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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

INTERNET ADVOCACY SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH
EMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

BY

MAUREEN ELIZABETH CURTIN

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

DECEMBER 2010

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This work is dedicated to our grandchildren: Erin, Molly, Clare, Colleen, Liam, Julia and Reese so they may understand the importance and joy of life-long learning and that hard work and perseverance can bring your dreams to fruition. To my husband, Bill who has supported every aspiration of mine throughout our many years together with love and understanding and when necessary, humor. Thank you. To our children: John and Bridget, Jim and Caroline, Joe and Michelle, Mary Meghan and Terry. You have been the greatest accomplishment of my life and I thank you for the help and support you have given me. I must especially thank Bridget whose endless willingness to help gave me valuable time to work and Joe whose statistical tutelage was an important component of my ability to complete this undertaking.

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My appreciation to the entire Loyola University community for their help and understanding throughout my journey to completion, particularly Dr. Pamela Fenning and Dr. Patricia Mooney-Melvin who understood the issues pertinent to the non-traditional student and provided endless assistance and support.

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ABSTRACT

Archival data from a survey of parents of children with emotional difficulties who are members of a specific online support group are examined to determine to what degree, if any, those parents are using internet resources to access sources of information for advocacy. Twelve specific variables were collapsed into four sources of importance: Legal, School, Personal and Online sources that served as the dependent variables. Demographic data were collected and parent income was collapsed into three variables: Upper, Middle and Lower. Parent level of education was collapsed into three categories: College degree and above, Some college, and High school and below, and served as the independent variables. A One Group Repeated Measures Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was utilized to examine the differences among the means of the parent reported scores of importance of the sources of information with results yielding significant differences for all four variables and a main effect for income by source. No interaction effects were found.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Despite well-established laws for educating children with emotional difficulties with safeguards including discipline, due process and the right to a free appropriate public education, there have been difficulties in interpreting the law resulting in many court cases. The development of a body of special education law in the United States has not always guaranteed parental access to a process that is meaningful. As noted by the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS), special education law is complex and cumbersome. The justices have further noted that parents are the best natural advocates for their children (*Board of Education v. Rowley*, 458 U.S. 176; 102 S. Ct. 3034; 731 (1982)).¹

Thus, parents need to become vigilant advocates for their child(ren). They need to ensure that social justice drives the services rendered to their child(ren) rather than the “best for all” approach that can deprive students of their individual rights to an appropriate education. Furthermore there is a tendency to assume that professionals by possession of their specialized knowledge have a certain autonomy that gives them the ability to know what is best for the children they serve (La Near & Frattura, 2007), and

¹S.Rep. at 11-12. See also S.Conf.Rep. No. 94-445, p. 30 (1975); 34 CFR § 300.345 (1981). Justice Rehnquist, “As this very case demonstrates, parents and guardians will not lack ardor in seeking to ensure that handicapped children receive all of the benefits to which they are entitled by the Act.”

undervalue parental input which is provided for by law. Therefore, parents need to become educated about special education rules and regulations to be effective advocates for their disabled children. This research addresses how a subset of parents of children with emotional and behavioral disorders, obtain this knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

Kellner (2003) presents a critical theory perspective concerned with issues of power and justice. He includes ways that education, disability and other social identities and institutions interact to construct a social system. He states, “democratizing education can be enhanced by more interactive and participatory forms of education such as developing convivial list-serves, the collective building of websites, on-line discussions” (p. 15).

One method for improving the individualized rights of children with emotional difficulties is through parents’ efforts to empower themselves by obtaining knowledge of advocacy. Specifically, they need information about advocacy in many areas. Some of these are accessed online and other methods are face-to-face. However, the likelihood of realization of the *need to know* about advocacy for their child(ren) is increased by participation in parent support groups and subsequently, advocacy information is readily available online.

Purpose and Rationale

The rationale for this study is based on the idea that parents of children with emotional difficulties need to empower themselves as advocates for their child(ren) in order to obtain an equitable education. The establishment of effective educational

experiences for students who receive special education services depends in large part on parents' involvement in educational programming (Stoner et al., 2005). When parents find out their child has a disability, they enter the world of special education, which has its own terminology, rules, settings, and personnel. In addition to grappling with the meaning of their child's special needs, families are thrown into the role of principal advocate for their child (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006).

Stoner et al. (2005) studied parents' perceptions of their child's initial Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting. The parents all reported that it was a traumatic, confusing, and complicated encounter that left them feeling dissatisfied with the special education system. Parents who do not understand the educational jargon and terminology that are used in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting may feel unprepared to address their child's needs. In turn, these parents may allow educators to convince them that decisions should be left to the educators (Rock, 2000). Lack of knowledge pertaining to their child's disability contributes to many parents' lack of participation (Fish, 2006; Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006). More recently, Fish (2008) found that parents who reported a clear understanding of the IEP process and special education law considered themselves as equal partners in the IEP meeting. The parent respondents stated that parents could improve IEP meetings by taking a proactive stance and educating themselves on the IEP process and special education law. In order to improve outcomes for children with disabilities, greater parental participation is needed. Based on available evidence, it appears that parents feeling educated about and familiar with the IEP process is an important key to achieving this goal.

Parents need to be aware of the services they are entitled to for their child(ren) with disabilities and they need to understand the rules, regulations, and legal processes that they can use to seek those services. Only the most sophisticated families of students with disabilities are fully knowledgeable about their rights and how to protect them (Greene, 2007). Another avenue for some families is to obtain outside assistance to navigate the special education system. However, direct legal representation often costs more than most families can spend.

The purpose of this study is to investigate membership in a parent support group as a source of general and specific information, resources, and support for information about advocacy (Smith, Gabard, Dale, & Drucker, 1994). Within the past ten years, internet support groups for parents of children with various disabilities have made participation in such groups more accessible than in-person support groups. Informal contact with friends and families and contact with school personnel, however, are still likely to be conducted at least in part, face-to-face. Since many sources of information are now available to parents, it is of interest to determine how important or useful parents find various resources. Further, it is also of interest to measure how income and education may interact with the types of information knowledge parents seek as participants in an online support group.

CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
**Educational and Social Outcomes for Children with
Emotional and Behavioral Disorders**

Children with emotional and behavioral difficulties continue to face outcomes that show little improvement in educational, behavioral or social spheres since this group was first included in the population of the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) in 1988.² Other national longitudinal studies such as the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS)³ and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS 2)⁴ have shown little improvement for academic achievement, social interactions, and long- term adult outcomes for children with emotional difficulties. Numerous authors have examined data from recent longitudinal studies (Bradley et al., 2004; Henderson, Klein, Gonzalez, & Bradley, 2005; Wagner et al., 2006) yielding similar dismal results. Students with emotional difficulties have the worst educational, behavioral, and social outcomes of any disability group (Bradley et al., 2004). They earn lower grades, fail more classes, are retained in grade more often, and pass minimum competency tests at lower

²NLTS provided follow-up samples in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000 with data showing little improvement for children with emotional-behavioral difficulties (Retrieved from www.nlts.org).

³From 2000 to 2006, SEELS collected data at three points in time through school staff, direct assessments, and parent interviews to provide information about the experience of students with disabilities (Retrieved from <http://seels.net/grindex.html>).

⁴The longitudinal study contains 5 waves of data collection for youth from all disability categories who were ages 13 to 16 at the start of the study (Retrieved from www.nlts2.org).

rates than any other disability group (Frank et al., 1995). The drop-out rate for these students exceeds 50 percent (Bullis & Cheney, 1999).

Not surprisingly, upon leaving school, they have difficulty securing and maintaining employment (Greenbaum et al., 1996). If these students are employed at all, it is usually part-time for minimum wage, making material well-being and financial independence difficult to achieve. In a study using outcome measures of legal problems, Quinn and Poirier (2004) indicated that more than half of adolescents with emotional difficulties are arrested within five years of leaving school. These outcomes result in substantial costs both personally and economically, to the families of children with emotional difficulties, as well as to society as a whole (Walker & Tullis, 2004).

As far back as 1993, Petr and Barney reported that parents of children with emotional disorders often want therapy for their child(ren) that they cannot always afford or that insurance companies will not always cover. The Special Education Expenditure Project (SEEP) (2002) reports that \$50 billion or \$8,080 per special education student was spent in the 1999-2000 school year in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The cost for the alternative to advocacy or failed advocacy can result in expensive litigation. The Center for Special Education Finance, in 2004 reported that the disparity in perspectives between parents and school professionals is shown by the nation's school districts spending \$146.5 million for special education due process, mediation, and litigation activities regarding appropriate programming and services for students. This costly avenue is one reason for effective advocacy to be considered by teachers and administrators as a viable and positive resource. In addition to these basic financial costs,

intervention costs may escalate because emotional and behavioral disorders are very difficult to treat. Despite evidence that early identification is critical to successful treatment of emotional and behavioral difficulties, there is an overall failure to identify students at risk early enough for optimal intervention (Conroy, 2004).

