DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 403 726 EC 305 302

AUTHOR Allen, Norma N.; And Others
TITLE The Parent Professional Partnership: African American Parents' Participation in the Special Education Process. Final Report.
INSTITUTION Maryland Univ., College Park. Inst. for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 28 Jan 93
CONTRACT H023C901254
NOTE 84p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Students; Decision Making; *Mild Disabilities; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; *Parent Teacher Conferences; Preschool Education; Primary Education; Student Evaluation; *Student Placement
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans; Baltimore City Public Schools MD

ABSTRACT

This report describes a project that sought to ascertain the educational expectations and actual levels of participation by Black, low to low-middle income parents of 36 regular and special education students entering three Baltimore (Maryland) public schools. The parents' initial expectations and the development of these expectations over the first 3 years of schooling were examined. The study used a qualitative design that employed interviews, participant observations, and a focus on the process of a series of interpersonal interactions. A central finding was that initial expectations were high for both groups of parents, but that, as time went on, participation became increasingly pro forma for the parents of children receiving special education. These parents experienced increasing difficulties in understanding and negotiating effectively with the special education system. Recommendations of the study include the following: (1) inclusion of parents in the assessment process and explicit explanation to parents of the possible implications of the students' classification and placement; (2) pre-conference meetings before initial and triennial reviews; (3) flexible scheduling and timing of Assessment, Review, and Dismissal meetings with adequate notice to parents including a proposed agenda; and (4) neighborhood or modified neighborhood placement of students. Appendices include the interview protocol and the parent consent form. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 403 726

FINAL REPORT

THE PARENT PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP: AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS' PARTICIPATION IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS

Grant No: EDUC. H023C901254

Report prepared by: Norma N. Allen, G. Elizabeth Harry, and Margaret J. McLaughlin

Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children & Youth, University of Maryland, Department of Special Education, College Park, MD 20742-1161

EC305302

January 28, 1993

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In July, 1989, the Office of Research in the Education of the Handicapped of the U.S. Office of Education, funded a longitudinal three year study, the "Parent-Professional Partnership: Minority Parents' Participation in the Educational Process." This study was conducted by the Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth (the Institute), of the Special Education Department, of the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP). The Co-Principal Investigators (CO-PI) were Dr. Margaret J. McLaughlin and Dr. G. Elizabeth Harry. The Project Coordinator (PC) was Norma Allen. The study was conducted in the Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS).

The Parent-Professional Partnership Study: Minority Parents' Participation in the Educational Process (Parent-Professional Study) sought to discover the expectations and actual levels of participation of Black, low to low-middle income, parents of thirty-six (36) regular and special education students, entering public school for the first time. The purpose of the study was to investigate parents' initial expectations of their roles as participants in their children's schooling, and to trace the development of these expectations and of their actual participation, between preschool or kindergarten entry and the end of first or second grade.

The research was designed to add two dimensions to existing knowledge regarding parental participation in special education. First, it was designed to contribute to understanding of the

reasons for minority parents' low level of participation in special education. Second, the research was designed to contribute to the building of a data base comparing parent participation in regular and special education. This information was perceived as especially important, since increased parental participation in regular education could help to mitigate the disproportionately high rates of referral of such students to special education.

Overview of Findings

Overall, the Parent-Professional Partnership project has discovered that the parents in the study are concerned about their children's progress and do attempt to be active participants in, and monitors of, their children's education. A central observation was that initial expectations were high for both groups of parents, but that, as time went on, participation became increasingly pro forma for the special education parents. The quality of parental input for this group is of great concern: These parents experienced increasing difficulties in negotiating effectively with, and understanding the processes of, the special education system, and were often deterred by the way parent participation is conceptualized and provided for in the school district. Parents of regular education students depended largely on report cards and other formalized documents for feedback from the school; in the early years, especially, they also utilized classroom observations and regular, informal contacts with the classroom teachers. None of the 18 regular education children studied were deemed "at risk" for special education by the end of

the study. Finally, each of the regular education parents continued to have high expectations for their children, while 16 of 18 special education parents' focus became having their children recommended for mainstreaming and dismissal from special education. These general findings, and others, will be discussed in greater depth later in this report.

Format of Report

The remainder of this report will describe sampling, data collection procedures, data analysis, and findings of the study. The four stated objectives of the research proposal will provide the format for describing the findings. They follow.

1) To find out what low-income, Black parents of 5-6 year old children, entering regular and special education for the first time, expect regarding parental participation in educational decision-making.

2) To discover how these expectations change or develop over the course of three years and how parents explain these developments.

3) To observe the extent and quality of these parents' participation in educational decision-making during the first, second and third years of their children's schooling.

4) To observe similarities and differences in expectations and participation, between parents of children in special education and in regular education.

METHOD

Qualitative Design

During the conceptualization of the project design, it was determined, based on a search of prior research in the field, that a longitudinal study, grounded in a qualitative research approach, would produce the most meaningful data. A longitudinal approach with the same sample of parents, clearly, was critical to any discussion of a process that was expected to show change. Most earlier studies on this subject had utilized single interviews, based on structured questionnaires, which provided parents only a single opportunity to state an opinion on what is essentially a dynamic process of interpersonal interaction (for example, Lynch & Stein, 1987; Lowry, 1983). Thus, with a longitudinal study, the qualitative research approach was considered critical if researchers were to discover parents' real opinions and potential for participation and advocacy.

Qualitative research, offers three advantages over the survey model. First, the traditional close-ended questions used in most questionnaires may yield information of a limited and stereotyped nature, as compared to the results expected from more informal, open-ended interviews. Second, through participant observations, parents could be seen responding to the typical demands of a naturalistic context, rather than to the presence of a researcher in an artificial or contrived setting. Further, the researcher had opportunities to compare the information gathered during interviews with actual events. Third, since the purpose of the project was to

discover the dynamics of a series of interpersonal interactions, then it was required that the design attempt to focus on that emerging process.

Sampling

The project personnel had their initial meeting with staff in the BCPS Office of Special Education, in November, 1989. At this point, the Program Coordinator had just been hired, so the purpose of the meeting was twofold: to familiarize the BCPS personnel with the study and the people who would be conducting it (and vice versa), and to obtain information about the city and the BCPS special education program that would be of assistance in choosing the three schools where the study would be conducted. During this meeting, it was also learned that, for BCPS, special education children usually enter school for the first time at the preschool level and remain in that classroom until the completion of kindergarten. Moreover, not every school in Baltimore has a preschool program, either regular or special education. If the neighborhood school does not have a special education preschool, the children are bused to the program. Thus, while the regular education preschoolers are neighborhood children, the special education children may come from other areas of the city, albeit, usually, those in close proximity to the schools. Special education preschool classes are operated for children with various disabilities - hearing/visual impairments, multiple disabilities and so on. For purposes of this study, the target population was drawn from children in preschool classes in the mild disability

classifications.

Choice of schools. After discussion with BCPS personnel, three schools and alternates were chosen. The three schools targeted for the study are in different geographical areas of the city; have both regular and special education preschool programs; and have predominantly Black student populations. Two are in lower income areas, while the third is in a low-to-middle income area. The principals of the three schools were sent a letter, in January, explaining the project and inviting them to participate. In late December, the BCPS Superintendent had provided the UMCP with a letter officially endorsing the study; a copy of this was included with each principal's letter. Follow-up telephone calls were made, and each of the three principals agreed to participate. Meetings were held in which each principal received further information regarding the study and assurances of minimal intrusiveness of staff into their daily educational programs. At that time, project staff arranged further appointments to meet the preschool teachers and the ARD (Assessment, Review and Dismissal) Managers, as well as to gain access to the class lists for the actual drawing of the sample.

Selection of sample: 36 families. In January, the sample was drawn. This was a random selection (every nth name), focusing on those children who had entered school for the first time in September, 1989. Each school was to have a total of 12 children, six regular and six special education, in the study. The random sample drawn included three alternates from each group in each

school, to allow replacement of any of the original families who might not choose to participate. One factor that did impact on the selection's random nature was: no family was chosen that did not have a telephone, as it was decided that regular communication with families with no telephone would be virtually impossible.

Letters were sent to 12 families from each school in late January, explaining the project and inviting their participation. This mailing included a form to be returned to the child's teacher, agreeing or not agreeing to participate. After 10 days, follow-up phone calls were made, responding to those who had sent in forms and again inviting those who had not. Of the original 36 parents contacted, only two chose not to participate, at this point. However, there were seven parents who either changed their minds or did not respond to repeated attempts to contact them, so a total of seven alternates had to be utilized. Of the 18 children, seven were girls; the remainder were boys. The actual interviews began in March, 1990, and by July, 1990, 36 interviews had taken place and staff had also attended five ARD meetings.

New cohort of six families. At the end of School Year 1990, a new cohort of six families was added to the special education group. Reasons for this were: First, it became apparent that the populations in two of the schools were quite transient, and staff was encountering difficulties maintaining contact with some parents in the original group, because of disconnected phones or moves out of the city; further, the late start of the project, in the first year, meant that parents' recollections of their initial

expectations and experiences had to be relied on; in some cases, these recollections lacked sharpness and immediacy. The new cohort, then, would represent families whose children had just been assessed and recommended for special education placement in one of the three study schools for Fall, 1990. These children would be entering school for the first time, and the researchers would be in a position to interview parents as soon as the children were placed, thus receiving first hand, initial impressions and expectations. The BCPS Office of Special Education, Early Childhood Placement Division was contacted, and the names of those children scheduled to enter any of the three study schools were obtained. Parents were chosen randomly and were contacted and invited to participate in the same manner (letter followed by telephone calls) as the original sample. Of eight families contacted, six agreed to participate. Of the two who did not, one child was a foster child, who was scheduled for relocation with another family (final placement unknown) and the other family moved from the BCPS area.

The addition of this cohort allowed the special education sample group to remain at eighteen, despite attrition. Two families chose not to continue to participate; one family moved to Baltimore County; and three families could no longer be located, with telephones disconnected and unknown addresses. Of the regular education children, five were lost from the study because three families moved and could not be located; one moved to Baltimore County; and one chose not to continue participation due to

increased work and family pressures. However, included in the new cohort were two sets of twins. In each case, one was in special education and one was in regular education. Parents were willing to have both children included in the study, so that two more regular education children were added to the sample, for a total of 15 children. Thus, the sample, by project end, was 33 children, and a total of 31 families.

Social Class and Family Constellation

Information on socio-economic-status (SES) and family constellations was obtained informally and gradually, from interview information and observations, since it was felt that direct questioning on these matters would be too intrusive and could place the establishment of rapport between researchers and participants at risk. For example, no attempt was made to explicitly determine information such as family income, which parents were receiving public assistance, or which ones were homeowners. Further, while the interview guidelines included a question asking parents to describe their families, no attempt was made to verify marital status or whether children in families were full brothers and sisters. Thus, the following information was gathered through repeated contacts and comparisons of one interview to another.

