



**JOURNAL of the
AMERICAN ACADEMY
of
SPECIAL EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS
(JAASEP) WINTER 2009**

Table of Contents

JAASEP Editorial Board of Reviewers

**A Comparison of the Effects of Tactile and Auditory Stimulation
and Choice on the Problem Solving of Students with Attention
Problems**

Stacey Emmert, Suneeta Kercood and Janice A. Grskovic

**Significance of Multiple Intelligence Among Children with
Special Needs**

S.Saradha priyadarshini

**Foster Youth Who Have Succeeded in Higher Education:
Common Themes**

Thomas Lovitt and John Emerson

A Mother's Story about Raising Children with Disabilities
Sadia Warsi

Due Process: A Primer for Special Education Teachers
Roberta Wiener

Author Guidelines for Submission to JAASEP

Copyright and Reprint Rights of JAASEP

JAASEP Executive Editors

Roger Pierangelo, Ph.D.

George Giuliani, J.D., Psy.D.

JAASEP Editorial Board

Nicholas Agro, ESQ.

Diana Basilice, Ed.M.

Heather Bausano, Psy.D.

Keri Chernichun, Psy.D.

Robert Colucci, D.O.

Jeffrey Froh, Psy.D.

Anita Giuliani, M.S., S.A.S., S.D.A

Christopher Kearney, M.S.

Scott Markowitz, Esq.

Lisa Morris, M.S.

Tanya Spadaro, Ed.M.

Danielle Warnke, M.S.

JAASEP Managing Editor

Richard Scott

A Comparison of the Effects of Tactile and Auditory Stimulation and Choice on the Problem Solving of Students with Attention Problems

Stacey Emmert

West Central Indiana Special Services Corporation

Suneeta Kercood

Butler University

Janice A. Grskovic

Indiana University Northwest

Abstract

Using a single-subject alternating treatments reversal design, the effects of three conditions, tactile stimulation, auditory stimulation, and choice of the two, were compared on the math story problem solving of elementary students with attention problems. Students attempted and solved slightly more problems and engaged in fewer off-task behaviors in the stimulation conditions than in baseline. Effects were very modest. Students chose stimulation conditions that were related to their behavior more than their accuracy.

Students with attention problems exhibit slower computation speed and attempt fewer math problems compared to control students (Barkley, Anastopoulos, Guevremeont, & Fletcher, 1991; Zentall & Ferkis, 1993). Their near average grades in computation in elementary school tend to decline in higher grades (Ackerman, Anhalt, & Dykman, 1986). For story problems, cognitive ability (including memory), sustained attention, and reading skills are needed to eliminate irrelevant information, handle multiple operations, and transform verbal information within problems (Zentall, Smith, Lee, & Wieczorek, 1994). Students with attention problems have significantly lower problem-solving scores in specific math concepts than students without attention problems (Zentall & Ferkis). Slow computation

affects mathematical problem solving as it increases attention and memory demands and decreases students' ability to focus on the deeper structures of the problem (Zentall et al).

Students with attention disorders are challenged by the attention and working memory demands required to successfully solve math story problems. Their attentional differences can be understood through the optimal stimulation theory that suggests these students are biologically under-stimulated (Zentall, 2006). According to the optimal stimulation theory, each human has a biologically determined level of optimal stimulation and when insufficiently stimulated, will initiate stimulation-seeking activity to create a state of homeostasis, or a comfort zone of optimal stimulation (Hebb, 1955). Zentall (1983) applied this theory to students with attention disorders and provided an understanding of students' inability to sustain attention in lower stimulating environments. They attend to that which is immediately salient in the environment and not their tasks, resulting in difficulty with sustained attention (Zentall, 1995).

Students with attention difficulties can pay attention; their problems have to do with what they are paying attention to and for how long. Any strong stimulus can captivate their attention and distract them from their tasks. They selectively attend to novelty such as, color, changes in size, and movement (Copeland & Wisniewski, 1981; Radosh & Gittelman, 1981). When task success is dependent upon sustained attention, as in math problem solving, it becomes imperative for students to find their optimal level of stimulation required to sustain focus.

Methods used to increase stimulation to optimal levels include pharmacological interventions and procedures that embed higher levels of stimulation into tasks (Pelham, Wheeler, & Chronis, 1998; Zentall, 2006). These methods require parents and teachers to take actions to increase performance or decrease behavior. Students with attention problems need tools to regulate their own levels of stimulation. Self-talk, self instruction, self monitoring, and self-reinforcement have been used with some success as motivational strategies to develop self-control of attention and impulsive behavior (Ervin, Bankert, & Dupaul, 1996). But these methods may add additional demands on attention during a problem solving task.

Another child-driven strategy included physical movement. Physical movement has been used successfully to sustain attention in clinical experiments (Welsh & Labbe, 1994). Studies on large muscle motor activity, such as running, have demonstrated increases in sustained attention on clinical tasks and subsequently reduced excessive motor activity and impulsive behavior (Bass, 1983). Grskovic et al (2004) utilized a fine motor activity to improve behavior of students with attention problems in time out settings. In these studies, physical activity occurred prior to academic engagement. Kercood, Grskovic, Lee, & Emmert (2007) assessed the effects of a fine motor activity during math problem solving tasks on the performance and behavior of students with attention problems. They reported that with the fine-motor activity, students demonstrated more on-task behavior and increased performance and the activity provided students with a less obvious and less distracting means of movement.

Auditory stimulation has also been used successfully as a less distracting, child-driven method for reaching stimulation levels needed to sustain attention, although this research is limited. Abikoff, Courtney, Szeibel, and Koplewicz (1996) reported that students with attention disorders performed better than baseline on the number of math problems correct in the presence of auditory stimulation. The results are promising and suggest that auditory stimulation can be beneficial to the arithmetic performance of students with attention problems. However, students with attention problems made

more errors under faster, than slower, music conditions when performing a precision motor task (Klien, 1981).

In summary, students with attention problems have difficulty with fast math calculations and solving complex story problems. Increased levels of stimulation may allow them to attend longer. Fine motor tasks and auditory stimulation have been used in classrooms because they are less distracting than some other methods for increasing stimulation and can be manipulated by children. It is not yet known if one of these procedures is more effective than the other. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare the effectiveness of tactile and auditory stimulation on the math problem solving performance of students with attention disorders. We hypothesized that tactile and auditory stimulation would promote gains in sustained attention and allow students with attention problems to focus longer on their tasks, leading to greater accuracy. A second question examined whether students with attention problems chose effective stimulation-generating methods.

Method

This study employed a single subject alternating treatments design with reversal and choice phases. Two instructional conditions, tactile stimulation and auditory stimulation, were alternated.

Participants

Three Caucasian participants, two fifth graders and one fourth grader, were invited to participate in this study. All three participants were middle class and nominated by their teachers as having attention problems. The inattention and hyperactivity status of participants was confirmed using ratings on the Conners' Teacher Rating Scale: Revised: Short Form (CTRS-R:S) and Conners' Parent Rating Scale-Revised (CPRS-R:S) (Conners, 1997). Students with a T-score of 60 or higher (1 or more SD above the mean) on either the (a) Cognitive/Inattention Index (b) Hyperkinesis Index or (c) the ADHD Index, on either the parent or the teacher ratings, were confirmed as students with problems with attention. All participants attended a general education classroom in an elementary school in a suburban community.

Bill's teacher rating on the Hyperkinesis Index was 68 and his ADHD Index was 62. Matt received a parent-rated Hyperkinesis Index of 66 and parent and teacher ratings on the ADHD Index of 68. Erin's T-scores on the Cognitive/Inattention Index were 68 (parent) and 70 (teacher). None of the participants were on medication for attention disorders.

Materials

Worksheets were created from a pool of over 300 math story problems taken from math textbooks used in the participants' school. Since the two fifth grade participants had failed the math portion of the state standardized test, problems were selected from fourth grade level texts. Thirty math story problems requiring addition, subtraction, and multiplication were printed on white paper with black ink (8-9 problems per page), stapled together, and placed in a manila folder. Teachers had not previously assigned the selected problems to the participants but the concepts had been taught. All the problems were at the 3rd to 4th grade reading level, determined with reading software offered by Microsoft Word. Blank answer sheets placed on clipboards, pencils, and erasers were also provided.

Experimental Design and Procedures

This study employed a single-subject alternating treatments design with an additional choice phase. All sessions lasted 20 min and were conducted in the mornings between 10:00 and 11:00 in an empty classroom in the participants' elementary school. A video camera was positioned in the room to tape all three participants during each session. Folders with math problems, empty answer sheets, pencils, and erasers were placed on worktables prior to students' arrival. Participants were escorted from their classrooms to the testing room by the examiner. The three participants were seated in different corners of the same room with their backs toward each other to reduce distraction and talking and to allow them to be videotaped at the same time.

For the tactile stimulation, students were given a Tangle Puzzle-Jr., a plastic circle-shaped toy with a series of 90-degree curves, connected, and able to pivot at each joint. The Tangle Puzzle-Jr. was chosen for tactile stimulation because it was flexible, easy to manipulate, twist, and swivel, and was not noisy. Additional description of the Tangle Puzzle-Jr. is available at www.tangletoys.com. For the auditory stimulation condition, students were provided with a personal compact disc player, headphones, and a music compact disc containing classical instrumental music.

For baseline, students were asked to complete as many math problems as they could. At the end of 20 min, students were told to stop and turn their materials in to the researcher. The researcher thanked them for participating and offered them a small reward, such as a pencil, notebook, or stickers.

During intervention, procedures were the same as in baseline except students were provided with tactile stimulation (i.e., the tangle puzzle toy), or auditory stimulation (the compact disc player and headphones with instrumental music). Before the first intervention session, students were shown how to manipulate the toy with one hand while working on the math problems. After the first session, the tangle toy was available on each student's desk for the Tactile Stimulation sessions. Before the Auditory Stimulation sessions, students were instructed on how to use the CD player and were told to keep the headphones and music on while completing the math problems. For the Choice phase, the CD player and music and the Tangle Toy were available and students were asked to choose which they wanted to use. Then that choice was provided each subsequent session in the Choice phase. A procedural check sheet was developed and followed to ensure integrity of the procedures.

Measures

The dependent variables examined in this study were (a) number of math problems completed correctly (calculated from the students' permanent product worksheets), and (b) number of off-task behaviors per 20-min session. Off-task behavior was operationally defined as looking away from the task by 90 degrees for more than 10 sec, rocking, talking out, leaving the seat, or lack of contact with academic material (e.g., manipulation of the writing instrument, reading). Inter-observer agreement for the behavioral data was scored from video tapes for more than 30% of the sessions and was calculated to be 95–100% (formula = intervals of agreement divided by total intervals times 100).

Results

All students performed somewhat better on math problems during at least one of the stimulation conditions than in baseline, although differences are modest. All students engaged in somewhat fewer off-task behaviors during the stimulation conditions. Mean number of problems attempted and correct, and the number of off-task behaviors for Erin, Matt, and Bill are presented in **Table 1** and **Figures 1-6**.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare the effectiveness of tactile and auditory stimulation on the math problem solving and off-task behavior of students with attention disorders and to assess the effects of choice. This study lends modest support to the optimal stimulation theory in that all three students tended to perform and attend better with increased levels of stimulation. The results of this study also support the findings of Kercood, Grskovic, Lee, and Emmert (2007) who reported improvements in academic and behavioral performances with the inclusion of a fine motor tactile activity during academic engagement. When viewing the videotapes from this study, it was noted that students typically picked up the Tangle toy during, what appeared to be, mental computation, fidgeted with it while contemplating their answers, set it down, and immediately wrote their answers.

Students in the present study did not choose the stimulation method that was most related to their own increased problem solving. Erin's best performances were with tactile stimulation but when given choice, she chose auditory stimulation. Matt and Bill had their best days for problem accuracy with auditory stimulation but both chose tactile in the choice condition. It would appear that all three students chose the wrong type of stimulation. But examination of the off-task data shows that each student actually chose the type of stimulation related to fewer off-task behaviors for them. Students may have been aware of their increased level of on-task behavior with their selected stimulation method.

In the choice condition, students were asked to use their chosen type of stimulation for all three days. It is not clear what effects would have resulted if students had been allowed to vary their choices. Prior time series intervention research with students with attention disorders showed a decline in performance and increase in off-task behavior over time as students became acclimated to the intervention and its novelty decreased (e.g., Belfiore, Grskovic, Murphy, & Zentall, 1996). In the present study, this did not occur, possibly due to the variation in interventions. This supports the need for novelty and variety in the academic interventions of students with attention problems.

The results of this study are variable and will need to be confirmed through continued research and should be interpreted with caution. Another variable affecting results was the type of headphones used during the auditory activity; light weight headphones with a metal bar over the top were used. Students voiced their preference for heavier headphones that fit snugly on the ears. Additionally, students asked if they could bring in their own music and expressed a dislike for classical music. It was noted that Erin, who choose auditory as her preferred type of stimulation, turned the volume up as high as it would go. This probably explains her reduced performances in the auditory condition as the loudness of the music served as a distraction. Future researcher may want to limit the volume control.