“More than half of secondary school youth with emotional disturbance did not begin receiving special education services until age 9 or older” (Wagner & Cameto, 2004). Left untreated, emotional and behavioral problems typically become increasingly intractable (Gagnon & Meyer, 2004). Further, many students may never receive services for the difficulties they experience (Bradley, Henderson, & Monfore, 2004). Upon leaving school, the “movement from a public education system based on entitlement to an adult service based on eligibility, limited awareness of community services, and a reluctance to self-identify as having a disability translate into young adults with EBD accessing few, if any, formal services and supports” (Davis, 2003). Rosenbaum (2005) calls for a continuous and concentrated micro-advocacy on behalf of these students by their parents and their support networks. They need to approach schools, their school districts, and state and federal levels to ensure that favorable policies and practices are adopted and that quality personnel are in place to implement them. “There is a foundation of statutes, case law, best practices, organizing strategies, and common sense on which advocates can mount an ardent campaign for improving the educational future of youth with disabilities” (pp. 3-7).

Historical Overview

In order to provide context, a brief overview of the history of special education is provided in this chapter. In addition, the literature pertinent to current types of resources parents might use to advocate for their child(ren) such as legal, school, personal and internet resources will be reviewed. The historical overview will illustrate the necessity of federal law as it attempted to curtail the discrimination in education that state and local agencies tended to perpetuate. It also illustrates the vital role parents of children with disabilities played in lobbying legislation that protects the rights of children. Cohesive advocacy movements began on a local level serving as parent support systems where groups of parents could vent their frustrations and gather support from other parents. Eventually efforts of parents and others precipitated legislative change through tenacious lobbying by parent groups and their advocates. This historic activism could serve as a model to empower parents' of today to voice their concerns and legal rights in securing services for their families and children with disabilities.

Parental Involvement in Special Education

Although knowledge of history is no guarantee that we will not repeat our mistakes, ignorance of history virtually ensures that we will make no real progress.

--James Kauffman

Although parents face the requirements of special education mandates by virtue of having a child with a disability, having such a child does not provide a parent with the knowledge necessary to advocate for the child. A basic understanding of the United States Constitution is pivotal in comprehending the legal principles that provide and protect educational rights. In particular, one has to grasp the correct interpretation of the

10th and 14th Amendments and Article 1, Section 8 (1) of the United States Constitution in terms of their impact on the development of educational law and policy.

The 10th Amendment states, “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” The reserve powers of this amendment, therefore, delegate to the states the primary responsibility for overseeing public education. Congress often exercises its powers by encouraging the States to implement programs consistent with national minimum standards.

An example of this device is to withhold allocation of federal funding where certain state laws do not conform to federal guidelines. Specifically, federal educational funds may not be accepted by states without implementation of special education programs in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). The 14th Amendment, §1 states, “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the law.” The 14th Amendment establishes two specific protections for individuals participating in public education.

First, the Due Process clause guarantees: “no state shall deny any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.” It guarantees substantive due process rights, such as parental and marriage rights; and procedural due process rights requiring

that certain steps, such as a hearing, be followed before a person's "life, liberty, or property" can be taken away.

Second, the equal protection clause guarantees "the state not deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." This requires states to provide equal protection under the law to all people within their jurisdictions. Article 1 Section 8 (1) of the United States Constitution gives Congress "the right to lay and collect taxes, duties, imposts, and excises, to pay the debts and provide for the common defense and general welfare of the United States." The omission of the word education is most obvious when reading the Constitution.

In fact, it does not guarantee a public education in explicit terms. It is the collection of taxes, which are used in part for the provision of public education that clearly establishes education as a "property right" of citizens.

Chief Justice Earl Warren reiterated that education is a property right and was the responsibility of state government under the 14th Amendment by stating, "In these days it is doubtful any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be available to all on equal terms" (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, 1954).

This declaration by the U.S. Supreme Court strengthened the link between property ownership and education as provided in the constitutional guarantee of equal protection which holds that people may not be deprived of liberty or property because of any classification, which in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, was race.

Many parents of children with disabilities began to question why the principles of equal protection did not apply to their children who were being arbitrarily excluded from educational opportunities due to their classification. Thus through application of reasoning fundamental to the desegregation of public education, the concept of equal protection became critical to parents and advocates who were dissatisfied with an educational system that denied equal access to children with disabilities. In 1972, two federal court cases, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC)* and *Mills v. District of Columbia Board of Education* cited *Brown's* equal protection rationale and applied it to students with disabilities. They were both class action suits in which, *PARC* challenged access to free, appropriate public education and *Mills* evaluated the plaintiffs' equal protection and due process rights that have been recognized as milestones of special education law. They are often cited as the source of guarantees included in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), commonly referred to as Public Law 94-142 that enacted the four principles of zero reject, nondiscriminatory evaluation, appropriate education and least restrictive environment. It also provided two accountability principles, including procedural due process and parent participation.

The first case interpreting EAHCA heard by the Supreme Court (*Board of Education v. Rowley*, 458 U.S. 176; 102S. Ct. 3034; 73L. Ed. 2d 690), was handed down in 1982. La Near and Frattura (2007) explain that Amy Rowley was a deaf student whose parents sought administrative and judicial review of the school's decision pursuant to EAHCA. The Rowley's wanted the school district to provide a sign language interpreter in the classroom with Amy instead of the tutor and speech therapist as provided in her

IEP. Amy's parents argued that because she was able to decode only a small portion of the oral language available to hearing students, she would be denied the educational opportunity available to her hearing classmates. While the district court and the court of appeals agreed, the Supreme Court reversed the lower courts decisions by finding that the state's obligation to provide support services to permit the child to receive some benefit educationally from that instruction, rather than the maximum benefit, satisfied the requirements to provide a free, appropriate public education (FAPE).

Yell, Katsiyannis and Hazelkorn (2007) describe that The Supreme Court developed a two-part test to determine whether a school met its obligations for FAPE: (1) has the school complied with the procedural requirements of the act; and (2) is the IEP developed through the Act's procedures reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits? (pp. 4-5).

Rowley has been identified as one of the most important of the seven U.S. Supreme court rulings on special education law as it determined that FAPE is an actual right. As a result of this decision, a school district has to provide more than access to the school building. The education provided also has to confer some educational benefit that was later defined as more than a "trivial" benefit.

The EAHCA was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 and the term handicapped student was changed to child/student/individual with a disability and included children with autism and traumatic brain injury as separate and distinct disability areas that are entitled to the benefits of the law. In the next iteration of special education law, referred to as IDEA 97 (PL 105-17) the

amendments and reauthorization strengthened the six principles found in the original legislation. Further, IDEA 97 made it clear that the federal presence in special education had new purpose which required state and local education agencies to implement reform, target federal research and training creating a greater impact on schools and their abilities to ensure students' rights. This brought specific federal legislation to the doors of neighborhood schools. While Congress made note of IDEA's success in improving students' access to public schools, the critical issue in 1997 was to improve the performance and educational achievement of students with disabilities in both the special and general education curriculum (Senate Report, 1997).

In 2001, Congress added benchmarks, measurements, and sanctions to the Elementary and Secondary education act popularly named, The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Its main purposes are to strengthen high school graduation requirements for all students, adopt higher, measurable standards of academic performance, increase time devoted to learning, and raise standards for teachers. NCLB standards require that schools report on students by subgroup (i.e., ethnicity, disability, English language learners, and low income).

To meet the No Child Left Behind standards, all subgroups must make sufficient academic progress to ensure that all students are proficient by 2014. If the school fails to educate any subgroup, the school will not meet standards (Wright, 2007). Rosenbaum (2005) posits that while these lofty goals will be difficult to meet even by 2014, it is hard to disagree with the objectives. It would be a stellar educational accomplishment to close

the gap between high and low achieving students and those who are poor, under juvenile court supervision, or members of other at risk groups.

Legal Sources

The most recent reauthorization of IDEA, known as the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 reduces the parental rights to notice, informed consent, and the immediacy and availability of review concerning eligibility, placement or services (Rosenbaum, 2005). The statute states, “it is in the national interest that the federal government have a supporting role in assisting state and local efforts to educate children with disabilities in order to improve results for such children and ensure equal protection of the law [§ 601 (C) findings].” Specific provisions require school districts to identify students with disabilities, conduct eligibility evaluations, develop an appropriate Individual Education Program (IEP), and place students in the least restrictive educational setting. Turnbull’s (2005) analysis of the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA into IDEIA found that both IDEA and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) impose accountability on schools.

