Roles and Responsibilities of Parents of Online School Students with Disabilities

Kelsey Ortiz
Mary Rice
Sean Smith
Daryl Mellard

Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities
University of Kansas

March 20, 2017

Indeed, parents of students with disabilities already have a legal status as important stakeholders in educational decision-making, and they are supposed to be positioned by schools (whether brick-and-mortar, blended, or fully online) as meaningful stakeholders in the education of their children (IDEA, 2004). The kind and type of support parents need to receive as primary decisions makers has been the subject of almost 30 years of research. Unfortunately, many studies have found that parents do not feel empowered to advocate on the behalf of their children with special needs because school officials on teams developing students' Individual Education Programs (IEP) tend to dominate the decision-making process (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

When a child changes enrollment from a brick-and-mortar setting to a fully online one, the educational experience is quite different for the child and his or her parents/guardians. Among the most important differences involves the parent's role in instructional activities. As part of the transition to online education from traditional settings, parents must determine what having their child complete coursework at home or another non-school location means for their parental roles and responsibilities. This situation is especially true considering the potentially conflicting messages parents may receive about what their role is from a variety of sources, including the school, the curriculum vendor, and even other online parents (Rice, 2015). On the one hand, schools like parents to be physically present as children work and to ensure that the children are logging on and working steadily. On the other hand, the schools are adamant that they are in charge of curriculum and assessment. The result is that instruction and who provides that instruction becomes a point of controversy.

Although no evidence-based or practice-based models address parent involvement and/or engagement specifically in the online environment, Borup and Stevens (2015) provide an overview of what extant research says about parental involvement in online learning environments that focused on parental involvement from traditional school and then attempted to translate that work to online schools. They argue that parents have different roles in online than in traditional settings and that those roles require a greater time and emotional investment. In addition, Hasler-Waters (2012) analyzed parental support in online elementary and middle school settings by conducting an exploratory case study. The study explored behaviors throughout the online instructional day for children and parents. The findings were organized into three themes: (1) learner-centric support and instruction, (2) identification and resources, and (3) parents' provision of real connections to academic content. She argued that parents were capable of taking on these roles and in some ways, were better positioned to execute online learning support than teachers because of their knowledge of their children and their proximity to them as they completed online coursework.

Finally, Curtis (2013) sought to find out more about the perceptions of parents concerning their roles in their child's achievement while they were enrolled in a full-time, online high school. According to findings, parents pointed out that communication supports parental engagement with students. Additionally, parents indicated that the transparency provided by the learning management system (LMS) helps the parents better support their students. However, parents conveyed that the transparency of the LMS was not sufficient to

keep students from failing. Curtis highlighted the importance of self-motivation for online learning success along with other factors such as flexibility, personalization, and learner control. Notable barriers identified in this study included developing rhythms and routines (e.g., getting children out of bed for them to log on to class) and intermittent fluctuation in children's interest in doing online coursework.

Taken together, previous research about parental involvement online suggests that parents are a vital part of the online process for all students, but they are not the sole providers of education, nor should they be expected to operate in isolation from the child's teachers, related services staff, and other sources of support (e.g., administrative supports, peers, and other parents). Given that students with disabilities need specific accommodations and modifications, it stands to reason that collaborative structures would be at least as important for them, if not more so.

Online Learning and Parents of Students with Disabilities

Given the findings from previous research regarding parental involvement and engagement for students with disabilities, and from general online learning research documenting the role of parents, researchers at the Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) sought to learn more about parents' experiences supporting their children in fully online coursework. To this end, Burdette and Greer (2014) surveyed 119 parents of children receiving instruction in digital learning settings. They found that although parents received training from online schools around planning and participating, they reported a lack of training on how to best communicate with the school about their children's needs. Twenty-seven percent of parents reported spending three or more hours helping their child. Moreover, digital tools including simulation, social media, discussion boards, and games were not part of the digital learning experience.

Next, COLSD hosted a series of forums with participants that included school superintendents, vendors, and representatives from state education agencies (Franklin, Burdette, East, & Mellard, 2015; Franklin, East, & Mellard, 2015). Directors from State Educational Authorities (SEAs) and superintendents from large online programs discussed their perspectives on parent participation and involvement in online learning experience. Participants at the forums generally agreed that parents of students with disabilities receiving online instruction are required to have much greater involvement in their child's education, particularly in instruction, curricular, and assessment roles. Major difficulties in preparing, communicating, and monitoring parents in the roles identified above were topics of discussion. All SEA participants agreed that a standardized framework for parent preparation, support, and monitoring would be beneficial. In addition, the forums highlighted a need for a deeper and richer understanding on the part of the parent and the online school administration and/or operators to increase student success and achievement.

Finally, Smith, Burdette, Cheatham, Harvey (2016) interviewed 19 parents of students with disabilities in grades 1 through 7. These students had enrolled in one fully online school. The purpose of the study was to understand their experiences and perceptions. Four themes

identified in these interviews were: a) the role of parent as teacher, b) enhanced communication between teacher and parent, c) the parents' significant time commitment, and d) barriers to fully online instruction for parents as they work toward positive educational outcomes for their children.