Future research should continue to explore strategies that help students attain their level of optimal stimulation through the use of relevant and self-selected strategies. Teachers have the ability to identify students who have difficulty staying on task and should allow these students to use strategies, such as fine motor activity, to enhance their performance and on-task behavior. Teachers can empower students

to use strategies that increase their learning across various environments, instructors, and task conditions.

References

- Abikoff, H., Courtney, M. E., Szeibel, P. J., & Koplewicz, H. S. (1996). The effects of auditory stimulation on the arithmetic performance of children with ADHD and nondisabled children. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 29, 238-246.
- Ackerman, P.T., Anhalt, J.M., & Dykman R.A. (1986). Arithmetic automatization failure in children with attention and reading disorders: associations and sequela. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 19(4), 222-32.
- Barkley, R. A., Anastopoulos, A. D., Guevremont, D. G. & Fletcher, K. F. (1991). Adolescents with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: Patterns of behavioral adjustment, academic functioning, and treatment utilization. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 30, 752-761
- Bass, C. K. (1983). The effects of running on behavioral control of learning disabled children. *Dissertation Abstracts International*. AAT 8319360.
- Belfiore, P. J., Grskovic, J. A., Murphy, A. M., & Zentall, S. S. (1996). The effects of antecedent color on reading for students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 29, 432-438.
- Conners, C. K. (1997). *Conners' Rating Scales-Revised: Technical manual*. North Tonowanda, NY: Multi-Health Systems.
- Copeland. A. P.. & Wisniewsk N. M. (1981). Learning disability and hyperactivity: Deficits in selective attention. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 32,88-101.
- Ervin, R.A., Bankert, C.L., DuPaul, G.J. (1996). Treatment of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. In M.A. Reinecke, F.M. Dattilio, A. Freeman (Eds.). *Cognitive Therapy with Children and Adolescents: A Casebook for Clinical Practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Grskovic, J. A., Hall, A. M., Montgomery, D. J., Vargas, A. U., Zentall, S. S., & Belfiore, P. J. (2004). Reducing time-out assignments for students with emotional/behavioral disorders in a self-contained classroom: Class-wide implications. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 13, 25-36.
- Kercood, S., Grskovic, J., Lee, D., & Emmert, S. (2007). The effects of fine motor movement and tactile stimulation on the problem solving of students with attention problems in visual and auditory tasks. *The Journal of Behavioral Education*, 16 (4), 303-310.

- Klein, P. (1981). Responses of hyperactive and normal children to variations in tempo of background music. *The Israel journal of psychiatry and related science*, 18, 157-166.
- Hebb, D. O. (1955). Drives and the CNS (conceptual nervous system). *Psychological Review*, 62. 243-254.
- Pelham, W., Wheeler, T., & Chronis, A. (1998). Empirically supported psychosocial treatments for ADHD. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 27, 190-205
- Radosh, A., & Gittelman, R. (1981). The effect of appealing distractors on the performance of hyperactive children. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 9, 179-189.
- Welsh, M. C., & Labbé, E. E. (1994) Children and Aerobic Exercise: A Review of Cognitive and Behavioral Effects. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 58, 405-17
- Zentall, S. S., & Ferkis, M. A. (1993). Mathematical problem-solving for youth with ADHD, with and without learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 16, 6-18.
- Zentall, S. S., Smith, Y. N., Lee, Y. B., & Wieczorek, C. (1994). Mathematical outcomes of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 27, 510-519.
- Zentall, S. S. & Zentall, T. R. (1983). Optimal Stimulation: A model of disordered activity and performance in normal and deviant children. *Psychological Bulletin*, 3, 446-471.
- Zentall, S. S. (1995). Modifying classroom tasks and environments. In S. Goldstein, *Understanding and managing children's classroom behavior* (pp. 356-374). New York: Wiley.
- Zentall, S. S. (2006). *ADHD and Education: Foundations, Characteristics, Methods. And Collaboration*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, Merrill, Prentice Hall.

Authors Notes

1 - **Stacey Emmert** is currently with West Central Indiana Special Services Corporation, Crawfordsville, IN.

2 - **Suneeta Kercood** is currently at the College of Education, Butler University, Indianapolis.

3 - **Janice Grskovic** is with the School of Education at Indiana University Northwest.

Address correspondence to Suneeta Kercood, College of Education, Butler University, 4600 Sunset Avenue, Indianapolis, IN 46208. Telephone: (317) 940- 8429. Email: skercood@butler.edu

Acknowledgements - We would like to express our sincere gratitude and thanks to the administrators, counselors, teachers, parents, and children from the Sugar Creek Elementary School – North Montgomery School Corporation, IN, who made this study possible.

[To top](#)

Table 1

<i>Mean number of problems attempted and correct and number of off-task behaviors</i>									
Condition	Problems attempted			Problems correct			Off-task behaviors		
	Erin	Matt	Bill	Erin	Matt	Bill	Erin	Matt	Bill
Baseline	18.7	30.8	30.8	9.4	17.1	17.1	17.3	7.7	7.7
Tactile	19.5	29.8	29.8	9.8	17.16	17.16	17	6.3	6.3
Auditory	13	32.5	32.5	5.4	18.2	18.2	15.7	6.6	6.6
Choice	18 A	33.6 T	33.6 T	6.3 A	17.3 T	17.3 T	17 A	3 T	3 T

