evaluate the school environment, offer suggestions,

and create joint improvement plans. This promotes distributed leadership (Erol & Turhan, 2018; Rueda & Fernández, 2019).

vii) Creating Support Networks for and between Families: Organize meetings where families can share ideas and support one another (Rueda & Fernández, 2019); Ensuring that parents' associations play a significant role in decision-making related to students and promoting IE is extremely important. This strengthens the relationship between the school and the families and empowers them to be active and influential participants in this crucial process rather than just symbolic communities (Erol &Turhan, 2018).

viii)Creating Support Networks for and between Families: Organize meetings where families can share ideas and support one another (Rueda & Fernández, 2019); Ensuring that parents' associations play a significant role in decision-making related to students and promoting IE is extremely important. This strengthens the relationship between the school and the families and empowers them to be active and influential participants in this crucial process rather than just symbolic communities (Erol &Turhan, 2018).

ix) Building Inclusive Learning Environments: Foster a collaborative relationship based on communication, trust, commitment, and equality between professionals and families. The goal is to create inclusive learning experiences for all students (Hacıibrahimoğlu, 2022; Rueda & Fernández, 2019).

By promoting family participation in inclusion, education professionals can better understand students' cultural differences and act as facilitators (Appiah-Kubi & One, 2020).

Good Practices for Promoting Family Participation in Inclusive Education

The studies analyzed provide practical insights into implementing effective strategies for promoting the active participation of families in IE. These practices have proven to foster a supportive and inclusive learning environment. These practices include:

- Organizing an "Open House" day where families and future students can learn about the school's facilities and projects (Hacıibrahimoğlu, 2022). This is particularly important for families of children with SEN as it allows them to address accessibility concerns and prepare their children for the new school (Odongo, 2018).

- Conducting home visits is especially beneficial for children with autism (Schuck, Simpson & Golloher, 2022). These visits help teachers understand the child's routines and assist families in creating a suitable study environment at home. Additionally, it allows the school to adapt to the needs of these children, fostering inclusivity in the classroom and playground (Odongo, 2018).

- Establishing open communication channels between school, parents, and other special education and health professionals, such as regular meetings, emails, and messaging apps. These channels facilitate the collection of parental concerns and suggestions, fostering dialogue and mutual respect (Condoya, Navaza, & Duchia, 2020; Kahraman, 2018; Na, Wang, Yang & Du, 2018).

- Encouraging family participation in school events like parties, science fairs, and extracurricular activities (Bellido-Cala, 2022; Kahraman, 2018). These events significantly

impact when promoted in partnership with the parents' associations, highlighting its importance in the school. Additionally, they provided opportunities for parents to volunteer and participate in IE.

- Providing orientation, training, and sensitization sessions for parents, addressing relevant family issues. These sessions offer resources and information on supporting learning at home, such as reading tips, math practice, and other educational activities (Erol & Turhan, 2018; Kahraman, 2018). For families of children with SEN, these sessions play a critical role in enhancing their understanding of their child's specific requirements, enabling them to overcome existing obstacles in the educational and socialization processes (Odongo, 2018; Rueda & Fernández, 2019).

- Assessing parental satisfaction and implementing improvements based on their feedback (Na, Wang, Yang & Du, 2018; Rueda & Fernández, 2019).

- Recognizing families' diverse circumstances, backgrounds, traditions, and needs and adapting educational practices and parental involvement accordingly. This approach fosters a sense of belonging and promotes a more inclusive and harmonious learning atmosphere (Appiah-Kubi & Amoako, 2020; Arce, 2019; Odongo, 2018).

Implementing these practices showcases a commitment to IE and emphasizes families' vital role in their children's educational journey. By actively involving families, schools can create an environment that supports the diverse needs of students and cultivates a sense of community and collaboration.

Conclusions

This systematic review comprehensively explains how different studies aim to promote effective family participation in IE. The research strategy employed in this study enhances our understanding of the various definitions of participation and involvement within the context of IE. It identifies barriers and facilitators, good practices, and the benefits of promoting family participation in the school environment.

Family participation in IE was found to have a positive impact on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Benefits include creating an inclusive educational environment and improving self-esteem, performance, relationships, and development. Effective collaboration and communication between parents and schools have been shown to enhance students' academic success.

However, the review also identifies several barriers to family participation. These barriers include financial difficulties, prejudice, administrative and bureaucratic obstacles, negative perceptions of schools and teachers, and ineffective communication between schools and families. These barriers are particularly pronounced in the context of families with children with SEN, where parents often face additional challenges in accessing resources and therapies.

Key facilitators for promoting family participation were identified: valuing family diversity and well-being, creating a welcoming environment, ensuring accessible information, recognizing family strengths, promoting collaboration and student engagement, encouraging

participation in school improvement processes, creating supportive networks, and building inclusive learning environments.

Limitations arose during the realization of this systematic review that may affect the understanding of the study. These limitations include restrictions on selecting articles that focus on empirical evidence and the limited availability of studies in free databases. Additionally, this research excluded books, master's dissertations, and doctoral thesis.

These limitations should be considered when interpreting this systematic review's results. They highlight the need for further research on family participation/parental involvement in children's learning, participation, family, inclusion, and school.

The results of this study emphasize the importance of developing strategies and resources to promote inclusion in primary schools. Despite barriers, the identified facilitators and strategies provide a roadmap for promoting family involvement in primary education. The goal is to develop a toolkit for primary school teachers to enhance parental involvement and create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment in Portugal and Brazil. These strategies will enable schools to collaborate with families in meeting the needs of children and fostering the inclusion of all students.

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