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Research Article

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Reframing Literacy Leadership in Behavioral Health Settings: Strengthening School–Family Partnerships for Students with Reading Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Today's educators are under growing pressure to tackle academic success, behavior managment, mental wellness, social-emotional learning, attendance, and family engagement while providing effective instruction. Although schools have launched several programs to improve student outcomes, these efforts are often implemented in isolation, resulting in fragmented systems that contribute to instructor overwhelm and uneven implementation. This article introduces the Educator Connection Framework, a practical, research-based strategy that focuses on cooperation among teachers, administrators, counselors, support staff, and families to improve academic performance. The paradigm builds on four major findings from qualitative research on literate leadership: organized collaboration, trust-centered communication, evidence-based decision-making, and continual career development. These conclusions are used to address four linked challenges: instructional placement and support, mental health and well-being, social-emotional learning, and family engagement. Rather than suggesting new projects, the framework focuses on synchronizing existing people, procedures, and resources to increase educator practice and improve the environment that promotes student learning. By offering an integrated approach, the article advances the field by providing actionable strategies to unify fragmented efforts, support educator effectiveness, and enhance comprehensive student support systems. These contributions highlight the significance of the Educator Connection Framework as a tool for promoting sustained improvement and coherence in behavioral health and literacy leadership practice.

List of Abbreviations

IEP	:	Individualized Education Program
MTSS	:	Multi-Tiered System of Supports
RTI	:	Response to Intervention
SEL	:	Social-Emotional Learning

Keywords: Educator Collaboration, Academic Success, Educational Leadership, Organizational Alignment, Family Engagement, School Improvement, Literacy Leadership, Reading Disabilities, Family Engagement, Educational Leadership

Introduction

Education has grown in complexity from an organizational and teaching perspective. To meet curricular standards, assessment, intervention, and accountability, teachers address students' educational preparedness, attendance, behavior, social-emotional learning, family circumstances, and general well-being.

Schools carry out academic interventions, provide social-emotional learning, involve families, monitor data, offer professional development, and deliver student-support services. Although many of these measures are worthwhile, they often use different organizations and methods. For this reason, teachers generally have to manage programs without having a well-defined framework for organizing them in relation to instructional goals.

According to growing research, in order to achieve long-term school growth, individual activities must be both high-quality and coherent. When teaching techniques are coordinated, leadership choices are logical, engagement with families and student-support systems are in place, schools can fulfill the diverse needs of their children and help teachers succeed.

The study presents the Educator Connection Framework a practical method grounded in qualitative research and the educational literature. It builds on existing literacy leadership research by proposing a joint approach that strengthens connections among instructors across four closely related challenges concerning academic success: instructional placement and support, student mental health and well-being, social-emotional learning, and family engagement.

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Background
Reading impairments go beyond questions of literacy; they affect students' motivation, self-image, and overall well-being. In addition to instructional methods, school administrators, families, and teachers all play important roles in creating supportive learning environments. There is significant improvement in outcomes for students with reading difficulties when effective collaboration and data use occur.

Techniques
This qualitative study explored how special education and literacy leaders support literacy in students with reading difficulties. Ten leaders from various educational roles participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data.

Results
The analysis identified four main themes: first, special education literacy leaders can improve instructional results by engaging in organised collaboration and adopting shared leadership approaches; second, it is necessary to have a trust-based and culturally sensitive form of communication if effective school-home literacy partnerships are to be developed; third, effective literacy leadership is maintained by making advocacy and calculated decisions based on data; and fourth, continuous and need-specific professional development is essential for keeping literacy improvement initiatives going. Literacy leadership encourages family involvement, strengthens teaching, and fosters environments that support student achievement and well-being.

Literature Review
Reading disabilities are one of the most common impairments in elementary education and can have long-term impacts on achievement and well-being. Early identification and intervention are crucial to improving outcomes [1,2].

Reading disabilities can also affect students' emotional and social experiences, often resulting in frustration, low confidence, and disengagement. Leaders should consider both academic and social-emotional factors in literacy development [3,4].

Family engagement has been identified as an essential element in supporting literacy development and improving educational outcomes [1-9]. Epstein's framework for school-family-community partnerships stresses collaboration between staff and families to promote student success [5]. Research suggests that when families are actively engaged in literacy activities, communicate regularly with schools, and participate in educational decision-making, students demonstrate stronger academic performance and increased motivation to learn [6]. For students with reading disabilities, family engagement can offer additional chances for practice, reinforcement, and encouragement beyond the classroom.