Note: A = Auditory, T = Tactile

Figure 1

Number of story problems correct for Erin

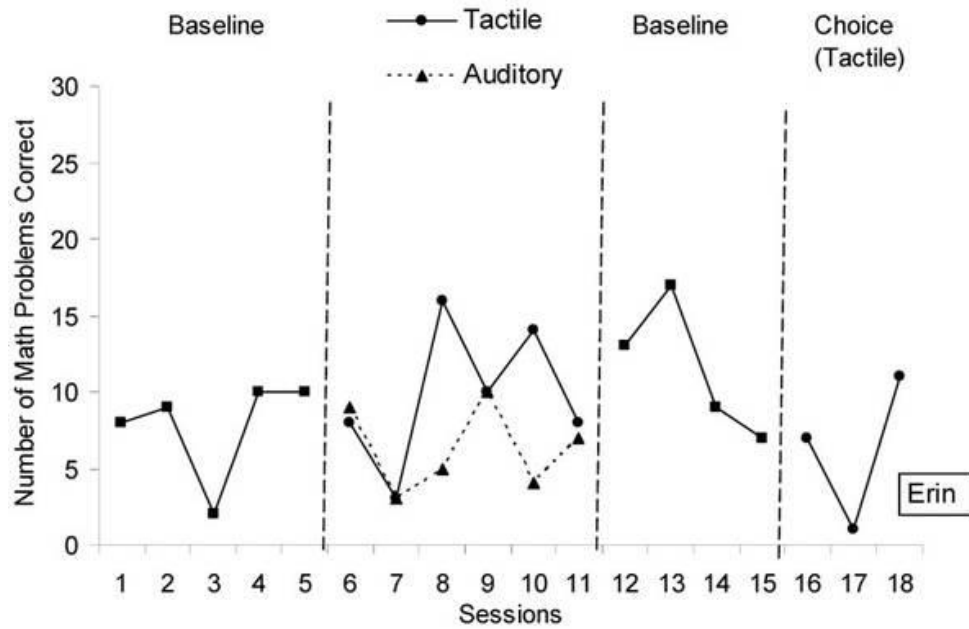


Figure 2

Number of story problems correct for Matt

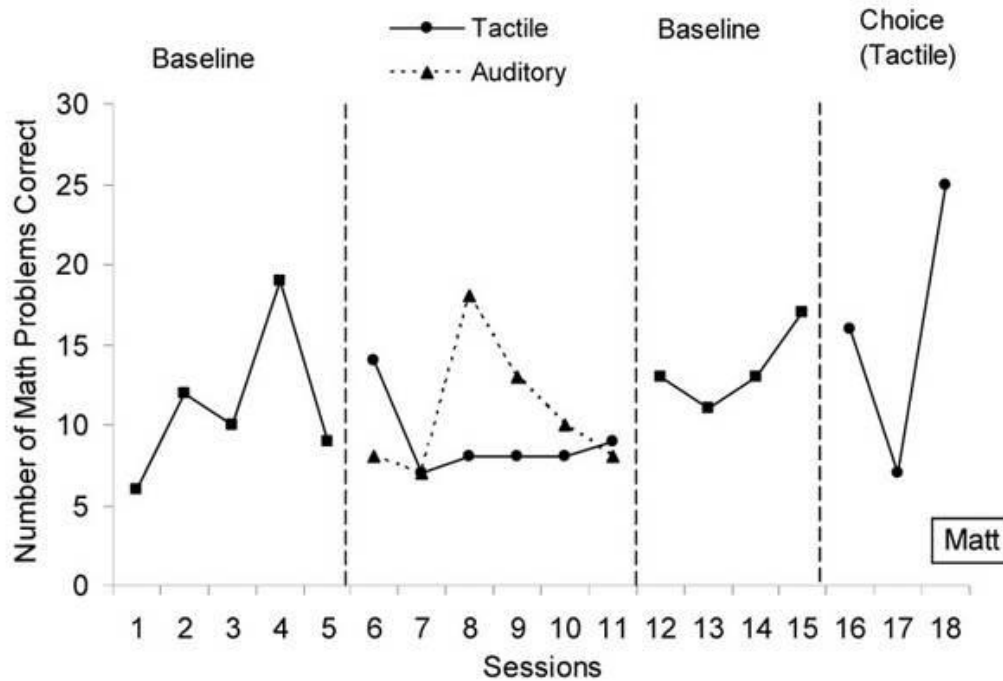


Figure 3

Number of story problems correct for Bill

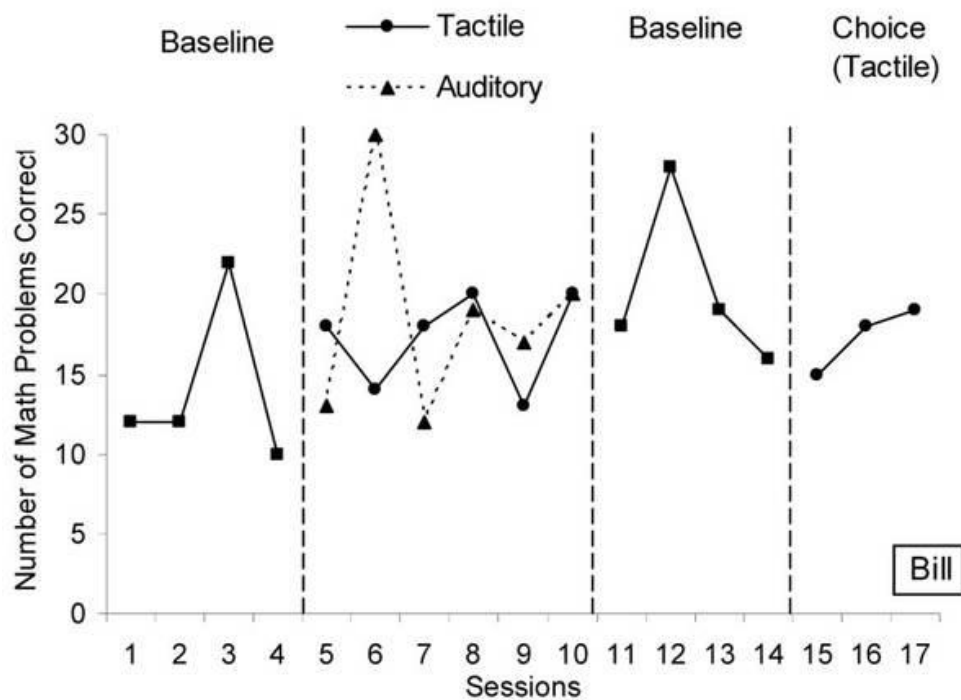


Figure 4

Number of off-task behaviors for Erin

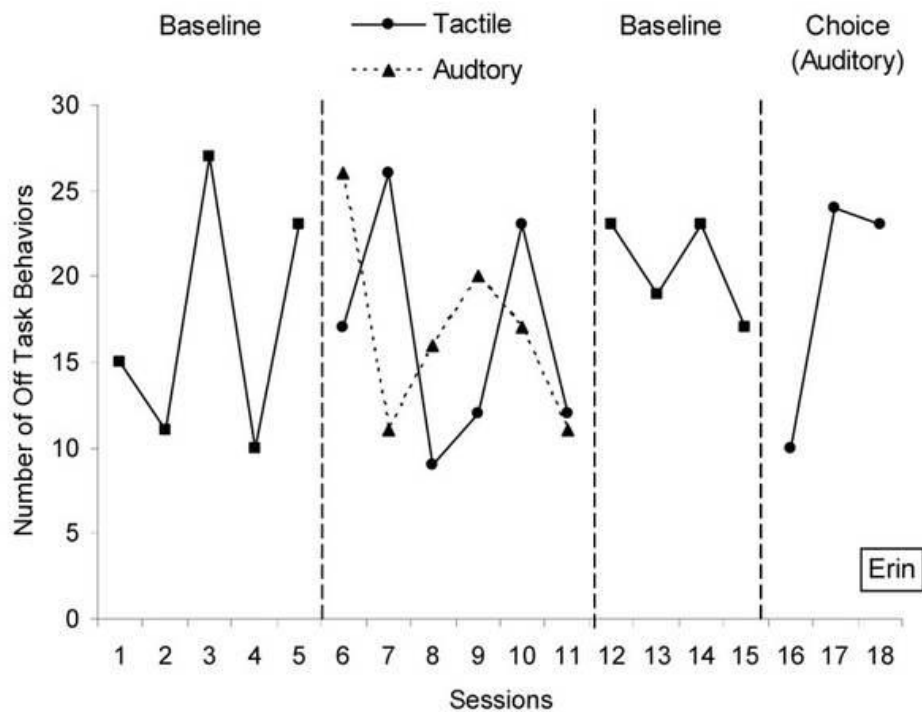


Figure 5

Number of off-task behaviors for Matt

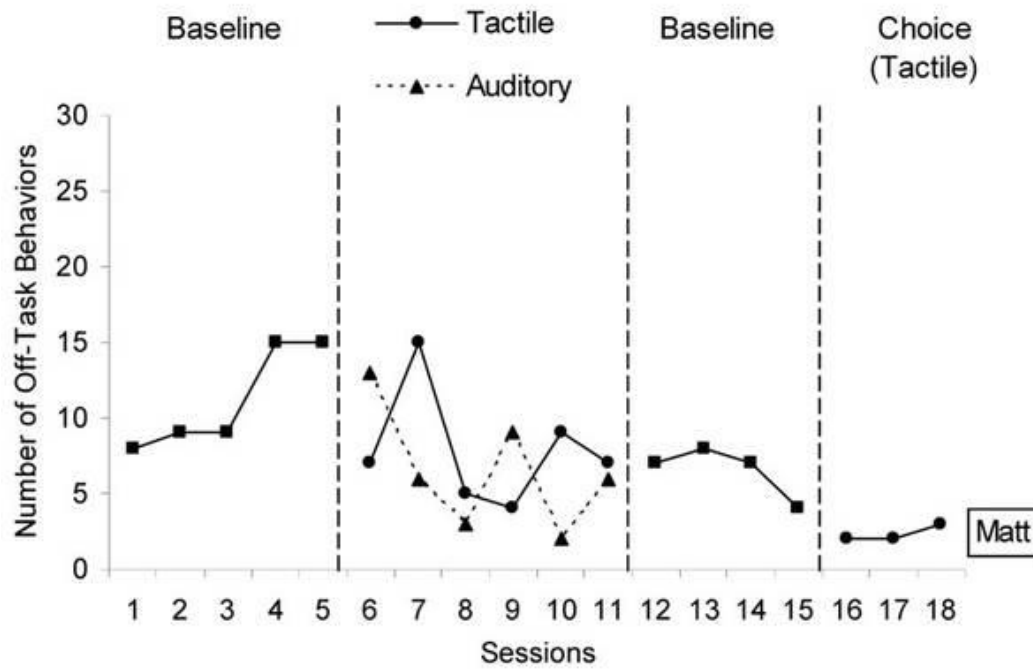
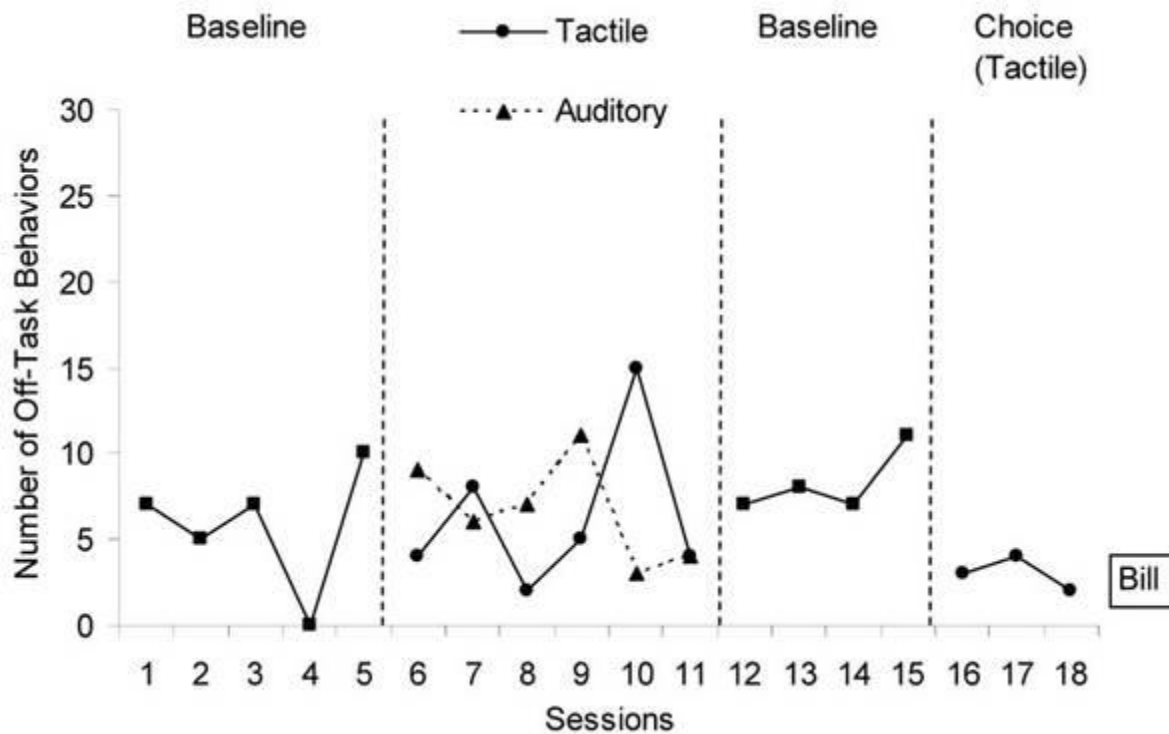


Figure 6

Number of off-task behaviors for Bill



Return to the Table of Content - [Click Here](#)

Significance of Multiple Intelligence Among Children with Special Needs

S.Saradha priyadarshini

“All students can learn and succeed, but not all on the same day in the same way” - William G. Spady

Children’s ways of learning are as different as the colors of the rainbow. Some grasp information best by reading, while others learn better through listening or discovering concepts through hands on experience. Traditionally, the concern of teachers and educators was on assessing what children learn instead of focusing how they learn which gives the child a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning. A learning style diagnosis is the key to an understanding of student learning.

Educational system today aims to design a creative and effective interdisciplinary approach to teaching, learning, and assessment taking into account the intellectual gifts of each student (Diaz-Lefebvre and Finnegan, 1997). Learning takes place best when it can be individualized, meeting the particular needs and interests of each student. It is important to know what helps students learn and then adjust teaching

strategies to enhance the method of instruction. Students can learn from a combination of modalities, hands-on activities, oral and visual instruction and a combination of these methods (Perkins, 2001).

In 1983, Howard Gardner, a noted Harvard psychologist and educator, in his book “Frames of Mind” theorized that there are multiple intelligences that dictate how children process and understand information. According to Him, all individuals possess, exhibit and perceive the world in eight different and equally important but in a varying amount and combine and use them in idiosyncratic ways. Students also will come into the classroom with different sets of developed intelligences. These sets determine how easy or difficult it is for a child to process information when it is presented in a particular manner commonly referred to as a learning style.

Gardner’s Theory has offered educators a comprehensive framework within which fundamentally different solutions can be implemented. A tenet of Multiple Intelligence Theory is that people learn, represent, and utilize knowledge in many different ways. These differences challenge an educational system which assumes that everyone can learn the same materials in the same way and that a uniform, universal measure suffices to test student learning.

Educators need to assess their students’ learning needs in ways which will provide a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses. Since all children do not learn in the same way, they cannot be assessed in the same way. Therefore, it is important that an educator creates an “intelligence profile” for each student. Knowing how each student learns will allow the teacher to properly assess the child’s progress (Lazear, 1992).

This individualized evaluation practice will allow a teacher to make more informed decisions on what to teach and how to present the required information.

Gardner’s theory also has several implications for teachers in terms of classroom instruction. It implies that educators should recognize and teach to a broader range of talents and skills present in young children. A second implication is that teachers should structure the presentation of material in a style that engages most or all of the intelligences.

The influence that MI theory has on children with special needs goes far beyond the development of new remedial strategies and interventions. Though we all learn through our five senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste but the bulk of learning is through sight and hearing. To learn well we must be able to harness these faculties, especially that of sight for maximum learning capacity and capability. The children with special needs might not have difference pattern of development and it depends on the residual senses they possess.

If MI theory is implemented on a large scale in both regular and special education, it is likely to have some positive effects. It provides more emphasis on the strengths and abilities of children with disabilities, increases students’ self-esteem and helps to promote success among a broader community of learners. MI theory makes sense of their individual differences, their tolerance and understanding. The MI theory increases the appreciation of those with special needs; leading to their full integration into the general classroom (Armstrong, 1994).

Every teacher and parent should assess their child’s multiple intelligences to address their strengths and build upon their weakness. Unless one is able to assess how the learning takes place in different domains, and by different cognitive processes, even superior curricular innovations are destined to remain unutilized. According to Gardner, “the broad spectrum of student and perhaps the society as a

whole—would be better served if disciplines could be presented in a number of ways and learning could be assessed through a variety of means”.

References

- Armstrong, T. (1994). *Multiple intelligences in the classroom*. New York: Penguin Putnam INC., New York.
- Armstrong, T. (2000). *Discovering and encouraging your child's multiple intelligences*. Penguin Putnam INC., New York.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. NY: Basic Book.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Multiple intelligences: The theory in practice*. NY: Basic Book

About the Author

S.Saradha priyadarshini has completed B.Sc (Multi - category), B.Ed (Visual impairment), M.Ed (Visual impairment), (v integrated) course in special Education at Avinashilingam university – Coimbatore. The author has stepped as a Special Educator into an Autism Center situated at Coimbatore, Tamilnadu, India for the past 10 months. As a part of her M.Ed she has conducted a small research (thesis) on multiple intelligence for children with low vision. At present she is doing her Post Graduation in Applied Psychology – correspondence course at Bharathiar University, Coimbatore. Her interest is in collecting books regarding the field, and preparing articles.

Return to the Table of Content - [Click Here](#)

Foster Youth Who Have Succeeded in Higher Education: Common Themes

Thomas Lovitt

&

John Emerson

Little was known regarding the numbers of young people with disabilities served in foster care and the barriers such youth face in education and the transition to adulthood until the recent report by the National Council on Disability (NCD; 2008). It sheds light on the poor education and employment outcomes and other indicators of well-being for youth with disabilities in foster care. The NCD estimates that youth with disabilities are between 1.5 and 3.5 times more likely to have experienced abuse or neglect than youth without disabilities. In addition, children born with disabilities more frequently become part of state child welfare systems.

There are over 500,000 foster youth in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2006). According to Yu, Day, and Williams (2002), in school, these young people are more likely than non-foster children to perform below grade level, score lower on state-wide achievement tests, repeat one or more grades, have high rates of absenteeism and

tardiness, and drop out of school. About 20,000 young adults age out of state foster care systems annually (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2006). Like many youth with disabilities, youth transitioning out of foster care tend to have very poor postsecondary education and training enrollment and completion outcomes (NCD, 2008). They are less likely to take college preparatory courses; have access to special programs, advanced placement courses, and extracurricular activities; and pursue postsecondary education. However, with 70% of youth in foster care reporting a strong desire to go to college (Martin, 2003), the barriers to college access and success facing these students need to be better understood and addressed by policymakers and practitioners alike.

All young people, including foster youth and youth with disabilities, can succeed academically given adequate support and advocacy from educators, professionals, and their caregivers. Casey Family Programs (www.casey.org), a Seattle-based national operating foundation that has served children, youth, and families in the child welfare system since 1966, interviewed eight former foster youth who recently graduated from college. With only about 3% of former foster youth earning a college degree (Pecora et al., 2005), these eight students had clearly beaten the odds. Their perspectives on going to college and obtaining a degree despite numerous barriers presents an opportunity learn how other young adults like them might be better supported. All were beneficiaries of the Casey Family Programs college scholarship program and supported by the Orphan Foundation of America (www.orphan.org). Of the eight students interviewed, five were female and three were male. Four were African American, two were Caucasian, one was Asian American, and one was Hispanic. All of them graduated from four-year universities. During the course of conversations and correspondences with them, 15 major themes concerning college success and a general outlook on life emerged:

1. *“I’ve been in more than one foster home.”* Most of the eight young adults had been placed in at least 4 or 5 situations; one had been in 20. Two of them were sent to group homes and family homes. This placement instability resulted in multiple school changes. These students entered foster care between the ages of 8 and 11 and, on average, were in the foster care system for 10 years. Two of the students had siblings who were placed with them temporarily; two students never lived with their brothers or sisters. Six students had been in their last foster situation for at least five years before going to college. Four of the eight had lived with a single mother for their last placement. Although none of the students reported that their foster situations were exemplary, they did view them as primarily positive experiences. Two young people even said that the foster system had saved their lives.

