

Parental Role and Support for Online Learning of Students With Disabilities: A Paradigm Shift

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- **This study, conducted by researchers at the Center on Online Learning and Students With Disabilities, investigated parent perceptions and experiences regarding fully online learning for their children with disabilities.**
- **Results suggest that with the growth in K–12 fully online learning experiences, the parent (or adult member) in students' households takes on added responsibilities for the child with disabilities to participate in schooling. In particular, parents take on the role of teacher. On the basis of this new teacher role comes a greater need for increased parent–teacher communication regarding their children's learning as well as greater parent time commitments. In addition, parents discussed several barriers to their ability to participate in their children's fully online learning experience.**
- **Implications of this study point to ways in which school administrators and online learning vendors can better support both parents and students with disabilities: clarify parent and teacher roles; understand the essential attributes needed for success in a fully online environment; realize the demands placed upon parents and their children with disabilities, including the need for frequent home-school communication; and require training to ensure that parents have skills needed to participate in their children's education via this online medium.**

Parent participation in the education of students with disabilities has links to democratic society and is a core principle of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Parent Participation, 34 C.F.R. § 300.345 (2004) (Turnbull, Stowe, & Huerta, 2007). As such, Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, and Shogren (2015) note that parent participation means that parents and students with disabilities partner with educators in decision making about students' education (34 C.F.R. § 300.345) and results in benefits for students, parents, and educators. Despite these mandates and advantages, meaningful parent participation can be elusive. Many parents remain unsatisfied with their ability to participate in decision

making in their children's traditional brick-and-mortar special education programs (e.g., Fish, 2006; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006; Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010).

In addition, some parents of students with disabilities are unhappy with their children's education in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. Many parents continue to have concerns about the quality of education for their children with disabilities (Hess et al., 2006). Indeed, though supports for students with disabilities in traditional brick-and-mortar schools have increased, some special education programs struggle to provide appropriate services for students within inclusive settings. Special education

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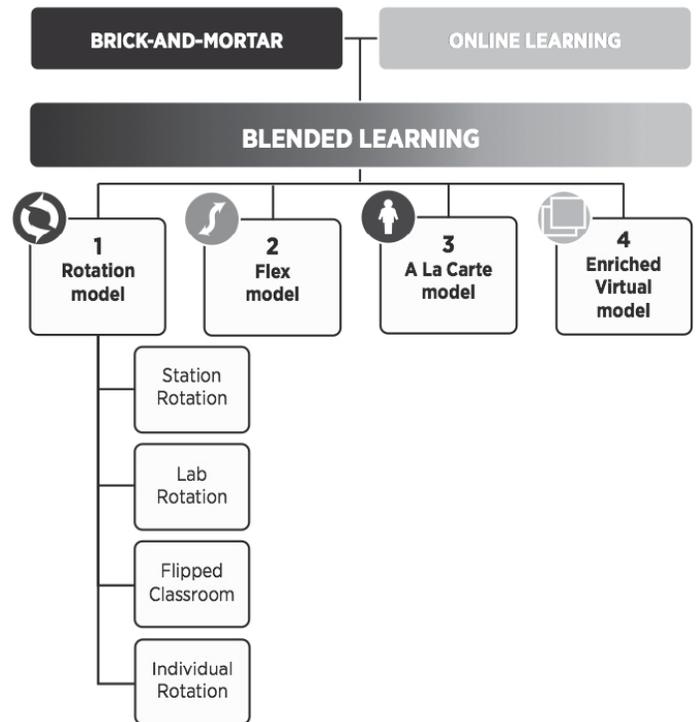
administrators and teachers point to lack of resources, inadequate teacher training, and inappropriate class size (Pugach, 2005; Wolery & Odom, 2000; Young, 2008).

In the past, students with disabilities could only attend traditional brick-and-mortar K–12 schools. More recently, students—both with and without disabilities—have been increasingly provided with options for online learning. Online schools may provide an educational alternative for many children with disabilities whose parents may be unsatisfied with brick-and-mortar schools. Recent reports indicate nearly five million students are currently enrolled in online K–12 coursework, with an ever-increasing amount selecting a fully online experience (outside of the brick-and-mortar environment). Werrell’s (2014) findings suggest that the majority of fully online or virtual school placement decisions are made by parents who have determined that the traditional school is no longer meeting the needs of their child. If this trend continues, and some estimates suggest that by 2019 more than half of all K–12 students will be enrolled in some form of blended or fully online learning, the K–12 online learning experience will become more of the norm for all students, including those with identified disabilities and thus affect the learners, their parents, and the educational leaders and instructors who work to support these individuals.

