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**THE RELATIONSHIP OF BIOLOGICAL PARENT OR RELATIVE  
INVOLVEMENT AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS AMONG  
SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS**

by  
James Murtaugh

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate School  
of Rowan University  
2002

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_

Date Approved 5/1/02

## **ABSTRACT**

James Murtaugh

### **THE RELATIONSHIP OF BIOLOGICAL PARENT OR RELATIVE INVOLVEMENT AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS**

2002

Dr. John Klanderma, Advisor

Dr. Roberta Dihoff, Advisor

Master of Arts in School Psychology

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between biological parent and relative involvement in special education students' lives and academic success. Also investigated was the relationship between biological parent and relative involvement in special education students' lives and the amount of time spent out of the classroom for behavioral reasons. Other variables include age at separation, type of placement, classification, number of siblings, or if the child's home school district was urban or non-urban. Each city of the urban districts examined was also analyzed. Statistical tests were performed to establish correlation between these variables and GPA scores. The subjects were seventy special education students, aged ten through eighteen, who attend a private school in New Jersey. Data was collected from school records to determine if any significant relation exists between the variables. The results suggest the presence of biological parents or relatives in special education students' lives enhance academic success. The results also suggest that those special education students separated for longer amounts of time show less academic success than those students who have lived continuously with one biological parent or relative throughout their lives.

## MINI-ABSTRACT

James Murtaugh

### THE RELATIONSHIP OF BIOLOGICAL PARENT OR RELATIVE INVOLVEMENT AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

2002

Dr. John Klanderman, Advisor

Dr. Roberta Dihoff, Advisor

Master of Arts in School Psychology

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the absence of biological parents and relatives in special education students' lives and their academic success, as well as time spent out of the classroom for behavioral reasons.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank Dr. Klanderman and Dr. Dihoff for support, advice and encouragement.

Additionally, I would like to thank my parents, Raymond and Dorothy Murtaugh, and Brian and Sheryl Murtaugh.

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## **CHAPTER ONE THE PROBLEM**

### ***Need***

All school systems require reliable predictors of student academic success. These predictors can assist in the evaluation of existing programs and formulation of new curriculum and school-based services that may better serve the student population. One such predictor is the presence or absence of biological parents or other relatives in the child's life. Although numerous studies have been completed with the general student population in this regard, limited data has been collected involving the general or specific special education population.

Within intact families, the relationship between parent and child can vary between secure attachment and abject abuse or neglect. However, many young people cite the family as the most important source of love, support, protection, and comfort (Allen & Land, 1999; Steinberg, 1990). Most adolescents believe their own moral values can be directly attributed to parental influence (Offer, 1969; Offer and Schonert-Reichl, 1992). The absence of biological parents or relatives in a student's life can further exacerbate preexisting conditions that challenge routine academic success. Furthermore, physical handicaps, and/or any resultant behavioral, learning or emotional problems can often lead to such students being formally classified.

Few studies have focused on parental influence in relation to classroom behaviors. For example, little research is available that measures how many special education students require disciplinary procedures in school and what environmental issues



influence chronic offenders. Typically, student disruptions and resolutions are made record, but those incident reports are not made part of a larger overall data collection for study of patterns, trends and source treatments.

Given the probability that the absence or presence of a biological parent in a child's life may directly influence his or her behavior and performance in school, there exists a need to identify the relationship and examine the depth of its impact on academic achievement. Variables include the presence or absence of biological parent or relatives in the subject's lives, educational performance and time spent out of the classroom for disciplinary purposes.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between special education students separated from their biological parents and relatives and academic success. This study will also examine the relationship between special education students who are separated from their biological parents and relatives and the amount of time spent in a school "time out" room. School records will be studied in order to determine if and when selected students were separated from their biological parents. Academic success will be determined by report card history. Time spent in time out rooms will be recorded in logs maintained by school staff.

Research will determine the following:

Special education students who were separated from their biological parents or other relatives will demonstrate equal or lower academic GPAs and more time spent in time out situations. Other collateral data will be examined, including age at separation,

classification, number of siblings, race, type of placement and the subject's home districts.

### *Hypothesis*

The general hypothesis of this study is that special education students separated from their biological parents or relatives will achieve less academically and require more discipline in the classroom.. Data will be collected from school records, report cards and time-out room logs.

The results of this study will test the following:

1. Special education students who were separated from one or both biological parents or other relatives will score lower academically than students who have resided continuously with a biological parent or relative.
2. Special education students who were separated from one or both biological parents or other relatives for longer amounts of time will score lower academically than students who have resided continuously with a biological parent or relative.
3. Special education students who were separated from one or both biological parents or other relatives will record more instances requiring teacher disciplinary intervention.

### *Theory*

All children grow up within the unique conditions of their individual family units. Parents possess varying degrees of child-rearing competency. Many unrelated

circumstances may contribute to the eventual removal of a child from the biological parent's home. Poverty, substance abuse, criminal activity, physical violence, sexual abuse and indiscriminate neglect, as well as the specific wish of a parent to sever parental rights are among those many factors.

Once a determination is made by authorities to remove a child, various circumstances dictate where the child will be placed. Among the placement options are foster, respite, group and adoptive homes, with licensed organizations or institutions or with a relative. State organizations like New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) have screening procedures to qualify placement homes. However, these guidelines are no guarantee that the placement will be appropriate. Some children may find themselves in less healthy home environments than from which they came.

### **Definitions**

Academic Achievement – for the purpose of this study, academic achievement is measured by referencing report card grades.

Assertive Discipline – a series of ordered behavior management tactics developed by author Lee Canter.

Separated – for the purpose of this study, students who did not reside with at least one biological parent or relative continuously for their entire lives.

Safety Time-Out Procedures (STOP) Room – a time-out room at the school utilized in this study which is used as a last resort when all aspects of Canter's Assertive Discipline are exhausted. Staff are trained to utilize counseling methods before students are escorted to the STOP room.

### *Assumptions*

It is assumed that the teachers who are employed by the school used in this study have been trained in the utilization of Canter's Assertive Discipline methods and will follow specific guidelines. Finally, it is assumed that the staff employed by the school utilized in this study who monitor STOP room logs keep accurate and complete records.

### *Limitations*

Administrative consent was required in order to access student files and STOP room logs. This study is also limited by the demographic makeup of the students utilized as subjects in this study.

### *Overview*

In Chapter Two, recent pertinent literature is reviewed. Material presented will address the academic outcomes related to the presence or absence of biological parents or relatives in the subject's home environment. Positive and negative aspects will be explored. This review will conclude with a summary of relevant material.

In Chapter Three, information is presented that pertains to the details of this study, including specifics regarding data and the sample group. Procedures relating to data analysis will be explained.

Chapter Four will present the data resulting from this study in text and graphs.

Chapter Five will summarize all findings, and provide suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Education professionals have long known that family background can be a predictor of academic achievement. A number of significant studies have been presented since the early 1900s that concern children who have been deprived of personal care, emotional warmth and individualized attention. The findings offer overwhelming proof that every phase of a child's personality development may be negatively affected by a lack of care and affection; his/her emotional reactions, attitudes toward self, relationships to other people, intellectual development and even the child's physical well-being.

