Abstract

Parental participation in American special education remains controversial. Despite arguments in favor of this practice, systematic studies pertaining to the effectiveness of parental involvement in special education is limited. As described in this paper, support for parental participation is primarily based on personal testimonials and anecdotal descriptions. This paper provides an historical perspective of parental participation in special education, reviews the extant research, and elaborates on important considerations associated with this practice.

Introduction

Although the active participation of parents in special education in the United States has received attention (e.g., Lynch & Stein, 1982; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990), there exists a dearth of systematic studies in this area. Largely influenced by the Head Start movement, this practice continues to be depicted as a necessary endeavor and potentially beneficial to children, their parents, and school personnel.

Despite reported benefits associated with parental participation in the special education context, arguments persist regarding the inherent value of this practice. This paper traces the evolution of parental participation in special education, examines the extant research, and discusses considerations related to this practice.
Parental Participation in Special Education: An Historical Review

Parental participation in special education has a rich history and is governed by law. According to Turnbull and Turnbull (1998) shared decision-making in the schools and other public agencies is referred to as participation-democracy. In essence, participation-democracy pertains to, "...the legal right or political opportunity of those affected by a public agency's decisions to participate in making those decisions" (p. 251). As described below, parental participation has evolved gradually and while the laws surrounding this practice have been enacted, their implementation remains nebulous.

Turnbull and Winton (1984) remarked that from the early to mid-1900's, it was common practice to institutionalize children who were diagnosed with severe disabilities. These children were perceived as a potentially destructive element and an extraordinary burden to their families. Subsequently, at birth, infants with severe disabilities were separated from their parents and institutionalized to reduce the feared pernicious impact on the family system.

By 1954, the National Association for Retarded Citizens (NARC) was established, supported public school programs in community settings, and advocated for parental participation in decision making within education (Turnbull & Winton, 1984). The educational bill of rights set forth by NARC promoted the role of parents of retarded children as active decision makers on issues pertaining to care, treatment, and training. While NARC was promoting legislative change to ensure active parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities, policy and practice for compensatory education for economically disadvantaged children was evolving.

A major component of proposed compensatory education involved parental participation. Two views of parental participation existed and included a cultural deficit perspective and a political perspective. The cultural deficit perspective recognized parents as needing remediation to improve a child's environment. Consequently, the parental role was that of learner, while professionals dictated the structure and content of such learning. The political perspective, on the other hand, perceived economically disadvantaged parents as disempowered and in need of decision-making power (Turnbull & Winton, 1984).

The Head Start program was based upon a melding of these two perspectives. Public Law (PL) 89-794 was the first legislation to reflect a policy of parent involvement and required parents to participate as learners, teachers, and decision makers (Turnbull & Winton, 1984). Legislation in the 1970s reinforced parents as decision makers and empowered them as advocates to ensure appropriate services to children with disabilities.

Implications of Participation Policies

The evolution of parental participation policies has created significant expectations for parents. For example, parents are currently expected to (a) assume an active role in a child's education by making informed decisions about the evaluation process, the individualized educational program, and placement; (b) acquire teaching skills in order to extend education within the home context;
and (c) assume an advocacy role on behalf of their children. As Turnbull and Turnbull (1990) remarked, "Because parents could [italics original] be effective teachers, many professionals believed that parents should [italics original] be teachers" (p. 11). It is important to note that this policy has been significantly influenced by political factors and has not been informed by systematic studies. In other words, whether the implementation of such grandiose policy is realistic, possible, or even acceptable to parents and educators is debatable. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) identified three constructs that influence parental involvement in the regular classroom: (a) beliefs about their roles (b) beliefs that they can help their children, and (c) perceptions of opportunities and barriers to involvement. These same constructs can also be applied to special education contexts. In short, parents need to know what is expected of them, whether they can make a positive difference in their child's life, and whether their participation will be endorsed by school personnel.

Considerations Regarding Parental Participation

MacMillan and Turnbull (1983) reported that parental involvement policies of PL94 -142 were implemented in a myriad of ways. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), for example, ensured the provision of public education to individuals with disabilities. Under IDEA, some continue to perceive parent involvement as a requirement while fewer people consider it a choice. Salient considerations pertaining to this practice are outlined and reviewed below.

