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Factors Related to School Involvement by Parents of Students with Learning Disabilities

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Factors Related to School Involvement
by Parents of Students with
Learning Disabilities
Kristen White
Longwood College

This thesis was approved by:

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DEC. 4 1995

Running head: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors related to a parent's involvement in their child's education. More specifically it addressed the factors related to the involvement by parents of children with learning disabilities. The subjects (n=52) were all parents of children with learning disabilities. All parents attending a convention sponsored by the Learning Disabilities Association of North Carolina were surveyed. A self-developed questionnaire was used for this research. 37% of the questionnaires were returned. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a Pearson r. A significant correlation was found between teacher involvement and parental involvement ($r = .33, p < .05$). The return rate was not high and this was a limitation in generalizing the results. A recommendation would be to use a larger population with subjects from several conventions.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take a moment to recognize my committee members: Dr. Linda Tennison, Dr, Ruth Meese, and especially Dr. Rachel Mathews. Your time, patience and guidance in this project is greatly valued and appreciated. I would have never made it if not for the three of you.

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Factors Related to School Involvement by Parents of Students with Learning Disabilities

Much has been written about the importance of parental involvement in a child's life, especially their educational development. Exactly when, how, and to what extent parents should be involved remains an issue of some concern (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1982), but few argue with the fact that parental involvement is important to a healthy child's development. Christian and Gorney (1992), defined parental involvement in a broad manner to include various activities that allow parents to participate in the educational process at school and at home. Parents whose children are enrolled in special education program have an even greater need for involvement. One major obligation of a special education parent is having an active role in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process.

Involvement of Parents in Special Education

According to PL 94-142, parents must be included as members of the committee responsible for developing their child's IEP. Parents are also encouraged to participate in public hearings, serve on advisory panels and belong to advocacy groups. In order to measure a parent's involvement, Cones(1985) suggested twelve categories of involvement in special education. These were: 1) contact with teacher; 2) participation in special education process; 3) transportation; 4) observation at schools; 5) educational activities at home; 6) attending parent education/consultation meetings; 7) classroom volunteering; 8) parent-teacher contact; 9) involvement with administration; 10) involvement with fund raising activities; 11) involvement in advocacy groups; and, 12) disseminating information. When Cones (1985) used this scale to measure involvement, the data showed that mothers had higher levels of involvement than fathers in most categories. Neither

one is highly involved, however, according to teacher rating and the overall score. Income and education levels of both mother and fathers are positively correlated with degree of participation.

In 1975 and 1986 the federal government recognized the importance of parental involvement in a child's education with the passage of PL 94-142, The Education For All Handicapped Children (reauthorized as PL 101-176, The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act), and PL 99-457, an amendment to the Education of the Handicapped Act. According to Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida & Kaufman (1978), a primary feature of PL 94-142 is increased parental involvement through informed consent (Herman, 1983). In addition, PL 99-457 provides for parental involvement by requiring that an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP), similar to an IEP, be written for every family with a handicapped infant or toddler in a Early Education Program (Part H, Section 672 a, b, c, d). The reasoning for parental involvement in a child's education is based on the assumption that because a child spends a majority of time with his or her family, services to the child's family will have the greatest effect on a child's development (LaCrosse, 1982).

Some applaud the charges of these legislative mandates as an important recognition of parental rights; however, others question whether "the pendulum has swung to far and to rapidly in a new direction" (Turnbull, 1982 p. 133). Turnbull and Turnbull (1982) were among the first to share their concern about the new areas of parental involvement. They examined assumptions about parental roles and questioned whether these assumptions applied to all parents. Turnbull raised an important question: are these parental roles causing parents of children with disabilities to feel guilty if they do not meet these obligations?

The motives for involving parents as teachers of children with disabilities is compelling (Allen & Hudd, 1987). Not only is to cost effective (Ora, 1973), but also it

provides the best link between the home and the school so that skills learned in school may be reinforced at home. It is true that many children with disabilities require specialized care, supervision and teaching methods. Parents may want and need training in certain areas; however, professionals should not assume that parents do not have teaching skills or that they necessarily require specialized training. Shriver & Kramer (1993), a professional who has a son with a disability, described this attitude as extremely insulting to parents.

The demands placed on parents of children with disabilities are different from the demands placed on parents of children with out disabilities. The amount and level of involvement expected is greater (Allen & Hudd, 1987). The demands placed on them frequently require additional training. Missing a meeting is somehow worse if your child is handicapped. For some parents, this may be linked with feelings of self-blame they already have about the cause of their child's disability (Walker & Stieber 1991).

