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A Case Study of a Foster Parent Working to Support a Child with Multiple Disabilities in a Full-Time Virtual School

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With increases in the number of students enrolling in virtual schools, increases in students with disabilities can also be expected at virtual schools. Further, not all of these students enrolling in virtual schools will live with their biological parents. As students with disabilities move online, they continue to be protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). However, these students spend much of the day with their parents or caregivers, if they are supervised at all, which raises questions about the depth and breadth of services that students with disabilities are receiving through their virtual schools. The purpose of this case study was to learn how a foster parent of a student with a disability in a fully online virtual middle school program perceived the school's response to her child's needs, as well as how she imagined that the school perceived her. This foster mother determined that virtual school educators could not educate her son in accordance with IDEA. The study offers implications for improving students' and parents' virtual school experiences.

Keywords: K-12 online learning, virtual schools, students with disabilities, IDEA in virtual schools, multiple disabilities, foster parents in virtual school, autism, anxiety disorder

INTRODUCTION

More than 200,000 middle-level children are enrolled in virtual school courses (Gemin & Pape, 2016). Students work through these courses using web-based applications and programs monitored by teachers in traditional districts as well as state-sponsored virtual schools and independent charter school programs. Regardless of whether a school is provided in a traditional or virtual setting, children are eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) if they are found to have a disability that interferes with their schooling (IDEA, 2004). Not all children with disabilities live with their biological parents or in homes with financially, socially, and emotionally stable caregivers. When this is the case, a child's schooling might be interrupted with court appearances, medical appointments, and periods of inactivity or non-activity in school.

Students with disabilities who enroll in virtual programs often move there due to parent choice. In fact, parents at one virtual school cited a perception of academic support and a safer social environment as major reasons to migrate to virtual schools (Beck, Egalite, & Maranto, 2014). In that same study, they reported increased satisfaction with the virtual school over the traditional school, largely due to the perception of better academic support and because they were free from bullying. While parents may perceive that virtual schools will provide a preferable educational experience, there is also evidence that such support may not universally exist in virtual schools (Smith, Rice, Ortiz, & Mellard, 2017).

A basic understanding of the ways in which special education services are developed and provided in virtual programs is emerging in the research literature (Rice & Dykman, 2018). At the same time, the research concerning parent perceptions of these services has not addressed how different types of family dynamics may factor into students' ability to access and benefit from services. As an illustration, Blum (2015) investigated mothers' work in advocating for children with disabilities in traditional schools. She found two trends. First, mothers were relentless in their efforts to help their children navigate school and mitigate the circumstances of their children's disabilities. Second, mothers' options for managing high need child care were dependent on interrelated dimensions of social privilege, including her class resources, her marital status, her race, and the gender and race of the children. Looking carefully at parent work in virtual education requires a similar inquiry into these interrelated dimensions.

While scholars acknowledge that parents of children with disabilities bring certain perceptions and expectations to virtual schooling, there is still much to learn about how those expectations and perceptions coalesce in a virtual setting. To serve children with disabilities in virtual programs more effectively, it was necessary to understand how parent perceptions are formed as parents support their students during a virtual schooling experience. The specific research questions were:

1. What perceptions does a foster parent have about the quality of her child's virtual education?
2. How do personal and family characteristics in the foster family contribute to these perceptions?
3. How does a foster parent respond to the perceived challenges of supporting a child in a virtual school?

This article proceeds with some background information about children in the foster system and the particular challenges they face. It continues with a conceptualization of IDEA in virtual schools as it relates to IEP development and expectations for parent involvement, followed by a very brief literature review due to limited research on the topic. Next, the methodological strategies for gathering the perspectives of a parent with a child with a severe disability are articulated. Findings are then presented as key themes. Finally, a discussion revisits the findings in light of IDEA and the literature review and offers suggestions for supporting families like that in this case study.

ACKNOWLEDGING FOSTER CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

The number of children in foster care in the United States hovers around 500,000, with 800,000 children served by the system every year in one form or another (Weiss, 2018). Further, approximately 13% of all children between the ages of 6 and 14 experience some form of disability. In fact, children with disabilities are between 1.5 to 3.5 times more likely to have experienced neglect or abuse than children without disabilities (Weiss, 2018). Sometimes in these cases, the abuse acts as a catalyst for the development of the disability. Other times, the strain of coping with or adjusting to the disability in a family brings on the abuse (Reiter, Bryen, & Shachar, 2007). Unfortunately, children born with various forms of disabilities are more often abused and more often relinquished to the child welfare system, either by force or choice. Abuse and trauma also happen within the system itself (Weiss, 2018).

Moreover, the constellation of disability, abuse, and being given up to child welfare produces conditions that might make children more likely to end up in a virtual school than a traditional one. For example, more than 50% of foster children experience some form of mental health impairment compared with 22% of children in the general population (Weiss, 2018). Of the children affected, 25% experience post-traumatic stress disorder, versus

4% of children in the general population. Other issues found to be prevalent among foster children include panic syndrome, social phobia, and generalized anxiety disorder (Weiss, 2018). Any of these conditions make it more difficult to attend a traditional school every day, all day. It makes sense that virtual schools could have high numbers of children with disabilities in foster situations enrolled. These children have different needs than other children, even other children with disabilities. Even so, virtual schools interact with students across distance (by definition) and so their strategies for observing and reporting abuse or trauma are likely less developed than in traditional schools.