The group included 13 households relying on public assistance, 18 households supported by one working parent, and 5 supported by either two working adults or one parent with a substantial income. All parents had completed at least some years of high school

education, but the number of high school diploma holders was not known; four had completed between one and three years of college. Fathers were resident in 16 homes. Of those 28 homes that were visited by the researchers, five were in apartments: two in a former single-family home that is subdivided, two in a complex of two-unit buildings; and one in a garden-style complex. All the rest (23) live in single-family houses, whether rented or owned. All but two of those visited were very neatly kept and cheerfully decorated with ornaments and photographs. The extent and type of furnishings varied widely.

DATA COLLECTION

Four types of data collection procedures were used: audio-taped interviews with parents and professionals; informal untaped conversations in person or by telephone; observations of school-based parent conferences; and examination of students' school records. All data collection was done by two Black researchers, the PC, Ms. Norma Allen, and Co-PI Investigator, Dr. Beth Harry. In the case of interviews, approximately 30 percent were conducted by both researchers in tandem, 50 percent by the PC alone, and 20 percent by the Co-PI alone. Regarding observations, approximately 45 percent were done by both researchers in tandem, 55 percent by the PC alone, and 5 percent by the Co-PI alone.

The goal of the study was to conduct a minimum of an interview per year with each participating parent. In addition, parents were

asked to give permission, in writing, for project staff to attend school-based meetings with them. These forms (Copy Attached) were for presentation to ARD Managers and other school personnel, to confirm the legitimacy of such attendance. Indeed, a few parents asked project staff to attend meetings that they could not attend themselves. It quickly became apparent that parents of regular education preschoolers, contrary to the expectations of the original project design, had almost no occasion to attend formal school meetings. Those who attended PTO (BCPS' term for PTA) meetings, for example, attended because of another, older child in the family, not because of the child in the study. Therefore, all school meetings attended by the Coordinator and the Project Co-Directors were for special education children: Sixty Day Review, Special Review, or ARD meetings.

Interviews

The initial interview guideline (Copy Attached) was designed to give a picture of family structure, parenting philosophy, approaches to discipline, expectations of preschool or kindergarten, expectations of outcomes, and expectations of parent participation. All interviews with parents were tape recorded. Interviews were conducted in the schools or in homes, depending upon parental preferences, work schedules, and availability. Every attempt was made to accommodate parents' schedules, so that some interviews were conducted late in the evening, after work, and some were on the weekends. Initial interviews averaged twenty-five minutes to forty-five minutes in length. Parents were constantly

assured that their responses would be confidential, and that they would be reported anonymously. As time went on, parents did occasionally ask that the tape recorder be stopped during a particular discussion; staff always readily acquiesced to these requests, recognizing that the maintenance of trust was critical to the ongoing success of the project.

The second year interview guideline (Copy Attached) was developed by the project staff during the Summer, 1990. The questions became broader, more open-ended, and more issue-oriented. This guideline was developed, based on data analysis conducted after the first year's interviews. It addressed issues of concern that had arisen repeatedly, areas that warranted further explanation and exploration, and themes that had begun to emerge in the first data collected. During this second year, the increasing familiarity with details about each family and parents' increased comfort with the project staff yielded longer, more in-depth discussions that also became increasingly honest and unstructured. Most interviews in the second year were about forty-five minutes to one hour in length.

By the third year, interviewers and parents were so familiar with one another that no set guideline was utilized for interviews. Instead, data analysis during the Summer, 1991 focused on individualizing issues and concerns, and these formed the framework for a highly personalized approach to the third year interviews. Staff began the interview with questions concerning problems or themes that the particular parent had raised in the preceding year,

and then allowed the interview to proceed in an unstructured manner, with the parents taking the lead. The length of interviews in the final year averaged anywhere from one hour to two hours, or more.

During the third year, also, the majority of interviews were conducted in parents' homes. Many of the children (n = 11) were returned to zone schools, after the kindergarten year, so use of the former schools for interviews was inappropriate and negotiating interview space and time in the new buildings would have been inconvenient. Further, the staff, by this time, had sufficient familiarity with the families that there was mutual comfort about utilizing the homes. Early in the study, researchers sensed that some parents were reluctant to have the staff in their homes. Staff, on the other hand, had sufficient familiarity with the location of these homes, after the first year, to feel comfortable about going to homes in the most varied neighborhoods.

All interviews were transcribed and hard copies made. In the first two years, some transcriptions were done by students, who were only available during the summer; a professional transcriber was also tried. Uneven results and time constraints finally resulted in most being done by the Project Coordinator. In the final year of the project, a competent transcriber was finally located, who would assist the Coordinator on a piece work basis. She and the Coordinator transcribed about 50% of the interviews, each. Field notes were made on the initial interviews, with details added during later contacts. These were transcribed by

whichever staff member composed them.

Interviews with professionals. As the project unfolded, the researchers realized that the original project design did not address the perceptions and attitudes of a critical group: the educational professionals. Thus, as the relationship and familiarity grew between the Coordinator and these persons, she began to solicit informal conversations with teachers, ARD Managers, and school administrators. Near the end of the third year, formal, taped interviews were conducted with special education teachers and ARD Managers.

Observations of Parent Conferences

The observation approach used is known as participant observation, with researchers acting primarily as observers, participating only so far as to make others comfortable with their presence, and to dispel any appearance of themselves as "cold" observers. As it turned out, participant observation was possible only for the special education group.

Regular education parents. As stated before, the regular education parents did not have occasion to attend school-based meetings for their children. Many of these parents relied on informal conversations with teachers, usually when children were being transported to or from school. One grandparent, who is also a licensed day care operator, goes to the school every day to retrieve the day care children and her grandchildren. She stated, "Ms. _____ says I am the only parent she has a conference with,

every day." Another parent, feeling her child was having difficulty, sat in on that child's class every day for an entire two month period, in order to observe for herself what was occurring. While these examples are the extremes, most parents had regular, informal conversations with teachers when children were being dropped off or picked up, and had observed in their children's classes at least once each school year. Parents shared their feedback from these encounters with the researchers and showed them samples of written communication with teachers.

The regular education parents relied heavily on children's report cards for contact with the school and as measures of the children's progress. The report card was the primary documentation available to researchers for assessing these children's progress. For both regular and special education parents, the children's notebooks provided both a picture of what was being addressed in class and a means for communication between parents and teachers. In the preschool year, in particular, parents and teachers maintained regular correspondence through the medium of the notebook, which went back and forth between school and home, each day, but this occurred less frequently in the subsequent years.

Special education parents. For the special education children, the home-school contact is expanded, since each child must have at least an Annual Review meeting with the ARD team. For children just entering a school, there is also a Sixty Day Review meeting. Parents and/or the ARD team can also request Special Review meetings, if needs arise.

From the outset of the project, staff stressed to these parents their interest in being included in as many of these meetings as possible. In the first eighteen months of the study, project staff were able to attend at least one school-based meeting on each of the children. In the latter eighteen months, many parents' attendance seemed to wane. As they became less regular in their own attendance, they also became less diligent about informing the project staff, when they were scheduled. Some parents, however, did ask researchers to attend meetings when they could not, but most did not seek the project staff's attendance, if they were not going themselves.

When project staff met with Principals and with ARD Managers, we declared our intention to tape record school meetings, also. However, this was not done. First, the ARD Mangers were clearly reluctant to have their meetings taped; and second, BCPS regulations require that if a meeting is to be taped, ten days notice of intent must be sent to every meeting participant. This proved too cumbersome, given the fact that parents often received only ten days notice, themselves. Thus, the researchers relied on field notes taken during the meetings and document examination for their records of these meetings.

Parents were asked, when follow-on interviews were scheduled, to have available their copies of the IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) and other documents that they received during the meetings. The same request was made if parents or researchers did not attend the meetings, since copies of the documents were always

provided to parents, whether they attended or not. The purpose of this was twofold: to give the researchers documentation on the children, based on the educational professionals' assessments, so it could be determined how closely parents' descriptions tallied with them; and to discover how carefully parents examined these documents and, most important, how much they actually understood. Over time, it became clear that the ARD teams became so accustomed to seeing project staff (especially the Coordinator) in their meetings that they made no attempt to change their procedures or to be less than natural in their demeanor.

Informal Communications with Parents

Two other frequent sources of information were telephone conversations with parents and "lobby" conversations, which occurred immediately after ARD meetings, when researchers solicited parents' immediate reaction to the proceedings. For each type, field notes were developed immediately following these contacts. It was through these field notes, as well as those based on meetings and those included with taped interviews, that researchers were able to record their personal impressions of situations and interactions, also. These were valuable as a source of information on background and atmosphere, as well as providing the basis for issues to be further expanded, elucidated, or validated in subsequent interviews.

Limitations of Methodology

Having described the methodology and sampling used for the project, it is appropriate also to discuss some of the strengths

and weaknesses that occur from their utilization.

Children's diagnoses The project staff made no systematic attempt to document students' handicapping conditions prior to the onset of the study. Rather, having chosen the sample from those in the mild disability category, researchers solicited parents' descriptions of their children's condition. While this led to selective assessments, based on parents' understanding or, in some cases, acceptance of children's diagnoses, it was also very revealing of a positive mind set regarding special education. Researchers were able, eventually, to attend ARD meetings and examine documents containing diagnostic data. However, initially, researchers relied on parents' perceptions. Later, study of documents often showed that children's conditions were perceived as more complicated or severe by the professionals than by parents. For parents, the most frequent statement was, "He's in for his speech." Further, as parents were interviewed repeatedly, as the length of the interviews increased, and as the structure became less proscribed, information received from some parents did begin to show discrepancies. For example, a parent who, in the first interview said that a child was referred to special education "For his speech," in a later interview stated: "Well, they say he's a little retarded, but I don't think so."

Attrition. In following a sample of children in any urban area, over a three year period of time, researchers must be prepared for attrition. Because two of the schools were in low-income areas, a certain amount of transience was expected.

However, transience occurred, also, in the more middle income area, where parents were renters and often, upwardly mobile. Two families (one regular education, one special education) moved to Baltimore County and became ineligible for continuation in the study sample. In total, 11 families (five, regular education and six special education), were lost from the study.

