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PERSPECTIVES OF THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

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Abstract:
The low-incidence disability of visual impairment has led to many challenges in the field of education. The present study compared school related issues of adolescents with a visual impairment and their parents to adolescents who do not have a visual impairment and their parents. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of students with a visual impairment and their parents to determine the level of satisfaction of the education the students are receiving. A sample of n = 180 parents and 10th grade students were used to answer the questions regarding various factors of education. The predicted outcome will be that overall parents are satisfied with their child's education but will have negative feelings regarding the quality of education. It is also predicted that the students with a visual impairment will have similar feelings regarding education.

Keywords: visual impairment, blindness, perception of education

Introduction

The role of education in a child's life is extremely influential for future development, especially for one who has a visual impairment. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), a visual impairment is defined as "*any impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance*" (20 U.S.C. 1401(3)). Children with visual impairments can receive an education in a mainstream—or inclusive—public school or in a specialized school designated for those with this specific low-incidence disability. Educational programming not only teaches academics, but also teaches how to cope with everyday life situations.

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Approximately 83% of children with visual impairments attend public schools, as of 2006; this suggests that families are choosing to enroll their children in their local public schools over residential disability-specific schools (American Printing House for the Blind, 2006). "*One benefit of mainstreaming, of course, is the opportunity for children who are blind to develop within the context of larger society. However, mainstreaming gives them little opportunity to meet other children who are blind*" (Barton, 1997). However, Gray (2010) noted that overall, students with visual impairments who attended mainstream classrooms reported a general disinclination toward their school and had fewer social opportunities when compared to similar students who attended special schools for students with visual impairments.

As students are exposed to the school setting, it is important to take into consideration their thoughts and feelings. Pinquart and Pfeiffer (2012) reported that most students with visual impairments are well adjusted in their schools but some may need interventions. Further, self-reports of students have suggested that while students with visual impairments have reported similar levels of happiness relative to their sighted peers, those with visual impairments rated their school climates in a more negative manner (Schade & Larwin, 2015). Together, these findings suggest that on an individual basis, students with visual impairments may feel safe and welcome at their schools, but they may also report experiencing difficulties interacting with other students and experience fear of being ridiculed or mocked because of their disability.

Inclusive Settings

Dimigen, Roy, Horn, and Swan (2001) examined early entrance and late entrance into inclusive educational settings. Though the study's sample was small (n = 2), it was noted that early entrance was met with success. Specifically, "*a well-managed transition encouraged strong feelings of independence and confidence*" (p. 164). However, late entrance into inclusive educational programming was found to result in fragmented support and services. It was concluded that "*allocation of resources was haphazard" (p. 164) and that "teachers did not have relevant training*" to deal with students visual impairments (p. 164). Further, the student who entered inclusive education later experienced poor social experiences with his sighted peers. This line of research suggests that earlier entrance into inclusive educational programming allows for need acclimation to the school setting, likely resulting in greater academic and behavioral success for students with visual impairments (Dimigen et al., 2001).

Likewise, Gray (2010) discovered that students with visual impairments in both inclusive settings and special school settings reported common beliefs that their teachers

were "*discouraging and thought to hold low expectations*" toward them (p. 68). Morris and Sharma (2011) later discovered that general education teachers oftentimes are unaware of the needs of students with visual impairments, lack appropriate training and professional development for teaching these students. Additionally, they are not provided adequate resources to provide appropriate instruction for the students based on their varying needs, which might explain why lower expectations for student outcomes result.

Parents of the Visually Impaired

Parents' perspectives on the quality of education of their children with visual impairments are highly predictive of the students' success. Parents of children with disabilities tend to be less satisfied with their schooling than those in the general population (Leyser & Heinze, 2001). However, Pogrund, Darst, and Boland (2013) found that 71% of parents reported that short-term educational programming at residential schools were effective for teaching their children with visual impairments, and 66% of these parents reported "*that their overall satisfaction with short-term programs was outstanding*" (p. 30).

Parents' assessments of their children's schools inform parents' actions and have been associated with differences in levels of family involvement in their children's academic programming and proficiency (Newman, 2005). Fortunately, Craig (1996) discovered that many parents or family members of children with visual impairments read to their respective children approximately three to four times each week, which is crucial for these children to develop and hone their literacy skills.