The PL 99-457 allows parents the right not to participate actively in their child's educational program since it states that the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) is developed with "the family concurrence". It should not be viewed negatively if a parent does not consent to the IFSP because there will be many factors influencing a parent's level of involvement in the child's education. In reality , the level of parental involvement in a child's education may vary drastically among different families. Parents may choose to participate fully in the decision making process by offering input in the placement team meetings, giving consent to changes after becoming fully informed of all options, participating in services recommended by the IFSP, and consenting to the IFSP. On the other hand, parents may choose not to participate, or offer little assistance by giving no input in placement team meetings, giving consent to whatever the school recommends for placement

without asking about options, not participating in assessment process, not consenting to the development of an IFSP, and wanting services provided directly to their child, rather than indirectly through the parent (Shriver, Kramer, Garnett, 1983). Turnbull and Turnbull (1982) suggested that rather than expecting all parents to participate in their child's education equally, the teacher should look at the amount of improvement among the existing number of parents. A major obligation that parents of children with disabilities have is their involvement in the IEP process.

Involvement of Parents in the Individual Education Plan

According to Turnbull and Turnbull (1982) the belief that parents should share the rights and responsibilities of decision makers and be an integral part of the educational process is based on the following assumptions: 1) parents want to be involved in the education decision making and given that opportunity they may take advantage of it; and, 2) attending the meeting to plan their child's IEP will enable parents to become decision makers. Like other areas of special education these assumptions are debatable. Studies of parental involvement in IEP meetings have shown consistently that although parent attendance is fairly high, parent participation in the actual decision making process is very limited (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980). For example the National Committee for Citizens in Education (1980) surveyed approximately 2,300 parents from 438 school districts representing 46 states. A slight majority (52%) of the respondents indicated that their children's IEPs had been finished before the IEP meeting.

A study conducted by Goldstein (1980) revealed that the average length of the IEP conference was 36 minutes; the teacher was observed talking more than twice as much as the parent; and the meetings usually consisted of the special education teacher explaining an already developed IEP to the parents (McKinney 1982). In a

follow up study, Goldstein and Turnbull (1982) found that the majority of the parent contributions in the IEP meeting were on the topics of personal or family issues, not on the educational objectives.

Many parents are convinced that their contributions cannot improve the quality of decisions made by the teacher. Some parents do not feel that their child needs to be protected from the special education system. They consider the special education system to be their greatest ally (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1987). It is also not surprising that parents express a lack of self-confidence and skill in improving their child's education. If it requires a master's degree in special education to qualify a person in curriculum planning and behavior management, it is questionable how parents without this specialized training could be equal participants in developing an IEP, much less request for a more appropriate IEP, programs, or placements.

Parental Involvement and Student Grades

According to Walker (1991) it is not uncommon for correlations between parental socioeconomic status levels and children's standardized achievement test scores to be high. The classic study of schooling outcomes, as reported by Coleman and Associates (1985), has been instrumental in shaping a general perception that family background and home setting factors are powerful determinants of children's at risk status and achievement levels. Patterson (1986) and his associates have shown that harsh and problematic parenting practices can contribute to producing antisocial behavior patterns in children. These may also contribute to school adjustment and achievement problems.

Grolnick and Ryan (1989) note that survey studies using large populations have begun to link specific attributes of parenting style and behavior to child achievement and adjustment to school. For example Dornbusch, Ritter, Liederman, Roberts and Fraleigh (1987) investigated the relationship of parenting style to

adolescent school performance using a large sample of adolescents (i.e. 7,836), who responded to a retrospective survey of the parenting practices to which they were exposed. Three parenting styles were studied: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative. Both authoritarian and permissive parenting styles were negatively related to school grades while authoritative parenting styles were positively related to grades. The above studies clearly showed that parenting style and parenting practices are related to later school achievement and adjustment. However, they are not longitudinal and do not directly assess the specific parenting practices and social interactions to which at-risk and normally achieving children are exposed within a natural home setting.

Epstein (1987) suggested that five types of involvement are needed in a school's program to share responsibilities with families for the education of children(Christenson & Gorney 1992). The five basic types are: (a) basic obligations of families to build positive home conditions that support learning, (b) school-home communications about school programs and children's progress (e.g., report cards, phone calls, conferences), (c) involvement at school (e.g. attend school functions, volunteer), (d) involvement of learning activities at home (e.g. , monitor, discuss, and help with homework), and (e) involvement in decision making (e.g., PTA, school governance committees). Increased parental involvement is related to increased student achievement in studies that specifically examine the effects of involvement (Clark, 1988; Herman &Yeh, 1983).