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K–12 online learning comes in multiple formats, with blended learning being the most common. Christensen, Horn, and Staker (2013) define *blended learning* as a K–12 experience where students learn partly through online content, controlling portions of their pace with digital materials as well as the time it takes, and the path they take in order to meet an expected outcome. Although blended learning is a mixture of face-to-face and online instruction, the model is more complex, allowing for variations in how the online material is offered, where, by whom, and to

Figure 1. Models of blended online learning.



what purpose. Figure 1 offers an overview of the variations of the blended learning model.

Fully online learning at the K–12 level is a virtual experience that takes place entirely online and away from the brick-and-mortar school, almost always within the home environment, with parents or adult members of the extended family engaged at some level of support. The role of the adult family member, often the parent, is so vital that an increasing amount of fully online K–12 schools are identifying specific roles for the parent. For example, the term *learning coach* is a common label that often comes with expected roles and responsibilities on the part of the parent or adult family in the home where the K–12 fully online is taking place.

Turnbull et al. (2015) discussed several roles for parents of students with disabilities. Of note, whereas many parents struggle with being assigned the role or being the recipient of educators’ decisions (i.e., parents are provided few opportunities to influence their children’s education), other parents assume the role of their children’s teacher. As their children’s at-home teachers, these parents can manage several responsibilities traditionally assigned to the teacher, such as implementing instruction. However, as Turnbull and colleagues noted, many parents are not equipped to take a teaching role due to lack of training, time, and

other constraints. Moreover, a parent-as-teacher role can negatively affect parent-child dynamics, leading to frustration for parent and child. With the current focus on meaningful participation and true parent-educator partnerships, parental roles may vastly expand, particularly in online environments.

Unlike the needs of students with disabilities and their parents in traditional brick-and-mortar schools, little research describes parent participation to best support online learning for K-12 students. The research that does exist targets typically developing high school students enrolled in fully online programs. For example, Liu and colleagues considered a parent involvement model and its application to virtual schooling (Liu, Black, Algina, Cavanaugh, & Dawson, 2010). Their analysis offers high correlation among four factors associated with parents' involvement in their child's learning: parental encouragement, modeling, reinforcement, and parental instruction. The validation of the parental involvement measurement, specific to virtual learning, indicates support for positive interaction between the parent and the online teacher and school community. Likewise, Borup, Stevens, and Waters' (2015) investigation of parental engagement in online high school instruction found parents working with the child to help develop perseverance, locus of control, organizational and time management skills, and overall parental guidance through online learning activities. They identified potential obstacles for parents and their child in the virtual school as including time constraints, conflict between parent and child, and lack of clarity in the role of the parent, including responsibilities and perceived level of engagement on the part of the virtual school and teacher.

Important for K-12 students with disabilities, their parents' participation activities and roles in supporting their online students may be expanded to provide greater support compared with that necessary for student success in traditional brick-and-mortar schools (Borup, Graham, & Davies, 2013; Russell, 2004), though evidence for this conclusion is largely anecdotal. Questions remain about the types of supports, difficulties, and roles experienced by parents of students with disabilities in fully online K-12 settings. Thus, this study responds to two primary research questions:

1. What are the roles of parents in the instruction of students with disabilities in fully online K-12 environments?

2. What are potential challenges or barriers as well as benefits associated with fully online K-12 instruction for students with disabilities?

Method

Participants

Parents of students enrolled in a fully online K-12 school, first through seventh grades, were recruited to participate in the study. *Table 1* details the child's gender, disability category, grade level, race, and the adult family member interviewed. Preference was made in identifying parents whose children had been enrolled in a fully online K-12 school at least one prior academic year. Parents were recruited from fully online K-12 schools across the country, with the majority of participants residing in the Midwest and Northwest of the United States. Researchers targeted elementary-age students due to requirements by online K-12 schools that an adult (e.g., parent) be at home during the instructional day. Reports indicate that fully online middle and high schools vary in requirements for parent/adult presence in the home as well as participation in a child's day-to-day or week-to-week online education. In total, 19 parents participated in the current study.