Effectiveness of Parental Involvement

A significant body of literature promotes the widely held assumption that parental involvement is beneficial to children, parents, and the educational system (e.g., McKinney & Hocutt, 1982). Systematic studies substantiating the effectiveness of parental involvement in special education, however, are absent. Furthermore, a bulk of the literature has focused on strategies to increase parental participation (e.g., Goldstein & Turnbull, 1982) and facilitate parent-professional cooperation, rather than examining the effectiveness of such participation.

According to Karnes and Zeherbach (as cited in Bauer & Shea, 1989) school-family efforts serve exceptional children more effectively than school efforts alone. Although these authors reported that an educational program can be enhanced through meaningful parental participation, they failed to provide empirical evidence. Turnbull and Turnbull (1982) underscored the hypothetical basis of parental participation as advantageous to children, parents, and schools. Morgan (1982) also noted that it may be more accurate to state that special educators are merely suggesting that parental participation can be beneficial.

Parents as Teachers

Under IDEA legislation, the role of parents as educators of their children remains vague. However, in contexts where they are expected to serve as educators it is assumed that parents are able to educate their children and that they are interested in pursuing appropriate counseling, consultation, and training to fulfill this role. What remains questionable is whether children with disabilities benefit from this educational arrangement and the impact of this arrangement on the
parent-child relationship. It would be naive to assume that there are no ramifications when parents begin to actively teach their children.

Auerbach (as cited in Bauer & Shea, 1989) contended that by participating in a child's education, parents developed a greater understanding of a child's strengths and needs. It can be argued, however; rather than contributing to a greater understanding of children, parental participation simply affords parents an opportunity to view their children in a different context. In other words, thinking that parents, who lack specialized training and supervision, possess the required skills to observe, identify, and articulate subtle educational needs is a major assumption. Furthermore, assuming that parents can interpret and translate scholastic results into a meaningful educational plan certainly challenges the need for specialized teacher designation or training. Karnes and Teska (1980) identified competencies that parents need to acquire:

The parental competencies required for direct teaching of the handicapped child at home involve interacting with the child in ways that promote positive behavior, reinforcing desired behavior, establishing an environment that is conducive to learning; setting up and maintaining a routine for direct teaching; using procedures appropriate for teaching concepts and skills; adapting lesson plans to the child's interests and needs; determining whether the child has mastered knowledge and skills; keeping meaningful records, including notes on child progress; participating in a staffing of the child; communicating effectively with others; and assessing the child's stage of development" (p. 99).

Having said this, however; it is conceded that despite a lack of formal training and supervision, there may be parents who are able to identify, articulate, and address the unique educational needs of their children.

**Parents as Decision-makers**

Turnbull and Turnbull (1982) contended that expecting parents to become equal participants in the decision making process sets up most, if not all, parents to fail. This arrangement also contributes to educator disillusionment when parents do not satisfy established expectations. In other words, although parents may understand educational objectives, and agree to proposed strategies, they may be unable to actively participate in all aspects involving FAPE (Free and Appropriate Public Education), despite their interest and involvement.

Winton and Turnbull (as cited in Turnbull & Turnbull, 1982) surveyed parents of children with disabilities regarding the parental role in relation to educational decision-making. The findings indicated that parents held special educators in high regard and preferred to defer decision making to these professionals. These data can be interpreted in a number of ways. For example, parents can be perceived either as disinterested and passive adults who prefer to abdicate their responsibilities or well-informed consumers who wisely invite educational experts to make critical decisions in the best interests of their children.

Turnbull and Turnbull (1982) questioned the ability of parents to assume responsibility and collaborate with trained professionals to produce an IEP (Individualized Education Program). In their view, parents may have been ill equipped to understand the complexities of educational programming and the educational needs of children. Although the efforts to assign decision-
making power to parents is well intended, parents may lack the necessary knowledge and skills to assess and recommend educational planning strategies.

