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Parents As Partners: An Analysis of the Barriers to Parental Involvement in Special Education

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PARENTS AS PARTNERS:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE BARRIERS TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SPECIAL
EDUCATION

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

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May 2007

Abstract

The purpose of the following exploratory study is to examine the interest levels, barriers and motivating factors influencing attendance at informational Parent Group Meetings held for parents of children who are part of the special education preschool program- both the Developmental Learning Program (DLP) and Integrated preschool classroom- in the Cranston Public School System. Existing literature expresses the importance of parent involvement in special education services, some of the barriers to participation, and the importance of periodically evaluating parents' needs. A Needs Assessment Survey was sent out to approximately 85 families involved in the DLP/Integrated Preschool Program in the Cranston Public School System. Twenty-six surveys were returned, and the data collected indicates that there is an interest among more than half of the respondents in attending a parent group; however there are significant barriers such as time conflicts and lack of childcare that prevent the majority of those interested from actually attending. The implications of this study revolve around the important roles the school staff, and the school social worker in particular, have in helping parents feel supported and encouraging parental involvement.

Introduction

Problem Formulation

Research shows that students with special needs tend to progress better when their parents are involved in the education and intervention process (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). Other studies reinforce this idea, explaining that school-parent collaboration is necessary for the desired outcomes in a child's education (Levy, Kim, & Olive, 2006). After reviewing the literature, it appears that one way parents become more involved is by talking with other parents who share similar concerns. One method schools can use to encourage this interaction is to host parent group meetings.

One problem that arises for some parents of children with special education needs is that they often are left unsupported, especially in their children's early childhood years. Studies show that these parents, especially those whose children have Autism, are usually more stressed than parents with typically developing preschoolers (Boyd, 2002). Many times these parents feel very overwhelmed. They may become isolated and not really know where to find the support that they need. Boyd (2002) says that "a lack of social support can lead parents to withdraw from the larger community because of the negative characteristics they associate with their child's disability—which in turn exacerbates their stress level" (p 212).

The problem that many service providers face is the difficulty of getting parents involved in services initiated by the school or an outside agency. In one public school system in particular full participation in these informational parent meetings is rare; attendance is minimal and often varies from time to time. Parents face a variety of factors that prevent them from being as involved in their child's special education as would be beneficial.

This study will focus on the barriers to parent involvement and ways to engage parents to help them stay informed about special education. Pertinent data will be discussed regarding parent participation in informational groups for parents of pre-school aged children receiving special education services. Parents of children in special education, especially those with developmental disabilities, need specialized information. The researcher will collect data from the parents regarding their understanding of special education services, how they acquire information, and their level of support. In addition the study will examine what motivates parents to attend these meetings. Inquiries will be made as to where parents find the support that they need and what else they feel they need. Knowing that groups can be helpful, at least for stress relief when parents get together (Boyd, 2002), it would also be interesting to explore different strategies for involving parents new to pre-school special education in these informational sessions in a manner that would be beneficial to both the caretakers and their children. In doing so, it would be important to identify the barriers to involvement for many of those parents.

Problem Justification

As Boyd (2002) states, “professionals in the field must better understand how parent and child variables interact to affect parents’ ability to seek out and obtain needed social support” (p. 216). In order to address the barriers to parent involvement, social workers should understand what they are and the impact these variables have on parent motivation and stress. The severity of the disabling condition of the child, parent understanding of services available, and levels of parenting stress are just some of the variables that can affect parents’ abilities to seek out necessary support.

The problem of parental stress is important to social work because the more stressed parents are the less they tend to be involved with their child's education (Boyd, 2002). They may also shy away from groups, becoming more isolated and less informed. The problem of parents needs being unmet and having feelings of being unsupported is an issue that many social workers can help alleviate for families. It is important that social workers understand the level of aid that social support groups can provide. Social work staff can help facilitate these groups, but must first come to recognize the needs of and barriers faced by these parents. Addressing the problem of unsupported parents also means being able to help families to cope with and adapt to the disabilities that their children may have. It also requires social workers to link families to the appropriate resources.

When working with a client, it is important that the social worker take the time to understand the family system of an individual. This is especially true when the "client" is a child. Parents of a child are also important members of the system, and are to be considered clients as well. Studying the problems with parent involvement or lack of support for parents is important to social work.

Social workers must serve as a resource to their clients. In a school setting, the social worker can serve as a resource to parents in a variety of circumstances. Providing a parent of a child with special needs with information and resources is one way that a social worker serves parents in the educational setting. In order to help the parents advocate for the needs of their child, it is important that social workers understand what information the parents need and the best ways to deliver that information. Social workers should come to an understanding about the kind of social support that parents would benefit from most and the barriers that prevent parents

from becoming involved in order to help facilitate opportunities for parents with special needs children to interact with parents who share similar concerns.

Literature Review

There is an extensive amount of literature endorsing the necessity of parent involvement in the services and interventions provided to children in special education. Studies show that the more parents are involved the higher the rate of their child's success. The research also indicates that there are many barriers to parent involvement, but also suggest some ways to overcome those barriers (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997).

Parents should be educated and informed in order to help foster the development of their children. Training parents on ways to teach their child is a key element in enhancing the development and learning of the child (White, Taylor & Moss, 1992). School staff should be responsible for sharing knowledge and expertise with parents on the special education services and other services that are available in order to help families make informed decisions (Brady, Peters, Gamel-McCormick, & Venuto, 2004). Shannon (2004) emphasizes that one concern for parents, and a possible barrier to involvement, is financial issues. Some studies stress the importance of parent training on how to utilize their resources, including finances and time (Smith, Oliver, & Innocenti, 2001).