Potential sample bias. Sampling bias could arise from two aspects of the procedure used: First, the requirement that all families in the study have a telephone may have produced a group who were representative of a more stable living environment and/or income level than those who do not have phones. However, income did not seem to be a relevant factor since the sample included families of a wide income range; while telephones were frequently disconnected, for all the parents who remained in the study, this was only a temporary phenomenon. Further, as is always the case with a volunteer sample, the fact that these parents agreed to participate in the study, at all, may mean they are more interested in their children than most, or more prepared to be actively participatory. Finally, and perhaps most important, a group of parents who have voluntarily enrolled their young children in non-mandatory preschool programs are most likely to represent those who not only value early education but also have the will and the human and/or financial resources to create the circumstances necessary for maintaining the child in that program.

Overall, we do not consider this a weakness of the study, as such, but rather a statement about the kind of parents to whom

these findings might pertain. In other words, it seems clear that the study did not include parents whom professionals would consider "dysfunctional" or unable to support their children's early schooling; to the contrary, the findings should be taken as relevant to urban African American parents who, regardless of income level (public assistance, working poor, low to middle income), have placed early education as a high priority for their preschool age children.

Discontinuous school placement. As the study progressed into the second and third years and children completed kindergarten, those not in their neighborhood school were returned to those schools for the first grade. This gave the researchers the opportunity to expand their perspective beyond the three original schools. What this did not allow was the opportunity to determine definitively whether increasing parental dissatisfaction with special education programs at the Primary level (grades 1 to 3) would have been as great had children remained in familiar surroundings where parental satisfaction was high. Altogether, the project staff was exposed to five additional schools by the end of the study.

Data Analysis

The approach to data analysis and interpretation in qualitative studies is inductive rather than deductive. Data from interviews and observations were analyzed using the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) by which incidents, comments, opinions are coded according to the types of

information revealed; these codes are then compared to each other to derive a set of themes underlying the incidents. These may then be gradually reduced to a smaller set of higher level conceptual categories which may provide the beginnings of theory development, or may illustrate already existing theory.

For the purposes of this report, the findings will be organized around the four stated objectives of the research, but the following outline and Figure 1 will explain the relationship of the process of thematic analysis to these four objectives.

An initial set of 50 codes derived from the data provided the basis for thematic analysis, resulting in seven themes which seemed to represent the most central aspects of parents' views of their children's early education. These themes were designated as: "families supporting children", "a good school", "a good teacher", "expectations to disillusionment", "expectations to satisfaction", "advocacy efforts", and "deterrents to advocacy". The first theme, "families supporting children", provided background information about the families and a picture of the logistics involved in sending these children to preschool; the themes, "a good school" and "a good teacher", addressed objective #1 by reflecting the parents' opinions and expectations regarding the purpose and effects of schooling in general and special education in particular; the themes, "expectations to disillusionment" and "expectations to satisfaction", addressed objective #2 by revealing the changes in parents' expectations over the 3 years; the themes, "advocacy efforts" and "deterrents to advocacy", addressed

FIGURE 1

Process of Data Analysis

OBJECTIVE 4:
comparison of special and regular education parents

OBJECTIVES	OBJECTIVE 1: parent expectations				OBJECTIVE 2: changes in expectations		OBJECTIVE 3: actual participation	
THEMES	families supporting children	a good school	a good teacher	purpose of preschool educators	expectations to disillusionment	expectations to satisfaction	deterrents to advocacy	advocacy efforts
CODES	grandparents great-grandparents homework supervision extended family work schedules transportation discipline church	discipline order safety the front office	likes the child homework chats with teacher observation regular notes	catching up a head start socialization independence	speech delays small classes labeling peer group curriculum mainstreaming	<u>positive:</u> - reading - math - report cards - parent advocacy (in crises) <u>negative:</u> - class size - no books	late notices scheduling timing jargon regulations bureaucracy sympathy exclusion group pressure documents	unilateral decisions confrontation observation tears chats with teacher private evaluation private services

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

objective #3, by revealing the extent and quality of parents' participation in decision-making; finally, objective #4, a comparison of participation between the two groups of parents, was made across all themes. The theme of "families supporting children," occurs throughout all the objectives. Figure 1 offers a graphic illustration of the data reduction procedure and its relationship to the 4 objectives.

Researcher Dilemmas

A longitudinal study that employs qualitative research poses certain dilemmas for the researchers. This section offers a discussion of the researchers' awareness of such dilemmas and the decision-making process used to address them.

Honesty in Interview Process. For this study, first, there is the question of whether parents, when interviewed, give responses that they think the interviewer wants to hear, rather than saying what they really think. There are indications that some responses in the initial interviews may have been of this type. For example, some parents who initially expressed great faith in the public education system's ability to educate their children would reveal, in later interviews, that they would enroll their children in private school, if they could, or that they felt public education was less than effective for them and was suspect for their children; similarly, initial statements about marital status were sometimes contradicted later. The same kind of process was discussed under methodological limitations regarding parents'

reporting of their children's diagnoses. Overall, however, we feel that the recursive and longitudinal nature of the interview process allowed for the development of a level of rapport that enhanced the likelihood of increasing interviewee honesty on sensitive matters.

Observer effects on parent conferences. The researchers have some concern, also, about the potential effects of observers on school meetings. Although the predominant approach was to reserve participation for occasional questions, it is possible that a question asked by one of the project staff during a meeting may, in some cases, have prompted parents to ask questions of their own. It is also possible that the mere presence of the staff member, may have made the parents feel supported, while ARD Managers may have invited questions with more enthusiasm. On one occasion, in the third year of the study, an ARD Manager new to the study and being observed for the first time, admitted that the length of time she allowed the meeting to go on was influenced by the presence of the researchers, since she did not want them to be inconvenienced by having to return for a follow-up meeting.

Most of the time, however, ARD Managers seemed to go about their meetings in a routine manner, and parents reported seeing no difference between those meetings where project staff were present and those where they were not. Nor did researchers observe any particular change in professionals' behavior over time; indeed, ARD managers and supporting professionals seemed to have their characteristic style in conducting meetings, which did not change

either positively or negatively as they became accustomed to the researchers' presence.

Objectivity. In interpreting the data, researchers must question the objectivity of their own perceptions. With time, parents and their problems and concerns became more personalized to the staff. It is difficult not to lean more in the direction of supporting their points of view, and less in the direction of the schools'. Parents are often interviewed in a naturalistic setting - in their homes. Researchers see the homes, meet the other children, become familiar with parents' job-related problems, and gain understanding of their personal strengths and constraints. It is difficult to develop that level of intimacy, and at the same time, maintain objectivity. Yet, given the naturalistic nature of the contacts, interviewers do recognize that parents' statements are often unverifiable, and attempt to keep that fact at the forefront of their consciousness. The ultimate extension of this is for the researcher to "go native," and so over-identify with the parents. Again, the researchers have tried to remain conscious of these pitfalls.

Researcher intervention. Perhaps most important, researchers sometimes faced the dilemma of having to decide whether to act as advocates for the parents. Indeed, this did occur in the context of three school meetings. In one, a parent became very upset, and her tears were treated by some members of the meeting as a rationale for ignoring the points she had made; for two others, parents had expressed a critical concern in private to the

researcher and seemed unable to effectively reiterate it when faced with a panel of educational professionals. In interviews, also, researchers did, on occasion, offer parents advice as advocates, but here, it was made clear to them that it would be up to the parent to take the advice or not, and to present the case to the school. Thus, the researchers felt that the best way to handle these situations was to treat them as ethical matters which could not be ignored, but to be aware that staff were at those moments stepping out of the role of researcher and into that of advocate.

Need for reciprocity. The final concern is that of reciprocity. It is difficult to continuously seek information from parents about some of the most meaningful areas of their lives and give nothing back. The researcher finds there is a difficult balance point between maintaining objectivity and exhibiting humaneness, as each case unfolds. It is almost impossible to refuse assistance, when asked, and it would probably be damaging to the ongoing trust relationship to do so. Usually, parent requests have taken the form of asking staff to seek information for them, on the assumption that, as educators, staff is better able to identify and locate the person they need to reach. This has usually taken the form of making telephone calls on policy questions; transfers; appropriate persons to contact on a particular matter of concern; and complementary program information -- tutorials, summer programs, camps. In all cases, the parent did the follow through and actual negotiating.

FINDINGS

As stated, the findings will be described under the four objectives that governed the project. Any modifications that had to be made will be noted.

Objective 1: To find out what low-income, Black parents of 5-6 year old children, entering regular and special education for the first time, expect regarding parental participation in educational decision-making.

As earlier stated, the study included one school where several families were middle, rather than low-income. Further, most children were in the preschool program, when the study began, so the age range was 3-5 years old. Although this objective is expressed in terms of parents' initial expectations regarding participation, it is important to state what the parents expected from the schools, when they first enrolled their children. For most, this had a direct bearing on their continued satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with their children's education, and with their own role.

Families Supporting Children

The theme of "families supporting children" permeates all four of the objectives, so it will be discussed here, with that in mind. This study found that family constellation was by no means a determining factor in these families' ability to structure positive learning environments for their children or to participate in special education planning. A variety of family structures were

equally effective.

Extended family structures were seen to be one source of support for children. Seven families had grandmothers, or, in one case, a grandfather, present in the home, while six others relied on grandparents or siblings to provide day care or attend school events. The picture of cross-generational support that emerged for the families with in-house grandparents was particularly poignant. In one case, a great-grandmother had legal custody of her mildly retarded granddaughter's eldest child, while the mother had custody of her three younger children, but under the great-grandmother's supervision. In another home, the young mother, in her twenties, lived with her 91 year old grandfather and her six year old son, who was doing very well in his regular education program. An outstanding aspect of this home situation was that the grandfather was himself illiterate, yet his presence was a source of both stability and support for school learning for his great-grandson. The mother says:

> My grandfather is 91. He can't read or write. When ___ was 3, I would give him work to do, and give the same work to my grandfather, also. They'd compare notes to get the right answers. He's an important influence on ___'s life. . . He's real stern with him, though.

In sixteen families, fathers were present in the home, and both parents worked. The roles portrayed were rather traditional, with relatively authoritarian parenting styles, especially for fathers. In one home, children referred to their father's

afternoon homework sessions with them as "Mr. ___'s school," while another father would engage his children in activities such as practicing walking in line, in the manner expected in school. All fathers participated in supervising children's homework.

Single mothers, including three who had no other adult in the home, were remarkably involved and proactive. In fact, three of the mothers from this group were among the strongest advocates for their children toward the achievement of their dismissal from special education, and all have had success with movement toward this end. In these single mother homes, in particular, the placement of the children in preschool programs required considerable logistical maneuverings related to the mothers' job schedules, child care, and transportation. Not one of these mothers had failed to make at least one or two visits per year to the school, and one spent time at the school almost every day and then, would retrieve her son, drop him at day care, and go to her evening job.