Data Collection

Semistructured interviews were conducted via videoconferencing or telephone with the parent participants across a period of 2 months. Interviews were conducted to describe the experiences that parents and their children were having with the enrollment in fully online K-12 experiences, to explore current educational practices, to identify potential barriers and benefits to fully online education for students with disabilities, and to learn about roles of parents in their children's online learning. Exploratory interviews were conducted on the basis of an interview guide that contained 18 questions and asked about parents' demographics. Interview questions were developed in steps. First, project staff identified five themes that aligned with initial findings from intense case studies constructed by the Center on Online Learning and Students With Disabilities (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014; Johnston, Greer, & Smith, 2013). The five constructs were (a) parents' perspectives regarding the level of support they receive from their child's K-12 online school, (b) the

Table 1: Participant demographics

Grade of child	Gender of child	Race/ ethnicity	Adult	Disability of the child
6	Female	African American	Mother	Down syndrome
3	Male	Caucasian	Mother	Autism
6	Female	Caucasian	Grandmother	Other health impairments
7	Female	Caucasian	Mother	Learning disabilities
4	Male	Caucasian	Mother	Learning disabilities
5	Female	Caucasian	Mother	Learning disabilities
6	Female	Caucasian	Mother	Learning disabilities
3	Female	Caucasian	Mother	Learning disabilities
7	Male	Caucasian	Mother	Learning disabilities
8	Male	Caucasian	Mother	Learning disabilities
7	Male	Caucasian	Mother	Autism
6	Male	Caucasian	Mother	Autism
5	Male	Caucasian	Mother	Autism
5	Male	Caucasian	Mother	Autism
5	Male	Caucasian	Father	Emotional/behavioral disorders
4	Male	African American	Mother	Emotional/behavioral disorders
4	Male	Caucasian	Mother	Intellectual disabilities
6	Male	Caucasian	Mother	Intellectual disabilities

level of participation parents have in their child’s educational experience, (c) the perceived benefits of fully online instruction, (d) potential challenges or barriers associated with fully online instruction, and (e) parents’ current roles and responsibilities to support their child enrolled in a fully online school. The constructs guided the development of interview questions designed by the authors and reviewed by a qualitative research methodologist. Eighteen questions were determined suitable for the interview guide.

During interviews, researchers restated portions of what was shared or summarized information to ensure parents’ response accuracy. After the interviews were completed and audio recordings transcribed, interview findings were sent to individual participants as a member check. Participants were asked to provide feedback and corrections to any errors; in addition, researchers offered the opportunity for parents to follow up via the phone, videoconference, or e-mail. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure anonymity, researchers replaced any identifying information with unique identification codes.

Although interview time varied from 60–90 minutes, the average interview lasted approximately 1 hour 15 minutes, with parents being offered the opportunity to follow up with the interviewer at any time to clarify responses or additionally explain their experiences.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were examined to inductively construct themes across all participants’ interviews using a constant comparative method. Three researchers independently reviewed a single transcript (i.e., three of 19 transcripts) to identify initial themes. Next, the researchers met and developed consensus themes for analyzing the remaining transcripts. Subsequently, one researcher used the developed themes to code the remaining transcripts. As necessary, themes were revised in response to the interview data. Next, the other two researchers examined the coded transcripts to ensure that each parent statement was reliably coded to a theme. Afterward, the three researchers met again to establish consensus regarding coding parent statements into themes.

Results

To respond to the research questions, four themes were constructed on the basis of the interviews conducted with parents of children with disabilities enrolled in fully online K–12 instruction: (a) the role of parent as a teacher, (b) enhanced communication between teacher and parent, (c) parents' significant time commitment, especially when compared with previous brick-and-mortar commitments in their child's education, (d) barriers to fully online instruction for parents as they work toward positive educational outcomes for their children. Each theme is delineated below.

Theme 1: Parents of children participating in fully online K–8 learning perceived their roles as both parent and teacher. Whereas fully online learning means increased parent–teacher interaction, parent commitment to the success of his or her child's learning extended beyond this communication. Parents also expressed a change in their traditional role regarding their children's education. Parents identified themselves as a “teacher” or the “primary” person in their child's online education. This role was noted as something new and not aligned with previous brick-and-mortar experiences. One parent rated her role and participation in her child's education as a 5 on a scale from 1–5, with 5 indicating the greatest participation:

I'd say a 5 ... Before in the brick-and-mortar school we weren't really told what was going on very much. They kind of did their own thing. Now with me helping out with the teaching I'm there 100% so I'd say I'm a lot more engaged.