Other parent concerns revolve around similar issues, such as day care, transportation, and work conflicts (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997). According to Funkhouser and Gonzales (1997), time is a major deterrent to parent involvement. Parents' work schedule and other commitments may hinder their availability for parent meetings. School personnel often only hold a meeting once, and many parents miss out on the opportunity to attend. One suggestion that Funkhouser and Gonzales (1997) make is to offer meetings more often, or on weekends in order to

accommodate the variety of family schedules. Some other barriers to parent involvement mentioned in the literature include issues of safety, cultural and language barriers, and a lack of timely information sent to parents (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997).

Another barrier that may impact parent involvement is a negative view on the part of professionals (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). Some professionals think that parents are uninformed and therefore not capable of making decisions. Some professionals may hold the perspective that parents are uninformed and unable to understand the services being provided (Plunge & Kratochwill, 1995). This may cause school staff to take over and appear intimidating, preventing some parents from feeling comfortable enough to express their ideas and concerns. Professionals should be aware that taking too much control, being forceful, or having negative attitude about the parents will not encourage involvement. That only puts up walls that can hinder parent participation in meetings (Plunge & Kratochwill, 1995).

When parents and professionals collaborate to plan services, the parents become more empowered (Smith, Oliver, & Innocenti, 2001). Minke and Anderson (2005) mention the importance of empowerment of parents to encourage them to be advocates for their children. A supportive relationship between parents and professionals is a key element in parent involvement. When educators and social workers give parents the respect they deserve, and form reciprocal relationships, it can foster collaboration (Minke & Anderson, 2005). It has been demonstrated at some schools that a cooperative relationship between schools and families can foster a mutual relationship useful in overcoming barriers (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997).

Lack of motivation can be another barrier to parent participation (Shannon, 2004). Parents who have more support are more likely to be motivated to be involved in their child's education. The motivations that parents have for choosing to participate can vary. Participation

in informational parent groups or meetings can largely depend on how the parents view the school, their own needs, and the supportive quality of the group. Parents view support in different ways, and therefore they are motivated by different factors (Brett, 2004). Brett (2004) mentions that some parents view support as a sign of failure and vulnerability. These parents are probably less likely to seek out parent groups, particularly those led by professionals. Most parents do not want to think that they have failed on taking care of their children's needs. Some may feel ashamed to seek out help because they see it as a sign that they have failed. Other parents may feel that they know what is best for their child and do not need a group of professionals to give them advice. Parents may feel they already have sufficient information (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997).

Existing literature highlights the important benefits of groups and the evidence that parent groups can be helpful in getting families involved in their child's education. Educational parenting groups are found to have a positive effect on children's behavior and development, as well as the mental health of the parents ("Early Years, Children, Families, and Parenting," 2004). In the article "Early years, Children, Families and Parenting" (2004) it is indicated that supporting and educating parents and improving parenting skills can help improve the mental health of children. The same article also indicates that positive outcomes have been derived through programs that deal with pre-school development and help parents understand developmental milestones ("Early Years, Children, Families, and Parenting," 2004). This supports the idea that informational parent groups for parents of preschool children in special education can have positive benefits for parents and children.

In order for increased parent participation Funkhouser and Gonzales (1997) suggest that there must be periodic assessment of the needs and interests of families through a variety of

means. It is indicated that needs assessments, surveys and other methods should be utilized in order to get an idea from the parents' perspective of what services they want or need and how to get more parents involved. Being open to conversations with parents about what they need and about the barriers they face is important for social workers and other professionals to keep in mind when thinking about parent involvement. Each parent will have their own ideas, as will different staff members. In forming parent informational groups it is important to take into account the barriers to involvement generated on both ends of the helping relationship, as well as the perspectives of parents, teachers, social workers and each of their diverse needs.

Overall there is an abundance of evidence in the literature that indicates that parent involvement is beneficial for the growth and development of children, particularly those in special education. The literature also notes some of the barriers to parent involvement, including parental stress, financial situations, day care, parent attitudes towards the school, as well as cultural and language barriers. Through a review of the literature it was found that parents are more likely to be involved when they have the support of the school system and support of other parents. Existing literature suggests that if schools and parents work together the barriers can be overcome. Surveying parents on their needs and concerns would be beneficial to get an idea of how to best serve and educate them.

The main problem to be addressed in this study is the lack of parent participation in informational support groups for parents of children in a public school preschool special education program. It is said that parent groups can be beneficial for parents and their children. Questions arise surrounding whether the informational parent groups held through the public school system are meeting the needs of parents. Are they too busy to attend the meetings? Do some parents lack an interest in these groups or are they simply uninformed about what purpose

they hold? This study will also look into ways to best accommodate parents in order to meet their needs and offer necessary support. The main question for research is what are the barriers for parents that prevent them from attending the informational support groups and what they need in order to increase their participation.

Methodology

In this exploratory study, a needs assessment was utilized to survey the level of parental participation and barriers to parental involvement in an informational parent group. This group is held for the parents of preschoolers in the special education Developmental Learning Program (DLP) and Integrated Preschool classrooms in Cranston, Rhode Island. The sample consists of an available group of parents drawn from a list of the families with children in either a DLP or Integrated Preschool placement in the Cranston Public School System. The Cranston Public School System has four elementary schools that have DLP and/or Integrated Preschool classrooms- they are Garden City, Oak Lawn, Glen Hills, and Stone Hill. Three of the four elementary schools have two classrooms each. Some classes have full day students, and others have students for only half of the day. The class sizes are limited to a maximum of 10 students per class.