(NOTE: a review of pertinent literature revealed no research strictly limited to the topic of this thesis, ie, the absence of parents and other relatives and its effect on academic achievement and school behavior. Research was plentiful concerning the circumstances under which children are separated from their parents and outcomes of those separations.)

Children are separated from their biological parents for many reasons: death, social agency orders, or other circumstances. These children may be institutionalized, placed in foster care or adopted. Institutionalized children may be exposed to the particularly severe negative effects of deprivation of sufficient intellectual, social and emotional stimulation and encouragement. The foster care system presents another unique environment, usually involving multiple placements intended to be temporary. It is generally believed that much is required of foster parents for limited compensation. In the United States in 1999, there were 550,000 children in foster care.

Research for the purpose of this study was generally limited to investigations regarding adopted children which were found to be the most numerous, continuous and relevant. In this chapter possible relationships concerning adoption and a child's developmental well being will be examined. Emerging trends in research will be discussed. This section is broken down into two areas of study:

1. General adoption data
2. Adoption in education and special education populations

### Adoption

Adoption has existed in various forms for centuries. Currently, one to two percent of children in the United States have been adopted (Haugaard 1998) by 1.5 million families. The relationship between adopted children and adoptive parents can be defined by the following three conditions:

1. adoption by a biological relative
2. remarriage and adoption by a step-parent
3. adoption by persons unrelated to the adoptive parents

Many different factors may influence the child in each of these situations. Placement age, sex, race, ethnic background and/or national origin also vary among adoptive children. Adoptive families may differ in size, level of functionality and their openness about the adoption. Two percent of American families adopt non-relative children, usually involving white mothers, age 25 to 34, who adopt an infant (Bacharach, Adams, Sambrano, & London, 1990). Children who are adopted face more complex developmental issues than non-adopted children. Kaplan (1989) described seven issues

that all adoptees have in common: loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy and control.

Many clinical and community-based studies have been initiated to determine if adopted children are at a greater risk for behavioral and academic problems. Early research offers overwhelming findings that suggest that adopted children are a higher risk for lower academic achievement and social competence, more aggressive acting out, learning disabilities, lower self-esteem, hyperactivity, school related misbehavior and other negative outcomes (Berry, 1992; Brodzinsky, Schechter, Braff, & Singer, 1984; Kortopolis, Cote, Joseph, Pentland, Stavrakaki, Sheahan, & Oke, 1988).

Many studies have noted the significant overrepresentation of adopted children in the psychological or psychiatric population (Berry, 1992; Kortopolis, et al, 1988). Ingersoll (1993) noted that adopted children are significantly more likely to be diagnosed as having learning difficulties, including those related to Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

In an exhaustive review of all pertinent research concerning adoption, including international longitudinal studies, Haugaard (1998) concluded that children adopted by non-relatives were overrepresented in inpatient and outpatient mental health settings (excluding those adopted as infants), but found no association between adoption and increased risk for specific mental disorders. Haugaard's review of studies that concerned the adoptees' rate of problematic behavior concluded that adopted and non-adopted children demonstrate only minor differences; but, some adopted children do experience significant problems. Haugaard summarizes that all previous studies that addressed adoption as a risk factor for adjustment disorders reached different conclusions depending on whether the study was clinically or non-clinically based.

Research based in clinics suggests that adopted children are at much greater risk for developmental and adjustment problems than non-adopted children. Non-clinical studies found little or no difference between the two groups. Haugaard also suggests that

the higher incidence of adoptees in mental health settings may be due to parental and juvenile justice authority patterns of referral, citing studies that indicate adoptees with similar levels of problems as non-adoptees are more likely to be referred into the mental health and justice systems. In conclusion, Haugaard urges further research, stating, "the extent to which the process of growing up as an adopted child has a negative influence on a child's development is unclear." He does reference research that finds that the characteristics possessed by adopted children prior to adoption (i.e., genetic, fetal alcohol syndrome) may place these children at a higher risk for potential developmental problems.

Some investigations into adoption have yielded positive results. An early study by Skodak and Skeels (1949) showed that adopted children may gain at least ten IQ points when they are reared in superior homes; also, identical twins who were separated and raised in distinctively different environments may come to differ even more substantially. Kadashin (1980) found 84 percent of adoptions are considered by observers as moderately successful or successful, with 16 percent reported as failures.

Clinician and researcher, David. M. Brodzinsky, who has devoted much time to the study of adoption, consistently notes that the vast majority of adoptees are free from emotional problems.

Additional research suggests that there are no substantial differences between non-adoptees and adoptees adopted in infancy. (Brodzinsky, 1987, 1990; Sharma, McGue & Benson, 1996). Both Brodzinsky (1987, 1990), and Berry & Barth (1989) offer convincing evidence that behavior and adjustment problems increase with the age of the child at the time of the adoption. Berry (1992) notes reliable research that concludes that adopted girls are at less risk than adopted boys for problems with social adjustment, school work and attitude towards school work.



### *Adoptees in Education and Special Education*

Adopted individuals who are raised by non-biologically related adults account for approximately one to two percent of the overall population of children in the United States under the age of 18 (Zill 1985). Additionally, the same population of children represent five percent of children in outpatient mental health settings and eight to fifteen percent of children in psychiatric facilities (Brodzinsky and Schecter, 1990; Rogeness, Hoppe, Macedo, Fischer and Harris, 1988). Ingersoll (1993) found adopted children are three to six times more likely than non-adopted children to be referred for psychiatric treatment. Regardless of the reason for referral, the very nature of these statistics may help to explain the overrepresentation of adopted children in special education programs. Additional studies have concluded that when compared to non-adoptive children, adoptees have a higher incidence of personality disorders and are prone to a higher frequency of acting out behaviors and conduct disorders, especially aggressiveness, oppositional behavior, impulsivity, hyperactivity and running away (Brodzinsky, 1987; Kotsopoulos, et al, 1988). One study comprised of a large, nationally representative sample found that adopted adolescents are at a higher risk for substandard academic achievement, substance abuse, poor psychological well-being and/or physical health, fighting and lying to authority figures (Miller, Fan, Christensen, Grotevant, & van Dulmen, 2000).

Brodzinsky, et al (1984) referenced findings noting that teachers rated adopted children as more restless, nervous and hostile than non-adoptees, and administered the Hahnemann Elementary School Behavior Ratings to a control group of adoptees and non-adoptees. Adopted children rated lower on the five Hahnemann scales relating to originality, school involvement, irrelevant talk, negative feelings and school achievement.

On a related level, many research studies have been conducted in recent years in an attempt to explain the overrepresentation of adoptees among the special education population. Zill (1985) notes that when comparing adoptive to non-adoptive elementary school children, the adoptees achieved lower teacher and parent ratings for academic success. They are also four times more likely to display significant learning difficulties. Non-relative adoptees are eight times more likely to display symptoms of ADD. Ingersoll (1993) states, "Twenty-three percent of all adopted children would be expected to have ADHD. This figure is several times greater than the rate of ADHD in the general population, which is generally estimated to be between three and five percent."

