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INCREASING THE INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS
OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN BY
ESTABLISHING A PARENT
RESOURCE CENTER

by
Anne S. O'Donald

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate
Division of Rowan College
1996

Approved by
Professor

Date Approved 5/7/96

ABSTRACT

Anne S. O'Donald

Increasing the involvement of parents of special needs children by establishing a Parent
Resource Center

1996

Dr. Jay Kuder, Advisor

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of a parent resource center, with related activities, on the parental participation of special needs children. Surveys consisting of seven questions were used as the initial data collecting instrument. Thirty five parents received these surveys. Twenty one parent surveys were returned. Information gathered here yielded percentages of parental participation during the last school year. (1994-95)

Personal interviews were accomplished at school, at homes or by telephone at the discretion of the parents. These percentages gave numbers for the present school year. (1995-1996)

When results from the survey and the interviews were compiled the following results were shown:

- (1) Use of the parent resource center by parents of special needs students increased by 33% for this school year, as compared to last school year.
- (2) The indicators with percentages remaining the same or nearly the same for both school years were:
 - a. Parents feel welcome at school.
 - b. Parents participating as room mothers or volunteers.

c. Parents who chaperone trips.

d. Parents who attend Back to School Night.

Results show we see many of the same parents participating each year.

(3) Results for two questions involving parental participation at conferences and after school activities were questionable. It became obvious during the personal interviews that some questions had been misunderstood on the written survey.

Within one year, with basically the same number of participants in most activities, the parent center showed a positive increase of 33 percent. With time, and strengthening and lengthening the outreaches and directions of the center, the writer feels that a parent center can be a means to a much needed and desired end.

MINI - ABSTRACT

Anne S. O'Donald

Increasing the involvement of parents of special needs children by establishing a Parent
Resource Center

1996

Dr. Jay Kuder, Advisor

Research Seminar in Special Education

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of a parent resource center on the school participation of parents of special needs children. A survey was used initially to provide baseline numbers of previous involvement. Personal interviews with parents followed to determine if the center had been successful in improving attendance at various school functions during this school year. Results from both procedures are discussed within this study.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Parent participation, parent involvement, parents as partners, and parent conferences are terms which are heard frequently by all educators. We are told that when parents become involved in their children's education, students get better grades and test scores, are better behaved, finish high school more frequently and will more likely go to college.

Parent resource centers are very popular right now as a way to enable families and schools to work together. These centers provide parents with a space set aside for their use at school. Use of the centers may be limited to a particular area or need. Or it may involve broader uses, such as, parent social gatherings or special interest group meetings. Making parents feel welcome in their child's school is a primary goal. The California Department of Education (1994) has formulated some advantages of a parent center as follows:

- * Making the school an accessible, safe and friendly place for parents to gather.
- * Improving communication between families and schools.
- * Promoting greater multicultural understandings.
- * Demonstrating tangibly that parents are welcome at school.
- * Having a wide range of home-school activities that enhance student learning.
- * Coordinating parent volunteer services that are available to

teachers and the school.

If parent involvement is known to be so beneficial with regular education students, perhaps we should be spending more time devising ways to involve parents of our special needs students. In my experience, many times you only see these parents when their children are having disciplinary problems at school. This, of course is a very negative experience for everyone involved. We should be doing something to get these parents physically into and actively involved in their child's school life, but in a more positive way. We feel parent involvement is important, yet it is not always happening. The Family Involvement Partnership for Learning found that forty percent of parents across the United States felt that they did not spend enough time attending to their children's education. For the purpose of this study, I have defined "involvement" as: Using the parent resource center, attending parent conferences, volunteering as a room mother, chaperoning a class trip, attending "Back to School" night and participating in other various school activities.

Research shows that when parents get involved, their children:

- * Get higher test scores and better report card grades.
- * Will be more likely to graduate high school and go on to college.
- * Have less discipline problems and view school with more positive attitudes.

U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley says, " We believe that strengthening the connection between families and schools is so important that we have made it one of America's National Education Goals. The Goal declares that by the year 2000, 'Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of children.' "

This quote was taken from a brochure from the Family Involvement Partnership of the U.S. Department of Education. This organization includes over one hundred education,

business, community and religious organizations nationwide. Its steering committee developed a plan of five goals, which are: (1) Increase the awareness of the need to strengthen parent involvement, (2) Develop a shared commitment by parents, schools and the community, (3) Develop the capacity for the partnership to work, (4) Identify programs and practices that successfully connect the partnership, and (5) Support the development of benchmarks that assess the progress toward these partnerships.

This organization offers publications, videos and books as aids to progress toward these goals. Also, the fourth week in November has been named National Family Week.

At the John Fenwick School, the percentage of families attending parent conferences and activities like Back to School night is much higher in the regular classrooms than that of the special education classrooms. Many times it can be difficult enough to involve the parents of our high achieving and gifted children, due to time constraints and working parents. At least we feel efforts will probably be made by these parents to attend activities that will tell of the glowing strengths or talents of their children. For parents of our underachievers and any at-risk populations, it becomes doubly difficult to get these parents involved. No one enjoys or goes out of their way to attend negative situations. This leads into my research question: Can we improve the parental involvement of parents of special needs children by establishing and operating a parent resource center?

The hypothesis of this study is that parents who participate in a parent resource center become more positively involved in the school life of their children. In my experience, I have seen where these parents have negative feelings toward school due to negative school conferences and suspensions of the children. In addition, I have heard them say "I didn't think I was needed," or "I didn't think I could do anything to help." To

make matters even more difficult, quite often there is not a telephone in their house. Home visits or letters are necessary. When you think about, parents and teachers have basically the same goals for the children. That goal is to have children succeed.

Sometimes parents do not know how to help their child. This is where the idea of a "lending library" enters the picture for parent education and involvement. By loaning appropriate materials for use at home with the child, we can help parents see the benefits and how important their involvement can be. The center could suggest appropriate books to be read to children at different developmental levels. The importance of this activity is well known inside and outside of educational circles.

For the purpose of this paper, a parent resource center is defined as a room or space set aside to facilitate parent involvement. The center used for this study was opened in the spring of 1995 during parent conference week as a lending library. Activities are being added to provide involvement opportunities to parents. These activities can give parents the confidence and capabilities to become directly involved with their children's schooling.

Improving parental involvement will be evaluated by using a survey at the onset of the study and individual family interviews to conclude and assess the impact of the center on the parents of our special needs children at the John Fenwick School in Salem, N.J..

Flaxman and Inger (1992) feel that the age of having parents' only link to school as being the annual conference, is over and parental involvement should be integrated to school improvement and restructuring, not just remedial intervention.

In chapter two I will review the literature dealing with the topics of parental involvement, parent centers and the effects of each in education, forming a basis for my study.

Chapter three will present my research study addressing the question of whether

or not we can involve the uninvolved parents of our special education children.

Chapter four will be a presentation of the data collected. This data includes information gathered through two approaches: surveys of seven questions used in September and personal interviews done in March, using the same parents and the same seven questions.

Chapter five will analyze and discuss the results obtained from chapter four as a summary of the findings.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The importance of school and family connections is documented by the vast and still growing amount of literature available on this topic. We've been told when parents get involved in their children's learning, the children achieve greater success in all areas of their schooling from attendance to going on to higher education.

Much of the research deals with the less educated or minority parents who cannot or do not want to become involved and will be discussed later in this chapter. Epstein and Dauber (1991) suggest we should look at teacher attitudes and practices as indicators of parental involvement instead of just the parents.

These researchers used 171 teachers in 8 inner-city elementary and middle schools to study the relationship between parent involvement programs, and the teachers' attitudes and practices that were used to involve parents. They felt that many studies will continue to show only that more educated families are more involved, until researchers begin to include some measures on teachers. This study used the following five types of parental involvement in their reports from teachers:

1. Basic obligations of families include providing for their children's health, safety, and building positive home conditions to support school learning and discipline. Schools help families with the skill areas needed to do these things.
2. Basic obligations of school include communication with families on school activities and children's progress. Types of obligations will vary and need to be understood by all families.
3. Involvement at school means coming to school to support school activities. Schools can change schedules so more families can participate.