A needs assessment survey was sent home to 85 families who have children in the preschool special education program in the Cranston Public School system (see survey in Appendix I). The assessment surveys were given to the preschool teachers to send home with their students. A cover letter was sent along with the survey to inform these parents about the purpose of the research, which is to help improve services for parents. The letter also indicated that all identifying information will remain confidential. An incentive was given to the parents to return the surveys. They were asked to put their children's initials on the survey and the initials

were then entered into a raffle drawing for an activity book entitled *365 Days of Creative Play*, which the winning parent can use with her child. This educational activity book was chosen with the goal in mind to increase parent-child interaction. The drawing took place at the DLP Parent Group Meeting on February 28th, 2007.

Currently the DLP parent meetings in the Cranston Public School system occur once a month. Fliers are sent home with the students to inform the parents about the meetings. Parents of DLP students from all four schools with DLP/Integrated Preschool classrooms are invited to the meeting, which takes place in one location. The location of the meetings changes month to month. These parent group meetings last about one hour and fifteen minutes. A staff member from the multidisciplinary team or member of the outside community will present on a topic. Topics in the past have included IEP information, Fine Motor Activities for children, and Nutrition to name a few. The group is formal, but is run in a very open and inviting manner that allows for parents to ask questions of staff and other parents. Attendance this year has ranged from 1 to 9 parents, out of approximately eighty-five families.

The purpose of the survey was to assess the needs of parents and other caretakers of preschool aged children with special education needs. The questions on the survey were presented in a format in which the respondents were asked to check off or fill in their answer. There were also a series of questions dependent on a four or five-point Likert scale. Space was provided for any additional comments. The survey sought feedback on variables related to how parents acquire information, parent group attendance, and level of interest in attending a parent group. Some of the data gathered includes the number of meetings parents have attended and at which locations. The survey also requested feedback regarding the level and type of support the parents already receive, where they get information on special education and parenting topics,

and an indication of the support and information they are interested in receiving. Some other data to be collected through the survey include variables related to the severity of the child's delay, parent employment, parent understanding of special education services, availability, and other characteristics that may influence parent involvement. (See Appendix I)

The data gathered will be analyzed and used to evaluate the services and support available to parents of children in the DLP/Integrated Preschool program. This will assist in identifying the areas of need that are unmet and the barriers that impact parent participation in the groups. Acquiring input from parents will help staff to structure the DLP Parent Meetings to accommodate the greatest amount of interested parents.

As with most research, there are some threats to the validity. The five-point scale is useful in collecting data about the sample population, but also can contain a high amount of bias. There is likely to be bias when the parents respond, particularly for questions measuring the parent's perception of their understanding of the special education services available for their child and the level of support that they may feel. The support that one parent feels could be different from another, but they may choose the same response on the scale to express how well they feel they are supported. Parents are likely to have acquiescence response bias, responding in ways that portray them more favorably. The researcher hopes that by asking the parents in the letter accompanying the survey to be as honest and open, in order to provide them with appropriate services that meet their needs, that this problem might be eliminated. There really is no way to ensure the complete elimination of this type of bias.

Another difficult issue that threatens the validity of the research is the response rate and who responds. It is probable that a majority of the parents who are more involved already are going to be more likely to fill out and return the survey. Parents who are not involved or less

involved are probably less likely to respond, causing some difficulty in truly surveying what hinders their involvement in the DLP parent groups.

Data Analysis

The survey data was coded and quantitative data was entered into the SPSS 13.0 program. Frequency tables and cross-tabulation were used to examine the demographic and descriptive variables. Parametric and nonparametric tests of correlation were used to examine the relationships between variables, particularly looking at the relationship between parent level of support and whether or not parents have attended or are interested in attending a group. Other factors examined using SPSS include barriers to participation, availability, and main motivation for parents to attend a parent group.

In the following section the variables impacting parent involvement will be examined and common factors among the respondents will be explored. The responses to the survey will be compared and contrasted for relevant information regarding what factors motivate families to join the informational group meetings.

Results

Of the 85 surveys sent home to parents of children in the DLP/Integrated Preschool classes a total of 26 surveys were returned. This was a 30.6% response rate. Of those parents that completed the needs assessment survey 88.5% were the mothers of special needs children. The remaining 11.5% of the respondents included a father, legal guardian and adoptive/foster parents. Approximately ninety-two percent of the respondents come from homes that speak English as their primary language. Approximately eight percent reported another language (Cambodian) spoken at home. The age of the respondents ranged from 21 to 58 years of age, with a mean in the range of 36-40 years of age (26.9%).

Demographics of the children included ages ranging from 3 to 6 years of age, with a mean age of 4.3. Of the 26 respondents, 42.3% of their children are approximately 4 years of age, 23.1% are younger than 4 years of age and 34.6% are between the age of 4 ½ and 6 years of age. The breakdown of schools is as follows: 50% are from Glen Hills, 19.2% are students at Oak Lawn, 19.2% are students at Stone Hill, and 11.5% are from Garden City School. 65.4% of the students are in half-day programs, 30.8% are in a full-day program, and 3.8% did not respond to this question on the survey.

