THE EDUCATIONAL PLACEMENT OF

CHILDREN WITH AUTISM:

WHAT DO PARENTS THINK?

by

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ABSTRACT

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The Educational Placement of Children with Autism: What do Parents Think? _____
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This study attempted to investigate the parental perceptions of inclusive placements of their autistic children. There were three main questions this study wished to answer: how parents felt about inclusion, the major benefits and drawbacks of inclusion, and the parents' satisfaction level of their child's educational placement.

The major benefits expressed by parents during this study included increased independence, support of teachers, and increased self-esteem. Drawbacks included exclusion of the functional living skills curriculum, inability to meet educational goals in the general education environment, as well as the fear of exclusion, neglect, and social rejection from general education peers.

Parental attitudes concerning inclusion varied depending on the severity of their child's disability and his or her educational goals. This study concluded that 66.7% of parents were satisfied with their child's educational placement.

ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Autism has been given considerable attention in the past decade. With the release

of the movie *Rain Man,* as well as publicity from organizations such as the National

Football League, the subject has been brought into our homes and our lives. In brief, the

term autism is used to describe a spectrum of disorders that is characterized by the

inability to interact and relate to others, speech and language difficulties, developmental

delays, and problems relating to environmental change.

The role played by parents of children with autism has been widely overlooked by

the general population. More specifically, the attitude concerning their child's current

educational placement, whether that placement is in an inclusive environment or other

educational setting, is rarely determined. Parents are instrumental in the education of their

child, as well as the driving force behind legislation, and subsequently, serve as advocates

for reform.

The movement toward full inclusion has become a debate among educators,

researchers, and parents. The Regular Education Initiative and the Least Restrictive

Environment have had an impact on students with disabilities, as well as within the field

of education in general. The debate concerning the educational placement of students

with autism centers not on whether the student will be better served educationally, but

whether the student will become more socialized with his or her general education peers

(Hamre-Nietupski & Nietupski, 1992).

In an inclusive environment, students with autism and other developmental delays make positive gains in the areas of friendship and socialization with their general education peers, but at what expense? Will the student's need to learn lifelong rudimentary living skills be met in the general education setting? It has also been established that general education peers benefit from the inclusion of students with disabilities in their classroom (Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997; Roeyers, 1996).

Parents' perspectives about the most beneficial educational placement for their child vary. Educational goals among parents range from the attainment of academic skills, to mastering functional living skills, or acquiring desirable social skills. These perspectives are the focus of this research.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the study was to investigate the parental perceptions of inclusive placements for their autistic children. Members of the Chippewa Valley Autism Society and other randomly selected parents of middle and high school aged children with autism within a 400-mile radius were selected to participate in this written survey conducted during the spring of 2001.

Research Questions

There were three main research questions this study wished to address. They were:

1. How do parents feel about inclusion?

2. What are the major benefits and drawbacks of inclusion to both disabled and nondisabled students?

3. Are parents satisfied with their child's educational placement?

Definition of Terms

The following key words were defined to further clarify the content of this research paper.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) – is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities and guarantees equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities in employment, public accommodation, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY) News Digest 15, 1997, p. 12).

Autism- refers to persons with significant social interaction impairments, communication problems, and repetitive, stereotypic and restricted interests and activities (American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), 4th ed.

Echolalia- the repeated use of spoken language out of context (Simpson, & Zionts, (2000).

Inclusion – integrating students with disabilities into the same classrooms, community, activities and resources, as students without disabilities (Sewell, 1998).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Public Law [PL] 105-17) – is a federal law that ensures a free and appropriate public education for children and youth with disabilities.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) – students with disabilities will be educated with students who are not disabled. Separate classes, separate schooling, or other removal from the general education environment may occur only when the nature

or severity of the disability is such that general education classes with supplementary services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (Simpson & Zionts, 2000).

Regular Education Initiative (REI) – "the integration of students with disabilities into the general education setting, accompanied by special education supports. The responsibility for the disabled students education is shared between general and special educators" (Sawyer, McLaughlin, & Winglee, 1994, p. 205).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 – this law provides individuals with disabilities basic civil rights protection in program and activities that receive federal financial assistance. The U.S. Department of Education's regulation implementing Section 504 applies to preschool, elementary, secondary, postsecondary, vocational, and other programs that receives or benefit from federal financial assistance (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY), Digest 15, 1997).

Assumptions

The researcher relied on the following assumptions when preparing the content of this research paper:

1. The researcher assumed that the teachers would distribute the survey to the parents in a timely and efficient manner, as agreed.

2. The researcher assumed that the parents would answer the questions accurately and honestly.

3. The researcher assumed that the parents would return the survey.

Limitations

        The sample size was small because autism is a low incidence category, therefore this researcher attempted to reach as many families within a 400-mile radius as possible.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

The literature review for this study includes a brief history of autism, the definition and characteristics of autism, and the educational challenges presented by autism. This review will also describe parental views on inclusion, as well as the parental perspectives of the educational placement for their child.