In considering the struggles, COLSD researchers sought to find answers to these questions:

1. What are the roles that parents take on when they enroll their children with disabilities in fully online learning?

2. What responsibilities do parents describe in relationship to these responsibilities?

To address these questions, researchers interviewed parents of students with disabilities enrolled in fully online learning environments. Those findings will be presented in this paper.

Methods for Understanding Parents' Roles and Responsibilities

This study was a qualitative analysis of the parent work involved in supporting children with disabilities in fully online schools. Researchers collected data primarily through phenomenological interviewing (Kvale, 1983, 1994, 2009). When attending to phenomenology, researchers shift away from a subject-subject relation (even though this relation still exists to some extent) to a subject-phenomenon relation, meaning that phenomenological researchers pay keen and close attention to the research participant as individuals who report having lived the phenomenon under investigation (Englander, 2012).

Participants

Researchers have noted that in qualitative studies, the number of participants may not be as important as whether (1) they authentically belong to the population the researcher desires to analyze, and (2) they have the experience the researcher desires to analyze (Englander, 2012; Kvale, 1994). Participants in this study were parents of children in grades 2 through 8 that had a disability and had enrolled in a fully online program or school receiving special education services.

A second recruitment approach was developed where research staff identified online schools in five states through state department of education websites and called the principals of these online schools. The schools had to serve students in at least one of the specified grades 2 through 8 and offer fully online services. In addition, the children need to have been enrolled in the school for at least 6 months. However, half of the students had been enrolled for more than 2 years. If the principals of the online schools agreed to have their school participate in the study, they identified a staff person (typically a special education teacher or counselor) to send out information to parents. Using this strategy, we invited 11 parents and 1 grandparent. The

grandparent in the study was custodial and had responsibilities concomitant to a parent and we do not reference her differently from the other parents throughout this document.

Participants in the study were parents with children with a disability enrolled in a fully online educational program or school and receiving special education services. Parents were interviewed from five different states (Georgia, Utah, Ohio, Kansas, and Wisconsin). Demographic information about the parents and their children are contained in Table 1. All the participants were females of male students. The following numbers of students were reported by their parents to be in the following disability categories: autism (4), emotional disturbance (1), other health impairment (4), specific learning disability (2), and speech impairment (1). Table 1 provides information about the participating families.

Table 1
Participant information

Parent	Race/Ethnicity of Parent	Gender of Child	Primary Disability of Child	Grade Level of Child
Mother	African American	Male	Autism	5
Mother	African American	Male	Other Health Impairment	8
Mother	White/ Caucasian	Male	Autism	5
Mother	White/ Caucasian	Male	Specific Learning Disability	4
Mother	African American	Male	Other Health Impairment	3
Grandmother	White/ Caucasian	Male	Other Health Impairment	4
Mother	White/ Caucasian	Male	Other Health Impairment	4
Mother	White/ Caucasian	Male	Autism	7
Mother	White/ Caucasian	Male	Autism	8
Mother	White/ Caucasian	Male	Specific Learning Disability	3
Mother	White/ Caucasian	Male	Emotional Disturbance	3
Mother	White/ Caucasian	Male	Speech Impairment	2

Instrument Development and Data Collection

The study included an individual phone interview with 12 parents that was recorded and transcribed. The interview protocol was developed using the current literature on parent involvement in general online learning as well as prior COLSD research on parent involvement and engagement in online learning environments. The interviews lasted between 60 to 80 minutes. The major question categories were demographic information, perceptions of online learning, parent role, and responsibility perceptions. The parents were also asked to describe specific instances in which they enacted these roles and responsibilities.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed in a four-step process. First, one researcher assigned the responses of the parents to categories based on the protocol. This step was done because some information was provided that directly matched the question asked, but in other cases information was offered before the question was asked or received elaboration further along in the interview. Second, another researcher checked the assignments made by the first researcher and then added additional codes that pertained to roles and responsibilities. Third, another researcher organized the data into a spreadsheet and made a visual representation of the major roles and responsibilities agreed on by researchers 1 and 2. Finally, all three researchers met together to compare the data in the spreadsheet to the chart made by researcher 3. During this process, roles were collapsed and a consensus was reached so that ultimately roles and responsibilities were assigned to each other in a way that was organized and accurate. The findings from this process appear below.

Findings

Participating parents articulated four major roles that they assumed in working with their child: Educator, Medical Aide, Reward Manager, and Executive Function Director. Each of these roles and their corresponding responsibilities will be discussed in turn. In the case of the Educator role, subdividing the role into Teacher, Teacher's Aide, and Consultant enabled a more accurate picture of the parents' work.