The parent reported “disabling condition” for qualification for special education services can be found in Table 1. Since the question was open-ended, in order to input the data into SPSS, the categories were coded as follows: speech/language delay, PDD/Autism, Down syndrome, emotional/behavioral delays, multiple delays, other developmental delays, and peer model. Those in the category of “multiple delays” reported that their children had a mixture of speech and/or other learning delays, and emotional or behavioral delays/disorders. “Peer model” refers to a student with mild delays whose parents may pay for that child to be in the integrated preschool. The most commonly reported condition was in the area of speech and language delays. It must be kept in mind that these are parent reports and though their child may have a speech delay, it is probable that the child may also have a different condition which qualifies him or her for the special education classroom placement. Approximately twenty-three percent of parents reported that their child has autism or another pervasive developmental disorder.

(Table 1) qualifying_disabling_condition

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	speech/ language delay	8	30.8	32.0	32.0
	PDD/Autism	6	23.1	24.0	56.0
	Down syndrome	2	7.7	8.0	64.0
	emotional/behavioral delays	1	3.8	4.0	68.0
	multiple delays	5	19.2	20.0	88.0
	other developmental delay	2	7.7	8.0	96.0
	Peer Model	1	3.8	4.0	100.0
	Total	25	96.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	3.8		
Total		26	100.0		

The data indicates that the disabling condition of a child does not play a significant role in parent involvement in the group. Although the relationship between parent involvement in the group and disabling condition is not statistically significant, parents with children who have PDD/Autism represent the largest category of those who have attended a parent group meeting (see Table 2).

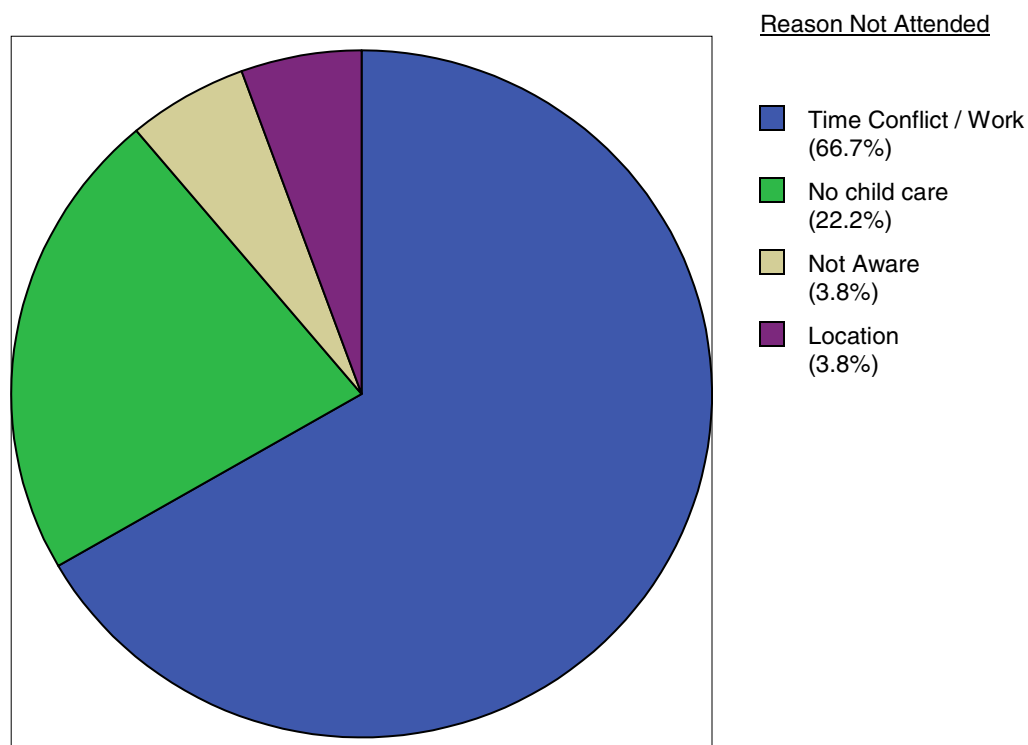
(Table 2) Cross tabulation of Attended_Group * qualifying_disabling_condition

		qualifying_disabling_condition							Total
		speech/ language delay	PDD/Autism	Down syndrome	emotional/ behavioral delays	multiple delays	other developmental delay	Peer Model	
Attended_Group	Yes	1	2	1	1	1	0	1	7
	No	7	4	1	0	4	2	0	18
Total		8	6	2	1	5	2	1	25

Of the parents that responded to the question about being aware of the DLP Parent Group meetings, 88% said they were aware of the meetings and when they meet. Of those who responded, 26.9% of parents said that they had attended one of the group meetings and 73.1% had not attended. The most common reported barrier to attendance at the meetings was the parents' work schedule or another time conflict (66.7%). Other barriers reported include

childcare (22.2%), location of meetings (3.8%), and a lack of awareness of when meetings are held (3.8%) (See Figure A).

(Figure A) Barriers to Parent Attendance at the DLP Parent Meetings



Two of the major barriers that parents listed in terms of what keeps them from attending the parent groups include time conflicts and location. In an additional question in the survey, respondents were asked to indicate the days, times, and locations they feel would be best for the DLP Parent Meetings. Only 38.5% of the respondents answered the question about the best location. Approximately 50% indicated Glen Hills as the best location; however the majority (50%) of the respondents that completed the needs assessment were parents of children who attended Glen Hills. This data could exemplify the fact that parents are more likely to attend a meeting at the school their child attends, and with which they are most familiar. Approximately

20% said they preferred to meet at Oak Lawn, 10% said Stone Hill, and 20% said all the schools (including Garden City) were equally appropriate locations.