Children and youth with autism have been given considerable attention in recent years. With the release of the movie *Rain Man*, almost overnight the world became aware of autism. Information on autism began to appear in popular magazines and professional journals, as well as electronic media. The rising interest in autism has amplified funding for research and existing programs. The increased awareness of autism has also created an enhanced understanding for persons with this disorder (Sullivan, cited in Sewell, 1998).

Children and youth with autism may be classified using different terms, including pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), autistic-like, higher functioning autism disorder, and Asperger's syndrome (Simpson & Zionts, 2000). For this research, the term autism will be used.

History of Autism

In 1943, Leo Kanner, a child psychiatrist at John Hopkins University, wrote about 11 children who he had seen in his psychiatric practice over the course of eight years. These children demonstrated unique behaviors and characteristics, the most common being "severe and unusual disturbances in social relationships, language, and an intensive

need for repetition and sameness" (Sullivan, cited in Sewell, 1998, p. 235). Kanner

referred to these children as autistic in his article entitled "Autistic disturbances of

affective contact" (Kanner, 1943). Kanner first coined the term "autistic" from autos, the

Greek word for self, "representing the extreme aloneness seen in children with autism"

(Sullivan, cited in Sewell, 1998, p. 235). The characteristics that Kanner acknowledged

fifty years ago have changed very little over the course of time (Simpson & Zionts,

2000). Kanner's description of autism is still valid, highly instructional, and is still useful

today (Sullivan, cited in Sewell, 1998).

<u>Definition and Characteristics of Autism</u>

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th

Edition (DSM-IV, 1994), the category of disorders under which autism falls is pervasive

developmental disorders (PDD). Autism is often referred to as belonging in a "spectrum"

of disorders. Autism is a severe disorder of communication and behavior. It is a lifelong

disorder that usually appears during the first three years of life. It occurs in

approximately 15 in 10,000 births, ten percent are classically autistic, the most severe

form of autism. Autism is four times more likely to occur in males than females and

there is no known cause or cure for autism (Sullivan, cited in Sewell, 1998).

Characteristics of autism include: severely impaired speech or lack of speech.

Speech may vary from a whisper to unusually loud, fast speech; individuals may also talk

backwards or sing (Sullivan, cited in Sewell, 1998, p. 87). Echolalia is common in the

early years of life and half of all individuals with autism never speak. Other

characteristics include an impaired relatedness to other people, failure to develop peer

relationships appropriate to developmental level, inability to regulate facial expression,

body posture, or gestures for use in appropriate social interaction. Persons with autism may also become extremely distressed for no reason, especially with minor changes in the environment (Sewell, 1998).

Characteristics of autism also include inappropriate use of toys or other objects, often in a highly "repetitive or unusual manner," and often become compulsive over a particular object (Sewell, 1998, p. 241). Other characteristics of persons with autism include hyper or hypo activity, apparent insensitivity to pain, peculiar body motions, such as violent rocking, flapping arms or hands, finger flicking, and head banging. Many have excellent fine motor skills, while others have limpness in their hands and fingers. Some individuals walk with a gait, termed "toe walk" (Sullivan, 1998, p. 241). Individuals with autism may also react to outside stimuli, such as sounds or light, these individuals often either overreact or do not react at all. Seizures may also develop during puberty. Persons with autism often have average or above average intelligence which may accompany normal to superior skills, such as arithmetic, music, or memory (Sullivan, cited in Sewell, 1998).

The Nature of Autism and Educational Challenges

The nature of autism can make the education process a difficult one for students with this disorder. Educating students with autism requires an understanding of the unique characteristics of autism: cognitive, social, sensory, and behavioral deficits that characterize this developmental disability (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). The characteristic of autism has a direct and profound impact on the education of students.

Because of the spectrum of autism, there is no single treatment or educational program that is equally effective for every individual. Each treatment or educational program will need to be individualized, and teaching strategies employed to the specialized needs of the individual. Many professionals believe that individuals with autism respond to a highly structured environment (Autism Society of America, 1998). When the environment is structured, the student can comprehend and attend to instruction without distractions. Examples of structure include small group instruction, soundproof rooms, bare walls and workspaces, predictable routines, posted schedules, and predictable teaching methods (Mesibov & Shea, 1996).

Students with autism have unique learning needs that are rarely emphasized in the literature. These include difficulty with the organization of ideas, increased distractibility, inability to generalize from one situation to the next, and uneven strengths and weaknesses. These learning needs may be addressed through a structured environment and the development of consistent routines, such as systematic work habits, working and learning in community-based settings to improve generalization skills, and identifying what is distracting to the student (Mesibov, 2001).

The treatment plan or educational program should in part focus on those skill deficits that are absent because of the developmental delay. These include social skill development, training in functional and self-help skills, communication, behavior management, and sensory integration. Other programs and services that may be incorporated into the educational program are services such as speech and language therapy, physical therapy, specialized social skill and functional skill classes, and a structured behavior modification program (Autism Society of America, 1998).

One of the greatest barriers to the education of an individual with autism is communication. Lack of communication skills is one characteristic that is exhibited in almost all persons with autism and poses the most significant obstacle to overcome (Koegel, Koegel, Frea & Smith, cited in Koegel & Koegel, 1995).

