

**AN ANALYSIS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT
AND SATISFACTION WITH THEIR
CHILDREN'S SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

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To the Graduate Committee:

I am submitting herewith a field study written by Cristina Mora McFarland entitled, "An Analysis of Parental Involvement and Satisfaction with their Children's Special Education Programs." I have examined the final copy of this field study for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Education Specialist, with a major in Curriculum and Instruction.



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CHILDREN'S SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

A Field Study Presented
for the Education Specialist Degree
Austin Peay State University

Cristina Mora McFarland

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DEDICATION

To all the families of children
with special needs for their
endless support, unconditional love and perseverance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The completion of this Field Study was made possible by the continuous support and efforts made by my amazing husband, Craig.

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A special thanks to the incredible people that I have the privilege of working with at my school and university.

ABSTRACT

This study researched and analyzed the extent of parental involvement in special education programs and how this relates to parents' level of satisfaction with such programs. The study focused on the families of 460 students receiving special education services in a school district located in the southeastern part of the United States. The school district was composed of one high school, two middle schools and five elementary schools. The study was conducted during the Fall of 2001.

The survey investigated issues including the ways in which the parent participates with regard to their child's Individualized Education Program and disability, overall. The study asked parents about their participation in organizations or parent support groups that address the disability needs of their children. Secondly, the survey considered parents' use of sources outside of the school district with regard to obtaining information regarding their child's disability or educational program. A third aspect of participation was taken into consideration by parents' response to their active involvement at home with regards to Individualized Education Program goals.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Nature and Purposes of the Study

In the past five decades, the educational system in the United States has gone through pivotal changes that have sought to enhance the lives of children and families. Landmark decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* provided for equal educational opportunities for children from a minority group and paved the path for the educational rights of individuals with disabilities to be recognized and established.

As a result of parent advocacy groups, a powerful voice evolved that demanded national attention to the needs of individuals with disabilities. For example, in 1973, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Pennsylvania* ruled that appropriate educational programs must be provided to individuals with mental retardation. The above-mentioned landmark legislative decisions were a result of parents' and family advocate groups' determination to bring to the forefront the need to provide educational services to children with disabilities. These Supreme Court consent decrees originated at the local and state levels. Due to their controversial nature at the time, they rose to the national level and demanded a place in the United States' legislative and educational agenda.

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142, now known as the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (hereinafter referred to as "IDEA") became a landmark decision that guarantees an education to all children with disabilities. This landmark legislation stemmed from the need to provide individualized educational programs to meet the needs for individuals with disabilities and to enable

children to participate in public school programs with their general education peers

(Smith, 1998). Congress' intent of the law was and continues to be:

To assure that all handicapped children have available to them ... a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs, to assure that the rights of handicapped children and their parents or guardians are protected, to assist States and localities to provide for the education of all handicapped children, and to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate handicapped children (20 U.S.C. section 1400[c]).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act realized the pivotal role that parents and families have in their child's educational development. Hence, there is a system of procedural safeguards that ensures that parents be involved in the decision making process of their children's educational programs.

Since 1975, the special education law has been reauthorized to meet the changing needs of families, children and the school systems. In 1986 the first reauthorization occurred (Public Law 99-457) and it resulted in the inclusion of services for infants and toddlers through Individualized Family Transition Plans. This law also provided Individualized Transition Plans for adolescents with disabilities.

These special education legislative initiatives are consistent with national efforts to increase parents' active involvement in the school systems in areas such as curriculum planning and development of standards. According to Lim, Firl, and Quah (1998), "the literature on parent preferences of curricular content for their children with disabilities is limited" (p. 91). Even though the literature documents the important role that parents have upon their children's education, the level of their involvement may vary among individual families (Shriver, Kramer, & Garnett, 1993). Hence, it is imperative that school systems actively involve parents in the decision making process of their children's

special education programs. Through proactive collaboration, consistent curricular standards can be implemented that promote the individualized educational and social needs of children with disabilities. An understanding of parents' involvement in the process and program of special education can confer meaningful information regarding school systems' provision of services.

Importance of the Problem

Public Law 94-142 seeks to clarify the continuing challenges that families, students, and educational systems face when providing a unique and meaningful educational program within the context of the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. Within the legal mandate there is a system of procedural safeguards that have been developed to promote active parent participation in their children's special education programs. In addition, such procedural safeguards are aimed at making the special education process a more democratic and balanced endeavor amongst all the parties involved. Thus, there is a concern regarding the extent of parental participation in the special education process and their level of satisfaction of the program.

Statement of the Problem

According to Sussel, Carr, and Hartman (1996), "increased parent involvement is associated with more positive parental attitudes toward teachers and schools, more positive student attitudes and behaviors, improvements in student performance, improved teacher morale, and enriched school climates" (p. 53). However, with a greater emphasis upon procedural compliance of legal standards, there is a growing concern regarding passive parent participation versus collaborative development of individualized educational programs. Hence, a major concern of this study focused on the amount of

participation parents had in their children's special education programs and their level of satisfaction with such programs.

Research Questions

The research asked the following questions:

1. To what extent are parents involved?
2. To what degree are they satisfied with the special educational program?
3. Is there a relationship between the extent of parental involvement and their satisfaction with the student outcomes of the special education programs?

In essence, the problem was to test for a significant relationship with regards to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis

There will be no significant relationship between the amount of parental involvement in the special education process and their satisfaction with their children's special education program.

Relationship of the Study to the Problem

A better understanding of the extent of parental involvement and its impact upon parents' satisfaction with the special education process can assist school districts in developing ways in which to create positive home school partnerships. Such collaborative efforts by families and professionals will work towards the development of special education programs that confer a meaningful educational benefit and that meet the unique needs of children with disabilities.

Preview

The purpose of this research was to analyze the extent of parental involvement and its relationship to parental satisfaction with regards to the special education process. To reach this goal, it was proposed that a survey of parental involvement and satisfaction of the special education process be conducted. An examination of parental satisfaction of the special education process will provide information regarding the ways in which a school district can improve effective communication skills and problem solving between families and professionals of children with disabilities.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined by Smith (1998), and are used throughout this study:

Collaboration: Professionals working cooperatively to provide educational services.