Parents were aware that a portion of their online role was similar to traditional parenting where they knew their children as learners, understood their personality, and were able to identify when they were having a bad day and accordingly organize the day and expectations for their child. For example, one mother shared:

I can tell what sets my kid off faster than ... a teacher who doesn't know him. I find it's really important that you sometimes ... skirt around those sticky issues instead of pushing a kid through it, thinking that they're being stubborn. They're not being stubborn: Sometimes they just don't understand something.

Likewise, parents realized that when their children attended brick-and-mortar schools, after-school,

home-based assistance translated to similar efforts for their children attending online schools. Parents who had experience with homeschooling compared the role of the online parent with that of a homeschool instructor where they identified strategies, planned for instruction, conducted instruction, and modified practice for their child. One former homeschooling parent shared how she adapted a flash card product that she used when her daughter was younger to current learning needs:

[For this activity] she sits on these five-gallon buckets and I “five flash” her, and then I keep making breakfast and then we do it again. I have five cards with birds and different pictures of birds. And so she's learned all kinds of birds, [inaudible] and falcon. To me, people think why do you show her birds and not something more useful? I really think it adds to her quality of life to be able to walk through a park and say “There's a robin.”

Parents explained that some of their changing roles included activities they typically performed as parents trying to instruct their child. Are they a teacher or a parent? Participants were not concerned about what role they played; rather, they simply stated that the role changed when they enrolled their child in the fully online school. Parents facilitated instruction, supported the child, were responsible for maintaining a child's progress, reported progress, and integrated instructional ideas and interventions suggested by the virtual teacher. One parent shared her responsibilities:

They [online teachers] let you know where you're supposed to be in your [child's] progress and offer any help. You know, you can always call them if you're struggling [with teaching] with something and they can walk you through. So, personally, I don't know that it encouraged me to do more, because like I said, I always had that expectation.

As parents shared their day-to-day responsibilities, the role of parent as instructor was identified with examples of how the mother (and, occasionally, the father) tutored her (or his) child, altered curriculum, and provided just-in-time supports to differentiate her (or his) child's curriculum. Although parents expected that they would assist and support their child, they did not expect to act as a teacher. One mother explained what was involved:

Helping him [my son] to take his time instead of rushing through. I think that's important. And showing different ways of doing things. There's

not always one way to do something; there's three or four ways to do something. So showing him different ways and opportunities to do something. I told him you can turn any subtraction problem into an addition problem if you just know how to do it. And you try to show him how to do it and that makes it a little easier for him. Little tricks I've learned, you know, with adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing. Little things you've learned through the years that you don't even think about it, teaching them those little things, too.

Another parent said:

They [online school] have the actual structure of what we do through the books and online and everything, the set-up of what we do. And then I'm the one actually doing the teach[ing] But for the most part I'm pretty much the teacher.

Similarly, a third parent offered the following perspective:

My role is basically ... I'm his teacher. I mean, I teach him, I work with him ... like I said, you know, because of his reading level he can't do a whole lot independently. But then I feel like another one of my roles is to ... is to help him become more and more independent as time goes on, and I know ... you give them a little bit more leeway ... but I'm always right there next to them, making sure that it's getting done, making sure that it's being done well.

Although parents reported that they played the primary role of teacher in their child's education, some expressed concern that this role's demands were beyond their schedule and affected family dynamics. These parents expressed concern with the online school's expectations and perceived themselves as unqualified to support their child. One parent explained:

I feel like an unqualified person hoping that Katie will glean at least the basics. I feel like I have to be a teacher for all her subjects as well as ... we're called a "learning coach," but it's not a coach, and I ... I don't understand how I'm supposed to teach her all of the subjects every day, I ... I find it exhausting, but I love the help that we get.

