GOALS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH A SEVERE DISABILITY:
PARENTAL AND PROFESSIONAL PERCEPTIONS
OF RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract

Parental and professional views of the responsibility for educational goals were examined. This study compared the perceptions of 81 parents who had a child with a severe disability and 31 professionals who taught children with a severe disability. Goal responsibility was compared across the preschool, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels. The data revealed a high degree of congruence between parents and professionals on goal responsibility. In addition, within-category comparisons indicated that parents at all four levels assigned responsibility in a similar manner. Likewise, perceptions of goal responsibility for professionals did not change across the four levels.

Parental involvement in the education of their son or daughter who has a severe disability takes many forms. Hilton and Henderson (1993) noted that parents “should play a role in virtually all aspects of the education of students with severe disabilities” (p. 199). Parental roles include those of political advocates, program organizers, curriculum developers, and teachers (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Underlying each of these roles is an expectation that parents will become educational decision makers.

The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 established parents as educational partners. The law provided parents with a legal right to take an active role in their child’s education. For the first time, educational decision making was within the purview of parents (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990).

A key, and often underemphasized, component of educational decision making is the perception of parents. Haring, Lovett, and Saren (1991) noted, “The perceptions of parents can be influential in determining the educational opportunities provided for students with disabilities” (p. 6). Educational decisions of parents are typically expressed in terms of goals that are articulated through the objectives on the child’s individualized education plan. Goals are more global than objectives and can be seen as general program targets (Shea & Bauer, 1991).

Limited professional attention has been devoted to goals and parental perceptions of goals (Hamre-Nietupski, Nietupski, & Strathe, 1992). Epps and Myers (1989) investigated parental preferences as one component of a comprehensive study which also examined satis-
faction with school and expectations for postschool living arrangements. Winton (1986) indicated that a basic difference in values makes collaborative goal setting more difficult and increases the probability of conflict between the parties. Leitch and Tangri (1988) noted that differences in educational goals can constitute an impediment to the home-school partnership.

If parents are to be active partners, consideration should be given to the issue of responsibility for educational goals. The ideal is, obviously, for parents and professionals to assume joint responsibility for the achievement of all educational goals. The reality, however, is that one party will likely be perceived as holding primary responsibility for training toward goals.

The purpose of this study was to compare perceptions, both within and across the categories of parents and professionals, of the primary responsibility for training in 10 goal areas for individuals who have a severe disability. A measure of goal responsibility was compared across four educational levels (preschool, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary) and also between the categories of parents and professionals.

To investigate this issue, three research questions were developed. The questions addressed were as follows:

1. Do parental and professional perceptions of the primary responsibility for educational goals for individuals who have a severe disability differ significantly at the preschool, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels?
2. Do parental perceptions of the primary responsibility for educational goals for their children who have a severe disability vary as a function of the children’s educational levels?
3. Do professional perceptions of the primary responsibility for educational goals for their students who have a severe disability vary as a function of the students’ educational levels?

Method

Sample

The sample for this study included parents whose children had a severe disability and professional service providers who taught individuals who had a severe disability. The sample consisted of eight groups, divided into two basic categories. The first category was comprised of four groups of parents who had children with a severe disability. The parents were grouped according to the educational level of their child, preschool, elementary, secondary, or postsecondary. The second category of subjects consisted of four groups of professional service providers employed to teach individuals with a severe disability. The professional service providers, primarily classroom teachers, were likewise grouped according to the educational level of their students, preschool, elementary, secondary, or postsecondary.

The parents and professionals included in this study were drawn from 11 sites in central and northern Alabama. The study sites included six public school systems, two preschool facilities, and three postsecondary facilities. One preschool facility was operated by a community agency while the other was a university affiliated program. The three postsecondary facilities operated under contract to the state Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation. Two postsecondary facilities were managed by community agencies while one was a university affiliated program. The sites were selected to include both rural and urban areas with a cross-section of economic groups.

