

Analysis of Haitian Parents' Perceptions of the Education of Their Children with Disabilities

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Abstract: This study explored Haitian parents' perceptions of their children with disabilities. Findings revealed parents' perceptions were guided by two core concepts: coping mechanisms and locus of control. Parental involvement was strongly influenced by values, beliefs, customs, and conceptual knowledge that were closely aligned with culture and acculturation.

Research has demonstrated that parents' involvement in the educational process has been shown to positively impact their children's educational progress. For example, parental involvement has been shown to influence motivation to learn, improve consistent attendance patterns, and decrease drop out rates and behavior problems (Chispeels & Gonzalez, 2004; Ginsberg & Herman-Ginsberg, 2005). Additionally, parental involvement provides opportunities for parents to serve as role models for their children by reinforcing the skills that were taught in school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Parental involvement is defined as active and ongoing engagement in children's education by Flouri (2006). Therefore, it is important to examine parental involvement as a component of student achievement. However, parent-teacher interaction is a strong component of parental involvement because teachers are the primary transmitters of knowledge at school. It is also valuable for teachers to understand parental involvement so that they could effect change.

With respect to parents of children with disabilities specifically, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required that parents play a role in the decision-making process for the education of their children (Department of Education, n.d.). However, Harry (2002) found that many parents of children with disabilities initially got involved with the planning of their children's programs in preschool, but they tended to become disengaged over time. As their children progressed in their education, parents' involvement in school decreased, suggesting the possibility of changing perceptions of their roles (Harry, 2002). Consequently, additional knowledge is needed related to parental perceptions and involvement.

Furthermore, parents' culture and acculturation have been shown to strongly influence their views of education of their children with disabilities as well as their perceptions of their involvement in the educational process (Harry, 2002). Although there has been considerable increase in cultural and linguistic diversity in today's schools, most of the research on parental involvement has been conducted with traditional learners from non-minority backgrounds (Hasley, 2004). More research is needed to understand the involvement of parents from diverse cultures and communities.

Researchers have suggested that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) parents have a different perception of their roles in the education of their children (Chen, 2005; Diamond, Wang, & Gomez, 2004; Kato-Otani, 2004). Additionally, Harry (2001) found that culture, values, beliefs, and customs influenced parental involvement. This study focused on Haitian parents, a subgroup of CLD parents, and aimed to identify their perceptions on parental involvement with their children and whether their culture had an impact on their views.

This study intended to add to the knowledge base by investigating the perceptions of CLD Haitian parents who have children with disabilities. Students born of Haitian parents represented the third largest group of CLD students in the urban district where the study was done. Haitians, among other groups, are included in demographic data on Blacks. In the school district where the study was conducted, 33% of the population is classified as Black and 35% of blacks are classified as having a disability (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Limited research has been conducted on Haitian parental involvement with general education students, but none has been done specifically on those with disabilities (Stepick & Stepick, 2003). Researchers (e.g., Stepick & Stepick, 2003) have found that Haitians, like other immigrant groups, usually exhibit high academic potentials, but that this potential does not necessarily lead to a positive outcome. Specifically, the main research question for this study was: What are Haitian parents' perceptions of their children with disabilities? Research sub-questions included the following:

- a) What are Haitian parents' perceptions of the education their children are receiving?
- b) How do Haitian parents perceive their role in the education of their children with disabilities?
- c) How do Haitian parents' perceptions of their children's disability influence their relationship with their children and their involvement with the school?
- d) What do Haitian parents see as supports and barriers to their involvement in their children's education?

Method

Research Design

Open-ended questions (Creswell, 2003) in a semi-structured interview format were used. This type of interview process allowed the researcher to delve into participants' emotions and feelings regarding the phenomena studied (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interviews also focused on how parents perceived their children with disabilities, the education the children were receiving, and ways in which the disability had affected their relationship with their children.

A qualitative research methodology using Advocacy/Participatory Phenomenology was used to explore answers to the research questions. This type of research can be easily translated into an action plan that effects change in the lives of the participants and their community (Creswell, 2003).