4. Involvement of learning activities at home includes the school providing information on skills at each grade level on how to monitor, discuss and help with homework.
5. Involvement of parents with real decision-making should include the school providing training for parents with the skills that would be needed for this to effectively occur in some cases.

Although some of the five types overlap, most practices used to involve families fall under one of the above.

Generally teachers in both the elementary and middle schools in the sample had positive attitudes about parent involvement. A ten item scale, scored 1 to 4 for negative to positive attitudes had a mean score of 3.07. Some results were as follows:

- (1) Attitudes were more positive for self-contained classroom teachers.
- (2) Teachers with more positive attitudes place more importance on conferences and communication with parents. Also these teachers have more success with hard-to-reach parents.
- (3) There was no significant correlation found between types of involvement and percentages of students with below average ability.
- (4) Teachers with fewer years of experience have slightly more communication with parents.
- (5) Teachers feel they are strong supporters of parent involvement. They also feel they are stronger supporters than their colleagues and much stronger than their parents and community.

There were greater discrepancies between teachers and parents when there were weaker programs of the 5 types of parent involvement described earlier. If teachers feel parents

are not interested, there is less communication. Middle school teachers communicate less than elementary teachers. Middle school parents receive less communication when they need it the most. Teachers of certain academic subjects, particularly with English and reading, involve parents more than teachers of other subjects.

This study shows evidence that strong school programs relate to the teacher's sense of the importance of parent involvement. Teachers say that parents and community members do not support parent involvement, but surveys of parents in some schools contradict the teachers' beliefs about parents. My personal experience attests to the fact that some parents are not involved, do not become involved or cease their involvement due to teacher attitudes. What we can say is that most teachers and administrators want to involve their families, but may not know the right way to go about it. Epstein's (1995) guidelines for current involvement practices and redefining them to involve all families may be a way to chart that course. Her framework for Six Types of Involvement and Sample Practices include:

Type 1- Parenting- Helping all families establish home environments to support children as students.

Type 2- Communication- Designing school-to-home and home-to-school forms concerning programs and progress.

Type 3- Volunteering- Recruiting and organizing parents for help and support.

Type 4- Learning at Home- Providing information on how to help students at home with homework and related topics; such as, decision-making and planning.

Type 5- Decision-making- Including parents in school decisions to develop parent leaders and representatives.

Type 6- Collaborating with Community- Relating community resources and services to school families.

Epstein addressed these six types of parent involvement by redefining them and providing specific challenges to be met:

1. Parenting:

Challenge- Providing information to all families, not just those who attend school functions.

Redefinition- "Workshops" for parents should mean more than having a meeting. It should be providing information to be viewed, read or heard in varied forms.

2. Communication:

Challenge- Establish two-way channels of communication with consideration for non-English speaking parents.

Redefinition- Using many channels of communication to join parents, students, schools and communities.

3. Volunteering:

Challenge- Making sure all parents are included when recruiting volunteers, so everyone will feel their time and talents are important.

Redefinition- Volunteers should mean anyone who is involved with student learning and/or school goals. (Not just those individuals in the school building, during the school day).

4. Learning at Home:

Challenge- Create a form of interactive homework, so students are responsible for discussing it with their family and parents are made aware of course content.

Redefinition- "Help" at home to mean support, discussion, and guiding, not "teaching" school work.

5. Decision Making:

Challenge- Include students, whenever possible, and any other group active in school life, with input from and return of information to all parents.

Redefinition- Decision-making is a process of shared actions toward shared goals.

6. Collaboration of Community:

Challenge- Contributions from the community should be matched to school goals.

Redefinition- Community should mean any neighborhood interested in or influencing school life. It should be judged by it's strengths, not by the high or low social/economic factors of it's families.

Epstein's expected results of the Six Types of Involvement for Students, Parents and Teachers are condensed below:

For students, certain practices will affect students' skills and scores, while other practices will influence attitudes and behaviors. Expected results for parents included leadership in decision-making and confidence about their parenting skills. For teachers, the expected results were two-fold. They included understanding of families and improved parent/teacher conferences.

With the above "do's" in mind on teacher attitudes, practices, challenges and redefinitions, Nicolau and Ramos (1992) list the following don'ts for educators:

- * Don't design programs to suit the convenience and tradition of the school.
- * Don't place parents in the role of students being taught in school.
- * Don't assume that parents have no knowledge or strengths to bring to the home-school partnership.
- * Don't tell parents they have to change the way they're rearing their children. Instead, offer them skills that they can add to their traditional ones, especially if these skills are embedded in a specific culture or ethnicity.

Finders and Lewis (1994) studied Latino and Anglo neighborhoods

and found certain factors that teachers need to consider when dealing with various ethnic groups. The following were deemed the most important to be understood by teachers:

- (1) Diverse economic and time constraints. Many parents work at physically exhausting jobs and their family comes first. If there is time left over, then parents can attend meetings.
- (2) Diverse linguistic and cultural practices. Teachers should not have children translate for their parents at conferences. Placing children in this equal role with adult status goes against some cultural norms.
- (3) Diverse school experiences among parents. Parents may have negative, personal experiences from their own school years. And limited schooling makes it very difficult to help their children with school work, in addition to the language barrier. These linguistic and ethnical differences may put up barriers for parent involvement.

In general, educators must understand that there are barriers in any community and be aware of them to understand them. One cannot assume that the absence of parents at school means noncaring parents. Besides understanding values and concerns of others, perhaps we should also realize that involvement is going to mean different things to different people.

Some parents may care deeply about the education of their children, but are just not "joiners", as found by Vandegrift and Greene (1993). As external evaluators for the Arizona At-Risk Project, they were involved with pilot projects that were required to involve parents. Involvement was not predefined, as each district used different means for involvement. Some typical types were workshops, newsletters, social events, counseling and volunteer programs. After one year of "wonderful events" families still did not come. It was realized that schools do not always know what parent involvement really means. They sometimes just look at the number of parents who were or became

actively involved and were observable. But they found that schools with large at-risk populations have a range of involvement. They decided to define "involved" as having two components. First, parents who are supportive and encourage their children's education. Second, parents who are active, or doing something observable. As was expected, lack of participation was the biggest problem. The study continued, but parent interviews were added. A major discovery was that many parents wanted to learn English. So English as a Second Language (ESL) classes were started.

These classes enabled parents to feel more capable of helping their children with schoolwork. They were also more likely to participate. Hiring parent advocates was suggested as a means to help parents fill their own needs. Results from the four year study revealed that activities for parents should range broadly and include non-threatening and low- commitment opportunities. When parents felt more comfortable with themselves, they began to feel more comfortable in school and involvement grew.

As was previously discussed, definitions of parent involvement are dependent on the group of people being discussed. No matter which definition is used, certain populations are grossly underrepresented. These groups involve low-income, minorities. With the vast amount of literature showing positive relationships between student achievement and parent involvement, the need to address this issue and work with our families is clear.

Jeffers and Hutchinson (1995) tell us that by the year 2010, the nation's largest minority group will be our 39 million Hispanic people. They surveyed 140 school districts in California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas to see how they communicated with their quickly rising population of Hispanic parents. Only 48 school officials responded. But they could enumerate several successful strategies:

- * Make sure all written communications go home in Spanish as well as English.
- * Convey school news via church bulletins.

- * Employ bilingual school personnel.

- * Keep in mind their strong sense of family and how it governs both the immediate and extended family.

Voltz (1994) suggested that one of the greatest concerns pertaining to culturally diverse learners is that of the high percentage of these children in classes for the mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed.

There are socioeconomic factors which may also negatively impact on the partnership of school and culturally diverse parents. This population is disproportionately represented among our nation's poor. Parents who are struggling financially to provide for their families may not have the time and energy to give to home-school relationships or a desire to do so.

How racial, ethnic and cultural characteristics of the Black community affect children's achievement is examined in a study by Perry (1993). She suggests that African-American student school achievement should relate to the extra cognitive, social and emotional skills that these children must have to be successful in school. Also of importance is the understanding of how African-Americans have traditionally thought about the reasons for learning.