Educational placement: The location or type of classroom program arranged for a child's education; the setting in which a student receives educational services.

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA): A federal law, Public Law 94-142, passed in 1975 with many provisions for assuring free appropriate public education for all students with disabilities; later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Free appropriate public education: One of the provisions of IDEA that ensures that children with disabilities receive necessary education and services without cost to the child and family.

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A requirement of IDEA that guarantees a specifically tailored program to meet the individualized needs of each student with disabilities.

Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP): A written plan that identifies and organizes services and resources for infants and toddlers with special needs who are under age three and for their families.

Individualized Transition Plans: A statement of the transition services required for coordination and delivery of services as the student moves to adulthood.

Involvement: To bring into connection; to occupy the attention of; to entangle or complicate.

Least Restrictive Environment: One of the principles outlined in IDEA that must be balanced when considering the best educational placement for an individual student with disabilities.

Multidisciplinary Team: Also known as the special services committee; this is a team of professionals that determines whether a student qualifies for special education and, if so, develops the individualized plan.

Participation: The act or fact of sharing or partaking.

Public Law 94-142: Education for All Handicapped Children Act (now IDEA).
Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA): New name given in 1990 to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA).

Reauthorization: The act of amending and renewing a law.

Satisfaction: The settlement of debt; payment of discharge of obligation; anything that brings gratification, pleasure, or contentment.

Special Education: Individualized education for individuals with special needs.

Assumptions

The researcher obtained permission from the Instructional Review Board at Austin Peay State University to conduct a study on human subjects. Care was taken to maintain the confidentiality of the research subjects. The researcher provided a cover letter to the parents describing the purpose of the study, the goals of the study and the importance of the study. The survey questions consisted of questions previously used by university professors in the field of special education. Permission to utilize these questions were obtained from the professors.

Limitations

Although parental satisfaction is an area in need of more intense research, it is a volatile construct that can be difficult to define and measure (McNaughton, 1994, p. 26). This was one of the major limiting factors of the study. Another limitation of the study was that a survey was used to identify the extent of parental involvement in their children's special education program as well as with their satisfaction with such programs. The purpose of the study was defined so that parents can provide accurate accounts of their experiences in order to better develop professional programs that will enhance parent and professional collaboration and involvement in an effort to promote positive student outcomes. However, parents may have been influenced to respond in a specific manner or disaffected parents were less likely to return the survey. Although the return rate at the preschool and elementary levels was satisfactory, another limitation was the low rate of returned surveys from the middle schools and the high school.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A cornerstone of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is the requirement for parental involvement in their children's special education program through informed parental consent. Parents must be notified of any types of assessments made of their child and they must allow permission for such assessments to be conducted. In addition, any changes in the individualized educational program of their child such as additional evaluations, placement and services, requires their notification. The extent of parental involvement however is not explicitly defined within the law. According to Ryndak, Downing, Morrison and Williams (1996), the educational teams' "definitions and decisions about educational setting, instructional content, and manner of delivering services will have a dramatic impact on both the student's education and life. The school-based constituents of the student's education team and the degree to which they collaborate with the student's parents, therefore, are critical for the student" (p. 106).

Barriers that may interfere with positive family school communication and collaboration in the special education process are multifold and can provide insight as to the reasons why parents may take on a passive role in their children's education. According to Salembier and Furney (1997), there are several barriers to active parent participation in special education programs that include: (a) parents who may lack background knowledge regarding the disability or procedures required to actively and productively participate in program conferences (Vaugh, Bos, Harrell, & Laskey, 1988); (b) teacher's negative perceptions towards parental involvement in the IEP process (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986); (c) parents' previous negative experiences with school

systems (Leyser, 1985); (d) the use of educational jargon in reporting evaluations and describing programs or services; (e) insufficient amount of time for the meeting; (f) inability to participate in conferences due to scheduling or transportation difficulties (Leyser, 1985); and (g) pre-drafted individualized education programs that do not take into consideration parental input during the conference (p. 30).

In 1985, Leyser examined parental perceptions of their involvement in special education programs and found that out of 325 parents surveyed in a low socioeconomic school district, 30 – 40% of the parents did not understand the purpose of an IEP and it was not explained to them at the meeting (p. 40). In addition, Leyser found that 50% of the parents surveyed did not want to participate in the IEP process citing one parent as saying, “I leave it to the teacher because she is more aware of the child’s capabilities.” (p. 40). For a question regarding the extent to which the parents gained a better understanding of their child’s disability and how their child’s needs were being met through the school program, 15-25% responded, “not really,” “only a little,” or “somewhat.” Nearly one quarter of the survey participants did not feel that they had gained any new information regarding their child’s disability and program after the conference. On the other hand, Leyser found that 80 – 85% of parents were satisfied with their child’s program and progress that school year.

Leyser’s study examines the critical question of the extent to which parents are actively involved in their children’s special education program and how this relates to their level of satisfaction with such programs. Even though the families were not actively involved in the program’s decision-making process, they were satisfied with the services provided to their child. Leyser points towards the development of alternative ways to

actively involve parents in the decision making process of their children's special education programs. Another integral avenue of focus is that of professional development on the part of school districts in an effort to develop ways to meaningfully engage parents in the special education process.

A study conducted two years after Leyser's study examined the extent of parental involvement in special education programs and found that parents from higher socioeconomic and educational levels were more actively involved in the IEP process, parent groups and home to school communication (Meyers & Blacher, 1987). According to Knill and Humphreys (1996), "socially advantaged parents are more likely to be aware of the diversity of programs, whereas parents whose educational opportunities have been limited tend to make more traditional choices" (p. 31). Yet, the literature indicates that the majority of parents, regardless of socioeconomic status, want to be involved in the special education process (Westling, 1996). Westling adds that inherent within a parent's participation in their child's educational program is that "they believe they have more opportunities to influence their child's educational program and they want these opportunities" (p. 102). There is a common thread that ties the majority of studies that focus on parental involvement in special education programs and the parents' satisfaction with such programs and that is that what parents need most is more information regarding special education law and procedures, their child's disability and the special education programs available (Sussell, Carr, & Hartman, 1996; Westling, 1996).

