The Impact of Parent Involvement Practices in Special Education Programs

Bilal A. Dameh

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The Impact of Parent Involvement Practices in Special Education Programs

by

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Dissertation Committee:
John Eller, Chairperson
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the Special Education coordinators’ and directors’ perceptions of current parent involvement practices in special education programs provided to Special Education students at select Minnesota online elementary schools. There were seven Special Education directors and coordinators of Minnesota online elementary schools interviewed for this study.

The literature review revealed a lack of published information related to parent involvement framework in the area of special education in both traditional and online schools. Several articles reviewed by the researcher referred to Epstein's Six Types of Involvement Framework. Therefore, this comparative case study used Epstein's Six Types of Involvement as a framework.

The findings revealed strong parent involvement practices related to decision-making, learning at home, and communications. The findings also detailed that parent involvement in parenting, volunteering, and collaborating with community were not viewed as strong practices.

Epstein’s framework was designed with traditional schools in mind. It presented valuable suggestions that can be implemented in both general and special education programs offered in brick and mortar schools. But, this framework needed to be revised to accommodate the modality of online schools and how they offer services to students with special needs.

The findings also divulged the following challenges: parents’ understanding of the content and nature of online education, the responsibility of the parent to serve as a learning coach, the availability or lack of availability of needed services in the student location, student
truancy issues, challenges in communication with select parents, challenges in obtaining services provided by the student’s home district, time management problems related to students’ login and assignment completion, and parents’ feelings of intimidations by school staff.

This research study revealed the following challenges related to online education and parent involvement: communication struggles between school and families, the availability of required services for special needs students, and the understanding of what online education truly is.

Finally, the findings highlighted advantages of customizing learning materials to fit students’ needs, the ease with which enrollment occurs, the provision of informative orientation that included parents’ training, and teachers’ advocacy for students with special needs.
Acknowledgements

This was a journey with many ups and downs.

But thank God, it ended up being a remarkable experience.

Many thanks to:

My wonderful wife, who is so gentle, yet so strong.

Without your support, I won’t be who I am.

Alharith who I cannot wait for him to grow,

so I can teach you everything I know.

Shaheen who brought a purpose for my life.

I will fight your battles until you can.

Cohort four colleagues, professors, and committee,

who always made me feel I belong.

My parents and other mentors through the years,

I hope that I made you proud.

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Professors Kay and Roger Worner for their support, and critique, through this journey.

My co-researcher, William DeWitt for all his support, collaboration, and motivation.

My colleague Durwin Hermanson for introducing Epstein's Framework.

My colleague Travis for his support and proofreading every final draft in red.
Inspiration for the Study

Five years ago, my youngest son was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Since then life has had a new meaning. Every member of my family has faced many ups and downs with this journey, but together we managed to get through every challenge and celebrated every progress. Inspired by my wife’s change of career to help kids with ASD, I got more involved in my son’s education in both private and public services providers. My involvement led to both satisfied and frustrated conversations with many service providers. I was an involved dad who found an opportunity of using technology and online resources that improved my son’s learning and behaviors.

This inspired me to learn more about students with ASD and services that improve their education. I wanted to know how technology would improve those services. Likewise, I needed to know my rights as a parent and how I could get involved.

Disclosure

The methodology and instruments for data collection in this study were written and designed in conjunction with another researcher. Both researchers are examining components of parental involvement and online schools, and the participants to be interviewed—as well as documents to be collected for both researchers’ studies—are located at the same online schools. Thus, both researchers partnered to form a case study team to interview the participants, collect data, and code participant responses. For further information about the co-researcher’s study, please reference; DeWitt, 2015.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Autism is the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States (Autism Speaks, 2013). About one in 68 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) according to estimates from Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network. ASD is almost five times more common among boys (1 in 42) than among girls (1 in 189) (CDC, 2014).

ASD is often used to describe a range of diagnoses that share characteristics of autism. Public schools apply the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V) definition which is published by the American Psychiatric Merriam,

Autism Spectrum Disorders are a range of complex developmental disorders that can cause problems with thinking, feeling, language, and the ability to relate to others. They are neurological disorders, which mean they affect the functioning of the brain. How autism disorders affect a person and the severity of symptoms are different in each person. (APA, 2014)

As noted by Yeargin-Allsopp (2003), with the increase in number of children with ASD, the demand for services in public school classrooms is rising. Because of the associated challenges with ASD, educators conclude that students with ASD are in need of specialized services in the schools (Lord, 2001). Federal legislations such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) have been in place for regulating those services.

In the year 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitled students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to receive the needed educational benefits such as a free and appropriate education, an individualized education plan which is developed in consultation with the parents of students with special needs and permit the use of related
services; due process for the identification, evaluation, and placement decisions, and the least restrictive environment for education (Special Education and Behavior Modification, 2014).

Similar to IDEA, the 2001 No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) provided for substantive parent involvement at state and local levels as provided in the federal Title I program. This legislation allowed parents and community members to intervene to help improve their school.

Both IDEA and NCLB emphasized the important role of parent involvement. The literature review also revealed that parent participation in education had been a topic of considerable interest and concern over the past 25 years. Family-school partnerships were the exception rather than the norm prior to the 1980s. Since that time, however, a growing body of literature suggested that parent involvement fostered a positive impact on children’s learning and success in school (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Koegel, Koegel, & Schreibman, 1991; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) as listed in Spann (2003).

The topic of parent involvement received focused attention in the field of special education. Prior to the 1980s, many parents were dependent on professionals for their training and emotional support (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001, cited in Spann, 2003). However, due to recent changes in the federal laws—including IDEA and NCLB—parents accredited equal partnership with school personnel.

Unfortunately, the literature review revealed a lack of published information related to parental involvement framework in the area of special education. Therefore, the literature review was broadened to review other parental involvement frameworks that were used in general education. Several articles reviewed by the researchers referred to Epstein's Six Types
of Involvement Framework and her theory of overlapping spheres of influence. Epstein concluded that student academic success is best achieved through cooperation between school, family, and community (Willems, 2012). Epstein’s research has led to important changes in the ways that schools view and interact with families as well as providing recommendations for how schools can develop partnerships with families, including engaging in quality communication, inviting parents to participate in school activities, soliciting parents’ input on decisions about their child’s education, and empowering parents to take action that addresses their own needs interact with families (Spann, 2003).

Epstein’s framework contains six types of involvement in a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships. Involvement types are as follows:

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

Type 2 Communicating: Designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and children’s progress.

Type 3 Volunteering: Recruiting and organizing parent help and support.

Type 4 Learning at home: Providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.

Type 5 Decision making: Including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.
Type 6 Collaborating with the community: Identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development (Epstein, 1995).

Epstein’s framework was designed with traditional schools in mind. It presented valuable suggestions that can be implemented in both general and special education programs offered in brick and mortar schools. But, this framework needed to be revised to accommodate the modality of online schools and how they offer their services to students with special needs.

Problem Statement

The literature review revealed a lack of published information related to a parent involvement framework in the area of special education in both traditional and online schools.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the Special Education coordinators’ and directors’ perceptions of current parent involvement practices in Special Education programs provided to Special Education students enrolled in select Minnesota online elementary schools.

Research Questions

1) What are the current parent involvement practices employed in select Minnesota online schools which provide special education programs?

2) What are the challenges that select special education coordinators and directors of Minnesota online schools experience when implementing parent involvement practices in special education programs?
3) What benefits are reported by select special education coordinators and directors of Minnesota online schools due to the implementation of parent involvement practices in special education programs?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was adopted from Epstein’s 1995 published study. This framework contains six major types of involvement evolved from previous studies and years of work by educators and families in elementary, middle, and high schools (Epstein, 1995). “The framework has assisted educators in developing more comprehensive programs of school and family partnerships” (Epstein, 1992; Epstein & Connors, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

Each type of involvement includes several different partnerships between school, family, and community practices. Each practice presents particular challenges that must be met in order to involve all families and assist in redefining some basic principles of parent involvement.

Finally, each type of involvement practice is likely to lead to different results for students, parents, teaching practices, and school climates. Thus, schools have choices about which practices will help achieve important goals related to parent involvement (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

Significance of the Study

This study examined parent involvement in Special Education programs at online schools targeted to students with ASD. Because the literature review revealed a lack of published information related to parent involvement framework in the area of special
education in both traditional and online schools, this study gathered information about the
current practices of parent involvement in the area of special education in select elementary
online schools. Further, this study highlighted the benefits and challenges of parent
involvement programs.

**Delimitations**

According to Roberts (2010), delimitations identify the planned limits of a study
including factors the researcher is able to control, and the manner in which the researcher
focuses the study. The following delimitations are proposed to be used:

a) Only online schools that serve student populations from elementary school through
grade twelve were included in the study.

b) Only the perceptions of the special education director of each online school
studied were included.

c) The duration of the study was 2014-2015.

d) Online Schools included in the study were exclusively located in the state of
Minnesota.

**Assumptions**

Four study assumptions were identified. First, the majority of participants would
provide honest responses when participating in the study. Second, self-reported information,
while typically honest to a certain degree, would usually attempt to portray the participant in a
positive manner. Third, the parent involvement practices across elementary online schools in
Minnesota would vary widely. Finally, special education directors of select Minnesota Online
Schools would be hesitant to share information they believe to be damaging (the online
schools compete against each other in recruitment of students), and there have been two recorded lawsuits questioning the validity of online schools from Education Minnesota (the Minnesota Teacher’s Union) and the Minnesota Department of Education in the past 11 years (McClatchy-Tribune, 2011; Newswire, 2011a, b; Trotter, 2003). This fourth assumption most likely had a greater effect on determining difficulties of parental involvement, than the other study questions which is the reason for the confidentiality assurances presented in Chapter 3.

**Definition of Terms**

In his book *Exceptional Children*, Heward (2012) defined the following terms which are used throughout this study. Many of the terms are related to Special Education services:

*Acceleration*: An educational approach that provides a child with learning experiences usually given to older children; most often used with gifted and talented children.

*Accommodation*: The adjustment of the eye for seeing at different distances; accomplished by muscles that change the shape of the lens to bring an image into clear focus on the retina.

*Advocate*: Someone who pleads the cause of a person with disabilities or group of people with disabilities, especially in legal or administrative proceedings or public forums.

*Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)*: "The science in which tactics derived from the principles of behavior are applied systematically to improve socially significant behavior and experimentation is used to identify the variables responsible for behavior change" (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007, p. 20).
Asperger syndrome: A developmental disorder characterized by normal cognitive and language development with impairments in all social areas, repetitive and stereotypic behaviors, preoccupation with atypical activities or items, pedantic speech patterns, and motor clumsiness; included in autism spectrum disorders.

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD): Group of five related developmental disorders that share common core deficits or difficulties in social relationships, communication, and ritualistic behaviors; differentiated from one another primarily by the age of onset and severity of various symptoms.

Direct Instruction: Any systematic approach to teaching characterized by clear specification of learning objectives, explicit presentation of curriculum content, and active engagement by students, systematic feedback for student performance, and evaluation by direct and frequent measures of student learning.

Disability: A condition characterized by functional limitations that impede typical development as the result of a physical or sensory impairment or difficulty in learning or social adjustment.

Due Process: A set of legal steps and proceedings carried out according to established rules and principles; designed to protect an individual's constitutional and legal rights.

Early Intervention: Any form of therapy, treatment, educational program, nutritional intervention, or family support designed to reduce the effects of disabilities or prevent the occurrence of learning and developmental problems later in life for children from birth through age 5 presumed to be at risk for such problems.
**Echolalia:** The repetition of what other people have said as if echoing them; characteristic of some children with delayed development, autism, and communication disorders.

**Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE):** As guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), schools must provide each qualifying child with disabilities a program of education and related services individually designed to meet that child's unique needs and from which the child receives educational benefit including being prepared for further education, employment, and independent living; this provision of education and related services is without cost to the child's parents or guardians, except for fees equally imposed on the parents or guardians of children without disabilities.

**Hyperactive:** Excessive motor activity or restlessness.

**Individualized Education Program (IEP):** The written document required by Individual with Disabilities Education Act (PL 94-142) for every child with a disability; includes statements of present performance, annual goals, short-term instructional objectives, specific educational services needed, extent of participation in the general education program, evaluation procedures, and relevant dates; and must be signed by parents as well as educational personnel.

**Joint Attention:** A social communication skill in which two people interact with their shared environment in the same frame of reference. Joint attention is evident when a child looks where someone else is looking or turns head or eyes in the direction someone is pointing.
Language Disorder: Impaired comprehension and/or use of spoken, written, and/or other symbol systems.

Learning Disorder: A general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities.

Occupational Therapist (OT): A professional who programs and/or delivers instructional activities and materials to help children and adults with disabilities learn to participate in useful activities.

Related Services: Developmental, corrective, and other supportive services required for a child with disabilities to benefit from special education. Includes special transportation services, speech and language pathology, audiology, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, school health services, counseling and medical services for diagnostic and evaluation purposes, rehabilitation counseling, social work services, and parent counseling and training.

Special Education: Individually planned, specialized, intensive, outcome-directed instruction. When practiced most effectively and ethically, special education is also characterized by the systematic use of research-based instructional methods, the application of which is guided by direct and frequent measures of student performance.

Organization of the Study

The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the study, the problem statement, purpose, research questions, conceptual framework, significance of the study, delimitations, assumptions, and organization of the study. Chapter 2
includes a review of related literature that defines autism and the characteristics and needs of students with ASD. It further examines the federal laws that regulate the specialized services needed for those students as well as the critical role of parent involvement. Chapter 3 describes the research design and the methodology used in this study, including data collection procedures, instrumentation, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 summarizes the findings of the study. Chapter 5 outlines the conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

Introduction

This review of literature covered four areas of parent involvement in educating students with ASD; the first area provided information about Autism that includes a definition, historical background, causes, characteristic, and finally treatments and interventions used in educating students with ASD. The second area presented Special Education laws that guide the education of students with ASD and the importance of parent involvement. The third area shows existing connections and correlations confirmed through research between parent involvement and various aspects of student achievement. Finally, the fourth area shows a review of research related to online schooling. The lack of published information related to a parent involvement framework in the area of special education for students with ASD in both traditional and online schools was the basis for this study. A summary of the literature review is included at the end of Chapter 2.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism is the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States (Autism Speaks, 2013). About 1 in 68 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) according to estimates from Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDN) Network. ASD is almost five times more common among boys (1 in 42) than among girls (1 in 189) (CDC, 2014).