UNDERSTANDING IDEA IN VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

When parents choose the virtual school for their children with disabilities, they receive all the assurances outlined in IDEA (2004). IDEA requires states to ensure a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all eligible students with disabilities residing in that state. FAPE occurs when students receive an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) designed to meet unique learning needs resulting from the disability. The student must receive educational benefit from the school as well as preparation for further education, employment, and independent living. The educational benefit must also be provided alongside peers without disabilities to the greatest extent possible.

As additional guidance for virtual schools and programs, the United States Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) issued a Dear Colleague Letter (Swenson & Ryder, 2016). The letter identified state and local education agency responsibilities for implementing IDEA in full-time virtual schools. Although the letter confirmed that virtual schools must adhere to IDEA, specific instructions as to how virtual schools were to achieve this federal mandate were not provided.

While questions, concerns, and even conflicts have always existed about how to best serve students with disabilities in compliance with IDEA, virtual schools present new areas of uncertainty. Some of these uncertainties emerge from the possibility that using computers and Internet-based applications may take the time that students should be spending to receive instruction from persons with special education licenses and training. Time with such specially-trained professionals has always been in short supply (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Mason-Williams, 2015). Other uncertainties arise from the new roles and responsibilities parents assume as their child's federally-guaranteed and informal contact with educators with specialized knowledge and skills naturally decrease when children leave a traditional school (Ortiz, Smith, Rice, & Mellard, 2017). Further, any program will require certain general and technological literacies to sustain learning and course materials themselves are not always accessible (Rice, 2018). Therefore, time learning virtually may not yield as much educational benefit if students cannot access the online instructional resources.

Even with these challenges, virtual schooling can also be a positive step toward the inclusion of students with disabilities. Inclusion would occur as students receive well-apportioned, well-designed, high-quality opportunities to learn in this manner (Kent, 2015; Newman, Browne-Yung, Raghavendra, Wood, & Grace, 2017). When this happens, virtual learning is inclusive because students with disabilities have access to the same online learning opportunities as their peers without disabilities.

PARENT PARTICIPATION IN IEP DEVELOPMENT IN VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

IDEA (2004) promised protections for students and requires parent involvement in all school contexts, including online learning. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted to find out whether and how students with disabilities and their families are being served through IEPs in fully online schools. Remember that it is the IEP that provides the roadmap for FAPE. It is difficult to conduct studies on whether services are received because the policy picture for online schools with regards to disability is grim. In a national scan of policy and guidance regarding IEP review in online settings, researchers found that only eight states required a review of the IEP prior to enrollment in a fully online, blended or digital learning experience (Basham, Stahl, Ortiz, Rice, & Smith, 2015; Rice & Ortiz, 2016). A more recent scan found major funding flow gaps in how money for the services travels from the federal government to the state, and then to local districts and charters, especially when the charters are not attached to a school district (Ortiz, Rice, Deschaine, Lancaster, & Mellard, in press). The absence of definitive state-level policy and guidance coupled with a lack of solid research on best practices for special education can put additional stress on parents.

Although there have been a few studies about parents' and children's experiences searching for services and supports in online schools, the findings have not been positive. For example, Greer, Harvey, Burdette, and Basham (2015) conducted structured interviews with 16 state directors of special education. These representatives of their respective states were asked several critical questions regarding online learning and students with disabilities. These questions included: "Based on your experience, what do you think are the primary factors an IEP team considers in making decisions about FAPE in online settings?" and "Do you think the average IEP team has the knowledge of online education to make decisions about FAPE in online settings?"(pg. 59-60). In the study, seven state directors reported that ensuring FAPE in online courses and programs was a major challenge. Additionally, state directors in this study did not think that IEP teams in virtual schools had the necessary expertise to make critical decisions about ensuring FAPE in the online setting. This lack of expertise could lead to inconsistent services for students with disabilities in virtual schools.

In another study, Burdette and Greer (2014) surveyed 46 parents of children with disabilities in grades K-8 that received some form of instruction in an online environment and noted that parents perceived that having their child in an online setting was particularly challenging. They attributed the difficulty to a lack of time to personally support their child in learning content and monitoring their daily progress. In addition to inconsistencies regarding an initial review of the IEP, parents also reported reading to their children, identifying additional resources to ensure their children could comprehend content, and providing intensive monitoring of all academic activities. In another study by Rice and Carter (2015), a school administrator reported consoling a parent who was overwhelmed by virtual teaching responsibilities. The parent thought that she would be able to go and do housework while her child learned online, but she found that she could not. The administrator told this mother that she could not expect to do laundry and ensure her child learned. Finally, Rice and Carter (2016) found that teachers of students with disabilities were underprepared to teach self-regulation skills in an online environment and that soliciting parental help was their primary strategy for making sure students with disabilities moved through course work. Together, these studies suggest that parent work in virtual learning for students with disabilities requires considerable effort from parents who are not formally prepared in special education practice.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study were collected as part of a series of case studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These case studies focused on parents and children with disabilities working in virtual schools across six states. To identify the main body of participants, researchers partnered with the national network of parent technical assistance centers to offer an opportunity to share their experiences of being a learning coach of a child with a disability in a full time virtual educational environment.

As we considered the entire data set, we became interested in Gladys' as an interesting case because of her status as a foster parent. Gladys had enrolled her 11-year-old son Derek in a virtual school (both names are pseudonyms). Derek's primary disability category was Autism, although he had also been identified as having an Emotional and Behavioral Disorder (EBD), as well as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Gladys said that she was especially interested in working with researchers because she felt that there were areas for improvement in virtual education, although she was grateful to have her son in a virtual school. Gladys had enrolled Derek in

Online Academy— a large for-profit vendor of virtual education. Online Academy operated 31 schools in several states with a total of approximately 64,000 students. As far as it could be investigated, we did not suspect that Derek was currently being mistreated, which was another factor in helping us to select him for the study. Otherwise, our priority would have been finding assistance.