The interview questions were developed based on a research report by Wathum-Ocama and Rose (2002) of Hmong immigrant parents' participation in their deaf children's education and observations of Haitian parents during Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings, parent workshops, and conferences. For this study, parents were asked to describe how they interact with their children with disabilities, how they explain the children's disabilities to family, friends, and others, and how they envisioned the future of their children with disabilities. Further, they were asked questions relating to their perceptions of the education their children were receiving, their involvement in their child's education, and of supports and barriers to their involvement. The questions were designed to elicit in-depth responses from the participants.

Participants

For the data collection, 10 Haitian parents of children with disabilities were asked to participate in the study. Creswell (2003) suggested a sample 6 to 10 participants was appropriate for this type of qualitative study. The method used to identify participants was purposeful sampling. Participants were selected from students enrolled in Exceptional Student Education (ESE) programs in a large urban public school district. All of the parents had a least one child identified as having a mild to moderate disability. A pool of potential participants was generated

by identifying schools with a high concentration of Haitian parents. Letters were sent to parents who had students in a program for children with disabilities.

Data Sources

To increase internal validity of the data collected, triangulation was used. The information obtained from parents was compared to data from school records, parent and teacher meetings, and IEP meetings. Information from these sources provided insight into the parent-child relationship and the nature of parental involvement. The researcher secured parent permission to review district records and documents and attend any parent teacher meetings or IEP conferences that were held the course of the study, if feasible. These sources were used to corroborate information obtained from the parent interviews.

As an additional measure of corroborating information obtained during the interviews, Cumulative records (CUM) were reviewed by the researcher. The CUMs are maintained by all the public school system for every student. They follow students from kindergarten to 12th grade and contain confidential information on students as well as parental information relevant to students' educational needs. This review was done to verify the accuracy of information provided by parents on student placement, psychological evaluations, and medical records if applicable, report cards, test results, parent contact information, student progress as well as interventions conducted with students, whether academic or behavioral. Parental permission to review these records was included in the consent to participate in the study. These records gave insight into parent participation in the meetings to discuss student progress and needs.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using a coding process that sorts, compares, and prioritizes the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). *Open coding* was used to identify discrete aspects of events and interactions and assign codes to participants' responses. The researcher analyzed the data for key words used to describe a child with a disability and whether those words were referred to in different instances. In *axial coding*, the researcher was able to group the codes for instances (which incidentally are grounded in the data sentences) into conceptual categories. The constant comparative method was very instrumental in the analysis of the data. The open codes were then refined (conceptualized) into axial codes and, eventually, into higher-level axial codes. Finally, selective coding was used to identify core conceptual categories that could systematically be related to other categories and lead to the beginning of a theory about the phenomena that was studied and provide answers to the research questions (see Figure 1).

Results

After organizing the data, open codes allowed the researcher to group similar responses into categories (see Figure 2). The category of home school collaboration included comments made by parents on their communication with the school, how well they understood the process initiated by the school to place their children into special education, their evaluation of the program and its impact on their children, the nature of their interaction with the school, their assessment of their needs, the assistance needed from the school, and their parental involvement. In the second category called parental concerns, the parents commented on their financial struggles, their perceptions of "normal" behavior and/or development, their hopes and dreams for those children, and the resulting reactions they experienced when confronted with the fact these children had disabilities along with their concerns about the future, and the problems they faced in their everyday lives with these children. The third category was called relationships/concerns. Parents discussed their relationships with God, how they perceived the children's interaction with siblings, the children's functioning within the larger community, the behaviors exhibited at

home and how parents coped with those behaviors, and to what factors they attributed the children's limited academic progress. This last category, called whose fault, grouped the comments parents made regarding the medical issues faced by their children, their perceptions of the causation of their children's disability, and who they felt was to blame.

Therefore, the axial codes yielded four concepts: home school collaboration, parental concerns and relationships/perceptions and whose fault. These eventually led to the formulation of two core concepts, which were coping mechanisms and locus of control. These two core concepts served as a lens through which parents navigated through the myriad of issues faced with children with disabilities. Parents' comments provided insight into their perceptions of their own role in these children's lives and whether they felt empowered to affect change in these children. These also identified parents' perceptions of their children and their ability to manage their current situations. The ability to manage a situation is a prerequisite to active participation (Ariza, 2000; Wathum-Ocama & Rose, 2002).