2. *“My family is important to me.”* For the most part, these youth valued what family they had. Three students held out the hope that someday they would reunite, to some degree, with their biological parents. Among the top goals of one young woman was spending more time with her biological family, with whom she had lost contact when she was a teenager. Another young woman tried to maintain contact with her immediate family, “Even when they get on my nerves.” One of the young men stated, “My family is very important to me. I didn’t feel I had the right to be 10 hours away from them [to attend a college].” One of the eight would not talk about her half-brother; however, in the past few years she has become very close to her younger sister. Another said that her brothers and sister are more important to her than anything else.

3. *“I could count on someone.”* One or two adults consistently supported these youth. For two students, the essential persons were their adoptive parents. For two others, it was an aunt: a biological aunt in one case and a foster aunt (the sister of the youth’s foster mother) in the other. One young man identified his grandparents, with whom he was placed when his foster parents were killed, as having the most influence. One young woman could always count on an older cousin: “I go to her when I have a

problem.” For yet another young woman, this “someone” was a group-home supervisor who encouraged her to attend college and supported her until she graduated. One young man said he depended on a coach.

4. *“I didn’t know how to study or manage my time.”* Although study skills and time management have been identified as keys to academic success, only two of the eight students appeared to have been provided with adequate instruction in these areas. Light (2001) found that college students’ top suggestion for entering freshmen was to obtain training in time management. In the area of study skills, one foster youth said that his teachers emphasized note-taking but nothing else. On the other hand, a second youth had an English teacher who, he said, stressed study skills and “put me in good shape for college.” A young woman stated that although a high school English teacher had offered this instruction, she didn’t pay attention. A second young woman noted that because she didn’t acquire good study skills in high school, she had great difficulty studying for college examinations. In fact, her only technique for learning was highlighting textbooks. All eight students admitted problems with managing their time in college.

5. *“I was involved in extracurricular activities.”* Most of the students participated in extracurricular activities while in high school. One student who didn’t have time in high school because of a part-time job came to see this as a deficit and actively changed her approach in college: “My objective was to get the most out of my college experience, academically and socially.” One young woman took honors classes, played tennis all four years, participated in track and field, and was a cheerleader. Her motivation for being so occupied was to escape her foster home. Higgins (1994) noted that such out-of-the-house involvement is quite common for “resilient” individuals.

6. *“Not every high school counselor was helpful.”* Six students were not satisfied with their high school counselor’s assistance. Four noted that when it came to determining which courses to take and when, the counselor merely gave them a list of the offerings and told them to handle the scheduling themselves. Only one student was encouraged to enroll in Advanced Placement classes. These students also did not get the necessary assistance for obtaining financial aid and completing the FAFSA. One young woman said, “Our guidance counselor . . . stayed in her office, and it was up to you to ask her questions.” A young man said that his school counselor “was a very negative person, not just with me, but with everybody.” One student who was pleased with her counselor said that she visited him frequently because “I really wanted to go to college and wanted to make sure that I did everything that needed to be done.” The other satisfied student said that even after high school his counselor stayed in contact with him.

7. *“I will do it!”* All these students told themselves that they would attend and graduate from college. One young woman said, “In high school, I figured that if I wanted to get myself out of the situation I was in, the best way to do it was to go to college.” Even when she felt under extreme pressure in college, she remained committed: “I never wanted to drop out; that wasn’t an option.” For another student, the motivation was financial: “I didn’t want to be poor forever.” Two young women took a year off after their junior year to work but returned and finished their programs. One young woman’s grades were quite low in a couple of classes during what would have been her senior year, but she redoubled her efforts and graduated a year later.

8. *“I have a plan.”* All eight students had charted the course of their lives to some degree. A few wanted generally to better themselves and take advantage of opportunities that arose. As one young woman said, “My life a year from now will be very busy, yet fulfilling . . . filled with anticipation of and excitement over future obstacles.” Several students planned to work toward master’s degrees or

attend law school. One of the eight hoped to own her own business; another wanted to pursue a career in music/video production. One young man's desire was to become involved with providing low-income housing. Still another youth had a detailed schematic, which she referred to as "the concrete plan for my life."

9. *"Money is important."* Although these individuals received scholarships, grants, and loans, money was a constant worry. Five of the eight incurred considerable debt in attending college, one as much as \$70,000. One student confided, "One of my biggest worries is that I will not be able to support myself financially. . . . Because I do not receive any financial support from family and I do not live at home, I am completely responsible for myself." All of the students worked various jobs while in college, and, as mentioned previously, two took a year off to earn money for school.

10. *"I just hoped I didn't get sick."* Only three of the eight youth had even minimal health insurance coverage while attending college, and most of them had no dental insurance. One young woman said that she had health insurance for the first time since she was 18 when she was a government intern: "I cannot tell you how many times I tried to get mental-health services when I was in college, because I was very depressed." Another student stated, "If anything could be changed [in the system] for children coming out of foster care, I would hope that it would be health-care coverage. We had state welfare from being in foster care, but once we were 18 . . . we were on our own."

11. *"I tried to do too much."* At one time or another, each student overextended him- or herself or came very close to it. They struggled with particular classes, held down jobs, volunteered for various organizations, juggled finances, and worried about their foster and biological families. One young woman said, "I kind of thought I was 'superwoman.' I will do this, I will do that, I will take six classes and work." A young man was working on his master's degree in business, planning to earn a doctorate, organizing a private company to work for low-income housing, and serving as a county council member. Another student volunteered at a work shelter for foster youth, a county courthouse, an HIV resource center, and the YMCA, in addition to working part-time and taking a full course load.

12. *"Counseling is essential."* These students were either involved in counseling, would have liked to have been, or should have been. As one student succinctly stated, "I was moving out of my first apartment, forced to quit my job, unable to focus on school, and sick like a dying dog. [This] left me barely able to pick up the phone and dial the student counseling services." Another student went to counseling just to sort out "stuff. . . . It's really a chance to get an objective voice on your feelings and just to validate how you feel." The director of the Guardian Scholars support program for foster youth at California State University, Fullerton, stated that most youth leaving foster care can become overwhelmed by having to care for themselves. Add to this common mental-health concerns, such as depression, and it is clear that they may need counseling (personal communication, May 10, 2004).

13. *"I used support services in college and wished there were more."* These young people took advantage of a fair number of support services their colleges offered, especially financial aid, residence and academic advising, health services, student counseling, learning centers, computer labs, and sports and recreational opportunities. Services they would have liked to use but were not available included assistance with housing during holiday or vacation breaks, ways to connect with foster youth in college, and interactions with foster youth who had graduated and could act as mentors.

14. *"I feel older than I am."* All eight had to grow up quickly, overcoming challenges that most young people never face. At age 22 or 23, several said they felt as though they were 35 or older. All the students knew they didn't have time to go to parties or waste time during college. A young woman said,

“At the beginning of my freshman year, I found a job and worked until I graduated from high school. While most of my peers and friends were out enjoying their youth, I was worrying about what to do with my life.”

15. *“I am ambivalent about depending on other people.”* One young woman confided, “I had a lot of people in my life who supported me, who were like family members, but you just cannot always depend on other people.” For example, she was skeptical of her relationship with her boyfriend, fearing he would leave her. A young man who said he is very cautious in choosing friends said, “I’ve had three or four friends that I had close relationships with, but everybody else I just considered acquaintances. Sometimes, when people don’t have the same goals you do, and if you get yourself affiliated with those people, you can get distracted. You might lose sight of your goals.”

An inevitable question concerning foster youth who have succeeded academically is “What do those individuals have in common?” The person who asks this question might want to find characteristics that he or she could instill in less successful young people, in the hopes of offering them improved opportunities to be successful. Although reasonable, this expectation may be naïve. The only trait shared by the eight young men and women we profiled was a persistent drive to succeed educationally, manifested in their graduation from college. Several reported that school was always a safe place where they could escape chaotic lives. They did, however, seem to share several similar experiences:

- First, an influential person or two—a foster parent, a cousin, an aunt or uncle, a grandparent, a supervisor, a coach—came into their lives at critical times and encouraged them to do well in school. This stable, caring, and trusted educational advocacy made an important contribution to their college success.
- Second, they reported having lived in supportive homes just prior to attending college. Several had foster parents with college experience who aimed them in that direction.
- Finally, during their adolescence, these eight foster youth began telling their stories, either informally to teachers, social workers, or other adults, or formally, as members of youth panels that addressed groups of foster children. Relating these experiences helped them begin to understand themselves. Each came to the realization that he or she could accept the past, and each found illumination concerning the future.

These young people defied the odds, achieving academic success, earning a college degree, and becoming better prepared for life after foster care.

References

- Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. (2007). Services for families. Retrieved March 26, 2008, from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/acf_services.html#aafc
- Higgins, G. O. (1994). *Resilient adults: Overcoming a cruel past*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Light, R. J. (2001). *Making the most of college: Students speak their minds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Martin, J. (2003). *Foster youth desire college, study shows, but face roadblocks to learning*. St. Louis, MO: Washington University in St. Louis. Retrieved March 26, 2008, from <http://news-info.wustl.edu/tips/page/normal/452.html>

National Council on Disability. (2008). Youth with disabilities in the foster care system: Barriers to success and proposed policy solutions. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved March 19, 2008, from http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2008/FosterCareSystem_Report.html

Pecora, P. J., Kessler, R. C., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A. C., English, D., et al. (2005). Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs. Retrieved March 31, 2008, from <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/NorthwestAlumniStudy.htm>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2002). Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System. Retrieved March 19, 2008, from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/systems/afcars/about.htm>

Yu, E., Day, P., & Williams, M. (2002). Improving educational outcomes for youth in care: A national collaboration. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America Press.

About the Authors

Thomas Lovitt is an independent education consultant and John Emerson is the Postsecondary Education Advisor for Casey Family Programs in Seattle, WA.

A Mother's Story about Raising Children with Disabilities

Sadia Warsi, Ph. D

National-Louis University

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to understand a mother's perspective about raising children with disabilities. This was a unique case study because the mother was a highly educated advocate in the special education profession and the process was very educational for the researcher. A detailed description of the methodology is provided to encourage new researchers and doctoral candidates to study the area of parental perspectives in special education using participant-observer case studies.

Interview Experience

The interview process was a real eye-opener for me. I found it overwhelming and exciting. Before the first interview I was nervous and unsure about the procedure, and about my ability to conduct an adequate interview. However, most of my anxieties disappeared during the first interview with Diane. We met on campus because it was a convenient site for the both of us. We chose an empty classroom to

sit in. Diane said that she “could talk for hours” because the topic of disabilities was very close to her heart. As the first interview began, it became apparent that Diane indeed was passionate about the topic. She was also very emotional at different times during the interview. At one point she cried, and I was so moved that I cried with her. This incident made us both feel comfortable with each other and Diane did not feel awkward opening up to me after that. I also felt very comfortable during the interview, and the interview seemed more like a conversation between two friends. We had established rapport within the first half-an-hour of the interview.

The questions I asked Diane focused on two different areas. Firstly, I wanted to gather data related to the focus of my study, and secondly, I had a personal interest in some of the issues. For example from the beginning, I was curious if having a child with disabilities affects a parent’s relationship with the other children in the family. When I asked Diane if Laura had affected her relationship with her other children, her answer surprised me, and at the same time provided me with substantial data for my study.

Case Study Participant

Before I delve into Diane’s story I would like to introduce Diane as well as I can. This case study is Diane’s story, and I hope to retell that story in Diane’s voice.

Diane as My Instructor

In the spring of 1997 I enrolled in a class called Families of Children with Handicaps. Diane was the instructor. I had decided to take the class because it is in my area of interest and also because Diane was teaching it. Since Diane and I were enrolled in a course together during a previous semester, during that time I discovered that Diane had a teenage daughter with disabilities. I did not know what the disability was because Diane did not bring it up in the setting of the classroom. Towards the end of the class I found out that Diane was going to teach a class, and I knew that I had to take it. One reason was my interest and the other reason was the way the class would be structured. Diane told me that she had planned to invite a number of parents of children with disabilities, because she wanted the students to understand the plight of these parents by interacting with them and “listening to their stories.”

So, in January 1997, I was one of the fourteen students enrolled in the class. All of the students were in the Special Education Master’s program.

Diane began the class by describing her background. Diane said that her daughter Laura was the reason she had decided to advocate for parents of children with disabilities. “It’s important to me to let teachers know that when a parent comes to a conference table, they’re coming with a lot of history behind them. That has to be considered.”

Diane’s selection of books for the course reflected her feelings about having a child with disabilities. These books dealt with the issue of parents’ plight in dealing with a society that is non-inclusive of the children with disabilities. Her choice of videos also dealt with the idea of inclusion, and how parents have to struggle to advocate for their children. A video titled “Sean’s Story” dealt with a mother’s struggle to give her child the opportunity to be in a regular public school. Shaun had Down’s Syndrome, and his mother had to fight the system to give him a chance to be with regular children. While watching the video, I glanced at Diane who was in tears. It was evident that she knew what the mother was going through.