In summary, one of the responsibilities parents assumed for an effective online learning experience for their child was that of parent-as-teacher. When their children were in online schools, parents participated at a higher level compared with when their children attended traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

Theme 2: Fully online K–12 instruction required (or enhanced the need for) a higher level of communication between teacher and parent. Critical to the K–12 online experience was the communication between the parent and the child's teacher. Although parents attributed their child's success to a number of variables, communication with the teacher was critical. Because all parents had experiences with parent–teacher interaction and communication (regarding their children) through previous face-to-face instruction, parent responses contextualized online communication in reference to their previous brick-and-mortar communication. As one parent explained about the brick-and-mortar experience:

[My child's teacher] seem[ed] to be in a rush whenever [we communicated] ... if you're talking to them inside a brick-and-mortar school, you have to wait 'til, like, at the end of the day, because if you go during the day at school, they're always ... you know, the secretary will be like, "Oh, no, they're in the middle of class," you know, then it's like, sheesh, this is frustrating, because the only time you can really talk to them is at the end of the day.

Another parent offered the following comparison between her experiences with traditional and fully online teachers:

I'm not actually meeting them face-to-face, but I actually do have more interaction with them—back-and-forth e-mailing—than I did with the traditional teacher, because, you know, I only saw the traditional teacher at drop-off and pick-up.

However, in the fully online school, parents expressed that there was easier access to their child's teacher with flexible times allowing for more frequent interaction. Not limited to face-to-face interaction, communications included e-mail, phone conversations, and, in some instances, videoconferencing via the school's online learning platform. As one parent shared:

I can e-mail these teachers any time I want and they will call me. There's really not a limit to the time of day or what day they can call me and talk to me for however long I need. I don't feel a barrier there like I have to wait until school's over [or] I have to wait until they don't have other parents to talk to. I have immediate access to them, basically. Any of the teachers.

Another explained that the regular communication put her at ease through e-mail messages and phone calls providing regular contact:

Actually, I have more interaction with them. It's easier for me to be more involved with them. I, actually—I have anxiety—and I'm getting e-mails from them. I appreciate being able to e-mail them, being in regular contact through e-mails, and the phone call that we have to do, that's required and everything. I get way more contact with the teachers.

Be it the mode of communication or simple access, parents also reported that their communication with their child's teacher was easier and more frequent. In addition, they reported having an actual relationship with the teacher, which furthered the teacher's support of their child. The teacher helped both the parent and the child in the learning process and supported understanding of what was required of the K–12 online content. Regarding this point, one parent shared:

I think [my child's teachers have] done wonderful. They call once a month and they e-mail me constantly. If I had any questions, they called me or e-mailed me back right away. They're very generous with their help.

Another parent explained:

You know, that way, like, if I have any questions, or if they have any questions for me, they can send it to me or vice versa right away. To me, it's a very open line of communication.

When parents were asked about their level of participation with their child's online instructional experience, they often reflected on greater involvement and communication compared with previous face-to-face experiences. Although not the actual teacher, parents were still present for most, if not all, instruction their child received. One parent reflected:

You know, when he does his live lessons and he does his speech, I let him do that; he does that on his own, but most of the time I'm right there ... very engaged with everything.

Due to the increase in communication, parents' perceived barriers with teachers were addressed or reduced. Some of these barriers were likely not understood by the teacher. However, barriers affected how the parent perceived and interacted with the

teacher. One parent shared this perceived barrier when she explained the benefits of communicating with her child's online teachers:

Yeah, we communicate a lot more. Before, the teachers didn't really communicate very well. They didn't really want us to know how their day went or want us to know what was going on. They were kind of keeping it secret-secret what was going on at school. Whereas now we know everything and talk to teachers once a week and we are all on the same page and we know what's going on. There are no hidden things in there.

To summarize, one of the perceived differences between fully online K–12 instruction and face-to-face instruction is parent–teacher communication. Parents reported that the frequency, level, and type of communication were different from the brick-and-mortar setting. Whereas findings were unclear regarding the primary mode of parent–teacher communication, parents indicated that e-mail, and thus the written message, was critical.

Theme 3: Fully online K–12 instruction required a significant time commitment for parents, especially when compared with previous brick-and-mortar commitments. Whereas regular communication was seen as a positive element, the time required to support their child's instruction and overall learning surprised the participants. Wanting to be engaged, parents were not resistant to supporting their child's learning. The time investment included what many parents expected from their traditional role: homework completion, study preparation for quizzes and tests, and support completing a larger research paper or extended project. What surprised parents was the extensive time related to what they perceived were traditional teacher responsibilities. One parent summed up this time commitment by noting that they were the primary teacher in their child's education:

I have to say that I was a little bit caught off guard when I realized that ... as the parents we were the primary teachers/instructors and that the majority of the work was going to be basically through textbooks with an online curriculum to help keep you ... on course and to keep track of your process. I mean, there's some instruction through it [digital materials], but the majority of it is through the textbook. So, I found that to be a challenge in the beginning, especially since I wasn't expecting it, and it required a lot more time than I had thought and a lot more time than I had allocated.