Coping Mechanisms

The parents' ability to cope was evident in how they communicated with the school, the level of their involvement, their ability to understand the process, and how they reacted to the problems faced with these children whether academic or behavioral. Their coping mechanisms were also evidenced by what they viewed as issues of concerns for the future. Parents who exhibited strong coping mechanisms were active participants in their children's education and exhibited a higher level of parental involvement both at school and at home. Although these parents are from a culture where parental involvement is not an expectation, they had assimilated sufficiently that they had internalized parental roles in this new culture and made adjustments to their behavior to the benefit of their children. They had become active participants in the educational program and had acculturated. Therefore, they needed less support from the school in the way of services and facilitated their children's access to a free appropriate public education. Parental coping mechanisms were also stronger in parents who identified fewer behavioral problems, fewer financial issues, more intensive and sustained interaction/communication with the school, and more positive concerns about the future. Although they realized that their children had difficulties, they attempted to cope with those challenges by becoming more active participants in the process.

Locus of Control

This conceptual theme revealed how parents perceived their locus of control. Parents with an internal locus of control relied on their faith in God as a source of strength to empower them, sought to establish positive relationships with peers, and actively sought ways to engage the children with family/friends and community. Those with an external locus of control believed it was the children's attitude as opposed to their aptitude that prevented them from being more successful academically, used their faith as a reason to be passive and give in because it was not up to them, blamed behavioral difficulties on the disability and did little to address them, stated children were disabled because of "something in the brain" and "not the school's fault". Therefore, they felt overwhelmed by the challenges inherent in dealing with a child with a disability. They discussed experiencing physical stress and were more concerned about the present and less positive about the future.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into perceptions of a group of Haitian parents with children with disabilities on: (a) the education their children were receiving, (b) their role in the educational process, (c) how their perceptions of the child affected their

relationship with the child and the school, and (d) the barriers/supports they encountered in their involvement. The research conducted thus far within the field of special education with minority parents has determined that these parents oftentimes held views of their children that were different from the mainstream culture. That is, minority parents' conception of disability was not as prescriptive as those of professionals because they evaluated their children's functional levels based on the ability to function within the home environment. These perceptions could also be influenced by parents' acculturation and assimilation into the mainstream culture (Harry, 1992a; Harry, Allen, & McClaughlin, 1995; Klein, 2008). This study is similar to previous findings regarding parents' conceptions of disability. Some parents stated that their children were independent at home and only had difficulties with reading and/or academic tasks. According to Harry (1992a), the school system's description of what constituted as cognitively impaired tended to be more narrowly based and more descriptive than parents' view. Therefore, parents' perceptions of their children with disabilities was not correlated with either medical or educational expert conclusions, but rather on parents' own rationale of what constituted as a disability and how it was manifested in the individual child.

The first research sub-question sought to identify parents' opinions of the education their children were receiving. Previous research indicated parents' perceptions of appropriate settings were different when they considered special education in general and when they took into consideration the individual needs of their own child (Klein, 2008; Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001). Parents did not feel confident or competent in challenging school personnel even when they did not agree with placement decisions (Harry, 1992b). The parents in this study seldom disagreed with placement.

With the second research question, the goal was to identify how parents of children with disabilities internalized their role in their children's education and to what extent they fulfilled those roles. Research had concluded that culture played a substantial role in parental involvement and that parents from minority backgrounds did not possess the knowledge necessary to be active participants in their children's education (Harry, 1992a; Harry et al., 1995; Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999; McWayne & Owsianik, 2004; Ouimette, Feldman, & Tung, 2004). This was also in line with the findings of this research. This research found parents would sometimes delegate responsibilities for supervision to siblings and would rely on siblings for the care of children with disabilities even if the siblings were younger. In a study conducted by Harry et al. (1995), it was determined that although parents were engaged initially in their children's education, this behavior faded over time and gave way to dissatisfaction and apathy. As children became older and more difficult to manage, parents' limited coping skills and needs were not addressed by the professionals instructing their children. Therefore, they disengaged from the school and became alienated. Parents in this study commented on the inability to communicate with school personnel and the limited resources available to them. They stated that they needed assistance in finding parental support groups and locating community resources to assist them with their children beyond school hours.