Educational leadership plays a central role in establishing systems that support effective literacy teaching and genuine family involvement [8-10]. Those responsible for literacy are responsible for coordinating instructional programs, organizing professional development, monitoring students' progress, and encouraging cooperation between teachers and families [7]. Great leaders establish systems that support evidence-based literacy practices and ensure that interventions meet the special needs of students with reading difficulties [8]. Leadership approaches that emphasize collaboration, communication, and continuous improvement have been linked to improved instructional outcomes and greater capacity among teachers [9]. The study is grounded in Epstein's Family Engagement Framework, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, emphasizing collaboration, scaffolding, and the influence of the environment on literacy.

Despite growing attention to literacy intervention and family engagement, limited research has examined how special education and literacy leaders combine these responsibilities to support students with reading disabilities. This study addresses that gap by exploring how educational leaders define, enact, and sustain leadership practices that strengthen literacy outcomes through collaboration, communication, data-informed decision-making, and professional learning.

Materials and Methods

- **Study Design:** The study used a simple qualitative research design to examine how special education and literacy leaders explain their roles and responsibilities in improving literacy outcomes for elementary students with reading disabilities. A qualitative method was chosen because it enabled participants to provide thorough accounts of their professional experiences, leadership practices, and views on literacy teaching and involvement with families. According to Creswell and Poth, basic qualitative inquiry is suitable when the aim is to understand how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their experiences in a given context [4].
- **Purpose of the Study:** This basic qualitative study aimed to understand how special education and literacy leaders defined their roles and put them into action to support literacy teaching and family involvement for elementary students with reading difficulties. By examining leadership practices related to instructional collaboration, family engagement, data-informed decision-making, and professional learning, the study sought to understand better how educational leaders support literacy development in schools and at home.
- **Research Question:** How do special education leaders effectively support educators and parents in helping children with reading disabilities? What specific roles and responsibilities do they undertake to bridge the gap between school-based literacy initiatives and home literacy practices?
- **Participants and Sampling:** Ten educational leaders with diverse roles and backgrounds were selected for their direct experience supporting students with reading difficulties. The researchers used purposive sampling to select people whose job duties included literacy leadership, providing instructional support, carrying out special education administration, preparing intervention plans, and participating in family engagement [11. This method ensured that the participants had expertise directly related to the study's aim and research questions.
- **Data Collection Procedures:** In 2025, semi-structured remote interviews were conducted with participants,

each lasting approximately 45 minutes and focusing on leadership and literacy practices. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed with the participants' consent. All participants were anonymized and provided informed consent.

- **Data Analysis:** The data were subjected to thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke, and the codes were combined to form themes representing common experiences.

The research led to the identification of four final themes based on their frequency and their relevance to the research questions.

- **Trustworthiness and Credibility:** The team checked transcript accuracy and maintained analytic memos. Researcher roles and bias were managed to ensure integrity. Member checking with four participants improved credibility.
- **Ethical Considerations:** The study was carried out in accordance with established ethical standards for research. Participants voluntarily consented to participate and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained through de-identification procedures and protected data storage practices. All research activities were conducted in accordance with institutional review requirements and ethical protocols governing human subject's research.

Results / Findings

Results: The purpose of this study was to explore how special education and literacy leaders define, enact, and sustain their roles in supporting literacy instruction and family engagement for elementary students with reading disabilities. Data analysis showed four themes describing how educational leaders support literacy outcomes while fostering collaborative partnerships among education professionals, families, and support personnel. The themes emerged through a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 educational leaders.

The four themes identified were: (a) special education literacy leaders strengthen instructional outcomes through structured collaboration and joint leadership practices, (b) trust-centered, culturally responsive communication is essential to building effective school-home literacy partnerships, (c) effective literacy leadership is sustained through data-informed advocacy and strategic management and (d) ongoing, needs-based professional development is critical to sustaining literacy improvement efforts

Theme 1: Structured Collaboration and Joint Leadership Practices

The initial point was that successful literacy leadership requires organized collaboration between teachers, specialists, and administrators. Participants consistently described collaboration as a basic duty of leadership, one that helped ensure instructional consistency and led to better literacy interventions for pupils with reading difficulties. The collaborative arrangements mentioned included professional learning communities, planned meetings to discuss teaching, co-teaching, sessions for reviewing data, and interdisciplinary activities to solve problems.

Participant 3 called attention to the importance of intentional collaboration, stating:

"We hold biweekly collaboration meetings between general education and special education teachers to remain coordinated. It helps ensure interventions match grade-specific expectations."