According to Bailey & Simeonsson (1988), parent satisfaction is critical in program evaluation. Knowledge about parent participation in and satisfaction with special education programs provides critical information in the following four areas as

described by McNaughton (1994): (a) parents have the major responsibility and control of a child's development, and their decisions concerning success and failure should have primacy (Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1990; Guralnick, 1989); (b) information about parent satisfaction can be used to develop better services and prevent program rejection (Upshur, 1991; Wolery, 1987); (c) parent participation in programs may be increased by including parents in evaluative decision making (Bailey, 1987; Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen, & Holburn, 1990); and (d) consumer satisfaction data may be used to convince other audiences of the usefulness of a program (Scheirer, 1978).

On the other hand, the dynamics of parental and professional collaboration techniques are not essential aspects taught within special education teacher preparation programs. The literature describes that in order to maximize the benefits of a meaningful and appropriate educational experience for children with disabilities and their families, parent preferences should be sought as early as possible (Westling, 1996). Furthermore, Westling states that in spite of the fact that educational systems are moving towards perceiving parents as consumers, there has been "little systematic inquiry into the desires of parents" (p. 86). A systematic inquiry of parents' knowledge of their children and their views as to what and where they would like their children to be in the future will provide valuable insight into the type of setting and educational program that will be both individualized, meaningful and appropriate for the child. This concept is critical in evaluating programs for all children with disabilities, however, it takes on even greater significance with regards to individuals with moderate to severe disabilities. School districts must understand the important role that family dynamics has upon the implementation and follow through of educational programs at the school level. If goals

are to be achieved and if they are to be both meaningful and appropriate for the child, then efforts must be made to bridge the gap between family oriented outcomes and school district outcomes for children with disabilities. For instance, Ryndak, Downing, Morrison, and Williams (1996) state that:

Parents' decisions about educational setting and services appear to be related directly to discrepancies they perceive between the outcomes they desire for their child and the outcomes they anticipate their child would achieve, both short- and long-term, in different settings or with different services. In addition, parents' decisions to request or accept the provision of educational services in a particular setting may be affected by discrepancies between their perceptions of (a) what educational services should be and (b) what educational services actually are provided in the specific settings. Parents perceptions of what their child's educational services should be to best meet their child's needs, as well as their perceptions of, and satisfaction with, the educational services actually provided for their child, can be critical variables in evaluating the appropriateness and least restrictiveness of educational services. These perceptions can help guide the development and maintenance of appropriate educational services in the least restrictive environment, and further empower parent members of education teams to participate in the definition and operationalization of these terms for their child (p. 107).

A close examination of parent's perception of special education programs and their definition of key terms such as appropriateness, meaningful education and student outcomes can provide valuable information that can establish a common ground to work towards the development and achievement of their children's goals.

According to Sussell, Carr and Hartman (1996), educators historically viewed families as the main reason for children having concerns in schools or disabilities (p. 53). These researchers add that such a philosophy was the impetus for the shift towards institutionalization of individuals with disabilities. With the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act in 1975 (now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Act), there was a paradigm shift whereby public school systems provided for the educational needs of individuals with disabilities. During the initial phase of the

implementation of the IDEA, the emphasis was upon education of individuals with disabilities in isolation. However, educators began to realize the need to involve parents in their child's educational process. Initially, this involvement was limited to "carrying out specific activities determined by the school staff" (Sussell, Carr, & Hartman, p. 54). Today, the intent and focus of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is to make the decision making process of program development a more democratic process for all parties involved, specifically for parents.

Clearly, by focusing only upon the needs of the child and taking into consideration only the professional's viewpoint, the needs of the family have been overlooked and this has brought about new challenges for both the school systems and the families of the children with disabilities. According to Dunst and Leet (1987), there is a negative relationship between the amount of unmet needs of the family and the amount of time that they invest in effecting the goals of their children's educational and therapeutic programs. Hence, as a response to the IDEA, it is legally and morally incumbent upon school districts to promote the active participation of parents in special education programs. According to Bailey and Blasco (1990), "periodic consumer validation of professional services will likely improve overall program effectiveness as well as build potentially stronger collaborative relationships between parents and professionals with mutual respect and responsiveness to different perspectives" (p. 202).

The literature also focuses on best practices that should be incorporated into the educational programs that will improve parent and professional collaboration and in effect promote positive student outcomes. According to Dinnebeil (1996), "if building collaborative relationships between parents and professional is important, then

identifying the variables that may influence collaborative relationships is an appropriate research activity” (p. 323). Examples of these factors include professionals’ attempts to: establish communication between parents, create positive meeting conditions, develop the relationship over time and to provide interaction and communication that is frequent and meaningful (Salembier & Furney, 1997, p. 39). A professional’s perspective on parental involvement is also essential in better understanding the dynamics and influences of such a collaborative process.

For example, Hilton and Henderson (1993) conducted a study on parental involvement and found that there was a positive correlation ($p < .05$) between teachers who reported parent involvement practices and five statements about parents. These statements were as follows: “teachers generally enjoy a high level of support from parents, most parents want more information sent home about classroom instruction, most parents who assist in the classroom become more involved with their child’s learning, most parents are willing to spend time on their child’s education at home, and more parents would help their children if they knew what to do” (pp. 206-207). Generalizations from this study, however, are limited due to the non-randomized nature of the selection procedures involved as well as the demographic data of the teachers. Nevertheless, there are essential factors that positively contribute to increased parental involvement in the special education process. These factors should be taken into consideration by teacher preparation programs and school districts in order to more effectively prepare professionals to actively engage and empower parents in the special education process.