Language is also often difficult and sometimes nonexistent for individuals with autism and is often the characteristic that sets them apart from the general population. The extent and severity of the language deficit depends on the severity and type of autism (Sewell, 1998). Individual communication techniques vary from person to person. If verbal language is nonexistent, other communication devices must be employed. These devices may include manual signing, communication boards, computerized language devices, and picture vocabularies. Verbal language does not develop in a small percentage of children with autism. It is estimated that only two decades ago 50% of children with autism developed functional expressive language. Early intervention and remediation of language development is essential (Prizant, 1983).

Instructional techniques that are effective with other students may be virtually ineffective for students with autism because of the immense area of language deficit. Instructional techniques such as verbal explanations of material and assignments, as well as social rewards such as "I'm proud of you", are often meaningless for students with autism (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). Students often have receptive language difficulty and cannot understand normal language cues. He or she may not be able to communicate appropriately with the teacher, possibly resulting in tantrums or aggressive behaviors (Mesibov, 2001). Teachers and peers usually look upon these types of behaviors in the general education classroom negatively.

Social interaction for persons with autism is often confusing and difficult. Interacting appropriately with others requires a wide range of adaptive skills that are often the most complex skills for someone with autism to learn (Sewell, 1998). With the combination of poor communication skills, behavioral difficulties, and the inability to interpret social cues, social interaction is often unsuccessful.

Because social interaction and communication are so difficult for a person with autism, it is important to teach basic social skills and behaviors. These skills include how to play and interact with others, appropriate social cues and personal space, tone of voice, and proper body language. Effective instructional procedures may include social stories and videotaping social situations, as well as and reviewing positive and negative aspects of the interaction with the student (Sullivan, cited in Sewell, 1998).

Self-stimulatory behavior, or stereotypic behavior, is another characteristic of autism and a challenge for education. This refers to such behaviors as hand flapping, body rocking, and loud vocalizations. Self-stimulatory behavior may be subtle, such as eye gazes or facial expressions, or very obvious, with violent rocking and loud vocalizations. Often the environment the student is in may encourage these behaviors. Students with autism perceive their environment differently than students with other disabilities or their nondisabled peers. The noise of the regular classroom may be too distracting or painful, the colorful materials on the walls overstimulating, and the physical organization of the classroom inadequate for identifying where to go or what to do. The result may lead students to have a sense of disorganization, agitation, and aggressive outbursts. These behaviors often interfere with relationships and learning (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). Many regular education teachers are not prepared or trained to

handle these types of behaviors (Koegel, Koegel, Frea, & Smith, cited in Koegel & Koegel, 1995). However, not all students with autism display disturbing behaviors.

Researchers now feel that there is a link between disruptive behaviors and communication. The behaviors serve as a way to communicate feelings and fall into certain patterns, such as avoidance of a task, activity, or situation. Children and youth with autism can now be taught replacement behaviors so that self-injury, aggression, and other behaviors can be avoided or prevented (Koegel, Koegel, Frea, & Smith, cited in Koegel & Koegel, 1995), thus making social situations and learning environments pleasant and productive. These characteristics, unique to autism, do not mean that children and youth with autism are incapable of learning. It does mean, however, that specialized instructional techniques are often necessary (Mesibov & Shea, 1996).

Another goal for the education of students with autism is independence and self-help/home-living, and employment skills. Although not academic in nature, these skills are extremely important to persons with autism. Not only will he or she be able to take care of him or her self by developing independence, they will be able to successfully integrate into the community. It has been argued that placing students with autism into full inclusion classrooms, students will not have the opportunity to learn these valuable skills, which will be detrimental for a person living with a disability (Mesibov & Shea, 1996).

Education Laws

The educational placement of students with disabilities has been a debate for many decades and is still going strong today. The civil rights movement of the 1950's paved the way for special education by increasing the scrutiny of the way children with

disabilities were educated in the United States. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that "separate but equal" had no place in public education. The landmark case, Brown v. Board of Education has become more than a racial segregation suit, it instigated a right-to-education movement for children with disabilities (Petch-Hogan & Haggard, 1999).

The civil rights movement helped to lay the foundation for the right of students with disabilities to attend and become included into school settings by ensuring that the principle of separate cannot be equal (Kellegrew, cited in Koegel & Koegel, 1995). In 1975, this principle became the basis for the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. This act gave each child with a disability the right to a free and appropriate public education.

Parents and advocates began to challenge the schools to provide their children with the "most appropriate" education in the "least restrictive environment" (LRE) (Petch-Hoggan & Haggard, 1999). As defined by IDEA, the "least restrictive environment provision requires that states assure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children without disabilities." Removal or separate schooling should only occur when the severity of the child's disability is such that the general curriculum cannot be modified to meet their educational needs (Sawyer, McLaughlin, & Winglee, 1994, p. 204).

During the 1980's, the interpretation of LRE began to change with the emergence of the Regular Education Initiative (REI) by the United States Office of Special Education and the Rehabilitation Services in the U.S. Department of Education. The REI called for the marriage of special education and general education services. Will (1986)

proposed that students with mild and moderate learning and behavior problems would be best served in the regular education classroom, as long as specialized educational services were provided. According to Will, the Regular Education Initiative called for a "shared responsibility" between general and special educators. Not long after the introduction of the REI, advocates for persons with severe and profound impairments began supporting and advocating for educational placements in the regular education classroom (Zinkil & Gilbert, 2000). Inclusion has since become an outgrowth of the Least Restrictive Environment and the Regular Education Initiative.