Collecting Data for this Case

One data collection tool for this study was the phenomenological interview (Kvale, 1983, 1994). From Gladys, we hoped to gain a deeper understanding of how she perceived various aspects of being a learning coach in a virtual environment. To write the questions for the interview schedule, researchers reviewed literature pertaining to parent involvement and special education implementation. Interview items were then tested with parents of children with disabilities enrolled in fully online learning environments and revised for relevance and clarity based on their feedback. Parents were interviewed once for 60 minutes. There were also follow up emails and shorter phone unstructured conversations for obtaining clarification, sharing data, and verifying findings. In Glady's case, she was contacted three additional times. Recordings were transcribed as part of the analysis process. In addition, Gladys shared a copy of her son's most current IEP document from the virtual school. She also provided materials she had created for teaching her son, including his daily schedule and materials she had made for him. The IEP document was reviewed by a panel of special education researchers including an educational psychologist to interpret the document.

Data Analysis

From this constellation of data relevant to the case, we worked to achieve a crystalized analysis. Crystallization in qualitative research seeks to understand the research in the contexts of the researcher position. Taking on crystallization as a goal requires researchers to set boundaries around the data and then rethink those boundaries. More simply put, the data was messy and to understand it, we had to develop a representation of it that was rich and interesting as well as firmly tethered to the data and provided insight on the research question (Stewart, Gapp, & Harwood, 2017). This was done by mapping responses to the research questions as we uncovered them in the data. Then we organized the responses into findings by looking for repetition, conceptual overlap, and social resonance. To find these repetitions, overlaps, and resonances, we engaged with both the transcript and the audio recording to learn from interviews and follow up interactions, paired Glady's words with the other documents she provided, sought contrary evidence for emerging themes, and obtained clarification during the coding.

We began with the interview, reading and studying the transcripts independently and then we compared as a group. As we document expressed or implied answers to the research questions, we determined that words and phrases such as “when X happens, I do Y” would be helpful for describing Gladys’ work. In addition, we were interested in finding pieces of discourse, such as “instead,” “by contrast,” and “so I just…” to help us identify her sense-making processes. Finally, we looked for evidence of ongoing, long-term philosophies or orientations Gladys had for working with schools Derek. These typically centered on terms like “I feel …”, “I think …”, “I want …” and “I decided…” We were especially attentive to these terms when they were qualified with words like “just” and “so”, when they were followed with violent images (e.g., “cramming it down his throat”), or when her voice became louder as she talked. We interpreted these moments as ones having emotional charge and therefore, were worth more careful analysis. After the initial review of the interview, we linked the other documents Gladys provided to look for additional insight.

Next, we turned to Derek’s IEP document and read it in two rounds. Two researchers had extensive experience reading IEPs and a third researcher who was not a part of the study provided additional insight. One reading of the IEP focused on identifying present levels of performance as well as instructional goals. The second round involved interpreting technical scores on the subtests, looking at the number of subtests administered, and locating evidence provided for identification. These readings were used for comparison against what Gladys reported was happening in terms of implementation and services Derek was receiving. Finally, we looked at the policies listed in the school and the state where Gladys lived to gain additional information about how Gladys might have formed her perceptions of the virtual school’s relationship with her. While her school had limited publicly available information, we did find state policies around special education services for traditional and virtual settings. Further, this lack of information provided some confirmation that Gladys felt she and Derek were underserved.

FINDINGS

In this case study, we interacted with a foster parent supporting a child with autism and other disabilities in a fully online setting. We present the findings as responses to the initial research questions. For each question, the findings have been grouped into themes where data exemplars are shared alongside interpretive and explanatory commentary.

Gladys' Perception of the Quality of Derek's Virtual Education

Three parental perceptions were identified as a response to this question. First, she perceived that Derek was not being accommodated in the virtual school. Second, she perceived that Derek was being asked to do work that was well out of his independent ability. Third, she perceived that the virtual school expected her to be the primary provider of specialized instruction.

Online Academy is not serious about accommodating students with disabilities. Gladys perceived that the virtual school curriculum is designed for students without disabilities. Those with disabilities (like Derek) are expected to perform comparably. Throughout the interview, she referred to her son as unable to do his work without constant assistance. She indicated that she understands teachers may be prevented from making curricular adjustments for students with special needs by the school or state policy. Her perception is supported by descriptions of the lack of accommodations and supplemental aids and services.

> There is no clear model program as a basis for special needs kids. If you look at some of the wording that they talk about, it says 'regular education classes' and special needs children are not regular education kids. So, we have to go through the process of modifying and then there's a line that the teachers can't cross because I'm sure they have to stick to policies and procedures in accordance with the Department of Education. So, there is no special needs program. They're just lumped in with the regular ed[ucation] class. [Online Academy] is a great school if your child is independent and needs less supervision and that's not the case with my son and so it's challenging.

Gladys reasoned that school policies are clearly geared toward general education students. When she was initially planning to enroll Derek, she noted the virtual school staff made her feel that the virtual school was intended as a place where her student could be served. It was only later when Derek started to struggle that she searched for policies about special education. She reported that she had to dive deep into the schools' website and all she found was vague language stipulating that students could be served. From these experiences, Gladys determined that "there is really no 'special needs' program in online schooling, and the one-size-fits-all curriculum requires too much from students with disabilities."