The Roles of Parents and Teachers in "A Good School"

Parents of both regular and special education children expressed strong views on the respective roles of parents and schools. With very few exceptions, both groups of parents expressed satisfaction because the child was enrolled in a "good school" and had a "good teacher." A "good school" is one in which discipline prevails, there are lots of programs, and the children are supervised and safe. A "good teacher" gives homework, stays in contact with parents, and "likes my child". Often, parents' satisfaction with the program was directly linked to their positive relationship with the teacher and the perception that the teacher cares about their child.

Parents clearly expected to be involved in their children's education. This involvement was manifested through visits to the schools, classroom observations, informal chats with teachers, and examination of reports, including report cards and documents from ARD meetings, especially the learning goals expressed on the IEP. They expected to be made aware of the child's progress through examination of homework, the notebooks, and notes from the teacher, and expected teachers to keep them informed regarding any problems. Parents expected to be (and were) influential in crisis situations: two parents intervened when a child had been inappropriately disciplined; one when a child was being mistreated; one when a child was inappropriately placed; and one when the child was not receiving prescribed services. They did not, however, expect to be influential regarding curriculum or instruction, unless the child

was definitely not progressing, and they and the teachers agreed to have the parent work with the child on specific areas.

Good Teacher - Special Education

She's a good teacher. She really likes him. You can't tell her anything bad about him.

She doesn't mind if I come and sit in on the class. She tells me I can come anytime.

Good Teacher - Regular Education

She's firm. She's not old, but she's an old-fashioned good teacher.

I found her to be dedicated, sincere . . . She was sincere about the kids . . . That's a good teacher, when she pushes them and makes them do.

A Good School

The school is orderly. The principal is firm, and he will listen. He will go along with retaining a child in grade, who's not progressing, and not just let the teachers push him along.

The school is clean. The halls are quiet and orderly. The principal is nice.

The Purpose of Preschool Education

In the special education group, the expressed purpose of preschool education was to afford the children an opportunity to "catch up", and, for many, "improve his/her speech". Except for four children, the most common reason for children's enrollment was delay in speech and language: Three of the children were diagnosed with cerebral palsy and parents were advised by their doctors to enroll them in preschool; one child had a congenital condition and had been in special programs since infancy; the remainder were children whose parents stated that family doctors,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

friends, or day care providers had advised them that the child's speech was not age appropriate and that he/she should be assessed. One parent reached this conclusion on her own, through reading child development books and deciding her child was not at the norm in speech. These parents accepted the children's special education placement, expressing high expectations that a number of features of this placement would facilitate their "catching up": small classes, the presence of teacher aides, special resource teachers (especially Speech Pathologists), and individualized attention.

For the regular education parents, the prevailing reason for enrollment and their expectation was that children would get a "head start" on their schooling. Many stated that kindergarten in the 90's was what first grade had been during their childhoods. Five had older children who had attended preschool, and these parents felt the advantages were invaluable. The remainder were convinced that preschool had become the required point of entry for children into the educational system.

Parents were asked what they wanted their children to accomplish by the end of this first year of schooling. Most were able to articulate very specific skills, based on their knowledge and understanding of what was going on in classrooms. They wanted the children to know how to count to 20; to know their alphabet; to know their names and addresses; to be able to cut along lines and paste; and to recognize shapes. They also wanted the children to learn to socialize appropriately and to develop independence in self-help skills. This was universal for regular and special

education children, since at this point, parallels in the two curricula were strong. Universally, parents expected children to be able to read by entry to first grade. With two exceptions, special education parents expected their children's "speech" problems to be solved by that point, and hoped they would be placed in regular classrooms. Thus, most of these parents had not fully grasped the magnitude and complexity of their children's handicapping conditions, when viewed from the perspective of the schools, based on formal assessments.

> Ever since my children have been in school, I have always made it my business to go [up to the school] regularly . . . I don't see how anybody could just send their child somewhere and put their child's welfare -- whatever -- in the hands of someone else, and not be aware of who the people are and what's [going on].
>
> I do believe, if you show the teacher you're going to be there, and you're involved with your child's learning process, then she's going to be involved too.
>
> If I had the same book he has in school, and I could keep it for a year, I could teach him to read myself. But every time I go up and ask for his book, the say they don't have enough. They won't let them bring books home . . . But I'm going to talk to the teacher. If I keep going up there, she has to realize I really care about my child.

Objective 2. To discover how these expectations change or develop over the course of three years and how parents explain those developments.

At the end of the first year of the children's education, the parents expressed satisfaction with what they were learning. There were, however, noticeable differences between the reactions of the two groups of parents.

Regular Education Group: Expectations to Satisfaction

The regular education group expressed considerable satisfaction with their children's progress in academic and social areas, and also with the quality of parent-teacher communication that had obtained during the first year. By the end of the second year, this pattern was still evident, although several parents did note that there was less parent-teacher communication in the kindergarten year. By the third year of the study, the children were all in first grade, and most parents felt the children had profited by their preschool and kindergarten experiences and expressed satisfaction at their progress in first grade. These parents remained involved, through school visits and classroom observations.

There were, however, a few caveats: One mother, who is quite active with her children and the school, was disturbed to discover her child was recommended for Chapter I for reading reinforcement. However, she allowed him to attend, and expressed conviction that she would be able to help him catch up, by working with him over the summer. Another parent, whose child has been placed in a first grade "transition class" to strengthen reading and mathematics skills, expressed conviction that this would help the child "catch up" and get ready for second grade work. One parent felt the program was not sufficiently challenging and is considering private school. Two other parents utilized private school for the kindergarten year, simply because the school lacked an all day

kindergarten program that would best serve their work schedules. One felt the public school program was superior and returned her child there in Fall, 1992. The other parent returned the child to public school because of the expense of private education, but felt private education was superior. One parent, who has two other children, has become disillusioned with the public schools and hopes to place all her children in private school, when she returns to work. However, the child in our sample is making excellent progress; it is the other two who are having difficulty. This parent has expressed great concern about the use of standardized tests in placement decisions and her inability to convince the school that these are not valid measures of progress, especially for minority children.

The Special Education Group: Expectations to Disillusionment

For the special education sample, the end of the first year seemed to be a time when parents did express satisfaction with children's progress, but most were, by then, looking forward to the children's return to regular education. Only four parents were resigned to their children's continuing in special education indefinitely. The others expressed the view that they hoped their children would be mainstreamed by the first grade year. In fact, since only one child was actually dismissed from special education, the remaining parents' level of satisfaction was beginning to wane, as was their faith in their ability to influence the system.

Parents' expressions of dissatisfaction increased over the

second year of the study, and by the end of that year, when most children were of the age to be entering the first grade, the majority were moved from their relatively homogenous, preschool/kindergarten classes into Primary Special Education classes, which served children who would have been in the first through third grades. For 11 of the children, this also meant movement back to their zone schools. Four children were transferred to other schools at parents' request (two), or because prescribed services were not available at the zone school (two). One of these children left the study because the parents moved out of the BCPS area.

> I didn't want her moved out. I wanted them to do something about the situation that she was in, right there. All they had to do was ... The teachers and the principals should go to meetings, and that's where they should suggest things. Say, "Well, our special education isn't holding up [to the needs]. We need so-and-so to help these children a little bit more, We're not going to move these children. We're going to work with these children . . . " A child doesn't need to be shuffled around.

Placement concerns When children entered the Primary Special Education classes at the beginning of the third year of the study, parents' concerns were no longer expressed as a rather general wish for mainstreaming. Rather, the most frequently and vehemently expressed concern was dissatisfaction with the actual classroom environment. The structure in the Primary classes led to children being placed in groups that had wide age ranges, often age 6 to age 9, and a wide range of disabilities, including behavior problems. The most frequent objection from parents is exemplified by the following statement: "My child can't learn there. There's a big difference between a learning problem child and a behavior problem

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

child. The behavior problems get all the teacher's attention."

> He needs a better educational situation. He's in a group of children between ages 6 and 9 . . . He's managed to pick up more bad habits, as opposed to learning his ABC's. From what I see, the teacher does a lot with discipline, and it takes away from the education department.
>
> You have kids in there way older than she is, and you have kids in there with behavior problems. They don't mix . . . She's picking up a lot of things -- bad habits. Ms. _____ has enough problems dealing with those behavior kids, and she doesn't have time to really put her mind on my child. Ms. _____ is all over the place; trying to work with each kid, correcting the behavior kids, and keeping the bad ones from acting up.

Most of these classes did not have aides, and in two cases, all levels of special education children, Primary and Intermediate (ages 6 to 12/13) were in the same classroom. These parents rapidly lost hope that their children would "catch up" in these classrooms.

Concerns about isolation: Stigma and separate curricula

Parents also cited the separation and isolation of the special education classes as detrimental to children's progressing to regular education. This isolation was both physical and academic: children in special education housed in separate wings of the school, with separate areas in the cafeteria; and academically, parents increasingly became aware that there was no parallel between the curriculum for their first grade special education children and the first grade regular education children. This was most clearly expressed by a parent who stated: "I'm worried that the longer he stays in special eduction, the farther behind he gets, because they are not learning the same things."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> I just want them to [learn] . . . whatever they can learn. And if they can't learn it in a "regular" classroom setting, and it takes going to a special room, that's fine. I mean why should a stigma be attached because maybe, I can't learn as fast as you can? Even in the cafeteria they have a special section where they eat apart form the "normal" kids . . . It's like "Lepers go over there."

Concerns about classification/labeling. The classification systems used by BCPS for children in special education were frequently confusing to parents. Part of this is because the codes are numerical, using Roman numerals and Arabic numerals (Intensity IV, Handicapping Condition 04). Some parents thought these reflected the number of hours children spent in special education, but the majority had little understanding of them, at all. Parents could tell the researchers what extra services a child was receiving, e.g. two hours a week of Speech, or one hour per week of Physical Therapy, but had problems describing the implications of the classifications. In meetings, the professionals frequently used educational jargon, while describing the disabilities and services; this further confused parents, but only two asked for clarification, while most listened to the presentations and signed the papers without asking meaningful questions. Some did ask further questions of the researchers, in private, after the meetings.

Where they did react vehemently was when the term "retarded" was first used to describe their children. This happened in four cases, and for three, the parents questioned professionals closely and stated that they disagreed strongly and expressed the opinion

that the child "couldn't do the things he does, if he was retarded." It is important to note that the vast majority of these children had initially been identified as exhibiting mild to moderate delays in speech and language; as mentioned before, there were 5 children who showed any clear medical etiology, (3 cerebral palsy, one with a genetic disorder, and one with Down's Syndrome. In the latter case, the parent accepted the diagnosis that her child had Down's syndrome, but she had described his main problem as "his speech," until faced with documentation in an ARD meeting. In most cases, it seemed that parents were reacting both to the introduction of a more severe label, and to a genuine discrepancy between the school's perception of "mental retardation" and the common parental perception of this condition as indicating the more severe end of the spectrum of intellectual impairment. The latter discrepancy was best expressed by a father of a 5 year-old who offered the following definition of "mental retardation": "To me it means. . .that they're slow. . . very slow, to the point where they seriously need some heavy personal attention. . ."