She explains that African-American children need to meet the demands of three conflicting roles: Their role in mainstream society, their role as a racial minority and their role within the Black community to be successful adults.

Perry feels they not only need to assume their roles, they need to possess membership in these groups, of which some are in opposition to the host, white society.

History has shown that African-Americans connect education to their fight for citizenship or as a prerequisite for leadership. They don't visualize school as simply a place to learn. Again we can see a need for a new definition, one that values education and motivation to achieve. African-American children should see biculturalism as a

normal experience. We must begin to restructure our schools to accomodate diversities of cultural and ethnic origins.

Harry, Allen and McLaughlin (1995) studied African-American parents of special education preschoolers in a large urban school district. The main question they addressed was: What factors affect parents' participation in the early years of children's special education placement? They felt something happened to cause the low level of partnership. The study had 4 main objectives:

- (1) To identify the parent's expectations of their children's early education.
- (2) To observe changes from the present to first grade.
- (3) To observe actual participation of parents.
- (4) To compare the data between two groups of parents.

Three schools were chosen because they included a wide range of socioeconomic groups, had general and special education preschool programs, and their administrators were agreeable to the project. Interviews and observations were used to investigate the parent's views.

Parental participation included homework supervision, "dropping in" to the classroom, attending IEP meetings, notes and chats with teachers. Parents relied on their child's teacher as a information source for their child. Over the three year period of this study all of the above parental input decreased except for homework monitoring.

Findings revealed five aspects of teacher behavior which proved to be deleterious to parent participation and trust:

1. Inflexible scheduling of IEP conferences and late notices of the IEP date. The state requires 10 days notice prior to meetings. Several times parents reported only 2 or 3 days notice before the scheduled meeting. Parents who could not attend were told not to worry, all the paperwork would be sent to them.

2. Limited time allowances for meetings or conferences. Teams varied in flexibility. Observations of meetings showed that 3 of the 4 committee managers did allow longer meetings when the parent came prepared with questions and concerns. However, other more involved cases of annual reviews were quite brief. Conferences held by the fourth team always ended before or close to the allotted time slot of thirty minutes. This occurred even if the review was not completed. Parents were advised to meet with their child's teacher for further discussion.
3. Emphasis on documents, not participation. Most of the parents felt that their main role at the meeting was to sign the papers. Observations revealed participation usually meant listening, perhaps a question or two and signing papers.
4. The use of jargon. In all meetings, the unexplained jargon of code classification or educational jargon of testing results was evident.
5. The power structure. It is implied by the way that the professionals report and the parents listen, that the professionals are the authority figures. They use the power of kindness to deter parents from continuing with an expression of dissatisfaction. The power of the group overpowers any attempt by parents to offer a different view. The power of manipulation of professionals using their knowledge and the power of need for the parents to understand, makes disagreement seem impossible at times for the parents.

Conclusions from this research indicated four areas to be addressed by professionals. First, parents should be involved in decision-making, not just signing papers. Parents became distressed by lack of communication throughout the assessment and placement. By the end of the third year, there were decreasing levels of parent involvement for more than half of the parents.

Second is the impact of labeling. Terms that described a particular problem seemed less stigmatizing than general impairments. Parents of lower socioeconomic status, many times, will not agree to a "disability" because their deficit may have a broader spectrum of normalcy.

Thirdly, when professionals allow no deviations from the law regarding parent involvement, parents get the feeling that their input is really not that important. And parents were not encouraged to be proactive and vocal on issues.

The fourth implication is that parents are often seen as adversaries, rather than allies. Due process in special education may make this more likely. Flexibility is also discouraged by the separateness of special education and general education decisions.

Findings show the need for new models of collaborations with parents and more of a focus on parent empowerment, than on parent advocacy. New models of professional behavior would be needed as early interventions to move forward, rather than continue to show an obstacle facing parents on one side and professionals on the other side.

Further, Grandlund and Bjorck-Akesson (1995) studied perceptions of parents and professionals in Sweden on the types of family involvement in assessment and early intervention. The Social Services Act allows that all children and families have the same rights of equality, solidarity, security and democracy. A new act assures more support and services for those with disabilities, in addition to the Social Services Act. The purpose of this study was to analyze the participants perceptions of parental involvement in the habilitation process.

Subjects were 139 professionals and 73 parents of special needs children. Rating scales were used to assess four dimensions of family involvement: (a) parent participation in decisions about the child's assessment process, (b) parental involvement in child assessment, (c) parental involvement in the team meeting and decision-making, and (d) provisions of family services.

Both groups expressed their feelings to have parents exert more influence in the process of assessment and intervention. But, there was a difference between how families were currently involved and how they should be involved. Discrepancies were evenly distributed over the four areas of parent involvement for professionals and

parents.. This indicated the perceptions of these two groups differed on critical points. System barriers were identified along with the reasons for the discrepancies. One barrier was that professionals have usually worked toward the goal of child development. Now they were told to be more family-oriented. They may not be competent with family focused skills. Parents have been used to a subordinate role, and now may be hesitant to the new demands on competence in parents as well.

Assessment may begin with a survey of total family needs rather than just the needs of the child. This would get parents involved from the start. Collaborative goal setting, promoting parental involvement could then be used to further parent empowerment.

Another study by Dunn and Tucker (1993) looked at differences in adaptive functioning and maladaptive behavior related to the quality of family support. When Black children have to adapt to two different cultures, behaviors considered adaptive in one, may be deemed maladaptive in the other.

Participants in the study were the primary caregivers of 107 Black children, including 54 second graders and 53 eighth graders. These children of whom 42% were girls and 58% were boy were involved in an after-school program. This program had been designed to improve the social and academic functioning of low-income children with a mean GPA of 2.5 or below. Most of the caregivers were women.

The Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale (VABS) instrument was administered to each child's caregiver to assess the child's adaptive functioning and maladaptive behavior. Also used was the Family Relationship Index (FRI). It measures Cohesion, Expressiveness, and Conflict in the family and is administered to caregivers. A questionnaire was used to determine annual income and whether or not a father figure resided in the home.

Results showed a mean score of 19.3 (SD=4.6) family support score, which was slightly above the norm. Only 36% of the cases had a father figure in the home. The

standard or mean adaptive functioning score was 87.7 (SD= 14.3), which was .79 below the group's mean score (100.1).

An analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used on the data to determine if the functioning and behaviors were associated with quality of family support, father figures presence or absence, grade level and gender. A finding was that Conflict was the only factor of quality family support that was a significant predictor of Black children's maladaptive behaviors. So parent training, family counseling and involvement of father figures should be considered to promote Black children's adaptive functioning and lessen their maladaptive behavior. Findings like this can empower parents to help with their children's academic, emotional and social problems.

Family literacy is another intervention that has been suggested for total family empowerment. An entire issue of *The Reading Teacher* (April 1995) is devoted to the theme of Family Literacy, with articles highlighting the importance of family involvement as follows:

Shanahan, Mulhern and Rodriguez-Brown (1994) Describe Project Flame, a family literacy program for linguistic minority families. It successfully helped Latino parents support their children's school learning. Family is central in the Latino culture, so meeting family needs is a must for success. Project Flame provided ESL to parents, along with basic skills classes and was based on four assumptions:

- (1) A supportive home environment is necessary to literacy learning.
- (2) Parents can have a positive effect on their children's learning.
- (3) Parents who are successful learners are effective teachers of their children.
- (4) Literacy is the subject most likely to be influenced by social and cultural aspects of the family.

These parents want to help their children who are not doing well in school, but do not know how to do this. They need to be shown exactly what is expected of them and how they can help their children at home.

The program allowed parents to become more comfortable with school personnel. Once this happened, they participated more actively in regular school functions.

Other articles in this issue deal with programs that can help us learn to design more culturally sensitive programs, hopefully lending to greater family literacy and parent involvement.

A literacy program to enhance parent involvement was developed in Australia by Cairney and Munsie (1992). The Talk to a Literacy Learner (TTALL) project began in the urban community of Sydney. Prevalent problems here were lack of family support, high unemployment, drug problems, vandalism, crime and high rates of family breakdown. Two major goals were to increase parent participation and to introduce parents to literacy practice related to school success. Three different stages were spread over a period of 18 months:

Stage 1: Identify and train 25 parents to interact more effectively with their children and make greater use of literacy resources within the community.