When Gladys initially viewed the Online Academy website, she felt assured that there was a process in place to modify digitally delivered academic content. However, after she enrolled Derek in the school, she determined that the school did not have an operating framework to support students with disabilities. Her conclusion was that the school required students with disabilities to assimilate into all regular education online courses despite the school being in possession of her son's IEP that clearly stated the severity of his disabilities and an initial impression that the school would meet his needs. The following statement is an example of the language from Online Academy's website.

> *FAQ: Does Online Academy provide services and accommodations for students with disabilities?*
>
> For students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) [Online Academy] provides a continuum of virtual special education services that range from consultation, curriculum accommodation, and modification, collaboration with learning coaches and general education teachers, to virtual direct instruction. [Online] Academy provides students with IEPs with related services, that may include virtual speech-language and virtual occupational therapy, as determined by the IEP team. For eligible students with disabilities who do not require special education, [Online] Academy develops (as needed) and implements Section 504 plans that detail appropriate accommodations and modifications.

The statement from the virtual school is a clear and detailed description of services that are supposedly available to students with disabilities. The statement ensured parents that a continuum of services was available that included specially designed instruction and related services. Since Gladys knew that Derek needed all the services mentioned, it seemed logical that a parent seeking additional support from the state's school choice program could expect that the virtual school would be a viable educational option for her child. After all, Gladys had removed Derek from the traditional school environment due to concerns about his emotional well-being and physical safety.

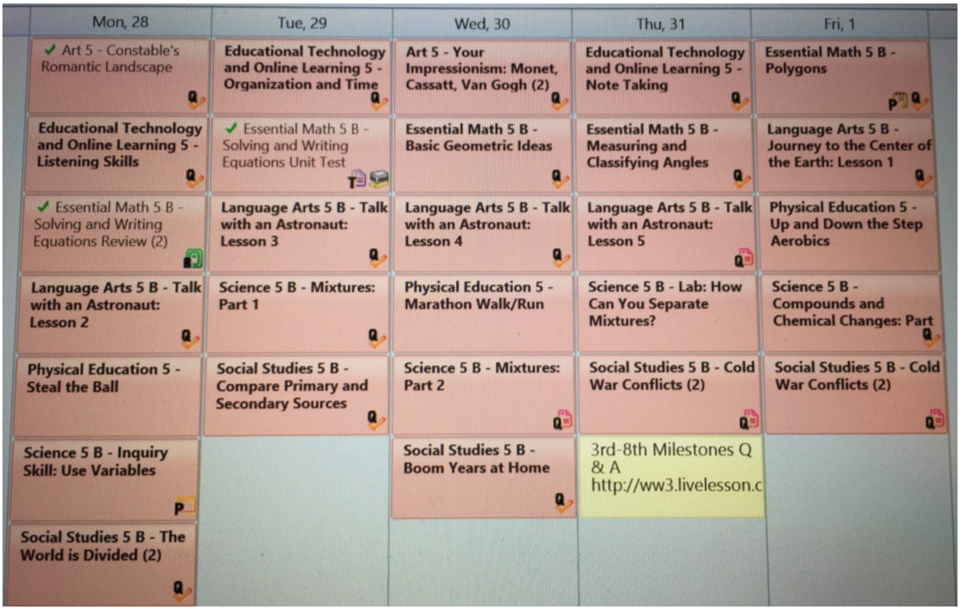
Online Academy expects grade level performance regardless of individual needs. Gladys perceived that school officials thought her son should perform at grade level to remain in the school. This perception was supported by her son's course schedule and the lack of alignment with her son's IEP. Her son's course schedule included all fifth-grade classes despite his significant documented challenges in reading and math. Derek's IEP revealed that he was at a second-grade level or lower in nearly every skill related to reading and math. When Gladys inquired as to why her child was not allowed to use materials at his reading level, Online Academy officials cited state policy saying that students must be exposed to grade level curriculum. While Gladys did not feel that the mandate for exposure meant that appropriate-level curriculum was out the question, the school did.

> I think throwing them in regular education with seven courses is a disservice to the child. I think they need to start off with a little and add as the child progresses and they're grasping what it is that they're learning. And I think that the restriction that they put on the children like, "Well, we have to expose them to whatever grade level they're in this coursework" needs to be tossed out the window. Because our children are not at their grade level. So, we need to do away with their grade level thing and we need to teach our special needs children with where they're at and get them started off small and then add. And don't move until they grasp what it is that they need to learn.

Gladys conveyed deep concern about the virtual school requirement that all students must attend grade level online classes regardless of ability level. According to her, none of the academic content was appropriate for him. She shared her conviction that her child was not receiving FAPE since he did not have an opportunity to learn independent of her. The IEP we reviewed articulated parental concerns in three different places throughout the document. These concerns were that her child was not reading or doing math at his expected grade level. There are also two places in the IEP where the student shared the same concern and that he thought school was too challenging.

> Too much. Too much expected for a special needs child. Five hours is not realistic. Three hours, two and a half hours or three hours of school for him is enough. Five hours and 25 hours a week for a special needs child is too much. And I know that they did not give as much work to him in [the traditional setting].

As a result of what she perceived as an inappropriate academic load, Gladys decried the intensity of the academic day. She compared Derek's workload to his previous school and felt like the virtual school drastically increased the demands with little regard for the limitations presented by his disabilities. Gladys lamented the academic stress caused by such expectations and the potential aggravation of her son's anxiety disorder and depression. Derek's IEP stated that he would receive 60 minutes a week of support for both English language arts and math. Further, he was supposed to have separate classes for science and social studies with access to specially designed instruction. Despite these placements, no accommodations are noted on the IEP. The schedule below shows only one section throughout the week where the student deviates from the regular education curriculum. There is also not a time slot allowed for a required 60 minutes of occupational therapy present in the IEP (Figure 1).