ASD is often used to describe a range of diagnoses that share characteristics of autism. Public schools apply the DSM V definition which is published by the American Psychiatric Association,
Autism Spectrum Disorders are a range of complex developmental disorders that can cause problems with thinking, feeling, language, and the ability to relate to others. These are neurological disorders, which mean they affect the functioning of the brain. How autism disorders affect a person and the severity of symptoms are different in each person. (APA, 2014)

**Historical background:** In his article Autism at 70 redrawing the Boundaries, Baker (2013) talked about the psychiatrist Leo Kanner who in 1938, described autism in 11 children as “extreme autistic aloneness, delayed echolalia, and an anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness, and extraordinary memory skills” (Baker, 2013). Kenner also noted that the parents were almost as distinctive as the children, and related better to concepts than to people (Kanner, 1938).

Unaware of Kanner’s work, in 1938, Hans Aspergers used the term Autistic Personality Disorders in Childhood to describe a behavioral syndrome he discovered among a group of children;

In addition to the marked difficulties in social interaction, Asperger also noted other features present in these cases, that is, impaired nonverbal skills, idiosyncratic communication, egocentric preoccupations and special interests, intellectualization of affect, clumsiness and poor body awareness, and conduct problems. (Volkmar, 1998)

In his book *Unstrange Minds: Remapping the World of Autism*, Roy Grinker discusses autism during the 1950s and 1960s when he referred to the term “the refrigerator mother”. Kanner introduced the term “refrigerator mother” when he explained that the parents of the first eleven autistic children he studied kept their children “neatly in a refrigerator that did not defrost.” This came to define many psychoanalysts' views on the causes of autism, including Bruno Bettelheim's (Grinker, 2007).

Bettelheim, an influential figure in promoting the “refrigerator mother” theory as introduced in the PBS documentary titled, Refrigerator Mother, declared that autism was an
emotional disorder that developed in some children because of psychological harm brought upon them by their mothers (Simpson, 2002).

In the early 1960s, the medical community began to challenge the “refrigerator mother” theory. In his 1964 book, *Infantile Autism: The Syndrome and Its Implications for a Neural Theory of Behavior*, Dr. Rimland did not accept that autism was the result of uncaring parents but is a biological condition (Rimland, 1964). Later in 1965 with the help of parents of children with autism, Dr. Rimland founded the National Society for Autistic Children, now known as the Autism Society of America (Autism Society, 2013).

Based on the information provided through WebMD, individuals with Autism were treated with medications such as LSD, electric shock, and behavioral change techniques. The latter relied on pain and punishment during the 1960s through the 1970s (WebMD, 2013). The site also listed behavioral therapy and controlled learning environments as the main treatments during the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1987 DSM III Revision provided a more complex definition of autistic disorder that required meeting eight of 16 criteria among the three domains of social interaction, communication, and restricted interest while dropping the requirement for early onset in life and providing new category of “Pervasive Developmental Disorder, not Otherwise Specified” for children who met some of diagnostic criteria for autistic disorder.

In 1994 DSM IV and 2000 DSM IV Text Revision refined the criteria for autistic disorder and added Asperger’s disorder and Rett’s syndrome to the pervasive developmental disorders. In 2013, a major revision of diagnosing criteria for autism in the new DSM V defines autism in two categories: “Persistent impairment in reciprocal social communication
and social interaction” plus “restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior”, present from early childhood. Other subcategories that were previously included in DSM IV including Asperger’s disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorders Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), and Rett’s syndrome are eliminated (Baker, 2013).

**Causes of Autism.** In her 2014, “Ted Talks”, Wendy Chung indicated that an increase labeling of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder occurred since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legislation was introduced in 1990.

This legislation provided individuals with autism with resources and access to educational materials that would help them. With that increased awareness, more parents, more pediatricians, more educators learn to recognize the feature of autism. As a result of that, more individuals were diagnosed and got access to the resources that they needed. (Ted Talks, 2014)

Dr. Chung relayed the increased prevalence of autism to the changes of the DSM definition of Autism published by the American Psychiatric Association. She also addressed concerns related to vaccines as a cause for autism; she discredited the original study and ensured that there is no credible evidence to support such claims. She concluded by examining the role of human genes as one of the causes of autism.

**Characteristics of Autism.** Individuals with ASD are divided into two categories: low functioning that includes those who have impairments in most or all aspects of their daily living, and high functioning which includes others who only have minimal to mild impairments. Although many individuals with ASD behave in similar patterns, their differences distinguish them from each other. “There is no single behavior that is always typical of autism and no behavior that would automatically exclude an individual child from a diagnosis of autism” (Lord, 2001, p. 11).
Some of the common characteristics of Autism include communication and language deficits. In his book Exceptional Children, William Heward explored some of the reasons beyond deficits associated with autism which included mute with no ability to speak in some of the low functioning individuals, and delayed or no language development with others. The lack of language development maybe illustrated by words with no meaning; gesture communication; short attention span; echolalia (speech consisting of literally repeating something heard); delayed echolalia or scripting; the act of repeating something heard at an earlier time; confusion between the pronouns “I” and “you”; and difficulty with “wh” questions (Heward, 2012).

The other deficit area includes social interaction such as lack of interaction with other children, lack of eye contact, lack of response to people, treating other people as if they were inanimate objects, laughing or crying inappropriately, struggling with transitions and interruptions, demonstrating ritualistic behaviors (Heward, 2013).

In the area of sensory impairment, individuals with ASD may show sensitivity in sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. About 70-80% of them exhibit sensitivity to sensory stimulation (Harrison, 2004). They may also appear over-responsive (hypersensitive) and under-responsiveness to sensory stimulation (Leekam, 2007). Over-responsiveness may manifest itself in the inability to stand certain sounds, disliking being touched, and refusing to eat food with certain texture, smell, or taste. Under-responsiveness may result in not feeling the pain in a normal way, spinning continuously, rocking bodies, and rub or pushing things hard into skin (Gabriels, 2008).
Behavior problems also manifest in being overactive or passive, having tantrums and lack of common sense, showing aggression, needing routine, lack of spontaneous or imaginative play, rocking body in a sitting position, flicking fingers, twirling around, spinning objects, staring at lights, sniffing at the air, and flapping hands at the wrists (Loftin, 2007).

Insistence on sameness and perseveration is another characteristic of individuals with autism which presents itself in demanding to have the same routines, otherwise resulting in explosive meltdowns, preoccupation with a certain subject or area of interest, talking continuously about one subject, and asking the same question over and over (Lord, 2001).

**Treatment and intervention options.** The following is an overview of treatment and intervention options available for individuals with autism. Some of the options below are provided by Fraser and can be conducted in classroom setting while others need to be performed by the appropriate therapist:

- Auditory Integration to help individuals who are oversensitive or hypersensitive to sound.
- Dietary modification that reduces or eliminates symptoms of autism, such as the gluten-free diet. Additionally vitamins and supplements have also been reported to improve behavior such as longer attention span.
- Medication to alleviate specific characteristics such as aggression, seizures, hyperactivity, obsessive/compulsive behavior or anxiety.
- Music Therapy allows to incorporate music into the teaching of cognitive, motor, and daily living skills.
• Occupational Therapy to help with fine-motor skills as well as increasing the ability to function independently.
• Physical Therapy to help with large-motor skills and mobility.
• Sensory Integration to treat sensitivity to sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste.
• Social Skills and Behavioral Interventions that treat an inappropriate or challenging behaviors as well as increasing that ability to understand social cues and interactions.
• Speech therapy provided by a speech language pathologist to address communication and language deficits as well as social interactions.
• Vision Therapy to treat some difficulties, such as poor eye contact, difficulty attending visually, visual fixation, and hyper- or hypo-sensitivity to light or color (Fraser, 2013).

As noted by Yeargin-Allsopp (2003), with the increase in number of children with ASD, the demand for services in public school classrooms is rising. Because of the associated challenges with ASD, educators conclude that students with ASD are in need of specialized services in the schools (Lord, 2001). Federal legislations such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have been in place for regulating those services. It should be noted that the State of Minnesota is one of the pioneers for offering special education preceding the federal laws.

**Special Education Laws**

**Background.** According to Algozzine (1984), literature research indicated that there were two historical movements that originated special education in the United States.
The first was in 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that “separate but equal” education of black children was unconstitutional. “Education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments….in these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education” (Patterson, 2001, as cited in Powers, 2007).

As noted by Zettel (1982), the second was the class action case of *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* in 1972 declared that students with disabilities must be given public education, due process safeguards, as well as periodic review for placement, to all children, including those in special education. The procedural safeguards included the right to appeal; the right to have access to records; and the requirement of written notice at all stages of the process. These safeguards became the framework for the due process component of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act.

**Minnesota Law.** Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities (2015) reported that in the “In the 1950s, a series of federal legislative provisions established grants for research and training of personnel in the education of children with disabilities. Some states began to adopt special education provisions. For instance, in 1957, Minnesota required public school districts to provide special instruction and services for children with certain disabilities.”

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).** The 1975 Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) set new mandates for the needs of children with disabilities. It ensured children of certain basic educational rights which include a free and appropriate education, an individualized education plan that permit the use of related services;
due process for the identification, evaluation, and placement decisions, and the least restrictive environment for education (Special Education and Behavior Modification, 2014).

It should be noted that all individualized education plan were required to be developed in consultation with the parents of student with special needs.

In 1990, EAHCA was amended and renamed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The new changes emphasized using a language that focus on the individual not the disability, as well as, the requirement of including a transition plan in Individualized Education Plans (IEP) for each student by the age of 16. Students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) were entitled to the benefits under the new changes (Special Education and Behavior Modification, 2014).

Later in 1997, IDEA was reauthorized with changes that focused on improving the educational achievement of students with disabilities in both the Special and General Education. Including measurable goals with objectives and functional behavior assessment in student’s Individualized Education Plan were some of the major changes (Special Education and Behavior Modification, 2014).

As noted by the Autism Society (2013), IDEA or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, was reauthorized in 2004. IDEA protects children's rights in receiving education and parents’ rights to plan their children education.

**No Child Left Behind (NCLB).** According to Anne T. Henderson (2002), The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is the latest amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which was passed in 1965. ESEA was the first major federal aid program for local public schools. Congress has revised ESEA almost every 5 years, and it has
been endorsed by most presidents. President George W. Bush signed the law in January 2002. NCLB is divided into nine titles with the most important being Title I, which contributes about $12 billion a year in federal aid to local school districts for assisting low-income students.

Henderson (2002) further added that Title I provided funds to schools with higher numbers of low-income students. School districts had to justify the funds, so they created “pull-out” programs, to provide remedial instructions for children by teachers who were paid out of Title I funds. By the mid-1980s, the program had unintentionally created a bottom track for poor children, and was not improving student achievement. Henderson (2002) also noted “Important changes were made to the law in 1994 to align the Title I program with the growing national movement to strengthen academic standards. Every state receiving Title I funds (and all do) had to create new, higher standards for all children”. Title I funds had to help low-income children reach the same standards as all children and states had to measure how well the children were meeting the standards.

Henderson (2002) noted that NCLB also allows parents to be largely involved at every level of the Title I program. This program identifies several key points in the process where parents and community members can be part of the decision making process in improving their school.

The new law (NCLB) is very clear about the importance of engaging families in the Title I program. The opening paragraph of Section 1118 lays out the major parent involvement provisions: A (school district) would receive (federal) funds under this provision only if such agency implemented programs, activities, and procedures for the involvement of parents in programs assisted under this part .... Such programs, activities, and procedures would be planned and implemented with meaningful consultation with parents of participating children (Henderson, 2002, p. 7)
Henderson (2002) also stated each school district must reserve a minimum of 1% of its total Title I grant to support activities for parents. The school district must spend 95% or more of these funds on the Title I schools and not at the district level. Both the district and the school may decide to spend more of the title I fund to support training, communication, and information dissemination for parents. Parents of students in the Title I program must be part of the decision making on the use of these funds.

Some of the key points of the Title I program include:

1. Every Title I school must have a written parent involvement policy, developed with and approved by parents. This policy must identify the parents’ involvement in the school and decision making about the program and updated periodically to reflect the changing concerns of parents.

2. Every Title I school must have a school compact, developed with and approved by parents describing the process of building partnership between parents and schools to improve student achievement. This compact must explain how school officials will meet the students’ needs to achieve high standards.

3. Every school district must have a written Title I parent involvement policy that is developed with and approved by parents, and evaluated every year. This policy must describe the methods the district will use to involve parents in developing its Title I plan and help them gain the knowledge and skills to be effective decision makers about the program.

It should be noted that student with special needs cannot receive Title I services.
Parent Involvement

Parents’ participation in education has been a topic of considerable interest and concern over the past 25 years. Family–school partnerships were the exception, rather than the norm, prior to the 1980s. Since that time, however, a growing body of research has suggested that parent involvement has a positive impact on children’s learning and success in school” (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Koegel, Koegel, & Schreibman, 1991; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) as listed in (Spann, 2003)

“The topic of parent involvement has received even more attention in the field of special education. Prior to the 1980s, many parents were dependent on professionals for training and emotional support” (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001) as listed in Spann (2003). Due to the recent changes in the federal laws such as IDEA and NCLB, parents are now considered equal partners with school personnel.

Research indicates that parent participation results in positive outcomes for children with special needs, including greater generalization and maintenance of treatment gains (Koegel et al., 1991), greater continuity in intervention programs (Bailey & Wolery, 1989), higher levels of parent satisfaction (Stancin, Reuter, Dunn, & Bickett, 1984), and more effective strategies for resolving problems (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

In addition, the field has suggested how school officials can partner with families, including communicating effectively, inviting parents to attend school activities, soliciting parents’ input on decisions about their child’s education, and allowing them to address their own needs (Dunst, Trivette, & LaPointe, 1992; Epstein, Munk, Bursuck, Polloway, & Jayanthi, 1999; Kroeger, Leibold, & Ryan, 1999; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

According to Goldstein, Strocland, Turnbull, and Curry (1980) and Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, and Maxwell (1978), many parents of special needs students do not fully participate
in their children’s educational planning process. Previous studies also suggest that although the parents were present in their child’s IEP meetings, they did not fully participate in planning objectives, evaluations, and interventions.