In a study of 293 third and fourth graders, Epstein found that students whose teachers frequently used parental involvement activities had larger reading achievement gains from fall to spring on the California Achievement Test than the students whose teachers did not use parental involvement activities. This was independent of teacher quality , students' initial achievement, parents' education,

parents' improved understanding of the school program and the quality of students' homework. Epstein and Becker (1982) found that students whose teachers frequently use parental involvement activities are more likely to be nominated by their teacher as "homework stars" (Christenson & Gorney 1992). Students with learning disabilities have a special need for parental involvement (Pearl, 1982)

Involvement of Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities

Mainstreaming is one of the major concerns of parents of students with learning disabilities. Reform proposals in special education are constantly of concern. The reason most parents are concerned about mainstreaming is due to the fact that the mainstreaming movement initially did not serve their children's needs. Parents who support mainstreaming do because of the social interactions and the improved academic performance. Bates, West, and Schnere (1977) surveyed parents of children with mild disabilities and found 69% preferred an integrated program for their children. They believed it gives the student an improved self concept and an opportunity to be around normally achieving peers. On the other hand parents preferring segregated programs for their children did so to avoid ridicule of their children by non handicapped peers and they thought their children would suffer from unfair grading procedures if they were compared to the other students in the mainstreamed classroom.

Mylnek, Hannah, and Hamlin (1982) surveyed parent members of advocacy organizations concerning such areas as learning disabilities and mental retardation regarding their attitude towards mainstreaming. Results showed that parents of children with learning disabilities were significantly more positive toward mainstreaming than parents of children with mental retardation. According to Simpson and Myles (1989) parents of children with learning disabilities believed that regular classroom integration would facilitate their children's overall

adjustment and growth including development of better coping skills, reduction of negative peer interaction and more involvement in school activities. Children with learning disabilities, due to past school failures, tend to possess less than optimal motivation and performance. Studies have consistently found children with disabilities tend to believe that positive outcomes are less under their control than is believed by a non handicapped child (Pearl & Bryan, 1982). Chapman and Boersma (1979) studied the view of how parents of children with learning disabilities interpret their children's achievement behavior. They found that mothers of children with learning disabilities reported less positive and more negative reactions to their children's achievement than did mothers in the control group. They described their children as more difficult to talk with and more anxious than their siblings. Compared to parents of children without disabilities, parents of children with learning disabilities view their children as less considerate, less able to show affection and more clinging (Strag, 1972).

Factors Encouraging or Inhibiting School Involvement by Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities

McKinney and Hocutt (1982) conducted a study to compare the involvement of parents of children with learning disabilities to parents of average achievers. Parents of children with learning disabilities were more likely to have received information about their child's adjustment. The parents were also more likely to help evaluate a certain program's effectiveness. Parents of children with learning disabilities also expressed their satisfaction with school services more often than parents of regular achievers. Little has been written about exactly what inhibits or encourages a parents involvement in their child's education. Epstein (1987) came up with some ways a school system or teacher can encourage a parent to become involved in their child's education. Many parents do not know exactly how to

approach their children. The school psychologist can counsel parents about specific ways to support students' learning and behavior in school. There are some parents who can not communicate because of a language barrier. It would be the schools responsibility to develop unique communication strategies for non literate parents and communicate in the parents' first language. In order to achieve parental involvement a teacher could organize a parent volunteer program to assist the teacher and children in the classroom. If a parent does not attend a scheduled conference the teacher should contact that parent to show some concern. The school administration should provide inservice training to teachers on home learning activities and other ways to involve parents with children's class work (McKinney, 1982). The use of some of these ideas could help a parent get involved and share responsibility in their child's education.

Statement of Purpose

According to the literature, parental involvement has an effect on student's education. Most of the literature show that this effect is a positive one. However, the literature did not have much evidence of what has exactly inhibited or encouraged the amount of parental involvement. Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine the factors affecting parent's involvement in a child's education. More specifically this study addressed the following:

1. The factors inhibiting or encouraging school involvement.
2. Is there a relationship between practical issues and parental involvement.
3. Is there a relationship between teacher provoked involvement and parental involvement.

Method

A self developed questionnaire was used in this study to determine what factors encourage parental involvement by parents of students with learning disabilities. The hypothesis was tested at .05 significance level.

Subjects

The subjects in this study were parents of children with learning disabilities. They were all from a mid-atlantic state. Fifty two parents were surveyed.