Mon, 28	Tue, 29	Wed, 30	Thu, 31	Fri, 1
✓ Art 5 - Constable's Romantic Landscape	Educational Technology and Online Learning 5 - Organization and Time	Art 5 - Your Impressionism: Monet, Cassatt, Van Gogh (2)	Educational Technology and Online Learning 5 - Note Taking	Essential Math 5 B - Polygons
Educational Technology and Online Learning 5 - Listening Skills	✓ Essential Math 5 B - Solving and Writing Equations Unit Test	Essential Math 5 B - Basic Geometric Ideas	Essential Math 5 B - Measuring and Classifying Angles	Language Arts 5 B - Journey to the Center of the Earth: Lesson 1
✓ Essential Math 5 B - Solving and Writing Equations Review (2)	Language Arts 5 B - Talk with an Astronaut: Lesson 3	Language Arts 5 B - Talk with an Astronaut: Lesson 4	Language Arts 5 B - Talk with an Astronaut: Lesson 5	Physical Education 5 - Up and Down the Step Aerobics
Language Arts 5 B - Talk with an Astronaut: Lesson 2	Science 5 B - Mixtures: Part 1	Physical Education 5 - Marathon Walk/Run	Science 5 B - Lab: How Can You Separate Mixtures?	Science 5 B - Compounds and Chemical Changes: Part
Physical Education 5 - Steal the Ball	Social Studies 5 B - Compare Primary and Secondary Sources	Science 5 B - Mixtures: Part 2	Social Studies 5 B - Cold War Conflicts (2)	Social Studies 5 B - Cold War Conflicts (2)
Science 5 B - Inquiry Skill: Use Variables		Social Studies 5 B - Boom Years at Home	3rd-8th Milestones Q & A http://ww3.livelesson.c	
Social Studies 5 B - The World is Divided (2)				

Figure 1. Derek's schedule at Online Academy

Gladys should be the primary service provider. Gladys consistently expressed a perception that school officials believed that she is best suited to work with Derek and that she should do so regardless of her skills or training. Her primary approach is to find ways to circumvent the current system with her own supports.

> As a learning coach, I have to sit there with him and make sure that he is staying on task with what he has to do. Now I have my sign in page, and he has his sign in page, and if I go in my sign in page to his courses, you'll see what the parent is expected to do. Basically, we're doing the role of a teacher because you should be reading up on the courses beforehand so that you can help the child with their classwork. That's highly impossible. Especially if you have other children. And in my case, I have two other kids who have issues and they're expecting me to get all this done in five hours. Well, that's unrealistic for me. So, it's a lot on a learning coach and this is free. So, I guess they would say "well this is your child and you should have an interest in what your child is doing," well yes, that's true but at the same time most of us are not educated.

Gladys felt that her role in Derek's education was overwhelming. She qualified this statement by listing some of her daily duties that include keeping her son on-task, signing into the learning management system, and studying the academic content prior to her son's school day in order to be prepared to teach him.

Keeping her son on-task was quite challenging, which is unsurprising since the IEP clearly states Derek has Attention Deficit Disorder. In addition to this diagnosis, the IEP states issues with self-control including a history of running out of the school and throwing large objects when experiencing fear and anxiety. A recent evaluation carried out by a school psychologist listed anxiety, depression, and difficulty sleeping as additional concerns for Derek. Gladys was not working with the virtual school special education staff to accommodate or address any of these issues despite the fact that a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) was included in Derek's IEP requiring that he receive clear directions and an additional break when displaying signs that he is getting overwhelmed or agitated. There is no one in the virtual school to ensure this is done. It is Gladys's job. The IEP also made provisions for instructional accommodations that included repeating or paraphrasing directions, allowing extended time for assignments, reading material aloud, and providing Derek with a visual timer. The IEP did not include any notation indicating Gladys would be in charge of managing difficult behavior throughout the day specifically related to her son's disability or that she would be the main provider of supports required for her son throughout the day. Unsurprisingly, Gladys felt that her current responsibilities were unsustainable.

Personal and Family Characteristics and their Contributions to Gladys' Perceptions

Gladys raised several issues that spoke to the narrative that her family's case is quite unique. These factors included special characteristics of (a) Derek, (b) herself, and (c) the family as a unit.

Derek's exceptionalities. Gladys stated several times that her child has a unique set of exceptionalities that sometimes they affect his ability to learn in an environment comparable to his peers. For example, the behavioral manifestations of Derek's disability impeded his ability to remain safe in a traditional environment (e.g., running out of the physical school building).

Not only were these episodes dangerous to Derek, but Gladys was also embarrassed by the am unable to face the school staff. She stated that she, "couldn't take the phone calls" from the traditional school anymore. These calls made her "super anxious and nervous every time the phone would ring." This particular manifestation of Derek's disability made it difficult for Gladys to perceive the traditional school a place where Derek would be in a safe environment with his peers. The fact that he had run out of the school building on six separate occasions weighed on her confidence in the traditional school's ability to keep Derek safe while he was not in her care.

Gladys also noted that she did not feel it fit his unique needs in consideration of his disability status. She stated that he had been receiving services through a school-based program for students with emotional and behavioral concerns, which included time in a classroom with a sensory room with one door and no windows where he needed to calm down. Because of her experience in traditional schools, it is likely that she already had concerns about trusting schools, but she also needed the virtual school to work because she did not feel Derek should return to a traditional program.