According to research conducted by Turnbull and Turnbull, (1982), typically parents were most comfortable in assuming the role of information giving and receiving. This is in contrast to legislation that recognizes parents in the role of education decision makers. The majority of parents continue to defer to educators for academic decisions. Research findings further suggest that educators expect parents to assume this role. Agreement regarding the parental role may, in turn, form the foundation for a collaborative family-school relationship.

**Parental Limitations**

When considering parental involvement, it should be recognized that the severity of a student's disability may directly impact parental time, responsibilities, and energy. According to Bauer and Shea (1989), support from school personnel served to provide respite for parents and helped them from becoming overwhelmed. For this group, extensive involvement in a child's educational program deserved special attention and may not have been feasible. What needs to be recognized are the repercussions associated with elevated parental stress when parental limitations are not acknowledged (e.g., Albrecht, 1995; Rolland, 1994). For example, additional demands placed on parents may contribute to tension within the parent(s)-child relationship. Turnbull and Turnbull (1990) elaborated, "The impact of the parent-as-teacher role on parent-child relationships has received negligible professional attention. Anecdotal accounts from some parents indicate unintended consequences, such as guilt and anxiety if they are not constantly working with their son or daughter" (p. 12).

Parents may find themselves in a precarious position when defining personal limitations that will affect their level of participation. On one hand, parents may seek direction and support from school personnel. On the other hand, they may fear jeopardizing their relationship with school personnel (and their child's educational services) when exercising their right to disagree or limit their involvement. Such apprehension may emerge when there is a perceived clash between school and parental expectations.

**Articulating Limited Parental Involvement**

To avoid erroneous generalizations, it is imperative to distinguish parental involvement in the educational process from overall parental involvement. In other words, parental choice to be minimally involved in a child's educational program should not be contiguously equated with parental disinterest in a child's life. MacMillan and Turnbull (1983) suggested that the encouragement of parent involvement be tempered by an appreciation of the possible beneficial or detrimental effects on parents and children respectively. For example, parents may at times choose not to be involved in their child's educational program in order to sustain their parental effectiveness or maintain a balanced commitment to other family members.
Options for Parental Participation

Turnbull and Turnbull (as cited in Bauer & Shea, 1989) asserted that a model for parental involvement should include the option of non-involvement. Underlying this view is the belief that parental non-involvement may be a reflection of the stresses imposed by children and parental coping abilities. Furthermore, Bauer and Shea (1989) remarked that parental activities must reflect the degree to which parents are comfortable and capable of being involved. Interestingly, although this option is extended to parents of children without disabilities, there appears to be less willingness to accommodate personal preferences of parents who have children with disabilities. MacMillan and Turnbull (1983) contended that decisions concerning the degree of parental involvement in their child's educational program should be based on individual preferences rather than on generalized expectations. Lynch and Stein (1982) reported that, similar to children with disabilities, the unique needs of parents must be honored.

When considering a model for parental participation, a continuum of involvement based on parental time, commitment, and level of self-disclosure warrants consideration. The continuum would range from minimal time and commitment to extensive participation. Turnbull and Turnbull (1982) further suggested that the needs, abilities, and preferences of parents in regards to the demands of their children and school expectations must be considered.

Conclusion

Despite appearing logical and reasonable, parental participation in special education continues to be a complex and controversial issue. The dearth of systematic studies in this area compounds the problem and, subsequently, professionals are left with personal testimonials and anecdotal descriptions upon which to base their decisions of how to effectively involve parents in special education. As demonstrated in this paper, the notion that parental involvement benefits all students, parents, and school personnel remains unsubstantiated and denies the uniqueness of individuals and can inadvertently contribute to unnecessary conflict within families and between parents and school personnel. This paper suggests that a balanced view of parental participation is lacking and several considerations related to parental participation deserve attention.

References


Author Notes

**Debra L. Morrissette, B.A.**, is a graduate student, Department of Special Education and Reading, Montana State University-Billings.

**Patrick J. Morrissette**, is Associate Professor, School of Health Studies, Brandon University.

Correspondence can be sent to the second author at:

270-18th Street,
Brandon, Manitoba,
Canada
R7A 6A9.