The class assignments also challenged the students to understand the feelings of parents of children with disabilities. We were asked to locate services that the parents could use for their child. Diane tried

to instill in us a sense of responsibility for parents. She said that as professionals, it was our responsibility to help and empower parents, and become advocates for their child.

Diane as a Peer in the Ph.D. program

Diane and I initially met in a graduate seminar titled Inclusion. This course was designed to give an in-depth picture of what the Inclusion movement is all about. We were instructed to read research showing the pros and cons of the Inclusion philosophy. There were six doctoral students in class and Diane was one of them. Each of had ideas on what Inclusion meant in terms of teaching. However, Diane brought forth a unique perspective. She had been a special educator, and was a parent of a teenager with Cerebral Palsy. While most of us viewed Inclusion only in terms of the classroom, Diane viewed it as a basic human right. She was adamant about her believe that children with disabilities have to be included in all walks of life, beyond the classroom environment. She talked about her struggles with the school system because she want Laura to be in the regular environment with all the other children.

Diane was very approachable both in and out of class. Since she was ahead of me in the Ph.D. program, I was able to learn from her. She was very resourceful when it came to understanding the rights of parents of children with disabilities. I did not hesitate to ask her questions related to the doctoral program, and the issue of Special Education in general.

Description of the Methods

In the following section, I will discuss the procedures I used to conducting this case study research. I will elaborate on the research method, the data collection procedures, the methods of data analysis, the ethical considerations taken, and what methods I employed to ensure the credibility of the findings. The aim of this case study to understand an issue in as much detail as possible. I do not propose to generalize the findings in anyway. However I will address the issue of transferability.

Focus of Study

The focus of my study was to understand what it's like to be a mother who has a child with cerebral palsy. I had no preconceived ideas about this topic because I had little knowledge about cerebral palsy. The daughter was a senior in high school and I had never met her. I know the mother as a fellow student and as an instructor. The mother was teaching a class that dealt with parents of children with disabilities. We had a professional relationship and she was willing to talk about her experiences.

My reasons for working with this mother had to do with her availability and her willingness to share her story.

For the purposes of this study I am using a pseudonym for my participant and all he children, so that she will remain anonymous. She told me that I had her approval and permission to use her real name, however I feel that it is my responsibility to protect her identity.

Interview Questions

In the questions that follow, I intended to collect relevant data about the focus of my study. To understand her feelings, I had to develop open-ended questions to give her the opportunity to describe her story as she saw fit. I wanted to understand what it has been like for her to have a teenage daughter who has disabilities.

My primary objective was to make sure that the mother was comfortable with the interview process and that it was a positive experience for her. Since I did not want her to feel judged by me, I had informed her that I was interviewing her for the purpose of the case study and not for any other reasons.

The interview questions were general in the beginning, but became more focused towards as the conversation progressed.

1. Diane tell me something about all your children.

I wanted Diane to feel relaxed. This question gave her the opportunity to open up and give me some understanding about her family.

2. Diane what is your relationship with your children.

I did not want to start talking about disabilities right away. I wanted her to focus on all her children and in the process talk about her daughter with CP (cerebral palsy). This helped me understand the uniqueness of her relationship with each of her children.

3. Diane tell me something about Laura (daughter with CP)?

This was a direct question. However I did not think that it was out of place since it was a follow up from the previous questions. It is also very open-ended and it let Diane tell me what she chose to. She decided what she wanted to share with me since I was a stranger.

4. Diane I want you to focus on different stages of Laura's life. Describe what impact these different stages had on you?

This question gave Diane an opportunity to open up and describe her situation in detail.

5. What has your role been at each stage of Laura's life?

This was a sensitive question, but it was non-judgmental since all parents play a role in the lives of their children with or without disabilities. Since it was open-ended, Diane was able to elaborate. This question also opened the doors to further questions because it was a broad question.

6. What are your dreams for Laura?

I wanted Diane to share with me what she wanted for Laura. I also got a glimpse of her feeling about what has been like to have a child with disabilities. This question also showed me that her dreams for Laura are the same dreams that Laura has for herself.

7. Diane what advice can you give to parents who are in the same situation as yourself?

This question is designed to let Diane reflect and focus on the needs of others and at the same time share her feelings about her situation.

8. Describe what the prom means to you.

During the first interview Diane mentioned that Laura wanted to attend the prom, and how important that is for her. I wanted to understand the significance of the prom from Diane's perspective, and how it has impacted her.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations were taken in conducting this case study. I obtained informed consent from Diane before starting the process of collecting data. I approached her with an exact explanation of what I wanted to know and what I was planning to do with the data. I did not want her to feel intimidated about the project. I wanted to help Diane feel like my partner in this study, and therefore I had to show her that I had no set agendas.

I met Diane in the education building for the interviews, and she gave me her official consent to use her first name during class discussions and in writing up the case study. There was some information that she did not want me to share with the class and I strictly followed this. I also told Diane that if she wanted a copy of the case study, I would be more than willing to provide one.

I informed Diane that although I was tape recording the interview, at the end of the data collection process, I would not share the tapes with anyone. I feel that the tapes contain a lot of private information that has to be guarded. I did not use certain sections of the tape because they were not useful for my purposes, and Diane was reluctant to share some of the information about her personal life. I did not make any extra copies of the tapes. I also assured her that I would not share the tapes with the instructor.

Methods of Data Collection

Interviews

Interviews were the primary method of data collection. Four open-ended interviews were conducted to gather the pertinent data. The first interview was used to establish rapport and to answer some basic questions related to Diane's family structure and her relationship with her children. This interview took place in one of the empty offices in the education building.

During the follow up interviews, which were conducted in the education building and the biological sciences building, specific ideas were explored in depth and clarified. These interviews were conversational in style to promote partnership between Diane and myself. The time duration for these interviews was an hour to an hour and a half each.

I audio-taped all the interviews and transcribed them. I took down some notes during each of the interviews, but most of the time, I simply listened to Diane describe her story. Although my questions were open-ended, I asked the same question in different contexts to ensure that the answers I was obtaining were consistent. In doing so, my objective was not to interrogate Diane, but rather check to see if she understood the questions the way I thought she would.

Class Observations

Since I was a student in Diane's class, I was able to take in-depth note in class. I used these notes to gain additional information about my topic, and to develop further questions. The class observations also provided with an opportunity to gather information that gave me further insight about my topic.

During the lecture Diane would talk about certain issues that she had not mentioned during the interview. For example, she mentioned how important inclusion is to parents of children with disabilities. I made a note of her remarks and later approached her for clarification. She desperately wanted her daughter to be included in all the mainstream activities. Diane invited several guest speakers who were parents of children with disabilities. They also mentioned the need for inclusion. Diane used their stories to describe what she had gone through. During follow-up discussions Diane gave the class insights into her feeling about her daughter, and why inclusion was a basic human right of every child with a disability. She compared her own experiences with those of her guest speakers, and thus I was able to relate better to her ideas and feelings.

Articles

Diane also mentioned articles that described her experiences with her daughter Laura. Diane mentioned that the grieving process that parents of children with disability go through is similar to that of those of parents who are mourning the death of a child. It is the death of a normal child. I examined these articles that made this comparison. I sought these documents to corroborate data that I had collected from the interviews. Since I had also completed a literature review before the study, I had a framework to evaluate her responses with.

Analysis of Data

I employed the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis in analyzing my data. After I transcribed the interviews, I printed out my transcriptions. In the margins of the transcripts, I made single-word notations for the themes that emerged from the transcripts. After I had completed this process I was able to see the emergence of certain key themes.

I saved the original print out of the transcripts. On the computer, I began reading the transcript to find the units. As soon as a unit was identified, I hit the enter key so that each unit would be separate. After all the units were identified, I saved the document and printed it out. Since I had clearly identified units, I simply had to cut them out. I listed the page number of the transcript behind each unit.

As I began grouping units into themes, I started typing the themes on the computer. When all the themes were typed up, I started cutting and pasting the units into the category. I was able to pull up the exact unit from the transcript because I had the page number listed on the back. When all the units fit into the themes, I began reading the new document. If I sensed that some units did not fit adequately into the existing themes, I moved them around. At the end of this process I was able to work on the organization of the case study.

The themes that evolved centered around not only what Diane's relationship is with Laura, and how Laura's disability has affected her, but also around what her relationship is with all her children.

While writing up the case study, I used the themes as the titles for introducing different aspects of Diane's life.

Ensuring Credibility of the Finding

Trustworthiness

Several criteria exist in qualitative research that ensure the credibility of the finding. In qualitative research, standards of trustworthiness have to be adhered to. For this case study I have taken the following measures to ensure that my findings be given serious consideration.

Peer debriefing

Peer debriefing is a term that means inviting others to review and discuss the research as the researcher proceeds along. This method ensures trustworthiness. It helps to build credibility by allowing an informed peer to analyze the questions asked, listen to the researcher's ideas and concerns, and to raise concerns that might arise from the research. I met with three fellow students from class to review the questions that I proposed to ask. We had in-depth conversations in person and over the phone. We discussed my interpretations of the themes that were emerging from the transcripts of the interviews. I met with one student three times outside of our class. With the other two participants I met during class. As a result of collaboration I clarified some of my questions and eliminated some questions that appeared to be leading.

Member checks

In order to present an insider's view, it becomes crucial that the participant agree with the interpretations of the researcher. The interpretations presented need to be verified by the participant. I made a point to retell the different sections of the story before conducting the follow up interviews. I also gave Diane the completed account of our interviews, so that she could make changes where needed. She verified or negated interpretations and conclusions. I made an effort to use as many quotations as possible while telling Diane's story, so that her voice could be heard clearly. After Diane completed her analysis of what I had written, I made the changes that she suggested by rephrasing or rewording certain sections of the case study, and confirmed the changes with her. I emailed the entire case study and Diane had a chance to read it. She told me that I had fairly and accurately represented what it is like to be a parent of a child with disabilities.

Time

There was a prolonged engagement with the respondent. This helped me develop an emic perspective. I was able to establish rapport with Diane because of the time I spent with her during the course of a semester.

Triangulation of Data

Triangulation is a method of increasing the trustworthiness and the credibility of the study. I triangulated my data using interviews, documents, observations, and audio-taping Diane's son during class. He was a guest speaker and he talked about what it has been like for him to be a sibling of a child with disabilities. He made several references to what his mother had to go through because she had a child with a disability. I clarified this information with Diane.

Transferability

Transferability of a qualitative study is dependent on the thick description that the researcher provides. For example, the researcher should try to describe the chosen topic of research in as much detail as possible. The aim is to demonstrate the applicability of the findings from one setting to the next similar setting. The researcher, however, does not state the applicability. Instead through rich, thick description, the reader should be able to see the applicability.

I have attempted to describe my participant and the topic of my case study in detail. Through this, I hope to convey to my readers a sense of what parents of children with disabilities feel. I have covered several aspects of Diane's life that show how she feels, being a mother of a child with disabilities. Her story can be the story of any parent in her situation.

Dependability

Since there is a chance of researcher bias in research, it is important for the researcher to be object during each stage of the research. From the beginning I used outside sources to confirm the truth of what I was learning. I made an effort to stay focused on my topic, by asking questions that were relevant. I also used articles to confirm what I was hearing from Diane. I was an objective listener during the interview, and after the interview, I clarified with Diane what I had understood.

Confirmability

Confirmability deals with the question, "Do the data help confirm the general findings, and lead to the implications?" (Marshall & Rossman, p. 145). I kept all the audio tapes of the interviews, and all the transcripts. The notes that I took during the interview were separate from the actual transcripts. The summaries of all the transcripts were shared with the respondent for confirmation. I also used peer-debriefing as a means of critically evaluating my research questions, and data-analysis. I checked the data (transcripts) several times against my own notes, to make sure that I was not misrepresenting my respondent.

Limitations of Study

There are some limitations to this study. Since Diane was my instructor, and the fact that she was also in the doctoral program made me feel intimidated at times. I was wondering whether I was doing an adequate job of interviewing, and if my questions were as insightful as Diane said they were. I tried to remedy the situation by preparing more carefully for the interview. I made sure that I listened to the tapes of the interviews several times before asking questions. Also, I made a serious effort to ask Diane to let me know if I was doing a poor job.

Although Diane's story can be any parent's study, it is not the story of a minority parent. It is also not a story of a parent from a low socio-economic background. These are some of the limitations. However since having a child with disabilities is a unique challenge for any parent, in some ways this issue transcends the cultural and economic boundaries.

Diane and Her Four "Great" Children

Diane's most defining role is that of a mother. She has a unique bond with each of the children. She told me about each of them with great enthusiasm. The birth of each child was exciting and unique, and brought forth with it new challenges. Diane also discussed her relationship with each of them and what impact they have had on her.