Stage 2: Train 15 of these parents with more advanced skills and deploy in the school to tutor children.

Stage 3: Train selected parents from Stage 2 to act as community tutors.

The 25 parents in the initial program and their 34 children served as the main subjects of the evaluation. Selected randomly were 75 more students to serve as central group for comparison.

A variety of qualitative and quantitative measures were used for evaluation. Pre and post test information was gathered for all experimental and control group students.

This included the ACER Primary Survey comprehension and vocabulary tests and the ACER Spelling test. A reading attitude test was also used.

Small group interviews were conducted. Observations of class, group and home interactions were taped. A written survey was given to all parents at the end of the program.

The following are some results that were found:

(1) The parents' families were affected. At the end of the program, 79% of the parents said they now organized their homes to better enable learning of their children.

(2) Parents gained a greater understanding of schools. Observations showed more parents working in classrooms and other areas of the school.

(3) Children's performance levels, attitudes and interests were affected.

It was expected that the children would benefit, but especially significant gains were made in comprehension for grades 4 and 5. ($F[1,20]=14.483, p<.001$).

This finding was especially encouraging since it was not the focus of the study.

(4) Development of more positive attitudes of teachers toward parents.

Teachers revealed they now had a better understanding of the role that parents play in their children's education.

Approximately 100 schools in Australia are now using the TTALL program. It has been proven highly successful in creating a greater sense of partnership between school and parents in educating their children.

We see parent involvement declining as students grow older. The need for educators to do their part to control this is discussed by Stouffer (1992) and Epstein and Connors (1992). Strong involvement at the elementary level should be a positive predictor of involvement at the secondary level. In addition to the usual indicators of communication, parent activities and obligations of school, family and teacher; this article provides more reasons to involve families.

1. A school should be a center of community and act as a provider of services or services referral for their families.
2. School facilities should be open after school hours for community use.
3. Booster clubs operating under the Board of Education can supplement school finances.
4. School improvement committees could use the talents of parents. (i.e., construction, landscaping, painting, etc.).
5. Parents can be valuable resources in regard to bond referenda and committee work.

The literature research thus far has been gathered from a variety of sources, including professional journals and magazines. It shows the importance of parent involvement from preschool through high school.

A book by the National Committee for Citizens in Education covers 66 studies, reviews, reports, and analyses of books on getting families involved in their children's education. I chose certain ones that were relevant and/or had similar indicators to my research study, discussed in Chapter 3.

Comer (1988) found that typical schools, with authoritarian structure, cannot give underdeveloped or differently developed students the skills and experiences that will enable them to fulfill expectations at school. Instead, such students are labeled "bad", unmotivated or stupid.

Back in the 1960's Comer was looking at the difference between children's experiences at home, those at school, and how they affected psychological development. He initiated an agreement for a study with two New Haven schools, whose populations were 99% Black and mostly low-income families. The schools ranked low in

achievement and attendance and had serious problems with discipline and staff turnover compared to the other 31 schools in the district.

An important principle in Comer's program was that children learn from people to which they have bonded. Expectations of families may be vastly different than those of teachers. Some behaviors may be punished at school and expected at home, such as "fighting back."

By the time a child reaches third grade, they begin to see how they and their families are different in income, culture and style from people at school. This can make the needed bonding very difficult. The school must promote positive interaction between parents and staff. A governance and management team is led by the principal and consists of elected parents, teachers, support staff and a mental-health specialist. This team decides issues involving the school's academic and social program, in addition to, school procedures. They had three rules to guide them:

1. Team members recognized the authority of the principal, but the principal had to weigh the concerns of all before making any decisions.
2. Efforts were made to problem-solve, not to blame others.
3. Decisions were made by consensus, not by vote.

The team created a mental health group to work with the emotional and behavior problems of many students. Programs emerged to fill the needs of students.

During the first five years, behavior problems declined, attendance records improved and student performance neared grade level. By 1984, fourth-graders in these two schools ranked third and fourth highest on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. According to Comer, there have been no serious discipline problems during the past ten years.

Dauber and Epstein (1993) surveyed 2,317 inner-city, elementary and middle school parents. The parents were asked questions involving their attitudes and

perceptions of schools, their practices at home and their preferences for programs. Over 50% of the parents in each school responded. Indicators measured were:

- * Parent involvement at the school building.
- * Parent involvement with homework.
- * Parent involvement with reading at home.
- * Total involvement -- Frequency of all types of involvement.

Parents also rated the schools on their parent involvement practices. Other measures weighed parental attitudes.

The authors found that parents of elementary children are more involved than parents of middle schoolers. This is due largely to elementary teachers doing more to involve the home and school. Regardless of the socioeconomic status or grade level, parents will get involved more often, if they feel their school involves them with homework and reading at home and at school. Parents want to be told how to help their children at home. Inner-city parents also want to see their children's special qualities developed.

Epstein also used parent involvement to find its effect on student reading achievement with fourteen elementary school teachers. She analyzed data from 293 third-and-fourth-grade students, who took the California Achievement Test (CAT) in the fall, then again in the spring. Their teachers were divided into three categories: (1) those who used parent involvement frequently, (2) those who used parent involvement infrequently, and (3) "confirmed nonusers." Multiple-regression analysis was used by Epstein to find effects of student and family backgrounds, teacher quality, parent reaction and student effort. When fall and spring scores were compared, Epstein found that teacher leadership in parent involvement at home, positively and significantly increased reading achievement. Also, parents reported they found out more than they knew about their child's instructional program, due to these partnerships.

The importance of these partnerships are described in a book by Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman and Hemphill (1991). These researchers studied 32 low-income children in grades 2, 4 and 6. All families were English-speaking, but the sample was varied by family size, educational level of the mother, employment status of parents and household income. These families were studied for two years. Data came from school records, interviews and observations in homes and school. Student achievement was measured by tests of word recognition, vocabulary, writing and reading comprehension. Three models were designed for organization:

1. "Family as Educators" looked at the literacy environment of the home and how it had a significant effect on children's word recognition and vocabulary.
2. "Resilient Family" gives children self-confidence. Children's writing was most strongly related to this model.
3. "Parent -School Partnership" deals with formal parent - school involvement. Formal involvement was defined as PTA membership, attending school functions and volunteering . No other variable had a stronger effect on all four literacy skills.

The authors give three reasons for this effectiveness:

- (1) Parents better understood the school environment and could better prepare the children.
- (2) It gave children the feeling of the importance of school.
- (3) It highlighted student potential in the eyes of the teacher.

A follow-up study was done when these children were in 7th, 9th and 11th grade. There was a dramatic drop in student performance. The researchers feel this decline was due to the reduction of formal home and school contacts and a lessening of the cooperative relationship between the teacher and the parents.

In her book, *Developing Home-School Partnerships*, Swap (1993) discusses her four elements if the partnership between home and school which are:

1. Creating two-way communication: Parents and teachers decide on expectations for children.
2. Enhancing learning at home and at school: Producing environments that support the importance of learning.
3. Providing mutual support: Schools help home with social services and parents support schools in various ways.
4. Making joint decisions: There is joint problem-solving at every level, whether it be child, classroom, school or district.

To obtain this partnership, Swap suggests three approaches to use:

1. Establishing a Limited Partnership for Children's Learning. This could include workshops by teachers for parents.
2. Building a Comprehensive Program: Networks of Mutual Support: Offer school and program options for different ethnic groups.
3. Restructuring Schools for Partnership and Student Achievement: Transfer the school into a community whose goal is to provide success for all students.

A multiethnic, low-income school district in Texas was able to form a collaboration between school social workers, families and community.

A coalition called PRIDE (Positive Responsible Individuals Desiring an Education) formed between the school district and the Walter Richter Institute of Social Work. Ethnic populations included 59% Hispanic, 37% Anglo and 4% African-American. The local telephone company, Chamber of Commerce and local alcohol and drug abuse agencies joined the coalition. The program included case management, consultation for teachers and parents with social workers, a referral system to connect families to needed social services and a tutoring program. The focus was on pre-K and high school levels. Logs were kept of all collaborations, all students were screened and tested. Preschoolers were given the Pre-Language Assessment Skills Test. At the high

school level, attendance, discipline referrals, credits earned graduation rates and standardized test scores were used.