Frequency tables were generated for best day and best time based on only those respondents who indicated they were “Interested” or “Very Interested” in participating in a group for parents of children with special education needs. Approximately 58% of the respondents were “Interested” or “Very Interested” in attending a group. That 58% listed the best days to meet as Monday (36.4%), Wednesday (9.1%), Thursday (9.1%), and any week day (45.5%). Approximately 61.5% of those interested in attending the parent group reported that they would prefer to meeting in the afternoon or evening hours and 38.5% indicated a preference for morning meetings.

The barrier of childcare was significant as the second largest category of reasons that parents had not attended a DLP Parent Meeting. Approximately forty-two percent said that they had other young children home during the day, 50% said they did not have young children home during the day, and approximately 8% did not respond to the question. Of the 58% of the respondents that replied to the question of whether they would use childcare, 46.7% said they would utilize childcare provided by the school during a meeting, 33.3% said they would not use childcare, and 20% stated that they might use childcare provided by the school. Some of those who stated they might use childcare provided by the school indicated that they may use available childcare if the person looking after the children is a qualified caregiver.

Another possible barrier to attendance that was suspected was a lack of interest in attending a group. According to the data this is not a barrier for those parents that responded to the assessment. Table 3 represents the interest level of parents in attending a parent group with other parents who have children with special education needs. Approximately 58% of

respondents reported being interested in attending a parent group with other parents who have children with special education needs. Only 11.5% of the parent respondents said they were not at all interested in the group, however, one parent that said she was not interested indicated she might be in the future. Half of the respondents marked that they were aware of other parent groups available to them as well.

(Table 3) Interest_in_ParentGroup

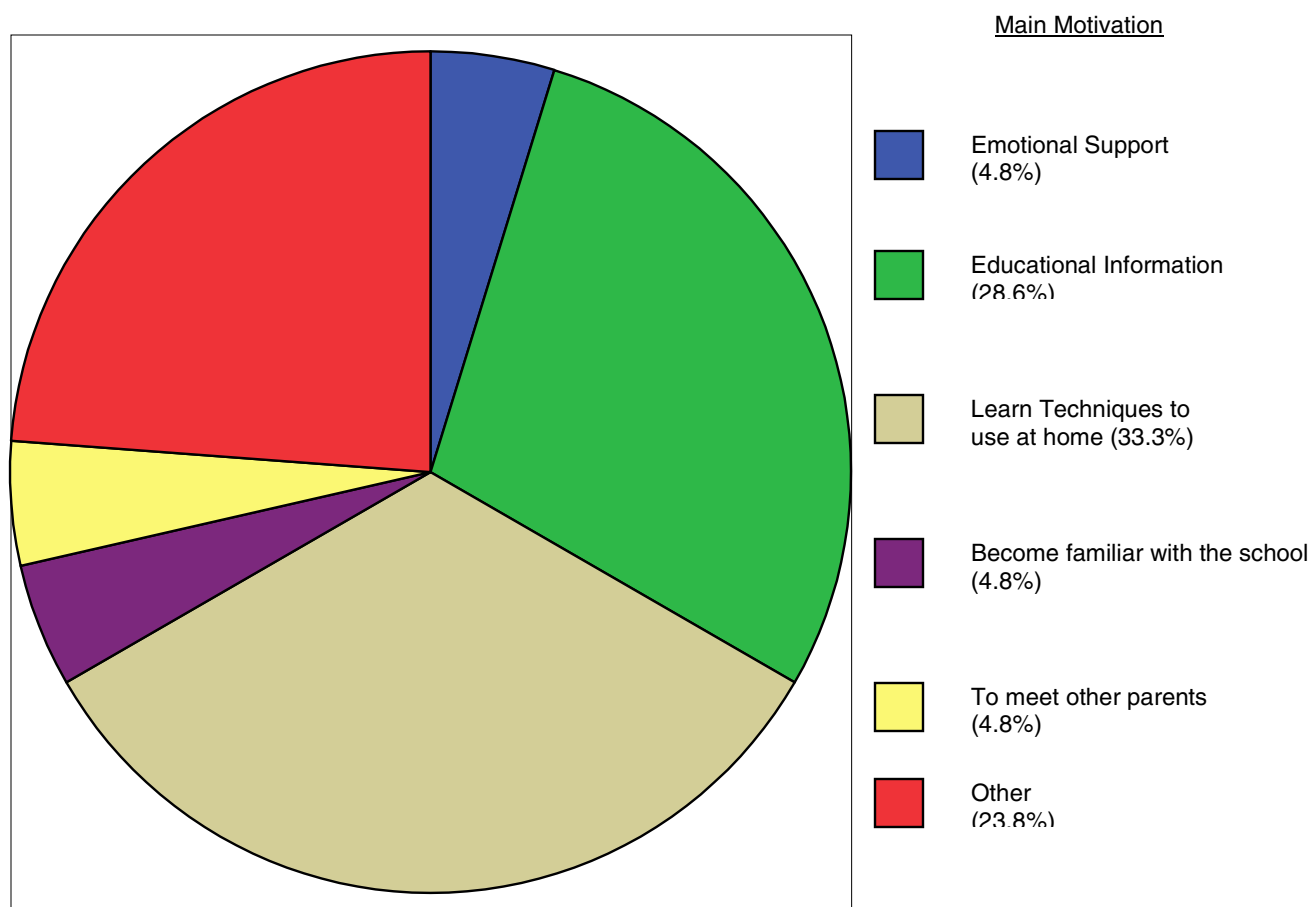
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not interested	3	11.5	11.5	11.5
	Somewhat Interested	8	30.8	30.8	42.3
	Interested	9	34.6	34.6	76.9
	Very Interested	6	23.1	23.1	100.0
	Total	26	100.0	100.0	