Clearly, although important factors that aid in increasing parent and professional partnerships have been identified, there are many questions left unanswered as to what constitutes active parental involvement in the special education process. If involved, some parents may lack the fundamental knowledge of the special education process. In addition, the research points to the fact that some parents may not wish to take on such an active role in developing goals and objectives and such individual preferences should be recognized (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980). Nevertheless, parents are the lifelong advocates of their children and their first hand experiences and knowledge of their children should be sought and taken into consideration when implementing an educational program.

The intent and spirit of the IDEA has evolved in the past twenty-five years to reflect the social milieu of the national perspective on educational excellence and individuals with disabilities and their families' efforts towards such an achievement. Special education is not a place but a service that seeks to meet the individual needs of the learner in a meaningful and appropriate manner. The provision of such services requires the collaborative efforts of all the members of the educational team.

One of the fundamental purposes of the Individual with Disabilities Act is to ensure not only the rights of the child with a disability but also to ensure the rights of the families of the individual with the disability who act in the best interest of the child's education. Inherent within the law, there is a system of procedural safeguards that seek to ensure that parents and families have an equal and active part in the decision making process of their child's individualized education program. However, there continues to be a need to more effectively include parents in the educational decision making process.

since approximately 40% of parents surveyed in a study of parents' perception of their involvement in the IEP and transition process felt that their children's plans did not reflect the unique interests and needs of their child (Salembier & Furney, 1997).

In order to fulfill the full intent of the law, parents' perceptions towards special education programs must be sought if school districts are to follow through upon meeting the unique needs of learners with disabilities. Parents have not been given the appropriate place that they deserve as valued decision makers of their children's educational programs. According to Ryndak, Downing, Morrison and Williams (1996), when parental input is sought and implemented, it results in an IEP and educational program that is "truly individualized to meet what [the parents] perceive to be their child's most immediate needs in the real world, while capitalizing on their child's strengths" (p. 116). The law's intent to solicit parental input in the special education process is reflective of the shift at the national, state and local level to begin to focus on the individual from a strengths or ability perspective. Albeit frustrating and complicated, active parental involvement is essential and must be ongoing if professionals are to construct an educational program that will meet the unique needs of the learner.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Procedures

During the spring of 2001, the researcher obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board at the university to conduct a study on human subjects. She then submitted a letter requesting permission for the conduction of a proposed field study to the Director of Special Education and the Superintendent of Schools for the school district. The survey contained a paragraph describing the purpose and importance of the study as well as a statement regarding confidentiality of the respondents.

The researcher obtained permission to utilize a survey on parents' perceptions of their involvement in the special education process as conducted by Dr. George Salembier, an assistant professor in the Department of Education, Special Education Programs, at the University of Vermont and Dr. Yona Leyser, an associate professor of special education at Northern Illinois University. The researcher used questions from both of these surveys. In addition, she developed questions regarding specific activities in which the respondents involved themselves:

1. Have you ever sought opinions about your child's concern outside of the school district?
2. Do you do specific activities at home to work on your child's educational programs?
3. How much contact do you have with the teacher who provides special education services to your child?
4. What would you like your child's teacher to do for you so that you would know more about your child?

In addition, key questions from previous studies performed by Leyser and Salembier included:

5. Do you belong to any parent groups that address your child's educational needs? For instance, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, United Cerebral Palsy Association or the Autism Society of America were examples provided by the researcher and a line was available for parental input.
6. Are you satisfied with the education and services your child is receiving this year?

The first two and the last two questions in this section addressed parental involvement whereas the third and fourth questions focused on avenues that perhaps school districts can utilize as avenues to further explore and improve involvement and satisfaction with the district's special education programs.

Survey Distribution

In the fall of 2001, the researcher requested a list of students receiving special education services in a school district located in the southeastern part of the United States. The subjects in this study consisted of military dependent families of approximately 460 children who were enrolled in the special education programs and who lived within the post/home school limits of the school district. In order to obtain information about parental involvement and satisfaction with the special education process, the researcher provided all subjects in the district with surveys. The surveys were provided to each teacher and they were distributed during a two-day conference

session held for the families. These two days of parent teacher conferences were built into the school calendar and allowed families to review with their child's teacher their first quarter performance for the 2001-2002 school year. Using the special education roster provided by the Director of Special Education, the researcher distributed the specific number of surveys according to the teacher and designated a school leader to obtain the surveys once completed and return them to the researcher. The researcher and the Director of Special Education discussed the elements and procedures of the survey at a system-wide special education meeting for the elementary level and the middle/high school level over a two day period prior to the parent teacher conferences. Each survey included directions on how to return their completed survey in a sealed envelope and reminded the respondents that such information would remain confidential.

The school district was composed of five elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school. Data was stratified according to the parent's involvement and their satisfaction with their child's special education program. Demographic data reflected the respondent's ethnic background, educational level, as well as their responses to their current level of communication with the special education program.

The researcher analyzed the collected data using a chi square test, comparing the effects of differing amounts of participation upon satisfaction.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a relationship existed between parental involvement in their child's special education program and their satisfaction with such programs. This research stemmed from prior studies that examined the lack of knowledge that families may have with regards to their children's special education needs as well as their individualized educational programs.

According to the related literature, there are specific obstacles that interfere with active parental participation in special education programs. Such barriers include a parent's lack of background knowledge regarding their child's disability, a teacher's negative perceptions towards parental involvement, parents' prior experiences in the educational system, the use of terminology that is difficult for parents to comprehend with regard to disabilities and specific programs and the lack of awareness/involvement with specific community support/outreach programs. Thus, these critical aspects lead to the secondary and more critical focus of this study that examines the level of parental involvement in their child's special education programs.

At the time of the survey, there were 460 students receiving special education services. 164 surveys were returned, providing a 35.65% return rate. Two of the surveys were discarded due to a lack of responding to all of the critical questions. Thus, the total response numbers are based according to 162 survey respondents.

The demographic characteristics of this study group are presented in Table 1. The respondents consisted of 135 mothers, 15 fathers, two in the "other" category (one sister

and one self-described as caretaker), and ten in the “Both” category representing both the mother and father.