However, IDEIA 2004 imposes “new accountability” and “personal responsibility” on students with disabilities and their parents. Congress, the State Education Agencies (SEA) and the Local Education Agencies (LEA) will share the responsibilities for educating students with disabilities and benefit from parental input. Students and their parents, however, must now accept more responsibility for their own behavior and for their relationships with the SEA and LEA.

A recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling on a special education case, *Winkelman v. Parma City School District*, 550 U.S. 127 (2007), impacts the interpretation of parents' rights under IDEIA (Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, & Katsiyannis, 2009). This ruling is now part of case law and applies to all states and school districts. *Winkelman v. Parma City School District* is considered the only recent SCOTUS decision that is pro-parent decision, making it critical for advocacy, as it basically expands the definition of FAPE by ruling (a) the IDEIA mandates parent involvement; (b) parents have enforceable rights under the law that are separate from their children's rights; and (c) parental participation in the special education process is crucial to ensuring that children with disabilities receive FAPE (p. 72).

School Sources

When you're wrestling a gorilla, you don't stop when you're tired... You stop when the gorilla is tired.

--Robert Strauss

Wagner and Cameto (2004) examining the reports from the National Longitudinal Transition Study found "that parents of children with emotional difficulties are more likely to report dissatisfaction with their child's schools and school programs than parents of children with disabilities as a whole." The legislation of the past 20 years has been found by Rosenbaum (2004) to have significantly altered the relationship between schools and families of students with special needs. Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, and Sumi, (2005) found that involvement can be a difficult undertaking for parents of children with emotional difficulties as they often feel blamed for their child's difficulties. Thus, the experiences that parents have had with schools have often been less

than positive. Therefore, parents may avoid future interactions with the school expecting them to be equally negative.

There are many reasons why parents avoid attending meetings held at school. They may feel they have little influence over the professionals or they may have difficulty finding childcare, transportation, or securing time away from work. Schools need to discover what it is that is keeping parents or other family members from being full partners in the educational process (Johnson, Pugach, & Hawkins, 2004) if parental participation is going to increase.

Formal School Contacts

The legal point of contact between the school and parents is the Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings that serve as the blueprint for services to be provided for students. IEP regulations identify meeting dates, parental and student consent and accountability, and responsibilities of educational agencies (Huefner, 2000). The IEP team consists of parents of a student with a disability, at least one general education teacher, a special education teacher, a person qualified to interpret evaluation results, the local education representative (usually the case manager), and any other individuals who are familiar with the student. These include related services personnel such as the school psychologist, school nurse, social worker, etc. who can assist in the decision making process and whenever appropriate, the child with a disability (IDEIA, 20 U.S.C. § 1414[d][1][B]).

IDEIA stipulates that parents must be equal partners in the IEP process. Even if parents bring people who can contribute (advocates, grandparents, day care providers,

etc.) with them to an IEP meeting, the sheer number of professionals seems to put the balance of power with the school district. Valle and Aponte (2002) found that professionals dominate within the setting of the special education meeting with authoritative discourse on psycho-educational reports and behavioral objectives, in stark contrast to the parent's everyday, informal language (p. 474). Special education, with its emphasis on objective tests and measures has solid footing on scientific authority. It may be difficult for professionals to recognize that the parent also may have valuable knowledge or insights about their child(ren). To credit sources unknown or unrecognized by the profession is seen by some as questioning the legitimacy of scientific knowledge. The professional may dismiss a skeptical parent as not ready to face the truth revealed in the scientifically based evaluation and recommendations.

The parent usually does not enter the special education committee meeting with scientific documents or communicate in the scientific language of the professional. The parent's oral contributions appear informal and lower in status than the professional's presentation (Mehan, Herweck, & Meihls, 1986). It is the professional who has the ability to assist parents when they do not have enough information to understand complicated legislation, technical budgets, or any number of documents that may require explanation. Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, and Beegle (2004) focused on the professionals responsibilities to ensure collaborative partnerships. Although professionals favor collaborative interactions with parents, research indicates that a gap exists between professionals' desires to do their best collaborative work and actual

practice. In many cases, the parents are limited to receiving information from professional staff and signing documents (Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988).

Despite federal law (IDEIA), many parents continue to feel alienated because the educators dominate the decision making process. If inclusion of the parent is largely symbolic, the spirit of the law is lost (Valle & Aponte, 2003). In contrast, Fish (2008) interviewed parents of children receiving special education services and found that most respondents reported favorable experiences during the IEP meeting. They reported that educators valued parental input and treated them respectfully and as equal partners in the decision making process. The parent respondents in this survey also reported that they had a clear understanding of the IEP process and special education law. While Fish did not establish a causal relationship, it is likely that due to parent training in special education law by a family service agency, the positive meeting interaction reported was influenced by the parents' feeling of efficacy and the professionals' awareness of the parents' knowledge of the law. However, since the parent respondents were all from the same area and all were educated by the same family service agency, making generalization for all parents of children receiving special education services would be inappropriate.

Other studies of parents of children with emotional difficulties have not indicated such successful partnerships. Frieson and Huff (1990) identified the problems faced by children with emotional difficulties as complex. They often need to receive several services requiring their parents to collaborate with more professionals than parents of children with other disabilities. They report that these parents carry a stigma attached to

their children's emotional problems that leave them reluctant to speak out or ask for the services and accommodations that their children need. Parents report they often feel blamed for their child(ren)'s problems and responsible for their child(ren)'s unhappiness. When professionals do hold to the view of parental blame and stigma, the issue becomes exacerbated, making partnerships difficult to develop.

Dempsey and Dunst (2004) posit that theoretical and empirical evidence has continued to clarify the relationship between the practices used by providers of support and empowerment. Assisting individuals to see themselves as responsible for positive changes in their lives as well as developing partnerships between themselves and support workers are essential to enhance empowerment (p. 40). Petr and Barney's (2001) content analysis of a focus group that included interviews with parents of children with emotional disorders reported their opinions on services: the parents' lamented the insensitivity of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process, the lack of information provided by the school staff, and their frustration at not having their wishes included in the IEP along with those of the school.

Hess, Molina, and Kozleski (2006) found that the simple act of engaging parents in conversation about their needs and helping them in their roles as advocates serves as a first step in creating more equal partnerships between parents of children with special needs and educational professionals. It is a simple beginning to what could develop into improved relationships through more communication, parent input into the IEP process, and parent satisfaction with school services. If progress beyond entry-level compliance to IDEA requirements is to be achieved, it will be necessary to foster collaboration and

cooperation on all levels, resulting in children with emotional difficulties and their families being better served.

Informal School Contacts

Informal school contacts are considered to be those relating to report card pick-up days, teacher conferences, picking up sick children and discipline procedures. Discipline is a difficult matter for students with emotional difficulties and their parents since there are often episodes of inappropriate behavior to which the school responds by calling parents to pick up their child(ren) for the rest of the day. There are more difficult situations that arise where schools take a more formal stance that includes the possibilities of suspension or expulsion. IDEIA (2004) has eliminated two defenses formerly available to students with disabilities facing suspension or expulsion.

First, to suspend a student for more than ten days is considered a “change of placement.” Formerly, there was an inquiry into whether the violation was a manifestation of the student’s disability. Under the reauthorized law, the IEP team may find that the manifestation exists only if the behavior was “caused by” the disability or the “direct result” of the district’s failure to implement an IEP, and not simply a relationship between behavior and disability (Rosenbaum, 2005). This means that IDEIA (2004) makes it more difficult for a student’s parent or advocate to prove that his/her behavior and disability are causally connected [Sec. 615(k)]. More importantly, and conversely, Turnbull (2005) explains that Section 612 codifies the zero reject principle by continuing to require that the state plan to provide for the education of all students with disabilities by retaining the “no cessation of services” provision, even during periods of

suspension or expulsion exceeding ten days. Moreover, Section 615 discipline provisions ensure that students with disabilities will have procedural and substantive protection against discipline that might terminate their right to an education or alter FAPE for them.

Personal Sources

Personal sources of support are important as children with disabilities present many stressful challenges for their parents, families, and the community. Crowley and Kazdin (1998) found that natural social support systems such as family and friends could be diminished for parents of children with emotional difficulties because of stigma, embarrassment regarding the child's problems, and hesitancy to reach out to others. Canary (2008) reviewed the past ten years of empirical research which included 103 peer-reviewed articles on formal and informal support for families of children with disabilities. She notes that higher levels of support from family and friends and parent perceptions of helpfulness of such support is associated with lower parental stress, greater feelings of parental empowerment, and higher levels of marital satisfaction (p. 414). Furthermore, informal support is related to parental well being across disability types and severity.