Instruments

A self developed questionnaire was used to survey the school participation by parents of children with learning disabilities. One section of the questionnaire requested demographic information. This section included information such as which parent completed the questionnaire, age and grade of the child, single or double parent household, state of residency, year of child's entrance into a special education program, and the length of enrollment in the program. The second section of the questionnaire contained questions about favorable and unfavorable factors in the child's education. The first question was to determine the overall school involvement by the parent. The next four questions dealt with practical issues of involvement such as other child care responsibilities, caring for an elderly family member and having reliable transportation. Questions six through ten dealt with teacher provoked involvement such as the teacher sending home progress reports, the teacher inviting the parent to volunteer, and the teacher asking for parent input while developing their child's IEP. The last group of questions dealt with parent provoked involvement such as the parent sending notes to the teacher, helping their child with their homework, and offering to help in the IEP process. This section used a four point scale with answers ranging from always to never.

Procedures

The Learning Disabilities Association of North Carolina was contacted. Parents attending a seminar were asked to complete a questionnaire at their first workshop. Questionnaires were returned after the conference was completed. Participation was completely voluntary and all answers were kept confidential. Participants were made aware that their responses are anonymous.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data gathered from the questionnaire. Means and percentages were computed for demographic data. The informational questionnaire was divided into three sections. Correlations were made between sections using a Pearson r .

Results

One hundred and fifty questionnaires were mailed out. Fifty six(37.33%) of the 150 questionnaires were returned. Fifty two(92.85%) of these questionnaires were scorable. Although 52 were scorable, only 34(65.38%) of the questionnaires were answered completely (see Table 1). Most of the participants, 50(96%), were mothers of children with learning disabilities. Forty five(86.53%) of the mothers responding to the questionnaire were married. All participants were residents of North Carolina and 25(48.07%) were from the suburbs of North Carolina. The other half of the participants were divided equally between a rural and urban environment. A majority (84.61%) of the participants had more than one child enrolled in a special education program. The children were being served for learning disabilities, academic giftedness, and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (see Table 2). The average age of the participant's child was 12 years. Average grade in school was sixth grade two months. Average length of enrollment in a special education program was three years eight months. The participants, on the average, reported to be frequently or always involved in their child's education. Some issues that may inhibit a parent's involvement are lack of reliable transportation, other child care responsibilities, caring for an elderly member, and a lack of parental volunteering. Issues encouraging a parent's involvement would be the teacher calling home to praise their child, being able to leave work during school hours and being involved in an advocacy group.

Testing of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: There is a relationship between practical issues and parental involvement .

This hypothesis was tested by using a Pearson r for 52 partially completed and for 34

completed questionnaires. The partially completed showed an $r=.15$, $p<.05$ (see Table 3) and the totally completed showed $r= -.10$, $p<.05$ (see Table 4). Both were not significant. Thus, there is no significant relationship between practical issues and parental involvement.

Hypothesis 2: There is a relationship between teacher involvement and parental involvement.

This hypothesis was tested by using a Pearson r for 52 partially completed and 34 completed questionnaires. The partially completed showed $r= .33$, $p<.05$ (see Table 5) and totally completed showed $r= .37$, $p<.05$ (see Table 6). Both were found significant at the .05 level. Thus, there is a significant relationship between teacher involvement and parental involvement.

Discussion

Most of the participants were the mothers of children with learning disabilities. The majority of the participants were married. All participants were from North Carolina. A majority of the participants had more than one child enrolled in a special education program. The average age of the child's participants was twelve. The average grade of the child was sixth grade two months. Average length of enrollment in a special education program was three years eight months. The insignificant correlation between practical issues and parental involvement may indicate that practical issues were not a barrier for these participants. If the participants in the study had problems with practical issues they would not have been able to attend the conference or belong to an advocacy group such as the Learning Disabilities Association. There was a significant relationship between teacher provoked involvement and parental involvement. This points out that if the teacher shows interest in a child's education then parents are more likely to become involved. Thus, teachers play a major role in getting the parents involvement. Some issues that may inhibit a parent's involvement are lack of reliable transportation, other child care responsibilities, caring for an elderly family member, and lack of parental volunteering. Issues encouraging a parents involvement would be a teacher calling home to praise their child, being able to leave work during school hours and being involved in an advocacy group.

The results with this were somewhat similar to the results of Cones (1985). The mother was found to be more involved in the child's education in the study conducted by Cones. This study found that 96% of the participants were mothers of children with learning disabilities. The parents in the this study reported a lack of involvement in the development of the IEP. This is consistent with the study conducted by Goldstein (1980) where it was found that an IEP meeting usually

consisted of a special education teacher explaining an already developed IEP.

A major limitation to this study was a very limited rate of response. The participants in this research were only the parents attending just one convention. If a larger population was surveyed the rate of response would be greater. Due to such a small response it is difficult to make a generalization from this study. A recommendation for a future study would be to use subjects from other conventions.