Table 1

Respondents' Identity and Race

Identity/Race	Percentage of Respondents
Mother	83.33
Father	9.26
Mother and Father	6.17
Other than Mother or Father	1.24
White (Non-Hispanic)	63
Hispanic	10
African American	23
Asian/Pacific Islander	3
Native American	1

Table 2 details the level of education of the survey's respondents. This data reflects the respondent's highest education level: completion of high school/GED, associate's degree program, a college/university degree, or a graduate degree. The results demonstrate that the majority of the respondents (63%) had a high school diploma, 19% an associate's degree, 16% had a bachelor's degree, and 2% have a graduate degree. This data is critical in better understanding the clientele's level of knowledge with regard to their child's educational program.

Table 2

Respondent's Level of Education

Level of Education	Percentage of Respondents
High School/GED	63
Associate's Degree	19
College/University Degree	16
Graduate Degree	2

Of the 460 surveys distributed, the majority of the surveys were provided to families of children receiving services at the elementary school level to include from preschool or Early Childhood Intervention Services to the fifth grade. The surveys were distributed as follows: 326 to the elementary level, 64 to the middle school level and 70 at the high school level (Total: 460). At the preschool/elementary level, 142 returned the surveys, 16 returned from the middle school level and six from the high school level.

Table 3 reflects the distribution of the respondent's children's level of education according to their rate of return.

Table 3

Rates of Returned Surveys per Children's School Levels

Children's School Level	Percentage of Respondents
Preschool and Elementary	44
Middle School	25
High School	9

Table 4 reveals the results that address the null hypothesis: There is no significant relationship between the amount of parental involvement in the special education process and their satisfaction with their children's special education program. This portion of the study addressed the question of satisfaction using a yes or no response format. Table 4 reflects the percentage of respondents who were and were not satisfied with the special education services.

Table 4

Question #28: Are the Respondents Satisfied with Special Education Programs?

Reply	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	96.2963
No	3.7037

In order to ascertain the extent of parental participation, this portion of the study reflects parents' participation in support groups or specific organizations that address their child's disability. In addition, this portion of the study focuses on whether parents seek answers to questions that they may have or alternative suggestions from sources outside of the school district. The third aspect of this portion of the study reveals whether parents perform Individualized Education Program related activities at home with their child.

Table 5 demonstrates the respondent's participation in parent groups that address their child's educational needs as well as whether or not the respondent has ever sought opinions about their child's concerns outside of the school district. Specific examples of support groups and organizations listed by the respondents that do participate include:

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, Parents of Multiples, Epilepsy Foundation, William’s Syndrome Association, and a local Autism Society. Outside opinions were sought from mainly medical personnel that include developmental pediatricians, neurologists, psychologists, social workers, and counselors.

Table 5

Parental Satisfaction and Participation

Participation	Percent who are Satisfied with the Education and Services
Belong to Parent Groups	85.7143
Do Not Belong to Parent Groups	96.7742
Seek Outside Opinions About Child Concerns	92.3077
Do Not Seek Outside Opinions About Child Concerns	98.1818
Do Specific Activities at Home	96.2963
Do Not Do Specific Activities at Home	96.2963

Table 6 reflects the type and frequency of contact between the respondent and the special education teacher providing services to the child.

Table 6

Parental Special Education Teacher Communication

Frequency of Communication	Number of Respondents out of 162
Daily	39
Once per Month	18

Twice per Month	8
Once per Quarter	44
Twice per Quarter	11
Once per Year	5
Never	4

Note: More than one response recorded by some respondents

Table 7 represents parent’s opinions regarding the type and frequency of contact that they would like to receive in order to know more about their child’s educational program and performance.

Table 7

Parental Thoughts Regarding Communication

What would you like your child’s teacher to do For you so that you would know more about your Child’s performance and special education program?	Percentage of Respondents
Daily Progress report/checklist	13.58
Weekly Reports	22.84
Hold Monthly Meetings	6.79
Write Letters to the Parents	17.90
Call Weekly	2.47
Call Monthly	9.26
Call Quarterly	5.56
Call Only When There is a Problem	21.21

Note: Only one response provided by each respondent.

Chi-Squared Analysis

The researcher collected 164 surveys of the 460 distributed, yielding a response rate of 35.65%. Of the 164, two surveys were discarded because the respondents did not answer one or more of the critical questions concerning method of participation or satisfaction, leaving 162 surveys from which to collect data.

The first analysis compares “any amount of participation” to “no participation” as presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Data for Chi Square Analysis Number One

	<u>Satisfied</u>		<u>Unsatisfied</u>		<u>Total</u>
	<u>Observed</u>	<u>Expected</u>	<u>Observed</u>	<u>Expected</u>	
Any amount of Participation	132	132.888889	6	5.111111	138
No Participation	24	23.111111	0	0.888889	24
Total	156		6		162

For each observed value, the expected value was calculated by multiplying the row total by the ratio of the column total to the grand total. For instance, the expected number of satisfied respondents who participate in any way is $138 \times (156/162) = 132.888889$. The chi-squared value was calculated by summing the ratio of the square of the difference between the observed value and the expected value to the expected value, for each observed and expected value. Mathematically, the formula is:

$$\chi^2 = \sum [(O-E)^2 / E]$$

In the above instance, χ^2 equals 1.085. Since there is one degree of freedom, this corresponds to a p value of .298. As this is greater than .05, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected.

In the second analysis, the differing amounts of participation were compared as presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Data for Chi Square Analysis Number Two

	<u>Satisfied</u>		<u>Unsatisfied</u>		<u>Total</u>
	<u>Observed</u>	<u>Expected</u>	<u>Observed</u>	<u>Expected</u>	
3 Types of Participation	4	4.8148148	1	0.185185	5
2 Types of Participation	44	44.2962963	2	1.703704	46
1 Type of Participation	84	83.7777778	3	3.222222	87
No Participation	24	23.1111111	0	0.888889	24
Total	156		6		162

Here, χ^2 is calculated the same way, but the p value corresponds to the χ^2 and 3 degrees of freedom. The degree of freedom is equal to the number of rows minus one, times the number of columns of observed minus one, or $(4-1) \times (2-1) = 3$. In this instance, the p value turns out to be .194 whereby the null hypothesis cannot be rejected.