When Petr and Barney (1993) interviewed parents of children with emotional disorders and other disabilities, they found that family, church and friends were important social support systems, but the parents could not always depend on these systems for the consistent, reliable and empathetic support they require. The parents reported that the most reliable and inspirational support was from parents of children with similar disabilities. Such parents share a common bond that offers support at the deepest level.

They found that these relationships could enrich the experiences of raising a child with a disability by helping the parents see the positive aspects and by helping them appreciate their personal growth (p. 250). Feeling supported by parents of children with similar disabilities is understandable as parents are able to share similar experiences without judgment. According to Worcester, Nesman, Raffaele Mendez, and Keller (2008), parents who they interviewed reported feelings of isolation. The impact of their child(ren)'s behavior prevented them from visiting relatives, going to restaurants or movies, or visiting friends. Parents in similar situations empathically shared the stigma associated with child(ren)'s emotional difficulties. They did not criticize the parents nor pass judgment on their parenting ability giving each other the capacity to better cope and value themselves as parents. Not having to explain, nor make excuses for, nor apologize for their child(ren)'s episodes of inappropriate behavior, reduces the stress associated with other relationships. Despite stigma and family tension around children's behavior, family and friends remain important sources of support for parents of children with emotional difficulties.

Formal and informal school contact and personal sources of information/support are likely to be conducted most in an in-person format. However, the internet has provided other options to parents of children with disabilities.

Internet Sources

Parents' use of internet sources for advocacy knowledge regarding their children with emotional difficulties has increased dramatically since the inception of on-line support groups. Potts (2005) defined online support groups as communities for those

affected by a common problem, in particular those related to health or social circumstances. It is recognized that there are benefits to internet resources and parent users of the internet may experience many advantages accessing this medium: they can search for information from a huge variety of sources without prohibitive expenses; they can remain anonymous; and they can have 24-hour access seven days a week to information and support. Online advocates can be either individuals or organizations and institutions that assist parents with possible solutions for specific issues. Numerous studies have found the internet to be an efficient way for advocates to provide information and support to a large number of parents. The efficiency of internet exchanges may reduce the pressure on ordinary treatment centers and reach out to sparsely populated areas in a way that increases cooperation and reduces organizational expense (Bae & Heltkemper, 2006; Boston, Rowe, Duggins, & Willging, 2005; Kouri, Turunen, & Palomaki, 2005).

Conductdisorders.com

Conductdisorders.com is an example of an online parent support group. The parent respondents to the present study are all members of this site. Potts (2005) finds the key advantages to being a member of an online support group include being in contact with people who have common experiences allowing individuals to put their own experiences into context and to share mutual support and practical information. He further posits that online support is disinhibiting for participants. The absence of social cues, the perceived intimacy and anonymity of the internet help people discuss difficult issues and overcome problems of embarrassment. To use the internet as an information

source or to establish contact with others in similar situations, allows parents a safe, non-judgmental forum to voice their concerns, problems, and victories. Many parents seek advice and affirmation regarding the upbringing of their children (Blackburn, Read, & Hughes, 2005). Online communities are available to help people when they need support on a daily basis, without interrupting their work schedule, or setting up an appointment with a professional.

Finally, online communities are enabling internet users to build bridges to other groups with similar interests, while at the same time deepening ties to groups with which people are already involved. As internet usage disseminates more broadly throughout the population, there are signs that online groups may facilitate new connections across ethnic, economic, and generational categories. Dunham, Hurshman, Litwin, Gusella, Ellsworth, and Dodd (1998) found that no differences in internet use could be attributed to either level of education or social class.

Other Online Sources

The internet can be used to acquire advocacy knowledge by users independently finding information from a variety of websites. This can be a daunting task for parents whose days are filled with other obligations. Finding a list of websites is an easy and fast maneuver on any computer that has access to the world-wide web. Knowing which sites are reliable for the specific information sought by a search can take hours of browsing, reading, judgment, and finally, the decision making process of individually determining whether or not the site is a viable resource.

Certainly there is no denying that information on any subject is available with a quick search and a tap of the “enter” button. However, it is more efficient and probably an empowering advantage to have parents in similar situations recommend specific sites rather than utilizing independent searches to seek highly specialized information. In addition, Plantin and Daneback (2009) found many parents feel the quality of the information increases if it is verified by other parents.

Research Questions

The focus of this research is whether or not the resources for advocacy knowledge that were formerly only available to parents of higher education and income levels now have become accessible to parents across the education and income spectrum because of the increasing availability of the internet as well as the degree of importance that in-person contacts continue to have as a source of information for parents who advocate for their child(ren). Prior to the advent of internet websites, access to information was limited and difficult to obtain. Information was available only in hard copy print and few parents had access to the locations that held those resources. Alternatively, more direct information and personal advice had to be obtained by securing the costly services of professionals.

This study attempts to understand whether a subset of a larger study of parent members of a specific online support group are able to circumvent the barriers suggested in previous literature for advocacy knowledge for their child(ren) with emotional difficulties and determine the importance of various sources of information, both on-line and in-person, to a group of parents of children with emotional and behavioral problems.

1. How important or not do parents find resources within the following categories of legal, school, personal, and other online resources to obtain support and advocacy information?
2. Do the four categories of information differ in importance by parents' educational level?
3. Do the four categories of information differ in importance by parents' income level?
4. Is the rated importance of the identified resources affected by an interaction of the educational and income levels of the respondents?

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Participants

Parent members of an online support group voluntarily responded to a survey to determine what parenting experiences survey participants have had with their child(ren) who have emotional difficulties. The original sample involved 627 parent members of www.ConductDisorders.com whose membership required a willingness to abide by the site's rules for anonymity among members, no discussion of political and/or religious beliefs, and the ability to remain respectful to one another if a disagreement should occur. Of these, 506 responded to questions relevant to the present study.

Demographic data for the sample are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 *Demographic Characteristics of Parent Respondents*

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Relationship to child (N = 457)		
Mother	413	89.6%
Stepmother	19	4.1%
Father	9	2.0%
Stepfather	1	0.2%
Grandmother	14	3.0%
Grandfather	0	0.0%
Marital Status (N = 444)		
Married	311	70.0%
Divorced	56	12.6%
Separated	14	3.2%
Remarried	16	3.6%
Never Married	33	7.4%
Partnered	11	2.5%
Residential Area (N = 433)		
Rural	125	27.5%
Urban	67	14.7%
Suburban	263	57.8%
Race or Ethnic Group (N = 457)		
Caucasian	432	94.5%
African American	4	0.9%
Latino/Hispanic	14	3.1%
Asian	0	0.0%
Native American	5	1.1%
Bi- or multi-racial	4	0.9%

Protection of Human Participants

The parent members were recruited through the utilization of a banner on the site stating, “Please click here to take The Parenting Experience Survey.” No emails were sent to the membership. The parents came voluntarily to the site, saw the banner and

chose to respond or not at their discretion. In responding to the survey, participants were able to skip any questions they chose not to answer and all responses remained anonymous. The internet- based survey driver (Survey Monkey) does not report any identifiable information, including IP addresses. There was no monetary reward for responding to the questions. There were no foreseeable risks in participating in this survey beyond those experienced in everyday life. Minors are not permitted to register on this site by the owner. People can view the website without registering however posting is only accessible to registered members. Only registered members were given access to the survey, making it very unlikely that children would gain access to the survey. Informed consent was obtained electronically via the survey.

The parents had access to this survey because they are registered members of www.ConductDisorders.com, a website which had approximately 5,500 members at the time of the original survey. The website was started in 1998 and is intended to be a place where parents can share their experiences and support each other in their attempts to help their children. There is reference on the home page that it is “a soft place to land for the battle weary parent.”

The ConductDisorders.com community was described as quite diverse in member location and demographics, “what we have in common is a commitment to do our best to help our difficult to parent children” Cheryl Ferraro, site owner, (personal communication (retrieved December 8, 2009 from <http://www.ConductDisorders.com>)).

Design

The design is a single administration cross-sectional quantitative survey. The delivery method chosen was an online survey that was carefully pre-tested to ensure that computers with different physical characteristics would be able to execute the questionnaire and display it in the same manner and format. Possible errors might occur if, for example, different display resolutions or web browsers are used (Dillman, 2000, pp. 360; 385-389). The survey provided directions that assisted the respondents through the navigational process of completing the survey. Parent respondents were able to click on specified answers and/or utilize designated open space to complete their open-ended responses.