In 1990, Public Law 94-142 was reauthorized as IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The reauthorization included several amendments, which increased the rights of students with disabilities to be educated in the regular classroom (Petch-Hogan & Haggard, 1999).

An important amendment was added to IDEA in 1990. Autism was added as a handicapping condition for the first time, making it an official disability. This required schools to provide appropriate educational services for students diagnosed as autistic. Because autism was added to IDEA as a handicapping condition, it has allowed children from low-income families to become eligible for Social Security and Medicaid. The collection of benefits provided much needed assistance to children and their families (Sewell, 1998). IDEA began to strengthen and has become the backbone of special education.

IDEA has been amended several times over the last two decades. The latest amendment came in 1997 (P.L. 105-17) and brought many changes to the law (NICHCY, 1997). The new amendments to IDEA specifically included parents in the process of

decision-making on eligibility and educational placement. IDEA also modified the transition services for students with disabilities. Beginning at age 14, and annually thereafter, the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) must contain a plan of the transition services required. The new amendment also stated that at the age of majority, the student must be informed of their rights under the law. Other amendments included the reevaluation process of students with disabilities, requiring parents to give their consent before an evaluation could be performed. The 1997 IDEA amendment also established mediation as a primary source for resolving conflict between the parents of a child with a disability and the school. Along with the mediation amendments, discipline and behavior issues were also rectified. These particular changes in the law were quite complicated.

Supportive Parental Views On Inclusion

Although the concept of inclusion has been around for decades, the term inclusion is relatively new. Inclusion refers to the practice of educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom setting. Special education services needed by the student are provided in the general education setting (Zinkil & Gilbert, 2000).

The past twenty-five years have brought about tremendous change for education. Although many people play a vital role in the system of education, it is the parents who have historically been the driving force behind the many changes that have occurred in the educational delivery and placement of children with special needs (Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, & Widaman, 1998).

However, parental views held on the inclusion of their children into general education classrooms have been greatly mixed. Several studies (Palmer, Fuller, Arora, &

Nelson, 2001; Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, and Widaman, 1998; Garrick Duhaney &

Salend, 2000) have indicated that parents and advocates are choosing sides in the debate

over the appropriate educational placements for their child (Palmer, et al., 2001).

Almost all parents are aware of the option of inclusion for their child, however, it

cannot be assumed that all parents are supportive of the inclusion model. While a large

majority of parents favor inclusion, a significant minority of parents are resistive to it

(Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, Widaman, & Best, 1998). This research will explore both the

opposing and supportive views held by parents and their preferred educational placement.

The reasons that parents choose or resist a particular placement for their child

varies from parent to parent (Garrick Duhaney & Salend, 2000; Palmer, Borthwick-

Duffy, Widaman, & Best, cited in Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001). Attitudes

regarding educational placement are complex, however, parental satisfaction is most

often linked to the perceptions that their child has a sense of well-being in the general

education class, as well as the presence of a caring teacher (Giangreco, Cloninger,

Mueller, & Ashworth, cited in Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001). A study

conducted by Palmer, Borthwick, Duffy, Widaman, and Best (1998) found that parents of

children with severe disabilities were more likely to have a positive perception

concerning inclusion if the parents placed a high value on socialization as a goal for

education, have children with higher functioning cognitive skills, have previously spent

time in general education, and have few behavior problems and/or require minimal

specialized services.

Parents of disabled and nondisabled students feel that there are many benefits of

educating students with disabilities in the regular education classroom. In a study

conducted by Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline, & Morrison (1995), students aged 5 to 20 years with moderate and severe mental retardation, showed signs of academic and social gains by being fully included in the general education environment. Parents who took part in the study stated that their children's attitude about school had changed since their inclusion into the general classroom. Examples of the positive academic gains included learning and using new concepts and completing homework assignments. Positive results were also found in the areas of social interactions and behavior skills. Parents found that their children became involved in extracurricular activities, developed friendships with nondisabled peers, and increased overall social skills. Parents also documented positive gains in behaviors, such as increased self-confidence, independence, and basic classroom skills such as taking turns, sharing, and staying on-task. Students also demonstrated more self-control and coping skills in negative situations.

Other studies (Garrick Duhaney & Salend, 2000; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999) have also found positive gains in both academic and social skills of students with disabilities included in the general education environment. Increase in positive self-identity was also found in persons included in the general education environment (Stainback, Stainback, East, & Sapon-Shevin, 1994).

Along with the positive outcomes found in the Ryndak et al. study (1995), Salend and Garrick Duhaney (1999) found that parents were satisfied with the progress of the Individualized Education Placement (IEP) goals for their child, as well as their child's increased motivation to learn. Salend and Garrick Duhaney also found that students with severe disabilities increased their social contacts and developed greater, lasting

friendships. The study also found that peers looked upon students with behavior problems less favorably, thus making social interactions difficult.