Although a number of studies find a relation between adoption and higher levels of academic difficulties, externalizing problem behaviors, psychological maladjustment and other negative outcomes, many other studies reveal no significant differences between the adjustment of adopted and non-adopted children. Other recent studies examine past research and suggest the research may be methodologically flawed. A report by Brodzinsky and Steiger (1991) cite small sample sizes and the reoccurrence of the utilization of single sources of data as typical shortcomings.

In addition, Brodzinsky and Steiger indicate that previous studies focused on adoptees recruited solely through clinical settings that would bias the sample toward the more disturbed segment of the adoptive population. Attempting to correct these problems in a study that is particularly relevant to the scope of this thesis, Brodzinsky and Steiger (1991) examined New Jersey public and private schools in order to measure the prevalence of adoptees among select special education populations. Reasoning that most adoptees live in middle-class families, thereby increasing the possibility that the parents may wish to send the child to a private special education program, and the tendency of New Jersey schools to send the more behaviorally disturbed and emotionally handicapped students to private schools out of district, Brodzinsky and Steiger made extensive efforts to ensure a large representative sample by contacting every private

school and child study team in the state. Available statistics demonstrate that 1.9 percent of New Jersey children were adopted, which is comparable to the national average. They also account for research results that suggest that children placed as infants have less incidence of neglect, abuse, emotional problems and/or medical complications than adoptees placed at an older age.

Attempting to prove that age at the time of adoption is a factor that may impact the prevalence of negative behaviors, Brodzinsky and Steiger also collected collateral data relating to the adoption age of the students participating in the study. Some investigated prior research had concluded that adoptee symptomology usually results in classifications of either neurologically impaired (NI), perceptually impaired (PI), or emotionally disturbed (ED). Research was restricted to children who had been classified in these three categories, and the 7,194 children included in the sample represented ten percent of the NI population, six percent of the PI population, and thirteen percent of the ED population in New Jersey.

Results suggested that special education adoptees represent a three to fourfold increase over the base rate of adoptees in the general population. Also, by calculating the percentage of early vs. late-placed adopted children in each special education category, a significant difference was found only for ED students. Brodzinsky and Steiger admit to three limitations present in their study: underrepresentation of minority and urban children, a focus on only three special education classifications, and exclusion of foster children in the sample.

Acknowledging these limitations, Brodzinsky and Steiger conclude that adoption increases the child's risk for adjustment problems.

Dickman (1992) wrote a response that analyzes their study in depth. Praising its finding, Dickman states that the overrepresentation of adoptees in the New Jersey NI and PI populations can be explained by the adoptee's birth mother's statistically higher risk for prenatal and perinatal complications. Citing Brodzinsky's findings from a 1987 study,

Dickman blames adoptee overrepresentation in the ED population on flaws in the classification system, but admits more research needs to be conducted, especially in the area of genetic expectancy (defined as trying to live up to one's biological parent's accomplishments or personality traits). Children adopted at a young age have no genetic expectancy, and older adoptees may have negative feelings of genetic expectancy because they may feel abandoned by their biological parents. Dickman also concludes that, as does Brodzinsky, more research needs to be completed on the adoption process and its outcomes.

### **Discussion of Previous Research**

Research concerning adoption is in a state of fluctuation. Prior to the early 1990's, the vast majority of studies concerning adopted children were conducted in clinical settings. By utilizing only clinical data, researchers presented findings biased toward the more disturbed segment of the adoptee population, not the vast majority (estimated at 84 percent) of adoptees who do not require clinical assistance. Researchers have begun to ask why so many adoptees are referred to inpatient and outpatient mental health programs. Haugaard (1998) notes prior studies that indicate adoptees with similar levels of problems as non-adoptees are referred to mental health facilities more often. Haugaard also found that this pattern of referral applies to the justice system as well.

Haugaard (1998) also reveals that many adoptees have preexisting biological conditions prior to adoption (ie, born addicted to drugs, genetic anomalies) that may impact upon a child's development in numerous ways. Adoptees affected by these conditions may be at greater risk for behavioral and academic problems which could statistically impact psychological, medical and special education populations.

A study by Brodzinsky and Steiger (1991) includes an analysis of previous research concerning adoption noting the reoccurrence of various methodological flaws

like the utilization of small sample sizes and single sources of data. Dickman (1992) offered a positive commentary about the Brodzinsky and Steiger study and places some of the blame regarding adoptee overrepresentation in mental health and special education populations on genetic expectancy. Dickman defines genetic expectancy as a child's desire to emulate biological parental status or personality traits, concluding that a child's inability to do this may lead to anxiety or other negative feelings. Although many authors urge additional research into the various issues of adoption, and are critical of past research, results of some studies are accepted as truth and are not disputed by research; that adoptees are overrepresented in mental health and special education populations, that behavioral difficulties are reduced the earlier the adoption age, and that adopted girls fare better than adopted boys in social adjustment, schoolwork, and attitudes toward schoolwork.

### **CHAPTER III DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

#### **Hypothesis**

Special education students who are separated from their biological parents or relatives will have less academic success and display more time out of the classroom for behavioral reasons than their peers who were not separated from their biological parents or relatives.

#### **Subjects**

The sample population for this study consisted of 70 special education students from various New Jersey school districts. The students attend a private education school located in central New Jersey. Thirty-eight students resided in cottages located on school grounds. Thirty-two were day students who were transported by bus each day from their home districts. Sixty-seven students were males and three were females. Since the percentage of females who attend this school was disproportionate, gender could not be a statistical consideration in this study. The age of the subjects ranged from ten years, three months, to eighteen years, four months, as of March 31, 2002, encompassing elementary through secondary grade levels. Forty of these students had been referred by urban school districts, and thirty by non-urban districts. (See Figure 3.1.)

Overall, nine students were classified as Socially Maladjusted, or with Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or Conduct Disorder and Behavior Disorder; eleven were