Instrumentation

Parental and professional perceptions of goals and goal responsibilities are issues which have not been closely examined. Consequently, no instrument was located that identified and
measured perceptions of goal responsibility. This study required the development of the *Goal Responsibilities Scale* (see Appendix). Items for the scale were generated from a general review of the literature followed by a more detailed examination of a norm-referenced adaptive behavior scale, a criterion-referenced skill checklist, and a curriculum guide used with individuals who have moderate and severe disabilities. The process of item selection began by comparing the skills represented in the *American Association on Mental Deficiency Adaptive Behavior Scale* (Fogelman, 1975), the *Skill Assessment Checklist* (Region II Community Services, 1988), and the *Syracuse Community-Referenced Curriculum Guide* (Ford et al., 1989). Those skills which appeared in all three instruments were listed alphabetically in tabular form. The list contained 34 different skills. Using the *Skill Assessment Checklist* as a general guide, these 34 skills were grouped by type under 10 goal areas: self-care, independent living, motor, language, self-direction, leisure, academics, economic activity, residential independence, and vocational skills.

The 10 selected goal areas were then used as the foundation for the development of the instrument. The *Goal Responsibilities Scale* required parents and professionals to determine primary responsibility for instruction in each of the 10 selected goal areas.

After the scale was constructed, a group of five service providers was convened to review the instrument for clarity. Open-ended interviews were held with each of the service providers to elicit their comments. Following this review, additional examples were included for each goal area and some introductory instructions were reworded. Subsequent to the review by the service providers, the revised instrument was submitted to a panel of experts. The panel of experts consisted of one professional service provider and one parent for each of the four educational levels. The panel of experts suggested renaming one goal area and the inclusion of additional instructions on the instrument.

Finally, the instrument was field tested with eight persons, four parents who had a son or daughter with a severe disability and four professional service providers who taught individuals with a severe disability. The cover letter, demographic form, and *Goal Responsibilities Scale* appeared to be readable and understandable as all participants provided accurate demographic information and completed the scale without difficulty. The process of instrumentation did not include a determination of the reliability and validity of the *Goal Responsibilities Scale*. This information is, therefore, not known.

**Procedure**

At each school or program site, the facility administrator provided a list of individuals who had a severe disability and professional service providers who taught these individuals. The parents of the individuals who had a severe disability were given a coded survey packet that contained a cover letter, a demographic form, and a copy of the *Goal Responsibilities Scale*. The directions included in the survey packet asked parents to complete the survey, seal the survey packet in a coded envelope, and return the envelope to the school or program prior to the deadline. The survey packets were collected by a research assistant at the respective school or program. The codes on the envelopes were used by the research assistants to identify parents who did not return the survey prior to the deadline. These parents were given a reminder letter encouraging them to complete the survey packet and to return it to the research assistant.

Professional service providers at the research sites were contacted in person to explain the purpose of the study. Professional service providers who indicated a willingness to participate in the study were given a coded survey packet which contained a cover letter, a demographic form, and a copy of the *Goal Responsibilities Scale*. The directions included in the survey packet asked service providers to complete the survey, seal the survey packet in a coded envelope, and return the sealed envelope to a research assistant at the respective school or program. The codes on the envelopes were used by the research assistants to iden-
Data Analyses
This study required two procedures to adequately analyze the data. The first procedure, the Mann-Whitney U test, was needed to determine the extent to which perceptions of goal responsibilities were similar for parents and teachers of children with a severe disability. This procedure was used across the four educational levels.

The second procedure, the Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance, was needed to determine the extent to which parental perceptions of goal responsibilities remained constant at four educational levels for parents of children who had a severe disability. This procedure was, likewise, used to determine the extent to which professional perceptions of goal responsibilities remained constant at four educational levels. In an attempt to limit experiment-wide error, a relatively conservative significance level of .03 was established a priori for this study.

Results
A total of 190 research packets was distributed to participants at the 11 study sites in central and northern Alabama. The participants returned 157 research packets for an overall return rate of 83%. The return rate for parents was 79%, with 122 of 154 research packets returned. The return rate for professionals was considerably higher at 97%, with 35 of 36 research packets returned.

Some research packets (n = 45) were determined to be unusable due to violation of data collection procedures or difficulty in responding to the questionnaires. The questionnaires at one site were completed by a classroom teacher with the input of the parents. A number of other scales were only partially completed. None of these scales was used.