The third research sub-question analyzed how parents' perceptions of their child influenced their relationship with their child and their involvement with the school. Parents interviewed for this study identified the school as being a partner. The majority stated that the programs available to their children had been beneficial to them. In the majority of cases, parents had questions regarding placement and/or services, but had not voiced their concerns to school personnel. Only three parents indicated that they visited the school on a regular basis and requested meeting when necessary. Overall, these comments demonstrated that many parents did

not fully understand their role in the special education process. They were unable to function as advocates for their children. Again this points to cultural factors as well because, in Haitian culture, parents were not expected to question school personnel or to engage in their children's education to such a degree. Special education services tailored to address children's needs were not established as part of the general education services.

The fourth research sub-question investigated the supports and barriers to parental involvement. Among the barriers identified by parents in this study, language was the most prevalent. Wathum-Ocama and Rose (2002) found that language was one of the barriers preventing parents from participating in their children's education. This was the case in this study as well. However, the presence of a translator at meetings seemed to be an incidental event. The parents had translation only if one of the individuals scheduled to be at the meeting happened to speak the parents' language. Otherwise, no concerted effort was made to provide translation in the home language during meetings. The parents also failed to request the services of a translator and instead nodded agreement to all items discussed during meetings, even when they understood very little of what was occurring in the meetings. Again, this pointed to cultural factors. Haitians tended to be reluctant to voice their needs. They felt it was not their place to make any requests or demands of school personnel who were regarded as people professionals and not to be questioned.

Limitations

Findings from the current study revealed that these parents of Haitian children with disabilities had various concerns that influenced their perceptions of these children as well as their perceptions of the education the children were receiving. However, these findings should be taken with caution in light of the size of the sample. A study with a larger group of parents might yield different results. The age range of the children participants might also have affected these results. Children had been in special education for 2 to 10 years or more based on their grade level at the time of placement and the grade at the time of the study.

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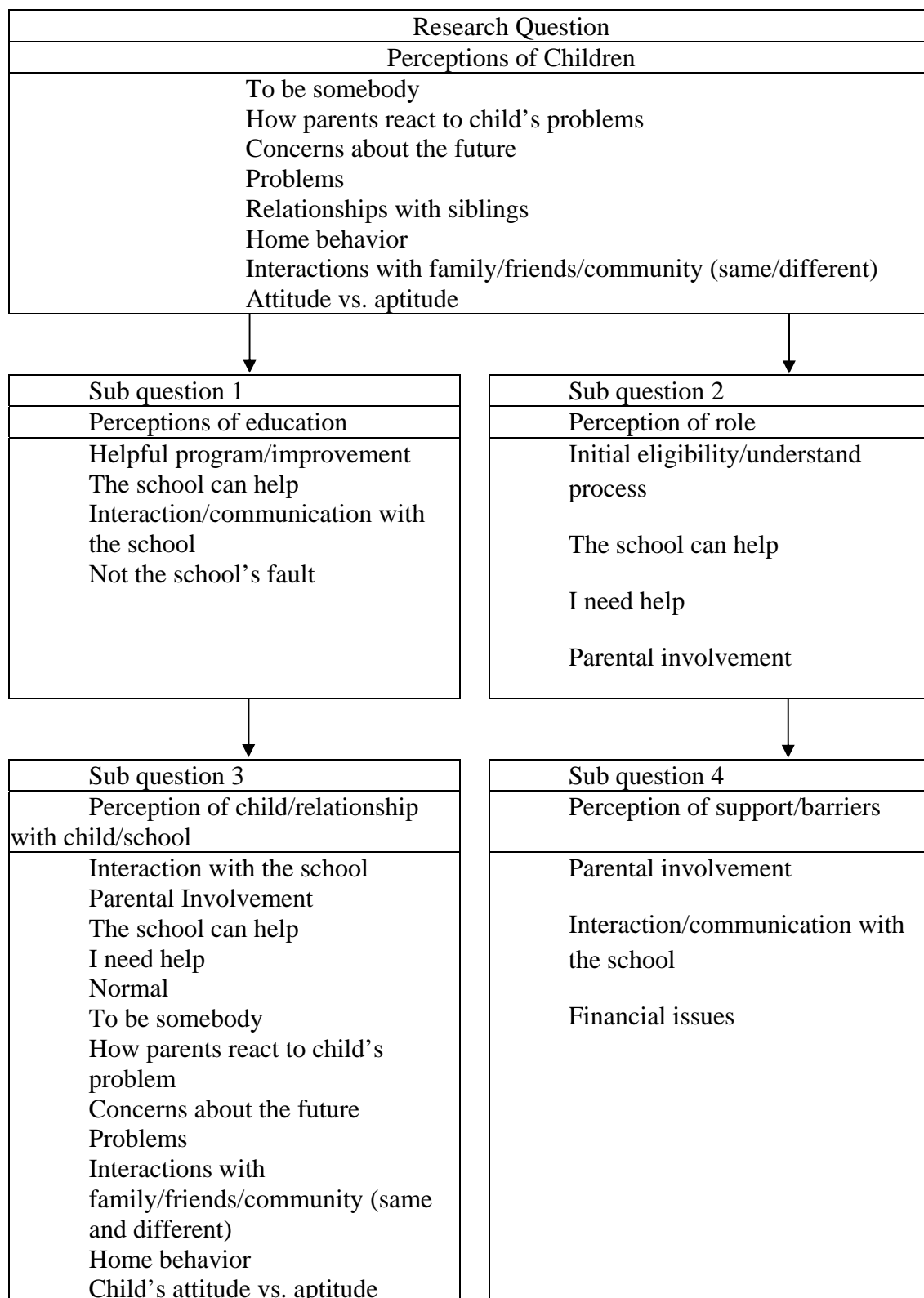