Major Parental Role: Educator

Parents of students with disabilities described themselves as taking on formal educator roles that went beyond what typical parents do to be involved in their children's education. Further, they felt that an extended role was necessary for two reasons: (1) because they were working in a fully online setting with their children, and (2) their children had disabilities that required additional services. As part of these assumed roles, the parents in this study described responsibilities that they perceived would have been the work of a general education teacher and/or special education teacher if the child had been in a traditional school or classroom setting. The specific educator roles included those of (1) teacher, (2) teacher's aide or assistant, (3) consultant, and (4) advocate.

Educator Role: Teacher. Almost every parent described themselves as their child's primary teacher in the online setting, even when they acknowledged the presence of teachers provided by the online school. These teacher roles emerged from the responsibilities they felt for maintaining the instructional momentum.

> I would describe my role as being a full-time teacher because we may start our homework anywhere from 9 o'clock in the morning until maybe 4 o'clock, we have our breaks, and I'll give him a lunch. We're just like being in a regular school. It depends on how he feels that day. Sometimes we may have to do three or four subjects and stop, and continue later that afternoon. Sometimes when he has a sleeping problem and he

doesn't go to sleep, if I have his attention, we may start at 3 o'clock or 4 o'clock in the morning. It depends on when I have his full attention, and when I have his full attention, I jump on it. Otherwise when I'm teaching he moves around a lot, just move, move, move, move, move, and I don't have his attention. (KS 2, Lines 245-254)

In the case of this parent, instructional momentum is driven entirely by the attention rhythms of her child. In a traditional classroom with many students, a teacher might decide that as a group, students are prepared (or not) to focus on particularly difficult content, but they do not make decisions based on the attention patterns of one child alone. The ability to do this comes from having only one child in the physical learning space. In addition, this parent co-regulates the movement of her child—working around the movement as best she can and taking advantage of the opportunities when movement is less—such as in the early morning. In a traditional classroom, a teacher would instruct students on where and when to move, and it is more typical for a teacher of many students to tell them to keep still rather than move, since a traditional classroom operates only during the day, and no possibility exists of a lesson taking place at 3 or 4 a.m. Finally, the parent sees a clear delineation between the online teaching that she is doing and the regular parent work involved in supporting her child. For instance, she references homework as a separate part of family life, even though technically all work occurs online in the space of the home.

Another major part of this teacher work described by the parents as they asserted the role of a teacher was advance preparation for learning.

I make sure that I prepare his subjects the night before. I look over them to see what we're going to be learning the next day or even that following week, because we have projects. (KS 2, Lines 265-267).

Here, the parent describes the advance preparation as falling to daily and weekly rhythms to maintain momentum on projects. These projects are embedded in the curriculum that has been provided to the parents. What was surprising to parents in this study was that even though there were lessons and materials given to them, they still had to learn how to help their children understand and become interested in the materials.

One major strategy for enhancing engagement was to take the curriculum they received and modify it according to their child's specific interest. Most of the parents described finding materials for students online as additional instructional support. They spoke with pride and a sense of accomplishment that they could leverage extant interests to help them understand a variety of subject matter.

He loves his video games like Zombies, so I'll try to incorporate that. I'll explain that this math is very simple, Nathan. If you have 20 zombies and you are over there shooting at them, how many would you have to do to get this? As soon as I start bringing in things that he can handle better, that he can visualize better, it makes it a lot easier for him. So, I think that's the easiest way for me. As far as what he is achieving, I can see when

he gets that gleam in his eye and he says 'oh, I understand this now!' He will do it, and he gets so proud of himself, like he has just climbed Mount Everest. (OH 1, Lines 234-339)

Leveraging the child's interests is much like what a classroom teacher in a traditional setting would do. In fact, teachers in traditional settings consider the interests for an entire class, as well as for individual students during spontaneous tutoring sessions, in which students receive individual help during small group instruction to contextualize new concepts. As a parent, this mother knows much about her child's interests since they have a long history together and spend more time talking outside of a learning context than a traditional classroom teacher.

Finally, the parents in this study state they assert roles as teachers because they have had the opportunity to see "that gleam" in the eyes of their children. The parents conceptualize roles for themselves as teachers, because not only they take on responsibilities for teaching, but also because they have experiences witnessing their children learn. While the parents in this study did not describe particularly complex instructional or assessment methods or strategies, they did assert the kind of actions and experiences that are common to classroom teachers yet grounded in a supreme interest in their own child's learning.

However, not all parents were satisfied with the role of being a teacher. Some felt the role was an imposition and that they were unprepared. These parents did speak of initially thinking that working with their children would be a chance to see them learn but instead caused feelings of anxiousness and even resentment due to having to teach when one was unprepared to do so.