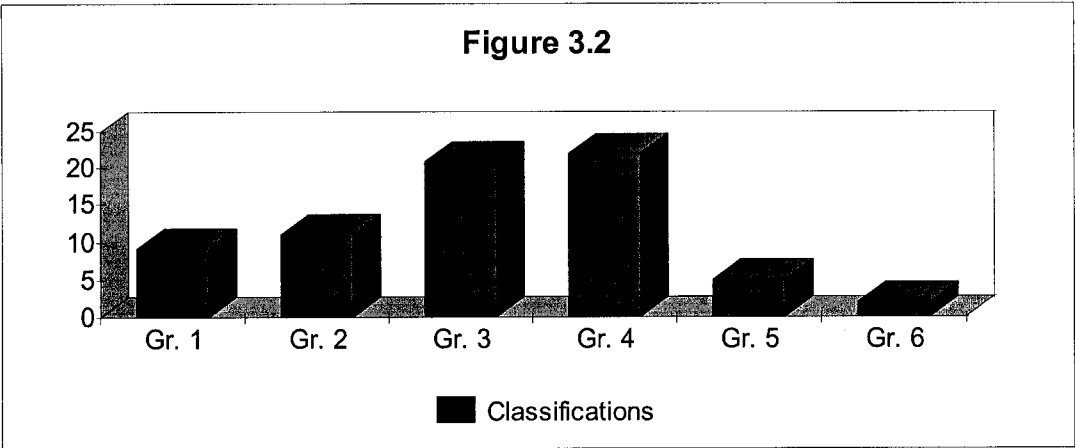
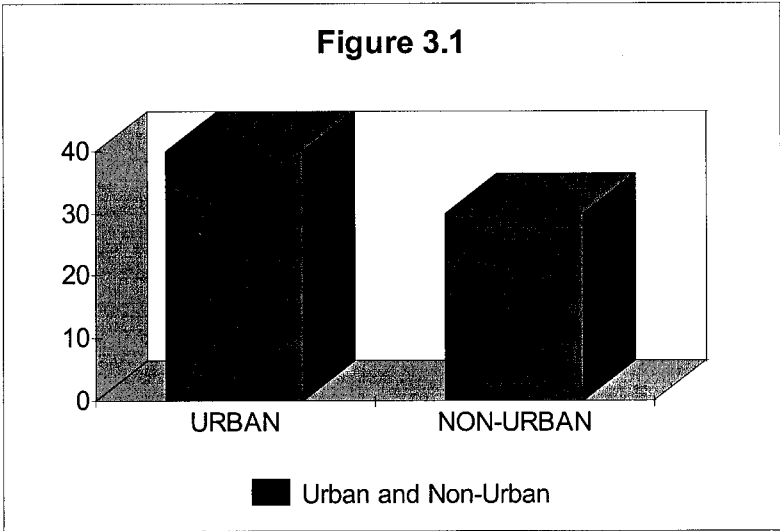
classified as Perceptually Impaired; twenty-one were classified as Emotionally Disturbed; twenty-two were classified with Multiple Disabilities or Multiple Handicap; five were classified as Learning Disabled and two were Neurologically Impaired. (See Figure 3.2.) Forty-eight students in the sample were African American; sixteen were Caucasian.; and six were Hispanic. (See Figure 3.3.) Twenty- two students had lived continuously with a biological parent or relative. Forty- eight students were found to have been separated from their biological parents or relatives. (See Figure 3.4.)

### Consent

Data was collected from existing sources. This particular special education school maintains separate administrative and academic records. Both sets of records required referencing for the purpose of this study, and permission was obtained from the necessary authorities in each area. The school principal granted permission to review STOP room logs. All informed parties were assured their individual information would be kept confidential.

### Variables

The dependent variable in the study was the presence of absence of at least one biological parent or relative in each special education student's life. The independent variables were the scores relating to the student's academic success. Other independent variables included the scores obtained relating to the students' race, classification, type of placement, number of siblings and whether the student was from an urban or non-urban district. In addition, the group of students who were separated from their biological parents were analyzed for correlation relating to the age at the time of separation, and the type of resultant placement ( non-relative adoption, foster care or institutionalization).

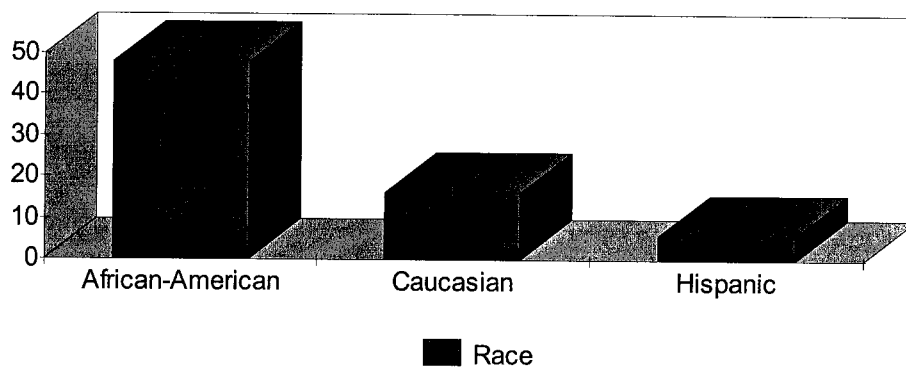


LEGEND

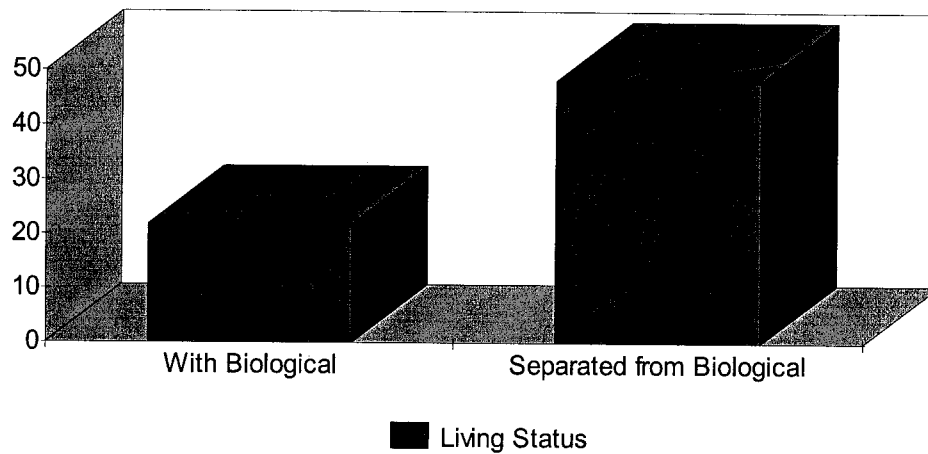
<i>Group One</i>	Socially Maladjusted Oppositional Defiant Disorder Conduct Disorder Behavior Disorder
<i>Group Two</i>	Perceptually Impaired
<i>Group Three</i>	Emotionally Disturbed
<i>Group Four</i>	Multiple Disabilities Multiple Handicaps
<i>Group Five</i>	Learning Disabilities
<i>Group Six</i>	Neurologically Impaired



**Figure 3.3**



**Figure 3.4**



Some subjects recorded multiple placements. In these cases the primary placement was determined by length of time in each placement.

### *Design and Analysis*

Since the data obtained was utilized to measure individual students across several domains, this study was longitudinal, within subjects, and correlational. No experimentation occurred so this study was descriptive. The One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and post hoc statistical methods were utilized to analyze the data.

Two different sets of school records were accessed to obtain the data required for this study.

ADMINISTRATIVE records contain medical, personal and academic information. For the purpose of this study, data was obtained from these records relating to each student's date of birth, race, number of siblings, age at the time of separation from parents, length of time separated from parents, placement information, prior report card scores and special education classification.

ACADEMIC records contain school-related information. For the purpose of this study, data was obtained from these records relating to current report card scores and the urban, or non-urban, status of the students' home district.