For example, Lynch and Stein (1982) surveyed 400 parents about their involvement in IEP meetings. Although 71% of the participants reported active involvement in the meeting, only 14% provided specific recommendations or opinions.

Also Able-Boone, Goodwin, Sandall, Gordon, and Martin (1992) surveyed 290 parents about their involvement in early intervention services. Many parents noted that their main concerns were not included in the Independent Family Service Plans.

Researchers have also examined parents’ perceptions or satisfaction with special education services. For example, McWilliam et al. (1995) surveyed 539 parents regarding their roles in and satisfaction with early intervention services. Many families reported that their choices and requests were not included in their received services. Covert (1995) examined the satisfaction of 78 families receiving intervention services in New Hampshire. Many families reported that professionals did not partner with parents and did not include them when changing services. In a telephone interview of Kohler (1999) with 25 parents of preschool- and school-age children with autism, more than half of those families reported that their school-based services were either ineffective or did not consider their child’s specific needs in mind. Furthermore, 60% noted significant communication problems with teachers such as not being heard or not receiving updates in the changes in their child’s programs.

Finally, Turnbull and Ruef (1997) interviewed 17 parents of children or youth with significant behavioral difficulties. Many parents expressed frustration with a teacher’s poor
communication skills and unwillingness to consider new ideas and perspectives. Despite empirical support, theoretical justification, and legislative foundation, research has indicated that family involvement in and satisfaction with school based services is often minimal. This may be because families typically have traditional roles in services or because educators sometimes hold negative perceptions about families. For example, some educators believe that families are not credible sources of information (Gilliam & Coleman, 1981; McAfee & Vergason, 1979).

According to Powell, Hecimovic, & Christenson, 1993; Rosin, 1996; Salisbury & Dunst, 1997, school personnel considered families confrontational and even dysfunctional or believed that involvement in educational services may be too demanding for those families (Baker, 1989). As these negative perceptions and relationships between schools and families of children in special education may result in adverse consequences, they need to be further examined. The core elements of this relationship are communication, parent input in the IEP process, and parent satisfaction with school services.

**Framework for parent involvement.** The literature review revealed a lack of published information related to parental involvement framework in the area of special education. Therefore, the literature review was broadened to review other parent involvement frameworks that are used in general education. Several articles reviewed by the researcher referred to Epstein's Six Types of Involvement Framework. In her 2012 School-Community Partnership Article, Willes stated that “A central principle to Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence is that goals for student academic success are best achieved through the
cooperation between school, family, and community (Willems, 2012, p. 10). In the 2003 article Examining Parent’s Involvement, Spann indicated that,

Epstein’s research has led to important changes in the ways that schools view and interact with families… providing recommendations for how schools can develop partnerships with families, including engaging in quality communication, inviting parents to participate in school activities, soliciting parents’ input on decisions about their child’s education, and empowering parents to take action that addresses their own needs interact with families. (Spann, 2003, p. 1)

In her 1995 article, “Caring for the Children we Share,” Epstein introduced the Overlapping Spheres of Influence,

The external model of overlapping spheres of influence recognizes that the three major contexts in which students learn and grow—the family, the school, and the community—may be drawn together or pushed apart. In this model, there are some practices that schools, families, and communities conduct separately and some that they conduct jointly in order to influence children's learning and development. The internal model of the interaction of the three spheres of influence shows where and how complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school, and in the community. (Epstein, 1995)

Her framework is based on six types of involvement in a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships. Involvement includes the following types:

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

Type 2 Communicating: Designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and children’s progress.

Type 3 Volunteering: Recruiting and organizing parent help and support.

Type 4 Learning at home: Providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.
Type 5 Decision making: Including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.

Type 6 Collaborating with the community: Identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development (Epstein, 1995).

**Online Schools and Autism**

Most parents of a child with ASD are eager to adopt an online curriculum to improve their children educational needs. In her article, Virtual ED. Targets rise of Autism, Davis reported that “E-learning programs and learning applications have evolved to meet the needs of a fast-growing population of children with autism” (Davis, 2011, p. 1). She explained that for some students with Autism, online education is more desirable because it reduces overwhelming sensory stimulus and unwanted social labeling that may lead to bullying. Online education is also allowing students with ASD to study advanced topics that they are interested in learning. One of the parents who Davis interviewed for her article, indicated that “she had to work hard to keep her daughter on task online and felt she needed additional face-to-face support…There's a huge value to online education [for students with autism], but it depends on how it's introduced and the nature of the person” (Davis, 2011, p. 1). The article stated that for low functioning students who have difficulty with language and motor skills, online education may not be an option. Being successful in an online education programs depends on the severity of the student’s conditions and abilities.

A special education director who was cited in the same article revealed that:

Online education allows such students to control their environment. Those students are also often ‘hyper-focused’ in certain areas and may want to go above and beyond in
that academic area, which online instruction allows them to do. K12 does provide online methods of socialization, such as an internal social-networking site, that is monitored by adults to promote positive interaction. Students with autism may also be involved in teacher-moderated social skills groups using Web-based conferencing. (Davis, 2011, p. 1)

Davis also talked about “the growing number of applications on computers (and particularly iPads) to help improve such functions as social skills and communication. In addition, new technologies for early detection, speech therapy, and research into autism, a complex developmental brain disorder, are being developed” (Davis, 2011, p. 1).

**Summary**

As the prevalence of ASD increases, more and more children with ASD require services in public school classrooms. Due to the nature of ASD and its associated challenges, educators agree that students with ASD require specialized services in the schools. To regulate those specialized services, Federal legislation includes parent involvement rights. An increasing body of research has suggested that parent involvement has a positive impact on children’s learning and success in school. However, many parents have little or no involvement in children special education services.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter presents a description of the proposed research study's purpose, research questions, participants, instruments for data collection and analysis, research design procedures and timeline, data analysis, validating the findings, and limitation of the study.

The methodology and instruments for data collection in this study were written and designed in conjunction with another researcher. Both researchers were examining components of parental involvement and online schools, and the participants to be interviewed—as well as documents to be collected for both researchers’ studies—were located at the same online schools. Thus, both researchers partnered to form a case study team to interview the participants, collect data, and code participant responses. For further information about the co-researcher’s study, please reference; DeWitt, 2015.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the special education coordinators’ and directors’ perceptions of current parent involvement practices in special education programs provided to special education students enrolled in select Minnesota online elementary schools.

Research Questions

1) What are the current parent involvement practices employed in select Minnesota online schools which provide special education programs?

2) What are the challenges that select special education coordinators and directors of Minnesota online schools experience when implementing parent involvement practices in special education programs?
3) What benefits are reported by select special education coordinators and directors of Minnesota online schools due to the implementation of parent involvement practices in special education programs?

**Participants**

The researcher included seven select Minnesota online schools in the study. In each of the study’s online schools, the Special Education director or coordinator was interviewed. Selection of either the coordinator or director was based on the main director’s recommendation of which position had the most knowledge about the online school’s special education and parent involvement practices. As an example, the special education director at some of the public online schools oversaw the entire district—which included brick and mortar schools. In some of these cases, the online school’s coordinator provided more detail. In other instances, such as in an online charter school, the special education director worked directly with the school. Each school was unique in its relationship, thus the main director was consulted in each case. The Special Education directors or coordinators were chosen to be interviewed since they provided unique insights on the parental involvement practices in online schools from a leadership perspective which had not been collected in previous studies. In the only two studies found on the topic of parental involvement in online schooling, data were not secured from any of the schools’ administrators (Ahn, 2011; Liu et al., 2010).

Purposive sampling was used to determine the participants in this study. The seven schools included in this study were selected from among an original set of 29 online schools in Minnesota (MDE, 2014). Only these five schools met the following criteria for the study:
a) The Minnesota Online Schools served students in elementary grades.

b) The Minnesota Online Schools’ Special Education directors or coordinators were willing to participate in the study.

c) The Minnesota Online Schools’ are accredited to operate by the Minnesota Department of Education.

d) Minnesota Online Schools that serve a special education population including students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The study population of online schools was selected from the state of Minnesota, due to the researcher’s geographical location in Minnesota, familiarity with Minnesota’s system of public education, and the intent to contribute knowledge to educational leaders in the state of Minnesota. Also, the selection of schools serving students at elementary grade levels was established as a criterion because of the fact that measurable parental involvement practices occur more frequently in elementary grades (Epstein & Becker, 1982, Sheldon, 2003).

**Human Subject Approval–Institutional Review Board**

Training was on November 23, 2014. Following approval from the researcher’s doctoral committee, submission to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval of this study was completed in December of 2014, with final approval gained in January of 2015. Data collection measures, analysis and instruments included proper controls to ensure confidentiality for all participants and ensured that no damage will occur to the school or personnel involved in this study. The approval document from the board is included as Appendix G. Additionally included from the institutional review board is a copy of the
informed consent form required to be signed by the participants based upon the board’s review of the study. This is also included as Appendix H.

**Instruments for Data Collection and Analysis**

Two instruments were used in collecting the study’s data. The first was a case study protocol (Appendix B) developed jointly by the two researchers—the case study team, as recommended by Yin (2009). This protocol provided guidance to the researchers on the frameworks and the objective of the study, the selected Minnesota online school locations and contact information, the preparation conducted by the case study team prior to each site visit, and sources and approaches for data collection at each site. It ensured reliability in the conduct of the study and internal study validity as suggested by Yin.

The second instrument used in this study was the interview protocol (Appendix C). The interview protocol was developed by the two researchers on the case study team. The interview protocol consisted of eight open ended questions designed to allow the on-line directors to share their perspectives on each type of parental involvement. Additional follow up questions were used to clarify or draw out specific information from the on-line school directors related to procedures and reactions on success or difficulties.

The interview protocol was reviewed with and field tested by a group of 12 doctoral students in May, 2014 to ascertain instrument readability, clarity and focus of questions, and correlation between the interview questions and the case study’s research questions—ensuring reliability in the study conduct and supporting the internal validity of the study. The protocol was field tested in the fall of 2014 to ascertain select factors about the administration of the
instrument, including time required to complete administration of the instrument, clarity of the questions to the participants, and ease of conduct of the interview.

**Research Design**

The study utilized a qualitative research methodology. The study was designed as a comparative case study, employing a methodology in which multiple case studies were examined with comparisons drawn between the sites (Common Wealth Association for Public Administration and Management, 2010).

The case study design was used as a result of the small number of select Minnesota online schools that served students in elementary grades and the fact that little information (research) was available on these schools’ parent involvement practices. According to Blatter (2008), “A case study is a research approach in which one or a few instances of a phenomenon are studied in depth” (p. 69). Blatter further stated that some researchers believe individual perceptions—a major focus area in this study—are important in social research, and the use of a case study is better than “large N-Surveys” for this purpose (Blatter, 2008, p. 70).

Yin (2009) also recommended that when determining a study’s methodology, three areas should be examined: (a) the type of research question, (b) whether the researcher needs to control parts of the phenomenon or question to be studied, and (c) if the researcher is interested in a phenomenon that has occurred recently or in the past (Yin, 2009). The study was not dependent on controlling any of the events currently present in the programs under study. The types of research questions aligned readily to a case study, and the study was focused on events that were actually occurring during the timeframe of 2014-2015 in Minnesota’s online schools. All three of the recommendations offered by Yin (2009) for
determining a study’s methodology were met in selecting the case study as the most appropriate methodology for the study.

Further, the study searched for areas of difference and likeness in parental involvement practices between online schools by comparing the research results of the seven cases (select Minnesota online schools), hence the selection of a comparative case study design. Mills (2008) states, “The underlying goal of comparative research is to search for similarity and variation between the entities that are the object of comparison” (p. 101).

Additionally, examining multiple cases–using the comparative case study design–allowed the researcher to apply common themes among the selected online schools. The comparative aspect lent weight to the external validity of the findings (Yin, 2009).

Yin (2009) stated that it is important to have at least two sources of evidence in case study research. This comparative case study’s design adheres to Yin’s recommendation, collecting data from two different sources at each case site (select Minnesota online schools), which is important to ensure validity. The first data source was inclusion of documents relating to practices of parental involvement at the select Minnesota online schools. These documents included parent and student handbooks, parent involvement or support policies, parent compacts, school website information related to parental involvement and other documents the online school directors provided. On the matter of documentation, Yin (2009) stated, “documents play an explicit role in any data collection in doing case studies. Systematic searches for relevant documents are important in any data collection plan” (p. 87). The second source of evidence in the case study’s research is the conduct of interviews with the directors of the select on-line schools.
The design of the study relied on the use of a case study team. Yin states that,

…it often happens that a case study investigation must rely on a case study team… for any of three reasons: 1. a single case calls for intensive data collection at the same site, requiring a ‘team’ of investigators… 2. a case study involves multiple cases, with different persons being needed to cover each site or to rotate among the sites (Stake, 2006, p. 21); or 3. a combination of the first two conditions.

In this study, Yin’s third condition was met. Multiple interviews at seven select Minnesota online schools were conducted; furthermore multiple sources of data had to be collected to secure answers to separate sets of research questions—one set for each researcher on the case study team. Due to these requirements and the high total number of schools—seven—a team approach between the two researchers was selected.

The validity and reliability of any case study, including the findings, are important in four areas according to Yin (2009). These areas include the internal, construct of the findings, external, and reliability of the study (Yin, 2009). The internal reliability and validity of the study are assured because of the collection of two types of data at each case site, and the use of interview and case study protocols.

The validation of the construct of the findings was accomplished by having all online school directors who responded to the interview questions review the draft of the transcripts as Yin (2009) suggests. Additions, clarifications and deletions to the transcripts were noted, and the report was then adjusted based on the directors’ review.

The external validity of the study is assured through the study’s use of multiple on-line school directors and school documents. Application of the results of each online schools director interview and document collections to the conceptual framework of the study, Epstein’s six types of involvement, allowed for comparisons by replication logic (Yin, 2009)
among the multiple on-line schools. Replication logic refers to drawing the conclusion that if a finding is replicated across multiple sites that were studied, it can be logically assumed it would continue to be replicated at other sites not studied. Yin suggests that if the generalizations found at each site continue to apply across multiple cases using this replication logic, then this lends weight to the findings and validity of the case study externally (Yin, 2009).

Finally, because of the creation and application of the case study protocol, reliability was further ensured. Thus, the study can be replicated again at any time using the same methodology. Also, placement of all data in the source of data chart will allow the researcher or future researchers to consistently replicate the study and achieve the same results. This proves the reliability of the case study (Yin, 2009).

