

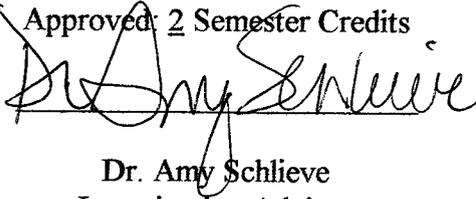
PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATION  
OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dr. Amy Schlieve", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive.

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this paper was to review literature containing information related to parent involvement in the education of students with special needs. Many researchers in the area of special education have recognized the importance of studying parent involvement since the conception of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997. The law made it very clear that parent involvement in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process was critical to a successful educational career for students with disabilities. This paper includes a review of three important areas of parent involvement: creating parent partnerships, barriers to parent involvement, and positive outcomes of parent involvement. This research showed the importance of meeting the unique needs of a child's family. An educator not only has to work with

children with different needs, but also needs to be able to meet the special needs of their families. This is a difficult feat for educators, as they have not been prepared to work with families during their teacher training course work. It has been proven that there are many barriers to parent involvement, which educators need to recognize and understand in order to promote parent involvement. These barriers are related to race, socioeconomic status, family structure, and the culture of special education. Parental involvement is important in all aspects of the education of students with special needs, as research has shown, there are positive student outcomes in academic achievement and attitude toward school and homework. The implications of this study include limited sources specifically related to parental involvement in special education. Most of the research containing parent involvement in education has been conducted in the area of general education. There is more research to be found concerning parent involvement beyond the three areas this paper has reviewed.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The history of mandated special education services dates back to Congress in 1975, when the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (now known as the *Individuals with Disabilities Act* or IDEA) was enacted. The problems that led to this legislation included the total exclusion of some students with disabilities, the inadequate education of others, and the segregation of those in school from their nondisabled peers. To ensure access and benefit, Congress adopted two approaches. First, it gave parents the right to participate with educators in making decisions about their child's education. Second, it gave parents and schools the right to an administrative hearing on any issue related to the child's rights to a free, appropriate education in the least restrictive setting (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2003).

Turnbull and Turnbull (2003) created an overview of the effectiveness of IDEA:

It is crucial to recognize just how successful IDEA and these accountability techniques have been. They have brought the majority of students with disabilities into the general education system. They have created a cadre of parents, parent organizations, special educators, and other educators who know students' rights and how to educate students effectively. They have brought intellectual and financial resources to bear on the problems of teaching children with disabilities. And they have given us (those who are involved with students with disabilities) the opportunity, indeed the duty, to advocate for different and more meaningful results (p.32).

Turnbull and Turnbull (2003) contend there are six principles that derive directly from Congress's declaration that students with disabilities have the right to a free, appropriate public education. The six principles include:

1. *Zero reject*- This principle ensures that no child can be denied a free, appropriate public education, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or disability.
2. *Nondiscriminatory Evaluation*- This principle states that schools must evaluate each student fairly and without bias to determine if the student has a disability, and if so, to plan what kind of education the student needs in order to benefit from school. Schools must find that the child has a true disability, not lack of academic progress related to disadvantages arising from ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic conditions. The intent is not about measuring their progress in school, but about deciding whether this is a child with a disability.
3. *Appropriate Education*- This principle states that students with disabilities are entitled to benefit from being in school. It exposes the value of special education, which goes beyond the mere presence of a student with a disability in school, and asks whether students are receiving an education that leads to their full participation in American life, that improves their economic capabilities and their ability to live as independently as they want to live.
4. *Least Restrictive Environment*- This principle requires that students with disabilities are granted access to the opportunity to be educated along with their regular education peers. Most students with disabilities will be living independently among their regular education peers in the future and all people need to realize that individual's with disabilities have the ability to make positive contributions to society.
5. *Procedural Due Process*- This principle ensures that students with disabilities and their parents have the right to be informed of changes to their educational plan, to participate in

the decision-making process surrounding the design and updating of those plans, and to protest any decisions that are adverse to their right to a free, appropriate public education by going to an administrative hearing and then to appeal any adverse judgement to a court.

*6. Parental Participation-* This principle is the key to effective implementation of the education program for a student with disabilities. It states that parents and students (when they reach a mature age) have the right to participate in decisions about their students' education. There are problems in putting this principle into practice. There is an imbalance in power and resources between educators on the one hand and parents on the other, especially parents with low socioeconomic status and other under-served populations.

Since the 1997 amendments to IDEA, parental involvement in the education of children with special needs has become a critical component of the children's educational programming. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (2000) reports the IDEA Amendments of 1997 reiterated the emphasis on parent involvement through provisions related to participation in eligibility determination, individualized education program (IEP) development, and transition planning; parental consent to periodic reevaluations of students; protections of due process rights; and strengthening family-school connections by regular reporting to parents of students' school performance. According to Brantlinger (1991), the purpose of family involvement is no longer to help keep the child from falling behind in school, but to facilitate student outcomes such as self-esteem, personal and vocational adjustment, and independence. In order to accomplish such involvement, educators need to encourage parents to become involved beyond

ritualistic actions, such as attending IEP meetings and annual parent-teacher conferences where parent's real opinions are easily undervalued and ignored with IEP jargon. Parent involvement needs to become more substantive and collaborative.