Impressive results were shown for high school students with severe academic and social adjustment problems, including drug abuse. For the pre-K program, records show a one-stage gain for limited-English students. All of the students increased their preschool readiness scores. The district also showed a decrease in the high school drop-out rate from eight to six percent of their at-risk students.

Increasing student success by increasing parental involvement was also documented in the Quality Education Program (QEP) in Mississippi. Since 1982 QEP has been begun in California, Indiana and Maine. In 1989 the State Department of Education selected low-income, predominantly African-American populated schools to implement QEP. At that time, 87% of parents were not involved in their children's school life. More the 70% of the students were functioning below grade level on student achievement tests.

Components of the QEP Program include:

- * Teacher and Administration Training.
- * Parent Seminars.
- * Home-School Activities.
- * School Community Effort.

Control districts were matched on basis of poverty, drop-out rates, ethnicity, and the Mississippi Basic Skills Assessment Program. (MS-BSAP) scores. The evaluation was based on:

1. Baseline data for both control and experimental groups on the percentage of parents attending conferences, monitoring student homework and attending school events.
2. Survey questionnaires and evaluation instruments.
3. BSAP scores before QEP was begun, compared with performances

two years later.

The statistical analysis showed a 65.8% increase over the baseline data and by 45.3% over the control schools. Dropout rates decreased by 5.3% over that period.

An exception to all of these success stories was a study done by White, Taylor and Moss (1992). They analyzed 193 programs utilizing early intervention. Validity of the results were tested against the following standards:

- * Subjects were chosen from a stratified sample and randomly put into two groups.
- * Demographics and family functioning were deemed comparable for the two groups.
- * Any special circumstances were noted that might interfere with the comparability of the groups.
- * The alternative interventions were discussed and confirmed for proper usage.
- * A central location was used for assessments and given by experienced testers.
- * Groups remained unaltered from pre-test to post-test.

White et al. focused on one type of parent involvement, that of "parents as intervenors." This term was defined as "parents teaching developmental skills(e.g. motor, language, self-help) to their children.

Of twenty studies covered three involved a direct test. Only one of these had a positive effect on children in intervention compared to those who received no intervention. For the other 173 studies, the authors used statistical analysis and found only a few studies met the validity criteria. They found no significant effect for intervention versus no-intervention studies.

They concluded that the vast number of claims which link parent involvement with student success are without a basis and more defensible research is needed to support such findings.

Another approach to parent involvement studies was done by Wong (1990). She studied child-rearing practices from different cultural, racial and language minority homes. Their influence on school performance was studied. Five different racial and ethnic groups were investigated. The children from Appalachian and Chinese-American homes were able to be successful because the middle class values and learning models stressed at home complemented those taught at school. Children from working class Black, White and Mexican-American families did not perform well because they learn by observation and imitation, not by direct instruction or coaching. Wong feels that early childhood programs that tend to promote socialization skills, to be more like the mainstream are detrimental to the children and their parents. They give parents a feeling of inadequacy in their child-rearing practices. Children need to have a strong hold on their primary cultures to adjust successfully to new environments. We need to build on the home experiences of our students and provide new experiences needed for school life.

Two studies dealing with values and behaviors of Indochinese families and the effect on their children's education were done by Caplan et al. (1992) and Mitsomwang (1993). They found that strong family values and behaviors, not cultural and religious beliefs, influenced high academic success of their children. Both groups of researchers identified the following practices in the Southeastern-Asian culture and related to high achievement:

- * Parents read to children either in English or their native language.
- * Families believe in the ability to master their own fate.
- * Willingness to help children and intervene at school.
- * Education is the key to all success.

A longitudinal Study of Children at Risk (LSCAR) was done by Reynolds et al. (1993). Ninety five percent of the 1,235 students included were African-American and five percent were Hispanic. Indicators of the families proved quite diverse from the typical stereotypes and are as follows:

- * 60% were high school graduates.
- * 55% were married.
- * 16% owned their home.
- * showed positive attitudes toward school.

This study sought to discover the factors that contributed to school success at the end of the sixth year.

Observations, interviews, surveys standardized tests and schhol records were all used. Response frequencies and correlational analysis were implemented to describe schools, families and children.

Parents showed satisfaction of their children's school, even when 75% of the children were scoring below the national average. Parent satisfaction was a better predictor of student achievement than the level of parental involvement. Authors suggest three reasons for this:

1. Feelings by parents that other schools are worse.
2. Teacher/parent rapport is more important than academics.
3. Parents may be satisfies too easily.

If parents feel satisfied with their children's schools, they will feel comfortable, welcome and more willing to become involved. Toward this goal, many schools have begun parent centers.

Davies (1992), president of the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) and director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at Boston University, suggests parent centers as a say to get parent involvement. A parent

center in Boston welcomes parents with ESL and GED classes, breakfast for fathers and a referral service for agencies.

Davies gives examples of other activities in which a parent center might be involved:

- * Referral services to social services, housing and health agencies;
- * A clothing exchange and a school store-on-a-cart.;
- * A small library of books and toys for children.

He also lists requirements for a workable parent center:

- * physical space.
- * adult-sized tables.
- * paid staff of parents.
- * a telephone.
- * coffee pot, hot plate, snacks.

Clichy (1991) talks about a special Parent Center in Buffalo, New York, where "Welcoming" is the center's first objective. The center is located in part of an office building in the downtown area. It serves 75 schools and is open from 8a.m. to 8p.m.. The schoolsystem provides buses in the evening. The center offers it's families nine different programs. The Parent -Child Computer Program gets everyone familiar with the machines. They teach keyboarding and word processing skills, along with reading and math software use. Then first to third graders and their parents move to the housekeeping and arts and crafts area. Fourth through sixth grades participate in a variety of different programs. Grades seven through twelve use the computer for business related skills. The center also has an Even Start program for parents and their preschool children to develop parenting skills. They watch teachers working with children, then they model the process themselves. There is an ESL program for help with English language skills. Also available is an advanced computer program which is operated jointly with State University College at Buffalo. The center has 120 portable

computers to use at home. Parents are trained carefully on all aspects of computer use at home beforehand.

Parent workshops are offered eight times a year in various areas of curriculum. Parents are given materials along with teacher guides to use at home with their children. In addition, there are classes in health, aerobics, sewing, art and painting.

Brock and Dodd (1994) provide a very interesting and comprehensive article on organizing centers. A family lending library is a way to promote literacy development and get parents involved with school at the same time. To begin, one needs to gather information on the families, by using surveys, questionnaires, interviews and home visits. Information on hobbies, interests, age spans involved and family ethnic and cultural backgrounds is vital when organizing a library. Today, many families have audio and video cassette recorders. Teachers could prepare demonstration cassettes on reading aloud to children on any topic relevant to a child's or family's needs.

Toys can also be added to the Family Lending Library and demonstrated, before lending out. Parents will better understand how children grow and learn. They will also be able to choose more appropriate playthings for ages and levels.

Operational procedures are discussed in relation to funding, hours of operation, accessibility, location and evaluation.

All of the studies discussed in this chapter can be separated into two different types of research. There were studies that looked at various programs and other interventions. There were also ones that investigated the characteristics home environments and their effect on student performance and learning. Except for the study done by Karl White and others at the Utah State University, they all concluded that the collaboration of home and school is a great benefit in many ways. This conclusion is and has been very well documented for a long time. Yet the implementation of this collaboration is not widespread enough. Many schools still claim poor parent

participation, even when the literature tells us that we must do more to change this. When children are very young, parents can benefit from programs that teach parents how to help their children's growth. At the elementary level, good study skills and having high expectations have been shown to be important areas. And when parents stay involved into the high school years, their children's quality of work improves and they are able to plan more effectively for the future.