Measures

The Parenting Survey developed by the Loyola University Home-School-Community Research Team operationalizes various constructs to tap into the parenting experiences of members of www.conductdisorders.com. The construct areas for the Parenting Experience Survey include: 1) Child Information and Disability Characteristics; 2) Preschool experience; 3) Parent Information and Characteristics; 4) Parent Support Groups; 5) Outside Mental Health Services; 6) Advocacy; and 7) Due Process Hearings.

The present study utilizes the parents (n = 506) who responded to those questions pertaining to the importance of specific resources they employed in their efforts to acquire information to effectively advocate for their child(ren) with emotional difficulties. These responses of interest were found in categories 2 and 5 of the original

data set. Figure 1 illustrates the categories originally examined by the research team and the categories derived from that data for the present study.

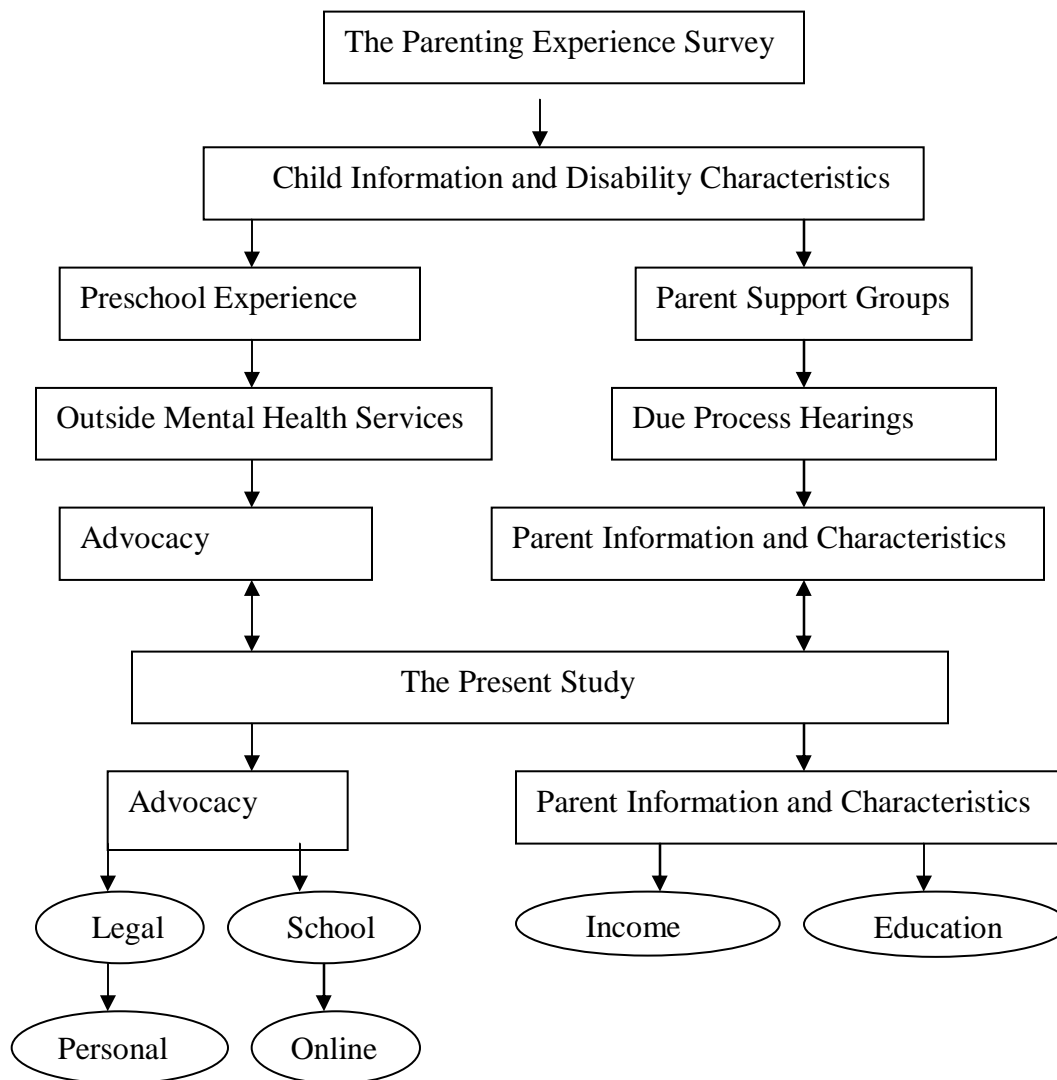


Figure 1. The Parenting Survey Categories and the Extracted Categories for the Present Study with Specific Variables

Definition of Variables and Terms

- Parent Level of Income: Self-reported on a seven point scale ranging from very poor to upper class.
- Parent Level of Education: Self-reported highest level of education obtained.
- Parent Rating of the Importance of Specific Sources of Information including-
 - Legal Sources from the original study include Wright's Law, Reed Martin, Independent Readings of Special Education Laws, Rules, and Regulations and Attorney.
 - School Sources from the original study include: Formal contacts: IEP meetings, Child Review, etc., and Informal Contacts.
 - Personal Sources from the original study include: Parent Seminars, Family and Friends.
 - Online Sources from the original study include: Online advocate, Conductdisorders.com and all other online sources.

Data Analysis

A One Group Repeated Measures Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine how parent members of an online support group rated the importance of various types of support they might seek for advocacy information regarding their children with emotional difficulties. Further analyses seek to determine whether or not they differ on the importance of those resources within income and educational levels. In the last three research questions, parent reported levels of education and income were the independent variables.

The examination of the parent responses to how important the following sources are for the knowledge they have regarding Special Education law, rules and regulations have been collapsed into four variables: Legal, School, Personal and Online Sources. Their level of importance for the responding parents was rated on a 5-point scale. These were employed in the study as the dependent variables.

Income Level

Within the Parent Information and Characteristics subsection of the original survey, data regarding the parents' Income and Educational levels were collected. The responses for the income level were originally rated on a 9-point scale with 9 = Other (please specify), 8 = Prefer not to respond, 7 = Upper class, 6 = Upper middle class, 5 = Middle class, 4 = Lower middle class, 3 = Working class, 2 = Working, but poor, 1 = Very poor, unemployed.

The resulting income levels were collapsed into three categories as follows: Upper Income = Responses 7 and 6 were assigned a value of 3; Middle Income = responses 5 and 4, were assigned a value of 2; Lower Income = Responses 3, 2, 1 and were assigned a value of 1. Responses 8 and 9 were treated as missing data. Figure 2 illustrates the original data values and the collapsed data values for the present study for parent level of Income.

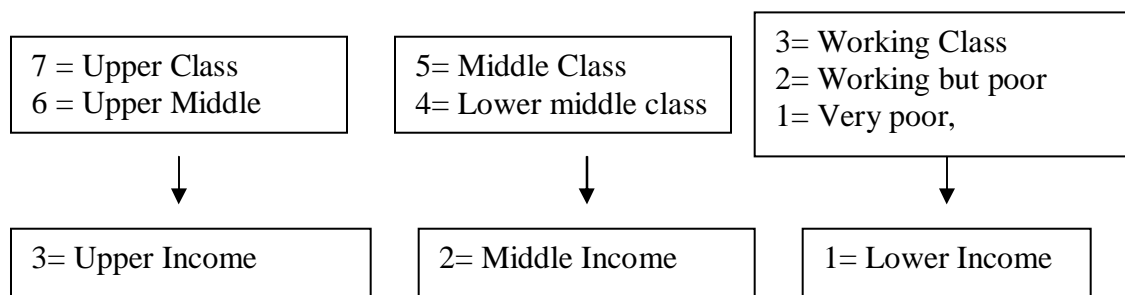


Figure 2. Original Data Values and the Collapsed Data Values for the Proposed Study

Table 2 Descriptive Characteristics of Parent Income Level

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Number of Respondents (N = 479)		
Upper	162	33.82%
Middle	163	34.03%
Lower	154	32.15%

Education Level

The original survey asked parents to indicate which response best described the highest level of education completed rated on an 8 point scale, where 8 = Graduate or Professional Degree, 7 = Some Graduate courses, 6 = College graduate, 5 = Some college, 4 = High school graduate, 3 = some High school, 2 = Junior high school, and 1 = Elementary school. For the present study, levels of education were collapsed into 3 variables where 3 = College degree and above, 2 = Some college, and 1 = High school and below. Very few respondents skipped this question and those that did were entered as missing data.