Given the results of the data regarding parental satisfaction, of the 164 surveys returned, two were discarded since the respondents did not answer one or more of the critical questions concerning the method of participation or satisfaction. Data was collected based upon 162 surveys and compared to “any amount of participation” versus

“no participation”. “Any amount of participation” results were derived from the positive response to any of the three questions regarding: involvement in parental groups, seeking a second opinion or support outside of the school district, and providing assistance to their child at home regarding IEP goals.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between parental participation in their children's special education programs and their satisfaction with such programs. The study focused on 460 military dependent students receiving special education services in a southeastern school district. Of the 162 respondents, 83.33% were mothers, 9.26% were fathers, 6.17% of the respondents were both the mother and the father and 1.24% consisted of other (individuals who identified themselves as a sister and a caretaker). The respondents' identity provides insight into who may be the primary participant in the special education process. These results can be used to target a wider audience that includes and promotes fathers to take on a more active role along with the mothers in their child's special education process. In addition, such information provides information that not all participants in the special education process may be a father and/or mother. For instance, such participants can be guardians, sisters, brothers, grandparents, or other caregivers.

The demographics of this study also focused on the racial distribution of respondents: White (Non-Hispanic) 63%, African Americans 23%, Hispanics 10%, Asian/Pacific Islander 3%, and Native Americans 1%. Demographic data such as the participants' identity and their ethnic backgrounds should be taken into consideration when addressing the dynamics of effective parental and professional collaboration techniques. As previously mentioned in the review of literature, school systems must conduct a systematic inquiry of parents' knowledge of their children and their views as to

what and where they would like their children to be in the future with an understanding and sensitivity of the family's culture and educational background.

The level of education amongst the respondents were as follows: 63% High School Diploma/GED, 19% Associate's Degree, 16% College/University Degree, and 2% Graduate Degree. The majority of the respondents had a High School Diploma/GED as their highest level of education. This is critical in understanding the manner in which information should be conveyed in special education conferences.

The research demonstrates that an alienating factor in the special education process is the educational jargon discussed at meetings. An understanding of the educational level of the families of children receiving special education services however should not underestimate the input that families have in such a process. In addition, it is incumbent upon the school district, which in this case would include the administrator, general education teacher, special education teacher, parent advocate, or other relevant specialist, in empowering the families with the knowledge required to make effective and proactive decisions in such a process. These are the basic tenets of the procedural safeguards for families.

This study is consistent with the findings conducted by Leyser (1985) who found that even though families from low socioeconomic backgrounds were not actively involved in the special education program's decision making process, the majority of respondents were satisfied with the services provided to their child.

Dissemination of information regarding school programs can be targeted in such a manner that promotes more active parent involvement in the special education process by eliminating the use of educational jargon at meetings or empowering families with the

knowledge regarding educational vocabulary. School districts can conduct introductory seminars on specific disabilities in order to create a greater awareness of the disability and at the same time establish a community network that would enable parents from all educational backgrounds to come together and discuss pertinent issues. Nevertheless, the educational background of the respondents has an impact upon their perception and ability to judge their children's special education programs however such educational background may not have a significant impact upon the respondents' level of satisfaction with such programs.

The majority of respondents had children receiving services at the preschool and elementary school level with the least returned responses coming from the middle school level. Although a return rate of 35.65% was achieved, the numbers reflect a poor return rate at the middle and high school levels. Such results may indicate the need to develop programs that inform teachers, district program directors and teacher preparation programs at this and across all levels on ways to improve parents' active participation at the secondary level.

Factors that influence this aspect of participation may be that as the children become older and the number of classes that they attend such as in the middle and high school level impacts the amount of communication or direct interaction that occurs between the special education professional and the families regarding the students' special education performance. The middle and high school return rates may be attributed to aspects previously discussed by Turnbull & Turnbull (1986) in that teacher's negative perceptions towards parental involvement in the IEP process may present barriers to active parent participation. Perhaps such low return rates may be impacted by

parents' negative experiences with school systems or an inability on the part of parents to participate due to scheduling difficulties (Leyser, 1985).

In order to analyze the relationship between parental satisfaction and participation in special education programs, the data was stratified in two ways and a chi-squared analysis was performed. In the first instance, the effects of differing amounts of participation upon satisfaction were evaluated. Several questionnaire respondents participated in two ways, (eg. belong to a parent group and do specific activities at home). Some respondents participated in three ways, and some in one way or no way at all representing no participation.

In the second instance, the researcher compared the effects of any participation versus no participation upon satisfaction. Regardless of whether the respondent participated in one way, two ways, or three ways, a positive response to any of the three questions qualified the participant as involved and these numbers were compared to non-participants.

In each chi-squared analysis, the resulting p value was well over .05. As a result, the researcher cannot reject the null hypothesis. Accepting the null hypothesis would imply that there is no correlation between the amount of parental participation and satisfaction, and that the research hypothesis is incorrect. For an explanation of the chi-squared analysis, see the section "Chi-Squared Analysis".

However, there are a number of other interesting implications of the data, and there are some reasons why the research hypothesis should not be abandoned outright. One of the first statistics to note is the overall satisfaction rate. A full 96.3% of survey respondents (156 of 162) reported that they were satisfied with the education and

services. This presents excellent results for the district at hand however it makes it difficult to demonstrate a statistically significant correlation between satisfaction and any particular intervention.

In fact, Table 5 suggests that there is a *negative* effect regarding parents' participating in parent groups or seeking outside opinions about child concerns. Of the respondents not participating in *any* of the three ways, 100% (6 of 6) reported being satisfied with the education and services. It may be inferred that the satisfied parents are participating in their child's education in some way that was not captured in the questionnaire. A more significant inference may be that the few parents who do not actively participate in any way may be making more traditional choices about their child's education and services.