While validity and reliability were assured, the following limitations were forecasted prior to the conduct of this study:

1. This study would be limited to select Minnesota online school Special Education directors’ or coordinators’ self-reported perceptions of their schools’ parent involvement programs and methods.

2. Depending upon the results and the replication of results among the multiple case studies, the findings may not be generalizable to other online schools in Minnesota or in other states.

3. Because one of the major sources of data was secured through interviews, interviewer bias might occur. The chances of this occurring were reduced because of the protocols and validation measures established in the study.
4. During interviews, directors may forget to speak about a practice that is actually occurring, and the practice may not be located in the school’s document data. These potential undiscovered practices may also be implemented solely by individual teachers, or small groups of teachers, which were not used as a source of data in the study.

**Procedures and Timeline**

Data collection for the study began in the fall of 2014. Each on-line school Special Education director or coordinator was contacted by electronic mail (Appendix A) in order to describe the purpose of the study, the study’s scope and information related to the scope, and to ask for their participation in the study. This email also included the assurance that the Special Education director’s or coordinator’s personal identification and the identification of their school in the study would be protected and not released, a protocol recommended by Roberts (2010). Once all directors were contacted, the researcher(s) developed an interview and site visit schedule. Directors were provided the option of being interviewed–according to their preference–in person or by telephone, though it was the researcher’s preference to conduct the interviews in person and at the school sites.

After the schedule was developed, all documents were collected following the case study protocol. Interviews were also conducted in adherence with the case study protocol–by utilizing the interview protocol.

All data was collected and recorded in the ‘Source of Data Chart’ (Roberts, 2010, p. 158) in Appendix D. Data collection was completed by May of 2015.
The researcher conducted audio recordings of the interviews in those instances when
directors agreed to this request. According to Yin, (2009), recording the interview is a
personal decision, but it should not be used if it could cause the interviewee to feel
uncomfortable. This case study relies on the use of a ‘case study team’ (Yin, 2009, p. 75).
Because of the joint approach employed in the conduct of the study, detailed note taking
without the use of recording devices was able to be readily accomplished.

Interview data were transcribed following the conduct of the interviews as suggested
by Boyce and Neale (2006). The transcriptions were classified and placed in the Source of
Data Chart. To further ensure validity in the transcriptions, each transcription was sent to the
interviewees for review and additional comments or adjustments to the transcripts. In
analyzing the transcripts of the interviews, the researchers independently established
preliminary codes on the first reading of a jointly selected transcript (Saldana, 2012). During
the second reading of this transcript, data were more firmly established–independently by
each researcher–into final codes (Saldana, 2012). After this second reading, the researchers
met to verify the alignment of their coded transcripts in order to ensure reliability. This was
completed by comparing and matching the preliminary and final versions of coding appearing
on the researchers’ transcripts.

According to Saldana, although it is difficult to achieve precise wording on the codes,
researchers should generally agree on the coded areas more than 85-90% of the time (Saldana,
2012). When agreement was not reached at this percentage level, discussion and modification
of the codes occurred until the percentage agreement recommended was achieved. After
reliability was established on the initial coding, the remainder of the interview transcripts
were coded jointly and agreement by ‘consensus’ determined the final codes. Saldana suggested that working together to complete the coding process may provide additional methods of interpreting and analyzing the data (Saldana, 2012).

Once the finalized coding was completed, application of these finalized codes from the transcripts into categories and themes, as Saldana recommended, occurred independently. This procedural step was conducted independently based on each researcher’s conceptual or theoretical framework and research questions. This allowed each researcher to answer the specific research questions related to the conceptual or theoretical frameworks of their study. All other data sources were subsequently reviewed independently because of the study-specific questions under investigation.

Patterns or themes that emerged between the interview source and other data sources in relation to the frameworks and research questions—along with comparisons across the case study school sites—are recorded in Chapter 4 of the study. After the recording of the findings, conclusions are drawn and recommendations for future study offered.

**Summary**

The study was a comparative case study, using a variety of data collection methods, to include interviews, document collection, archival records retrieval, and direct observation. The data collection was conducted with more than one researcher because of the amount of data to be collected due to multiple research questions, and the number of sites proposed to be studied. After final reviews of protocols and field testing, contacts of participants began in the fall of 2014. Interviews and collection of data took place through May of 2015. At all points of the study, validity and reliability were ensured through the establishment and
adherence to case study and interview protocols, transcription and data source chart development from recording and reporting tools, and review of findings with interviewees and the case study team. Data analysis occurred after December 2014, with the final results presented in the spring of 2015 in the Chapter 4 of this study.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the Special Education coordinators’ and directors’ perceptions of current parent involvement practices in Special Education programs provided to Special Education students enrolled in select Minnesota online elementary schools.

Summary of Research Methodology

A case study was used to examine the research questions related to Special Education coordinators’ and directors’ perceptions of current parent involvement practices in Special Education programs provided to students in select Minnesota online schools. The case study format allowed for the collection of individual interview responses from Special Education coordinators and directors. Interview questions were based on Epstein’s (1995) framework. Data analysis included organizing the data into common themes and categories. The data are presented by research questions. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What are the current parent involvement practices employed in select Minnesota online schools which provide Special Education programs?

2. What are the challenges that select Special Education coordinators and directors of Minnesota online schools experience when implementing parent involvement practices in Special Education programs?

3. What benefits are reported by select Special Education coordinators and directors of Minnesota online schools due to the implementation of parent involvement practices in Special Education programs?
This study obtained information from Special Education coordinators and directors of online schools that provide elementary education. The seven online schools included in this study were selected from among an original set of 29 online schools in Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Education, 2014). These seven schools met the following criteria for the study:

a) The Minnesota Online Schools served students in elementary grades.

b) The Special Education director or coordinator of those Minnesota Online Schools expressed willingness to participate in the study.

c) The Minnesota Online Schools were accredited to operate by the Minnesota Department of Education.

d) The Minnesota Online Schools served a Special Education population as indicated by the table below.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Online School</th>
<th>Total enrollment</th>
<th>Special Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>approximately 50 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>approximately 100 students</td>
<td>less than five students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>over 1500 students</td>
<td>approximately 250 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
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<td>over 50 students</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
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<td>less than five students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>over 1500 students</td>
<td>over 250 students</td>
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Findings by Research Question

Research Question One

What are the current parent involvement practices employed in select Minnesota online schools which provide Special Education programs?

According to the Epstein (1995) framework, there are six types of parent involvement practices in a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships. Involvement types are as follows:

**Type One: Parenting.** The first type of parent involvement practices examined by the researcher was related to assisting families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child development, and setting up home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level (Epstein 1995, 2009). Although all seven Special Education coordinators and directors acknowledged the importance of such involvement, only three schools provided these services. Special Education coordinator A explained that helping families understand their children’s needs happened during IEP meetings:

> Our goal in this school is to serve the student the best, based on whatever IEP we have in place. Because of the confidentiality, we help parents understand and deal with their kids’ needs during IEP meetings. We do not do that broadly, but we address it specifically to that parent.

Other schools provided broader approaches to educating parents about child development and academic needs. Special coordinator F indicated that his/her school offered an open event or academy to provide information to parents:

> Our district does a parent academy in all of our buildings… a few times a year… so they are looking at as a parent what topics you might need to learn or focus on. So recently we were talking about our new bullying policies and making sure that parents were aware and had opportunity to learn about that policy, what their role is with that policy, you know, just really bridging. We provide lunch during that parent academy
so that more parents can come, network with each other, network with the district. So it’s been a really great program. For next year, we are looking at some topics that are specifically targeted towards Special Education parents.

Another Special Education coordinator reported that the school sends parents to workshops to learn more about their child’s disability and related needs. Special Education coordinator G reported that a free workshop subscription is provided for six months to the parents of students with disabilities:

We also have a subscription to the PACER Center where they have the PACER workshop where we pay, so that all our parents can go there for free and try out any technologies or any curriculum. Anything they want for free for six months. They have a specialist that will help them. They listen to what the disability area is and what that student may need and families then can take that item home and try it out for a while. For example, smart pen is a big one. So many times they might want to buy one, and they don’t know much about them, so we will come to the PACER Center, and we will get those “assignment center” or that’s what they are called. We also use the National Repository for library books on tape. A lot of students need that, and a lot of parents want that, so we help them subscribe to that.

The researcher examined all participating schools’ websites as well as supporting documents created through the interviewees. Only five schools provided information related to improving parenting skills and understanding child development on such topics as test anxiety, providing an ideal learning environment at home, time management, and tips on study.

**Type Two: Communicating.** The second type of parent involvement practice examined by the researcher explored the manner in which school officials communicate with families about school programs and student progress in an effort to create a two-way communication channel between school and home (Epstein 1995, 2009). All seven Special Education coordinators and directors emphasized the importance of communication with parents. Special Education coordinator A mentioned that “Communication is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but, clearly, frequent communication is always a good thing especially with
the online relationships, that’s critical. To build the trusting collaborative relationship is really important”.

The findings related to this involvement revealed that there existed four major themes for communication with parents: (1) Communication during the enrollment process, (2) Communication related to academic work, (3) Communication related to IEP evaluation, progress reporting and parental concerns, and (4) Communication related to general school matter such as announcements and updates.

1. **Communication during the enrollment process.** Communication with parents begins with the enrollment process. Many parents inquire about school accommodations for their children’s needs as stated in their IEP. Such conversations often start with a phone conversation, an email request, or a personal meeting. After parents receive an overview of the school and the Special Education services it provides, the registration and IEP evaluation follows. School websites include information to assist with registration forms, students’/parents’ handbooks, and steps to schedule IEP evaluation meetings. According to SPED Coordinator G:

   They [parents] send me their IEPs and their evaluations from their last schools. And the question is, usually and it’s phrased differently, but it’s usually, can you help us? … So my first question to them is what do you mean by that because every family has a different idea or different experience that happened to them in their school career with their students, so I don’t want to put any preconceived notion into their head what I can do for them. I want them to tell me what they envision. Through that call, I gather that information. And then I talk to them about what our school looks like.

Similarly, Special Education coordinator C talked about the enrollment process communication:

Our communication starts with the enrollment process. Each parent needs to fill a survey about their kids. In the survey parents have the opportunity to share any
concerns, Special Education or 504 needs. Once any of these boxes are checked, the application would transfer to me, and I will contact the parents and start the conversation in a form of a welcome call.

2. **Communication related to IEP evaluation, progress reporting and parental concerns.** This type of communication occurred in multiple forms and with different frequencies. A common use of email and telephone communication was mentioned by all seven Special Education coordinators and directors. For example, Special Education coordinator A explained that:

   If I have a student who has a certain set of IEP goals and everything is kind of in place and working as the team had envisioned, there are still ongoing communications to ensure that things are continuing to go well…if a situation isn’t maybe going well for whatever combination of reasons, then that [communication] becomes even more important.

   Special Education coordinator B stated that “We communicate with parents each week. Most of them have emails. We also have the secretary who calls every week”.

   Special Education coordinator C reported that “We exchange emails within our system with students and parents, and we call the parents at least two to three times a month for updates”.

   In addition to email and telephone communications, information related to progress reporting are always available online. Parents can access this reporting at any time as related by Special Education coordinator E:

   Our communication would generally be through email and phone call, only if there is a specific need such as if students are inactive, unresponsive…truant, things like that. Also, in our student information system, every guardian has an account…at any time parents can log on to see progression and percentage, activity and such.

   Special Education coordinator G concurred with the availability of the online progress reporting system:
Parents have their own account and at any time everything that a student does inside of our system is carbon-copied to the parent account. So when they look in, they can see exactly where their student has been during the day, broken down in the minutes. They can see the grades so they have a good grade book that pops up. They have a carbon-copy of any…email that the student has responded to or hasn’t responded to.

According to Special Education coordinator G, progress reporting was also being communicated to parents in the form of a report document sent home with students.

Based on the SPED laws, whenever a family is communicated with academically in regular Ed, the Special Ed has to follow through, so whenever there is a report card grading period, we do a progress report that is attached to that report card and it talks about the goals and objectives in the IEP and how the student is doing in those areas.

Special Education director F added that:

In terms of students with disability, we do have a structure in place. Their progress needs to be reported as frequently as it’s reported for General Ed students and so many of our students have progress reported six times a year, so that the parent is receiving a progress report that includes graphs that are showing their child’s goals and if they are making progress. If it’s adequate progress or inadequate progress and if it’s inadequate, why do we think that is and what’s our plan so they are getting that regular communication again. For some parents we look at the fact that it may need to be more frequent.

There were occasions when communications need to be made on a face-to-face bases in order to address parent concerns as described by Special Education coordinator G:

We had a family two months ago that the mom was very upset because she was being treated poorly because of her race. So I immediately got in the car and went to her, and we had a meeting about that and just talked things through. So those are kind of my communications.

3. Communication related to academic work. Communications with parents regarding academic work is often among the grade level teacher, Special Education teacher, and the students in order to explain concepts, convey expectations, and discuss options or solutions to challenges related to required learning. These communications often take place online, within the school’s management system, through a conference or in chat rooms
provided to students and open to their parents. Some of these meetings are scheduled, and students are expected to attend. Other meetings are recorded and available online to be viewed. Special Education coordinator C indicated that “Special Education teachers communicate with families regularly through the online curriculum, telephone calls, and emails”.

Special Education coordinator G explained that:

Teachers meet in their chat rooms sometimes daily, sometimes bi-weekly depending on what the student needs. So a student is sent a link and at a certain time of the day, they are expected to appear in that classroom. If they don’t appear, then the teacher makes contact with the student via phone or email. Then if the student does not communicate back, then the parent is called or the learning coach.

SPED Coordinator G also added:

We contact with students everyday on Skype. All the kids are Skype contacts for the teachers. So if the students get stuck and they feel comfortable, they Skype the teacher with their issue and then the teacher meets them in their chat room. So every single teacher has two screens they are working on. One screen is their regular classroom, the other screen is the resource room with several rooms that the teacher can put kids into. Student pop into that resource room and the teacher manages those kids as they come in and out.