Similarly, Participant 6 explained: "Since the classroom teachers don't always know what we do, working together helps us reach an agreement regarding expectations and tools." The participants stated that working together went beyond simple communication to include a shared responsibility for student outcomes. The leaders arranged intervention planning, monitored students' progress as a group, and encouraged alignment between instruction in general education and that provided in special education [12]. This evidence indicates that collaborative leadership arrangements can help establish consistent literacy support systems that may reduce academic frustration and create more opportunities for student success.

From a behavioral health perspective, structured collaboration helps achieve stability and consistency across various learning environments. If educators take on a shared responsibility for students' progress, then students may receive greater continuity of support, which in turn reduces confusion, frustration, and obstacles to engagement.

Theme 2: Trust-Centered, Culturally Receptive Communication

The second point stressed the value of communication in establishing effective school-family literacy partnerships, with participants saying that building trust was a continuous process requiring consistent communication, cultural responsiveness, and genuine opportunities for family involvement. The leaders reported using literacy nights, parent workshops, multilingual resources, online communication platforms, and individualized outreach methods to enhance family engagement. Participant 7 explained: "We send weekly texts and emails to parents, so they know what their child is working on. They feel included and begin to respond more." Participant 6 further noted: "Families need to see consistency. When we follow up regularly, they are more likely to attend literacy nights and participate." Many participants mentioned difficulties engaging with their families, such as language differences, conflicting work commitments, concerns about transportation, and that some families had previously participated in school activities to a greater extent than others. Nevertheless, the leaders stressed the need for culturally appropriate communication methods that respected families' backgrounds and provided inclusive opportunities for them to take part.

The results are consistent with the behavioral health literature, which emphasizes the value of supportive relationships and protective factors in achieving positive student outcomes. When there is a strong partnership between school and family, it may result in greater student motivation, enhance students' sense of connection to school, and strengthen the support systems that contribute to both their scholastic and emotional well-beingng.

Theme 3: Data-Informed Advocacy and Strategic Decision Making

The third theme showed how educational leaders use data to guide their instructional decisions, campaign for resources, and improve the effectiveness of their interventions. Participants said they regularly reviewed assessment results, progress-

monitoring data, individualized education program (IEP) goals, and diagnostic information to identify students' needs and assign support services. Participant 8 stated: "We use assessment data to advocate for reading resources, staff training, and even smaller instructional groups." Participant 3 added: "Formative data helps make a case when literacy goals are not being met. It is difficult to argue with measurable evidence." Participants described data as a means of identifying gaps in instruction, of keeping an eye on the effectiveness of interventions, and of communicating students' needs to stakeholders. Making decisions based on data also contributed to equitable access to resources and enabled leaders to justify the program changes they aspired to improve literacy outcomes.

From a behavioral health perspective, early identification and intervention may lessen the likelihood that students will experience extended academic difficulties, which in turn often lead to feelings of frustration, avoidance, and reduced self-confidence. The leaders saw data as a vital way to prevent students from falling further behind, both educationally and emotionally.

Theme 4: Ongoing, Needs-Based Professional Development

The fourth theme stressed the need for continuous professional learning to maintain literacy improvement. The participants said that professional development was most effective when it was ongoing, closely linked to employees' actual work, data-driven, and directly related to what took place in the classroom. Instead of relying on separate workshops, the leaders encouraged coaching cycles, collaborative learning communities, mentoring, and continuous feedback systems. Participant 5 stated: "One-time workshops are not enough. Coaching and data talks help teachers apply strategies in real situations." Participant 8 similarly explained:

"When professional development connects directly to student data, teachers engage more because it reflects their classroom reality."

Participants identified time constraints, competing initiatives, and limited resources as barriers to sustained professional learning. Nevertheless, they stressed that continuous development was necessary to ensure that educators possessed the skills needed to support students with reading disabilities effectively.

It is clear that professional development not only improves the quality of teaching but also increases teachers' capacity to identify and respond to the social-emotional and behavioral factors that affect literacy achievement [13]. Continuous support allows teachers to put evidence-based approaches into practice by adjusting their teaching to meet the different needs of their students.

Summary of Findings

Together, the results demonstrate that literacy leadership extends beyond the mere management of instruction to encompass a variety of collaborative, interpersonal, and organizational responsibilities. Addressing the study's research questions, participants directly described leadership as a multi-faceted process involving structured collaboration with colleagues, engagement with families, advocacy grounded in data-informed decision-making, and sustained professional development. These leadership practices align with the investigation's focus on how special education and literacy leaders define and enact their roles to support literacy instruction and bridge school-based and home literacy practices. Furthermore, the evidence underscores that such practices help cultivate educational environments that foster literacy achievement while also enhancing student engagement, confidence, and overall well-being. Importantly, the findings respond to the research questions by indicating that effective literacy leadership may serve as a preventative mechanism addressing both academic success and behavioral health outcomes for students with reading difficulties.