The data analyzed in this study consisted of the 81 usable returns by parents and the 31 usable returns by professionals. These usable return rate for parents was 53% while the usable return rate for professionals was 86%. The overall usable return rate was 59%.

The demographic data for the survey participants are shown in Table 1. The number of professionals (n = 11) who had a job type other than teacher is potentially misleading. Many of the professional service providers at the preschool or postsecondary levels held a different job title (e.g., adult training specialist), but functioned as a teacher.

A summary of the responses to the Goal Responsibilities Scale is presented in Table 2. The numbers of responses, means, and standard deviations are presented for each of the eight cells.

Scores on the Goal Responsibilities Scale may range from a low of 1.00 to a high of 2.00. Individuals who held the school or program responsible for instruction in all 10 goal areas would score a 1.00 on this scale. Individuals who held the parent responsible for instruction in all 10 goal areas would score a 2.00 on this scale. A score of 1.50 on the Goal Responsibilities Scale would indicate that an individual held the parents responsible for instruction in five goal areas and held the school responsible for instruction in the other five goal areas.
Across-Category Comparisons

Across-category comparisons examined perceptions of responsibility for educational goals at a single educational level. Parental responses were compared with professional responses for each of the four educational levels.

Table 1
Demographic Information

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<th></th>
<th>Preschool</th>
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<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Post-secondary</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>71</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>41</td>
<td>56</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>&lt;10th Grade</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>51.8</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
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Table 2
Goal Responsibilities Scale: Means and Standard Deviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Professionals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.23</td>
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</table>

No prior research has specifically targeted across-category comparisons on the issue of goal responsibility. In related research, Cadman, Goldsmith, and Bashim (1984) identified a difference in parental and professional perceptions of needs. Cadman et al. (1984) found that parents and professionals who read clinical descriptions of children with disabilities disagreed on the needs of the children and service priorities for the children.

In contrast with the findings of Cadman et al. (1984), parents and professionals at all four levels responded to the Goal Responsibilities Scale in a similar manner. The results of
the across-category comparisons for each of the four levels are contained in Table 3. The Mann-Whitney U Test yielded z statistics in the range of 1.25-2.12 with corresponding probabilities from 0.13-0.034. No statistically significant differences were seen between the way parents at the four levels responded to the Goal Responsibilities Scale and the way professionals at those levels responded.

Table 3
z Statistic and Probability for Across-Category Comparisons

<table>
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<th>Level</th>
<th>z Statistic</th>
<th>Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Preschool</td>
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<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postsecondary</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within-Category Comparisons

Within-category comparisons were made to determine if participants from a single category responded to the Goal Responsibilities Scale in a similar or dissimilar manner. Each comparison focused on a single category of participants. Parents were compared with parents and professionals were compared with professionals.

No prior research has specifically targeted within-category comparisons on goal responsibilities. In related research, Epps and Myers (1989) found that parents of students from four different age groups prioritized goals in a similar manner. Suelzle and Keenan (1981), however, found a difference between the programming options preferred by parents of young children with a disability and those preferred by parents of older children with a disability.

Parents. Parents at all four levels responded to the Goal Responsibilities Scale in a similar fashion. The Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance yielded a chi square statistic of 2.74. This corresponded to a significance level of 0.43. Parents at each of the levels appeared to assign and accept responsibility for goal instruction in a like manner.

Professionals. As with parents, professionals in this study responded to the Goal Responsibilities Scale in a similar fashion. The Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance yielded a chi square statistic of 2.64. This corresponded to a significance level of 0.45. Professionals at each of the levels assigned and accepted responsibility for goal instruction in a like manner.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare parental and professional perceptions of goal responsibility for individuals with a severe disability who received services at a number of sites in Alabama. Responses to the Goal Responsibilities Scale were compared both within and across categories. The study revealed no statistically significant differences among parents, among professionals, or between parents and professionals.