> I told him I don't agree with that. I told him I don't think somebody retarded could do all the things she can do . . . I know that she's slow, but she's doing . . . She does good, compared to . . . I know she's slow though.

Diminishing participation The matter of parents' diminishing expectations of their own participation will be given detailed treatment in our report of findings under the next objective. Suffice it here to say that, as time went on, the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> . . . She [the teacher] said she think he look like, maybe he just a little, slight retardation. And it kind of got me a little bit, [because]. . . here, he don't act like it's no slight retardation. . . 'Cause if she tells him to do something, and like he say, "Well, she telling me something to do, but I don't quite know what it is she want me to do." That don't mean there's some slight retardation there. To me, it [retardation] means like, that they're slow. I mean, very slow, to the point where you seriously need some heavy personal attention. . . But, I guess in the school, the least bit of difference or whatever, they use that term.

pattern of parental attendance at ARD meetings became less regular; seeing little difference in outcome whether they attended or not, many parents seemed to be developing the expectation that they would simply receive the "papers" in the mail, sign them, and return them to the school. When asked to describe her usual participation at these conferences, one parent explained: "They lay it out. If you have a question, you can ask them. Then you sign it."

Objective 3. **To observe the extent and quality of these parents' participation in educational decision-making during the first, second and third years of their children's schooling.**

In view of the much greater requirement expected of parents of children in special education, the report of findings related to this objective will focus mostly on the special education group.

Patterns of Participation

We concluded the foregoing section with a brief statement that the participation of parents of children in special education diminished over the three years of the study. More specifically, the pattern was as follows: In the first year, 16 of the original

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

18 attended ARD meetings. In the second year, of the added cohort, four out of six attended the initial meetings (ARD or 60 Day Reviews), while 12 of the original group were in attendance at Annual review meetings. In the third year of the study, 11 out of 18 participating parents attended these school meetings.

Those who did not attend cited conflicts with work schedules, the fact that the school would send the papers for them to sign, anyway, late receipt of notices, or "I just couldn't make it," as reasons for non-attendance. When questioned more closely, some parents cited the routine nature of the meetings and the fact that they knew their input would not be meaningful as reasons for not attending. Three of four parents whose children had been previously classified as retarded, and who had objected to the classification did not attend the following year's ARD meeting. The one who did, while still objecting to the classification, attended, in part, to lobby for the child to be transferred to another school, as she was being mistreated by other children in the school.

Those parents who did attend, either had certain points they were determined to try to make, or attended, seemingly, out of a sense of duty, but contributed very little. Those parents who assumed active stances will be discussed below. The remainder, typically, listened to what was presented by teachers and resource teachers, perhaps asked a question (usually a logistical rather than an academic one), and signed the papers. The meetings seemed to become increasingly pro forma in nature, for these parents.

In addition to the routinized nature of the meetings, it seems that parents became increasingly bewildered about the academic milestones their children were expected to achieve. Every parent in the study had, at least, some years of high school education. When children first began school, parents seemed to understand and relate to the learning expectations of the schools and felt competent to assist in that learning; for example, mastery of numbers from 1 to 20 or of the alphabet. As time went on, and parents were faced with more complex learning tasks, their confidence in their ability to assess whether the child was mastering these tasks, or not, diminished. For example, parents could not relate as well to learning goals like, "will answer the "wh" questions about a story with 90% accuracy," nearly as well, and many felt they had to leave these in the hands of the school. They would still help with homework, but lacked the confidence to state children's achievements in unequivocal terms, especially if their assessments were at odds with the schools'. When this was coupled with test results, which often reflected significant delays that parents could understand ("functions on a 3.6 year level), parents' hopes for placement in regular education for their children dwindled and a sense of resignation prevailed.

Advocacy Efforts/Deterrents to Advocacy

Some parents did make attempts to advocate for their children, although with rather limited success. The three parents whose children were labeled "retarded," all expressed disagreement when this classification was stated in the meetings; they further

elaborated on their disagreement and resistance to this to the interviewers, in private. However, all were resigned to the fact that they would not be able to change the classification in the school records. One parent sought outside tutoring services for her child from a variety of private agencies, but was reluctant to let the school personnel know that this was occurring. She felt they would resent or dismiss those achievements that were at odds with their assessments. Two other parents simply expressed annoyance or generalized worry about their children's placement, but were reluctant to actually confront the ARD team and make demands. One parent became so frustrated at the team's seeming dismissal of her views of the child's needs that she was reduced to tears in the meeting.

> I've been fighting for this child for three years, and I guess I'll just have to fight a little bit more.

Some parents did succeed in influencing decisions by a variety of methods. Two parents simply moved their children to other schools, enrolled them in regular education classes, and never informed the new school that the child had ever been in special education. One of these parents moved to Baltimore County, but the other "mainstreamed" her child within the BCPS. Three other parents continued to resist decisions regarding placement of their children. One of these was the only parent in the study who wanted the child's special education services increased rather than decreased, and was willing to have his classification changed to a more severe category to achieve this. This parent had

representatives of a private agency accompany her to the ARD meeting to present their assessment and has continued to challenge the school's assessment with those of the other agency. The other two parents continued to seek meetings and ask for special assessments and reviews until they achieved at least partial success: One child is to be mainstreamed for part of the day, but remain in special education class for reading and math; the other parent continues to lobby for having her child transferred, so that if he remains in special education, he will be in a Primary class and not, as he is now, in a Primary and Intermediate combination that contains every special education child in the building (ages 6 to 12/13). Finally, one parent has succeeded, through diligent efforts and constant contact with the school, in having her child partially mainstreamed. This parent, also, sought meetings and insisted on regular assessments, until she and the school came to agreement on the child. His only special education service, now, is speech and she plans to request a Special Review on that in the Fall, 1992. She said: "He got into this (special education) because I panicked about his speech, and now, it looks like it's going to take an act of God to get him out." The remainder of the parents, the majority, tended to accept decisions they did not agree with, or they allowed themselves to be persuaded that these decisions were correct.

> They [the meetings] were tiresome. But, I'm used to it. I had other children . . . who put me through changes. I was at the school all of the time. I have raised hell, been calm, walked out, and even cried. I have been to all kinds of meetings and hearings . . . Even with the court system, I done been through that. So what they're putting me through now, it's not nothing.

Despite dissatisfaction and lower attendance at ARD conferences, however, parents continued to participate in their children's daily education, through helping with homework, observing in class, and talking with teachers. Parental presence at the school, however, did diminish significantly as children exited from the preschool program: parents' classroom observations were much less frequent, since, while most had seemed comfortable dropping into the preschool teachers' classrooms, this welcoming atmosphere did not continue at the Primary level. Two parents, who did observe regularly in Primary classes, did so because they were trying to verify perceived problem areas. Subsequently, both these children were transferred to other schools, at the parents' insistence. The "good teacher" description was used very little by parents, after kindergarten. At most, they expressed sympathy with the burdens the teachers labored under (range of behaviors and ages, lack of assistance). Thus, their relationship with the teacher seemed to become less personalized.

Researcher Observations of Meetings

In the course of this study, researchers observed many school meetings for the special education children (ARD Meetings, Sixty Day Reviews, Special Reviews). As stated above, parents' interest and participation in these meetings lessened, over time. The

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

reasons given -- conflict with work schedules, inability to gain permission for time off -- were realistic, but when questioned, many parents admitted that they didn't feel their participation was that critical, and that these meetings had become rather routine. The project staff's observations led them to concur with this impression. The researchers noted six aspects of professional behaviors that were deterrents to parental participation, and which taken together, added up to the message that parents' participation was invited, but not considered very important.

Late notices Parents reported that, despite regulations that parents should receive notices of meetings at least ten days prior to the scheduled date, they regularly arrived late, often only two or three days before the meeting was to take place. In two cases, parents reported the notice arrived the day of the meeting, and in one case, the day after. Researchers did verify with the school that some notices were mailed late. Working parents experienced difficulty obtaining time off, with so little notice, and even non-working parents often cited unbreakable appointments or commitments. Thus, from the point of notifying the parent of the meeting, the school personnel can send a signal to parents that their attendance and presence are less than critical.

Unilateral scheduling When parents did receive notification that a meeting was to be held, the time and date were already chosen. No attempt was made to consult with parents to ascertain mutually agreeable times and dates. Rather, the ARD Manager develops a calendar of meetings, usually on a monthly basis, and

parents are assigned a time slot. The regulations dictate that an annual review meeting must be held every 365 days for each child in special education, and this forms the basis for when Managers choose to hold the meetings. When parents expressed the need for a change in meeting time or date, ARD Managers were frequently resistant to making these changes. Instead, parents were often told that the papers could be mailed to them for signature, and not to concern themselves if they could not attend.

Limited time for meetings The average time allotted to any ARD meeting is twenty minutes. The researchers observed varying degrees of flexibility about this, from team to team. Some would allow the meeting to run longer, on occasion, while others held strictly to the allotted time. In these cases, parents were advised to sign the required papers and continue the meeting with the teacher immediately afterward or at another time. Parent questions were often answered in the briefest of manners; meetings seemed rushed; and there was little opportunity for any extended discussion of concerns.

Pressure for compliance Each ARD Manager is under steady pressure to insure and maintain compliance for each child in her caseload -- to hold meetings, at least annually; to have all documents completed and signed; to order appropriate assessments; and to certify that all files are complete. This pressure seemed to dictate the tone and manner of much of their activity. The emphasis was often more on timeliness and less on inclusion. When a parent's response to a meeting notice indicated that she would be

unable to attend, for example, she was not given a choice of several alternate dates, but was told the papers would be mailed to her. The parent was actually encouraged to just sign the papers and mail them back; with time, parents began to view the process this way. Documentation, rather than interpersonal communication, seemed most important. As stated earlier, as children progressed and preschool gave way to primary placement, parents often had a less personalized relationship and thus, less contact with teachers. Therefore, the primary point of contact between parent and school -- the classroom teacher -- became less accessible, and parents became even more isolated.

> They kept saying something about "language." Sometimes, it's like the three of them, they are discussing things that I don't understand. And I'll say "Excuse me. What are you talking about? Break it down into English."