Motivation, or lack of motivation, is another factor that influences parent involvement. The researcher examined the different factors that might motivate parents to attend the DLP Parent Group. Respondents were first asked to check off those factors that would motivate them to attend a parent group. The largest factors for motivation were “to learn techniques to use at home” (61.5%) and “Educational Information” (42.3%). The remaining motivating factors include “Emotional support” (11.5%), “to become familiar with the school” (11.5%), “Parent support from staff” (11.5%), “To meet other parents” (38.5%), and “other” (3.8%).

Under the variable “Main Motivation,” the respondents were asked to write in what their main motivation to attend a parent group would be. Of those who answered, 33.3% indicated that they are motivated to attend groups where they can learn techniques to use at home, 28.6% said that their main motivation is to obtain Educational Information, 4.8% are motivated by a desire

for emotional support, 4.8% look to the group as a means for becoming familiar with the school, 4.8% would be motivated to attend a group in order to meet other parents, and 23.8% indicated they had “other” motivations (See Figure 2). Some of the “other” motivating factors responses include: “to learn more about my child’s program,” “topics of interest to me are being presented,” “to help improve the life/future of my child,” as well as “availability” and “location of the meetings”.

(Figure 2) Parents’ Main Motivations for Attending a Parent Group



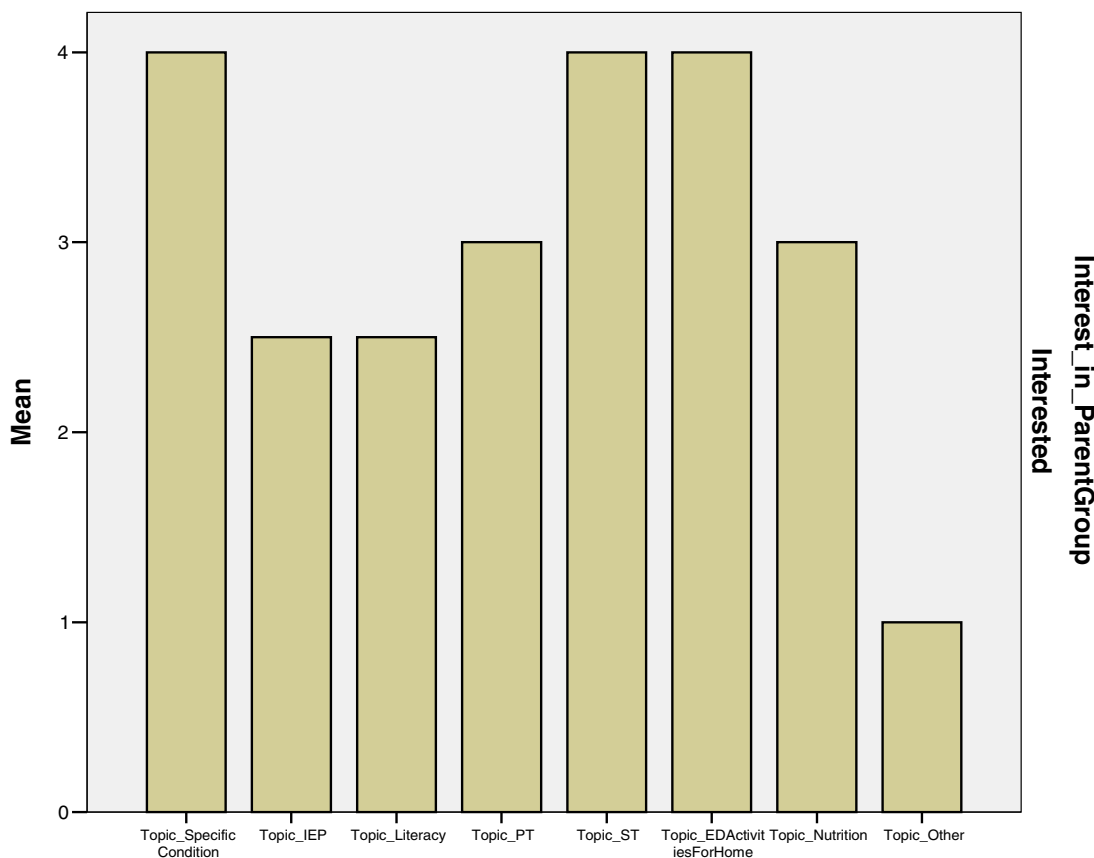
(Figure 3) Topics of Interest for Parents Interested in Attending DLP Parent Group

Figure 3 represents the topics of interest to the respondents who indicated they were in fact interested in attending a parent group. Overall the parents interested in a group indicated high levels of interest in topics specific to their children’s disabling conditions (or specific to their children’s needs), speech therapy and educational activities to do at home. They indicated moderate interest in information regarding the Individualized Education Plan, literacy, physical therapy, and nutrition. There were a couple of parents who expressed interest in other topic areas to include information on home-based occupational therapy, where to find additional speech therapy, and recreational activities geared towards children with special education needs.