Gladys's non-traditional mothering age. Another factor that contributed to Gladys's understandings of the school's perception of her was her age at the time of the interview. As a 61-year-old foster mother, she indicated that she was an older parent. At one point during the interview, she stated that the fact that she was "not a young chicken" and her age presented a barrier. It was a barrier because she could not draw on her formal education because she received it so long ago. It was clear that she felt like being older put her out of touch with the information Derek needed to learn and the technologies necessary to learn it in the virtual environment. We wondered if being older meant she might also be tired and have fewer resources in the form of friends with children the same age to support her.

Gladys's level of education. The time elapsed between Glady's formal education and the current study positioned her to feel unintelligent while working with virtual school staff. However, sometimes her interview reflected pride in this education. Gladys actually credited her bachelor's degree for her ability to give any help to Derek. "I don't know how I would do this without my college education," she said several times. "How could a parent do this [support online learning for a child with a disability] without one?" Gladys viewed the fact that she holds a college degree as a somewhat unique asset working with Derek in the virtual school. Gladys reported that "most of us [parents] are not educated… most of us don't have degrees… and some parents may not even have a GED." Despite her pride in her own education, she was frustrated with the level of the literacy, cognitive, and other demands required for learning coaches to feel proficient in the task of facilitating their child's mastery of the material.

A household comprised of adopted foster children. Gladys was a single parent to multiple foster children, each with their own unique disability characteristics. Maintaining family life under these circumstances requires a high degree of coordination amongst members, especially due to the family's limited finances. Also, for Gladys, there was fear that her children would be taken from her and so it was important that she not draw attention to herself if she could avoid it. The fear and the difficulty coordinating time and money carried over into Derek's educational experience. For example, Gladys felt restricted from fully engaging in all of the face-to-face socialization opportunities offered by the virtual school. For example, the virtual school offered frequent field trips, ostensibly to help the students feel more connected—an inclusive goal. However, Gladys said that ensuring Derek could attend these trips was difficult.

> I'm crunched for how much time I need to do this because of when the other two kids get home. [Also] financially, I can't afford to be running an hour here and two hours there and back.

Derek's inability to participate in the trips—to participate alongside his peers in a school-sponsored environment—is unfortunate. According to 20 U.S. Code section 1401(9)(A), FAPE should be provided at the public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge. Some may argue that field trips would fall outside of FAPE. After all, are they optional? Not exactly. First, because the field trips in the virtual school provide access to peers without disabilities. Second, if field trips are related to the curriculum (and ideally, they should be), students with disabilities should be participating in them as part of their access to the curriculum—a clear access point for FAPE. Also, the United States Department of Education has clarified specific protections of individuals with disabilities in educational settings. These protections specifically state that denial of field trips without cause is a civil rights violation that will be managed by the Office of Civil Rights (Cantú & Heuman, 2000).

In Glady's case, there seemed to be an additional reason for Derek's non-participation besides time and money: Gladys is his sole source of behavioral support. Taking Derek on a field trip would be taxing to her ability to monitor his behavior. Recall that the school should be providing that support at public expense under the FAPE rationale. Further, denying students with disabilities access to the field trip because of behavior is specifically called out as problematic by the department of education (Cantú & Heuman, 2000). Although frustrated, Gladys did not deign to complain to the school—because of fear of losing the child, and because she felt she has received multiple implicit messages from the school that is was her sole responsibility. Therefore, Derek did not participate in field trips and Gladys remained silently frustrated.

Gladys Responses to the Challenges She Perceived

Gladys responded to the challenges resulting from the lack of support for implementing his IEP as written. She responded to these challenges by asserting support for teachers, advocating for Derek, and articulating Derek's strengths as a learner. Unfortunately, these were insufficient. Her final response was to move Derek to another school.

Adopting an attitude that prohibited external blame. Instead of calling an IEP meeting and engaging agonistically with the teachers, Gladys aligned herself with the teachers. She felt that shifted her out of an adversarial role. This type of action was supposed to help her manage the day-to-day stress of working with her son with high needs at home.

> I'm going to say this. First of all, those teachers are bound by the education department, so they're not going to go against the grain. I think there needs to be more leeway in allowing the teachers to express their concerns without being penalized. Because as I began the dialogue this time it was like a full shock wake-up and I had to really keep reminding them that I'm part of the team. I could feel them; they wanted to say something, but they're bound by the fact that they are teachers and their loyalty first is to the school. And I think there needs to be some anonymity there so that when the teachers really see something that is not right that they're not going to get penalized for speaking up.

Gladys took a position where she saw teachers as wanting to help, but the pull of the institution stopped them. That way, she did not have to be angry with them. She could be angry with the institution as represented by the state. This also kept her from drawing attention to herself as an older mother with multiple foster children who was somewhat overwhelmed.

Taking on an additional role as an advocate. Gladys took on a role as an advocate for Derek. She described several instances when Derek could not understand the curriculum and tried to solicit some assistance from the school. Rather than receiving that assistance, she was told about state policy for having students exposed to grade level curriculum that he could not read. Unable to contend with the school officials in ways that would change their minds and fearful that pressing the issue too hard would result in negative consequences for her family, Gladys took on the challenge of finding materials that were appropriately challenging for Derek on her own. This required "many hours of my time to locate the materials and then to provide Derek with the literacy support to access them." For example, she found him supplementary videos about curriculum topics and websites with lower reading demands.

Asserting Derek's strengths as a learner. Gladys made a point to regularly touch on her child's strengths, as opposed to focusing solely on his disability status. She noted "...he's very intelligent" and described him as "talkative" when interacting one-on-one. In particular, she highlighted Derek's self-advocacy skills, as well as his ability to actively engage with academic material when it was presented in a visual or interactive manner.