How does an educator improve parent and family involvement in the education of children with disabilities? Unfortunately, a special educator's training often overlooks the need for school professionals to be trained to work with families of children with disabilities (Ehley, Conoley, and Rosenthal, 1985; Simpson, 1996; Brantlinger, 1991). Special education teachers are prepared to evaluate students abilities and develop educational programming for students with disabilities, but the educators are often not prepared to meet the needs of the family. It is important that teachers and parents become collaborative partners in education. Teachers and parents play an important role in the preparation of children for the demands of classroom academic and social progress (Ehley et al., 1985).

As children get older, the family's needs change. Teachers of students with disabilities should be aware of the trends that have an impact on parents and families, the range of needs, methods for individualizing parent and family involvement, and strategies appropriate for serving their needs. Just like every student with disabilities requires an individualized education plan, the parents of the student with disabilities also have unique needs that require special attention. In order to find out what those needs are, the educator must establish effective communication with the parents and family.

The key is to establish two-way communication rather than sending messages (Ehley et al., 1985). The problem with sending messages from the teacher to the parent is that often the communication is only directed one way. Sending messages home does not guarantee that the

message will be received in the way it was meant to be received or any action will be taken.

Communication involves sending messages, how the message received along with feedback is critical to effective communication.

Feedback is an important tool to determine if the parent or child has received the message sent (Simpson, 1996). When the educator is writing messages back and forth via notes the instructor is unable to get immediate feedback from the parent (visual - facial expressions, comments, questions etc.), therefore the parent may misinterpret the message sent. This type of communication is often interpreted as impersonal by the parent. It is essential to establish effective methods communication with the parent preferably in frequent informal visits, requiring active listening to take place.

Parents may feel that they do not have the opportunity to communicate with school personnel directly. As a result, communication occurs either through one-way phone conversations or notes. Ehly et al. (1985) suggest that written information sent to parents saves time, but the sender is unsure as to whether it ever arrived or was interpreted and understood in the way it was meant. It is easy and less time consuming to inform the parent what is going on through short, written messages or messages on an answering machine, but the educator is not allowing for a response.

As an educator reflects on the communication he or she has had with parents, the educator may find that most of the communication has been limited to opportunities when active listening was not required. Active listening implies that two or more people are meeting face to face with one another and they are exchanging conversation in a respectful manner. Ehly et al. (1985) state that the astute professional can check for comprehension and interpretation

immediately by being aware of the parents' nonverbal cues and questions concerning the information being presented. Feedback is an important aspect of active listening, which is essential in order for a parent to feel like they are being heard and understood. It is only then that rapport between can be established between school personnel and the family.

An IEP is usually the first opportunity for school personnel to meet with families of students' with disabilities. School personnel can use the format of the IEP meeting as a way to build on information for subsequent child-centered meetings, including problem identification, establishment of short- and long-term goals, and development of ways to evaluate progress (Ehly et al., 1985). Karther and Lowden (1997) suggest that schools can plan multiple ways to continue the partnership with parents after the IEP meeting, as regular family contact is important. Informal meetings should be initiated by school personnel, not waiting for the parent to schedule meetings.

The needs and characteristics of families are not only varied but also in a state of constant change. Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003) reported that parents of older children reported lower levels of satisfaction with home-school communication. As students with disabilities become older, they seem to become less motivated to perform well in school (Span et al., 2003). Span et. al. (2003) found a pattern in parental involvement which suggests that as the student becomes older, the less the parent becomes involved in the child's education. This could be a result of past experiences where the parent has received communication efforts from school personnel limited to times when there were problems.

In addition to the age of students becoming a factor in parent involvement, the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2004) reports that the *Special Education Elementary*

*Longitudinal Study (SEELS)* (2000) suggests that parents of children with high incidence disabilities such as specific learning disabilities and speech and language impairments were least likely to attend either IEP meetings or informational meetings. SEELS data would imply that the majority of students with disabilities have had the least involved parents.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to review literature relative to communication with parents of children with disabilities and parents' involvement in their children's education.

#### *Definition of Terms*

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* - Legislation passed in 1997 for the education of all students with disabilities previously known as PL-94-142.

*Individualized Education Program (IEP)* - A legal document containing the educational needs for a child with a disability.

*Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS)* - National Center for Learning Disabilities (2004) defines SEELS as "part of OSEP's national assessment of IDEA" (np).