4. Communication related to general school matters such as announcements and updates. According to Special coordinator D, communication on general school issues involves the same approaches as found in traditional public schools:

Well, the strategies are the same as we use for brick and mortar schools for Sped. So we just do it in a different format, so the format is either electronic or virtual, most of the time. We use phone, cell phone, computer…google communication- google hangouts, Skype, etc. The nice thing is that with online, there is more flexibility with that…our employees aren’t just 8-4…more flexibility with later contacts if needed.

Additionally, Special Education coordinator A reported that:

The online coordinator pushes the communication to the students on announcement page or attaches an email to the learning management system that says, you know, we
have an upcoming field trip. Like we very much indicate to all of our online families that they have the ability to come in and enjoy any of our extra-curricular activities whether it’s a movie night on a Friday or a musical performance.

**Type Three: Volunteering.** The third type of parent involvement practice examined by the researcher was the provision of opportunities to involve families as volunteers (Epstein, 1995, 2009). Most of the Special Education coordinators and directors indicated that their schools provided multiple volunteering opportunities for parents during the school year. These opportunities varied from helping with school events to organizing field trips to monitoring, evaluating, and improving services provided to online students.

Special Education coordinator A reported that “We have a strong parental involvement on a number of things like volunteering on movie night. Board meetings are open to the public, so parents are able to come [and volunteer] to those things”.

Special Education coordinator B reported that “About three to four times a year we have different activities that parents will participate in such as art work and science museum field trips. We also have a home school group that meets at different times together and parents volunteer to arrange them and participate”.

Special Education coordinator C added:

We have ten field trips a month. Parents need to provide transportation to and accompany their kids on field trips. Like today we have a book fair; parents bring their kids and help with the book fair. We have game night that students and parents connect with other students, parents, and staff. Our school also has a Student Council, National Honors Society, and virtual clubs and activities (i.e., Chess Club). Lastly, parents have a tool in the platform to arrange events in their community via our Message Board system.

Special Education coordinator D stated that “Volunteers with online…when we do Statewide assessment…regionally around the States…parents volunteer to proctor
tests…..some groups meet regionally for parent nights to socialize, etc. Depending on how interested they are”.

Special Education director F indicated:

Our building just has really open policies in terms of welcoming parents to be part of the learning environment like when they come to lunch, when they go to elementary school, when they volunteer in the classroom … making sure that school is not a separate thing that is just for educators. That parents are being welcomed in for very intentional reasons.

Special Education coordinator G added:

So the way they volunteer, there is a PTA or PTO sort of a group that meets. Those parents are very strong. They get together once a month, and they talk through issues that they see, strengths and weaknesses of the program and they approach our principal. They approach our staff, and they talk about those things. For example we do onboarding every year which is our system of getting kids acclimated to the online learning. And if they see a problem with that onboarding, or if something wasn’t clear, that parents didn’t know, they are kind of a funnel to let us know and guide us and help us to make those changes. We have parents who volunteer to support those outings that we do every month so they make connections in their community especially if they are going to cool museums or some sort of an activity, a play coming up that they want to go to. And they let the teacher know and coordinate and organize that type of program. Other than that, if there are other parent opportunities, I am not sure that I am aware of them. I know that there is a district board that parents can get on and ask questions … .We have teacher conferences just like the brick-and-mortar school that are three times a year.

**Type Four: Learning at Home.** The fourth type of parent involvement practice examined by the researcher was related to involving families and their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting and other curriculum related activities (Epstein 1995, 2009). All Special Education coordinators and directors interviewed indicated learning at home was an essential type of parent involvement for the success of their online students. Special Education coordinator B indicated that “For K-5 they have to have a mentor
or a coach. If they don’t, we just pretty much tell them that they’re not going to be successful and that they should go to a different school”.

Special Education coordinator G stated:

In the elementary group, the learning coach is vital. So if the learning coach is not a good learning coach, it doesn’t work because they have to be with that child. If you can envision a child with multiple disabilities like a first grader sitting at home, they need someone hands on. So those teachers in the elementary (my teachers) have about 18 kids per teacher and so they get to know those families very well and they touch base every day. They make sure that they understand what is due for the curriculum, and what their schedule is. There is a visual schedule they’re given, and if the regular education teacher reports that there are some issues, then they all get together on the phone and kind of talk about that.

Special Education coordinator A reported:

We are not there in the [students’] houses, so that is [why students] must have adult oversight … if they [students] do get enrolled and they don’t have a strong adult presence, it’s not going to work out well. Every parent has a username and password so when your child starts his or her school work, and says “Well, I’m all done, Mom”. What are you going to do? You are probably not going to say, “I am sure you are”. You are going to say, “Let’s log in and check”.

Special Education coordinator D reported:

The parents are key in our programming as they are the academic coach, so they do play a much bigger role…if son or daughter has a disability….they work on it daily….versus in brick-and-mortar…maybe just with homework… the materials are provided, and parents have some say on speed for movement through the curriculum.

The term, learning coaches, was mentioned by all seven Special Education coordinators and directors during the course of interviews. Special Education director F explained:

If you were the parent, you are critical in all learning regardless of where your education is taking place. If it is in a general building or if it’s in an online program, the parent’s role is huge. I mean they are really serving as a learning coach. They have a big responsibility…you need to be checking in with your student. They may come to you for assistance with things more frequently than they would if they were going to school and a school building. They have that direct contact with their teacher all the
time and so making sure that the parents are prepared and understand that its a very active role that they play. Making sure that they know what their student is working on, and they know the upcoming deadlines, things like that. They really need to be connecting with that teacher...I feel like online is even greater, making sure that they have access to all the technology that they need, the access to the Wi-Fi that they need, that they are staying on track, kind of that check in. So that parent role is huge. As you know most of the work is happening at home. So we are really looking for those parents to be a bridge between the online program and what is actually happening for their student at home.

Special Education coordinator G added:

The learning coaches, 85% of the time, are the parents. Other people may take that role, but we don’t encourage it. Sometimes it’s PCAs who are just in the home maybe an hour a day. You know, if the parent wants them to do it and they are very adamant about it and assess the situation and decide maybe that would be a good point of contact if the parent isn’t able, we will move in that direction. Every once in a while its maybe a trusted friend, especially if a student, for example, is living away from their home for one reason or another like a parent being incarcerated or we have a couple of kids that they are hockey stars or basketball stars or ballerinas and they have to live away from their family so their learning coaches are someone else.

Special Education coordinator B emphasized that serving as a learning coach is a task that requires time commitment “With parents, I think they start to realize that they have to put time in to work with their kids if they’re going to be successful and make sure that they have an environment that they can learn in”.

Knowing that parents have different levels of knowledge and skills, the participating online schools provided support materials, tips, and online tutorials as well as in person tutoring services to assist the parents.

Special Education coordinator A indicated that information provided during orientation is captured in online tutorials so parents will be able to review them when needed:

Online school allows for, I would say, a very direct parent role. That is different from the traditional five day brick-and-mortar setting. That, in itself, almost demands a different kind of flow of information that parents need to be clear as to what the work expectations are…We are now working on creating video tutorials for parents…. so
the parents get the orientation, too, so that they can help monitor their [students’] work completion. So we have tips and things on our website … so that parents can figure that out, and we are in the process of creating video tutorials because it’s a lot of information to take in, so that’s one thing we are working on the parent communication….

Special Education coordinator D added:

If parents cannot help their kids with course work, we outline to them during enrollment that, they must be the coach …but we do have something called “I can’t do sixth grade math”…then the teacher increases the amount of time they work with the student.

For SPED, there are additional sessions, so the SPED teacher can work on additional strategies with the student so they group into a classroom, and they work together in a small group online.

The speech clinician did online sessions where she asked the parent to watch so they’d know how to prompt…and with stuttering it’s so important…..without training it can be worse….So virtually this has been helpful. It is recorded so parents can do so after practice…they could go back and observe more steps. So there are some really good advantages with online.

If additional non-academic services such as therapies are required, then I work to purchase services from the home district.

Special Education coordinator C mentioned the use of online speech and occupational therapy sessions:

We also have virtual Speech and Occupational Therapies and the parents need to watch and work with their kids at home. Parents have access to the physical course materials and the online environment. We provide parents with the guidance that they need to be able to help their kids.

Special Education coordinator B added:

The thing that we do pretty well, I think, is that if kids have problems they can come in, especially 7-12, and we help them if they need extra help. So we have someone from 7AM to 8 PM at night in our computer lab, and it’s usually a licensed teacher, other than over the noon hour.

Type Five: Decision-Making. The fifth type of parent involvement practice examined by the researcher was related to including families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities regarding their children’s education or general school
matters (Epstein 1995, 2009). Given the nature of Special Education and Individualized Education Plans (IEP), every responding Special Education coordinator and director considered parents in deciding education goals or strategies related to their children’s education.

Special Education coordinator A reported:

When a student is just getting services, I always like to let the parents know that nothing is going to happen without your permission. You are really in charge here, not solely, but there is a lot of protection for the parents so they know every decision you make is with their input. When they are presented with the IEP, they feel like they are part of the decision making.

Special Education coordinator C added that “We work with parents on the IEP goals and course choices. Parents are integral team members during IEP meetings and provide vital information about student participation and success”.

Special Education coordinator D stated that “Decision making for curriculum is not there. It is just what we offer….different than curriculum review committee in brick-and-mortar….parent groups don’t have a lot of impact with curriculum…they can impact with disability and they can delay algebra, etc.”.

Special Education coordinator G said:

The parents are expected to participate in the child’s IEP and their evaluation process, and that’s vital at our school because we can’t always see a student … we need information [about students’ learning in their homes] so we may be having them chart that formally; we may be having them show out surveys and giving us that information. So when the student is in the special education program, they have those kinds of communications where they come to those meetings. They help support making the correct decision on what level of service their student is going to get. They are also vital in telling us, “Well, I already get physical therapy from my hospital that is nearby so I don’t want to get that from you”. Because I want my student when they are home to be working on their curriculum. We kind of sort through those types of experiences as well.
Special Education coordinator E added:

[Parents] could help make decisions about the special education student within the parameters of the IEP. As an example, if they felt there were some accommodations needed to be met, that they wanted to bring to our attention. And actually, we would be more than pleased to have that.

Special Education director F stated:

When we are talking about students with disabilities, parents play a critical role. They are a required member of their student’s IEP team and their input and perspective on their student’s strengths and needs are critical. So they are huge decision makers in making decisions as a team on how their [the student’s] program looks like.

**Type Six: Collaborating with the Community.** The sixth type of parent involvement practice examined by the researcher was related to coordinating resources and services for families, students, and community groups to collaboratively contribute service to the local communities in which students live (Epstein 1995, 2009). Special Education coordinators and directors were divided in their opinions when considering this type of parent involvement; some considered collaboration as a part of course work while others viewed it as extra-curricular activities.

Special Education coordinator A reported:

We do, but not directly as a part of Special Ed. Student council will once-a-year make sandwiches and bring them to a shelter. I think of that as an extra-curricular. Any student is welcome to enroll in any of those. We never discriminate against any student.

Where Special Education coordinator C considered it as part of course work:

We try, within the course work, to encourage them to do community services such as cleaning parks within their neighborhood or helping at an elderly home. Parents have a tool in the platform to arrange events in their community via our message board system.
Special Education coordinator G reported:

We have parents that volunteer to support those outings that we do every month so they make connections in their community especially if they are going to cool museums or some sort of an activity, a play coming up that they want to go to. [Parents] can let teachers know and [together] coordinate that type of program or activity.

Special Education coordinator D stated:

In fact, if we have a student with a disability such as autism that have social needs, they are missing that interaction so we use their community. Parents will search their local community for independent PE class for nutrition and activity at the YMCA or fitness center. Maybe they could access their neighborhood school for such activities.

Research Question Two

What are the challenges that select Special Education directors of Minnesota online schools face when implementing parent involvement practices in Special Education programs? The findings revealed the following challenges:

**Challenge 1:** Parents’ understanding of online education and its requirements and impacts on student learning as reported by respondent Special Education coordinators and directors:

Special Education coordinator B indicated:

Parents need to grasp what a student has to do. So, I think that some parents think that their kids are working really hard, and then explain to them, no your student has only put in twenty minutes…well, they said, well my student’s been there all day working. As it happens in regular school, too, kids are pretty savvy with where they can switch screens and play video games or different things. So, I think just educating parents that….to watch their portal, so you know how many minutes they are putting in.

Special Education coordinator C reported that:

Some parents do not understand the difference between brick-and-mortar school and online school. The different modality does not work for everyone especially students with special needs. The need for some of these students cannot be met with online schools.
Special Education coordinator D added:

I think that parents have to understand the whole picture of how that works, and they have to decide if it works for them. With the distance…no place to come for activities. They have an extra piece to do in the community, not school related or not going to neighborhood school. Sometimes they aren’t involved in online school as they don’t know technology and virtual classroom. We spend time training parents, but it is somewhat difficult for parents who struggle with technologies.

Special Education director F said:

Really understanding what an online learning program is, what your child’s needs are, who your people are to advocate to, so that children with disability should have just the same access to online learning as students without disability. That’s the fact of the matter so then it’s just learning how to do that. What does it looks like? Because it’s different than when they are in the building. And sometimes it’s not the right choice. Sometimes it is, and we need to work as a team to figure out how best to meet that student’s needs so that they can be successful.

Challenge 2: Parents’ availability as a learning coach reported by the respondent

Special Education coordinators and directors:

Special Education coordinator B stated:

Some parents just think that [the student] can maybe just learn at home, or a lot of times the grandparents get thrown into the mix. But they’re not real comfortable with helping because they might be up at, in age, so, then I just try to educate them that this might not be a good opportunity for them. We would help them just like we would with a normal student and then indirect minutes, but I’ll be honest. With the online, we can’t just drive over to their house if they’re 200 miles away. So we really educate the people what they’re getting themselves into. Now some online schools might have areas where kids can meet with them, but we just don’t have that resource right now. So I think parents kind of know that, or if I educate them that this might not be the right fit for them. I can’t tell them no, but I don’t tell them yes unless they really want to. Usually after I educate them, they know that this might not be the right spot for them.

Special Education coordinator D added:

Some parents with student with various kinds of disabilities find paced instruction is exactly what they need, but difficult to get to it. For elementary some parents can’t be the coach, too tough for their job to do it. Sometimes disabilities prevent … [having] the best learning time- late afternoon is not best, but that’s when they can get it in.
Special Education director F said:

I think one of the difficulties is capacity. Some of our parents are single parents working crazy hours, and they just don’t have the capacity to be as involved as they would like to be or we would like them to be so I think capacity is an issue.