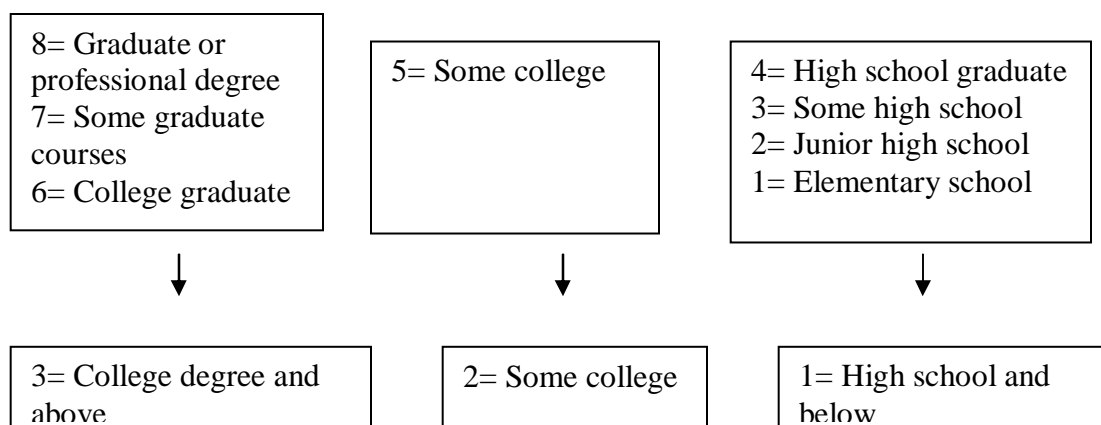


Figure 3. The Original Data Value and the Collapsed Data Values for the Present Study for Parent Education

Table 3 Descriptive Characteristics of Parent Level of Education

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Number of Respondents (N = 502)		
College degree and above	266	52.99%
Some college	182	36.25%
High school and below	54	10.76%

An extensive list of sources for the knowledge parents have regarding Special Education law, rules and regulations was investigated in the original survey. The data for these responses were examined in the present study by collapsing them into four categories: Legal resources, School resources, Personal resources, and Other Online resources. Figure 4 illustrates the variables in their assigned categories.

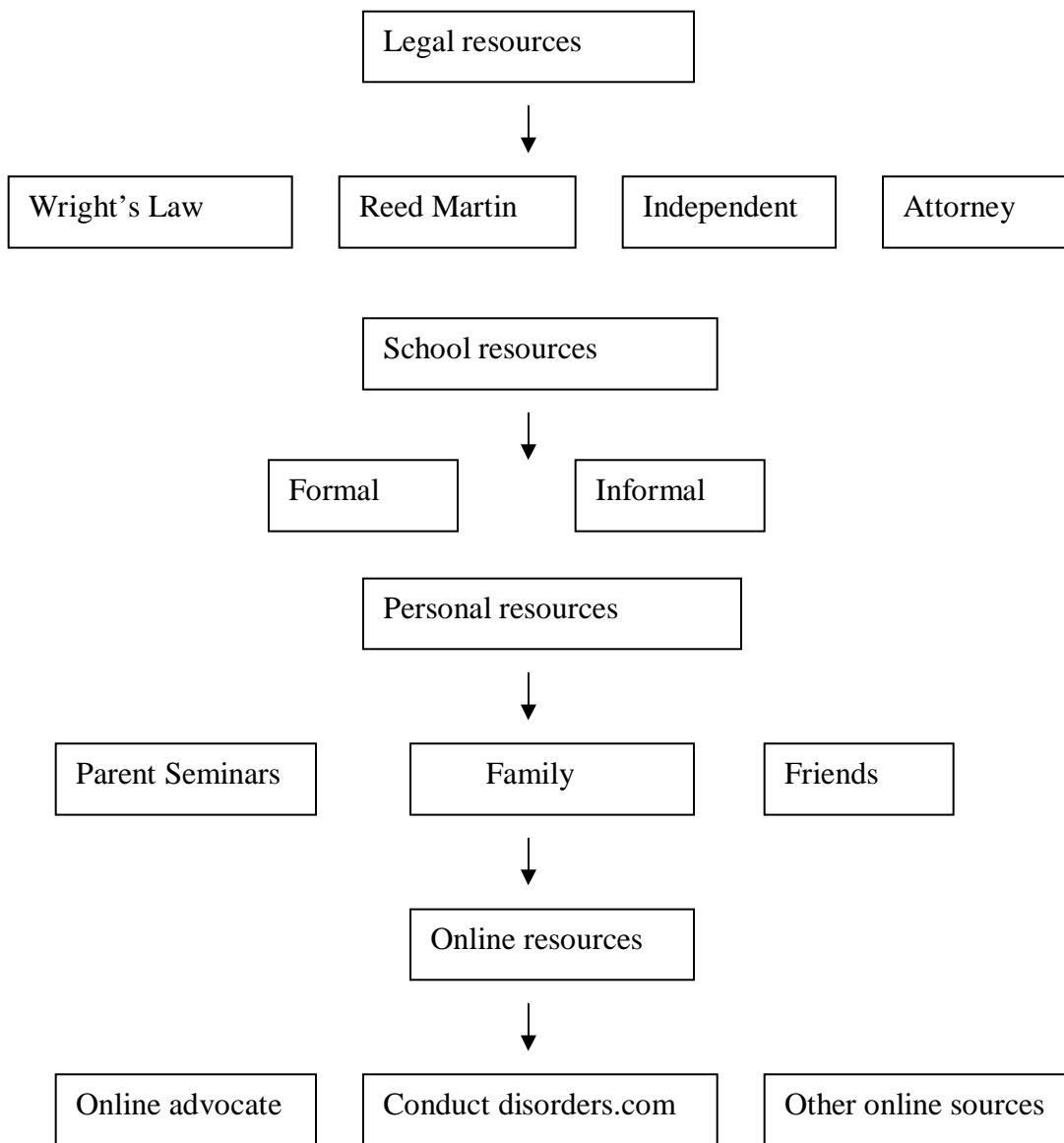


Figure 4. Specific Categories for the Present Study

For all of the following indices, the importance of parent responses will be measured on a 5-point scale where 5 = Very Important, 4 = Important, 3 = Neutral, 2 = Little Importance, and 1 = No Importance.

Legal sources include the use of formal sites with information disseminated from highly educated and trained professionals including the following: Wrightslaw: Parents, educators, advocates and attorneys come to Wrightslaw for accurate, reliable information about special education law, education law, and advocacy for children with disabilities (Personal communication, retrieved December 8, 2009 from <http://www.wrightslaw.com>). This site was begun in 1998 and the homepage lists 48 topics, 15 resources and directories, a law library, an advocacy library, and a section of books and training.

Reed Martin, J.D.: At the time of the original Parenting Survey reedmartin.com was a widely used and popular site for parent information regarding their child(ren) with disabilities. It provided information on special education law, resources, and advocacy measures. The website reedmartin.com is no longer available. It was very similar to Wrightslaw but contained less information. The SchwabLearning.Org. Parent-to-Parent Message Board still offers information on in-person seminars conducted by Reed Martin, JD. The information can be obtained from:

<http://schwablearningforumarchive.greatschools.net/thread/6531.html>.

Independent: These responses were from those parents reporting that they independently research special education laws, rules and regulations using standard legal research techniques.

Attorney: These responses are from those parents reporting how important an attorney is for the knowledge they have regarding Special Education law, rules and regulations.

The following variables were categorized in School Sources:

Formal - These responses were from those parents reporting that they obtained information regarding evaluations, IEP's and other decision-making meetings from formal contacts with school personnel.

Informal - Parents reporting the importance of incidental and informal meetings at school, mandatory pick-up of students for behavioral reasons, illness and volunteering at the school.

The following variables were categorized in Personal Sources:

Parent Seminars - The parent respondents determined how important seminars are to them in terms of acquiring advocacy knowledge for securing special education services for their child(ren) with emotional difficulties.

Family - The importance of family as support and information was rated by the parent respondents.

Friends - The importance of friends was rated by the parent respondents.

The following variables are less formal than the legal sources. While professionals can provide information and support through these sites, parents can also acquire information and support from other parents, message boards, personal postings, etc., and were categorized in Online Sources.

Online advocate - Parent respondents rated the importance of an online advocate in special education decisions for their child(ren) with emotional difficulties.

Conductdisorders.com - Parent respondents rated the importance of their membership in conductdisorders.com as a resource for information and support.

Other online sources - Parent respondents rate the importance of Other online sources for information and support regarding their ability to effectively advocate and secure appropriate special education services for their child(ren) with emotional difficulties.

The use of the internet as an information source or to establish contact with others in similar situations is of particular importance to parents of children with a variety of illnesses and disabilities (Plantin & Daneback, 2009). In general, categories 1 and 4 were predominantly online sources and 2 and 3 were predominantly in-person sources.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The ubiquitous availability of the internet may have increased its importance as a source of advocacy information for parents of children with emotional difficulties in comparison to traditional in-person sources. The importance of the sources may interact with parental educational level and income. These are the overall question addressed by this research.