And while parents may provide appropriate reinforcement of academics at home, it is important for students to have additional support while at school. A study conducted by Grimmett, Pogrund, and Griffin-Shirley (2011) found that parents perceived the supports and services provided to their children with visual impairments as successful and rated the professionals who provided such services as competent. However, Lohmeier, Blankenship, and Hatlen (2009) found that parents are frequently unaware or unsure of the extent of educational programming, supports, or services provided to their children with visual impairments. These finding suggests a gap between the programming offered and provided by schools, and communication regarding such programming to parents and families.

Other researchers examined the adequacy of the regular classroom for students with visual impairments. Findings revealed that inadequacies were observed in the systems underlying the inclusion of students with visual impairments—professional training, professional development, and the support provided to school staff (Brown, Packer, & Passmore, 2013). Few students experienced an appropriate level of adult

involvement during the school year, but over half of the participating parents reported feelings of felt positive overall involvement in their child's schooling (Brown et al., 2013). One study noted that while screening for visual impairments and vision problems is ubiquitous among schools across the United States, follow-up and coordination of services for urban minority youth remains scant (Basch, 2011), These findings suggest that youth with visual impairments who live in poverty may be at the greatest risk for experiencing poor academic and social outcomes.

The purpose of the current study is to examine the perspectives of students with visual impairments and their families of the their levels of satisfaction with the students' educational programming. It is expected that students with visual impairments will experience more social obstacles at school and report worse feelings about school climate, relative to their sighted peers. Further, it is expected that students with visual impairments will receive similar grade point averages, relative to their sighted peers. Lastly, it is expected that the parents of students with visual impairments will perceive that their children experience more social obstacles at school and report less satisfaction regarding their child's school and educational programming.

METHODS

Participants

The parent and student surveys were gathered from the Add Health National Database and involved a nationally representative sample of 180 tenth grade students and their parents. A total of 164 participants indicated that they did not have a visual impairment (n = 84 males, n = 80 females). Ten individuals responded that they were visually impaired (n = 7 males, n = 3 females).

Instrumentation

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health, 2016) is a longitudinal study of youths ranging from grades 7-12 in the United States. Add Health links survey data on respondents' social, and psychological well-being with related data on the family, school, friendships, and peer groups. This provides exclusive ways to study how social environments and feelings in youth are associated to health, education, and achievement.

Procedures

The factors studied in this research are students' feelings about school, parents' feelings about school, students' trouble in school, students' feelings about care from others, current

core grade point average. Each factor was constructed by taking the mean of the participant's responses across all items. If all items were not completed, the participant was deleted from inclusion in the analysis. The factor of students' feelings about school (Feelings about School) was constructed with these items:

- FEEL CLOSE TO PEOPLE AT SCHOOL,
- FEEL PART OF YOUR SCHOOL,
- FEEL SOCIALLY ACCEPTED,
- HAPPY AT YOUR SCHOOL,
- TEACHERS TREAT STUDENTS FAIRLY, and
- FEEL SAFE IN YOUR SCHOOL.

The factor of parents' feelings about school (Parent Feelings School) was constructed with these items:

- TROUBLE GETTING ALONG WITH TEACHER,
- TROUBLE PAYING ATTENTION IN SCHOOL,
- TROUBLE GETTING HOMEWORK DONE, and
- TROUBLE WITH OTHER STUDENTS.

The factor of students' trouble in school (Trouble in School) was constructed with the following items:

- TROUBLE-GETTING ALONG TEACHERS,
- TROUBLE-PAYING ATTENTION,
- TROUBLE-GETTING HOMEWORK DONE, and
- TROUBLE-WITH OTHER STUDENTS.

The factor of students feeling about care from others (Feelings about Care) was constructed with the following items:

- ADULTS CARE ABOUT YOU,
- TEACHERS CARE ABOUT YOU,
- PARENTS CARE ABOUT YOU, and
- FRIENDS CARE ABOUT YOU.

The dependent variable, Core GPA, was computed by averaging the student's grades across the four core classes: reading, mathematics, science and history.