The majority of the respondents reported that they have at least some understanding of the special education services available for their children. Of those who said they understand

special education services, 42.3% said that they feel they have a good amount of understanding; 26.9% said they understand the available services very well; 23.1% said they somewhat understand special education services; and 7.7% feel they have enough understanding to get by. The majority of parents (40%) reported that their main source of information on parenting a child with special education needs is the school system. Other common responses among the parents regarding main sources of information include: parents' place of employment (20%), other agencies (15%), pediatrician (5%), family members (5%), and the Internet (5%). Approximately 10% of the parents indicated they receive the majority of their information regarding parenting a child with special needs from more than one main source. Other specific sources of information that parents mentioned include: school flyers; Rhode Island Parent Information Network (RIPIN); home-based therapy services; Early Intervention services (i.e.: Meeting Street); Pediatric Partial Hospitalization Program at Bradley Hospital; parents' employment as professionals in special education jobs; and information gathered from reading, as well as their own intuition and experiences. Approximately 15% of the parents also indicated that they have other children with special needs.

The data shows that positive relationships exist between the level of support parents feel they receive from school staff (defined as teachers, school social workers and other staff) and their level of understanding and interest. The data indicates a small positive correlation exists between level of interest and level of understanding [$r = .105$]. The positive correlation between level of support from the school (teachers, social worker, and other staff) and interest in a group is significant [$r = .44, p < 0.05$]. This positive correlation is especially significant when parents feel a high level of support from the school social worker [$r = 0.542, p < 0.05$]. Using a nonparametric test, the data reveals that interest in a parent group increases when the level of

support from teachers increases, but this is not a statistically significant relationship. The data reveals that for the parents that have attended the group there is a strong positive correlation between attendance and level of support from teachers, school social worker, and other school staff. There is not, however, a significantly strong correlation of attendance and level of support from friends, family, and outside agencies.

Discussion

Limited parent participation in the DLP information Parent Group in the Cranston Public School System (with less than 10% attendance rate) leaves one wondering if parents are fully supported and informed about parenting children with special needs. Investigation of the barriers, needs, and motivating factors can help staff improve support provided to families. Through the data collected in the needs assessment survey conclusions can be drawn about parents' understanding, interests, availability, level of support, and barriers to involvement in the group meetings.

The respondents in this study seem to have moderate to high levels of information obtained from a variety of sources including the school system, outside agencies, pediatrician, family, friends, and the internet. Parents also reported the use of past experience and intuition in caring for their children with special needs. The data collected in this study shows that the more informed parents have interest in groups and learning more about their child's special needs services and meeting other parents who have similar concerns. Many of the parents say they would be motivated to attend a parent group if topics of interest were offered. Parents also indicated that they would attend a group meeting to obtain educational information and learn techniques to use at home.

This exploratory study confirms what the literature states about parents who are more supported. Boyd (2002) indicates that parents who feel supported are less likely to be stressed and therefore less likely to withdraw from the larger community. This allows for higher motivation to become involved in school initiated services, such as the parent group. In addressing the question of what parents need to increase participation in the DLP Parent Group, this study found that an increase in the level of support they feel from the school social worker and other staff was likely to increase parent participation. Those who feel more supported by the social worker at the school were interested or very interested in participating in the DLP Parent group, which is facilitated by the school social worker. Overall levels of support by the school staff in general were higher for those parents interested in a group, following what the literature (Minke & Anderson, 2005; Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997), has to say about the impact and importance of parent-school relationships in encouraging parent involvement. The data confirms the statement that parents who have more support are more likely to be involved in their child's education, particularly when the support is coming from the school system.

The major barriers that parents reported in this study include time conflicts, availability, and a lack of available childcare. Other factors that prevent parents from attending these groups include a lack of awareness about the group and when it meets and the location. A small percentage of the parents expressed a lack of interest in attending the parent group which would also serve as a barrier to attendance. The topic of the group meeting also has an impact on whether or not a parent will attend the meetings.

While the current meetings are held on Wednesday mornings, the results of the surveys indicate that most parents who are interested are available on Mondays in the afternoon or evening. If possible, the staff should try to accommodate the largest amount of interested

parents. However, the small sample size and number of interested respondents must be taken into account when planning the meetings. Making sure that parents are given reminders about the meetings in a timely fashion and structuring meetings based on current parents' interests are some ways that social workers and administrators can help improve parent participation. Implementing other ways to deliver information to parents who cannot attend meetings is also another way that the school can help support the families.

Limitations

One major limitation to this study is the sample size. The numbers represented in the data come from a very small sample size, and are not representative of the population of Cranston parents of DLP/Integrated Preschool students. Some of the difficulties in gathering more surveys included a limited time frame in which the surveys were collected and the method used to distribute the surveys. Because they were sent home with the children some parents may not have checked their children's backpacks for the survey. It is also possible that parents returned their surveys but the teachers forgot to retrieve them from the backpacks of some of the students.

Other limitations exist in the needs assessment survey itself. The organization and wording of the survey left for open-ended answers which made coding difficult for some of the variables. Answers varied for these types of questions, which set limits on the analyzing of the data. Some questions were also left unanswered by the respondents.