**Challenge 3:** Location and availability of needed services reported by the respondent

Special Education coordinators and directors:

Special Education coordinator A reported:

Every online school has been struggling with this. I’m going to use the ASD example. Typically, students on the autism spectrum have social skills deficits which is part of the disability. So how do they get those needs met if they are online? Depending on the situation, they might not be getting a lot of opportunity for social interaction. So one thing that has worked well [is that] we have a number of different social groups provided by different people. We welcome that opportunity, and we always put that on the table at the IEP team decision which is we would love to involve your daughter or your son in one of our social skills group and clearly identify the needs that students have in the IEP. And it’s up to the parent.

We have a speech language pathologist and OT [Occupational Therapist]. We would absolutely never say you are online, so we don’t provide that. That would be bad. We haven’t done online speech services yet; we have talked about it a little bit.

Special Education coordinator B added that “In my opinion, I don’t think online is successful for some special education students because they have special needs and get special programs, and being distance-wise it’s difficult to provide a lot of those programs”.

Special Education coordinator C indicated:

The need for some of these students cannot be met with online schools. We use some of their home district services when we can. Other times, we invite the home school district to the conversation. We try to work things out between the families and their home school’s district so students can go back to their home school district.

Special Education coordinator D added that “Some students have been greatly successful- mild disabilities seem to be a better match than severe disability”.

Special Education coordinator G said:

Some families want their child to get their DAPE (Developmental Physical Education) in a brick-and-mortar school. They think that it’s necessary for their student to get those connections with real-life people. So, that’s my job. I create those experiences for them. I will coordinate with their brick-and-mortar school to contract for those services whenever possible if a family desires them.

Special Education Coordinator G mentioned that one of the challenges the school faces when arranging field trips is where the student lives.

The only problem with that is not every student has access to that just because of where they live. We have kids that are close to Canada so they are not able to participate in that face-to-face event at the Science Museum.

Challenge 4: Truancy issues reported by the respondent Special Education coordinators and directors:

Special Education coordinator A said:

The whole question of truancy in an online learning is being a big issue. Unlike some of the online schools where that’s called the synchronous model where there is a scheduled class, like teleconferencing, that’s not what we have. We just have that count set of the assignments to be completed for the fully online program. The student is supposed to complete twenty assignments a week in the fully online program to count as full attendance and if they don’t do that, we will send a lower level introductory email that we noticed that the student is missing, that keeps up the process or protocol. We hold families accountable in that just because you are online, you are still in school.

Special Education coordinator B added:

The kids have to minimally be online one hour per day per subject, and that’s minimal. We also have the secretary that calls every week for the kids that aren’t logging on as much. [indicating that] you’re absent for their one class and they didn’t put that hour in, then that day they’re absent. When it gets to three, we do a letter letting them know they can’t do that as stated in the attendance policy. Then once it gets to seven, I believe it’s if they’re 13 or 14 or older then they’ll get a letter where they’ll eventually have to go to court for truancy, and that’s why I was saying our county is very supportive. I don’t think there is a lot of counties that do that, but then we have truancy court, so the parents or guardians, or in our case, sometimes in this area either brother or sister if they’re older, they go to court with the student, and then we figure
out a plan and then usually what happens if they are not consistent in that, then they get moved out of online into regular bricks-and-mortar school.

Special Education coordinator D indicated that “Just as brick side…if they’re not attending, sign in, make progress…you will be dropped from enrollment…and you can’t continue. We work really hard to keep them involved…but there are times when it is not working”.

**Challenge 5:** Parents not interested in participating in school activities:

Special Education coordinator D said:

If parents don’t want to be involved, online doesn’t help. It’s a barrier. It effects performance, but they’d probably be uninvolved in brick and mortar. Sometimes the reason for choosing online school is because parents don’t want to be involved. We are finding that families that select online are not interested in volunteering and socializing. It is not as an important piece. Instead, they use community services available by their church, YMCA, scouts, and 4-H, services not structured by us.

**Challenge 6:** Struggle in communicating with parents as reported by the respondent

Special Education coordinators and directors:

Special Education coordinator A reported that “Students and families who for whatever combinations of reasons can’t, won’t, don’t want to, or choose not to suffocate the communication”.

Special Education coordinator G added:

If a family wants to hide online, they can. They can shut off all forms of communication with us. They don’t have to access their email; they don’t have to call us. They don’t even have to be living at the address they put there. We can’t control that. So sometimes that is a real struggle. There are some families who indicated that they don’t want anything to do with the school, and please don’t call them.

**Challenge 7:** Challenges in obtaining services provided by the home district as reported by the respondent Special Education coordinators and directors:
Special Education coordinator B said:

Sometimes the reason why they’re going into online is they’ve had a bad experience in another school, you know, and my big thing is on making them understand if a student is not doing well in a brick and mortar school where they are supervised all the time… how would they do well at home?

Special Education coordinator C added:

Parents who are examining alternative forms of education tend to have had poor experiences with the traditional brick and mortar school. Alternative schools have the opportunity to change that mindset. We use some of their home district services when we can. Other times, we invite the home school district to the conversation. We try to work things out between the families and their home school’s district so students can go back to their home school district.

Special Education coordinator D reported:

Sometimes the reason for choosing online school is because parents don’t want to be involved or things haven’t’ gone well at previous placements and sometimes feelings spill into next one. Some parents came to online school because they are angry with the school district. This is a problem because if additional non-academic services such as therapies are required, then I work to purchase services from the home district. If the parent left the home district because they’re mad, then it’s a bigger conflict.

Special Education coordinator G indicated:

We have a small population of people who for one reason or another, escaped their last school. Sometimes it’s the truancy issue, and they are in the court system, and they no longer want to go back to that school because of feelings of what happened so they come to us and that always scares me when I see that in the initial report because I always feel that do you think this is an easier route because it’s not. It’s actually more difficult because before you sent your child to school and you left them for the day. Now you are expected to engage with them in this process so those are the ones that I always worry about.

**Challenge 8:** Online students will receive more indirect minutes from their academic coaches than direct minutes provided by their teachers as reported by the respondent Special Education coordinators and directors:
Special Education coordinator B indicated that “If there’s a Special Education student, then the big thing would be, that they have direct minutes. In online school, it would be more indirect minutes where they were emailing, Skyping or on the phone”.

**Challenge 9:** Time management problems related to students’ login and completing assignments as reported by the respondent Special Education coordinators and directors:

Special Education coordinator A said that “We are consciously working on helping both the family and students to develop an organizational time management system that is advantageous with them because in some online schools with synchronous or asynchronous learning model you don’t have that”.

Special Education coordinator B added:

We have had kids who think they can work more hours now because of their flexible schedule, and then that’s run into some roadblocks for kids where they are not able to get their work done, so we just really try to let kids know it’s not going to be any less time… it’s going to be [that] their time might be a little more flexible.

**Challenge 10:** Parents felt intimidated by school staff as reported by the respondent Special Education coordinators and directors:

Special Education director F stated:

I think intimidation is an issue in terms of parents not being involved. I sat around meetings with parents who have barely said a word because they are alone with six educators who they are viewing them as an expert, and they don’t know that they have a role. That role maybe hasn’t been defined for them. I had a parent recently who I had asked about her thoughts when discussing placement for her child. She indicated that her opinion doesn’t matter because you guys will make the decision … She wasn’t confident in her perspective in what she could bring to the team in that decision intimidation factor and then I think just time from the perspective of everyone. You know, speaking with the teachers, they are case managing several students, and they are teaching lots of classes. They are spread pretty thin, and sometimes finding that intentional time to really pull parents in, I think, can be a challenge.
Special Education coordinator E added:

Sometimes they’re frustrated. Sometimes students in SPED or with 504s and IEPs, to the parents they can be frustrating….they’ve [the parents] tried everything….they don’t know what to do now…they think well we’ll try online because nothing else is working! And actually, sometimes that’s the response we get with counselors….they want to try online courses, so we’ll try it…and we work as best we can. Now sometimes they [the students] say to me, “Well my counselor thought this would work, but I’m not that good with computers”…..so you have to teach them more basic things, like the username and password to log in to Moodle to access their course, and you hope they will be successful.

**Research Question Three**

What benefits are reported by select Special Education coordinators and directors of Minnesota online schools due to the implementation of parent involvement practices in Special Education programs?

According to Special Education coordinator A, one of the greatest benefits of parent involvement in online education is customizing the learning to fit students’ needs,

The beauty of the online school is the added flexibility. If a parent says my student is only capable of fifth grade math so let’s give him the fifth grade math, we can do that to meet his academic challenges…. we can differentiate that way. You have options. Or the other way, which is a student can take course-work above their age or grade level so we can go both directions and sometimes that has been helpful, and that obviously very much involves the parents. That would be like a team discussion.

Special Education coordinator B echoed the same point:

We have the special cases where the students feel like in the bricks and mortar they were having to slow down and have a lot of wait time, and then this [online schooling] is the way they can accelerate, and you know, get done early if they feel that they can.

According to Special Education coordinator G, an additional benefit is the simplicity of the enrollment process and the orientation and training of parents:

I would say our onboarding program; it’s really successful because it packages up all the communications that the students and the parents are going to need to know about and gives them a chance to practice those skills before school starts, and it gives them
the names of people that they can contact when they are in trouble. There are phone numbers and a list of things that they can try, and so that I think is definitely a huge success for our program.

Special Education director F added:

Having an orientation for online programming and targeting that tool for the parents that you have and the needs of their students. But this is to really explain to them this is what this means; this is what we look for, and you play an active role in making sure that they are clear on that. And that there is a process early on for checking in with both the student and parent while they are figuring out those roles when everything is new, I think is significant. Because, again, there are some families who just have a view of what this program is based on things they’ve heard or just limited information. And they think, oh great, my kid will just do on his own so making sure to define it for them. And I think creating intentional opportunities to bring them in as a group to network because networking is so powerful for parents. I can tell you as an educator what I believe you need to do, and you can say that’s great educator person, but here are the challenges I face in my life at home. I think being able to network with parents who are going through the same thing, to here is what’s worked for me, and I had that same problem and here is how we worked through it, I think is invaluable.

Special Education director D stated:

We had a student with extreme fluency issues for speech language so the speech clinician did an online session where she asked the parent to watch so they’d know how to prompt…and with stuttering it’s so important…..without training it can be worse….So virtually this has been helpful if is recorded so parents can watch later and practice…they could go back and observe more steps. So there are some really good advantages with online.

Parent involvement which result in advocating for special needs students is another important benefit as reported by Special Education coordinator A:

I think it’s developing a trusting open repertoire. If there are disagreements, people can voice them. If it’s real and it happens consistently, that’s what makes the difference and also the ability of the general education and Special Education teachers to collaborate on behalf of that student so it isn’t just the Special Education who is advocating, but we have really developed a systematic culture here; that it’s not just my job. I know that any other teachers that I work with here will absolutely be on board as much as they are able to make sure that the needs of those students are met not just because I am there as their advocate, and it all relates to the parent communication.
Chapter 4 presented the findings of the study’s three research questions. Perceptions were reported from seven Special Education coordinators and directors on current parent involvement practices in Special Education programs provided to students enrolled in select Minnesota online elementary schools.

The first research question addressed current parent involvement practices employed in select Minnesota online schools which provide Special Education programs. The findings revealed strong parent involvement practices related to decision making, learning at home, and communications. The findings also detailed that parent involvement in parenting, volunteering, and collaborating with community were not viewed as strong practices.

The second research question examined challenges that select Special Education coordinators and directors of select Minnesota online schools face in implementing parent involvement practices in Special Education programs. The findings divulged the following challenges: parents’ understanding of the content and nature of online education, the responsibility of the parent to serve as a learning coach, the availability or lack of availability of needed services in the student location, student truancy issues, challenges in communication with select parents, challenges in obtaining services provided by the student’s home district, time management problems related to students’ login and assignment completion, and parents feelings of intimidations by school staff.

The third research question addressed benefits reported by select Special Education coordinators and directors of Minnesota online schools of implementing parent involvement practices in Special Education programs. The findings highlighted advantages of customizing
learning materials to fit students’ needs, the ease with which enrollment occurs, the provision of informative orientation that included parents’ training, and teachers’ advocacy for Special Education students.

Chapter 5 examines the study’s findings and conclusions. Additionally, the researcher provides recommendations for improving parental involvements practices in online school Special Education programs and recommendations for future research studies.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine Special Education coordinators’ and directors’ perceptions of current parent involvement practices in special education programs provided to special education students enrolled in select Minnesota online elementary schools. A comparative case study methodology was used to examine the research questions related to Special Education coordinators’ and directors’ perceptions of current parent involvement practices in special education programs provided to students in select Minnesota online schools. The comparative case study design contained a collection of individual respondent perceptions acquired through interviews of Special Education coordinators and directors and the collection of detailed documents at seven case study sites. Interview questions were based on Epstein’s (1995) research framework. This chapter presents the conclusions of the study as they relate to the research literature on parent involvement framework. Limitations of the study, recommendations for professional practice, and recommendations for future research studies are also presented.

Discussion and Conclusions

Research Question One

The first question of the study addressed an examination of the current parent involvement practices cited in the Epstein (1995) framework that were employed in select Minnesota online schools providing special education programs. According to Epstein (1995), there are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships. They can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents’ skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work. However, the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life. When parents, teachers, students, and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around students and begins its work.
This sense of caring community was echoed by all the online Special Education coordinators and directors who were interviewed in the study. Some current parent involvement practices were well established in the online school programs while other practices appeared to need improvement. Given the nature of special education programs in which the Individualized Education Plans (IEP’s) require parental consent, parent involvement in decision-making is considered a strength for building partnerships between the school, parents, and community.

Communication is a vital element for the success of establishing a caring community. According to Epstein (1995), “With frequent interactions between schools, families, and communities, more students are more likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, of working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another, and of staying in school.” All seven Special Education coordinators and directors interviewed emphasized the importance of communication with parents.

Learning at home is another well-established parent involvement practice identified by this research study. The role of a learning coach, usually presumed to be parents, is important as indicated by Special Education director F,

If you were the parent, you are critical in all learning regardless of where your education is taking place. If it is in a general building or if it’s in an online program, the parent’s role is huge. I mean they are really serving as a learning coach. They have a big responsibility…You need to be checking in with your student. They may come to you for assistance with things more frequently than they would if they were going to school and a school building. They have that direct contact with their teacher all the time and so making sure that the parents are prepared and understand that it’s a very active role that they play. Making sure that they know what their student is working on and they know the upcoming deadlines, things like that.