Arguments for the inclusion of students with disabilities have been derived from benefits found both academically and socially. Advocates contend that students with disabilities are held to higher standards of academic and social behavior in the regular education classroom. They feel the increased standards are important because it has been found that students who are disabled are less likely to graduate from high school, maintain employment, or live independently, compared to their nondisabled peers (O'Neil, cited in Daniel & King, 1997).

Benefits of Inclusion For Disabled and Nondisabled Students

The research on the benefits of nondisabled students, when educated together in the general education classroom with students with disabilities, has positive benefits for students with and without disabilities (Staub & Peck, 1995). Students with disabilities have the opportunity to develop friendships with their nondisabled peers, increase social and academic skills, and develop a sense of belonging to a group.

Nondisabled peers receive many benefits by welcoming peers who are disabled into their classroom. These benefits include a decreased fear of human differences, growth in social cognition and understanding of individual differences and disabilities, improvement in self-concept, development of personal principles, and a better understanding of oneself (Staub & Peck, 1995).

Current research indicates that the inclusion of peers who are disabled into the general education classroom has no adverse affects on the educational, social, and

behavioral outcomes of nondisabled students (Sharpe, York, & Knight, 1994; Staub & Peck, 1995; York, Vandercook, MacDonald, Heise-Neff, & Caughey, 1992).

Resistive Parental Views On Inclusion

As previously stated, not all parents or educators favor inclusion. Several studies indicated that full inclusion into the general education classroom may be detrimental to the education and interest of the child (Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001; Simpson, 1995; Simpson & Sasso, 1992). Although some witness the merits of inclusion, as the previous section implies, are the victories of a few the rational placement for *all* students with disabilities?

In a study conducted by Palmer, Fuller, Arora, and Nelson (2001), parents of students with severe disabilities were given a survey to identify reasons why they were supportive of or resistive to inclusion. Written comments from parents who were resistive to inclusion within the general education environment included the belief that the benefits from participation may be impossible because of the severe needs of their child. These needs may include medical attention, sensory impairments, lack of self-help skills, lack of language, and seizures due to conditions such as cerebral palsy.

Additional reasons given by parents who were resistive to inclusion included a feeling of overburdening the general education teacher and students. Many parents felt that it was impossible for general education teachers to adequately fulfill the needs of their child while also fulfilling the needs of the rest of the class. Parents also felt as though their child would be a distraction to the other students and impair their ability to learn. They also expressed the need for an emphasis on a functional and life skill curriculum. Additional comments also included a fear that their child would be

mistreated, neglected, socially rejected, and /or would not receive the individualized attention that he or she required, or as specified on the Individualized Education Plan. Many parents felt that the over stimulation of the general education environment would not be conducive to learning by either their child or the general education students. Parents whose children displayed the most significant disabilities were less likely to favor inclusion than were parents with higher functioning children (Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, Widaman, & Best, 1998).

Parents who were supportive of an inclusive learning environment indicated that their child would learn more due to increased expectations of teachers, as well as a more stimulating, challenging, and learning environment. Parents also commented on the benefits of inclusive education, such as increased social skills and friendships with general education students. Parents felt that there was a benefit for general education students as well. These benefits included friendships with disabled peers, exposure to disabilities, and increased self-esteem (Palmer et al., 2001).

Many professionals and parents of autistic children believe that the characteristics of the disability are unique and students should have completely separate and specialized programs (Simpson, 1995). However, many proponents and advocates of full inclusion contend that the full inclusion of students with disabilities "is the moral and just thing to do" (Stainback & Stainback, cited in Simpson & Sasso, 1992, p. 1).

Full inclusion has been advocated for every child without "proper consideration for the individual needs of the students" (Simpson & Sasso, 1992, p. 3). These needs are seen as secondary to the exposure to their normally developing peers and the general education environment. Social and friendship issues have replaced the much-needed

functional life skills that students with disabilities need to survive within the context of life. These proponents and advocates have initiated the full inclusion model "not on what is known to be true or in the best interest of the student, but instead, how they would like things to be" (Simpson & Sasso, 1992, p. 3). Many advocates have placed students with autism into the general education setting without regard to the specialized curricula and assistance that many students with autism require because of the unique characteristics of their disorder (Simpson, 1995).

The full inclusion model is based on the equity of educational advantages of students with disabilities; however, the full time general education environment is not appropriate for all students with disabilities (Simpson & Sasso, 1992). Although full inclusion for some students with autism may be inappropriate, many students may be placed in the general education environment when provided the proper supports. Examples of supports required may include: the services of a paraprofessional, reduced class size, modification in curriculum and materials, and general education teachers experienced in working with students with disabilities. It has also been suggested that by speaking with the general education class about the student and his or her disability before he or she is included into the class, this discussion may enable general education students to feel more at ease with the student and situation, making it more conducive to foster friendships and become a comfortable learning environment (Simpson, 1995).