Given the results of the data regarding parental satisfaction, of the 164 surveys returned, two were discarded since the respondents did not answer one or more of the critical questions concerning the method of participation or satisfaction. Data was collected based upon 162 surveys and compared to "any amount of participation" versus "no participation". "Any amount of participation" results were derived from the positive response to any of the three questions regarding: involvement in parental groups, seeking a second opinion or support outside of the school district, and providing assistance to their child at home regarding IEP goals.

The null hypothesis, that there is no relationship between parental satisfaction and participation in their children's special education programs, therefore cannot be rejected. Although the collected data from this research does not support it, the researcher continues to believe that a relationship does exist between these two variables.

This study shows that the respondents are receiving the majority of their information regarding their child's performance through progress reports (76 of 162 respondents) and through the annual review, a once per year school conference (86 of 162 respondents). The frequency of communication occurs on a daily basis for 39 out of the 162 respondents and once per quarter for 44 of the 162 respondents. Unfortunately, there were four respondents who stated that they did not receive any type of communication regarding their child's educational performance or program. Of these four respondents, only one respondent stated that they were dissatisfied with their child's educational program. Of the seven respondents who stated that they were dissatisfied with their child's overall special education program, six of the respondents received communication on a daily or monthly basis and participated in school visits.

When soliciting information regarding type and frequency of communication, 35 of the respondents want to be contacted only when their child is having a problem. Weekly reports regarding their child's performance was suggested by 38 of the respondents. Daily progress reports or the use of teacher checklists was recommended by 22 of the respondents.

A limiting factor of this study was the yes or no answer format that was not sensitive enough to identify the varying degrees of satisfaction with the special education programs of the respondents' children. In reviewing the methodology of the survey, a Likert scale would be more appropriate in identifying a relationship regarding parental satisfaction and participation. Another limitation to this study is that the sample population may be a biased sample in that those that do participate in their children's

special education programs may be the individuals that also returned the survey with only a limited few being dissatisfied with the special education program.

This study's results regarding participation is consistent with the majority of studies regarding parental satisfaction in that what parents need most is more information regarding their child's disability and the special education program. As per Bailey and Simeonsson (1988), parent satisfaction is critical in program evaluation. Although this school district may be able to boast a high satisfaction rate, critical factors that express the varying degrees of satisfaction are also important and should be taken into consideration in future studies. This information can be used to provide information regarding what can be done at different educational levels to improve parental participation in their children's special education programs, specifically at the middle and high school levels. Undoubtedly, this information can be used to convince other school districts of the usefulness of a program as Scheirer previously described in his 1978 study. With this in mind, further studies can be conducted to determine teacher's attitudes towards parental involvement and satisfaction with special education programs.

As families become more informed of their children's special needs and the programs that are available or discussed in the literature or support networks, school districts have and will continue to see a greater need to provide professional training to their teachers in order to provide a well rounded special education program that incorporates parental involvement as an integral part of the special education process. Teacher's knowledge of actively involving their students' families in the educational program should be perceived as a best practice technique that will improve parent and

professional collaboration with the ultimate effect being to promote positive student outcomes.

Recommendations

The recommendations generated from this study are as follows:

1. University programs should consider the need to teach the dynamics of parental participation in their children's special education programs.
2. Parental satisfaction surveys should involve a Likert Scale to be able to identify differing levels of satisfaction.
3. Future studies can focus more specifically on a particular grade or school level of the student receiving services or the education level of the parents.
4. Surveys of parental satisfaction and participation can be provided to several districts within a state.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
**Austin Peay State University
Institutional Review Board**

May 24, 2001

Larry Lowrance, Ph.D.
Ms. Christina McFarland
College of Education, PO Box 4545
Austin Peay State University
Clarksville, TN 37044

RE: Your application dated May 14, 2001 regarding study number 01-077: Analysis of parental involvement and satisfaction with special education programs

Dear Dr. Lowrance and Ms. McFarland:

Thank you for your response to requests from a prior review of your application for the new study listed above.

Congratulations! This is to confirm that your application is now fully approved. The protocol is approved through original submission. You must obtain informed consent from all subjects; however, signed written consent is not required. This approval is subject to APSU Policies and Procedures governing human subjects research. You may want to review this policy which can be viewed on the APSU website at : www2.apsu.edu/www/computer/policy/2002.htm

You are granted permission to conduct your study as most recently described effective immediately. The study is subject to continuing review on or before May 23, 2002, unless closed before that date. Enclosed please find the forms for reporting a closed study and for requesting approval of continuance.

Please note that any changes to the study as approved must be promptly reported and approved. Some changes may be approved by expedited review; others require full board review. If you have any questions at all do not hesitate to contact Linda Freed (221-7881; fax 221-7304; email: freedl@apsu.edu) or any member of the APIRB. Again, thank you for your cooperation with the APIRB and the human research review process. Best wishes for a successful study!

Sincerely,



Dr. Parris R. Watts
Chair, Austin Peay Institutional Review Board



APPENDIX B

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
FORT CAMPBELL SCHOOLS CENTRAL OFFICE
77 TEXAS AVENUE
FORT CAMPBELL, KENTUCKY 42223-5127

May 29, 2001

Ms. Cristina McFarland
Special Education Teacher
Marshall Elementary School
75 Texas Avenue
Fort Campbell Kentucky, 42223

Dear Ms. McFarland,

I have read the proposal for your field experience and the survey that you wish to distribute. The survey is extensive and the questions are clear. At this time you may proceed with the distribution of your survey to the parents of special needs students within the Fort Campbell Schools.

I look forward to reading the results of your survey. Good Luck with this project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ray C. McMullen", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Ray McMullen,
Superintendent
Fort Campbell Schools

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cynthia H. Chen", written in a cursive style.