Three inferences can be made from the data. Strong parent-school partnerships are built upon many elements, including congruent views on goal responsibility. A lack of agreement could be potentially damaging to the parent-school partnership and ultimately to the education of an individual with a severe disability. Since this research indicates that parents and professionals hold similar views on goal responsibility, both groups should be able to approach planning and placement meetings with the expectation that the other party is
likely to perceive goal responsibility in a similar manner. This expectation might help to ease the adversarial approach that many individuals bring to the process.

Second, preservice and inservice training for special educators should emphasize the benefits of a healthy parent-school relationship. Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin (1995) noted that most professionals “become entrenched in a ‘we-they’ posture by which parents are seen as potential adversaries rather than allies” (p. 374). If parents and professionals are predisposed to agree on goal responsibility, this issue might serve as the basis for strengthening parent-school collaboration in other areas. This should ultimately lead to positive outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Finally, alternate approaches to determining the educational views of parents should be considered. As some parents had difficulty with the present research instrument, other methods to determine parental perceptions of goal responsibility should be explored. These might include structured parental interviews, a modified research instrument with fewer items, or perhaps more extensive instructions on the present instrument.

The setting and research procedures limit generalized statements regarding similar population responses to the Goal Responsibilities Scale. Three limitations in the present study should be noted. First, the relatively high number of comparisons made in this study increased the possibility of experiment-wide error. The study design could not control this fact, but did attempt to limit the problem through a reduced hypothesis-wide error rate. Second, the sample was limited to individuals residing in central and northern Alabama. As noted by Hamre-Nietupski et al. (1992), surveys limited to one geographic region make generalizations to other locations untenable. Finally, a sizable group of parents had difficulty responding to the research packet. The perceptions of this portion of parents are, therefore, unknown.

This study did not attempt to determine the factors which contributed to the significant agreement between parents and professionals on responsibility for educational goals. Possible explanations include a high level of communication between parents and professionals on this issue. Regular, substantive communication between parents and professionals could account for the significant congruence between the perceptions of parents and the perceptions of professionals on responsibility for educational goals.

The motivation for this study came from the perceived, but not measured, differences between parents and professionals on the issue of responsibility for educational goals. A perception common to many educators is that parents of children who have a severe disability and professionals who teach those children disagree on the assignment of goal responsibility. This perception may be based on incidents with a small number of verbal parents. Professionals may make the assumption that the views espoused by this small group of verbal parents are representative of the total group.

The data in this study indicated that there were no statistically significant differences among parents, among professionals, or between parents and professionals in the area of goal responsibility. This study gives no support to the notion that parental-professional conflict is the result of differences in the assignment of goal responsibility. Parents and professionals showed remarkable agreement on this issue.

References


Appendix

Goal Responsibilities Scale

This scale asks you to assign primary responsibility for instruction in 10 different goal areas to either the school/program or the parent(s). In practice, parents and teachers should work together to achieve goals. On this scale, however, you are asked who you think is more responsible for instruction in these areas.

For each of the following statements, check either “the school” or “the parents” according to who you think is more responsible for teaching that skill area. Remember to check only one for each statement.

Training in self-care skills such as dressing or undressing is primarily the responsibility of:

____ the school/program
____ the parent(s)

Training in independent living skills such as cooking or cleaning is primarily the responsibility of:

____ the school/program
____ the parent(s)

Training in motor skills such as walking or grasping with fingers is primarily the responsibility of:

____ the school/program
Training in language skills such as talking or following verbal directions is primarily the responsibility of:
  ____ the school/program
  ____ the parent(s)

Training in self-direction skills such as social skills or personal responsibility is primarily the responsibility of:
  ____ the school/program
  ____ the parent(s)

Training in leisure skills such as playing games or enjoying a hobby is primarily the responsibility of:
  ____ the school/program
  ____ the parent(s)

Training in academic skills such as reading or arithmetic is primarily the responsibility of:
  ____ the school/program
  ____ the parent(s)

Training in economic activity such as getting a job or holding a job is primarily the responsibility of:
  ____ the school/program
  ____ the parent(s)

Training in residential independence such as living in a group home or supervised apartment is primarily the responsibility of:
  ____ the school/program
  ____ the parent(s)

Training in vocational skills such as sorting items or operating machinery is primarily the responsibility of:
  ____ the school/program
  ____ the parent(s)