Students with autism may present significant challenges to general education teachers and often require very individualized education and behavior strategies and/or academic management programs. These challenges include high frequency and high-intensity self-injurious and/or aggressive behavior, aggressive behavior toward other

students and teachers, behaviors that may impede the education of other students. Alternative placements could become an option. Extensive collaboration with the special education teacher and paraprofessionals is often necessary to accommodate and include the student into the general education environment (Simpson, 1995). The consideration of full time inclusive environments should be on a case-by-case basis. Individualism is important, and the basis for the Individualized Education Plan, and special education in general.

Educational Placement

Parents of children with autism have rarely been asked their opinions about their ideal educational placement for their child (Kasari, Freeman, Bauminger, & Alkin, 1999). Parental opinions on the proper placement for their child vary greatly and often evoke a wide range of emotions. The decision to place students into full or part-time inclusive environments is often dependent on several factors. The severity or diagnosis of the disability and the age of the child are often considerations in the decision making process (Kasari et al., 1999). Children with mild disabilities are most often placed in full time general education classes, where more moderate or severe/profound students are served in a traditional day class/resource room setting with very little integration into the general education environment (Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001).

A study conducted by Kasari et al. (1999) examined the perceptions of parents toward inclusion of students with Down's syndrome and students with autism. The study specifically looked at the parent's satisfaction and perceived advantages of their child's educational program. This study also examined the parental desire for changes in their child's current educational placement.

The first major finding in this study was that parents of children with autism were less likely to choose full time inclusion for their child. Parent's written comments stated that their child's specialized service needs could not adequately be met in the general education environment, especially the highly structured environment that most students with autism require. Parents also worried that their child may be ridiculed because of social interaction difficulties characteristic of students with autism. However, parents chose part-time inclusion for selected academic and nonacademic interactions. In contrast, parents of students with Down's syndrome wanted full inclusion for their child because children with Down's syndrome respond well to social interactions and change.

This study also found that parents of students with autism viewed a teacher who was specially trained to work with their child, or students with disabilities in general, to be an advantage to their child's program, while parents of students with Down's syndrome viewed general education peers to be an advantage in their child's placement.

The second major finding of this study was that the child's age had a direct influence on parent's perceptions on the most appropriate educational placement for their child. Parents of younger children viewed inclusion as the appropriate option, wanting their child to develop socially acceptable behavior and create friendships with their peers. Parents of older students were less favorable toward inclusion as an educational placement because they felt the severity of the child's disability or behavior issues may hinder the success of the inclusive placement. Parents also desired a functional life skills curriculum so that their child may become independent and flourish in community and work opportunities (Kasari et al., 1999).

The third major finding was that 40% of parents were not satisfied with special education as their child's current educational placement, and desired to change their educational program. However, parents of all students in special education were more likely to recognize teachers (but not the curriculum) as the advantage to the program (Kasari et al., 1999).

Parent's instructional goals for their children varied with age of the child and level of severity (Epps & Myers, 1989). However, many parents and professionals have begun to emphasize the development of friendship/social relationships between disabled students and their nondisabled peers as the most important educational objective (Hamre-Nietupski, 1992).

In a study conducted by Hamre-Nietupski, Nietupski, and Strathe (1992), sixty-eight parents of children with moderate/severe/profound disabilities were surveyed to determine the value parents placed on program preferences for their child. The educational programs listed included functional life skills, academic skills, and friendship/social relationship development. This study found that parents of students with moderate disabilities believed instruction in functional academics and life skills would be more beneficial to their child, however, all areas were rated high. Parents of students with severe and/or profound disabilities rated friendship/social development the highest, perhaps due to their child's limitations and level of functioning. Parents of severe/profound students also preferred inclusion into the general education environment to receive friendship/social development. Parents of students with moderate disabilities wanted their child to be educated within the special education environment (Epps &

Myers, 1989). The implications for this study illustrate that parents value different

educational goals for their children.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

<u>Introduction</u>

This chapter described how the subjects were chosen for this study. It also described the assessment tool, and explained the procedure for the collection of information.

<u>Selection and description of subjects</u>

The subjects for this study were the parents of middle and high school students with autism. The parents were selected through contacts obtained from friends and colleagues who worked with students with autism or had knowledge of families that had a son or daughter with autism. This researcher also telephoned middle and high school special education teachers in the area. The Chippewa Valley Autism Society was also contacted. All parents and students remained anonymous to the researcher. There were seventy-five parents who were given the survey.

<u>Instrumentation</u>

This researcher developed a survey to obtain specific information needed for this study. The survey questions were influenced by current research reviewed by this author. The questions on this survey were designed to be simple and non-time consuming while gathering information about the child's age, educational placement, parental feelings about educational and IEP goals, benefits of placement, teacher communication, and their child's current level of self-esteem, friendship, and social skills. There was also a section for parents to add additional comments if desired.

The survey consisted of ten questions, which the parents circled or checked the correct answer(s) which applied to their child.

A cover letter was also provided with the survey which explained the identity and educational background of the researcher, how the researcher would use the information, statement of parent anonymity, and a declaration of consent for participation in the study. Parents were asked to return the survey within two weeks of receipt. A copy of the finalized instrument is found in Appendix A.

Procedure for data collection

The first step in this procedure was to obtain the names of the teachers and the addresses of the schools in which they taught. Contact was made with the special education teachers to inquire whether they would participate in the study by distributing the survey to their students' parents.