As a learning coach, I sit there with him and make sure that he is staying on task with what he must do. Now I have my sign-in page and he has his sign-in page, and if I go in my sign-in page to his courses, you'll see what the parent is expected to do. Basically, we're doing the role as a teacher because you should be reading up on the courses beforehand so that you can help the child with their classwork. That's highly impossible. Especially if you have other children, and in my case I have two other kids who have issues, and they're expecting me to get all this done in five hours, well that's unrealistic for me. So, it's a lot on a learning coach, and this is free. So, I guess they would say, 'well this is your child and you should have an interest in what your child is doing,' well yes, that's true, but at the same time most of us are not educated. Most of us don't have degrees. And some parents may not even have a GED. And you're asking us to perform as a teacher. That's sticky, and I think the role of learning coach needs to probably be modified a little. It's very overwhelming I can tell you. (GA 1, Lines 148-160)

Educator Role: Teacher's Aide. Not all the parents constructed roles for themselves as the primary teachers of their children. Students with IEPs often receive instructional assistants to help them with their coursework. These assistants carry out many of the individualized elements identified to accommodate and, in some cases, modify content or assessment for students with disabilities. Typical examples of these types of supports include reading texts to

students, listening to verbal answers, writing things for students, and making sure they understand instructions.

> We do a lot of things verbally because handwriting is a chore for him, and I can quiz him on things, and he can give me verbal answers, which works better for him instead of making him write. (GA 3, Lines 119-120)

This parent described her work not as a major provider of instruction, but as a person who modifies the assessment process by accepting verbal answers. In this scenario, the parent does not think that she is the major provider of instruction, but rather a means to advancing the agenda within the provided course curriculum. These parents emphasized the way in which their responsibilities were important but not to the level of teaching.

When parents constructed roles as teachers' aides, they spoke more often about what they were "allowed" or disallowed" from doing by the school.

> The classes that he has taken online, if he didn't have an IEP, I wouldn't need to do much of anything. But since he does have an IEP, I can sit with him through them and read him everything. I know it depends on what online curriculum you're using, but the ones that he's been using, if he can do it by himself then I wouldn't need to do anything other than to monitor that he's on track. (WI 3, Lines 101-108)

Also interesting was the parents who took on roles as teachers managed the time their children spent on various classes and developed consistent rhythms and routines. In contrast, parents who thought of themselves more as aides or assistants spoke more of monitoring progress and ensuring the child was keeping up. Planning the day's activities appears to be a different responsibility than merely ensuring the child is following along with prescribed coursework.

Finally, parents who thought of themselves as teachers seemed to have derived that role internally or by perceiving that the online school did not support them. Parents who indicated that they were aides or assistants described being assigned that role by the online school, usually as part of a parent training program.

> I think [our school] is very clear about their education coaches, their learning coaches. They are very specific in the setup in the online education system for the parents. They have a little learning coach university, and they're very specific. It is your responsibility to make sure your child is not only attending but following through and doing classwork. So, I know what my role is. But to me Connor is very, very obedient and does what he needs. The hardest part would be to motivate a child who is burned. You know, when they're burned out and exhausted, it's hard to make them continue in learning. And once the online lesson has ended, then all falls to the parent. I think a lot of people going into [online] education with their children don't understand that that's a lot of the time. However, with our [online] academy all of Connor's current classes have online lesson components every day. So, he interacts with his teacher every day. And he

interacts with his peers every day. For that I'm immensely grateful because it makes my part in coaching simpler because I'm not teaching. Coaching and teaching are very different. I'm grateful for the input and the lesson setup and the schedule. (UT 2, Lines 133-139)

The final aspect in ensuring that parents accepted the role of aide or assistant rather than teacher appeared to be communication with the teacher. As was the case in the above example, teacher interaction was frequent, even daily.

Educator Role: Educational Consultant and Advocate. The final major educator role named by the parents was that of a consultant or advocate. In this role, the teacher asks the parent what he or she thinks would be best for the child, treating them like a consultant. When the parent recommends adjustments, advocacy is the result. What is consistent in either scenario is that the parent relays knowledge about the child to the teacher, and the teacher implements the support.

I could talk to the teachers and get even more adjustments. There was one time for science where I didn't think the curriculum was appropriate, and he just wrote up some alternatives that we could do for that chapter and graded it on those. (WI 3, Lines 93-95)

When parents thought that they were consultants or advocates, they tended to think highly of the school. They felt involved in their children's educational success, while also not thinking that they had to do all the work. Rather than speaking of training to learn how to advocate as the parents who accepted roles typically performed by teacher's aides or assistants, parents who were consultants and advocates assumed this role by themselves. They called the school when there was a problem. They followed up. They answered their phones and responded to emails. They could set boundaries for themselves, their children, and their children's teachers regarding what everyone should be doing.

Most parents, regardless of the dominant role that they took up, wanted to be able to consult with the teacher or someone at the school regarding ways to work with their children more effectively.