*Local Education Agency (LEA)* - a member of the IEP team who represents the individual school district.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will focus on three basic concepts of parental involvement in the education of their children with disabilities: building parent-teacher relationships, possible barriers to parental involvement, and positive student outcomes. Building parent-teacher relationships is the foundation for a successful education for a child with a disability. When building those relationships, school personnel must be aware of the possible barriers to parental involvement, as each family the school encounters will have different needs. The purpose for promoting parent involvement is to achieve positive student outcomes. These three areas will be discussed in length in order to better understand parent involvement in the education of students with disabilities and the effects it has on their children.

### *Building parent-teacher relationships*

Collaborating with parents of students with disabilities involves effective communication. In order to achieve effective communication, the special educator must be able to create a listening atmosphere. A listening environment is conducive to making the parent feel safe to express feelings and attitudes, the educator must learn to be an active listener, he or she needs to allow the parents to take part in the format of the conference, the educator needs to assess the overall needs of the family and he or she needs to be aware of the barriers to communication.

Even though many educator's training texts and surveys allude to the fact that parent involvement is important, there is typically no specific training provided for teachers to prepare them to work with families with disabilities. Powell and Graham (1996) agree it is doubtful that there will be an improvement in parent-professional partnerships without a substantial effort to prepare new professionals to work effectively with parents and provide continuing education to

professionals on the importance of parent-professional partnerships. Professional education programs typically do not mandate such training for new teachers, even though IDEA makes it very clear that parent-professional partnerships are necessary in effective progress in the education of students with disabilities.

The reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 has put a great emphasis on parent involvement in the IEP process of a child with a disability, however attendance does not necessarily imply participation (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2004) . Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) reviewed the results of three studies, which reported limited parental involvement in the IEP process. Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull & Curry found “parental contributions (mothers in 12 of 14 conferences) accounted for less than 25 percent of the total conference contributions,” (as cited in Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001, p.267). Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky found that “parent interactions accounted for only 14.8 percent of the conference time, or 6.5 minutes,” (as cited in Turnbull and Turnbull 2001, p.267). Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin reported that six parents out of 24 families indicated that “they were unable to influence decisions in the conference,” (as cited in Turnbull and Turnbull 2001, p.267). Even though IDEA has given parents the right to be involved in the IEP process, parents still have limited knowledge and resources to feel confident in participating during IEP meetings. Parents often do not feel comfortable providing input to help establish goals for their children’s education. According to a SEELS survey (2000), school staff primarily developed the IEP goals without parent input (The National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2004) .

It is not that the parents do not want to be involved in developing goals for their child, but are often not equipped to participate in determining academic goals for their child. Zellman and

Waterman (1998) note that all parents report wanting their children to succeed at school but some parents are far more successful than others in promoting their children's academic success. Many parents may rely on professionals to tell them what their child needs are in the classroom setting. Sometimes it is fostered by trust and other times it is fostered by intimidation. Karther et. al. (1997) contend that parents who have not had successful school careers may feel a great deal of anxiety and intimidation when meeting with teachers. Regardless of circumstances, there needs to be more parent training focusing on their rights and responsibilities, including the *Individual's with Disabilities Education Act*.

Simpson (1996) created a five step model of parent and family involvement. This model contains information exchange; partnership and advocacy training; home and community program implementation; counseling, consultation, and support programs; and parent and family coordinated service programs.

1. Information exchange is the most basic way school personnel and parents communicate. Parents need to understand the interpretation of data collected from assessments and how that information will be used to create an individualized education program for their child. It is also important for the teacher to express his or her philosophy and strategies that will be used to carry out the educational plan the child. Communication between professionals and parents should exclude as much jargon as possible. According to Kalyanpur and Harry (1999), jargon occurs when a group of people who belong to a particular field of work use language in a way that differs from the way that it would be used by the population at large. In this case the particular field would be special education and the population at large would be parents of children with disabilities.

Most parents receive an interpretation of their child's functioning on diagnostic measures, yet few have an opportunity to discuss the findings and/or their own feelings about them (Ehly et al., 1985). At every IEP meeting, it is required that a parent be informed by the *Local Education Agency* (LEA) representative of their rights to additional time to review the materials and data presented at the meeting. School personnel often take it for granted that parents understand their rights. School personnel may state the rights a parent has according to the law or send out a brochure stating those rights, but there is no assurance that parents understand those rights. An excellent resource for parents for interpreting the law and IEP jargon is *Special Education in Plain Language*.

2. Advocacy and partnership training is necessary if parents are expected to effectively participate in parent- teacher conferences and meetings. IDEA has given parents of children with disabilities the power to assist in developing a child's educational programming and monitor the progress, but many of these parents do not understand those rights and responsibilities. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2004), Parent Training and Information centers (PTI's) and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRC's) are authorized within Part D, Sections 682 and 683, of IDEA and funded by the US Department of Education. Each state has at least one parent center, and states with large populations may have more. There are approximately 100 parent centers in the United States. These parent centers serve families of children and young adults from birth to age 22 with all disabilities: physical, mental, learning, emotional, and attention deficit disorders.