Use of professional jargon The educational professionals utilized system jargon in their classification codes and professional jargon in their reports. Children were described as "Intensity IV, Level 04," for example. Test results, also, were reported in "educationese" -- "significant delay;" "standard score of 5;" "percentile rank of 26;" "auditory processing skills." These reports and much of the information presented were frequently incomprehensible to the average lay person. Thus, parents would sign papers and leave a meeting, with little understanding of the significance and meaning of much of the data presented, despite the fact that this data concerned the educational standing and placement of their children. They would often attempt to get the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

researchers to interpret for them, after the meetings. One ARD Manager did stop the proceedings periodically to ask parents if they understood, or would offer further explanations. This Manager would also routinely invite parents to telephone her, after they had time to go over the papers at home, if they had further questions.

> I missed the ARD meeting. I would've gone, but the notice came too late. If I had gone, it's always the same. They lay it out. If you have questions you can ask them. Otherwise, you sign it.

Structure of meetings The usual meeting consisted of two or more professionals, who would make reports, while the parent listened. The atmosphere was that of a panel of experts arrayed before one lay person. This often produced a sense of intimidation in the parent. Indeed, one ARD Manager reported that several of her parents regularly missed meetings. While they would come, if offered an alternative, these parents were really seeking a one-on-one experience (with the ARD Manager or the teacher), where their comfort level would be greater, and communication would be easier. Meetings were made less comfortable for parents, also, when the child's classroom teacher could not attend. Most parents, especially those with children at the preschool/kindergarten level, had their most regular contact with the school through these teachers. When the teacher was absent from the meeting, the parent lacked a familiar presence and the input of the person most intimately involved with her child on a day-to-day basis. Researchers learned, however, that teachers can only attend these

meetings, when they have asked for and obtained coverage for their classes; their attendance is not automatic or guaranteed.

The professionals had varying responses, also, to parents' displays of emotion. In one case, a mother who broke down in tears, was quickly ushered out of the meeting to "get herself under control," and the content of her concerns was totally dismissed. Another parent's tears, by contrast, were met with acceptance and sympathy, and her views, despite the emotional content, were incorporated into the meeting's deliberations.

Generally, parents' non-educational judgments of children's capabilities, whether presented emotionally or otherwise, were given no credence. A parent's statement such as, "_____ can do that. I don't know why he wouldn't do it for you all on the test. Do you think he didn't like the lady who gave him the test?", is given no consideration, whatsoever, in the determinations and findings. Meetings were planned and executed in a routinized, even mechanical, fashion. Parents' perspective that the process was largely pro forma, that "they lay it out. . . ; you sign it," was generally accurate.

> If they feel that way [that the child is okay if the teacher likes him], then they're fooling themselves. I mean, me and the teacher we can call each other by our first names, and talk about getting together outside of school. But when she comes to that meeting to talk about your child, she still works for the school system. And she's gonna judge your child by whatever measure they tell her to use. And those are the results's she's gonna give them. And those are the reasons for their recommendations; and that's it.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Objective 4. To observe similarities and differences in expectations and participation, between parents of children in special education and in regular education.

The study found that parents of regular and special education students shared similar expectations for their own participation and for their children's educational outcomes. Parents could readily identify the educational goals that children need to reach: reading, addition and subtraction, spelling, etc. Parents were willing and able to assist with homework, to observe in classes, and to interact with their children's teachers.

Over the course of three years, the majority of regular education parents continued to be satisfied with their children's progress. As children exited from kindergarten, many stated that, with larger classes, they no longer felt as free to visit classes unannounced. Two parents have tried private education for their children, due to the lack of all day kindergarten, but returned the children to public school for first grade. Two other parents expressed their intention to place their children in private school if the quality of academics does not improve. Two others felt that their children got little from the kindergarten program, that it was just a repeat of much that was learned in preschool. These parents felt that their children were mastering tasks adequately, but were not being sufficiently challenged. All of the regular education parents expressed their intention to continue to carefully monitor their children's progress and to act quickly if

problems arise.

Special education parents, on the other hand, expressed increasing dissatisfaction with the program. Except for those four who have children diagnosed as retarded, parents' dissatisfaction with special education seemed to be based on their inability to influence school decisions about their children, either to obtain further special education services (one) or, for the remainder, to effect mainstream placement for their children. The diminishing attendance at ARD meetings is a reflection of this. Parents are given documents in ARD meetings that describe their rights of appeal, but only one parent has actually discussed following that course. The others will talk about "calling down to North Avenue" (the location of the BCPS Board of Education), but this has been for purposes of obtaining transfers, not to attempt to appeal an actual placement decision. Parents still attempt to make their influence felt, primarily, at the school level.

Special education parents continue to assist children with homework and to stay in contact with teachers. One area of frustration for them, however, is the discrepancy between the schools' assessment of what the child can do and theirs. For example, a parent will work with a child on spelling words at home and feel the child has mastered them, only to have the teacher give the child a low mark on the report card in spelling. The parent is at a loss to explain this. Or, a parent will state that she is willing to help the child with reading at home, but books do not come home (a BCPS policy), and "I don't know if the book I'm using

is the right one." Further, in areas of speech and language, parents fail to understand that speech does not just mean the child can say the words; it also means the child must be able to define words, draw inferences, etc. As these nuances arise, parents feel increasingly at a loss as to how to help their children.

Finally, special education parents perceive, by first grade, that their children are not reading well, and that their stay in special education may be prolonged. Again, their frustration is with the slow progress to this goal, as well as the realization that, with the ungraded special education curriculum, their child's education will continue to diverge further from the regular education curriculum. Instead of a "catch up" situation, the child is in a "falling further behind" situation.

PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES

-- Teachers

Four special education teachers were interviewed formally and informally. Much of the information obtained was confidential and directly related to individual children under their tutelage, but there were also several themes that emerged from these contacts that can be discussed in the context of this report.

It is important to restate that parents experienced general satisfaction with the preschool/kindergarten teachers in special education; that they based much of their satisfaction with the program itself on the teachers' interest in, and liking for, their children; and that, at this early level, they saw themselves as active participants, with the teachers, in their children's

schooling.

Special education teachers, especially the preschool/kindergarten (hereinafter referred to as "preschool") view the parents as important participants in their children's education, especially as regards assisting with homework and behavioral management. Teachers utilize the notebook, which is used consistently in all the schools, as a means to involve parents in children's work and for communication regarding other concerns, especially classroom behavior. This consultation often involves verifying if the parent sees similar behaviors at home and discussion of ways to synchronize home and school responses to certain behaviors. The teacher and parent will often send notes back and forth in the notebook and arrange for mutually agreeable telephone or school conference times. The preschool teachers welcome and encourage parental visits to their classrooms.

Most preschool special education teachers express a nurturing philosophy toward their students and even refer to them as "my babies." They are protective of these children, and especially within the larger school community, seem most comfortable keeping the children under their care at all times. Some even admit to being overprotective. They view their role as getting the children up to grade level, by the end of kindergarten, or at the least, fully readying the children for the primary special education program. Two are advocates of partial mainstreaming, especially at the kindergarten level, for children who show great improvement. Two others are inclined to keep such children with them, while

providing extra assistance and strengthening activities, with an eye toward recommending first grade mainstreaming. All express concern that the transition to the typically larger regular education first grade classrooms be accomplished smoothly, so that children will be successful in the new setting and not have to be returned to special education.

At the preschool level, teachers are advocates of regular contacts with parents. For some, this takes the form of conversations at arrival or dismissal; for others, it is through unsolicited telephone conversations. As a result, these teachers exhibit broad knowledge of the families, of the personal details of the children's family lives, and of the strengths and weaknesses of the parents. Classroom management techniques include praise for jobs well done, which can include an impromptu call to a parent to tell them what a good job the child has done that day; the "sad chair" for children not participating properly; and "time out" for children who are misbehaving.

The teacher, typically, conducts many of the required assessments for ARD meetings and prepares the child's IEP. Specialized assessments, e.g. speech and language or physical therapy reports, are prepared by the resource person who works with the child. These complex professional assessments of children are often at odds with parents' more simplistic ones. Usually, teachers will acknowledge where assessment results diverge from their daily observations of children. However, a parent who goes to the ARD meeting with high expectations of the outcome, such as

a recommendation for dismissal from special education, will often be shocked when presented with these assessment outcomes. Teachers are quick to acknowledge children's strengths; indeed, they express that they feel obligated to give parents positive feedback, whenever possible. But, they also acknowledge that it is often at the point of the ARD meeting, when these results are explained and shared, that parents first realize that the educators view their children's disabilities as much greater than, for example, a mere speech problem. The teacher note too, that it is most often in a meeting that the parent hears professionals give a name or acknowledge a level of intensity of services to what has heretofore been discussed as simply a "catch up" process.

--ARD Managers

Every school in the BCPS, which has special education classes, is assigned an ARD Manager, who is responsible for case management. This requires assembling and maintaining all data, including test results, IEP's, and any external evaluations; scheduling and chairing all meetings -- Sixty Day Reviews, Special Reviews, and annual ARD meetings; and synthesizing all written and verbal data into a proscribed file format for each child. Theirs is a case management role, dependent upon input from a variety of sources, especially their team members; yet, the ARD Manager has no supervisory authority. It is the ARD Manager, also, who must insure that regulations are met regarding timeliness of notifications to parents; completeness of each child's files; routing of request for services; and determination of appropriate

service delivery.

Four ARD Managers were interviewed; three were formally interviewed, with taping, and all were informally interviewed, also. In addition, the project staff, especially the Coordinator, had many opportunities to observe them actually conduct meetings and to get their feedback afterward. Three of the ARD Managers were responsible for more than one school. As children in the study completed kindergarten and returned to their zone schools, project staff found these same Managers were assigned to three of the new schools. This allowed opportunities to observe them functioning in different settings with different teams.

ARD Managers were asked their views on mainstreaming. Two of the ARD Managers strongly expressed the opinion that children in the mild disability categories should not be retained in special education for long periods of time. One even stated that eighteen months should be the target point for the child to be mainstreamed, even if resource services had to be continued to bring skills up to grade level. The others expressed little opinion about this matter, although all expressed concern that the number of children in special education in BCPS is high, when compared to the rest of the state and the nation. All expressed concern that special education referrals, especially from grade three on, too often reflect teachers' (and parents') inability to manage, and unwillingness to cope with, children's behavior problems.

> But, what if you had a kid that fell through the cracks? What if he's a kid from a single parent family and his Mother is on Social Services? He might have a social problem, because his mother doesn't pay that much attention to him. And he acts out in other ways . . . trying to get as much attention as he can. But he's gonna have some [learning disabilities], because that ARD class is not teaching him anything. They're teaching him how to socialize and how to get along; say his alphabet and his numbers. But when it comes to sitting down and working with him, with his alphabet or numbers, with math and everything, they say "Don't worry about that right now. Johnny is having a problem today. Don't worry about it right now. He doesn't have to learn to read today."