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics of the factors – Feelings about School, Trouble in School, Grades in School, Feelings about Care, Parent Feelings School, and Current GPA – are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the factors

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Feelings About School	177	2.3947	0.60934
Trouble in School	172	1.4448	0.62336
Feelings About Care	177	4.1139	0.65776
Parent Feelings School	68	2.1569	0.69222
Current GPA	172	2.4302	0.83127

Reliability estimates were conducted for each factors, and revealed a good level of univariate reliability, based on Cronbach's α. These results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Reliability Estimates for Factors

Factor	α
Feelings About School	0.767
Parents Feeling School	0.827
Trouble in School	0.674
Feelings About Care	0.759

Independent samples *t*-tests were ran to compare the differences in Feelings about School, Trouble in School, and Current GPA between students who have a visual impairment and those who do not have a visual impairment. The results of the *t*-tests related to the various student factors are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: T-test of Factors by Group

Factor	Blindness	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t
Feeling_About_School	0	168	2.3274	0.68921	0.837
	1	9	2.2778	0.92796	
Student_Trouble_School	0	163	1.0015	0.70025	0.410
	1	9	0.8056	0.54167	
Parent_Feelings_School	0	117	1.4202	1.0747	0.335
	1	5	0.9500	0.71589	
Feelings_About_Cared_For	0	168	4.1235	0.66002	0.767
	1	9	4.0556	0.82706	
Current Grade Point Average	0	163	2.4213	0.82803	0.549
	1	9	2.5926	0.92463	

The results from this analysis indicated that there were no significant differences in Student Trouble in School, Feelings about School, Parents Feelings about School, Feelings about being Cared For, and Current Grade Point Average, respectively, between the two

groups of students. However, it is noteworthy that students who are vision impaired have less trouble in school (as reported by the students and the parents) and have slightly higher GPAs. A Multivariate analysis was performed to examine more precisely the impact of vision impairment across the multiple factors. A zero-order correlation was conducted to assess the appropriateness for the multivariate analysis. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Zero-order Correlations Between Variables

		1	**2**	**3**	**4**
Current Grade Point Average		.327**	.388**	.214*	-.202**
Feeling_About_School	(1)	-	.357**	0.066	-.238**
Student_Trouble_School	(2)	-	-	.308**	-.283**
Parent_Feelings_School	(3)	-	-	-	-.249**
Feelings_About_Caring	(4)	-	-	-	-

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Based on the zero-order correlation analysis, the results presented above have indicated that there are significant moderate correlations regarding the factors. The Multivariate analysis using these factors revealed no significant differences across the two groups, $F(5,112) = .723$, $p = .607$.

DISCUSSION

The results of the analyses support the hypotheses developed regarding grades, trouble in school, feelings about school of students with visual impairments and their parents' feelings about school. The results of the factors regarding Feelings about School, Trouble in School, Parents Feelings About School, Feeling Cared For and current GPA compared students with visual impairments and students without a visual impairment indicated that there are no significant differences between the two groups. This implies that students with visual impairments receive similar grades as those students who do not have a visual impairment. The students with visual impairments do not experience any more trouble in school than those students who do not have a visual impairment. Even though the students have a disability, their education is not impacted negatively. Analyses regarding student feelings about school demonstrate that there is a slightly negative correlation between the two groups. Students with visual impairments feel less cared for in school compared to their sighted peers. The parental feelings about education compared the parents of students with a visual impairment to the parents of students who do not have

the low incidence disability. The findings of this analysis show similar findings to the students. There is a slightly negative relationship regarding feelings about school related to the low incidence disability. Parents of students who do not have a visual impairment have more positive feelings about their child's education than parents of children who have a visual impairment.

The findings support previous research in that parents' negative feelings of the education has some impact on the child's performance in school (Newman, 2005). Children with a visual impairment who have been mainstreamed in public school experience similar grades to typically developing students, however; there are negative feelings regarding how they are perceived and cared for by others in the school. The findings in this study can help to improve the quality of care given by teachers. If students with visual impairments feel more cared for in school, this could improve their grades. This could also help to improve how the parent feels about the quality of education that their student is receiving as well as the level of care they feel the students are receiving. To improve the results of this study, future research could include other variables and explore other aspects of education, such as extracurricular activities and interests in school. Future researchers may add in the perspectives from teachers to explore how they view students with visual impairments based on similar areas.

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