3. Home and community program implementation is an effective way to bridge the gap between home and school. Parents of children with disabilities can be trained to provide tutoring

services to their child. If parents are shown the strategies used to assist their children with material that has already been taught at school, they will be more able to help the child with homework or daily living skills. Karther and Lowden (1997) suggest simple family activities that foster parent-child interaction and provide parents with ideas for home learning activities can be more motivating than homework assignments. Parents can also be trained to implement behavior plans. Consistency between school and home when dealing with a child's behavior is critical to reducing negative behavior or promoting positive behavior. If the behavior program does not include implementation at home, it may not be successful for the child in real-life settings.

4. Counseling, consultation, and support programs are necessary for families in crisis situations. It is important that parents have advance notice of these referred services, in case they are needed in the future. Support programs are helpful for all members of the family in order to deal with the effects that the disability has on the family. It is not only difficult to be a parent of a child with disabilities, but it is also challenging to be a sibling of a person with disabilities. In a support group environment, parents and siblings can safely express their feelings and frustrations to trained professionals and share experiences with other parents and siblings of persons with disabilities (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001).

5. Parent and family coordinated service programs allow parents to get involved in programs that affect the services provided to individuals with disabilities. Parents who are empowered to improve services provided to individuals with disabilities expend a tremendous amount of time, ability, and energy to create opportunities to benefit their child (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001). It can be as simple as volunteering for Special Olympics or as much as getting involved in the legislation that affects the large community of citizens with exceptionalities.

Parents of middle-class families have advantages when accessing the resources to become involved in their child's education. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) state, "families with a higher socioeconomic status have more resources available to address exceptionality issues than families who have a lower socioeconomic status," including the ability to pay for services and a higher level of education (pg.94). Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) link higher education to family empowerment. Some parents of children with disabilities have become professionals in the special education field resulting in familiarity with professional knowledge such as terminology of the field, availability of service options, and current professional practices. Kalyanpur and Harry (1999) state that becoming a professional is an option that is available primarily to middle-income families.

According to Lareau, as cited by Brantlinger (1991) "stereotypes of low-income parents as uncaring tend to be reinforced because such parents may not have the resources to comply with school personnel's standardized views of the proper role of parents" (p. 253). Low-income parents may not have transportation to attend their child's meetings. The school the child attends may not be walking distance, because the child is bused to a school farther away from home where the appropriate programming is available. Parents may have small children at home and may have difficulty finding day care during the time of meetings. For low-income parents, issues of transportation and child care can impede direct school involvement (Karther and Lowden, 1997). Despite legal regulations that protect parental rights, school districts might schedule IEP meetings according to their convenience, not the parents' convenience (Simpson, 1996).

Allowing parents the opportunity to structure a portion of both the format and the content of parent-educator conference will encourage participation and promote collaboration (Ehly et

al., 1985; Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001). Providing a pre-conference form that assists the parent in thinking about the issues they would like to address before the conference allows parents to prepare for the meeting ahead of time. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) suggest that families frequently find it helpful to reflect in advance on information such as current levels of performance, goals, objectives, placement, supplementary aids/services, and related services so they can feel more confident about agreeing or disagreeing with professionals' opinions and recommendations. If families feel comfortable drafting their own version of an IEP, then educator can review that form before the conference and have an idea of the issues coming to the table before the conference begins.

Simpson (1996) suggests the following outline for obtaining initial information:

1. Parents' statement of issues
2. Developmental history of the child's disability
3. Parents' analysis of child's attitudes
4. Child's history of past school performance
5. Parental goals and expectations for their child's education; and
6. Family sociological information

Ehly et al. (1985) suggest that the educator must create an environment that allows the parent to feel comfortable expressing emotions and attitudes with an empathetic listener.

Educators have the tendency to show their "professionalism", which often means educators present themselves as "we know best" and that leads to a feeling that educators are

unapproachable (Ehly et al., 1985). When meeting with parents, educators may have the tendency to reveal their own perceptions, which may not be accurate or complete (Turnbull and

Turnbull, 2001). The inability to recognize differences in human experiences could lead to feelings that educators are unapproachable and inflexible. Parents of students with disabilities are often intimidated by school professionals before they enter the building. Karther and Lowden (1997) state that parents who have had unsuccessful school careers may feel a great deal of anxiety and intimidation meeting with teachers.

Effective communication also requires giving parents the opportunity to have their messages received without distortion (Ehly et al., 2001). Although educators may wish to decline support or reinforcement of a particular message, they must nonetheless extended a chance to be heard. Responses that fail to confirm a parent's message often detract from further attempts at communicating with professionals who work with their children.