Student report cards from previously attended academic institutions were often available. These grades were averaged with the grades from the students' recent report cards to better determine the students' overall rate of academic success. Numeric and alphabetic grades were converted into the system utilized by colleges (4.0 being the highest grade, etc.). Only grades from the areas of language arts, mathematics, science and social studies/history were considered.

Additional data was obtained through the examination of the school's STOP room logs. Teachers employed by the school are trained to use the discipline system

known as Assertive Discipline, authored by Canter. The student acting out is to be removed from the classroom only after a series of warnings. The student is then required to report to the STOP room and each referral to the STOP room is compiled into a school STOP room log. These logs were referenced, and a scale determined to statistically evaluate the amount of time spent in the STOP room.

**Testable Hypotheses**

NULL HYPOTHESIS

1 - Special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives will have equal or lower academic grade point averages than those special education students who have lived with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth.

2 – Special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives for longer amounts of time will demonstrate equal or lower academic grade point averages than those special education students who have lived with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth.

3 – Special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives will spend more time out of the classroom for behavioral reasons than those special education students who have lived with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth.

## ALTERNATE HYPOTHESIS

1 – Special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives will have a higher academic grade point average than those special education students who have lived with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth.

2 – Special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives for longer amounts of time will have higher academic grade point averages than those special education students who have been living with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth.

3 - Special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives will spend less time out of the classroom for behavioral reasons than those special education students who have lived with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth.

To supplement the data supporting the three main hypotheses, additional data was gathered pertaining to each individual student's age at separation, race, special education classification, number of siblings and home district (urban or non-urban). This data was also used as independent variables in this study, and any significant correlation reported. Additional data was also collected relating to those students who have been separated from their parents, including age at the time of the separation, and the type of placement (adoption by a non-relative, foster care or institutionalization).

## **CHAPTER IV ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the academic success of special education students as determined by an overall GPA and their status as living/not living with a biological parent or relative. Additional data was collected to determine if any correlation existed between these student's GPA and the amount of time separated from biological parents or relatives, age at time of separation, classification, race, number of siblings, urban or non-urban district, and, if urban, differences in mean GPA among cities. Additionally, data was gathered to determine if there is a relationship between the amount of time spent out of classroom for behavioral reasons, and status of living/not living with a biological parent or relative.

The data collected was often separated into groupings for statistical purposes. These groups will be defined in the sections devoted to each hypothesis and in the section devoted to the other variables examined. The statistical method used to analyze the data collected was the One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Multiple comparisons were obtained through the utilization of post hoc tests.

### **HYPOTHESIS ONE**

Hypothesis One in null form maintains that special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or other relatives will have equal or lower academic GPAs than those special education students who have lived with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth.

To determine a correlation between variables the data collected pertaining to the students' primary residence was divided into two groups:

#### Group One

Those students who have lived continuously with a biological parent or relative (aunt, uncle or grandparent of subject). Twenty-two students comprised this group.

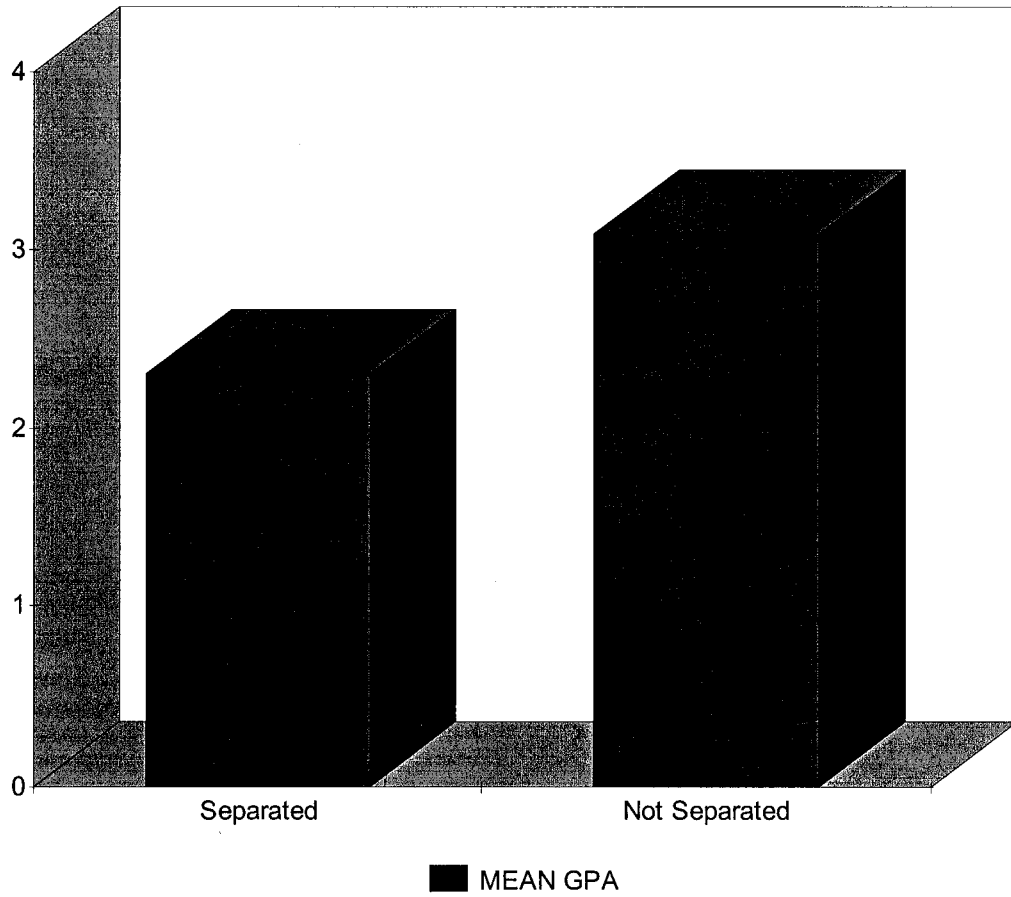
#### Group Two

Those students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives, regardless of the duration of separation. Forty-eight students comprised this group.

Student academic success was determined by converting report card grades in mathematics, language arts, science and social studies into the grading system used by colleges (4.0 to 1.0 scale). Grades from schools previously attended by the subjects were included when available. The dependent variable in this trial was the GPA scores. The independent variable was the condition of separation/no separation from the biological parent or relative, regardless of length of duration of separation. Separation could occur at any point in the child's life.

Significance was found between the dependent and independent variable allowing acceptance of the null hypothesis and rejection of the alternate hypothesis. It was found that the group of students who had lived continuously with a biological parent or relative recorded higher mean GPAs than those students who had been separated from their biological homes. The Group One averaged GPA was slightly over 3.0. The Group Two averaged GPA was slightly over 2.2. (see Figure 4.1.)

Figure 4.1



## **HYPOTHESIS TWO**

Hypothesis Two in null form maintains that special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives for longer amounts of time will have equal or lower academic GPAs than those special education students who have lived with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth.