Tom: The Athlete

When I asked Diane to tell me something about her children, she seemed excited and eager to talk. She began her discussion about them by saying that "They are great!" She chose to talk about them in their

birth order, but elaborated on Laura after she had discussed all of them. The discussion began with Tom, her eldest. It was evident during the conversation that she admires Tom immensely. She is extremely proud of his achievements.

Tom is my eldest, and he is twenty. And when he was born he did everything according to the book, and you never worried about any of the milestones. As a matter of fact I thought he was a genius. And I remember going to his three-year conference, and the teacher told me that she always gauged everything by Tom because she thought of him as being sort of normal. And I was just appalled, because I just thought that he was incredible. Anyway. He really taught me a lot about parenting. I had been a teacher for years and years and from him I learned how exciting it was just to watch those different stages and respond to him, and all that stuff.

When I asked Diane to discuss her feelings for Tom, she smiled and said:

Since he is my first born, for some reason there is a hook. And because it is a mom-son thing. They all pull my heart strings, but he can really jerk them! But he was a great kid to raise. He was very athletic, very popular, and so we experienced a lot with his high school, because a lot of our social life was around the things he had done. He is pretty much a star in terms of what he was able to do athletically.

In terms of the current relationship, Diane expressed some concern.

With Tom, hopefully my relationship will be improving. In his last couple of years in high school, he rebelled a lot. And got pretty angry at me. And really rebelled against our life style, parenting and all that kind of stuff. And since he has gone away to college, he turned to the family for support. He struggled a lot in college. Right now that relationship is tentative. Part of what is happening is moving from parent-to-child to more adult-to-adult. And trying to help, and guide, and give the benefit of your experience. But yet not be over parenting.

He is at UCLA, and, although “he got away as far as he could go,” Diane felt that it was very healthy for him.

Oliver: The Entertainer of the Family

Since Laura was born with a disability, Diane decided to wait before having the next baby. They waited quite a while. It was six years after Laura before they had their next child. According to Diane, Oliver was just an “absolute treat.” She said that he was her hardest baby to deliver, and he also had a disability, but it is not as profound as Laura’s. At his birth they were aware that something was wrong, but they did not know what it was. According to Diane, when he was born, his soft spot was big at the top of his head. With a huge smile on her face, Diane recalled what Oliver looked like at birth.

He had this heart-shaped head, and curly red hair. And so he just came out looking like this little imp! And he has sort of maintained those characteristics all along. He is the joker of the family. He is into theater, and that sort of all about what he is.

Diane described her relationship with Oliver as the best relationship. She referred to him as an “open” child who says the most “outrageous things.” For example, Oliver approached Diane to find out what the rules were about having his girl friend in the basement. When Diane asked him what he thought the rules were, he said, “Why don’t you yell downstairs ‘are you having sex?’” Both of us began to laugh and she said that she told him that she was going to be with him in the basement with his girl friend.

He is the one who asks Diane how her day is and how she is feeling. He is twelve years old yet he cuddles up in her lap.

Mary: The Youngest

The fourth baby was born five years after Oliver. Diane did not talk about Mary in great detail. She mentioned with a smile that Mary is “exhausting,” and that she enjoys reading Dr. Seuss.

And that was just wonderful. Mary must have known that she had to come out with a very strong character and she did. From the minute she was born, she has let her presence be known. She screams, she yells, she demands, with hands on her hips and that’s the way she is. But she is delightful.

In terms of her relationship with Mary, Diane felt guilty.

I probably feel the guiltiest about Mary. I am not in synch with the parents of kids that are Mary’s age. I am also at a stage that I am looking at a second career, and I’ve been gone, and so the play group and the swim lessons, and the long bike rides are just not there as much as they were there for the other kids. And so a lot of my relationship with Mary is guilt. It might not be as natural as it was with some of the other kids. There isn’t that sort of a normal routine of hanging around and cooking dinner. But the kids are real close. So you see that when you have families the size of our families. And so she gets the benefit of other experiences that I am not able to give her.

Laura: Committed to Succeed

Laura was born almost two years after Tom and Diane described her birth experience in more detail after she had completed talking about the other siblings. Diane took a deep breath and began her story. She stated that “from her birth on, it was just a very different experience.” Diane was absolutely overwhelmed at having two children, both in diapers. But she was thrilled to have a boy and a girl. When she and her husband were in the recovery room, they cried because it was just so incredible to see a baby that had just been born. She described what had occurred at birth and what life was like after she and the baby came home. Diane described Laura’s birth as “very quick.” “In fact, we barely made to it the hospital. And there was something very scary about that, and I did not know what that was about.” But for a while at least, everything seemed fine. Her APGAR score was between 7 and 8. Diane recalled that there were some reason for concern but “everybody said it was fine.”

With a lot of love and jubilation, the new parents brought their baby girl home. However, at about three or four months, they realized that her development was very different from that of the other children. Her muscular development was very tight on one side, and quite loose on the other side. “But the thing we keyed into the most was that her left hand was fisted all the time, and contracted to her chest. And she had very low affect.” So they went to the doctor and raised these questions.

Finally, at about seven months, Diane went into a panic. The parents decided that they would take things into their own hands, and consult with a neurologist and an orthopedic doctor to see what was going on. Diane made an appointment with the pediatrician to discuss her concerns. When she went in to see him, he gave her a file on Laura. What he had been doing was consulting with a neurologist and an orthopedic through letters. They had diagnosed that Laura had Cerebral Palsy. “And that’s how I found out about her diagnosis. I was alone because we did not know that anything was going to come up in this meeting. I went to a friend of mine, and we both cried.”

This was the beginning of lots of hard work and perseverance for Diane and her husband Dave. As soon as they got that diagnosis they were immediately introduced to the medical system. Laura was hospitalized for about a week. She went through extensive neurological testing, which confirmed the label of Cerebral Palsy. The doctors explained to Diane that Laura had had a stroke during the pregnancy, and that they had never been able to detect it. Nor could they ever give a reason for why it happened. Diane remembered a doctor who was trying to help her, explain that the stroke could have been caused by a sneeze, or a hiccup, or even when Diane had walked up the stairs.

It could have been anything. But the “anything” he said was the stuff I had done. And that was very difficult, because I held the responsibility. There was a lot of guilt thinking about the glass of wine I had had, that I probably shouldn’t have. And the time I went water skiing when I was pregnant. You go back through everything you might have done.

While the parents were grappling with the medical diagnosis, they were also plunged into the educational system. They were told to get Occupational Therapy services, Physical Therapy services, Speech and Language services, and Social Work help. Diane remembered feeling “clueless.” She had never known anybody with a disability, and she had no idea what it meant to have Cerebral Palsy. She remembers vividly the reactions of members of the community. People from her church called her up and told her how sorry they were, and that the disability would impact Laura’s life expectancy. “The way people responded to me was difficult.”

We started into a 0-3 (zero-to-three) program, and it was every single day. I had to drag Tom to Laura’s therapy all the time. And from those therapies you were supposed to do certain things at night. The doctor told us he did not know if she would ever walk or talk. The prognosis that we were given was just horrible. There was this constant struggle to enjoy the baby but then feeling you were not doing enough, and you had to do more. On one hand you would see the kid as a kid. And on the other hand it was medical. It was very confusing.

One of Diane’s strongest memories revolves around a social situation at a park where a woman exercised her freedom of speech!

I remember taking Laura to a park. A mom and a kid came up to me and asked, “what’s wrong with your child?” I said she had Cerebral Palsy. And I really needed to say those things, because I needed to let people know that there was a reason. And I needed that for a long time. But when she heard those words she picked up her child and left the park. So there were things that kept telling me from professionals and community people that having a disability was not acceptable. That it was bad and it was a burden. It was hard, because she was my baby and I wanted to enjoy her. But there were these other messages.

The messages that Diane received from her family ranged from pity to no concern at all. Diane’s mother responded with incredible sympathy. She would get angry at Diane because Diane would push Laura. Laura had a high chair that was crafted for the purposes of therapy. She was supposed to hold on to it for therapy. Sometimes she would cry and the parents would push her to hold on to it some more and for a longer time.

I remember my mom getting real angry at me for pushing her. It was really the poor and pitiful, and “lets take care of her” attitude. And my thing was to get the most of it and it was hard to keep pushing Laura.

Diane's husband's family, on the other hand, reacted as if nothing was wrong, and that Laura was just fine and "we were making this all up, what's our problem. So we had these two responses that were totally different."

Moving on to her current relationship with Laura, Diane expresses some concerns. She worries a great deal about her relationship with Laura for many reasons. She feels that often-times she has had to play the role of teacher.

I don't think that Laura and I have had a chance to just be playful in our relationship. And she is big in teenage stuff right now, and so there is that push pull. You know people say that, before you go away, you dirty the nest. She is rebelling, and there is some of that push pull kind of stuff. One minute she is that little girl, and one minute she is really screaming that I am bugging her and that she is not a baby. So I say that in this relationship I have had to be much more guarded with. Much more distant and even more objective. I think that much of the guardedness is because if I would allow myself sometimes to get so much into it, it would overwhelm me.

There were tears in Diane's eyes, although she tried to laugh it off by reminding me that she had told me that she would cry.

Laura is aware of her mother's sensitivity and she has told Diane that she does not like to tell her things sometime because "you have too much sentiment Mom." Diane admits that she reveals her emotions. Diane realizes that it is hard for Laura sometimes because she feels responsible for "keeping me happy."

It's hard, because she is cautious with me. Sometimes I think that to protect myself in all this is to protect her from feeling like she has to take care of me. I am more guarded in that situation.

The Impact the Disability Has Had on Diane

Attending to the needs of Laura's siblings

I was very anxious to find out if having a child with a disability had impacted Diane's own life in any way. Diane confirmed that it had affected the ways in which she responds to her other children, and the way she feels.

From my perspective, I feel that there have been times when we have had to give more attention to Laura, especially when she was little, and there were so many things we had to do in terms of therapists and doctors. But even as she is growing up, the expectations are clearly different for everyone in the house. There have been times when the kids have complained that Laura doesn't have to do that much.

I was curious to find out how the siblings felt about their mother's treatment of Laura, and whether it had had an impact on them. Diane had only eluded to the feelings of her other children towards her treatment of Laura, and I wanted triangulate her story with that of her other children. Diane had scheduled her eldest son Tom to come and talk to the class about what it has been like to be a sibling of a sister with Cerebral Palsy. I recorded the lecture, and found him to be an amazing person. While talking about his feelings about his sister, he also talked about Diane's treatment of him.

Tom began his discussion by introducing himself and his family, and proceeded to talk about Diane:

I don't exactly remember when I realized that my sister had a disability. I don't remember when I came to the realization that there were things that I can do that she couldn't, or that she was different from me. I don't know that I ever came to that realization entirely.

He proceed to talk about the way he was treated by his family. He said that as a young child he was annoyed when he would have to do more physical work around the house than his sister. He mentioned that his father was “really into chores,” and that Tom would have to mow that lawn in the heat, while Laura had to empty the dishwasher. “It made him really mad.” He said that when he realized that Laura had a difficult time doing physically demanding tasks, he stopped complaining. He also pointed out that he realized how hard his sister worked in school while he “hardly finished his homework.” She would spend four or five hours a day trying to finish her homework, and she would get very angry that he was watching television. “So things balanced out.”

When I asked him if he felt that he was treated unfairly, he said “Not really. Because Laura had to do some things that I didn't have to.” However he voiced one concern: “I wish my parents had told me why Laura did not do certain things. I wish I had known that she had Cerebral Palsy when I was younger.”

Diane had mentioned several time during class that her children had a very solid relationship, and Tom confirmed this by telling the class that he really loves his sister. He also read a letter Laura had written for a project.

My brother influenced me by telling me that I could do a sport even if I had Cerebral Palsy. My brother's name is Tom. He is seventeen years old. Whenever I would try to play a sport, and do it with my left hand, he would encourage me, and not be a kid who would put me down. I liked that, because it would give me a lot of courage. He has changed my life over the years, because he is kind and a wonderful brother, and I won't change him for anyone else. At times he can be mean, but he tries not to hurt me. He tries to make me see if I am doing something right or wrong. He's a cool guy, once you get to know him.

Diane mentioned that she had tried to instill in all her children a sense of responsibility for each other, and after meeting Tom, I think she has been very successful. Diane is also very cautious of the needs of her other children.

I think sometimes I flip the other way. You know Laura could really hang out with Oliver's friends who are in 7th and 8th grade, and I won't let that happen, because I don't want Oliver to feel that he has to take time to entertain, or always be with his sister. So sometimes I think I go the other way. It is a hard balance.

She as a mother wants her children to be responsible for each other on one hand, but on the other hand tries to respect their needs, for privacy and independence.

Diane felt that Laura has had an impact on her siblings because: they felt a need to explain for whatever reason Laura's behavior. They have seen Laura through a fit. By that I mean get out of control and not being able to talk through it and stuff. I know Tom had to and Oliver probably had to defend her in front of his friends.

Diane has also set a high standard for all her children because of how hard Laura has worked. Laura's level of determination is used as an example for the other siblings.