I feel like the only thing that they could touch base on a little bit more is if your kid is having a bad day and you're getting frustrated, is it okay just to quit and give up for that day? What are some strategies? Maybe they could give you a printout on ideas [of] what you can do if this is happening, are your kids getting frustrated? And just give you a bunch of ideas on things to try instead of me getting frustrated when it's happening. Can you give me some pointers? I have learned these things throughout the years, but I kind of wish they had done that at the new family orientation. I wish they had told us, 'it's okay if this happens, and here are some things you can try.' (WI 5, Lines 144-156)

Parents mostly had questions about how to manage schedules and work with children on executive functioning behaviors. They struggled to figure out positive ways to get their children

to sit down and work. Parents who took on strong roles as teachers mostly talked as if they had lost hope that the school would provide the help they desired. Parents who acted in the role of aide or assistant were the most vocal about what type of help they wished to obtain. Parents who saw themselves as consultants were satisfied in their role as an expert on their child, but they still desired more dialogue.

Overall, educator roles were important for helping the parents feel empowered. When the parents took on teaching, assisting, and consultant/advocacy roles, they could utilize their own knowledge of their children to help them learn. These parents, whatever their role construction, knew that their children were not learners with ideal skill sets and dispositions. Nevertheless, they also believed that their children were not being served well in their traditional schools. They thought that moving the child to fully online setting would mean better services. In addition, the move would demonstrate to their children that they, as parents, could respond to problems and they were willing to do whatever it took to help their children attain an education.

> My son is a rocket. He's a whirlwind. When he was in school he was teased. The teacher would get upset with him. He's a crybaby. He would throw his fits whenever things weren't going his way. If his pencil broke, instead of sharpening it he would throw a fit. So, he would get teased at school for that. He would get in trouble for stupid, stupid things. I remember one instance… His sister's birthday is in April. We had a party for her on a Sunday, lots of peanut butter fudge, lots of cake. The next day he went to school and he had spiked his Mohawk up, which wasn't very big, but the principal called me in because she thought his hair was distracting him. I said, 'I thought it was the fact that he had about 500 pounds of sugar the day before is what's distracting him.' In this school system, here, they wanted everybody to come in, sit down, do their learning, eat, come back, do their learning and go home. There was no room for being an individual. I think that was one of Nathan's biggest issues because Nathan is a very vibrant individual. I think that was one of the things that we had the biggest issue with because in some situations, as far as schooling was concerned, he was very afraid to speak his mind. If he says, 'okay, here's the problem that I have in my workbook, is it kind of like if I were to do this, this and this?' 'Yes, Nathan, that's exactly how it is.' But there was no room for that at school. He couldn't put things in his own way to remember them better. So, bringing him into online schooling and having him home, there was a little bit of giving him that boost of confidence to do what made it easier for him (OH 1, Lines 267-301)

The "boost of confidence" that this parent could provide for her son required the mother to take on a greater role as an educator. Nevertheless, to her, this new role was worth the effort because her son did not have to go to a place where she believed the educators did not understand what her son needed to feel comfortable and be successful.

Major Parental Role: Medical Aide

In addition to parents assuming roles that align with teaching duties, some parents disclosed that their child struggled with a serious medical condition. In these cases, the medical condition was present alongside a primary disability, such as autism or a learning disability. For these parents, the decision to enroll their child in a fully online school provided a way to monitor symptoms and attend to medical needs on a moment-by-moment basis. To provide this level of care throughout their child's instructional day, parents assumed the role of medical aide. These parents described responsibilities similar to those that a school nurse may typically fulfill in a traditional setting.

The role of the medical aide emerged from responsibilities that the parents perceived were necessary for the child's physical health throughout the instructional day. The excerpt below shows how parents juggle numerous roles, including being the medical aide or caretaker of their children during the school day.

> It is our first year. It is a challenge to balance, me being a medial caretaker, a parent of a small child, a wife, manage a house, and make sure he gets what he needs (NC 1, Lines 92-94).

The role of the medical aide can include monitoring behaviors that occur during the day and then working with a medical professional to ensure the child's needs are addressed so they can focus and learn while at home. In the excerpt below the parent discusses how challenging this role can be due to medicine changes and behaviors that may disrupt the child's learning processes.

> With him, we've gone through a ton of medicine changes. We've tried all these different things. For a while there he just really was completely out of control. (WI 4, Line 179).

Some interview participants disclosed that their children struggled with medical conditions. These instances may require the parent to monitor their child's physical condition while participating in online academic activities. Parent described a need to be aware and observant to attend to the medical needs of the child. This need for vigilance stems from how abruptly the health of the child can shift as illustrated in the following parent's report.

> One minute his blood sugar may be 400, the next it may be 50. You don't know when he is going to go into a diabetic coma. You don't know when he's going to go into hallucinations. You don't know when he's going to go into a seizure. He just has to be watched 24 hours a day. I've been his caregiver since Day One because we couldn't have a nurse come in because there was nothing we could explain to her to give her any clues, to let her know he's like this at this number because he doesn't give you any indication that he's low (KS 2, Lines 104-111).