Parent time commitments were associated with a variety of tasks, some of which would traditionally be facilitated by a face-to-face teacher. With parents being the only adult interacting face-to-face with the child, tasks associated with the brick-and-mortar classroom teacher became a part of the parents' role. One mother shared the following:

I thought it was going to be more like 60–70 percent teacher and online instruction, and maybe 30 or 40 percent [where] I would supplement that, as a parent or coach—whatever they want to call me—and, as it turned out, I think it was more the opposite, which caught me off guard.

Parents characterized the time commitment as a part-time job or at least as requiring the hours of a part-time job. Although some parents reported working or operating a business outside of the home, they all agreed that they could not hold a traditional part-time or full-time job outside of the home while their child was enrolled as a fully online student:

Oh, gosh no, [I have] never [worked outside the home] But if I had to work, there's no way ... because [my son has] special health care needs, [so] I put in a good 20–40 hours a week for [his education].

Theme 4: The nature of fully online instruction presented barriers for parents as they sought to support positive educational outcomes for their child. Increased parent–teacher communication and a more participatory parental role for online programs were discussed by parents. Parents also identified barriers to child learning for online schools. More specifically, program and product requirements, and what some parents described as the lack of personalization, interfered with their children's learning. Whether due to their children's disability or simply what they knew about their children's learning preferences, parents who were overwhelmingly happy with the fully online experience also expressed concerns about unnecessary requirements. These parents also discussed having a sense that they were beholden to a product and structure that did not align with the intended flexibility of online learning. One parent contextualized this barrier with reference to the idea of working at one's own pace:

With the pacing guide [from school], there's no accommodation for her. It's yes, we can do it at home, but it's still a pretty progressive pace, so I would say that we—my husband and I—are

reconsidering some of it because it doesn't seem like she's really able to go at her own pace because we have deadlines.

Although parents recognized the need for due dates and deadlines, they shared that barriers existed when online schools did not consider their children's disabilities. The very reason many parents enrolled their child in the online classroom—to gain access to a flexible and more personalized learning environment—at times was not available to their child. One mother discussed the online pacing of content requiring completion without accommodation for her son's disability:

I do think only having the due date every 2 weeks is hard for a kid with his particular organizational issues. I mean I can say to him, "I want this all done today," but I'm just his mom; I'm not the teacher. And in a regular school setting he's not going to have 2 weeks to get everything done. This thing where he crams on a Friday due date, you know, sort of reminds me of what I did in college.

Central to online learning was the vendor-based product that online schools use to provide lessons for most of day-to-day instruction. Whereas parents liked the element, including up-to-date data and built-in reinforcements for recognizing students' achievement or milestones, a number of product features (and added school policies) were perceived as barriers. Whether it was part of the vendor-based product or the manner in which it was used, parents expressed concerns about the negative impact it had on their children's learning, especially when not accounting for their children's specific needs. One mother explained what the product required:

They [the children] have to go in [to the online product] and they have to complete so many problems a month ... I think that's one of the ways that they [the school] are, you know, trying to improve their TCAP scores, but when you have a special ed child it's very time-consuming and it doesn't necessarily bear fruit; it's just an activity that they have to do, and in a lot of ways I feel like it detracts from time I could spend doing other things. I do not like that. ... Both my son and my daughter struggle with [the vendor's product]. It's ... all the [product] things are at grade level. They're [students] not necessarily performing at grade level and they process differently, so ... I don't think that's a positive.

Another parent shared concerns about added requirements placed on the child not by the teacher but by the vendor-based product:

One thing that I didn't think worked well was when they [vendor product] were requiring us to submit a bunch of work samples A work sample is great if it's something I've worked on, but when I have to do something extra on top of the regular curriculum—the curriculum's challenging in itself—I didn't feel like that was a very good approach because it was piling work on these kids and they had all these [other things to do like] ... the Study Island, then they had these extra work samples above and beyond their curriculum and I didn't feel like that was a good way of engaging [students]; I felt that was a good way of alienating and overworking.