Figure 1. Grouping research questions by categories.

Organization of Data

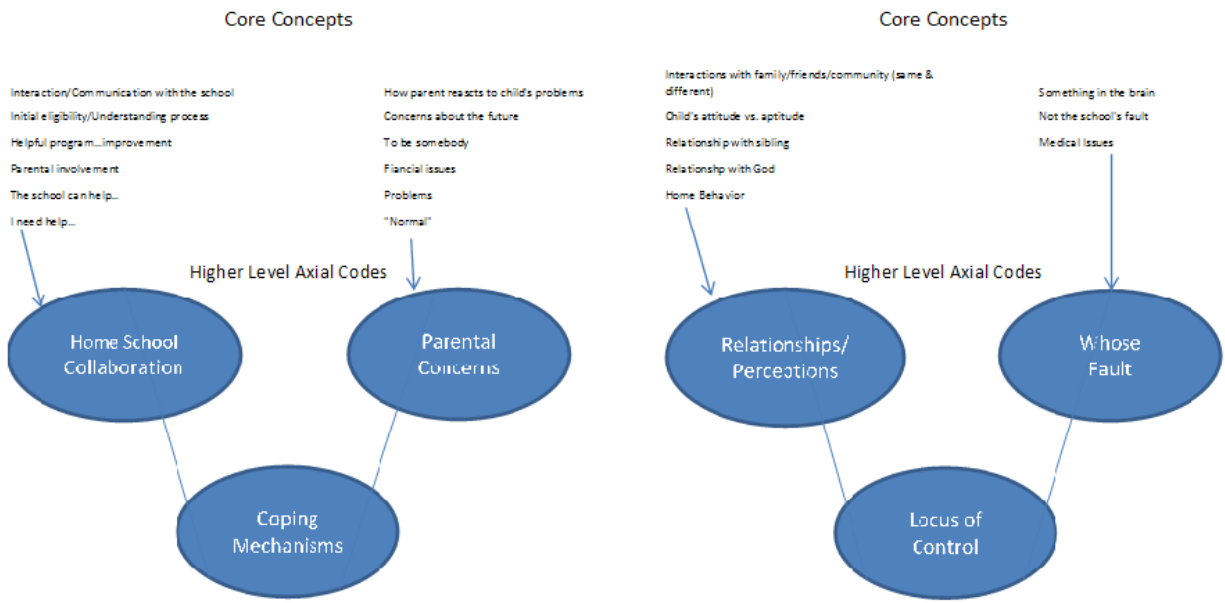


Figure 2. Organization of data into categories and core concepts.