The surveys and cover letters were then copied. They were placed, along with a self-addressed stamped envelope and cover letter, into sealed business sized envelopes. The surveys were then placed into a large manila envelope addressed to the teacher. A personal letter addressed to each teacher was included in the manila envelope. The letter explained the purpose of the research, educational background of the researcher, how the research would be used, the benefits of the research, and instructions on the distribution of the survey. The manila envelopes were then mailed to the special education teachers.

The second step in the procedure was the distribution of the surveys. Teachers distributed the surveys to the parents of their students with autism. This was accomplished by sending the sealed envelope home with the student.

The Chippewa Valley Autism Society also distributed surveys. This researcher was invited to attend a meeting in March, 2001 where surveys were distributed to parents. The Vice President also distributed surveys to the parent members who were not in attendance. Parent anonymity was maintained throughout the meeting.

Parents mailed the surveys back to the researcher using the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope provided.

Procedures for data analysis

Descriptive statistics, using frequencies and percentages, were used to analyze the data and address the research questions.

Limitations

Possible limitations to the collection of the research data were:

1. The sample group was small, therefore limiting the generalizability of the findings.

2. Survey return was dependent on parent's willingness to participate.

CHAPTER FOUR

Analysis of Results

<u>Introduction</u>

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the results of parental responses from an educational placement survey given in the spring, 2001. This chapter includes a description of the data collected and statistical information of the results. For a complete description of the survey, refer to Appendix A.

<u>Results</u>

This survey was distributed to parents via their child's teacher. There were seventy-five surveys distributed. Of the seventy-five surveys, thirty were returned, constituting a return rate of 40%.

<u>Question 1</u>: *What is the age of your child?*

The age selection ranged from 12 years to 21 years of age. The reported mean age of the children was 14 years of age.

<u>Question 2</u>: *What is your child's current educational placement?*

Over 33% of parents indicated their child received general education with aid from a special educator or assistant. Almost 17% of parents identified special education with (some) inclusion into general education as the current educational placement of their child. A little over 13% said that general education with specialized services was their child's placement.

Question 3: *Do you feel your child's IEP goals are being met in his/her current placement?*

Over three-fourths (76.7%) of parents stated that the goals on their child's IEP were being met. Over 23% stated that IEP goals were not being met for their child.

Question 4: *Do you feel you are able to adequately communicate with your child's teacher?*

Over 83% of parents stated that communication was adequate with their child's teacher, while 16.7% stated that communication was inadequate.

Question 5: *What do you feel are the most important educational goal for your child?*

Almost half (46.7%) of parents chose functional living skills as the most important educational goal for their child, 26.7% chose social skills, and 23.3% chose academic skills.

Question 6: *Does your child have friendships with general education peers of the same age?*

Nearly half (46.7%) of parents stated that their child has friends in general education, 43.3% of parents stated that their child did not have friends in general education, while 10% of parents did not know whether their child had friends in general education.

Question 7: *Has your child increased his or her social skills by being included in regular education classes?*

Sixty percent of parents stated there was an increase in social skills, 26.7% of parents stated there was not an increase in social skills, and 10% of parents stated that their child was not in regular classes.

Question 8: *Do you feel your child has increased his/her self-esteem by being included in regular education classes?*

Seventy-three percent of parents stated that there was an increase in the self-esteem of their child, while 16.7% of parents stated that there was not an increase in self-esteem. Ten percent of parents stated that their child was not in regular education classes.

Question 9: *What do you feel are the three (3) greatest benefits of your child's educational placement?*

Seventeen percent of parents stated that increased independence was the greatest benefit of their child's placement, while 14% of parents state that the support of teachers was the second benefit. Twelve percent of parents stated that increased self-esteem was the third greatest benefit to their child's educational placement.

Question 10: *Are you satisfied with your child's current educational placement?*

Two-thirds (66.7%) of parents were currently satisfied with their child's placement, while 23.3% of parents were not satisfied with their child's current placement. Almost 7% of parents were uncertain about the satisfaction of their child's placement.

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The perception of parents toward the educational placement for their child will vary depending on many factors. These factors include the severity of the disability, age of the child, and the parent's general reaction to the learning environment in which their child will be placed. The parent's reaction of how their son or daughter will be treated within the educational program by the general education students and teachers will also be a factor in choosing an appropriate placement.

Although the movement toward inclusion has become an emotional topic for parents, educators, and other professionals, the primary decision in the placement of the child rests on the parents. Because of the varied placement options available for students with disabilities, parents must establish educational goals for their child so that the most beneficial and appropriate placement may be provided. Educational goals include functional life skills, academic skills, and friendship/social relationship skill development.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the parental attitudes of their autistic child's educational placement in the middle and high school setting. A written survey was sent to selected parents within a 400-mile radius of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. This investigation wished to address several questions. These included the attitudes parents felt toward the inclusion of their child in the general education environment, the major

benefits and drawbacks of inclusion to both disabled and nondisabled students, as well as the level of satisfaction parents felt about the educational placement of their child.