This is consistent with Epstein (1995) research which defined homework:

“Homework” to mean not only work done alone, but also interactive activities shared with others at home or in the community, linking schoolwork to real life. “Help” at
home to mean encouraging, listening, reacting, praising, guiding, monitoring, and discussing—not “teaching” school subjects.

This research study also found that the parent involvement practices of parenting, volunteering, and collaborating with community were not reported as strongly by the study participants.

Although all seven Special Education coordinators and directors acknowledged the importance of parent involvement, study findings suggested more intervention is needed to help families establish environments to support, academically, those children with special needs. Helping parents understand how to address their children’s needs should improve conditions for learning at home. This encourages parents to realistically request needed services and accommodations. Epstein (1995) recommended the following interventions to improve parent involvement practices:

1. Suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level. These are often found on school websites or discussed during parents’ orientations or IEP meetings.

2. Parent education and other courses or training for parents. Special Education coordinator G indicated that the school has a subscription to the PACER center where parents can attend workshops and training sessions.

3. Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services. More needs to be accomplished in this area.

4. Home visits at points where students are transitioning from one level to another among preschool, elementary, middle, and high school. More needs to be accomplished in this area.
5. Neighborhood meetings to assist families in understanding schools and to help schools understand families. More needs to be accomplished in this area.

Volunteering and collaborating with the community practices also require more frequent interventions by Special Education directors and coordinators to increase parent involvement participation. Parents who desire not to be involved in the teaching and learning process is one of the primary challenges expressed by Special Education director D,

“Sometimes the reason for choosing online school is because parents don’t want to be involved. We are finding that families that select online schools are not interested in volunteering and socializing”.

A possible reason for the limited parent involvement in collaborating with the community is that some parents consider such activities as extra-curricular activities or merely limited to specific course assignments. Therefore, more effort is needed to build parent awareness about the benefits of volunteering and collaborating with the community.

Examples include the following:

- Organize volunteer work, skills, and availability.
- Provide training to better match the talents of parents, teachers and community members with students’ needs.
- Recognize efforts of the participants as being valuable.
- Match parental community contributions with school goals.
- Integrate child and family services with education.
Research Question Two

The second question of the study addressed challenges that select Special Education coordinators and directors of Minnesota online schools face in implementing parent involvement practices in special education programs. The study’s findings identified many challenges and raised an important question, “is online education the best modality to educate special needs’ students?” Special Education coordinator C reported that:

Some parents do not understand the difference between a brick-and-mortar school and online school. The different modality does not work for everyone especially students with special needs. The need for some of these students cannot be met with online schools.

Other Special Education coordinators and directors were speculative as well. The type and severity of the disability of the students appeared to have influenced whether or not online education would be a good fit for their needs. The following reasons support this conclusion:

- Online schools require the support of a learning coach. This role presumed to be the parents’. For working parents this might not be the best option as reported by Special Education director D:

  For elementary students some parents can’t be the coach; too tough for their job to do it. Sometimes disabilities prevent having the best learning time. Late afternoon is not best, but that’s when they can get it in.

- Time management problems related to students’ login and completion of assignments needs to be addressed. Special education students may require the supervision of a learning coach to complete their assigned tasks since the students cannot manage their time due to their disabilities or age. Online schools need to provide some assistance to the learning coaches in most effectively managing
students’ time while they are engaged in learning online. Special Education coordinator A stated, “We are consciously working on helping both the family and students to develop an organizational time management system that is advantageous with them because in some online schools with synchronous or asynchronous learning model, you don’t have that”.

- Online students receive indirect minutes logged by their academic coaches in addition to direct minutes provided by their teachers. This is a critical issue as it relies so heavily on the skills and knowledge of the learning coaches about the content of academic subjects as well as their coaches’ abilities to convey learning concepts. Depending on types and severity of the students’ disabilities, additional interventions may be required to help special needs students understand concepts and materials. This may expand the complexity of the role of the learning coach.

- Location and availability of needed services for some students present unique challenges. Depending upon the type and severity of a student’s disability, additional services such as physical, occupational, and speech therapies—as well as socializing groups—may be required. Although some online schools are experimenting with providing these services online, some special education students experience greater benefits from such services if provided in person. The location and availability of needed services to students may become a new challenge that impacts online education. Some parents may choose not to take advantage of such service options and use private providers or other services
within their community. Others may choose to obtain services provided by their home districts.

- Reaching out to parents who are not interested in participating in school activities or communicating with the schools presents significant challenges. School staff should take advantage of their limited face-to-face meeting opportunities with parents—such as during the enrollment process, orientation, and during required IEP meetings—to promote existing parent involvement practices in a meaningful—but not overwhelming—way. A sponsored lunch or coffee break provided by volunteer parents from the school’s advisory board and administrators may furnish the motivation parents may need to engage in some parent involvement practices.

- Truancy is an issue for online education. All Special Education coordinators and directors shared concerns about online students’ attendance. Minnesota statutes 120A.22 and 260A permit schools define what is considered an excused or an unexcused absence. Some online schools base attendance on the number of weekly assignments students are expected to complete, while others count hours students are expected to spend online for each subject as a guide for determining online attendance. For student with special needs, the detail of work completion or number of hours devoted per subject should be clearly defined in the students’ IEP. Online Schools rely on the students’ counties of residence to enforce attendance policies. Each county governs its own procedures based on the guidelines of the statutes to enforce truancy and to provide support for students and their families.
Parents sometimes fail to understand how online learning operates. Multiple Special Education coordinators and directors reported that some parents have limited knowledge of the nature of online education. Parents who seek online schooling for their children may lack an understanding of online learning requirements, the amount of supervision and coaching parents need to provide, and the limited services available to special needs students. Due to the Minnesota open enrollment statute 124D.03, Special Education coordinators and directors are not allowed to drop students from their attendance rolls. Discussions may need to occur with parents about programs and services the school can and cannot provide to online students and, in particular, those related to their child’s disability. In this regard, Special Education director B spoke of the concept he identified as “educating” the parents. The concept included openly discussing the future of special needs students in online schools or, in fact, discouraging parents from enrolling their special needs children in an online school by focusing on the limited services available to them instead of critically assessing the students’ needs first.

Failure to understand how online learning function requires the involvement of education leaders–directors of online schools, Special Education coordinators and directors, online teachers, community leaders, and members of student support groups such as PACER Center and Autism Society, to advocate for the establishment of admission and enrollment requirements for students with special needs who are interested in an online education, identifying skills that are required
to be successful, and addressing issues related to the availability of services for special needs students.

Epstein’s (1995) framework referred to the need for policies to regulate education in general when she stated the following:

The field has been strengthened by supporting federal, state, and local policies. For example, the Goals 2000 legislation sets partnerships as a voluntary national goal for all schools; Title I specifies and mandates programs and practices of partnership in order for schools to qualify for or maintain funding. Many states and districts have developed or are preparing policies to guide schools in creating more systematic connections with families and communities. These policies reflect research results and the prior successes of leading educators who have shown that these goals are attainable. Underlying these policies and programs are a theory of how social organizations connect; a framework of the basic components of school, family, and community partnerships for children’s learning; a growing literature on the positive and negative results of these connections for students, families, and schools; and an understanding of how to organize good programs. In this article I summarize the theory, framework, and guidelines that have assisted the schools in our research projects in building partnerships and that should help elementary, middle, or high school to take similar steps.

**Research Question Three**

The third question of the study addressed the benefits reported by select Special Education coordinators and directors of Minnesota online schools regarding the implementation of parent involvement practices in special education programs. One of the greatest benefits of online education is the ability to customize learning to individual student needs. The combination of learning at home, collaborative decision-making, and communication practices, allows both parents and teachers to better understand the online students’ abilities to master educational content. Therefore, if more time or assistance is needed by the student to complete certain learning modules, communications between parents and teachers provide the flexibility to permit arranging a new completion date and
identification of any additional resources for the student. This flexibility also allows capable students to advance academically by enrolling in course work above their age or grade level.

Numerous Special Education coordinators and directors reported that the enrollment process was enhanced when parents were encouraged to communicate their children’s special needs and participate in selecting appropriate programs and services to meet those needs. Such a process permitted school staff to better explain the content and delivery methodology of online schools. The orientation associated with the enrollment process provides parents and students with the opportunity to explore the online environment, learn how to prepare the learning environment at home—based on the best practices and tips provided—practice the skills required to be successful online, and identify the resources and personnel that may be contacted as needed.

Finally, with increased parent involvement, the development of trusting relationships between parents and school personnel creates a caring community in which concerns can be voiced, collaboration within the school or in the community can occur, and advocacy for the best interests of students with special needs can be acknowledged.

**Limitations**

The following were limitations of this study:

1) During interviews Special Education coordinators and directors of online schools may have failed to mention parental involvement practices that occurred in their schools. These omissions would have been undocumented, and, therefore, not included in the study findings.
2) Interviewee bias—despite planning and methodological controls—may have occurred, due to the fact that interviewed Special Education coordinators and directors were self-reporting data on their own online schools.

3) The study findings and conclusions may not be generalizable to secondary schools or to schools operating in states other than Minnesota.

4) Data gathered from one source that was not corroborated through a second source in the study may be questionable in drawing study conclusions. As an example, legally required documentation was discovered during the study which revealed that policies were in place to involve parents in the review of parental involvement practices. Such involvement may not have actually occurred as none of the school directors mentioned it during the course of their interviews.

**Recommendations for Current Practice**

1) It is essential that general and special education administrators of online schools—with the help of members of their parent advisory boards—introduce and advocate for greater parent involvement practices. Specifically, practices that foster a better partnership between school, family, and the community should be encouraged.

2) Online school administrators are encouraged to create shared blogs (to address different disabilities if needed) that would faster collaboration among educators, parents, and experts in the community in organizing training and social events, designing and publishing informational materials related to each disability, and starting continuous conversation to reduce or eliminate communication barriers
between families and the experts within the community such as advocacy groups for special needs individuals.

3) Online school administrators are encouraged to design online informational modules that explain to students and their parents the facts and myths about online education and their requirements, including the role of a learning coach, student time management, direct and indirect minutes, managing non-academic services, and other topics. It would be beneficial to parents and students to have access to a sample course module appropriate to the student’s grade level. The student could be requested to complete the module to determine if he or she was able to adequately preform on a first-hand experience in online education.

4) Special Education coordinators and directors are encouraged to design online training modules that provide both general and special education teachers and specialists strategies to interact with or involve parents and families. Such online training modules may be designed to include parents, permitting them to share their perspectives on relevant materials for the training.

5) Online school administrators are encouraged to explore exemplary communication methods that allow for synchronous face-to-face meetings. This will aid staff members in ensuring that communications with parents are clear.

6) As more parent involvement practices occur, online school staff members are encouraged to provide online support materials that include best practices, time management tips and teachers’ manuals to better prepare parents to perform their coaching tasks.
7) Online school administrators are encouraged to partner with local community organizations and businesses to provide non-academic experiences necessary for serving Special Education students. This would provide options for parents to assist their children to succeed in their online education program.

8) Online Special Education coordinators and directors are encouraged to advocate for procedures to address the state-wide online enrollment and related truancy issues.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The researcher recommends the following areas of study as potentially enhancing to the knowledge base of online schools serving Special Education students:

1) Conduct an in-depth study of the relationship between specific types of parent involvement practices and improving the learning of students with special needs.

2) Undertake a study that includes schools serving middle and high school students—as well as private online schools—to compare with this study’s findings and promote best practices in parental involvement.

3) Conduct yearly online surveys, individual interviews, or focus group meetings to secure the perspectives of parents, teachers, and specialists on parent involvement practices and determine the impact of those perspectives on building a caring educational community.

4) Conduct a case study of an individual online school and its special education services (in general or related to a specific disability) to secure information on the
perspectives, concerns, benefits and challenges of employing parent involvement practices.

5) Include a brief description of the Epstein’s (1995) framework with the interview request email sent to Special Education coordinators and directors. This could assist in focusing responses on those practices that reflect Epstein’s framework of six types of parent involvement practices.

6) Conduct a state-wide survey that examines special education students’ and parents’ understanding of online education and its requirements and impact on students with special needs.

7) Conduct a focus group that includes administrators, teachers, and specialists to identify student skills that are required to success in an online education program. This may be beneficial to the Minnesota Department of Education in developing online education admission requirements and enrollment policies for students with special needs.

8) Conduct a focus group that includes educational and residential county leaders to discuss truancy issues among special education students in an effort to establish state-wide attendance policy and the required enforcements.

9) Conduct a research study to determine whether or not a new parent involvement framework is needed for online schools and special education programs.
Summary

Chapter 5 examined the study’s findings in the content of Epstein’s (1995) framework and presented conclusions, limitations, recommendations for current practices and recommendation for future research. Recommendation were provided in support of increasing parent involvement practices in special education programs delivered to special students education students enrolled in online elementary schools.
References


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Appendix A: Email Invitation to Participants

Dear XXXXXXXXX,

Thank you for your time and attention to this email. As an administrator at XXXXXXX School, you have an important role in educating Minnesota’s students in a new and innovative way, through your online programs.

We are studying the current practices of parent involvement in Minnesota online schools in both general and special education. We respectfully request the opportunity to interview you on how you involve the parents of your students.

If you are interested in receiving the results of our study, we will provide you a copy. It will include results from other online schools in Minnesota you may be interested in viewing.

All schools and administrators who participate can be assured of their privacy protection. All names of participants as well as schools will be reported anonymously (example: School A, or Administrator A). Additionally, any audio recordings made will be destroyed once confidentially transcribed. You may also request that we not use recording devices.

Thank you again for your consideration, we look forward to visiting with you soon.

Respectfully,

Bilal Dameh, Instructional Designer, E.d.D. Candidate, Saint Cloud State University
William DeWitt, M.S.E, E.d.D. Candidate, Saint Cloud State University
Appendix B: Case Study Protocol

1. Role of the Protocol:
   a. This protocol is to be reviewed prior to commencement of contact with the site being researched. It is also to be reviewed prior to commencement of any data collection activities, to include interviews. This protocol provides guidance to the researcher, or the researcher’s designated investigator, in order to ensure each case is approached consistently, and the study may be replicated at any point, with little to no variability.