Parents expressed concern about online product design features, concluding that neither the school nor the vendor considered their children's individual needs. Parents cited their child's specific learning weaknesses and how the presentation of the content, completion requirements, program time and content expectations, and similar factors prevented their child from accurately showing teachers their knowledge and skills. For example, one parent explained it in the context of simple access to the lesson and how this complicated her son's learning:

There's many times I have to read it [the on-screen text] to them ... it seems illogical that they wouldn't have some kind of link where you can click it, and then it would be read to them.

Another parent felt that online lessons were "designed for children who are better ... who are more advanced [than her child]." She felt that the vendor had not designed lessons "for children who are ... who have educational needs, who are not more advanced, who need a slower pace." Likewise, a mother who selected the online school due to her daughter's disability and the need for an applied behavior analysis (ABA) approach, discussed how the technology requirements posed a further barrier:

She [the child] doesn't like to talk on a microphone, so the teacher has a hard time, like, having her in class and actually participating. One thing we're working on in ABA is actually to get her to sit in front of the computer and it was, like, last year it was only a half an hour, and we had gotten up to that, but now it's an hour or two hours, or ... at one point, they

[online school] wanted it two and a half hours because she had that one class and then another half an hour with resource right afterwards, and that's just not working. It is recorded [asynchronous], but even sitting in front of a computer with a recording, you know, is not helpful for her situation.

When parents discussed schedules, they were often appreciative of the flexibility of the online school day. However, the demands of the content, finding time to work around the teacher's face-to-face schedule, and changes in policies increasingly presented barriers to nearly half the parents interviewed. One parent described how a flexible school day schedule was altered and presented challenges:

I'd say second grade we were quite a bit more fond of [because] we had a lot of freedom to just get our curriculum done and do what we needed. Starting in third grade, and I think that was due to state changes, but I don't think it was due to the curriculum, we were with [name of online school], she [her daughter] had to meet with a teacher once a week and that got to be kind of, it ended up being two different teachers twice a week and ended up ... [getting] kind of restrictive because at that point I had another daughter enrolled [in online school] also, and it got very hard to juggle time on the computer, time with the teachers and we found there were days we hit three o'clock and we still weren't done with her school work for the day.

Another family shared how they were successful with the daily lessons, but weekly and monthly expectations offered barriers and caused anxiety for their child and the entire family when faced with a pressing monthly deadline. The mother said:

I know right now we're hitting the end of the month and he has to get all his Study Island things finished and it takes him ... a lot longer to do 10 problems of long multiplication because he processes slower. He understands the concepts, but because of his processing, it took him an hour and almost two hours to do one set of 10. That and then, of course, crying happens because they [the child] get frustrated. It's too long.

Finally, a mother shared how a schedule change accompanied by new online school requirements presented a new barrier to her son's learning:

This year virtual school went from having one lesson a week to having what they now call office hours, so

when they go into the synchronous session they're not teaching a lesson, they are just answering questions and I'm not sure why they made that change, but Isaac has had a really hard time adjusting to that, that used to be his favorite part of the week to have those synchronous sessions and have a lesson taught by an actual teacher. You have to be pretty self-directed for these classes, which he is, but I think he wishes there was a little more time with the teacher and you know again unless we are going to go to K-12 that is just not what this is designed to do, but in general they are very available by e-mail and phone so we have been able to reach teachers when we need them.

In summary, one of the primary barriers parents faced in fully online education was the growing demands on and expectations for their children. This can be especially problematic when the due dates and requirements do not align with the children's challenges and potentially further complicate learning. Online lesson elements further challenge learners; parents discussed a need to provide external supports to accommodate limited features or to complete system expectations that do not benefit instruction.

Discussion and Implications

The results of this study align with previous research in that parent participation including home-school communication and collaboration with professionals in their child's K-12 education supports positive student outcomes (Turnbull et al., 2015). Although this study did not delve into student outcomes, the findings further define parents' roles and responsibilities when their children with disabilities participate in fully online schools. Furthermore, study findings describe current parent participation in their children's fully online schooling, including their level of decision making, their types of participation (e.g., activities as a teacher), and learning that transpires at home.