Student academic success was measured utilizing the same method as hypothesis one. The amount of time separated from parents was calculated by months (two years separated = 24 months). The data runs through March 31, 2002. The separation could occur at any time in the students' life. This data was divided into three groups for statistical purposes.

### Group One

Students who have lived continuously with at least one biological parent or relative for their entire lives.

### Group Two

Students who were separated from their biological parents or relatives for a period of one month through sixty months.

### Group Three

Students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives for a period of sixty-one or more months.

The range of separation was from zero months (students who were not separated from their biological homes) to a 200-month old student separated from his biological parents or relatives since birth. The independent variable was the duration of separation. The dependent variable was the GPA scores.



A correlation was found in the relationships among all three groups. The alternative hypothesis is rejected and the null hypothesis is not rejected. Group One students (not separated) averaged higher mean GPAs (mean = 3.1) than Group Two students (mean = 2.4). Group Three students (separated the longest) recorded the lowest mean GPA average (2.0). (see Figure 4.2.)

### **HYPOTHESIS THREE**

In null form, Hypothesis Three maintains that special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives will have an equal or greater number of times spent out of the classroom for behavioral reasons than those students who have lived with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth.

The teachers employed at the special education school used in this study are trained to give the acting out student a series of warnings prior to removal from class. The students removed from class report to a “STOP room” similar to a “time-out” room. The STOP room monitor maintains a daily log referencing each student sent to the room. The number of times each student was removed was tallied and the data was divided into two groups.

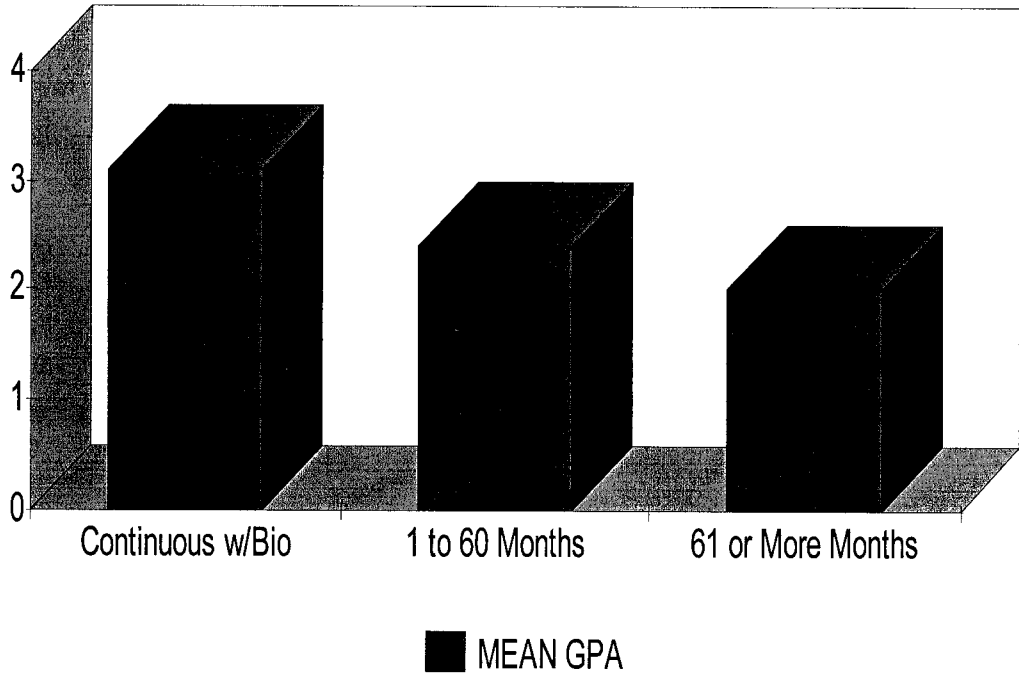
#### Group One

Students who have lived continuously with a biological parent or relative.

#### Group Two

Students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives.

Figure 4.2



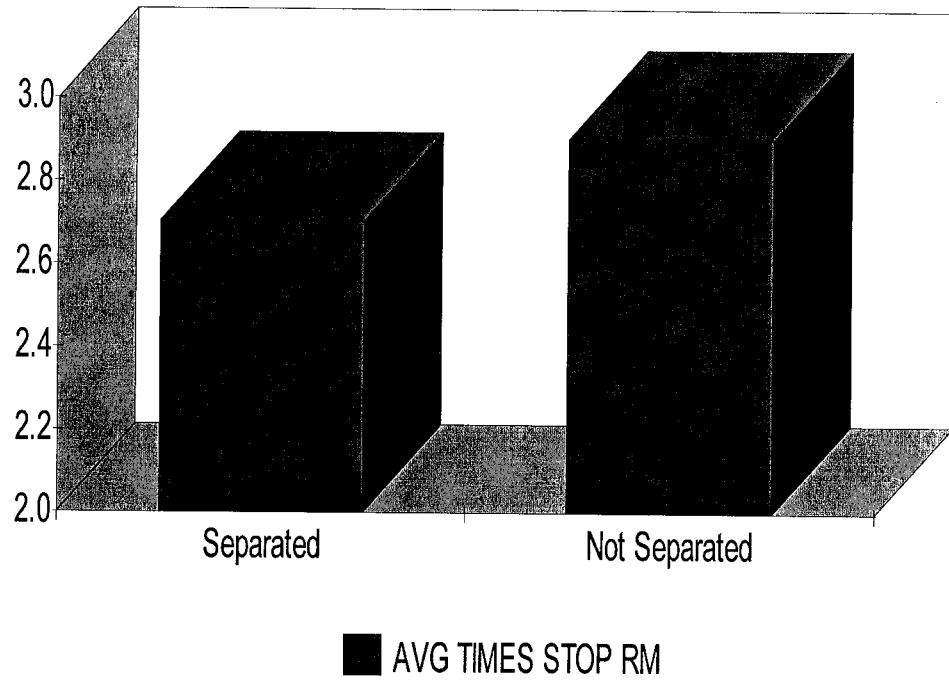
The range for this data was zero (those not sent to the STOP room) through one isolated case reporting sixty-nine times. The independent variable is whether the child was separated or not separated from his biological parents or relatives. The dependent variable was the number of times reporting to the STOP room. Analysis of data showed no significance between variables. The null hypothesis is rejected and alternate hypothesis is accepted. Those students who had lived with their biological parents or relatives continuously displayed a slightly higher average amount of time spent out of the classroom for behavioral reasons than those students who had been separated from their biological homes for any duration of time in their lives. This difference, however was not significant. (see Figure 4.3.)

#### **ADDITIONAL DATA**

Additional data was collected to supplement the findings of the three main hypotheses. The data was analyzed by utilizing ANOVA and post hoc tests. In all cases, the dependent variable was the student GPA scores. The following variables were included:

1. Age at separation from parents: zero to five years, from five to ten years, greater than ten years. Analysis of this data showed no correlation between age at separation and mean GPA.
2. Special education classification: Socially Maladjusted; Oppositional Defiant Disorder; Conduct Disorder; Behavioral Disorder; Perceptually Impaired; Emotionally Disturbed; Multiple Disabilities; Learned Disabled; Neurologically Impaired. Analysis of this data showed no correlation between classification and mean GPA.
3. Race: Group One was African American; Group Two was Caucasian; Group Three was Hispanic. Analysis of data showed no correlation between race and mean GPA.