The Parent Resource Center at the John Fenwick School in Salem, New Jersey was begun for the same reasons and with the same objectives as those schools used in the literature research above. The center was implemented to help all children with it's lending library of assorted learning materials and related activities. The target population for this study was the parents of students with special needs. It was felt that this group was even less likely to become involved. Activities and projects were planned and the center opened. The desired cause and effect was to increase the parental involvement of the special needs children, which studies show enable the children to become happy, healthy students who are more likely to realize their potential.

CHAPTER 3

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Subjects: The families involved in this study all reside in Salem City, New Jersey. It is a small city, surrounded by mostly rural areas. Its population according to the 1990 census was 6,883. This includes 46.87% White, 50.95% Black and 2.18% Other, within an area of 2.75 miles. Its unemployment rate was 11.1% with 19.8% of the total households being on public assistance.

Only parents whose children were enrolled in self-contained special education classrooms were used for this study. Racial distinctions of these 35 parents were: 25 Black, 7 White and 3 Hispanic. With the exception of three children, investigation of socioeconomic backgrounds found that the families participated in the free or reduced breakfast and lunch programs at the school.

The center is a small room across from the main office at the school, and is shared with the Big Brother, Big Sister program. This room was the only available free space, but the location is easily accessed as parents enter the building. This area is also where kindergarten parents wait to pick up their children. So, many times literature involving relevant parent issues are displayed here for parent perusal or distribution.

The center began as a lending library. Parents were encouraged to borrow learning materials to be used at home with their children. Inventories of available materials for loan were distributed to teachers before conference time. This enabled teachers to recommend materials to parents that could help with any problem skill areas their children were having in school. A large budget was not necessary. Materials to be loaned were purchased with funds from a mini-grant and New Jersey Pride in Education assistance funds. In addition, teachers were asked to donate any materials that were no longer being used in their classrooms. So, outdated materials were recycled, instead of being thrown away or left in the back of a closet.

The committee organized and opened the lending library. Parent volunteers were trained and by the end of the year, they were operating the center.

When school opened for the 1995-1996 school year, the Parent Involvement Committee applied for more NJEA assistance funds for further development of the center. Funds requested were to be used for more materials to lend to parents, guest speakers for workshops and school/family activities. The following activities were developed and implemented by the parent involvement committee to expand the outreach of the Parent Resource Center and improve parental involvement.:

1. "Let's Get Together"- In September, parents, board of education members, child study team members, and the complete faculty and staff at the school were invited to an informal "Get Together." The objective was to improve home-school relations. Participants were asked to bring their ideas and their appetites. The ideas were needed to improve home-school relations. Appetites were needed for the catered luncheon.
2. Invite a Dad to Lunch Day- Previous lunches with mothers and grandparents had been successful. This was a joint effort between the Parent Resource Center and the Parent Teacher Association.
3. Discipline Workshop - This was in response to a survey asking parents what topics they would like addressed. The speaker was from the ERIC facility in Sewell, New Jersey.
4. Massage Therapy Workshop for Children - Designed to teach parents how to help their children relax, communicate better with their child, reduce stress and possibly help child with emotional problems, ADHD and aggression.
5. Trip to Rowan College - Trilogy by Ballet South of New Jersey (Snow White, Peter and the Wolf and St. Elmo's Fire) Reduced rate tickets available with free transportation.

Procedure: In order to determine the effect of the center on parent participation, questionnaires were developed. A questionnaire was sent in September of 1995 to parents of special needs children. The questions formulated and used were as follows:

During the past year have you:

1. Felt welcome, very welcome or not welcome at John Fenwick School? _____
2. Attended parent conferences? _____ How many? _____
3. Been a room mother or volunteer at our school? _____
4. Chaperoned a trip? _____
5. Attended Back to School night? _____
6. Used the Parent Resource Center? _____
7. Enrolled in any after school activities for parents and children?

Parents were also asked for suggestions on how to increase their participation and how we could help them.

They were sent to parents of children, who were classified multiply-handicapped, perceptually impaired or educable mentally retarded. Thirty five parents received questionnaires. Because of some families having more than one child enrolled in special education classes, the number of children affected was 43.

The questionnaires were hand delivered to special needs children in their classrooms. An explanation was given on what would occur upon receipt of returned forms. The children were told that when completed questionnaires were returned to school, they would be given a special treat as a reward for returning these important papers. Of the 35 surveys sent out, 21 responded by returning the questionnaires. A copy of the survey appears in Appendix A.

Interviews were done later in the school year with the 21 parents who responded

initially. Numbers and classifications of students change during the year, due to different placements, reclassification, transfers, etc.. Only those parents who responded to the September questionnaire and whose children were still classified were asked for an interview.

The parents were then asked their preferences for time, date, and location for the interview. A copy of this form is located in Appendix B.

A delving format was added to the original questions for further clarification. Parents were asked for reasons as to why their interview responses changed or remained the same.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of a Parent Resource Center, with related activities, on the participation of the parents/caretakers of special needs children. The center which began as a lending library of educational materials, expanded to include offerings for guest speakers and various family participation activities. The data collection was conducted using a two-fold approach. First, a questionnaire of seven questions, dealing with their participation in school events during the past school year, was given to thirty five parents. There was also a section for comments and suggestions to improve parent involvement. A copy of this document can be found in Appendix A. The questions and data collected for each are as follows:

During the past school year:

Question 1: Have you felt welcome, very welcome, not welcome at the John Fenwick School? Of the parents surveyed for this question, twenty parents (96%) replied they felt "welcome" or "very welcome". One (4%) felt "not welcome." This one parent responded "no" to six of the seven questions. A "no" was also written in the comments section.

Question 2: Have you attended parent conferences? With this question, eighteen (85%) said "yes" they did attend. Three (15%) said "no", they did not attend. Two parent conferences are held annually. Of the eighteen who said they attended, three said they attended six conferences, one said four conferences, the others used question marks or wrote "all." One response in the comments section was a request for early morning or evening hours for conference appointments.

Question 3: Have you been a room mother or volunteer at the school? Seven parents (33%) responded "yes". Fourteen (67%) said "no."

Question 4: Have you chaperoned a trip? Six parents (29%) answered "yes" and fifteen (71%) answered "no." There were no comments listed pertaining to this question.

Question 5: Did you attend Back to School night? Ten parents said "yes" and eleven parents said "no." In my experience, attendance at this event, far exceeds participation at other functions. Each September for the past 15 years there has been "standing room only."

Question 6: Have you used the Parent Resource Center? Five parents (24%) stated they used the center. Sixteen (76%) said that they had not.

Question 7: Have you enrolled in any after school activities for parents and children? Four parents (19%) answered "yes" and seventeen (81%) said "no."

In the comments section, one parent asked to be able to go her child's classroom without being announced. Two parents said, "Keep up the good work." And one more parent stated she hoped to participate more this school year.