Listening is the key to effective communication. Educators are often more comfortable talking than listening, therefore it is important to focus on creating a listening environment both internally and externally. Simpson (1996) suggests educators should acknowledge parents' and family members' role as collaborative and active participants; strive to achieve relationship parity with parents and family members; strive to understand the parents' frame of reference; be prepared; arrange for appropriate furniture; identify anxiety-reduction measures; maintain a natural demeanor in the conference; recognize that eye contact is a basic component of good listening; and be sensitive to the emotions of parents.

A special educator needs to be aware that parents may see different abilities in their child at home compared to the school atmosphere. When a parent or family member states that the child is able to complete a task that the child is not able to complete at school, the educator should remember that the home atmosphere is most familiar and comfortable for the child.

Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) explain that student outcomes should not depend on a six-hour school day, especially for children with cognitive or behavioral challenges. This discrepancy in performance between home and school may be a result of the child knowing he or she is not being assessed or evaluated by a teacher in the home setting. In many cases, it is difficult for a child with a disability to transfer skills from one environment to the other (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001).

If one shows interest in another person, then rapport can be established (Ehly et al, 1985). Eye contact is one of the most basic ways to show a person you are involved in the conversation. Eye contact shows trust and general concern for another person. Simpson (1997) states that without trust, the ability of parents and professionals to effectively communicate and collaborate will be significantly impaired. Other nonverbal cues include body position, facial expression, and body movement.

During meetings, parents and families may present their feelings and attitudes about their child's disability in an inappropriate way that is exaggerated and rash (Ehly et al., 1985). It is easy for school personnel to become defensive and "set the record straight", but sometimes the parent just wants to know he or she is being heard. All comments do not require a response. Even though a parent may seem irrational, it is still possible to put your own biases aside and become an active listener.

#### *Possible barriers to parental involvement*

Possible barriers to parental involvement in special education may include family structure, cultural diversity, and the culture of special education.

Benson and Turnbull (1986) contend that individuals with disabilities cannot be

adequately understood without analyzing how they fit into the family structure, therefore they advise professionals to consider the interaction influences of each family's structure (membership characteristics, cultural style, and ideological style), functions (economic, physical, rest and recuperation, socialization, self-definition, affection, guidance, educational, and vocational), and life cycles (developmental stages and transitions, structural change, functional change, sociohistorical change). If family structure is ignored, it becomes a barrier to creating a parent-teacher partnership.

Effects of transitions and change are among the greatest stressors for parents and educators (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001). These stressors could still become a barrier to communication between the family and the school if the right resources are not found to meet the needs of the family. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) note there are two factors that tend to reduce the amount of stress most families feel during a transition. First, the roles of the new transition are usually fairly well defined for the individual and the family by culture. An event, such as graduation is a signal that the family's relationships following the event will be changed. Second, the timing of the transition is usually expected and often a ritual within a culture. These transition can be frightening for families with children with disabilities, as norms and models of expected behavior may not be available for their child or the family (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001). In the case of graduation, a family of a student with a disability will often be looking at options which deviate from the norm of American culture. The future is often ambiguous.

Another barrier to parental involvement is cultural diversity (Kalyanpur and Harry, 1999; Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001; Ehly et al., 1985; and Simpson, 1996) . Even though many professional educator programs include diversity training, every family will be different. When

we speak of different cultures, this not only includes race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, but also family structure. Educators are commonly seeing a change from the “typical” family structure of a household including a mother and a father to one parent families, children raised by relatives, and households with cohabitation. A “traditional” family is no longer the norm, as only 6% of US households constitutes a working father, a housewife mother, and two children (Simpson, 1996).

The Urban Institute (2003) reports that 2.3 million children live in kinship care. Kinship care is a situation where a child lives with a relative, such as grandparents or aunts and uncles. Most of the children (54%) living in kinship care, live in low-income families due to hardships (Urban Institute, 2003). It is important for the educator to realize that each family comes with their own special circumstances that will affect their involvement. These nontraditional families will be involved in stressful situations that are enhanced by raising a child with a disability.

An educator must investigate a variety of procedures and strategies to facilitate involvement in the child’s education. There may be limited resources, but there is an increased awareness of such situations. For example, the Wood County Health Department of Wisconsin heads a support group called “Grandparents raising grandchildren”, where grandparents are able to share their experiences with each other and they are able to talk to health professionals about their concerns. Even though educators are not targeted audiences of such support groups, it would be beneficial to the educator to attend a meeting and hear the grandparents’ point of view. Simpson (1996) insists that relying on basic effective human interaction and communication tools such as active listening will work with any type of family.

It is necessary that an educator put aside any bias toward a family’s values and priorities

in order to promote involvement. Both family members and professionals tend to utilize their personal value systems in making educationally related decisions (Simpson, 1996). This would be an excellent opportunity for the educator to incorporate some of the daily living skills the child was using at home into his individualized curriculum at school.