Major Parental Role: Reward Manager

As discussed in the literature review, the parental role of motivator is typical for parents to assume when their child is learning in the fully online setting. However, parents in this study described a more intense and involved style of motivating their children. Curtis (2013) found that student self-motivation is critical to online learning success as well as the flexibility, personalization, and control students had over their learning helped in their success. However, students with disabilities may not have these characteristics fully developed. Thus, researchers found that parents had to find creative ways to motivate their children to help them stay engaged throughout the instructional day. All the parents from this study described ongoing negotiations with their child that included providing agreed-upon incentives and rewards.

The role of reward manager emerged from parent descriptions of behaviors that they engaged in that, in turn, supported children in continuing in their coursework.

> And together, if we're working together, then Jason gets really, good results. But if either of us, either from the teaching point or the mom-support point, if either of us fall on the job, then the only one that misses out is Jason. The teachers will keep talking and the lessons will keep happening, but if Jason isn't doing the work, they can't make it happen. But if Jason is willing to do the work and the teachers are not doing it, then it's up to me to make a change to fill in the gaps that are missing. This is my role. Mine is specifically support and encouragement and sometimes bullying him into doing. Sometimes I'm sorry you're tired and sometimes I'm sorry you don't feel like doing your homework, but it doesn't go away just because you don't want to do it. And that's my job, because you can't make that happen, but I can. And between us, if we're each holding our own end of the rope, then Jason's got all the support he needs to be standing upright and walking. That's my understanding (UT 2, Lines 271-283).

The primary source for providing motivation for student engagement rests with the parent. The parent alludes to the importance of a partnership between herself, her son, and the online instructor for her child's academic success. However, if she perceives a breakdown in that partnership, then she states that it is her role as a learning coach to provide additional incentives and rewards independent of the online teacher. In a traditional inclusive classroom setting, a teacher might increase student engagement using positive reinforcement strategies directly linked to instructional activities. For example, a teacher may adjust lessons to increase social interaction using cooperative learning. The teacher could also provide explicit feedback or scale down assignments if the teacher thought that would help the learner grasp the material. If the student still lacks motivation, a classroom teacher could also increase student support by including the special education teacher and/or the parents. In this specific interview, the parent identified that the fully online setting is less sensitive to the motivational level of the student.

> The teachers will keep talking and the lessons will keep happening, but if Jason isn't doing the work, they can't make it happen (UT 2, Lines 273-274).

Thus, the parent must come up with rewards throughout the day that they determine will be effective.

> Sometimes I'm sorry you're tired and sometimes I'm sorry you don't feel like doing your homework, but it doesn't go away just because you don't want to do it. And that's my job, because you can't make that happen, but I can (UT 2, Line 278-281).

Parents acting as reward managers in the online setting must find ways to motivate their learner. This task is challenging for several reasons. Researchers are still working to understand how a learner responds to attending school at home under the direct instruction of an online teacher and their parent.

For some parents, on-task support reverted to behavior management, in which they provided structure and verbal reinforcement, accompanied by targeted disciplinary actions. They felt it necessary to be prescriptive in their support because of a fear that limited interaction would lead to incomplete work and lessons and incorrectly submitted lesson, or work that would not pass the muster required by the online program. For example, one parent provided the following explanation.

> [My son] would never remember so it was always my responsibility to make sure that he was in class. And there were times when he was not in a functional state to attend class. At that point, there really isn't, if you don't attend class, you lose this. It wouldn't work because he was so out of control. So generally, what I would do in those situations was I would say, okay, I'm turning Health on. I hope, though, that you will make the choice to come and participate. Sometimes he would go to his room and not participate. Sometimes he'd come halfway through. Sometimes he'd decide to go. There were times when we didn't make it to Health at all because things were just not good. (WI.4 Lines 308-318)

Educator Role: Executive Function Stopgap

Parents in this study described responsibilities for organizing the online course for their children. In contrast to reward management behaviors, the organization role referred to the cognitive and metacognitive management of the tasks necessary to persist in online courses. For their children to participate in the demands of the online learning experience, parents felt that they needed to perform the required executive functioning work to move through the course. Students with disabilities often have difficulty in planning and organizing demands or assigned tasks, holding information that is critical for maintaining and completing a task, and structuring or imposing order on school or even play-related environments and the tasks associated with these experiences (Titz & Karbach, 2014). For the fully online student, these executive functions present barriers requiring parent intervention. The parents' solution has been to take up the executive function themselves. Essential executive functions that parents engaged in included (a) supporting on-task behavior, (b) promoting organizational skills to

further structure coursework, (c) paying attention to assignment details, and (d) managing time to ensure timely submission of work.

Supporting on-task behavior. On-task behavior is an attribute that produces work completion and generally leads to successful learner outcomes (Willner, Bailey, Parry, & Dymond, 2010). Students who have chronic difficulties paying attention to schoolwork (e.g., content presentations, assigned activities) risk poor grades and often school failure. With much fully online instruction being student-driven, in which they sign in and complete digital lessons (e.g., readings, watching a video), attending to the online learning is paramount.