Preparing Derek for Self-advocacy. Gladys stated that Derek was able to advocate for himself when he experiences difficulty understanding concepts presented within the curriculum. She noted that "when he didn't understand he'd say, 'Mommy, I don't understand this,'" which suggests that he is aware of the point at which material becomes too difficult for independent engagement.

Finding supplemental instructional materials. Gladys said that Derek has the ability to engage with the material presented in the curriculum when he can access the material in a way that is meaningful to him. She reported that he particularly appreciated the synchronous lessons from the school where he could watch the academic material as it was presented in real time. "He was involved with the life lessons because he understood what they were talking about." Gladys also stated that Derek could engage with various technological literacies to access his education, which was vital for him as he works to learn online.

Gladys explained that the virtual school sometimes provided links to meaningful information related to course content for students to click on to learn more about a topic. She gave a specific example stating: "What they will do is they'll put links in to like movies where he'll have to go online. Like one of his art classes had a link to the Metropolitan Museum." Gladys noted that Derek particularly appreciated this type of presentation modality when accessing course material.

Changing schools (again). Although Gladys tried to leverage her strengths in helping Derek throughout the school year, she was never able to work with the other members of the IEP team to help him receive services. Instead of requesting an IEP team meeting or asking for the IEP team to review progress and then make appropriate adjustments, she enrolled Derek in another school for the next year.

> I wouldn't do this again. My eyes were really open. And I wouldn't recommend this type of setting for children with special needs unless [the school] really included in their catalog a separate category for special needs and they say exactly what they have to offer.

Instead of filing a complaint, she changed schools, vowing not to return to the virtual setting. Unfortunately, this would be the third school Gladys has moved to in her attempt to get the appropriate services for Derek.

DISCUSSION

Gladys perceived that she and Derek are viewed in terms of their deficits rather than their strengths. She resisted this positioning in numerous ways that were illustrated in the findings of this study. However, her resistance culminated with Derek leaving the virtual school. Below we present implications of these findings.

Implications for Practice

Gladys perceived that virtual school officials had foregone conclusions about what should be expected of students with special needs. Further, she perceived that they were unwilling to consider what might be helpful for Derek in persisting and achieving in this school. She felt that it was up to her to single-handedly determine what services Derek needed and provide them on her own. In the meantime, school meetings and communications were merely for the purpose of keeping the peace. She engaged with school officials and spoke kindly to and about them so that she would not be forced from the program. Eventually, she decided it was time to go and find a new situation.

One extremely important question that remains is: What will happen to Derek and students like him? He needs skills that will allow for further education, work, and independent living in adulthood. At present, Derek cannot access a curriculum that is appropriate for his math and reading levels. It might be tempting to look at Gladys's experience with Derek and take a perspective where the online environment is not suited to them. However, that view is not in keeping with the laws about public schools—even public charter schools—where children are not required to fit into them (Rice & Carter, 2015). Instead, it would seem more appropriate to accommodate children instead of removing them. Further, virtual educators need additional preparation and support for noticing and acting when families are struggling. This is especially important when children might be in emotional or physical danger at home.

Like other teachers in other virtual schools, Derek's teachers were not empowered to provide support within or outside of the IEP for persisting and being successful in the virtual environment (Rice & Carter, 2016). Another question for practice might lie in teacher preparation for students with disabilities in virtual schools. Currently, special teacher educators do not perceive a strong need to provide teacher preparation for the online environment (Rice, Mellard, & Carter, 2016; Smith, Basham, Rice, & Carter, 2016). Teacher educators have actually reported that some of that resistance came because they were unsure that virtual schools could provide FAPE in an environment alongside their peers (Rice, Mellard, & Carter, 2016). What Derek's case shows is that teacher educators might be correct about how these services are not being universally delivered, but his story also brings some urgency. Something has to yield in this system so that Derek and students like him do not have to be transient students with fearful, exhausted parents for most of their school careers. Teacher education might consider making greater efforts to learn about virtual schools, engage with them, and provide initial and subsequent professional development experiences that meet the demands of IDEA (2004). Of course, the virtual schools will have to embrace this offer of support and states will have to guide the licensure process with a clear goal of appropriate monitoring and evaluation of virtual special education programs.

Implications for Research

Future inquiries might revolve around parent perceptions in virtual schools more generally. For example, researchers could ask: How do parental perceptions of student strengths affect student persistence and achievement? Questions about family contexts and work requirements might also be important. One such question of this type might be: What workloads are "doable" for families of students with disabilities learning in different circumstances when they enroll a child in virtual school?

Moreover, additional research might consider the effectiveness of support practices that remove parents as the primary providers of instructional support and implementers of IEPs (Swenson & Ryder, 2016). These practices might involve general literacy support, technological literacy support, policy literacy support, social and behavioral support, and information about specific disabilities (Rice, 2018). This is especially important in cases where parents are unwilling or unable (for a variety of reasons) to monitor and support students (Christle & Yell, 2010). Researchers might ask: What types of information or literacy skills support parents of students with disabilities in virtual schools? What alternatives to parents as primary or sole on-site mentors produce positive outcomes? Or even, what new types of support staff might be necessary to move students through virtual work (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Mason-Williams, 2015)?