Figure 4.3



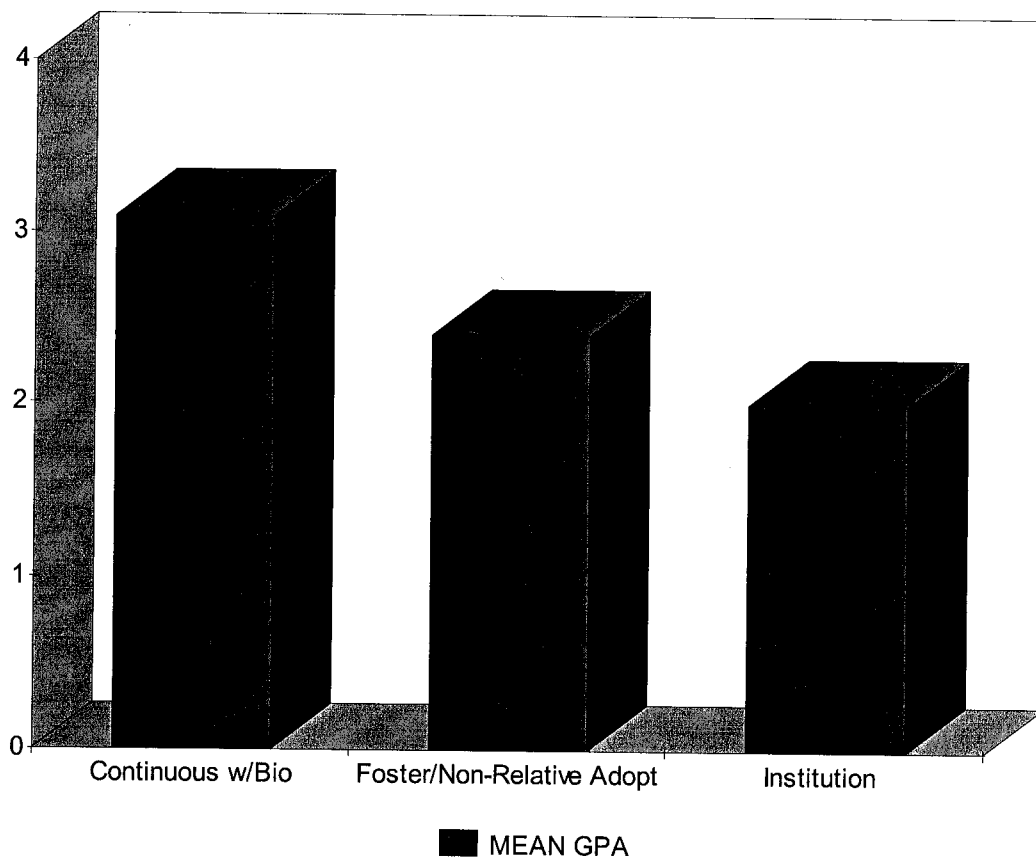
4. Number of siblings: zero through ten. Analysis of data showed no correlation between number of siblings and mean GPA.
5. Urban or Non-Urban school district. Analysis of data showed no correlation between the child's residence in an urban or non-urban district and the mean GPA.
6. Urban New Jersey school districts: Trenton, Camden, Jersey City, Newark and New Brunswick. Analysis of data showed no correlation between urban school districts and mean GPA.
7. Type of placement: birth parents or relative, foster care or non-relative adoption, institution. (Many students had multiple placements; therefore, the primary residence was determined by the placement of the longest duration.) Analysis of data showed a correlation between the type of placement and mean GPA. Students who lived continuously with a biological parent or relative recorded a mean GPA of 3.1; students whose primary placement was in foster or non-relative adoptive care recorded a mean GPA of 2.4; institutionalized students recorded a mean GPA of 2.0. (see Figure 4.4.)
8. Duration of separation: analysis of data showed no correlation between duration of separation and mean GPA.

### **Summary**

This study of three hypotheses are stated in null form:

1 – Hypthesis One maintains that special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or other relatives will have equal or lower academic GPAs than those special education students who have lived with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth. This hypothesis is accepted. The students who were separated from their biological parents or relatives displayed a lower average mean GPA than the group of students who had not been separated for any length

Figure 4.4



of time. The level of significance is less than .004 ( $P < .004$ ). This level was determined by a Tukey post hoc test.

2 - Hypothesis Two in null form maintains that special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives for longer amounts of time will have equal or lower academic GPAs than those special education students who have lived with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth. This hypothesis is accepted. When the students were grouped into categories pertaining to amount of time separated, a correlation exists between longer periods of time and poorer grades.

3 - In null form, Hypothesis Three maintains that special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives will have an equal or greater number of times spent out of the classroom for behavioral reasons than those students who have lived with at least one birth parent or relative continuously since birth. This hypothesis is rejected. Students who lived continuously in the birth home recorded greater amounts of time spent out of the classroom for behavioral reasons. This difference was not significant.

Additional data was gathered pertaining to students' special education classification, age, race, number of siblings, residence in an urban or non-urban district, and age at separation. Analysis of data showed no correlation between these variables and the students' GPA. Data was also collected to determine if students from five different city school districts varied in mean GPA. No significance was found.

Type of placement was also examined. It was found that those students who had lived continuously in the birth home had the highest average mean GPA, followed by those placed in non-relative adoption or foster care. Institutionalized children recorded the lowest mean GPA.

## **CHAPTER FIVE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between biological parent and relative involvement in special education student lives and academic success. Also investigated was the relationship between biological parent and relative involvement in special education student lives and the amount of time spent out of the classroom for behavioral reasons. Other variables included age at separation, type of placement, classification, number of siblings, or if the child's home school district was urban or non-urban. Each city in the urban districts examined was also analyzed. Statistical tests were performed to establish correlation between these variables and GPA scores. The subjects were seventy special education students, aged ten through eighteen, who attend a private school in New Jersey. Data was collected from school records to determine in any significant relation existed between the variables.

The first hypothesis of this study in null form stated that those special education students separated from biological parents and relatives would have an overall GPA (obtained from all available report cards in the areas of language arts, math, and social studies) that was equal or lower than those students who have lived continuously with their biological family. Analysis of this data has supported this hypothesis. The group of separated students had a lower overall mean GPA. This indicates that the presence of biological relatives in a special education student's life can have a positive effect on academic achievement.



The second hypothesis in null form stated that those special education students separated from their biological families for longer amounts of time would have equal or lower mean GPAs than those students who have lived with at least one parent or relative since birth. This hypothesis is accepted. At each level, a significant correlation was found. Group One (not separated) had a higher mean GPA than Group Two students (separated from one month to five years). Group Two students had a higher mean GPA than Group Three students (separated over five years).