Discussion

This study examined how special education and literacy leaders describe their roles and responsibilities in improving literacy outcomes for elementary students who have reading difficulties. The results showed that effective literacy leadership is marked by four closely linked practices: structured collaboration and shared leadership, communication based on trust and family involvement, data-informed advocacy and decision-making, and continuous professional development. Taken together, these findings indicate that literacy leadership goes beyond mere instructional supervision and instead serves as an all-embracing system of support that affects academic achievement, family engagement, and student well-being.

The idea of structured collaboration and shared leadership approaches aligns with earlier research that emphasizes the need for collaborative professional cultures for educational outcomes to improve. Participants consistently stated that collaboration is necessary to align instructional practices, coordinate interventions, and ensure continuity of support for students with reading difficulties [14]. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights how interconnected environments affect student development [2]. Students gain from a more coordinated educational experience when general education teachers, special educators, literacy specialists, and administrators work together, as this promotes consistency and helps prevent fragmentation across different learning environments. It may also lessen student frustration because instructional support remains consistent across settings.

The second theme, which is about trust-based and culturally appropriate communication, emphasizes the need for meaningful family involvement in their children's literacy development. In keeping with Epstein's Framework of Family Engagement, the participants stated that communication is a basic component of effective school-family partnerships [1]. It was noted that continuous communication, literacy events, access to parent resources, and culturally appropriate outreach efforts increased family participation and improved the relationship between home and school. These results support previous research showing that family engagement positively affects student achievement, motivation, and school engagement. For students with reading disabilities, strong partnerships with their families can act as protective factors, reinforcing literacy development and offering emotional support outside the classroom.

The third theme, data-informed advocacy and strategic decision-making, demonstrates the critical role of leadership in ensuring

that instructional decisions are responsive to student needs. Participants described using assessment results, progress-monitoring data, and individualized goals to guide interventions, allocate resources, and advocate for additional support. These findings are consistent with research emphasizing the value of evidence-based decision-making in improving literacy outcomes [15]. Through systematic data review, leaders identified learning gaps early and implemented targeted interventions before academic difficulties worsened. Early intervention may be particularly important from a behavioral health perspective because prolonged academic failure is often associated with increased frustration, reduced self-confidence, and disengagement from learning.

The fourth theme, ongoing needs-based professional development, emphasizes the importance of building educator capacity through sustained learning opportunities. Participants reported that coaching, collaborative learning communities, and data-informed professional development were more effective than isolated workshops. These findings align with research suggesting that job-embedded professional learning promotes greater implementation of evidence-based practices and improved instructional effectiveness. By strengthening teacher knowledge and skills, leaders create conditions that support more responsive instruction for students with reading disabilities.

An important contribution of this study is the connection between literacy leadership and behavioral health outcomes. Although participants primarily discussed literacy instruction and family engagement, their descriptions revealed practices that may also support student well-being. Students who struggle with reading often experience academic frustration, embarrassment, avoidance behaviors, and reduced confidence. Leadership practices that promote collaboration, family engagement, early intervention, and instructional responsiveness may help mitigate these challenges by creating supportive educational environments. While literacy leadership is not typically viewed as a behavioral health intervention, the findings suggest it may serve as an early prevention framework that reduces risk factors associated with academic disengagement and poor educational outcomes.

The results also supportsupport the study's theoretical basis. Epstein's Framework of Family Engagement is shown in the way the participants stressed the importance of communication, partnerships, and a shared responsibility for student success. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development appears in the way the leaders spoke about differentiated instruction, targeted interventions, and scaffolded support for students who have reading disabilities. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is apparent from the participants' acknowledgment of the interrelated roles of schools, families, teachers, and community influences in promoting literacy development. Taken together, these theories offer a complete perspective on how literacy leadership leads to better outcomes for students with reading disabilities.

In summary, the results show that effective literacy leadership needs a multidimensional approach that combines instructional support, family engagement, data-informed decision-making, and professional development. Because these practices are linked, they create conditions that promote literacy achievement and support environments that lead to higher levels of student engagement, confidence, and long-term success. As educational systems continue to address the complex needs of students with reading difficulties, literacy leaders remain uniquely positioned to improve both academic and developmental outcomes through collaborative and inclusive leadership practices.