The ARD Managers were asked about their teams. The ARD Manager operates as the core of a team that consists of the special education teachers; resource specialists, such as speech and language specialists, occupational therapists, physical therapists; and the school psychologist. The resource specialists, especially the occupational and physical therapists, and the psychologist are usually not employed fulltime in one school, but rather have responsibilities in several buildings. Often, then, these professionals are not present when meetings are held, and it is the responsibility of the ARD Manager to report and interpret their findings to parents. This often leads to a void, from the parent's point of view, where a parent cannot directly question the person about the child.

More critical, however, is the current situation with the speech and language specialists. When this study began, most of them were either fulltime in one school, or at most, halftime in two schools. Over time, personnel have changed and demands have increased. Many of the schools now have speech and language specialists, who are contract employees, who are paid by the hour

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

only to come to the school and render services directly to children. All the ARD Managers express frustration with this situation, especially since so many children in this study and in special education receive speech services. These hourly employees are not required to, or recompensed for, attending meetings or conducting special assessments; they do provide progress reports, but these must be presented in the meetings by someone else. This depersonalizes the process and puts ARD Managers in the position of reporting a critical service delivery area, without the benefit of the person's presence. Overall, with the exception of this area, ARD Managers are complimentary of the teams in their schools and feel they work together well. One reported, also, that the principal regularly attends meetings and that she depends upon her to reassure parents and facilitate closure and agreement in difficult cases.

When asked about their caseloads, most of the ARD Managers confirmed that the caseload is heavy, and the demands on their time for meetings, correspondence, and report generation are compounded by the fact that BCPS is currently under a Consent Decree, arising out of a lawsuit (Vaughn, G. v. Hunter), brought by a group of parents of special education children. This Consent Decree sets stringent timetables for key events to occur and has resulted in pressure being placed on ARD Managers to see that all cases are in compliance. This can range from timely notification of parents about meetings; to insuring that assessments ordered occur within certain timelines; to providing every child with an annual review

on or before his anniversary date; to obtaining parents' signatures on all documents; to provision of prescribed services. These requirements have greatly increased the demands on ARD Managers, especially in the area of paperwork. One felt it increases the burden to the point that "being an ARD Manager is all about paperwork"; one views it as, simply, another challenge to be met; and two say it has little impact on the manner in which they were already doing their jobs. One of these admits that she feel that "time" is now her greatest limitation in doing her job, and the additional demands "keep me from doing any extras" for the children and their parents. Again, the ARD Managers state that their effectiveness in coping with these demands depends greatly on the cooperation of their teams.

ARD Managers were asked how they schedule their meetings and the amount of time allotted for each meeting. Twenty minutes is the average time cited. However, one ARD Manager saw little reason to deviate from this and had a policy of holding rigidly to the schedule. The others stated that they use this as a guideline only; most meetings can be conducted effectively in this time, but some will run beyond. One Manager stated that she sees it as a "judgment call." If the parent clearly needs further explanations or is emotionally stressed, she will try to allow the meeting to continue to a comfortable conclusion, even if it means asking the next scheduled parents to wait. Sometimes, however, the parent is best served by going into a private session with the classroom teacher, and the ARD meeting can be ended. Another Manager stated

that she tries to give first-time parents more time, because of the unfamiliarity of the process. Three of the Managers report that, as they get to know parents, they can begin to judge which meetings will be routine, and which parents will "come with their notebooks and questions." All express sympathy with parents' concerns and recognize that they are making decisions about these children's educational lives.

The ARD Managers were asked about the issue of parent notification and how much encouragement Managers give parents to attend meetings. Some rely totally on mailings; one sends parent volunteers with reminders; one sends messages by the children; and one utilizes back-up phone calls. One ARD Manager reported that she has certain parents who routinely ask for rescheduling of meetings, she has learned, not because they lack interest, but because they are intimidated and uncomfortable facing a panel of educators alone. She attempts to honor these requests and makes arrangements for the parent to have a one-on-one session subsequent to the formal conference, either with her, the classroom teacher, or the resource specialist, whoever is most appropriate. Papers are mailed to parents, who miss meetings, for them to sign and return them. Three of the ARD Managers state that they make every effort to encourage parents to attend.

Finally, ARD Managers were asked to evaluate parents' understanding of, and participation in, the ARD process. They feel that parents do, generally, try to participate and are interested in their children. Several pointed out that parents of younger

children, those represented in this study, are especially involved, perhaps because they can easily understand the expectations of their children early on, and still feel they will "catch up" and be placed in regular education. They feel this participation can diminish over time. None of them feel that most parents really fully understood the process or the content of the papers they were signing. They cited parental intimidation with the formality of meetings, the sheer number of documents presented, the unfamiliar terminology, and the parents' own educational limitations, including the possibility that their own school experiences were not positive ones. When asked about reasons for not involving parents more in IEP preparation prior to meetings, they cited parental apathy and lack of knowledge. One ARD Manager says she routinely stops and explains given portions to parents and asks if they wish to add anything, but almost never gets any response. None of them denigrates the value of parental interest and participation, but state they wish parents could, somehow, be better informed. All seem aware that they have an important responsibility. As one says, "It's not always about assessment. I don't know, I guess it's all about caring. I look at a folder like it's a kid."

CONCLUSION

This project has provided the researchers multiple opportunities to observe and interact with parents of regular and special education children at the very beginning of their children's educational careers. For three years, the project staff has had numerous contacts with these parents, and for the special education group, have attended numerous school meetings with them. Additionally, the staff have observed and had contacts with teachers, ARD Managers, and personnel from other agencies that make referrals to the BCPS.

As the researchers addressed the parents' expectations, for example, they also had the opportunity to speak informally with some of the professionals from referring agencies in the City. The referring agencies' personnel, it was found, tend to adhere to a more medical model of special education. They point to inherent deficits, induced prenatally, by poor maternal nutrition, maternal substance and/or drug abuse, and low birth weight as causative factors. For them, remediation should be addressed only by experts, and parents' expectations of outcomes are not realistic; e.g. parents expect children to be "fixed" or "cured" by the educators. For most of the school personnel, a more educational model is embraced. Deficits and delays are viewed as more ecological than inherent, and potentially, more responsive to interventions. While the educators, also, feel remediation should be addressed by experts, their expectations of outcomes are more optimistic.

When parents are factored into the equation, then, the professionals' expectations of them and their expectations for their children are frequently far apart. Parents are resistant to the "mentally retarded" appellation for their children, and often embrace an interpretation of retardation as a condition that is much more severe in its manifestations than anything exhibited by their children. Further, in the case of several children who were initially referred for apparently mild developmental and/or speech delays, parents expected these difficulties to be remediated over a short period of time, not realizing that the professionals' may have been viewing the children's difficulties as more severe or long-lasting.

Based on our observations of parent conferences and our examination of evaluation and placement documents, it is not hard to see how these discrepant views came about. First, parents are afforded no opportunity to discuss, have input in, or digest, the evaluation information given in ARD conferences. This information is undoubtedly beyond the immediate comprehension of the parents, not because of the concepts themselves, but mainly because of the educational jargon in which they are couched, and the pro-forma style in which a great deal of information is given. Consequently, most parents rely on day-to-day information from the teacher, but this information is more likely to be criterion based, showing how the child is progressing on his/her own goals, rather than any normative, standardized measures. This is helpful to parents in terms of being able to assist the children. However, when formal

evaluation information is offered at an annual, or more frequently, a triennial review conference, the formal assessment of childrens' level of functioning often comes as a shock to parents. For some parents, this was the first occasion on which they heard a child being identified as "mentally retarded"; for others, this was the first time they were hearing officially that their child might not be back in regular education by the first grade.

Secondly, most parents are frustrated in their desire to advocate for their children. The formal conferences are supposed to provide the primary avenue for parents to undertake advocacy efforts on behalf of their children. Ironically, this has been revealed as the least effective vehicle for their purposes, and is conducted in a framework where they are least likely to be able to accomplish advocacy. The classroom teacher, then, becomes the most accessible, least threatening route for parents to leverage the system and make their needs felt. However, as children progress from preschool into the primary grades, and the relationships between parents and teachers become less personalized, this approach also becomes less viable. The result is that, by the third year of children's schooling, parents so-called "best" official routes to advocacy become the least accessible.

Contrary to much that has been written about parents from low to middle income status, these parents of regular and special education children were far from apathetic and non-participatory. In the early years of their children's schooling, they are interested and involved with the schools and with their children's

progress. They are eager to see their children succeed and express faith that they and the schools can effect this. For regular education parents, this attitude continues. For special education parents, faced with their children's continuing difficulties and with the schools' reluctance to allow them meaningful input into their children's educational planning, the process becomes increasingly disillusioning.

This research found that these parents can be mistakenly viewed as apathetic or indifferent, when in fact, they are frequently simply disillusioned and frustrated. They have found little evidence that their input is either welcomed or considered. Their participation is sought, more to meet legal requirements, than to make them functional members of their children's educational teams. Dismissal from special education is put on an ever-lengthening timetable, and "catch up" no longer seems easily attainable. Despite this, some parents continue to attempt to advocate for their children and to challenge the perception that the "educators know best. Many still continue to hold out the hope that the child will be dismissed from special education, eventually, and will attain educational, even collegial, success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the foregoing report of this three-year study of the views and participation of parents, and bearing in mind the known constraints under which special education professionals practice, we offer the following recommendations:

1) Inclusion of parents in the assessment process, and explicit explanation to parents of the possible implications of the students' classification and placement.

In this process we envision a genuinely collaborative approach to assessing children. Parents' "home diagnosis" should be seriously sought and carefully attended to. Parents should be included in any assessment procedures where they think their presence could be helpful to the child's demonstration of his/her abilities, and to professionals' understanding of the child. The purpose and meaning of testing and test results should be explained to parents in lay language, and all possibilities for continued special education placement, or more serious learning difficulties, should be explicitly discussed with the parent from the outset.

2) Pre-conference meetings for initial and triennial reviews.

Pre-conference meetings, involving one or two professionals, who can interpret to parents the main gist of evaluation results, have been recommended by many researchers and implemented in several school systems. The purpose of these informal conferences would be to give professionals an opportunity to explain, reiterate, and simplify evaluation

results, the range of placements available to students, the meaning of classification, the levels of intensity of service, and any other matters on which the parent may be unclear. Parents would have an opportunity to have their concerns heard, the doubts acknowledged and addressed, and their misunderstandings clarified. Although this may seem like yet another meeting, the logistical advantage would be that only one or two professionals would be required to hold a time-consuming meeting with parents; the official review, at which more relevant personnel are expected to be present, could then be briefer and focus on fine-tuning of decisions and official giving of consent. Truly informed consent would then be a real possibility.