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Appendix A
Letter to Parents

Kristen White
207 South Virginia St.
Farmville, Va. 23901
804-392-5626

Dear Parent,

I am a graduate student at Longwood College in Farmville, Virginia. Currently I am working on my masters in special education. Throughout my program I have become interested in several areas of special education. One of the areas that has become of interest is issue of parental involvement in a child's education. The questionnaire that is enclosed is intended to gather information regarding this topic.

As a participant in this study you will be guaranteed confidentiality. No information will be disclosed which may identify you. Your participation is completely voluntary but will be greatly appreciated. Please return questionnaires to Fran Cortez during the designated registration period.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kristen M. White
Longwood College
Graduate Student

Appendix B
Demographic Questionnaire

PART I

Please check appropriate answers.

1) Which parent is completing this questionnaire?

mother father guardian

2) Marital status:

single married divorced widowed

3) What type of area do you live in?

urban rural suburban

4) What is your state of residency? _____

5) a) Do you have more than one child enrolled in a special education program?

yes no

b) If you checked yes, what are they being served for?

If you responded yes to question number five please think of only one of your children receiving services for a learning disability while completing the following questions.

6) What is the age of your child? ___years ___months

7) Please give the grade level of your child. _____

8) How long has your child been enrolled in special education?

____years ____months

9) Is your child receiving any other services besides those for a learning disability?

yes no

If yes, what other services?

10) Were you or your spouse enrolled in a special education program during your schooling)

yes no

Appendix C
Informational Questionnaire

PART II

Please choose the most appropriate response to each statement. Please answer the statements with:

NEVER(N) SOMETIMES(S) FREQUENTLY(F) ALWAYS(A)

- 1) I am involved in my child's education. _____
- 2) I have reliable transportation. _____
- 3) I am unable to leave my job during school hours. _____
- 4) I have other child care responsibilities during and after school hours. _____
- 5) I care for an elderly family member during and after school hours. _____
- 6) My child's teacher calls home to praise or compliment my child's behavior. _____
- 7) My child's teacher invites me to work or volunteer in the classroom. _____
- 8) My child's teacher requests my input while developing my child's IEP. _____
- 9) My child's teacher sends home progress reports. _____
- 10) My child's teacher sends me information about the type of special education services provided for my child. _____
- 11) I send my child's teacher notes to tell of any progress at home. _____
- 12) I call my child's teacher to compliment or praise my child's behavior at home. _____
- 13) I offer to participate in my child's classroom. _____
- 14) I am involved in an advocacy group for children with learning disabilities. _____
- 15) I help my child with his/her homework. _____
- 16) I offer help with developing my child's IEP goals and objectives. _____

Table 1
Survey Responses

Table 1

Number and Percentage of Survey Responses

Test Battery	Number	Percent
Questionnaires delivered	150	100.00
Total Returned	56	37.33
Scorable	52	92.85
Completely answered	34	65.38

Table 2
Profile of Respondents

Table 2

Profile of Respondents

Demographic Information	Percentage
Parent Completing Questionnaire	
Mother	96.00
Father	3.84
Marital Status	
Single	3.84
Married	86.53
Divorced	7.69
Widowed	1.92
Type of living area	
Suburban	48.07
Rural	25.00
Urban	26.92
More than one child enrolled in special education	84.61
Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder	37.50
Learning Disabilities	75.00
Academic Giftedness	37.50

Table 3
Relationship Between Practical Issues and
Parental Involvement

Table 3

Relationship Between Practical Issues and Parental Involvement

Variable	N	mean	SD	r
Practical Issues	46	6.34	2.62	
Parental Involvement	44	16.00	2.87	-.10

Table 4
Relationship Between Practical Issues and
Parental Involvement

Table 4

Relationship Between Practical Issues and Parental Involvement

Variable	N	mean	SD	r
Practical Issues	52	6.09	2.93	.15
Parental Involvement	52	15.26	3.26	

Table 5
Relationship Between Teacher Involvement
and Parental Involvement

Table 5

Relationship Between Teacher Involvement and Parental Involvement

Variable	N	mean	SD	r
Teacher Involvement	39	10.89	2.63	
Parental Involvement	44	16.00	2.87	.37*

*p < .05

Table 6
Relationship Between Teacher Involvement
and Parental Involvement

Table 6

Relationship Between Teacher Involvement and Parental Involvement

Variable	N	mean	SD	r
Teacher Involvement	52	10.01	3.21	
Parental Involvement	52	15.26	3.36	.33*

* $p < .05$