Implications for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

Social workers in the school system serve as a good resource and support for students, families, and teachers. One aspect of the school social worker's role is to continue to link families to resources and provide parent education. Social workers can also serve as a link for

families to the school system, as well as outside agencies that might be helpful, particularly for parents who have children with special needs. The results of this survey indicate the importance of the school social worker within the special education system. Social workers should be encouraged to continue providing the support that parents need, whether it is emotional or informational support, or direct (actually talking with them) or indirect (connecting parents with outside resources and other parents) support.

One way to help improve parent involvement would be to do more periodic assessments, such as the needs assessment used in this study, to examine the current areas of need and interest that parents have and evaluate support and informational services. Recommendations for future research include a focus on further examining the impact of parental stress on parent involvement and possible ways to alleviate this stress. In addition it might be useful to explore the impact of having DLP Parent Meetings or similar services for families, and the benefits of such services for parents and children involved in special education. Policies could be implemented in school systems that encourage improved home-school relations and further support, information, and trainings to be provided to parents of special education students.

Appendix I

Dear Parent(s),

My name is Sarah Arnini. I am a social work student from Providence College and an intern in the Cranston Public School System. As part of my senior research I am conducting a survey of parents in the Developmental Learning Program and Integrated Preschool in order to help improve support services. In the interest of improving on the parent group meetings, I am asking you for your feedback regarding your experiences with the parent meetings within the school setting.

Whether or not you have attended these meetings, I would greatly appreciate any feedback that you have to offer. The information you provide will be used to help the school staff know how to best meet your needs. All personal identifying information will be kept confidential.

In keeping with the idea that your connection to your child's education is important, when you return the survey you will be entered into a raffle drawing to receive a fun and educational activity book that you can use with your child. Your child's initials (no full names please) on the survey will only be used for the purpose of identifying the winner of the raffle, and will be kept confidential. If your survey is chosen from this drawing you will be notified about when and how you can receive your book.

The drawing will take place on Wednesday, February 28, 2007. Please return the attached survey no later than Friday, February 16th.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can be reached Tuesdays at the Early Childhood Center at 270-8592 or Wednesdays at Garden City School at 270-8073. I can also be contacted by email. My email address is sarnin07@providence.edu.

Thank you very much for your time. Your feedback and responses will help shape the future Parent Meetings!

Sincerely,

Sarah Arnini
Social Work Intern

DLP Parents' Needs Assessment Survey

Child's initials: _____

1. Child's date of birth _____
2. Qualification for DLP classroom (condition or delay) _____
3. Your child's school (please check one):
4. _____ Garden City _____ Glenn Hills _____ Oaklawn _____ Stonehill
5. Your child's school day is a: _____ full day program _____ half day program
6. Your relationship to the child: mother / father / legal guardian / other
7. Your age: _____
8. Primary language spoken at home: _____
9. If you are employed, what hours do you normally work? _____
10. Are you aware when DLP Parent Group Meetings occur (*once a month*), providing information on a variety of topics regarding your child's education and topics relevant to parenting? ___ Yes ___ No
11. Have you attended DLP Parent Group Meetings? ___ Yes ___ No
If yes, how many DLP Parent Group Meetings have you attended? _____
If not, please explain what prevents you from attending:

12. *Location:*
At what location(s) were the meetings you attended held? (please check all that apply):
_____ Garden City _____ Glenn Hills _____ Oaklawn _____ Stonehill
Of the above locations, which is the best for you?
_____ Garden City _____ Glenn Hills _____ Oaklawn _____ Stonehill
13. Is there another location that you feel would be better? (Please list)

14. *Availability:*
What is/are the best day(s) of the week for you to meet? _____
What would be the best time of day for you to meet? _____
15. *Childcare:*
Do you have young children at home during the day? _____
Would you use child care provided by the school while attending a DLP meeting?

16. Do you have other children in special education programs or with special needs? ___ Yes ___ No

17. Where do you get most of your information regarding special education services and parenting?
(Please check all that apply)
___ Family ___ Friends ___ School System ___ Pediatrician ___ Other agencies ___ Internet
18. What is your main source of information regarding parenting a child with special education needs?

19. What factors would motivate you to attend a DLP Parent Group Meeting? (Please check all that apply)
___ Emotional support ___ Educational Information ___ To learn techniques to use at home
___ To become familiar with the school ___ Parent support from staff ___ To meet other parents
___ Other: _____

20. What would be your main reason for attending a parent group?

Please rate the following questions according to the scales provided. Write in any comments you have about the questions or your answers in the extra spaces provided. Feel free to use the back of this sheet for any additional comments.

21. Please rate how well you feel the *level of support* is that you receive from the following groups of people:

	None	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
a) Teacher	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
b) School Social Worker	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
c) Other School Staff	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
d) Family	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
e) Friends	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
f) Outside Agencies	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I

Comments:

22. How well do you feel you understand the special education services available for your child?

not at all	somewhat	enough to get by	good amount	very well
I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I

23. How interested are you in attending group meetings with other parents who have children with special educational needs?

not interested	somewhat interested	interested	very interested
I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I

24. Please indicate how interested you are in hearing about each of the following topics.

	not interested	somewhat interested	interested	very interested
a) <i>Topics specific to your child's condition</i>	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
b) <i>Information about the Individualized Education Plan (IEP)</i>	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
c) <i>Literacy (Reading)</i>	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
d) <i>Physical Therapy</i>	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
e) <i>Speech Therapy</i>	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
f) <i>Educational activities to do at home</i>	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
g) <i>Nutrition</i>	I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I

Please list any other topics you would be interested in hearing more about:

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