The survey used for this study was developed by this researcher to obtain specific information for this study. The survey used in the present study (Appendix A) asked ten questions and also provided a space for additional comments from parents. The survey questions were influenced by current research conducted by Hamre-Nietpski, Nietupski, and Strathe (1992). The results obtained from this study closely resembled the results of their research.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicated that the parents who participated in this survey were satisfied with their child's current educational placement. The returned surveys indicated that 33.3% of parents chose general education with the aid of a special education teacher or paraprofessional as their child's ideal placement. Benefits of the inclusive placement chosen by parents included an increase in social skills, self-esteem, independence, and friendships with nondisabled peers. Parents surveyed also felt that their child's IEP goals were being met in the general education environment.

This research indicated that 46.7% of parents chose functional life skill development as the most important educational goal for their child, followed by 26.7% choosing social skill development, and 23.3% choosing an academic placement for their child.

A similar study conducted by Hamre-Nietspki et al. (1992) surveyed parents of students with moderate disabilities. Parents chose functional life skills as the most appropriate goal for their child, followed by social skill development, and academic skill

acquisition. Parents of students with severe/profound disabilities chose friendship/social skill development as the appropriate goal.

Research collected for this study demonstrated somewhat mixed results in parental attitudes toward inclusion. The study conducted by Hamre-Nietpski et al. also established that parents who regarded friendship/social relationship skill development as the primary educational goal usually chose general education as the ideal educational placement for their child. In contrast, parents who wanted their child to be involved in a functional life skill curriculum valued an individualized education, such as special education placements. Parents who chose special education services also chose part-time inclusion with selective academic and nonacademic settings to enhance social skill development with nondisabled students.

Current research (Kasari et al, 1999) also suggested that the age and severity of the child might be a consideration for the placement of students in inclusive environments. The survey conducted by this author did not request the level of severity of the child as a determinant for educational placement.

There are many factors to consider in the educational placement of students with autism. Because the spectrum of characteristics vary, it is extremely difficult to advocate for the full inclusion of *every* child with autism. Full inclusion of every child, regardless of his or her level of functioning, violates the concept of individualized education in particular, and special education in general.

The educational program of students with autism should contain a balance between functional life skill development, social skill training, and the development of relationships with same age, nondisabled peers. This balance should become the priority

of educators and advocates so that students with autism may learn the functional life skills needed to survive. Students will become independent adults in the community and work setting, while still acquiring the social and friendship skills that are required to integrate into society. Social skills are particularly difficult for individuals with autism and it is important that students develop these skills.

The construct of special education is that each child should be looked upon individually. Students should be placed into the most appropriate environment on a case-by-case basis.

Recommendations for further research

It is the recommendation of this author that further research is needed concerning the education of children with autism. If this researcher was given the opportunity to reconstruct this survey, there would be a delineation of severity (mild, severe, profound) and specific questions concerning which skills (functional, social, academic) were most important and why. A brief written explanation of the parent's thoughts on the importance of these skills would be required. This researcher is also curious about whether parents have ever received outside assistance from agencies such as the Wisconsin Early Autism Project or have ever enrolled their child in behavior modification programs such as Lovaas. This would be another question that would be asked.

Recommendations to the field

Because a structured environment is important to almost all students with autism, it is the recommendation of this author, from research as well as personal experience working with students with autism, that teachers construct as much structure in the

learning environment as possible. Examples of simple structural changes include uncluttered walls and classrooms, a schedule of the student's daily activities taped to the student's desk as well as written on the board, and verbal announcements when the schedule or activity is going to change.

Because communication is vital to the child's education, parents and teachers should communicate with each other by phone or written communication, such as in a daily parent/teacher communication notebook. Parents should discuss their child's educational goals with the teacher, as well as concerns that they may have. There are many small, but significant accommodations that both parents and teachers could implement to ensure educational success.

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Appendix A

Educational Placement Survey

Please circle or check all that apply.

1. What is the age of your child?
   12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21

2. What is your child's current educational placement?
   ___General education only
   ___General education with specialized services (for example speech therapy)
   ___General education with the aide of a special education teacher or assistant
   ___General education and resource room
   ___Special education and included in general education for recess, lunch, physical education, and home economics
   ___Special education only

3. Do you feel your child's IEP goals are being met in his/her current placement?
   Yes   No

4. Do you feel you are able to adequately communicate with your child's teacher?
   Yes   No

5. What do you feel is the *most* important educational goal for your child?
   ___Academic skills
   ___Functional living skills
   ___Social skills
   ___Other – Please specify: _____

6. Does your child have friendships with general education peers of the same age?
   Yes   No   Don't know

7. Has your child increased his/her social skills by being included in regular education classes?
   Yes   No   Not in regular education classes

8. Do you feel your child has increased his/her self-esteem by being included in regular education classes?
   Yes   No   Not in regular education classes

9. What do you feel are the three (3) greatest benefits of your child's educational placement?
   ___Curriculum
   ___Feelings of acceptance
   ___Increased independence
   ___Increased self-esteem
   ___Peers as friends
   ___Peers as role models
   ___Support of teachers
   ___Support of services
   ___Other_____

10. Are you satisfied with your child's current educational placement?
  Yes   No   Uncertain

Thank you for your time and participation.

Please feel free to use this space for any additional comments.