> Well, keeping him on track and making sure he is comprehending things and not skipping to the end and trying to answer a question and just…We've had a few where he thought he was slick and tried to get on there and move ahead and, it's like, wait a minute, and go back and ask him a few questions so I could see if he had not read the material, and we'd have to go back. So, keeping him honest. (GA.3 Lines 272-275)

The expectation is that students can attend to the demands of the online course moving through required lessons with minimal direction. The structure of the asynchronous online learning experience presumes that students can remain on task, moving independently through the assigned content at an appropriate pace. Parents reported that despite this presumption, direct intervention on their part was still necessary.

Another parent offered:

> A lot of what he needs is the guidance to stay on task and to be able to visualize the upcoming lesson. (W.1 Lines 117-118)

The remarks offered by parents centered on the need for their child to maintain focus and remain on task. Parents felt it was their role to encourage and engage their child as they worked to complete the required digital lessons. The parents assumed they needed to provide the support or concluded their child would not succeed without their intervention.

Parents said they had the responsibility to keep their children on task. The requirement emerged as the parents witnessed their children's negative behavior, which was disruptive to family life, when the students worked on course assignments. Although not directly assigned this task by the online school, parents realized that to complete the assigned lesson and more at a pace identified by the online teacher or school, as a parent, they had to intervene and maintain the structure and reinforcement to ensure task completion.

Promoting organizational skills to further structure coursework. Many of the digital learning materials are organized into sequential lessons or learning experiences. The structure is designed to provide the learner a clear path forward on what needs to be completed and when and often designates the amount of time expected for the assigned exercise. Parents indicated that they had taken on responsibilities related to the role of content organizer.

…[I]f I made him do every single section of every single lesson he would just shut down. Too much for him, and frankly, he doesn't need it. He's smart and he catches on quick, and to make him do that stuff that he'd already mastered would just be frustrating for him. Finding what works for you and what you need to get done when, you know, just like a teacher would in a classroom, what flows best, what time of day you're doing what type of thing, that sort of thing was big for us. (GA.3 231-235)

Another parent expressed the need to take the assigned work and pre-plan to ensure the next day's coursework activities were aligned to what they had determined were the learning needs of their child.

Log in the night before and get his lesson material together or do any preparation ahead of time. And then so the next day when he logs in, he has a lesson plan, and I just kind of make sure that he goes through the lesson plan and completes the lesson plan. (NC.1 Lines 126-128)

Other parents described the need to re-organize the course content, particularly if it repeated a previous activity or was not aligned to their child's instructional needs. Here, they organized materials according to their own perceptions of their child's learning needs.

If he had already mastered something, I wasn't going to make him do the worksheet because it would just be redundant, and specifically for him he would just get overwhelmed with too much stuff that he felt like, I don't need to do this, I already know how to do this, it would be difficult to get him to do anything after that. So we reduce the actual writing and that sort of thing as long as he was comprehending the material, and because it was not turned in, that would be up to the learning coach whether or not that was required or not required. I know some parents make their child do every single thing that the lesson ... you know, and maybe the child needed that. But you do have the flexibility of, I can see that he's mastered this, I'm not going to make him sit here and do two more worksheets on this material that I know he knows. So, we can move on from here. That's a lot of flexibility. (GA.3 Lines 308-315)

Here, parents intervened to accommodate their child's instructional needs. Realizing the intent of the lesson, what their children could do, parents took on the role of the teacher, thereby making instructional decisions on what was necessary to complete and what was not applicable to their child's future success. Whether this role was assigned by the online teacher or the parent, they witnessed the instruction taking place, took it on, and made decisions for their child's next tasks to complete.

Learners with disabilities have challenged the assumption that sequential digital lessons structure the learning experience. Parents in this study did not feel the digital structure provided sufficient flexibility for their specific needs of their child. Instead, they reported re-organizing course expectations, individualizing where appropriate. For the parent, they

combined their knowledge of their child's needs with the expectations of the content to organize a learning experience relevant to the needs of their child.

Paying attention to assignment details. The ability to monitor one's own performance, consider one's attention to detail, and to measure it against some standard of what is expected or needed is a self-monitoring executive function. While overlap exists with on-task behaviors, parents were clear that a portion of their responsibility was keeping their child on track and instilling within them an understanding that they have a role in their own education. This role includes an awareness of course expectations.

> I would describe my role as being a full-time teacher because we may start our homework anywhere from 9 in the morning until maybe 4 [p.m.] and we have our breaks, and I'll give him a lunch. We're just like being in a regular school. It depends on how he feels that day. Sometimes we may have to do three or four subjects and have to stop, and continue later on that afternoon (KS.2 Lines 245-249).

Again, parents reinforced the fact that while the online teacher or the online school may not have defined their role, they made executive decisions that determined what their child would do, when, and for how long. Likewise, the parent served as their child's compass when it came to learning. They directed their child to the lessons that needed attention, decided on what time allotment was appropriate, determined when to move onto another lesson, and provided guidance to the instructional day. The student looked to their parent for that information and responded accordingly.