Special education is a unique culture in itself. Kalyanpur and Harry (1999) define culture as “the shared implicit and explicit rules and traditions that express the beliefs, values, and goals of a group of people” (p.3). Special education is a subculture of education as a societal institution . The value of *education* is that every child is educable to the extent that each student will attain the norms of the institution’s society, whereas the value of *special education* is that each student with a disability is educable to the extent of his or her disability [according to IDEA] (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2003). Every educator should assume that each student with disabilities will make annual progress toward goals stated in his or her IEP. Society has not established norms for individuals with disabilities, therefore special education has created its own cultural values.

Kalyanpur and Harry (1999) introduce the concept, *Posture of Cultural Reciprocity* to refer to a method of inquiry for professionals to reflect on their practices and question assumptions of the field (the field of special education). This concept is recognizing culture in special education as a barrier to parent involvement in the education of a child with disabilities, because the families of children with disabilities are not aware of this culture. The four steps of the posture of cultural reciprocity include:

Step 1: Identify the cultural values that are embedded in the professional interpretation of a student’s difficulties or in the recommendation for service. It is important for the professional

to ask himself or herself why he or she holds a particular belief.

For instance, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2001) established criteria for all disability areas, which every school district must follow for initial referrals and reevaluations. The professional interpretation of recommended service for a student with disabilities is driven by the criteria set up by the state of Wisconsin. Once a student meets criteria for a special education program, the IEP team determines the placement that best fits the needs of the child.

Step 2: Find out whether the family being served recognizes and values these assumptions and, if not, how their view differs from that of the professional. The professional needs to examine whether or not the family has the same belief as his or her own. In this case, you would present the information generated from Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (2001) criteria for the appropriate disability area (cognitive disabilities, learning disabilities, or emotional/behavioral disabilities) and suggest an appropriate program to meet the child's needs.

Step 3: Acknowledge and give respect to any cultural differences identified, and fully explain the cultural basis of the professional assumptions. Before one can acknowledge and give respect to these cultural differences, the professional must first identify them. In order to identify the family's perspective, the professional would need to set up a safe environment where active listening can take place. Once the appropriate environment is set up and the family's concerns have been heard, then the professional will be able to communicate their assumptions to the family in a nonthreatening manner. The professional needs to explain to the family his or her assumptions and beliefs and how they are different than the family's assumptions and beliefs. The goal of a child's program should be to make sure each student could improve independence in school, at home, and in the community.

Step 4: Through discussion and collaboration, set about determining the most effective way of adapting professional interpretations or recommendations to the value system of this family. Together the professionals and the family should work out a compromise that does not interfere with the family's beliefs. Making the family aware of the goals of the program for children with disabilities and how it would fit the needs of the child may show acknowledgment of the family's beliefs about the abilities of the child. The family's concerns should not be ignored or perceived as irrational, instead the educator should put the family's minds to ease about the education the child would be receiving. This may establish a rapport between the family and the educator.

School personnel need to increase their awareness of family structure when setting up IEP meetings (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001). Even though IDEA is specific in its requirements that IEP meetings be established at times and places that are convenient for parents, common practice continues to be far from the rule (Powell and Graham, 1996; Kalyanpur and Harry, 1999; Simpson, 1996; Ehly et al., 1985). As the Urban Institute's statistics showed earlier, the two-parent families, where the mother is available during the day to meet with professionals, is not a reality today. Differences in cultural attitudes, family structure, employment responsibilities, daycare, and transportation need to be taken into consideration when establishing dates and times for IEP meetings.

There are educational models/procedures that are most effective in achieving outcomes related to true parent-professional partnerships. The following description of Parent Training and Information Centers is taken from Powell and Graham (1996):

Each state and many territories have one or more federally funded Parent Training and

Information Centers (PTIC's) aimed at providing education on IDEA to parents and family members. These PTICs enjoy a strong national reputation for providing meaningful education for parents as well as effective advocacy and problem-solving. These Centers, all private entities, are headed by parents and controlled by boards who are predominantly parent of children with disabilities. In some cases PTICs have made a substantial effort to work closely with higher education in the preparation of education professionals (np).

Powell and Graham (1996) also admit there are problems with these programs such as, unclear missions, some programs are viewed as adversarial to school personnel rather than supportive, and parents have problems accessing their services. In some cases, educators may find that programs and people who act as advocates for parents and children with disabilities can create a barrier to parent-professional partnerships. Many times the contact between an advocate and a parent does not include any communication with the educator prior to the conference. Prior to the meeting, the advocate and the parent have their agenda and the school personnel have their own agenda. Many times the agendas do not work well together, while all are trying to meet the needs of the child. Simpson (1996) states that parents and professionals must acknowledge that they are both actively committed to the child and that only through their mutual concerted efforts will progress take place.

It is very important that when an educator finds out there is an advocate involved, the educator attempts to set up a meeting with the parent and the advocate to establish effective communication. This action may alleviate barriers to parental involvement such as misunderstanding and mistrust.