I think that since Laura has such determination, that sometimes my frustration level is higher with Oliver and Tom, who are so capable and when you see them not working to their full potential, in contrast to Laura, who gives it her 150% all the time.

Although Diane admitted to treating all her children differently, she is not apologetic about why she has chosen to do what she does.

Everybody is who they are, and their needs are different at different times. So one kid will get more one time, and another kid will get more another time. It's that way with Christmas presents, it's that way with attention, and it's that way with our time.

When I asked Diane if her treatment of her children would have been any different if Laura did not have a disability, she said:

Maybe. But Laura taught me because of who Laura is. I am more sensitive to it. I want each of my kids to recognize their gifts and use those gifts wisely. Laura has served as a model for me, and as a model for the kids. The impact of having her there has made it more meaningful to them, and to all of us.

The Grieving Process

Several times during the course of the semester, Diane referred to the grieving process. During class she showed the students videos that described the grieving process.

Although Diane made comparisons between herself and other parents who experience this process, she did not describe why she was grieving. I asked her to describe to me what the grieving process has been for her. Diane described it as:

It has been on-going, and there have been different periods where I have been really aware that this is about grief, about acceptance, although I don't like the word acceptance. I don't feel that there is non-acceptance. It's a deeper understanding of what it is like to have a child with a disability.

Her strongest memory of when it really “hit” revolves around a time when she had an exchange student. Diane and her family have exchange students who come yearly, and the family fosters them. They are usually graduate students, but one year they had an eighteen year old girl from Paris. She was “absolutely lovely.” She was there to understand how an American family worked. She would “hang out” with Diane in the kitchen and she would stay up and talk. She wanted to understand what parents’ expectations were in terms of boys and girls and she would talk about her mom and dad. She was also home sick. She spent a lot of time with Diane. “There was something that hit me in that relationship that I think I got very sad realizing that I probably wouldn’t have that kind of a relationship with Laura.” However, Diane, upon reflection concluded:

Now that I have raised two teenagers, I think I never would have had that kind of relationship (laughs), just because she is my daughter. But at that time it really hit me because Laura was about eleven years old, and Tom was twelve. And it hit me that that was what I had lost. I had lost the daughter that would be real connected and would be cognizant enough to ask me all those “what if” kinds of questions, futuristic kinds of questions.

When Laura was younger Diane remembers going past playgrounds and it would “grab” her that “she (Laura) was not part of the group.” “You know that this is not the kind of life she has. She does not have a group of kids that she hangs out with.”

Diane was also grieving the loss of a close friendship that she had with her sister growing up.

The loss was that I grew up with one sister, and the loss was replacing that sister relationship, and that closeness, and looking to Laura as doing that. I think I am more realistic now that I think that some of these things might have happened anyway. But it is exaggerated for me because she does have a disability.

Grieving has been “sort of cyclical.” For Diane it has been more profound at the transitional times like junior high and high school. Also knowing that Laura’s career is not like that of Diane’s or “even close to it, or like that of her brother,” has caused Diane to grieve.

Diane’s Role in Laura’s Life: An Advocate

In Diane's own words, she described what her main role has been in Laura's life:

I think that probably the biggest role that I’ve had to play has been that of an advocate for making sure that things were on track. We have done it through a couple of ways. We’ve done it through the school and we’ve had outside resources to help us help Laura stay in the mainstream as much as possible.

She also stated she would not be getting her doctorate in Special Education if it were not for Laura.

There is that personal side of it too that changes you. When I saw her schooling in a segregated environment, I knew that would not do, and so I got my Master’s in Special Education.

Early school years

I asked Diane to describe what it was like for her when Laura began school. After the struggles with the early childhood programs it was time to deal with the public school system. Laura was placed in a Special Education school although she lived in a neighborhood where the school was practically in her backyard. All she would have had to do was walk through her backyard with Diane and arrive at school. However, she could not go to that school. She was bussed for forty-five minutes to the Special Education school, and she was bused with the same kids that were in her class. She was one of two girls, and one of two whites. The other girl was a minority student. Laura went there for three years and had the same teachers for three years. The parents watched their daughter's school experience patiently. She had no social life. The family of the other little girl wanted nothing to do with Laura, and therefore there was no social life after school either. Diane kept looking at Laura's educational experience and comparing it to Tom’s, and it drove Diane "absolutely crazy.”

This awful experience resulted in Diane fighting for her daughter and becoming an advocate for her. She made a commitment to get Laura out of the Special Education, and Diane decided to go back to

school and get her Master's in Special Education. She had always believed that one had to change the system from within.

Changing the system was going to be an uphill battle. Her first encounter with the system set the stage for what Diane had to face later. Since Laura was in the Special Education system, the parents had to call a meeting to discuss their plans for a different placement. The first IEP (Individual Educational Plan) meeting was a nightmare for the parents who were so proud of themselves. They felt that they had experienced what they thought was a horrible school experience. They thought that they had "really done their homework." Without any help from the school system, they went and looked in the district and found the perfect school. They were very excited, because they thought this was the perfect school for Laura.

Their happiness did not stand a chance at the meeting. At the meeting, they requested that Laura be transferred to this school. The reaction of those around them was that of outrage.

It was just horrible. We had the principal tell us that what we were doing was immoral, because what it meant was we would have to change her label from LD (Learning Disabled) to DD (Developmentally Disabled). But we were not going for the label, but for the environment. Even though she was going to be labeled DD she was going to be in a least restrictive environment. We wanted a better educational experience. We were told we were immoral. That we were unethical, and that it was illegal. People were standing up in this meeting and yelling at us.

As terrifying as that experience was, it did not stop Diane from fighting back. Diane and her husband had to threaten a lawsuit to get Laura into that school. Diane was convinced that Laura received the placement in the Special Education school because the school needed a white child, and the fact that she was girl was an added advantage. Recent research confirms Diane's speculations. There is an over representation of minority students in Special Education for several reasons including mislabeling, and sometimes the system is criticized for that.

By the time they were able to get her into the regular school, she was in fourth grade. Diane recalls

How absurd the entire situation was and when you look back on things like that you feel really stupid. We should have known better, but you have professionals telling you that this is the way things should be.

She did conclude that since it was the early 1980's, the idea of inclusion was unheard of, and they were going against the grain.

The Middle School Years

From grades six through eight, Diane felt that she could take a break. The advocacy piece was still present, but the school's philosophy coincided with Diane's philosophy of education. Laura was thoroughly involved in the process of attending IEP meetings and advocating for herself. She gave a presentation in her social studies class, on what it means to have Cerebral Palsy, which was so well presented that the teacher called Diane to congratulate her. Laura was understanding what her rights were and she was taking the initiative in demanding what was rightfully hers. During a school assembly the principal honored all the students who had received A's and B's on their report cards. However he failed to call Laura's name and this prompted Laura to approach him. He told her that since she was a Special Education student, the criterion was different. However in the process of telling her that her A's

and B's were not the same as those of students in a regular setting, he realized how absurd his explanation was. And so Laura and the principal changed the school policy. As a Special Education teacher in Chicago Public Schools, I could relate to this experience. On my first day at my job, I was told the I could not give my students A's or B's, or F's. When I questioned my supervisor, she told me that my students were not performing at the same level as their peers, and therefore all they could get was a C or a D. I was not allowed to give out F's because I cannot retain Special Education students. Diane described these middle school years as a "time where I could sit back and watch."

The High School Years

Although the educational setting was under control for Laura, the social arena presented problems in high school. Diane found it difficult to see that Laura did not have a social life. Because of the lack of social opportunities available to Laura, another role that Diane had to play was that of a social network coordinator. The parents have created a social network around Laura, and a lot of it has been with the church. Diane and her family are extensively involved with their church, and, through this involvement Laura has been able to get in touch with young adults. Many of the connections she has made are with the young adults in the church or youth group leaders who are in their early twenties. Also, Diane has always presented a picture of success to of Laura by giving her the opportunity to meet successful individuals who have disabilities.

To facilitate the process of socialization further, birthday parties have been family parties. For example, Laura's sixteenth birthday party was a huge bash. Her parents and other family members made an elaborate album for Laura and everybody gave Laura advice. The family transformed the birthday into a ceremonial occasion.

Diane credits Tom for playing the biggest role in Laura's life. When he was in high school and as popular as he was, he brought "tons of friends around and since he was older he was sort of able to see what was going on." He included her in everything. But since he has been gone for three years, that network of friends has disappeared. Laura tried to pull some of Oliver's friends and that has been hard for Oliver. Laura invited Oliver's girlfriend to go shopping and she agreed to. However that made Oliver upset because he wanted to be with her. Diane expressed her concerns by telling me that:

Whenever Oliver's friends are there Laura is there. Sometimes it really isn't appropriate because Laura is a teenager and is very hormonal. She does not have a boy friend and wants one more than anything in the world. She talks a lot about boys and what she would do if she had a boyfriend. And it is not appropriate around these seventh and eighth graders. That has been that hardest thing to watch.

Attending the Prom

Diane began talking about the prom by saying that "more than anything right now she wants to go to prom." Both Mom and daughter have gone out and looked at dresses. But Laura does not have a date. Laura has compiled a list of three or four people whom she would like to invite. They are Tom's friends. And Diane is "so afraid that they will say no, and watching her go through that is real painful."

Since I grew up in a culture that did not create the pressure about having a date for the prom, I was curious to find out what the prom meant for Diane. Since I went to an all girls high school, I looked forward to having a huge girls' party. Since we hated our principal, we had our own graduation

ceremony without her. However after listening to Diane describe the significance of the prom, I realized how painful it was for her to watch Laura not get that opportunity.

According to Diane, the prom is the culmination of the senior year of high school. There is the sense of getting over the hurdle of high school. Teenagers go a little crazy, and they drive their parents crazy worrying about them for a night. Diane sat back in her chair, and with a smile described the purpose of the prom.

It is sort of the rite of passage. It is the biggest dance that they really have. And they make it sort of spectacular. The date becomes important because people usually go with a date. Sometimes a group of kids go together but Laura does not have that group.

There was also a personal aspect of the prom that Diane described. She wants Laura to share the same positive experiences that Diane had growing up.

What it has brought out for me is how prom was for me, and how special it was , and all the activities, and the guy that I went with. I mean all the stuff that she doesn't have. So that sense of loss is there.

Dreams for the Future

College

Diane told me in her first interview that “the doctor told us that Laura was never going to walk or talk, but now Laura is going to college. I never dreamed that Laura would ever go to college.” This is a big moment in Diane’s life.

And probably the most important thing in the world is that she is going to college. We are so excited. We applied to ten places. What we have basically gone for has been the environment. We had some good experiences and we had some bad experiences. Our first experience was really horrible.

Diane described the first experience in detail. She pointed out with pride that Laura’s resilience beams through in that experience. The family drove up to Milwaukee to see a small Christian school that had an LD program. Diane had a very frank discussion with Laura about what kind of program Laura wanted to pursue. Laura said she wanted to try for the next level of programming which demands a 90 IQ. Since this is what Laura decided she wanted, Diane wanted nothing less. They were welcomed and taken around the college. They talked to the dean of education because Diane wanted to be very frank. She did not want to set Laura up for failure. After the tour of the campus they went back to the main office. The admissions officer asked Laura if she had a good time. She asked Diane if she would like to talk to the a financial aid officer. Everything seemed to be going as planned until the admissions officer turned to Laura and said “We will not even consider your application.” She went on to say:

I want you to know that you did the right thing by coming here, and we are so glad you came up here, but given your grades and the classes you have taken we are not even going to consider your application.

Laura was shocked but kept her composure. However Diane who has “too much sentiment” started crying. While telling me this story Diane started to laugh and she said:

But to show you Laura's resilience, we were getting out the door and Laura said "that's the rudest thing that anyone has ever done," and we both started to laugh. That is who Laura is. She has been hit with a lot of crap all her life. She has been to places where she hasn't been accepted because of who she is. Yet she has this determination and persistence.

Independent Living

I asked her what she expects for Laura, and she said that her goals for Laura were Laura's goals for herself. Laura desires what we all do. She wants a family of her own, a loving spouse, a home, and a career. Laura wants to be an aide in an early childhood center. She has worked very hard, although school has not been easy for her. She is determined to do what she wants to do.

Well it's what Laura wants to do. She wants to live in an apartment by herself or with a roommate. She wants to be an early childhood aide in a classroom. She definitely wants to be married. She wants to have kids. She clearly sees herself as a Mom. I think she sees herself living close to family. She wants to be part of a church. And if those are things that Laura wants, I want her to have those things. Those are my expectations for her as well.

Diane added that she wants to make sure that Laura is safe, and that she doesn't get into a vulnerable situation. She wants to place her in situations where her strengths can be enhanced. Diane sees her role as "working frameworks around her, so that she can do what she wants to do." She has "had an impact on an incredible amount of people, and people have rallied behind her wanting to help her reach her goal." Diane informed me that Laura just got a summer job. She described what "frameworks" she and her husband had to build to help Laura reach her goal.