Parents have long identified frustrations in traditional, face-to-face special education programs (e.g., Fish, 2006; Hess et al., 2006; Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010). However, parents in the current study did not identify many of the same frustrations. Moreover, previous literature discussed enhanced communication and increased parent participation as leading to positive outcomes for students with disabilities (Lord-Nelson, Summers, & Turnbull, 2004; Turnbull et al., 2015). Though

research investigating parent participation of students with disabilities enrolled in the fully online environment is in its infancy, a changing parent role, parent-teacher communication, parental involvement in decision making, and overall collaboration appear critical on the basis of the results of the current study. These findings suggest that the fully online K-12 learning experience altered parents' previous role in and time commitments to their children's instruction to more clearly align with the role of teacher. Consequently, parents need to realize that there is a role transformation in the fully online school to what Turnbull et al. (2015) characterized as "parent as teacher." They are an even more integral part of their child's education; therefore, their children's success depends on their level of participation. The parents in this study emphasized their participation, which was well beyond previous experiences when their children attended brick-and-mortar schools. Responding to this new role led to the parent taking on the role of teacher and, in many instances, the parent as primary in their child's education. Parents in this study approached their child's learning by planning for the educational day, problem-solving the learning experience, implementing teacher-suggested interventions, altering routines, structuring lessons, and modifying activities to align with their child's needs, attributes of their disability, and similar demands.

In addition, fully online learning required increased parent-teacher communication, parent participation in their child's education, and parent investment in children's learning outcomes. It appears that additional communication between home and school, as well as an increase in parent understanding and subsequent involvement in their children's learning, allows for parents' expertise regarding their children's strengths and challenges to be further built upon and addressed in collaboration with their child's teacher and online school.

Bridging the home and school experience for students with disabilities appears significantly different in a fully online K-12 experience compared with traditional brick-and-mortar schools. Regardless of the type of communication (e.g., e-mail, synchronous video conferencing, telephone calls), the level of interaction increased from their previous brick-and-mortar experiences, and the positive outcomes associated with the shared information

enhanced a collaborative parent–teacher relationship. Once regular communication was established, personal relationships appeared to have formed, assisting in parents’ knowledge of their children’s day-to-day educational experience, learning expectations, the type of instruction used, and overall course content learning objectives. Parents in the current study realized some of this through their day-to-day interaction with the online content. However, to support their children, parents must also understand teacher expectations, and, in turn, teachers must understand dynamics of the learning environment, the student, parents’ expertise, and related variables communicated by parents. Therefore, two-way communication is critical and requires that both parents and teachers actively listen, provide time to interact, and be responsive to the types, times, and levels of communication. Furthermore, parents must realize that, to benefit from this level of communication, their role in their child’s learning has changed in an online school, leading to more active participation and leadership than found in brick-and-mortar educational experiences.

To address changes in roles and associated expectations for both parents and teachers, training is necessary. Professional development for teachers can include improving communication, ways to use the online environment to keep parents informed, and ways to further empower parents as teachers. Similarly, parent education can ensure that parents possess skills necessary (including instructional methods) to take the primary role in supporting their children’s learning in a fully online environment.

Finally, although barriers were noted, parent-identified difficulties suggest challenges with online platforms and expectations of the curriculum of vendor-based products. As such, online education vendors and schools may better collaborate with parents of students with disabilities to ensure that rigid requirements are fully explained to families and/or better adapted to meet individual child and family needs.

Several limitations to the current study should be noted. This study did not solicit certain demographic characteristics of parents, such as socioeconomic status, which are well known to affect many aspects of parent participation and other aspects of the education of students with disabilities. Similarly, though participants were asked about their ethnic/racial background, this study did not address relationships between these backgrounds and parents’ perceptions.

In addition, a relatively small number of parents, all mothers, were interviewed for the current study, which suggests limitations of study outcomes. Nonetheless, this study addresses the dearth of studies investigating parent participation for children with disabilities who attend fully online schooling. As such, the outcomes of the current study are a first step toward better understanding these parents’ perspectives and needs with the intent of fostering greater support and more effective online systems for the parents and their children with disabilities.

Subsequent research might expand participants to include the student and the teacher(s) to gain more comprehensive understandings from a variety of perspectives. Similarly, evidence of student engagement with both the student’s parent and teacher, the type of interaction, and other variables that might be collected through direct observation of the online learning experience would be helpful to further document parents’ roles and responsibilities and the manner in which they participate in their child’s online educational experience.

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