Four research questions were tested. The hypotheses stated in the null form are as follows.

Null Hypotheses

1. There is no difference in rated importance among four types of information (Legal, School, Personal, Other online sources) to parents.
2. There is no difference in the rated importance among four types of information source to parents by educational level.
3. There is no difference in the rated importance among four types of information source to parents by income level.
4. There is no interaction between education and income level in the rated importance among four types of information source to parents.

To test my hypotheses that there is no significant difference in importance of advocacy information sources within the group as a whole, a One Group Repeated

Measures Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was utilized to examine the differences among the means of the importance scores. The dependent variables were the ratings of importance of the four categories of information: Legal Sources, School Sources, Personal Sources, and Other online Sources.

Each parent respondent was repeatedly measured over a number of variables thus yielding a repeated measures design. Therefore, there are four repeated measures. The MANOVAS that were found to be significant were followed by paired sample t-tests to ascertain differences among the variables.

The One Group Repeated Measures Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)

The descriptive differences among the means was tested by a one group Repeated Measures MANOVA. The means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4 *The Descriptive Characteristics of the Categories for Importance to Parents*

Variable (Categories)	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Legal	1.7103	1.86726	506
School	2.3599	2.04321	506
Personal	2.2823	1.98401	506
Other Online	2.4096	2.02969	506

The Multivariate test yielded a Wilks' Lambda, $F(3, 503) = 47.350$ (exact statistic) with a corresponding level of significance of $p = .0001$. There is a significant difference in importance among the types of information sources. Therefore, I reject the

null hypothesis. The paired t-tests showed that Legal Sources were significantly different from all other sources ($p < .001$). The only other significant difference among paired t-tests was Personal Sources compared to Other On-line Sources ($p < .05$).

**One Group Repeated Measures MANOVA for Source of Information
by Parent Educational Level**

A MANOVA for the four dependent variables by education was utilized. The test used an $n = 506$ which is the number of parents with complete data for these variables. The means and standard deviations for each dependent variable by education are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5 *The Descriptive Characteristics of the Categories for Importance by Education*

	Education	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Legal	High school and below	1.7364	1.98339	55
	Some college	2.0528	1.81283	328
	College degree and above	2.3841	1.90749	123
	Total	2.0990	1.86096	506
School	High school and below	2.7364	2.06571	55
	Some college	2.9695	1.86362	328
	College degree and above	2.7561	1.89517	123
	Total	2.8923	1.89312	506
Personal	High school and below	2.6424	2.01522	55
	Some college	2.8272	1.85435	328
	College degree and above	2.7859	1.73475	123
	Total	2.7971	1.84149	506
Online	High school and below	2.8424	2.00062	55
	Some college	2.9883	1.86719	328
	College degree and above	2.8984	1.80588	123
	Total	2.9506	1.85799	506

The Multivariate test yielded a Wilks' Lambda, $F(3, 501) = 1.843$ (exact statistic) with a corresponding level of significance of $p = .088$. Although the differences in importance among the types of information sources when educational level is considered approaches significance, it does not reach the criterion of $p < .05$. Therefore, I fail to reject the null hypothesis.

**One Group Repeated Measures MANOVA for Source of Information
by Parent Income Level**

When considering the effect of parental income on the rated importance of sources of information, 482 parents completed all items. The means and standard deviations obtained are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6 *The Descriptive Characteristics of the Categories of Importance by Income*

Categories by Income	At present, how would you rank your family's total income level	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Legal	Lower	2.0538	1.87470	155
	Middle	2.0588	1.82560	163
	Upper	2.1631	1.89322	164
	Total	2.0927	1.86143	482
School	Lower	3.2000	1.85916	155
	Middle	2.9693	1.87552	163
	Upper	2.6280	1.89658	164
	Total	2.9274	1.88823	482
Personal	Lower	2.9925	1.81110	155
	Middle	2.7454	1.84176	163
	Upper	2.7652	1.85416	164
	Total	2.8316	1.83576	482
Outline	Lower	3.1247	1.87021	155
	Middle	2.8865	1.84765	163
	Upper	2.9065	1.82015	164
	Total	2.9699	1.84492	482

The Multivariate test yielded a Wilks' Lambda, $F(6, 954) = 2.479$ (exact statistic) with a corresponding level of significance of $p = .022$. There is a significant difference in importance among the importance of types of information sources when income level of parents is simultaneously considered. Therefore, I reject the null hypothesis. The paired t-test showed that Legal Sources were significantly different from all other sources ($p < .001$) but not significantly different from each other within income levels. Within School Sources, significant differences were found between lower income levels and middle and upper income levels ($p < .05$). Differences between middle and upper income were not significant.

**One Group Repeated Measures MANOVA for Source of Information
by Parent Educational Level by Income**

Since one of the main effects was statistically significant, a Repeated Measures MANOVA considering education and income together was conducted. Tables 7, 8, 9, and 10 display the means and standard deviations for the four parental sources of information by education by income. The total number of parents with complete data was 481 for this test.

Table 7 Means and Standard Deviations for Legal Sources by Parent Education and Income

Legal Sources	Income	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Legal High School and below	Lower	1.7692	2.15514	26
	Middle	2.3000	2.07096	10
	Upper	1.5000	1.84842	13
	Total	1.8061	2.03822	49
Some college	Lower	2.0203	1.81441	111
	Middle	2.0721	1.80744	119
	Upper	1.9775	1.82784	85
	Total	2.0283	1.81002	315
College degree and above	Lower	2.9284	1.70183	17
	Middle	1.9412	1.86480	34
	Upper	2.5328	1.94117	66
	Total	2.4038	1.89706	117
Total	Lower	2.0671	1.87342	154
	Middle	2.0588	1.82560	163
	Upper	2.1631	1.89322	164
	Total	2.0970	1.86091	481

Table 8 *Means and Standard Deviations for School Sources by Parent Education and Income*

School		Income	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
School	High School and below	Lower	3.0192	2.05173	26
		Middle	3.2500	1.87454	10
		Upper	2.2692	2.26950	13
		Total	2.8673	2.06855	49
	Some college	Lower	3.2342	1.82386	111
		Middle	3.0462	1.82728	119
		Upper	2.6059	1.89154	85
		Total	2.9937	1.85458	315
	College degree and above	Lower	3.3235	1.91165	17
		Middle	2.6176	2.04887	34
		Upper	2.7273	1.84637	66
		Total	2.7821	1.91341	117
Total	Lower	3.2078	1.86269	154	
	Middle	2.9693	1.87552	163	
	Upper	2.6280	1.89658	164	
	Total	2.9293	1.88972	481	

Table 9 Means and Standard Deviations for Personal Sources by Parent Education and Income

Personal		Income	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Personal	High School and below	Lower	2.6154	2.03020	26
		Middle	2.7667	2.03700	10
		Upper	2.7179	2.23957	13
		Total	2.6735	2.04520	49
	Some college	Lower	3.1667	1.77041	111
		Middle	2.7269	1.83291	119
		Upper	2.6471	1.92251	85
		Total	2.8603	1.84432	315
	College degree and above	Lower	2.4902	1.67650	17
		Middle	2.8039	1.87149	34
		Upper	2.9268	1.69517	66
		Total	2.8276	1.73687	117
Total	Lower	2.9989	1.81522	154	
	Middle	2.7454	1.84176	163	
	Upper	2.7652	1.85416	164	
	Total	2.8333	1.83727	481	

Table 10 Means and Standard Deviations for Other Online Sources by Parent Education and Income

Other Online Sources		Income	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Other	High School and below	Lower	3.1154	1.99765	26
		Middle	3.0167	2.13213	10
		Upper	2.3974	2.07670	13
		Total	2.9048	2.02616	49
	Some college	Lower	3.1817	1.85136	111
		Middle	2.8459	1.84666	119
		Upper	2.9451	1.84903	85
		Total	2.9910	1.84886	315
	College degree and above	Lower	2.7549	1.92220	17
		Middle	2.9902	1.81740	34
		Upper	2.9571	1.74270	66
		Total	2.9373	1.77678	117
Total		Lower	3.1234	1.87624	154
		Middle	2.8865	1.84765	163
		Upper	2.9065	1.82015	164
		Total	2.9692	1.84677	481

The MANOVA for the importance of the four dependent variables by education by income was not significant (Wilks' Lambda, $F(12, 1243) = 1.358$ with a corresponding level of significance of $p = .180$.) Therefore I fail to reject the null hypothesis. These results will be discussed in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study examined the parental ratings of importance for 12 variables collapsed into four categories of support for members of a specific online support group. The results are summarized and discussed within the context of supporting literature. Finally, a discussion of the study's limitations and implications for future research is presented.