In order for her to get that job, we had to make a grid for her. She wanted to work at a summer camp. We broke it down to the name of the camp, the contact person, the phone number, follow up and a what happened column. When she sort of had the structure, and we listed all the things that needed to be done, she kept walking through, we provided that structure that allowed her to get the job. She sent resumes.

Diane does not see those structures being removed, and she feels that Laura will always need someone to check on her financial situation on a regular basis. Diane and her family hope to help Laura figure out what supports Laura needs in order to reach those goals that she has set for herself. Diane firmly believes that Laura can be independent the framework of structures that the family provides.

Socialization

Socialization has been an area of ongoing concern for Diane. In the future, Diane wants to create "some sort of social life around her." She pointed out that it is easier to create a social life for young children. But as the child gets older, the job gets tougher. Diane has some ideas on how she plans to create the social structure for Laura.

Maybe that's being part of a volunteer group or something. Maybe being well-connected to a young single group at church. But I see us as figuring out resources for her to be able to plug into. So we are sort of this net. But they wouldn't be things that she would initially instigate on her own.

Conclusion

The struggles that have arisen from having a child with a disability have clearly impacted Diane. However Laura is not a burden on Diane. There are changes that she has had to make, but having any child changes a parent's life. Diane wants all her children to succeed and Laura is no exception. She admires her daughter and credits her for giving her a focus in life. Diane knows that Laura will succeed in life because of her determination and a strong desire to succeed. Diane's admiration for and awe of Laura were evident in her voice:

I admire her incredibly (started to cry and so did I). She has been very clear about what she wants in life. I am learning a lot from her. The doctor told me she would never walk or talk and then she walked. She did things much slower than everyone else but I was so surprised. You don't have to predetermine anything. She will let you know. Just watch.

Laura has taught Diane how profound ordinary life is. Diane considers herself to be Laura's student. Laura has taught her about people and human relationships, and how important it is to include all sorts of people. Laura has been able to instill in Diane the value of relationships. For Diane, life is "really about relationships and about supporting one another, and I don't think without Laura I would have learned as much about myself." Having Laura has made Diane look at people differently. She has the need to "get to know people better and in a different way, than I might not have otherwise had."

In conclusion, Diane believes that Laura has changed her life in many ways.

I don't know if I would have taken the time to do some things had it not been for Laura. I know that there is much more than meets the eye. And clearly Laura is the catalyst for why I am doing what I am doing.

Return to the Table of Content - [Click Here](#)

Due Process: A Primer for Special Education Teachers

Roberta Wiener, Ed.D

Pace University

Abstract

The threat of special education due process has set the tone for the way IEP meetings are conducted and IEP decisions are made. This threat has eroded relationships and trust between families and district personnel. This article reviews the background, history and current status of special education due process and offers suggestions to teachers about how their work can help restore the much needed trust that is the bedrock for all the primary relationships assisting students in need of special services.

The effects of litigation in special education cases are too often destructive, affecting students, parents and teachers with long-lasting negative consequences. According to a pilot study conducted by Public Agenda in 2003, superintendents and principals report that special education issues are the most frequent cause for educational litigation. Special education administrators choose either to stand up to these due process challenges and litigate, which results in expense in money and time, or they choose to take the easier and initially less expensive alternative of settlement.

When PL 94-142 became part of the fabric of public school education in 1975, it was expected that IEP team decisions occasionally would be challenged. Disputes would arise over issues about classification

and placement. Today, however, we see an entirely new use of special education due process litigation. Procedural mistakes often lead to large settlements that have little to do with appropriate educational programs. Parents find private schools promising special programs and treatment and remove their children from the public school. After a unilateral placement in a special private school, parents expect to be reimbursed for tuition by the public school for their legal action. This new wave of litigation activity has changed the way IEP teams make decisions; it dictates the way they document information and it lurks in the shadows of every IEP meeting. Too frequently litigation interferes with or impedes the process of educating a child. When did IEP teams move away from putting their efforts into child-centered decisions to thinking about avoiding being sued? The Public Agenda (2003) survey documents the reality that educators perceive parents having a sense of educational entitlement based on special education law which increases the likelihood of litigation.

What are the implications for today's teachers? The bond between families and teachers working with students with disabilities is still the key to achieving the goal of providing a free appropriate public education. Now is the time for all responsible parties to realize that no one wins in a special education due process hearing and that the best way to win for children is to avoid disagreement, resolve differences and find solutions.

The design of a child's educational program is a collaborative process. Collaboration begins at the IEP meeting with unanimous commitment to respect each participant as a sincere, honest and dedicated member working towards designing an appropriate education. If we agree to establish safeguards, to follow the same rules and guidelines, to stop looking for fault and personal gain, then we can avoid frivolous litigation and increase the effectiveness of services for children.

Recent changes in IDEA (IDEIA'04, P.L.108-446) require parents to state their complaints and provide an opportunity for the district to resolve issues at a new IEP meeting. It is recommended that the district initiate a pre-meeting with the parents to discuss issues and possible solutions to bring to a new IEP meeting. Teachers can assist in this step by providing concrete information about what works or does not work for this student. They should include work samples of success and areas of need.

Mediation is still not required as a step preceding litigation in the reauthorized IDEIA, but when mediation is used both parties should agree that it will be "legally binding". Mediation is less contentious than due process and is a way to work through differences and arrive at a compromise with less expense in time and money. Every effort should be made, therefore, to consider mediation seriously as a step that could well avoid litigation.

Trust and meaningful communication with parents are the foundation of change in this due process cycle. When teachers and administrators avoid contact with parents who have initiated due process, they only exacerbate negative feelings and mistrust. A strong line of communication must remain open with equal access for parents and teachers. Teachers should make every effort to remain focused on the education of the student and work on maintaining a good working relationship with the parents. Teachers can and should be the educational ambassadors who open a healthy dialogue between school and home.

All educators involved with the child need to understand the issues in dispute and be consistent among themselves in their approach and communication with parents. Team members need to attend all meetings, be prepared and informed with updates on the student's status, and be able to suggest possible changes. It is important that teachers understand how their role relates to other professionals

on the team. Any differences of opinion that may exist within the team should be discussed and resolved before the meeting so that all sides can feel comfortable with suggested recommendations.

All team members must take the remarks and information from parents seriously without appearing defensive. When reviewing reports presented by parents, team members need to articulate their own expert opinion using specific information that will either support or dispute the parents' position.

When parents bring an outside expert to the IEP meeting it is important for the educational staff to engage that person in a comprehensive discussion. It is helpful to have the experts inform the committee of their findings and recommendations. Having the opportunity to hear and discuss the perceptions from outside professionals will help school professionals gain important insight into the parent perspective. The teachers in attendance should never feel intimidated by the outside expert. Teachers need to be honest with their remarks and support their comments with specifics.

Teachers and related service providers will need to be prepared to present a comprehensive current educational status report. This report is most effective when it includes work samples with teacher comments and recent anecdotes from classroom activities. At least one current observation conducted by a team member should be included to support important anecdotal information from the current placement. When reporting this information the staff will need to be honest and straightforward with clear comments about educational gains or the lack of progress. Staff should always support their recommendations with scientifically based methods of instruction. The wealth of supportive information should be shared generously with the parents.

The student's special education file is very important and, of course, confidential. It needs to be up-to-date, well organized, and accessible to the parents and staff upon request. This requires ongoing attention regarding professional notes, assessments, classroom tests and reports.

Occasionally a meeting is in progress and parents comment that they are in serious disagreement and try to stall the process. It is important for the IEP team to consider such comments with respect and make every effort to complete writing an appropriate IEP or make clear that the meeting will be rescheduled.

When surprised by the unannounced presence of an attorney representing the child, the IEP team should proceed with caution. School district representatives have a right to reschedule a meeting to include their own legal representative. Under no circumstance should teachers begin to discuss the child before the official opening of the meeting by the designated chairperson.

Current changes in IDEA (IDEIA '04, P.L.108-446) have made a mild attempt to alter procedural safeguards. These changes require that either party seeking due process must submit a formal complaint that includes a description of the problem, the facts relating to the problem and a proposed resolution. It is expected that a meeting will be convened to resolve the dispute unless both parties agree to waive the meeting.

Additional IDEIA changes help prevent procedural mistakes from clouding programming issues and decisions. Hearing officers must decide the cases on substantive grounds related to the child's receiving a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

It can no longer be expected that school districts have deep pockets and that they will be held hostage to an imperfect ability to cope with attorneys trying to seize a financial opportunity for their clients and

themselves. A free appropriate public education for all students with disabilities is obtainable when the special education staff and parents work together to find solutions instead of litigating differences.

References

- Blau, M. (2003, June 9). Learning curve. *New York Magazine*. 31-35&79.
- Getty, L.A. & Summy, S.E. (2004). The course of due process. *Teaching Exceptional Children*. 36(3). 40-44.
- Goldberg, S.S. (1986). Reimbursing parents for unilateral placements in private Special education schools. *Exceptional Children*. 52, 390-394.
- Groeschel, R.L. (2002, March). Bulletproof your IEPs: How to overcome common roadblocks in the process. *The Special Educator*. 17, 8-9.
- Keith, J.A. (2002). *The attorney's guide to due process: Preparation equals success*. Horsham, PA: LRP Publications.
- Kelman, M. (2001). The moral foundation of special education law. In Finn, E., Rotherham, A.J., & Hokanson, C.R. (Eds.) *Rethinking special education for a new century*. Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Progressive Policy Institute.
- Lake, S.E. (2002). *The top 10 IEP errors: How to avoid them, how to fix them*. Horsham, PA: LRP Publications.
- Lanigan, K.J., Audette, R.M., Dreier, A.E., & Kobersy, M.R. (2001). Nasty, brutish...and often not very short: The attorney perspective on due process. In Finn, E., Rotherham, A.J., & Hokanson, C.R. (Eds.) *Rethinking special education for a new century*. Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Progressive Policy Institute.
- Martin, J.L. (2001). *10 effective strategies to resolve special education disputes without due process*. Horsham, PA: LRP Publications.
- McGroarty, D. (2001). The little-known case of America's largest school choice program. In Finn, E., Rotherham, A.J., & Hokanson, C.R. (Eds.) *Rethinking special education for a new century*. Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Progressive Policy Institute.
- Katsiyannis, A. & Herbst, M. (2003). *Legal and policy trends in special education*. National Association of Secondary School Principals, A Legal Memorandum.
- Richards, D.M. (2002). *Settlement agreements and special education: The essentials for successful dispute resolution*. Horsham, PA: LRP Publications.
- Rotter, K. (2001, Nov.). Coordinate staff communication with parents during due process cases. *The Special Educator*. 17, 8.

Weatherly, J.L. (2003, July). Eight promising practices to keep schools out of “Deep Due” process. In CASE. 6-7.

Weintraub, F. (2005, February). IDEA amended. In CASE, p. 1-2.

Zurko, L.G. (2002). Preparing your staff for due process: An administrator’s guide. Horsham, PA: LRP Publications

Return to the Table of Content - [Click Here](#)

Author Guidelines for Submission to JAASEP

JAASEP welcomes manuscript submissions at any time. Authors are completely responsible for the factual accuracy of their contributions and neither the Editorial Board of JAASEP nor the American Academy of Special Education Professionals accepts any responsibility for the assertions and opinions of contributors. Authors are responsible for obtaining permission to quote lengthy excerpts from previously-published articles.

Authors will be notified of the receipt of their manuscripts within 14 business days of their arrival and can expect to receive the results of the review process within 30 days.

All submissions must have a cover letter indicating that the manuscript has not been published, or is not being considered for publication any where else, in whole or in substantial part. On the cover letter be sure to include your name, your address, your email address, and your phone number

As much as possible, typescript should conform to the following:

- Method of Manuscript Submission: Send Manuscripts should be submitted electronically with the words "Submission" in the subject line.
- Language: English
- Document: Microsoft Word
- Font: Times New Roman or Arial
- Size of Font: 12 Point
- Page Limit: None

- Margins: 1" on all sides
- Title of paper: Top of page Capitals, bold, centered,
- Author(s) Name: Centered under title of paper
- Format: Feature Manuscripts should follow the guidelines of fifth edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2001).
- Figures and Tables: All should be integrated in the typescript.
- Abstract: An abstract of not more than 150 words should accompany each submission.
- References: Insert all references cited in the paper submitted on a Reference Page

Submission of Articles: Submissions should be forwarded by electronic mail to the Editor, Dr. George Giuliani at editor@aasep.org

Copyright and Reprint Rights of JAASEP

JAASEP retains copyright of all original materials, however, the author(s) retains the right to use, after publication in the journal, all or part of the contribution in a modified form as part of any subsequent publication.

JAASEP is published by the American Academy of Special Education Professionals. JAASEP retains copyright of all original materials, however, the author(s) retains the right to use, after publication in the journal, all or part of the contribution in a modified form as part of any subsequent publication.

If the author(s) use the materials in a subsequent publication, whether in whole or part, JAASEP must be acknowledged as the original publisher of the article. All other requests for use or re-publication in whole or part, should be addressed to the Editor of JAASEP.

Return to the Table of Content - [Click Here](#)