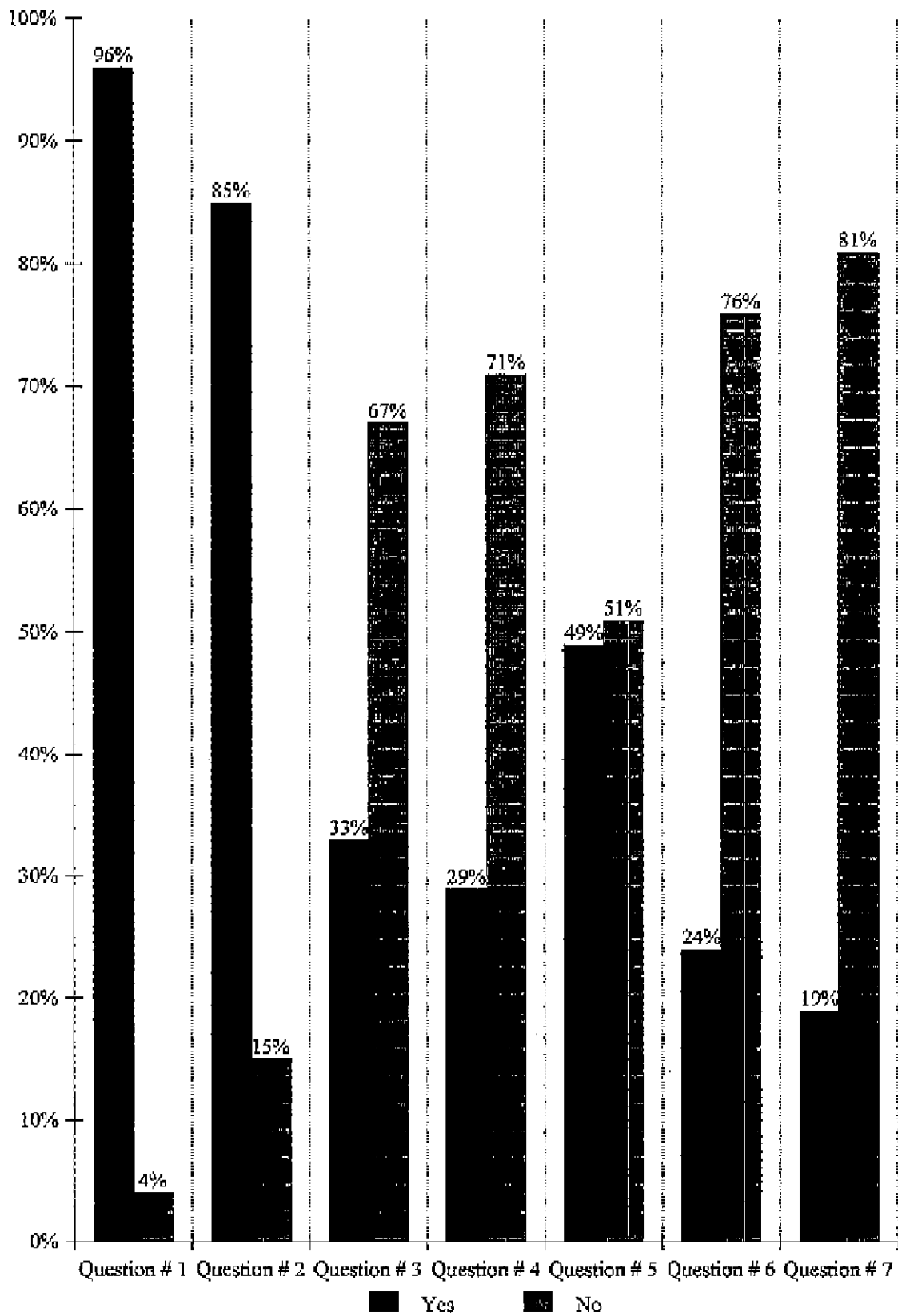
Results from this first phase are illustrated in figure 1.

Later in the year personal interviews were conducted using the same subjects. The parents were asked if they wanted an interview at school, on the telephone or at their home. Two asked for home meetings, and seventeen wanted meetings at school and the other seventeen wanted interviews over the telephone. A copy of this letter is in Appendix B. In addition to the original questions, participants were asked for reasons as to why their answers changed or remained the same. The results follow and are illustrated in figure 2.

Question 1: Have you felt welcome or not welcome at the John Fenwick School this year? Percentages remained the same as twenty parents (96%) felt welcome and one (4%) felt not welcome. Reasons for feeling welcome included friendly and helpful faculty and staff. The one parent who did not feel welcome said that the teachers were too picky. They should be friendlier and show more concern.

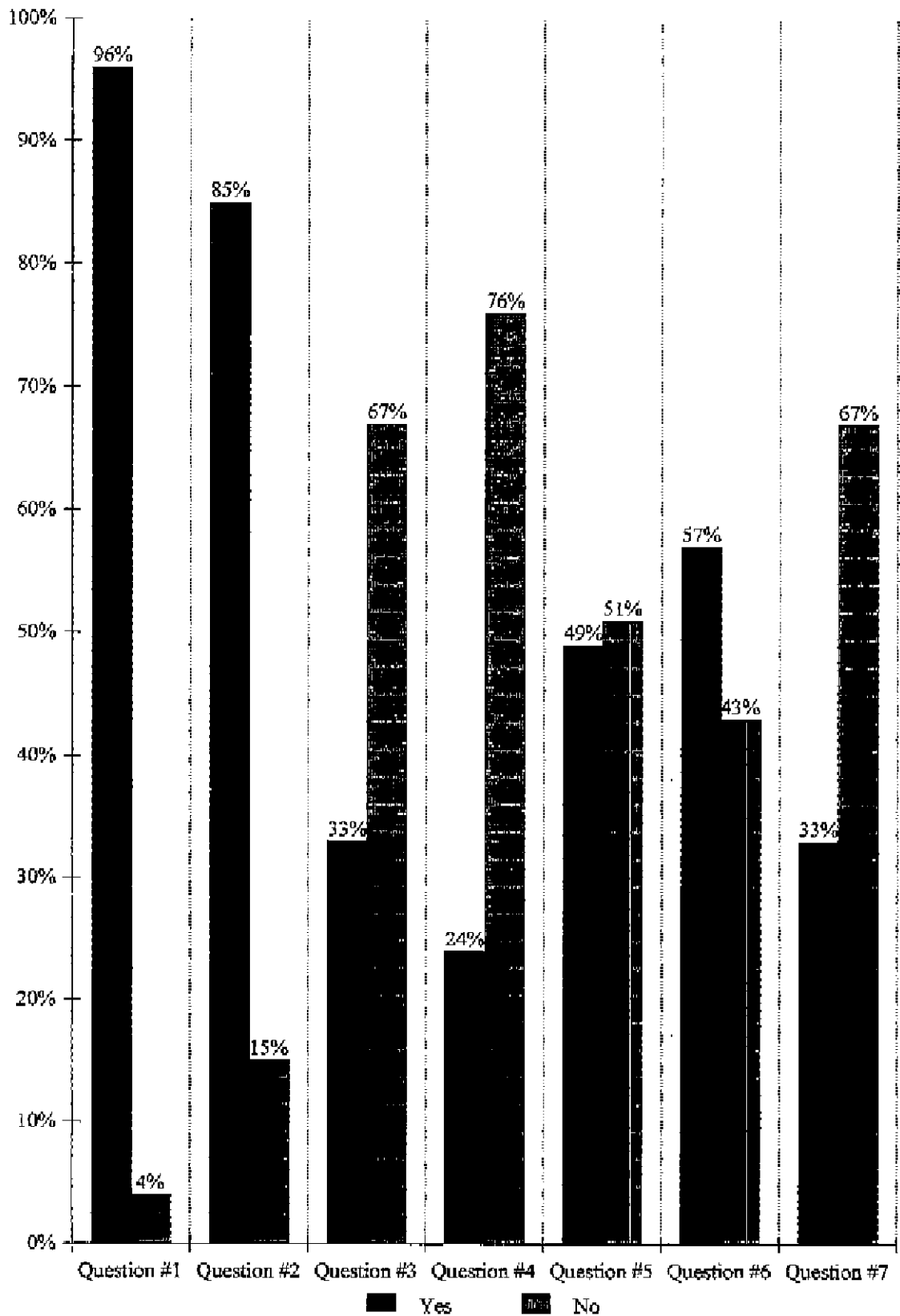
Results of Twenty-one Parents Surveyed

Figure 1: September



Results of Twenty-one Parent Interviews

Figure 2: March



Question 2: Have you attended parent conferences this year? Parents reported that eighteen (85%) attended. Three (15%) did not attend conferences.

Question 3: Have you been a room mother or volunteer this year at school? The numbers remained the same here also, as last year. Seven (33%) said they were room mothers because they had done it before and enjoyed it. Of the fourteen (67%) that were not, said either they were too busy or they were not asked.

Question 4 : Have you chaperoned a trip this year? The numbers here were almost the same as last year. Five (24%) chaperoned and sixteen (76%) did not chaperone. This number declined, with one less person who chaperoned this school year, than did last school year.

Question 5: Did you attend Back to School night this year? Number remained the same as last year. Ten (49%) attended and eleven (51%) did not attend. Those who attended, liked to visit their children's classrooms, see their children's work or meet their children's teacher. Those who did not attend, had young children at home, had to work or did not like some of the other parents .