2. Understanding of the Conceptual Framework:
   a. The child can be supported with focus on six areas: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with community (Epstein, 1995).

3. Objective of the Case Study:
   a. Determine the online school’s reported practices of parental involvement that exist, along with difficulties or successes that are experienced with these practices.

Field Procedures

1. Sites to be visited: (include contact information)
   a. XXXXX
   b. XXXXX
   c. XXXXX
   d. XXXXX
   e. XXXXX
f. XXXXX

g. XXXXX

2. Preparation prior to site visit:

a. Email invitation to participate in the research study will be sent to all selected schools’
general and special education directors. This email will explain purpose of study and
give a background about the researchers.

b. A reminder email will be sent two weeks after the original email to those directors
who did not respond to the invitation request.

c. A thank you email will be sent to those directors who respond to the invitation.

Directors who accept the invitation will be asked to schedule a quick phone
conversation to arrange for the interview date and provide more details about the study
if needed.

d. Phone conversation to schedule interview and discuss the follow email and option for
recording the interview.

e. A Follow up email reminder with the following preparatory questions:

i. How many students are enrolled in the school?

ii. How many students are receiving Special Education services? Please provide a
general breakdown by type/area if available.

iii. Does your school have a formal ‘Parent Involvement Policy’ in place? If so, how
is it typically communicated to parents?

iv. May we obtain a current copy of the parent/student handbook? (We can collect at
the interview).
f. Collect all available public documents and records without needing to contact staff at research site.

* Remember, to ensure consistency, no further contacts, except as directed in this protocol.

[Check for Parent/Student Handbook, parent involvement policy, volunteer opportunities/policies, communications policies, brochures for parent nights, parent contracts, etc]

g. Review documents; incorporate any information into interview questions to enhance communication during interview.

h. Perform map reconnaissance of route to and on site for interview. Identify alternate route(s) and transportation.

i. Inspect on site supplies - pens, pencils, paper, recording device, charging status or additional batteries, 2 copies of interview protocol (separate locations), 2 copies of case study protocol (separate locations).

j. Identify back-up meeting location if difficulties encountered on site.

k. Review case study protocol and interview protocol for each interview.

3. Data Collection Plan:

a. Perform searches of online school’s website for document data prior to interview.

b. Upon arrival at site, interview director with strict adherence to interview protocol (Appendix C). If possible, record interview for transcript preparation.

c. Subsequent to interview, ask for documents related to parent policies and procedures (examples are student handbook, parent handbook, parent involvement plans, parent
contracts, program plans for parents (reading classes, community activity brochures, etc)).

f. Interview Special Ed. Director using Interview Protocol.

Case Study Guidelines for Both General and Special Education

1. Discover how the school interacts with parents.
   a. Find out: What formal policies exist, what actions are actually taken to interact with parents, which actions parents actually participate in/respond to, how do they implement the actions and policies (email, phone, online interface, etc).
   b. Source(s): Documents involving parental policies, interviewee perceptions, direct observation of involvement practices.
   c. Example(s): Formal Parent Involvement Plan, Parent Teacher Organization procedures/bylaws, School Policy Documents relating to parents, Interviewee comments focused on involving parents, demonstrated use of online reporting system to parents.

2. Discover which of Epstein’s types of involvement are being used.
   a. Find out: What the policies or parent involvement actions require from school staff, students, and/or parents. Also what the stated goals are.
   b. Source(s): Documents involving parental policies, interviewee perceptions, direct observation of involvement practices.
   c. Example(s): Teacher handbook outlining requirement to provide reports at certain times (communication). Parent contract outlining requirement for at home
supervision. Interviewee comments focused on what they require, and how they execute it.

3. Discover which of Epstein’s types of involvement are not being used.
   a. Find out: What area of involvement is not mentioned, avoided, deemed unfeasible, unnecessary or unknown.
   b. Source(s): Documents involving parental policies, interviewee perceptions, direct observation of involvement practices.
   c. Example(s): Lack of involvement guidelines or resources in various contracts or handbooks, interviewee comments about unnecessary, unfeasible practices, or failed practices. Interviewee experiencing difficulty answering involvement questions.

4. Discover the difficulties in parent involvement that have been encountered.
   a. Find out: What their weakness is. What are they searching for a solution for, or have looked and could not find it. What is a complaint about involving parents during the interview?
   b. Source(s): Interviewee perceptions, direct observation of involvement practices.
   c. Example(s): Policies that place 100% of responsibility on student or parent (could indicate an inability of the school to involve or influence area). Interviewee comments like ‘hard’, ‘tough’, ‘impossible’, ‘difficult’.

5. Discover which parent involvement programs or practices that have been successful.
   a. Find out: Which programs receive positive feedback from students, parents or staff. Which programs the site feels caused an increase in achievement. Which programs they feel were easy to implement.
b. **Source(s):** interviewee perceptions, direct observation of involvement practices, archival records.

c. **Example(s):** Questions the interviewee readily responds to about involvement.
   Examples of programs referred to multiple times. Programs or policies promoted in documents. Parent contacts that are directly observed in the online school program.
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

*Ensure Initial steps in Appendix B (Case Study Protocol) have been followed prior to start of interview data collection.

Introduction

Say: “I would like to start by thanking you for your time and help in completing this interview. We have 11 questions to ask, with some follow up questions and we would appreciate your answers and feedback. This interview may take approximately 45 minutes to complete. The purpose of this interview is to collect information on parents’ involvement in online elementary schools.

Following the interview, as discussed prior, we would be very appreciative of collecting any documents you may have in the areas of parental involvement.

We would like to record the interview. Only the researchers will have access to the recording for the purpose of transcribing the interview. The recording will be locked in our offices until the transcription is complete, and then destroyed. You will be provided a copy of the transcription, to allow you to clarify, confirm or edit responses. During transcription, and when the results of the study are published, your name and your school’s name will be kept confidential. You may be referred to as Director ‘C’ or School ‘C’.

If you would like a copy of the study when completed, we will provide one to you.”

Wait for comments.

i. Please explain your strategies for communication with parents, and how often you communicate with parents.
ii. Please discuss parents’ role in learning, and how they help their children learn at home.

iii. In what ways can, or do parents volunteer in this school? Also, in what ways can, or do parents participate in making decisions affecting this school or their children?

iv. How does the school connect with communities in which your students live? Also, do you provide parenting or family support programs through your school?

v. When thinking of the success you have had involving parents, what are the top three successful involvement practices that come to mind?

vi. Please consider difficulties your school has experienced when involving parents; what are the top three difficulties that come to mind?

vii. If you could give advice to a new director of an online school in regards to parent involvement and the role the parents and school play in supporting the child, what would it be?

viii. Do you have any other comments you feel would be pertinent in the area of parental involvement in online schools?

Interviewer follow ups on specific questions as needed:

Question 1) Any further information about communicating announcements, grades, IEP’s…any satisfaction surveys?
Question 2) Are you able, or how do you confirm parents help at home? Do you have methods to encourage and motivate parents?

Question 6) Any ideas on fixing those difficulties?

Interviewer follow ups on all questions as needed:

Can you tell us more about__________?

Could you describe more about how _________ is done?

Do you feel________benefits students and why do you think it benefits them?

After the interview:

Thank you again for your time and help. We will provide the transcript of the interview to you soon, so you are able to verify the accuracy, and edit, or update any information in it.

Thank you as well for providing any items or documents you may have in the area of parental involvement. We would be interested in items like parent and student handbooks, parent involvement policies, communication policies, brochures for parents, and similar items.
## Appendix D: Source of Data Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Parent Involvement Policy</th>
<th>Parent School Compact</th>
<th>Handbook</th>
<th>Website captures</th>
<th>Other documents (brochures, program descriptions, etc.)</th>
<th>Interview Recording/Destroyed</th>
<th>Interview Transcripted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Found copy In handbook</td>
<td>Found</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Brochure, Newsletter, and Parent letter on community involvement</td>
<td>Yes/ Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Found Expectations And communication letters</td>
<td>Found – ALC is it – plus expectations</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Program guide-learning coach role</td>
<td>Yes/ Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Found</td>
<td>Guide</td>
<td>No/NA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Found Located in the Registration packet</td>
<td>Not found</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Registration Packet</td>
<td>No/NA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Found</td>
<td>Yes - numerous</td>
<td>No/NA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Found Registration Form and Refers to Individualized Learning Plan</td>
<td>Found (but district wide)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Registration Forms</td>
<td>Yes/ Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Found</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Found</td>
<td>Parent Newsletter</td>
<td>No/ NA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Select Minnesota Online Schools Achievement Statistics Analysis (MCAs-2009-13)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Scores below state average</th>
<th>Scores equal to state average</th>
<th>Scores above state average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data Analysis conducting using data from the Minnesota Department of Education’s Data Center via their website. (Minnesota Department of Education, 2014)

*3 schools had no available data
### Appendix F: Joint Interview Protocol to Research Question Alignment Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question (w/follow-up prompts not shown)</th>
<th>RQ1: 6 types</th>
<th>RQ3: Benefits</th>
<th>RQ1: Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Please explain your strategies for communication with parents, and how often you communicate with parents.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Please discuss parents’ role in learning, and how they help their children learn at home.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. In what ways can, or do parents volunteer in this school? Also, in what ways can, or do parents participate in making decisions affecting this school or their children?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How does the school connect with communities in which your students live? Also, do you provide parenting or family support programs through your school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. When thinking of the success you have had involving parents, what are the top three successful involvement practices that come to mind?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Please consider difficulties your school has experienced when involving parents; what are the top three difficulties that come to mind?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. If you could give advice to a new director of an online school in regards to parent involvement and the role the parents and school play in supporting the child, what would it be?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Do you have any other comments you feel would be pertinent in the area of parental involvement in online schools?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G: Institutional Review Board Approval

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
St. Cloud State University

Name: Bilal Dameh
Address: 1626 Woodlyn Ave E #3
Maplewood, MN 55109
USA
Email: Bilal.dameh@gmail.com
Co-investigators: William DeWitt
Advisors: John Eller

Project Title: The impact of parent involvement practices in special education programs

IRB Application Determination

Exempt
1/2/2015

Comments:
The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application to conduct research involving human subjects. We are pleased to inform you that your project has been APPROVED in full accordance with federal regulations. Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of human subjects in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).

- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.

- Exempt reviews only require the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.

- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

Good luck on your research. If you require further assistance, please contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 320-308-4932 or email ldonnay@stcloudstate.edu. All correspondence should include your SCSU IRB number as indicated on this letter.

For the Institutional Review Board:

Linda Donnay
IRB Administrator
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

For St. Cloud State University:

Patricia Hughes
Interim Associate Provost for Research
Dean of Graduate Studies

SCLIRB: 1985 - 1090 Approval Date: 1/2/2015
Type of Review: Expiration Date: 1/2/2016
Office Use Only
Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
Continuing Review/Final Report

Name: Bilal Dameh  
Co-Investigators: William DeWitt

Project Title: The impact of parent involvement practices in special education programs

1. Please indicate the status of your project:

   This form serves as a Final Report:
   ___ Project has been completed.
   ___ Data collection has been completed but data analysis continues.
   ___ Project has not and will not be conducted. Explain: __________________________

   This form serves as a Continuing Review
   ___ Subject recruitment/enrollment continues; current consent/assent required. Please attach.
   ___ Data collection continues with enrolled subjects; no additional subjects will be recruited.

2. How many subjects have participated in your study? _________________

3. Have any unexpected reactions, complications or problems occurred during this research?
   ___ No   ___ Yes, explain: __________________________

4. Have any subjects withdrawn from the research, either voluntarily or at the researcher’s request?
   ___ No   ___ Yes, explain: __________________________

5. Have any subjects complained about the research?
   ___ No   ___ Yes, explain: __________________________

6. Has any new information been identified which may affect the willingness of current or future subjects to participate in this research?
   ___ No   ___ Yes, explain: __________________________

7. Have any changes been made to your research (including changes to informed consent documents, debriefing statements, recruitment materials, etc.) since it was approved by the IRB?
   ___ No   ___ Yes, explain and indicate whether changes were approved by the IRB: __________________________

_________________________________________  ____________________________________
Principal Investigator’s Signature            Date

SCSU IRB#: 1385 - 1690

Website: stcloudstate.edu/osp   Email: osp@stcloudstate.edu   Phone: 320-308-4932   Administrative Services 210
Appendix H: Adult Informed Consent

Adult Informed Consent

Title: The impact of parent involvement practices in special education programs
Primary Investigator: Bilal A. Dameh
Research Assistant: William S DeWitt
Telephone: 612-205-6531

St. Cloud State University
Institutional Review Board
Approval date: 1/2/15
Expiration date: 1/1/16

Introduction
Parental involvement has been shown to be effective in supporting both general education and special education students in traditional schools. There is very little research into how online schools employ parental involvement practices.

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to investigate how what parental involvement practices online schools employ, and what successes or difficulties they encounter. Additionally, we are investigating any benefits that students derive from these practices.

Study Procedures
One 45 minute interview will be conducted with you relating to parental involvement practices in the online school. Additionally, we will request, if you are able to provide documents such as parent handbooks, or parent contracts that may show us additional parental involvement information.

Risks and Discomforts
We do not foresee any risks or discomforts associated with this study. You may stop the study at any point if you do feel any risk or discomfort associated.

Benefits
Benefits from this study include learning about successful parental involvement practices and their benefits to students in online schools. You may also learn what other online schools in Minnesota are currently doing if you would like a copy of the study results.

Compensation
No compensation is being offered for completing this study.

Confidentiality
The confidentiality of the information gathered during your participation in this study will be maintained. Your personal identity will remain confidential. You will not be identified by your name in any published material. All data will be kept in our locked offices until study completion, and then destroyed.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time, for any reason, without penalty. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Cloud State University, or the researchers.

The study investigator may stop your participation at any time without your consent for the following reasons: if it appears to be medically harmful to you, if you fail to follow directions for participating in the study, if the study is canceled, or for reasons deemed appropriate by the research coordinator to maintain subject safety and the integrity of the study.

Acceptance to Participate in the online parental involvement study
You have read the information provided above, and you have consented to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty after signing this form.

Subject Name (Printed) __________________________________________________________
Subject Signature, ____________________________________________________________
Date __________________________