Managing time to ensure timely submission of work. Working at one's pace is a hallmark of the fully online or personalized learning experience. Yet parents expressed the need to move through digital content efficiently. Be it a required number of lessons per week or documented evidence of content completion, parents emphasized that time was a valuable commodity. As an expectation, parents expressed the need to manage time for their child.

> [My son] doesn't have a conception of time at all. So, I just kind of keep him on task, make sure that he completes his assignment, and communicate and schedule with the therapist the times that he needs to get those online. And then make sure that it's all documented. He has to get at least six hours of the learning time, reading, you know, in all those different subjects. He has to tally up six hours a day, because it is state regulated (NC.1 Lines 130-134).

In this instance, the mother is the timekeeper. She serves as the external timekeeper, the one who facilitates the time needed for each task, and the one moving her child from one required activity to another. Yes, her child can tell time but in realizing that the instructional day requires efficiency to address all the instructional requirement, she serves as the one to ensure effort is applied where and when needed to allow for lesson completion.

Another parent reinforced this role in ensuring that time commitments were proportional to the lesson requirements. Below she explains how she facilitated time management to ensure that her son was successful in recognizing that her role was the timekeeper or time manager.

> I would say just making sure we spend the appropriate amount of time every day so that we're making progress. And just trying to monitor the time what he can handle (WI.1 Lines 129-130).

While families in this study and others desire fully online learning because of time flexibility, these parents reported that finding time to do the lessons on a regular schedule does present a challenge. Parents in this study reported that time is a major consideration, so much so that they identify time manager as a primary role. Somehow, the initial expectation was the time to do the lessons would appear or be natural within the context of the home instead of having to be scheduled.

Discussion

In this study, we interviewed 12 parents in five states about their roles and responsibilities in working with their children with disabilities in online coursework. We learned participating parents had a primary role as an educator to the point that they were finding materials, engaging in instructional sequencing, and assuming considerable responsibility for conveying content knowledge to their children. Even when parents were assuming educator roles that were less demanding on their time than a teacher, they were reading texts to their children, managing their behavior, and advising the school as to their children's needs.

Another role was medical aide, in which they managed and monitored medications and health concerns, which was in conjunction with and necessary for their participation in lessons. Some parents tried to communicate with the school around these issues, and some did not. It is unclear whether and to what extent the schools these students attended could have or would have been helpful in this regard. Although IDEA (2004) does require schools to take on certain medical responsibilities so that children can derive benefits from special education, the online contexts in which these students were enrolled presented a unique situation since the online instructors or staff may not directly see or physically interact with the children.

The final major roles were reward manager and performer of the executive function responsibilities for their children when they were unable to do so themselves. While the reward management was typically an effort to entice the child into performing their own executive function responsibilities, often parents took on these tasks. In turn, the parents found the organizing, task management and planning both exhausting and comforting because in performing these duties, they could feel confident that they could continue to stay in the school.

This work confirms Burdette and Greer's (2014) initial findings that parents of students with disabilities spent large amounts of time supporting their children but also extends it by

offering specific descriptions of parental roles and what the parents are doing with those long periods (three or more hours) during a work session.

Our findings from this study also comment on and expand the forum work by COLSD researchers (Franklin, Burdette, East, & Mellard, 2015; Franklin, East, & Mellard, 2015) and the interviews from Smith, Burdette, Cheatham, and Harvey (2016). The findings from the forum discuss challenges in preparing, communicating, and monitoring parents in their roles, and suggestions by participants for a standardized system for parent preparation, support, and monitoring. Namely, parents need help planning instruction or need relief from that duty. They also need access to more accessible curriculum for their children. Further, they need help organizing their children to perform executive functions or provide them improved instructional materials rather than having to take those responsibilities up themselves. Finally, online schools need guidance on whether and to what extent they are responsible medical support services as part of the related services in IDEA (2004).

Conclusion

The differences between instruction in the face-to-face classroom and the fully online setting also mean that parents engage differently with their children and educators. Parents of children with disabilities take on different and additional responsibilities within the online learning environment. Specifically, these data described heavy responsibilities closely linked to a teacher rather than an on-site mentor or learning coach, who would be expected to play a more peripheral role.

For practice, online schools need to recognize that telling parents that they are not teachers but coaches do not ease their burden. Instead, there needs to be support structures both human and technological to ensure that parents are not teaching.

For research, the field needs more studies about role differences and responsibility divisions between teachers and parents that consider students with disabilities and their families separately from other types of students.

For policymaking, state entities and local educational authorities have information that should guide decision making about parent support requirements for online schools. They might initiate discussions about ensuring that students with disabilities have on-site mentors who are prepared to work with students when the parents are unwilling or are unable, since students with disabilities are entitled to educational opportunities equal to their peers. What is clear is that more work is needed around the appropriate role of a parent and their reasonable expectations for responsibilities in online learning for students with disabilities.

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