The third hypothesis in null form maintains that those special education students who have been separated from their biological parents or relatives will have an equal or greater number of times spent outside the classroom for behavioral reasons than those students who have lived continuously with at least one birth parent or relative since birth. This hypothesis was not supported. Results showed that separated students averaged less time spent out of classroom for behavioral reasons. Further examination revealed three non-separated students in particular comprised most of the STOP room incidents. Later discussion with staff members monitoring the STOP room revealed these three students to be habitual offenders; therefore, they may have skewed the data due to the small sample size.

No significant correlation was found between mean GPA scores and age at separation, length of separation, classification, number of siblings, urban or non-urban district, or the different urban districts. A correlation was found among types of placement. Those students who lived with biological parents or relatives scored the highest mean GPA, followed by students residing within adopted homes or foster care. Institutionalized students represented the lowest mean GPA scores. This confirms the

findings of Dickman's research detailed in Chapter Two's literature review regarding genetic expectation.

Psychology is a field with many disciplines; most prominently, the psychoanalytic, behavioral, and cognitive. Each discipline offers explanations for the motivational and developmental issues faced by many special education students. Freud emphasized the parent's role in early psychosexual stages. One prominent Neo-Freudian, Erik Erikson, described eight stages of development. At each stage, a psychosocial crisis is presented that must be resolved by an individual in order to adjust to society in a healthy manner. The parental role is important in Erikson's early stages, when trust and autonomy issues are addressed. Erikson also identified seven areas that all individuals must clarify to form a good sense of self; including, self-certainty and anticipation of achievement, issues faced daily by many in the special education population.

Behaviorists view reinforcement as an event that follows a behavior, and increases the probability that the behavior will be repeated. Famed behaviorist, B.F. Skinner, was not concerned with emotions, but another researcher, Albert Bandura, stressed that we often learn by direct and indirect modeling, and stated that much of what we do, we learn from observing others. Children living in dire situations that necessitate removal from the home insinuate poor models and insufficient reinforcement for positive, social interactions.

Cognitive and cognitive behavioral theorists have studied the individual's place in the world, and how that individual views and fits into that place. Individuals may attempt to alter the world around them to meet their specific wants and needs; or, may change the way they think to adapt to their environment. Many of the subjects in this study were

exposed to severe circumstances. Reasons for removal from the birth home included lack of care, parental incarceration, drug and alcohol abuse, and other forms of child abuse. All would have a major impact on the way an individual views the world and his or her place in the world. These negative environments could very well limit academic success and hinder individual development in other areas.

The famous researcher, Abraham Maslow, has offered motivational theories that may offer insight into this study's findings. Maslow believed that all individuals have the capacity to develop and become self-actualized: happy, friendly, creative, loving, productive, fully developed beings; however, the events in one's life, or the actions of another, can impede this progress. Maslow developed a pyramid of needs to demonstrate his concept. To attain each higher level, and grow into a more fulfilled individual, the lower levels must first be strong and secure. Level order: basic physiological needs, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Some of the students from this study have had problems with satisfying even the most basic needs: an unheated home, lack of food, safety from external dangers. Many of the students from the inner city cannot feel safe and secure when there is gunfire outside their windows at night. Those students fortunate enough that have their basic needs met may not realize the more abstract level of love and belonging for other reasons. The students in this study, hailing from foster homes and institutions, showed lower mean GPAs than those living with biological families.

The literature review chapter of this study cites that most research related to adoption issues. The acceptance of the first null hypothesis supports the study's reference: notably, Miller, et al, who found adopted adolescents are at higher risk for

substandard academic achievement. This study utilized a nationally representative sample. Also confirmed are Ingersoll's findings that adopted children are more likely to be diagnosed as having learning difficulties. Data in this study did not affirm both Brodzinsky's, and Berry and Barth's conclusions that behavioral and adjustment problems increase with the age of the child at the time of adoption.

### *Discussion*

I have worked almost twenty years with many different special education populations; however, for most of my career, I worked with a select group: male adolescents who do not attend schools in their home districts, but attend private, special education schools. These students are not classified by physical handicaps, but are often classified as emotionally disturbed and perceptually impaired. My motivation in selecting my thesis topic was to gain insight of the children I work with now, as well as those I may work with in the future.

One student in my current class frequently exhibits bizarre behavior. At a child study team meeting, I noticed how much he disliked his mother. She had never been there for him in any capacity. Obviously, he did not want her to be his mother. Another student in my class is often clownish, but one day he began to act out differently and more frequently. When I spoke to his clinician a few days later, I was told that on the day his behavior changed, he discovered he could not live with his sister, since the state would not compensate her. A third student speaks disdainfully of his encounters with his absent mother on the street.

I have noticed a trend in this separate, special education population. These students place much emphasis on their own biological relationships, and are often preoccupied with their peers' biological relationships.

Mothers and sisters are the frequent brunt of jokes and insults. These adolescents may be in the midst of casual conversation involving any topic, and suddenly, say, "I was with your mother," or, "your mother made me do it." Many students call each other son, with biological implications. The most commonly used retort is, "your mother." What was once the most unmentionable expletive regarding mothers is in common use as a pronoun, adverb, adjective, and interjection, usually with no ill intent.

When this behavior occurs in my classroom, I always address it; however, it would be an insurmountable task to attempt to have this population stop referring to their biological relatives. Thinking or talking about such relationships constitute a large part of each day for these boys and can be a source of great shame or pride ("at least I live with my real mother..."). The individuals in the special education population may have various self-esteem issues; however, a need to feel biological attachment is extremely important, and may impact on many aspects of their cognitive development. The results of this study imply the bigger picture: this student group is often disadvantaged, and are dealing with many problems in their lives, including issues of physical well-being and personal safety. One of their primary social cognitive issues is how they perceive themselves in a biological sense, and how they feel others perceive their biological picture.

### **Implications for Future Interventions and Research**

Early intervention, perhaps utilizing empirical or Rogerian counseling methods, may help special education students work through emotional issues regarding their biological relationships. Clinicians should be aware of the need these students have to perceive themselves and be perceived in a biological context. Resultant emotions are deeply rooted, and an integral and ongoing part of these students' lives. Special education students face unique pressures, and must often face these challenges without support from any biological family in an environment where constant emphasis is placed on such relationships.

Research may lead to better predictors of academic success, the reevaluation of existing programs, and formulation of new curriculum and school-based services. Teaching strategies may be identified to accommodate different learning styles. This research would enhance a greater understanding of motivations behind acting out behaviors. Staff communication between those that interact with the students frequently should be encouraged.

Admittedly, some students live with relatives who are abusive, addicted, or have no positive influence. My research, using a reflective sample of Brodzinsky's classification demographics of a larger New Jersey private school population, indicates the majority of special education students fare better academically when living with biological families.

A review of related literature (separation from biological homes and academic and behavioral outcomes) yielded few results. Research options exist in many similar areas. Most referenced literature was limited to adoption and its outcomes. One recent

trend in adoption research samples larger populations, implying that prior research may have been flawed through the utilization of strictly clinical samples. As a result of this new turn, research opportunities of adoption are now limitless.

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