Initial contacts between parents of children with disabilities and school personnel will occur over a variety of times and among a variety of professionals (Simpson 1996). For parents of children with high incidence disabilities, the contact usually begins with the regular education teacher when the child begins to experience difficulties within the academic setting. The teacher will usually maintain phone contact or note exchanges with the parent to discuss problem-solving strategies and progress. This initial contact will usually determine how well the parent will respond to future contacts with school personnel. If the parent feels blamed or accused of not being involved in the child's education, then the parent will often desire to not have future contact with school personnel. But if there has been a positive parent-professional partnership created through mutual problem-solving efforts, then the parent is more likely to become involved with the process of referral, assessment, diagnostic testing, placement, the IEP process, and service delivery (Ehly et al., 1985; Simpson, 1996; Spann et al., 2003; and Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001).

Even if there has been a negative relationship established between the regular education teacher and the parent, it is possible for another school professional to repair the relationship between the parent and the school. Many times it is just a misunderstanding between the teacher and the parent that results in frustration. It takes a concerted effort among all professionals involved with a child with disabilities to maintain a positive relationship with the parent.

Once the child has been placed in a special needs program, contact between the parent and the school professionals usually occurs once per year during IEP meetings, an annual parent-teacher conference, and during times when there are problems (Ehly et al., 1985).

Communication between the teacher and the parent must go beyond these efforts in order to

develop the foundation for collaboration. The opportunities to establish further communication tends to be seen as the parent's responsibility to initiate that contact.

It is important for educators of students with disabilities to establish early contacts with parents and then maintain that contact throughout the child's educational career. Simpson (1996) emphasizes a basic reason for initial conferences is that they can facilitate a positive and collaborative working relationship. It is used as a vehicle to improve student success and future opportunities for parental involvement. Information included in these initial contacts should be an analysis of the needs and concerns of the parents. This will allow issues related to possible barriers to come out before they have a negative affect on the parent-professional relationship. This can be done by interviewing the parents concerning family history that may affect the progress of the student (Ehly et al., 1985; Simpson, 1996; and Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001).

#### *Positive student outcomes based on parental involvement*

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) describe the relationships between parent involvement and positive student outcomes. They suggest that the positive influence of parental involvement on children's educational outcomes is contingent upon two major variables as perceived and experienced by the child: the parent's selection and use of developmentally appropriate involvement strategies and activities, and the fit between the parent's activities and the school's expectations for parental involvement. Before an educator can expect a parent to use developmentally appropriate strategies at home with a child with disabilities, the parent must understand the child's needs.

Parents generally feel inadequate when helping their child with homework. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) state three reasons for this feeling of inadequacy: "1) changes in instructional

methods since they were students, 2) a lack of information about what is being taught at school, and 3) their belief that specialized training is needed for them to be able to help their children” (p. 302). Simpson (1996) states, “The process of helping the parents and families of children and youth with exceptionalities to effectively serve their own children requires instruction in basic behavioral change strategies and home tutoring methods” (p. 221).

Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) contend there are more family concerns about homework, including wanting more information about a teacher’s homework expectations, preferring experiential homework related to life skills, and communication with the teacher. Sometimes parents are not sure whether or not the homework should be an independent activity. It is important for the educator to make the parent aware of expectations for homework.

An educator cannot expect that parents will include their child in explaining daily routines and living skills. Students need opportunities to complete practical homework that involves project activities. When the class is working on measurement, the educator could send a letter home letting the parent know what concept is being taught. The parent can have the student help them with daily activities around the house that include measurement, such as cooking and baking, feeding animals, making craft projects, or small building projects around the house.

In order to ensure positive student outcomes, it is important to make sure there is a fit between the school’s expectations and the parents’ expectations for the child’s educational progress (Spann et al., 2003). The best time for this to occur is during the IEP meeting. If a parent is empowered to actively participate in the IEP process, the parent will make suggestions for how the child learns best (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001). By taking the parent’s suggestions

into consideration a link can be created between activities at home and activities at school.

Once professionals get beyond parent participation in the IEP process, the parents are typically expected to help with homework. The most important aspect of homework for student's with disabilities is that the work is individualized to meet their needs (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001). It is important that the educator acknowledge that an assignment may be easy for one child, but at the same time it may be difficult for another student. It is important for the parent to be aware of the homework expectations. This requires two-way communication through a notebook or by phone, explaining the expectations. An educator needs to let the parent know that the homework expectations have been individualized.

Zellman and Waterman (1998) found that the way in which parents interact with their children at home is more important in predicting student outcomes than the extent to which the parents are involved at school. Children usually respond to modeling as a way to acquire values in education. If parents set aside the time for homework, in which they make themselves available to help the child, the child will probably be more willing to do the homework. Parents may also incorporate daily living skills training during food preparation time, taking care of pets, and personal grooming.

Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) reviewed studies that suggested students with mild disabilities have more problems doing their homework, because they need assistance of others to complete the work. It can be frustrating for parents and students to do homework when the material is challenging for the student. It is important for the educator to recognize this problem and send more difficult work home in small increments and send work home that can be completed more independently and with confidence.

Researchers agree that parent involvement may take on many forms, which may reflect the different needs of the child, parental tendencies, and cultural patterns (Zellman and Waterman, 1998). Educators need to become more aware of the importance of working with parents. Lazar, Broderick, Mastrilli, and Slostad (1999) recommend a more systematic, comprehensive, educational effort to help teachers work with parents, starting with preservice education and continuing with ongoing professional development support for teachers.

Encouraging collaboration between home and school is a central theme when empowering parents of children with disabilities to become involved in education (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001). Research has focused on effective communication with parents in order to build parent-professional relationships (Ehly et al., 1985, Simpson, 1996; Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001). Once educators become involved with families, they usually find that there are barriers which become factors in collaboration. When an educator recognizes those barriers, he or she should seek out resources to meet the families needs.

Ehly et al. (1985) note that there is a reality that parents of children with disabilities and educators must face, which contains a number of “truths”:

1. Most parents are very interested in their child’s welfare.
2. A small number of parent are neglectful and abusive toward their children.
3. Caring for a child with a disability is one of life’s most stressful challenges.
4. Most parents know important facts about their children that others will rarely know.
5. Most parents believe things about their children that are simply not true.
6. Educators are not uniformly skilled in dealing with people.
7. Professionals have often done and said things to parents that lead to mistrust, which

leads to barriers that future professionals must work through in order to gain trust back.

Many parent involvement efforts focus on schools, but according to Epstein, as cited by Zellman and Waterman (1998), nonschool involvement should be emphasized. With the amount of time children spend in their homes, time and resources spent on improving parental involvement within the home may have longer-lasting effects on children. Positive outcomes will come from successful collaboration between the home and school.

### CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION

The review indicates that parent involvement is dependent upon collaboration between the educators and the family. Simpson (1996) contends that the initial conference should be designed to establish rapport and a foundation for collaboration with parents and families, which should include the sharing of information for accurate educational programming, recommending the educational strategy to be used, and assessing the needs of the family. If a good relationship, promoting positive communication is established early, the educator can probably expect more parental involvement in the child's education.

Most likely first contact with the family will be in an IEP or evaluation format. These types of meetings are usually formal and sometimes overwhelming for families of students with disabilities (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001). It is important for school personnel to exercise active listening while encouraging the family to become involved in the education plan (Simpson, 1996).

After the formal meetings are completed, will be necessary for the teacher to maintain frequent contact with the families. Meeting with parents at the beginning of each school year is a good way to start the year. This will show the family that the school is interested in keeping them involved in the educational process on an ongoing basis. The key is to not wait for problems to arise before making contact with the family during the school year.

All families want to see their children succeed in school and they try to become involved in this process the best way they know how. It is important for teachers to encourage parents to become involved through homework activities, school activities beyond the school day, and the IEP process. School personnel must realize there may be barriers to any kind of involvement.

These barriers may include lack of transportation, need for child care, intimidation of the school environment, lack of understand or misunderstanding of the educational process, or past experiences (Ehly et al., 1985; Karther and Lowden, 1997; Simpson, 1996; Spann et al., 2003; Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001) . The educator must recognize that all families are different and will exercise different levels of involvement. Factors such as family structure, ethnicity differences, and socioeconomic status need to be taken into consideration when reflecting on family involvement in education (Kalyanpur and Harry, 1999).

Family structure is in a constant state of change in our society as recorded by the Urban Institute (2004). School personnel are no longer communicating with the parents of children with disabilities, but they are also communicating with grandparents, aunts and uncles, foster parents, coinhabitants, etc. Many children do not live with their biological mothers and fathers in one house. It is important to understand the needs of each family and try to meet those needs in the best interest of the child and the child's education (Simpson, 1996).

As a special educator, one should keep a log of communication with each family in order to recognize the effects that communication has on student outcomes. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) described a situation in which an educator implemented a six-week telephone communication system and found that she improved parent phone calls, which improved students' academic performance. In order to track the communication more easily, the log could be kept with a copy of the students IEP and progress reports.

Limitations to this literature review include limited studies conducted in the area of parent involvement in the education of students with disabilities. Much of the research has been conducted concerning parent involvement in general education of students without disabilities.

Most of the literature reviewed in this paper was limited to parent involvement in the education of students with disabilities or at-risk students.

The researcher recommends that more studies be conducted in order to answer the questions, why are parents becoming involved in the education of students with disabilities, how are the parents becoming involved, and what are the barriers to parent involvement specifically related to children with disabilities? Educators need as many resources as possible in order to establish effective partnerships with families of children with disabilities.

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