3) Conduct of ARD Conferences: Flexible scheduling and timing of ARD conferences, adequate notice to parents, coverage for classroom teachers, and inclusion of an informal, but official, parent-report on the agenda.

Annual, triennial, 60-day, and special review conferences should be scheduled on a more feasible timetable, with some afternoon/evening meetings available for parents, leeway for meetings which need more time, and coverage for classroom teachers to attend conferences. Parents should be explicitly allotted a place to report their perceptions of their child's progress and needs, and should be informed that their presence is, therefore, really important at these conferences. Parents should be advised that their report need not be written, but will be taken seriously and responded to by the professionals

involved.

4) Placement: Neighborhood or modified neighborhood placement

A central concern of parents was the practice of placing children of widely varying ages and behaviors in one classroom. At best this would be a primary or intermediate special education class, at worst, in one class encompassing both of these age ranges. While we believe that placement in their neighborhood schools would be best for all children, with services provided within each building, we feel that a compromise position might be more feasible at this time: for example, where Intensity IV classes are considered necessary, a group of schools within a small radius could serve as a "pool" for one age range, for example, early primary classes, while a second school could offer the older primary classes, and a third could offer the intermediate level. While this would have the disadvantage of children having to move after a couple of years, it would keep them close to home, while also providing a more appropriate peer group, and some choice of classroom within each building.

Further, we recommend that children with severe behavior difficulties should be placed more carefully in an attempt to minimize the disruptive effects on the learning environment. This could mean distributing students with such difficulties so that there would not be several in any given classroom; it would certainly mean placing them with teachers who are very

well trained in structuring behavior management programs. In all cases, we do recommend that all self-contained special education programs should be provided with an aide.

Finally, although we recognize that the issue of restructuring so as to include all children in their neighborhood schools would present a much larger challenge than can be addressed by this study, we do believe intensity V services should be provided in neighborhood or modified neighborhood programs such as that outlined above for intensity IV schools. This was the view expressed by the only parent whose child was actually placed in an intensity V building during the course of the study. As quoted previously on page 35, this mother said:

> "I didn't want her moved out. I wanted them to do something about the situation that she was in, right there . . . A child doesn't need to be shuffled around!"

Appendix A

Questions for Interview: Parent Interview Guideline

INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDELINE

I: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A: Family:

1. How many children are there in your family? what ages?

   What is the age of the child who recently entered the pre-k/special ed program?

   Did any of the older children attend this school?

2. Are there other adults in the home? Any other adults who might deal with the school on behalf of your child?

3. Where do you live? distance from school. transportation to school?

4. Do you work outside of the home? What child care arrangements do you have for the children after school hours?

B: Reason for preschool placement

5. What was your reason for placing your child in a preschool program? (beliefs about preschool. convenience..?)

6. Did the older children attend preschool program? Reason?

7. If child is in special ed:

   How was your child referred to special ed? by whom? at what age?

   Did you agree with the placement?

   How has your child been classified? (try to get exact classification)

   Do you agree with the classification? How would YOU describe his/her difficulties?

Notes re: additional questions arising

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

II: PARTICIPATION

A: Retrospective

1. When your child started preschool, who were the first people you spoke to in the school about his/her program?

2. Was there a special interview then? What kind of information did you have to give? Did you talk with the teacher or observe the class?

3. Overall, how did you feel about these first meetings with the school? Do you think there should have been more/less/ different contact with the school at that time?

4. Since then, what other meetings have you had with school personnel about your child? What did you think of these?

B: Expectations

5. Do you expect to participate in more/other types of meetings, or other kinds of events?
(If in special ed, probe for parents' awareness of the correct name and purpose of meetings, eg: annual review, ARD, IEP)

6. Do you expect to ask for meetings with the teacher, or is it up to her to ask you to come?

7. Do you think that your participation will have an effect on your child's program or the kinds of classes he/she will be placed in?

   -can you give me an example of a decision about your child that you would like to be able to influence?

   -do you think the teachers would act on your opinions/wishes?

8. Do you think your participation ought to have an effect on your child's program?

   - for example, in the example you just gave me, do you think that the teacher should listen to your opinion? Or do you think it really should be up to them to decide?

9. (If the parent has older children): when your older children were in preschool, what sorts of things did you participate in?

Notes re: additional questions arising

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Parent Interview Guideline 1990/1991

Family Background

Intro:
How have things gone for your family since we last talked?

General problems
Is everything going ok with the other children? Any health problems? Schooling?

Other services
Have you been receiving any other services for your family, like social worker or medical support? Are you satisfied with these and are they coordinated with school services in any way?

Extended family support
I forgot to ask last time whether you're one of those lucky parents who get help from grandparents...such as?...how about uncles, aunts...?

Spouse/father support
How about your husband (child's father), does he help out with the kids or housework? (has he learned to cook yet?!)

Parenting Challenges

Discipline
How old is your child now? Do you find that discipline needs are changing at all? What kind of approach seems to work best? Is this area a problem, or is your child pretty easy to handle?

Special challenges
Some parents have mentioned areas that they find challenging as a parent, such as sex education or moral education generally, how do you see this?

Aspirations for child
I know your child is very young now, but do you have any particular hopes or expectations about how you would like to see his/her life turn out? What do you think will be the main thing that will decide how this turns out? (eg: education, family life, child's ambition/potential)

Parental assistance with school work
How is your child keeping up with the school work? Do you find you have to help a lot? What about with the older children, do they manage their work ok, or do you have to help a lot? If so, are you comfortable with that? For example, is the work real different from what you did in school?

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Out-of-home activities
Are there any activities you like to do with your child outside of home? What makes it difficult to accomplish these?

Satisfaction with Preschool

Child's progress
So what class is he in this year? Have you met the teacher? What work is he doing now?

A good school? or program?
Now that your child has been in the preschool program for a year. how would you evaluate the program? (what makes it a "good" program? a "good" teacher)

Most important person
Who do you think is the most important person in your child's education right now? Do you think that will change?

Does child's progress meet expectations
Is the child making more/less progress than you expected or hoped for? Examples? How was his final report card?

School discipline
Do you like the teacher's approach to discipline? Is it different from the way you discipline the children at home?

Success of preschool
When your child enters the first grade, do you think the preschool program will have made a difference to how ready he is? In what areas?

Home-school communication/collaboration

Talking to the teacher
About how many times did you have the opportunity to talk to the teacher last year? What kinds of things did you talk about? Were you satisfied with this? What would have made it better?

Examples, satisfaction
If spontaneous chats only, did you feel satisfied with this? What were some of the things she told you about the child?

Observing class
Did you observe the class at all? How did that come about. eg: was it your idea or the teacher's? What was your impression of the class? Do you think you will want to observe this year? Does the teacher invite you, or is it your idea?

School-wide meetings
Did you attend any school-wide meetings? Were you invited to any? Do you think these meetings are valuable?

Written communication
What about written communication? Did the teacher send notes home? Can you give me an example?

Teacher suggestions
Did the teacher make specific suggestions about work you could do at home, or methods of discipline to use? How did this work out?

The school in general

Overall evaluation
Now that you're more familiar with the school, does it seem like a good school overall? How does it compare to other schools the other children went to or the school you went to?

Other school services
Are there any other aspects of the school that you are concerned with? eg: is the lunch program/transportation/building cleanliness/security ok?)

School atmosphere
Last year you said that... did you continue to feel welcome when visiting the school? (or did the atmosphere improve)

Confrontation
Last time we talked you told me about your concern re.... did you talk to the teacher/principal...about it? (If so, tell me how it went...if not, why not? Would you talk to them if it happened again?)

Any changes you want to see
Is there anything that you intend to do differently this year regarding your child's schooling (any changes you want to see...)?

SPECIAL ED

Referral and diagnosis: for example, if the parent had expressed dissatisfaction with the diagnosis, or had been unclear in her explanation of it, we might ask questions such as:

You know, when I listened to our interview on the tape, I realized I had gotten mixed up about some of your child's early problems...I seemed to have misunderstood what you said about his ..., (or how the doctor explained ...) can you tell me again?

Any further investigations
Has the school or your doctor done any more investigation of his difficulties since we last talked? What did they say? Were you satisfied with the way it was done and the information you were given? Did it fit with your own impressions?

Teacher's assessment
What has the teacher been saying about her this year? How does she seem to see him (in terms of abilities, disabilities)
What do you think are the teacher's expectations for the child?

Related services
What other services is she receiving? How many hours per week - in a group or individually? How important is this service, or professional, in comparison to the teacher?

Communication with related service personnel
Do you get a chance to talk to the speech therapist? Does she ask you to work on things at home? If so, are you able to do so?

Attitude to special ed versus mainstream
Last time we talked you said you were pleased with the special ed program (OR: you wanted the label off your child), how do you feel about this now?

Experience of special ed at older level
Have you ever observed, or do you have any experience of special ed classes for older children? What would you expect the children to be learning at, say, the fourth grade in sp ed?

Advantages/disadvantages of special ed: potential / real?
What are the advantages/disadvantages of his/her being in special ed? Do you think this will change as he gets older?).

Plans/hopes for mainstreaming
Has the teacher talked about mainstreaming at all? Is this something you hope for?

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ARD Process

I am so glad we were able (sorry we were not able) to observe your ARD meeting, let's talk a bit about these meetings:

# of meetings
How many ARD meetings have you been to now? What is your overall impression of them?

Purpose of meetings
How would you describe the main purpose of these meetings?... (eg: is it mainly to give you information? is it for you to give them information about the child? How important is your presence in the meeting...Do you think it's important for you to be there or is it mostly information that could be sent by mail?)

Most important/influential person
Who do you see as the most important person in the meeting, in terms of making decisions and giving information?

Changes you would like to see
Is there any aspect of the meeting that you would like to see done differently?

Expected changes in participation
Do you think you will participate any differently this year?

Reasons for missed meetings
(If the parent missed last year's ARD, try to find out why, and what information they received about the meeting susbsequently, and whether they plan to attend this year)

Appendix B

Parent Consent Form

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I am participating in the University of Maryland at College Park, the Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth, Parent-Professional Partnership Project. The Project will continue for three school years. As a participant:

_____ I hereby give my permission for the Project Director(s) and the Project Coordinator to attend meetings with me at my child's school, as observers.

_____ I further give my permission for the Project Director(s) and the Project Coordinator to tape record any of these meetings. Where required, notice of intent to tape record has been give to the other meeting participants.

_____ _____

Parent/Guardian Signature Child's Name

_____

School

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

REPRODUCTION BASIS

☐ This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

☒ This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").