It is my belief that the internet provides enormous potential for parents across the education and income levels to advocate for their children with problem behaviors by providing tools to create effective inter-group contact. Support via the internet has the potential to reduce anxiety, eliminate geographical distance obstructions, significantly lower costs, and create equal status despite education and income differences (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006). To test my question, I determined how important various sources of information were to parents in gaining advocacy information. Since education and income levels have previously been related to internet access and use, I tested importance of information sources considering the effects of education and income separately and together.

Parent Education and Income Levels

In keeping with previous research, the demographics of the responding parents reflect a majority with some college or college degrees and above and middle or higher incomes. As far back as 1991, Koroloff and Frieson illustrated that while participants in

many studies of self-help groups tend to be from middle and upper levels of income and education, this phenomenon is not universal. Self-help group participation encompassed a wider membership than is generally assumed. They described some group members as basically working class persons with some training past high school. In this sample, income levels were better distributed than educational levels of parents.

Discussion of Research Questions

The first research question examined how important or not parents find resources within the following categories of Legal, School, Personal and Other online resources to obtain support and advocacy information. A significant difference in the importance among the types of sources was found in the overall test. In the paired t tests, Legal sources were significantly different and lower from all other sources and Personal sources differed compared to Other online sources. The results are consistent with previous literature indicating that there are significant barriers to families accessing the legal information to advocate for quality services. Zirkel (1997) who systematically tracks education litigation found that judges increasingly appear to believe that school officials merit the strong benefit of the doubt, otherwise known as due deference to their expertise.

Therefore, information from sources like Wright's law and the Independent reading of special education laws, rules and regulations would serve to empower parents with the important information needed to advocate for their child(ren) with emotional difficulties. However, Legal sources' importance was ranked lowest among the four categories suggesting that even "user-friendly" (and free) websites such as Wright's law may require more prior knowledge than even parents active in support groups possess.

Alternatively, perhaps these online resources simply are not helpful, but since Wright's law is the most widely-used site by both attorneys representing parents and lay advocates, it seems unlikely that poor quality of the information would account for its significantly lower rating than other sources.

Online sources, which include online support groups, were rated as significantly more important than family or friends as a source of knowledge and support for advocacy. This is not surprising since there is much literature that suggests that there is shame and stigma associated with parenting a child with behavior problems (Crowley & Kazdin, 1998). Support groups via the internet ensure privacy as well as an arena where other parents have experienced parenting children with behavioral problems and thus, it is less likely to be a judgmental environment. In addition, Worcester, Nesman, Raffaele Mendez, and Keller (2008) found that a child's challenging behavior may have a negative impact upon relationships with both immediate and extended family members (p. 520).

The second research question examined whether the four categories of information differ in importance by parents' educational level. The overall results of the MANOVA were not significant but there is a clear trend within the Legal category showing that there is a positive correlation between educational level and importance of Legal sources. This sample is very positively skewed for education with the modal educational level being "college graduate." Therefore, it is noteworthy that the importance of independent use of Legal sources appears to be difficult for the group as a whole, but particularly challenging for those with a high school education or below.

The third research question examined whether the four categories of information differ in importance by parents' income level. The results were significant. The difference for Legal sources is significant for all other categories in the pair-wise comparisons but this was anticipated based on the legal scores for the entire group. The differences for the importance of Legal sources among income groups are trivial in contrast to educational level, where there was a clear trend toward positive correlation. An unanticipated finding is that income is related to parents' higher use of School as a source of information. It is consistent with the literature (Fish, 2006; Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Petr & Barney, 1993; Stoner et al., 2005) that parents who have low incomes, language barriers, and may be unfamiliar with how special education operates in the U.S., are deferential to school authorities, but it is surprising that income would be as strongly related to importance of School as an information source as was found in this sample.

The sample is positively skewed for income but not as skewed as for education, i.e., the income groups were nearly equal in size. There is adequate representation of lower middle class and working poor parents in the sample, but it is unlikely that many of the parents were facing extreme economic hardship at the time the data were collected. Nevertheless, the parents with the lowest income rated the importance of school as a source of advocacy information more highly than either middle class or upper (middle) class respondents. This finding suggests that school personnel should be sensitive to the dependency of parents with limited financial means upon the school as a source of advocacy information and strive to ensure that parents are given accurate information and

an opportunity to participate in their child's educational planning process (Valle & Aponte, 2002).

The fourth research question examined whether or not the use of the identified resources is affected by the combined educational and income levels of the respondents when considered simultaneously. The results were not significant which was anticipated since only one of the main effects was significant. It is difficult to ascertain whether or not this finding is consistent with or contradicts existing literature because there are very few studies that address the interaction of between income and education in well-educated, middle income parents. Logic would suggest that educational level would buffer the effects of lower income but the data did not support this conclusion. In fact, the opposite seems to be true: parents with lower incomes rate schools as a more important source of information than other income levels suggesting that economic circumstances play a bigger role in the importance of the information sources than does education.

Limitations

The parent respondents in this study provided limitations pertaining to demographic variability: 94.5% were Caucasian, 3% were Latino, 1% were Native American and less than 1% were African American or Bi- or multi-racial. There were no Asian respondents. The majority of respondents were married (70%) and almost 90% of the respondents were the child(ren)'s mothers, thus limiting the generalizability of the results.

While the availability of computers is becoming more widespread, there are still parents who do not have access to the information and support available via the internet.

The participants for this study, by virtue of their membership in a specific online support group, indicate that they possess reasonable computer skills and the ability to successfully navigate websites.

It is currently unknown how different the participants' computer skills are from the general population but it is safe to say that membership in an on-line support group that focuses on advocacy for children with emotional and behavioral problems would suggest that these parents are not representative of all parents who have children receiving special education services for emotional or behavioral problems.

The present study relied on the self-reporting ability of the parent respondents, and caution must be used with regard to self-reporting in general. However, since the participants were drawn from a web site that is very careful about the privacy of its members, and with respondents have familiarity with and probably trust that the web site's servers are secure, the respondents may have felt freer to express themselves than they would have in a format where anonymity was not assured (Potts, 2005).

The generalizability for the income level of the parent respondents also warrants a cautionary note. The parents' decision about what category the family income level belonged in was left to their personal discretion rather than having them select a specific level or range that could possibly correspond more closely to the national norms. However, the income levels for this group were evenly distributed at $\approx 33\%$ in each group and were thus less positively skewed than the reported educational levels.

Implications for Future Research

Despite their limitations, the present findings have important implications for future research. Knowing what categories of information are important to parents could give professionals the ability to disseminate pertinent information to large numbers of parents simultaneously. Knowing that these parents are members of an online support group, who are probably better informed about their child's educational rights than parents who are not members of a support group could have implications for better parent- professional partnerships. It does not however, guarantee an improvement.

Future research should include efforts to develop a framework that gives parents a voice, one that values parental input, and eliminates the barriers that are frequently illustrated in parent-professional interactions. The challenge for professionals is to provide parents from diverse backgrounds, classes and races with the tools to participate in their child's education as equal partners. A first step in improving parent-professional partnerships might be in the formation of a joint online support group. That would afford professionals an opportunity to actively engage parents in developing working partnerships with them, while eliminating the need to schedule additional conferences, and also provide specific answers to routine questions. Professionals could disseminate information or refer a parent to a helpful resource in a matter of minutes. Finally, establishing an efficient means of collaborating with parents could alleviate some of the school professionals' overwhelming workload giving them more time to devote to teaching the students.

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VITA

Maureen Curtin received her Bachelor of Arts in Clinical Psychology from Saint Xavier University in Chicago and graduated Cum Laude.

Ms. Curtin worked in many capacities for the Chicago Public Schools at Bogan High School from 1979 to 1999. While Ms Curtin enjoyed every aspect of her career, her favorite duties were those that included the students enrolled in special education services. Ms. Curtin has advocated for these students in many aspects of their educational experiences. More recently, Ms. Curtin has taught numerous classes at Loyola University Chicago.

Volunteer work has always been important to Ms. Curtin and she served on numerous committees in many capacities. These include but are not limited to teaching Great Books and religious education classes, Operation Snowball, Saint Rita and Maria High Schools' Mothers' Clubs. She served as a faculty representative for the Bogan High School Local School Council on the Safety and Security Committee and the School Improvement Plan Committee.

Ms. Curtin's research interests focus on improving parent empowerment for advocacy skills for their child(ren) with emotional difficulties. Her primary interest is in improving the predicted poor academic, social and employment outcomes for these students through the concerted efforts of families, schools, and communities.