Cynthia H. Chen, Ph.D.
Special Education Director

APPENDIX C

A Survey of Parental Involvement and Satisfaction with Special Education Programs

The purpose of this survey is to obtain critical information regarding your experiences, involvement in and satisfaction with your child's special education program and procedures at this school district. Your input will provide valuable information as to how the school district can improve collaboration between school professionals and families of children with special needs. Please note that you and your child's identity will remain confidential. By completing and returning this survey, you are voluntarily agreeing to participate in this procedure. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of rights. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Should you have any questions regarding this survey or your rights as a participant, please contact any of the following individuals: Principal Investigator: Cristina McFarland, at 931-920-1994, Dr. Larry Lowrance, Faculty Supervisor at 931-221-6153 (APSU), and/or Linda Freed from the APSU Instructional Review Board at 931-221-7881.

Child's School Level:

☐ Early Intervention ☐ Preschool ☐ Elementary

☐ Middle School ☐ High School

1. Who is answering this questionnaire?

☐ Mother ☐ Father ☐ Both ☐ Other (Please Specify)

2. What is your (the person responding to the questionnaire) native language?

3. How would you describe yourself?

☐ White (Non-Hispanic) ☐ Hispanic ☐ African American
☐ Asian/Pacific Islander ☐ Native American

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4. Father's Level of Education:

- ☐ High School Degree
☐ Associate's Degree
☐ College/University Degree
☐ Graduate Degree
 (MS, PhD, MD, JD, etc.)

Mother's Level of Education:

- ☐ High School Degree
☐ Associate's Degree
☐ College/University Degree
☐ Graduate Degree
 (MS, PhD, MD, JD, etc.)

5. How long has your child been receiving special education services in this school district?

- ☐ 0-2 months ☐ 3-6 months ☐ 7-9 months
☐ 10-12 months ☐ 1 year ☐ 2 years
☐ 3 years ☐ 4 years or more

6. For which of the following does your child receive special education services?
(Check all that apply)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> information processing deficit | <input type="checkbox"/> hearing problem |
| <input type="checkbox"/> intellectual deficit | <input type="checkbox"/> vision problem |
| <input type="checkbox"/> speech therapy | <input type="checkbox"/> Autism/PDD |
| <input type="checkbox"/> occupational therapy | <input type="checkbox"/> orthopedic impairment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> physical therapy | <input type="checkbox"/> early intervention program |
| <input type="checkbox"/> developmental delay | <input type="checkbox"/> other health impairment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> other (please specify) | <input type="checkbox"/> emotional impairment |

7. When you have questions about your child do you feel that you get good attention in the school?

- ☐ yes ☐ no

8. Did you attend a conference concerning the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for your child?

- ☐ yes ☐ no

9. Do you understand what an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is?

- ☐ yes ☐ no

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10. Did someone talk with you before the meeting to help you get ready for the meeting?

☐ yes ☐ no

What was the person's role?

How did they get in touch with you?

11. Were all the people at the conference introduced by name and position?

☐ yes ☐ no

12. Was the purpose of the conference explained to you?

☐ yes ☐ no

13. Did a friend go to the meeting with you?

☐ yes ☐ no

14. Was one person at the meeting especially helpful to you?

☐ yes ☐ no Who? _____ (Title)

15. Was the meeting held in a place that made you feel comfortable?

☐ yes ☐ no

16. Was there enough time for the meeting?

☐ yes ☐ no

17. Was the meeting well-organized?

☐ yes ☐ no

18. Were you satisfied with the IEP meeting overall?

☐ yes ☐ no

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19. Do you feel that you gained more understanding of your child's educational needs in school after attending this conference?
- _____yes _____no
20. Did you ask questions at the meeting?
- _____yes _____no
21. Did you answer questions at the meeting?
- _____yes _____no
22. Did you make statements regarding your thoughts about your child's progress/program?
- _____yes _____no
23. Overall, were you satisfied with your participation in the IEP planning process?
- _____yes _____no
24. Were the meeting minutes written so everyone could see or hear them read at the conclusion of the meeting?
- _____yes _____no
25. Do you have any difficulties communicating with your child's teacher?
Special Education Teacher:
- _____yes _____no
26. Do you have any difficulties communicating with your child's teacher?
General Education Teacher:
- _____yes _____no
27. Is the language used by school personnel in talking to you about your child easy to understand?
- _____yes _____no

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28. Are you satisfied with the education and services your child is receiving this year?
☐ yes ☐ no
29. How much contact do you have with the teacher who provides special education services to your child?
☐ daily
☐ about once per week
☐ about once per month
☐ about twice a month
☐ About once a quarter
☐ about twice a year
☐ about once a year
☐ Never
- Type of contact:
☐ communication log
☐ progress report
☐ telephone conference
☐ school visit/conference
☐ support group
30. Do you belong to any parent groups that address your child's educational needs? (Example: Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, United Cerebral Palsy Association, etc.)
☐ yes ☐ no
 Name of organization:

31. Have you ever sought opinions about your child's concerns outside of the school district?
☐ yes ☐ no From whom:

32. Do you do specific activities at home to work on your child's educational program?
☐ yes ☐ no
33. Who recommended these activities?
☐ teacher ☐ doctor ☐ special education teacher ☐ other
34. What would you like your child's teacher to do for you so that you would know more about your child? (Please check one)
☐ daily progress report/checklist ☐ call weekly
☐ call monthly ☐ hold monthly meetings
☐ write letters ☐ call only when there is a problem
☐ other:

Thank you for your participation in this survey.
Please feel free to add any comments or suggestions you may have regarding your involvement in your child's special education process.

VITA

Graduate School

Austin Peay State University

Name: Cristina Mora McFarland

Home Address: 15 La Gorce Circle, Miami Beach, Florida 33141

Education

I. University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida

Bachelor of Arts, May 1994

Major: English Literature

II. Florida International University, Miami, Florida

Master of Science in Special Education, April 1998

Certificate

Kentucky Professional Certificate For Teaching Exceptional Children – Learning and Behavior Disorders, Grades Primary through 12