Finally, there is previous research suggesting that parents of students with disabilities in virtual schools chose the virtual environment and they are satisfied (Beck, Egalite, & Maranto, 2014). This study presents an alternative viewpoint to that thesis as well as a possible explanation for why parents would say that they prefer the online setting even as they suffer. Why would parents who are dissatisfied or even struggling mightily be reluctant to report anything negative about virtual school? In Gladys' case, she cares about her son, but she does not understand or trust institutions. Further, she fears the potential ramifications of complaining too much (Blum, 2015). In her case, she was afraid that Derek might be expelled or counseled away from online learning. Worse, she feared that Derek and/or her other children could have been taken from her. This is a fear that many other parents of students with disabilities might also have because of the prevalence of mistreatment of children with disabilities in foster care (Reiter, Bryen, & Shachar, 2007; Weiss, 2018). In fact, Gladys' assertion that teachers are bound by a culture of fear and silence may have even emerged from her understandings of her own experiences trying to navigate foster parenthood and schools.

Of course, the dependability of instruments developed to gauge the satisfaction of virtual school parents depends on the nuances of the survey questions. For example, obviously, Gladys could report on a survey that Derek had not been bullied in the virtual school. However, that was because he was not interacting with his peers, except for a few precious occasional moments in a synchronous tutor session. It is not that we would want Derek to be put in the path of bullies, but as advocates for IDEA implementation, we do want him to learn alongside his peers. For better data about such matters, questions for surveys of students with disabilities in virtual schools might be crafted to better reflect IDEA (2004) guidelines.

Although there were some ways in which Gladys was fearful of retribution, it was also important to her own and Derek's dignity that she not make a fuss. She took pride in being able to help her son. Finally, she knew her son had limitations, but she did not want to tell a story of him as a boy who could not—but a boy who could. If she was going to have to take his learning into her own hands, that is what she was going to do. Future research should consider these nuances when obtaining parent perceptions in virtual schools and counterexamples should be more rigorously sought (Rice & Dykman, 2018; Smith, Ortiz, & Mellard, 2017). This is especially important since Beck, Egalite, and Maranto (2014) proposed that students with disabilities were a potential pool for growth in virtual schools. From Gladys' experience, it would seem that a school should carefully consider their ability to provide authentic FAPE and access to peers and other support for all students. To do otherwise seems problematic to the point of inviting legal liability.

Implications for Policy

Policies for special education in virtual schools should attend to the question: How can parents be appropriately involved in IEP implementation in a virtual school? This is a question that goes beyond parent perceptions of the quality of virtual schools or their experiences with them. This is a question that speaks directly to IDEA. Given the lack of research related to virtual schools and special education, it is likely that parents of students with disabilities lack sufficient information regarding school choice options and the critical considerations necessary to make an informed school choice (Van Dunk & Dickman, 2002).

Policies that support parents in making informed school choices seem to require schools to provide clear, accurate information about the true nature of their particular online setting and how the virtual school is structured. Such policies in virtual schools might address procedures to provide clear information to parents about their responsibilities for content delivery, extracurricular activities, and in facilitating peer-to-peer interactions (Basham, Stahl, Ortiz, Rice, & Smith, 2015). Where schools see that these are not the responsibilities of the parent, they should make that clear as well, and tell the parents how to get relief and support when they find themselves overwhelmed. They should also be more mindful about linking activities like field trips to the curriculum and ensuring that students are not denied chances to interact with peers because of household constraints (financial and otherwise) or behavioral challenges. When it is a liability to take students with disabilities on such trips, the school must demonstrate why this is so (Cantú & Heumann, 2000).

Additionally, little is known even to virtual school IEP teams about how to ensure that the shift in instructional delivery and the educational setting is a successful one. If Gladys had been involved with an effective team, then she might have known about the specially trained staff that is required to support her son (Kent, 2015; Newman, Browne-Yung, Raghavendra, Wood, & Grace, 2017). Students might not always come to virtual schools with baseline data that describes or predicts how well they will perform in online settings. Policies that require IEP teams to frequently review new students' responses to instructional approaches delivered online could alleviate parents from taking on responsibilities that belong to the virtual school.

Another important question for policy is: What policies support parents of students with disabilities in the context of the entire family? It may not be appropriate to write an entire family into a disability service plan, but IDEA does require the IEP team to consider if parent supports and training are appropriate in order to successfully execute a student's IEP. This would have been helpful in Gladys's situation. Since almost all of Derek's educational activities occurred in the home setting with his parent and siblings, it would only seem fitting that supports in the home environment may be necessary.

Although Gladys was confident in her training as an advocate by leveraging her bachelor's degree, it became clear throughout the interview that she lacked the ability to access her rights with regard to procedural safeguards as outlined in IDEA (2004) at critical moments. This happened because of her lack of clarity regarding which roles she and the school play in Derek's education and because she was unfamiliar with the nuances presented by the virtual school. Policies ensuring that parents are empowered to enact procedural safeguards in virtual schools could assuage these circumstances. Also, it might make sense to require virtual schools to provide information about advocacy centers to parents to answer their questions.

CONCLUSION

Not every parent of a student with a disability is in Gladys's situation. The purpose of sharing her experience was not to offer her and Derek's story as representative or generalizable. Even so, there are probably more individuals like Gladys and Derek than are acknowledged in the virtual learning community. Those who practice and conduct research in such settings should consider that foster children with disabilities deserve special attention because their situations are precarious. By sharing such a case, additional layers of complexity in working with foster parents become visible. They have fears. They have beliefs with evidence from their experience about how schools feel about serving them—and although traditional schools have behaved in untoward ways that caused parents to leave them, virtual schools may not universally be a superior situation for all students. If virtual schools are going to expand and increase in quality as a viable learning option for all students, virtual educators should acknowledge those parents' experiences and beliefs and work harder to do right by them.

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