Question 6: Have you used the Parent Resource Center this year? Twelve (57%) parents said "yes" and nine (43%) said "no." This showed an increase of 33% compared to last year. Reasons for using the center were: to help children with weak skill areas, children can have fun with the reading and math games, recorded cassette stories help children learn to read, provides more "stuff" for learning and parents can be shown "how to" use flashcards, etc. by Parent Resource Center staff. Reasons for not using were: bad hours, don't have time, car is in the shop, and several asked where it was?

Question 7: Did you enroll in any after school activities for parents and children this year? Activities like Make and Take workshops, Family Fun Literacy Night, etc.

Seven parents (33%) responded "yes" and fourteen (67%) responded "no." The seven who attended, overwhelmingly said, they had attended last year and had fun. For those

who did not attend, the reasons were: need baby-sitting, are baby-sitting for others, work, or don't have time.

At the end of each interview parents were asked for suggestions on how to improve parent involvement? "What can we do?" The following responses were made:

- Morning or evening appointments for working parents (3)
- Make it worth our while (1)
- Provide baby-sitting (5)
- Don't announce when a parent is coming to the classroom (1)
- Keep up the good work (2)
- Nothing (9)

The following chapter contains an analysis of the results, its implications and some suggestions to improve parental involvement for parents of special needs children.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In this study I examined the impact of a Parent Resource Center on the parental participation of special needs children. Many times negative experiences for parents of children with special needs lead to negative feelings and less desire for involvement with school related activities. The center provided a lending library of educational materials, guest speakers and other "get together" projects. My hypothesis was that parents who participate in the parent resource center become more involved in the school life of their children.

Did the Parent Resource Center improve the parental involvement of parents of special needs children? More special needs parents used the parent resource center this year and more participated in after school activities in comparison to last year. Results showed 33 percent more parents used the parent resource center this year as compared to last year. Participation of parents in after-school activities also showed an increase of 14 percent. At first glance it would seem that positive interactions of special needs parents and activities at the John Fenwick School did increase during this school year, as compared to last school year. For a more complete understanding of the results, we need to analyze the answers to the more in-depth questions used in the personal interviews.

Question 1 showed that ninety-six percent of the parents responded in the surveys and during the personal interviews, that they felt welcome at the school

Question 2, examining the attendance at parent conferences was thought by some parents to include any conferences that had taken place, such as disciplinary conferences. In these cases, parents are required to attend, not requested. These can not be interpreted as positive, voluntary parent participation. The parents involved claimed they had indeed attended the report card conferences also.

With question 3, concerning volunteers, once again the numbers and percentages were the same for the surveys and the interviews.

Question 4 concerned chaperoning trips. The percentage of parent participation dropped a little from last year (one less parent).

With question 5, here once again, numbers remained the same. Forty-nine percent attending Back to School Night and fifty-one percent not attending.

Question 6 involving the parent resource center did show a positive 33% increase in the number of parents using the facility. This has been especially evident during parent conference week. During the winter months, there was very little movement of materials from the lending library in the center. Activities sponsored by the center were also attended with greater numbers in the fall months, as compared to the winter months. The number of parent volunteer workers in the center also decreased as the year went on. As spring came, along with parent conferences, the numbers began to rise a little.

Question 7 involved participation in after school activities. The numbers made it seem that there had been a positive increase in percentages here also. During the interviews, three parents responded they attended activities because they had enjoyed participating in them last year. I referred to their initial answers on the survey, which said they had not participated in after school activities the previous year. When asked about this discrepancy, they replied they must have been mistaken or they were confused about the activities.

One of the limitations of this study involves the specificity of writing the questions. Questions need to be carefully designed, especially if a written survey is used. Each time I read the responses, I thought of other questions, I could have asked for possibly greater understanding of the answers. Perhaps if the personal interview had been done first, some of the misunderstandings would not have happened. The written survey could have followed later. Then parents would be supplying answers to questions

with which they were familiar.

Another limitation of this study was the time element. I feel it will take several school years to reap the benefits of a center. The task of establishing and maintaining such a center is not easy. Time, perseverance and commitment are needed.

Review of the literature, showed two themes emerging throughout. First, regardless of income, educational level or cultural background, children succeed when their parents are involved in their learning. Second, when parents become involved at school, as well as at home, children progress better and stay in school longer. While these studies dealt more with the outcome and importance of involvement of parental involvement, my study concentrated on improving the involvement.

Although most of the numbers remained the same in the survey and the interviews, I feel the center had a positive impact on the participation of special needs children at the John Fenwick School. A 33% increase in the number of parents using the center this year is certainly a positive factor. Reasons cited by parents were as follows:

- to help their children with problems in school work.
- to have more games and materials at home for the children and themselves.
- children enjoy listening to the recorded book cassettes.

A surprising factor, not directly related to the study that emerged, involved teachers. Although teachers usually expressed strong positive attitudes toward parent involvement, they do not always take advantage of parent's help at school, when offered. A not so surprising factor, directly related to the study, that also emerged was that a parent center is not a "quick fix" to increase parent involvement. For persons interested in organizing a parent center, the following strategies have been found to be helpful during this study:

- (1) Ask for help! Sometimes the most unlikely prospect yields success.
- (2) Start small. Begin with a project that you know can happen. As with the lending

library, materials were obtained by recycling outdated learning materials.

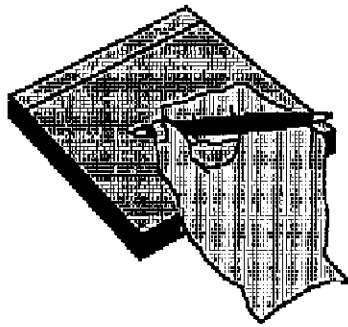
- (3) Reach out to all families. Those who need help the most usually resist, keep trying.
- (4) Provide materials and activities in as many languages as needed for your school families.
- (5) Train volunteers. Make it a fun experience.! Parents do not have to be well educated to help.
- (6) Help parents feel comfortable. Parents may say they feel welcome. But as this study showed, most wanted to talk on the telephone, rather than at school or in their homes.

The latest project related to our parent center at John Fenwick School is a Welcome Waiting Area. A large, library-type table for children, colorful padded benches and stools were placed in the foyer as you enter the building. Greetings in English and Spanish adorn the walls. Several large plants provide more color. Magazine racks for parents and lots of books for children are available in this area.

Before this happened, people were often crowded into the school office, while waiting for meetings or various services. It's a colorful, comfortable and user-friendly place. If we can make parents feel needed, welcome and comfortable, hopefully they will be more apt to become involved.

The importance of a parent center is shown by the various needs it can serve. For parents of children with special needs, it can provide the families with strategies, techniques and the proper materials to assist in their children's learning at home. It can enable parents to develop parenting skills if this is a need of the school's parent community. It can provide the linkages needed to benefit these families by helping them access school and community support services. The possibilities of a center can be as varied as the needs of the special populations it serves.

APPENDIX A
PARENT SURVEY



Dear Parents,

I am working on my master's degree at Rowan College and need your help. Would you please take a few minutes to answer the following questions? **ALL RESPONSES WILL BE STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL!!! DON'T SIGN YOUR NAME. JUST RETURN THIS FORM TO YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER.**

During the past year have you:

1. Felt welcome, very welcome or not welcome at John Fenwick School? _____
2. Attended parent conferences? _____ How many? _____
3. Been a room mother or volunteer at our school? _____
4. Chaperoned a trip? _____
5. Attended Back to School night? _____
6. Used the Parent Resource Center? _____
7. Enrolled in any after school activities for parents and children?

Do you have any suggestions on how we can increase parent participation ? What can we do for you? _____

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW LETTER

Dear Parents,

In September you helped me by answering some questions about activities at the John Fenwick School. I am finishing my coursework at Rowan College and I need your help once again. My professor wants me to interview each parent. I can do this by meeting with you in person or by telephone. The questions will be basically the same type, as the questions I asked you back in Sept.. The interviews would not take more than 10 or 15 minutes and they would be kept confidential. No names will be used in my thesis. Please take a few minutes and fill in the blanks below.

I prefer to meet in person _____ at school ____ at my home ____

I prefer to have a telephone interview _____

Time preferred : Day _____ Time _____

Name _____ Tele. # _____

Address _____

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