Literacy Leadership as a Preventative Behavioral Health Framework

An important implication of this study is the potential role of literacy leadership as a preventative behavioral health framework. Students experiencing persistent reading difficulties frequently encounter academic frustration, reduced confidence, avoidance behaviors, and diminished engagement with school. Over time, these challenges may contribute to increased emotional distress and negative educational experiences. The findings suggest that leadership practices emphasizing collaboration, family engagement, early intervention, and professional learning may help mitigate these risk factors by fostering supportive, responsive educational environments. While literacy leadership is not traditionally classified as a behavioral health intervention, it may serve as an important preventative mechanism that strengthens protective factors associated with student resilience, engagement, and long-term success.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Description
Total Participants	10
Research Design	Basic Qualitative
Sampling Method	Purposive Sampling
Data Collection Method	Semi-Structured Interviews
Participant Roles	Special Education Directors, Literacy Coaches, Principals, Assistant Principals, Reading Specialists, MTSS Coordinators, Faculty Directors, Regional Coordinators
Years of Experience	5-28 Years
Educational Settings	Public Schools, Charter Schools, District Offices, Higher Education

Limitations

The qualitative approach used in the study, together with its small sample size, means that the results cannot be widely generalized. The findings are based on participants' experiences and do not include direct measures of student outcomes. On the other hand, since participants came from a range of educational settings, areas, and professional positions, this might allow for some degree of transferability of the findings to other schools or districts that are encountering similar problems. Although the identified framework and themes are rooted in U.S. circumstances, basic leadership practices such as structured collaboration, family engagement, and data-informed decision-making could be relevant in other educational contexts and possibly in international ones, provided that appropriate cultural

and systemic adjustments are made. Further research should examine literacy leadership and student outcomes using larger samples to investigate applicability across different educational environments.

The study examined how special education and literacy leaders define their roles and carry them out to support literacy outcomes for elementary students with reading disabilities. The findings showed four closely linked leadership practices: structured collaboration and shared leadership; trust-centered and culturally responsive communication; data-informed advocacy and decision-making; and continuous professional development.

The findings suggest that literacy leadership extends beyond instructional management and serves as a critical mechanism for fostering family engagement, strengthening educator capacity, and supporting student success. Effective literacy leadership promotes coordinated systems that connect schools, families, and educators to support literacy development and educational engagement.

From a behavioral health perspective, literacy leadership may serve as an early prevention framework by reducing barriers to academic frustration, disengagement, and diminished self-confidence. When educational leaders create collaborative and supportive environments, they contribute to conditions that promote both academic achievement and student well-being.

Recommendations

- **Recommendations for Educational Leaders:** Educational leaders should establish organized collaboration systems that encourage communication among general educators, special educators, literacy specialists, and families. They should also ensure that family engagement activities offer parents meaningful opportunities to support literacy development outside the classroom.
- **Recommendations for Professional Development:** School districts should offer continuous professional development that is tied to employees' jobs, with a focus on evidence-based literacy practices, reading disabilities, family involvement, and behavioral health awareness. Professional development should be linked to student needs and supported by coaching and collaborative learning arrangements.
- **Recommendations for Behavioral Health Professionals:** Behavioral health professionals should consider forming partnerships with schools as a way of taking a preventative approach to students' well-being; joint initiatives by educational and behavioral health professionals could help strengthen the support systems available to students facing academic and emotional difficulties related to reading problems.
- **Recommendations for Future Research:** Future research should examine the connection between literacy leadership practices and measurable student outcomes such as literacy achievement, school engagement, attendance, and behavioral indicators. It is recommended that researchers use specific quantitative measures, for example, standardized reading assessments (such as DIBELS or the Woodcock-Johnson Reading Mastery Tests), attendance rates, the number of behavioral referrals, and results from student engagement surveys, to provide clear evidence of impact. Furthermore, future studies might consider measures such as improvements in standardized test scores, the frequency of disciplinary incidents, and the rates of parent participation in school activities as concrete indicators. Additional studies should also include the views of parents and students to gain a more complete understanding of literacy leadership and practices related to family engagement. Longitudinal studies could then help to clarify how leadership practices affect student outcomes over time by monitoring these quantitative indicators over several years.

Table 2: Themes and Behavioral Health Implications

Theme	Leadership Practice	Behavioral Health Connection
Structured Collaboration	Shared leadership and instructional alignment	Increased consistency and student support
Trust-Centered Communication	Family engagement and relationship building	Stronger support systems and school connectedness
Data-Informed Advocacy	Early identification and intervention	Reduced academic frustration and disengagement
Professional Development	Teacher capacity building	Improved responsiveness to academic and emotional needs

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author states that there are no conflicts of interest in relation to the publication of this manuscript and that they are the only one responsible for the content and the writing of the article.

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