

Addressing Multiple Disabilities in the Educational Process Involving Students and Their Families

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the impact of multiple disabilities on the educational process of students with Severe Multiple Disabilities (SMD) and the role of their families in supporting educational interventions. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study combines qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with teachers, content analysis of educational plans, and observational data, with a follow-up survey focusing on family involvement in the educational process. The findings emphasize the importance of family support in special education, highlighting the challenges parents face in accepting their child's potential and their coping mechanisms. Key findings suggest that effective communication between teachers and families, professional guidance for parents, and the integration of nursing activities into the educational process are essential for the success of SMD students. The research also discusses the need for realistic educational goals based on parents' capacities, as over-investment without adequate support can lead to parental exhaustion. Recommendations include a comprehensive approach to family involvement in educational planning and the development of tailored interventions that address both educational and emotional needs of students and their families.

Keywords: *Severe Multiple Disabilities, Special Education, Family Involvement, Educational Interventions, Coping Mechanisms, Teacher-Parent Communication, Parental Exhaustion*

In the modern educational landscape, addressing the diverse needs of students with multiple disabilities remains a critical challenge. Children who experience more than one type of disability—be it cognitive, physical, sensory, or emotional—require educational approaches that are both individualized and comprehensive. These students face unique barriers that impact their academic performance, socialization, and overall development. Furthermore, their families often grapple with additional emotional, logistical, and financial burdens as they seek the best possible educational outcomes for their children. A multi-faceted approach that involves collaboration among educators, special education professionals, and families is essential for fostering an inclusive environment in which students with multiple disabilities can thrive. This paper will explore the complexities of addressing multiple disabilities within the educational process, focusing on strategies for

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creating effective learning environments, the role of families, and the importance of individualized educational plans (IEPs).

Understanding Multiple Disabilities

Multiple disabilities refer to the co-occurrence of two or more disabilities that impact a student's ability to learn and function in traditional educational settings. These disabilities may include combinations of intellectual disabilities, physical impairments, sensory impairments, communication disorders, or behavioral conditions. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2020), the prevalence of students with multiple disabilities is steadily increasing, reflecting the broader recognition of diverse student needs and the expansion of diagnostic criteria. While each disability can present distinct challenges, students with multiple disabilities often face compounded difficulties that require a nuanced and coordinated approach to their education. These challenges are not only academic but also social, emotional, and behavioral, necessitating a holistic strategy that integrates both educational and therapeutic supports.

Challenges in the Educational Process

The educational process for students with multiple disabilities is fraught with challenges, both for the students themselves and for the educators who work with them. Teachers must be equipped with a diverse set of strategies to address a wide range of learning needs, from adapting curricula to providing additional physical support. Differentiated instruction, the practice of tailoring teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of all students, is essential in this context (Tomlinson, 2014). However, teachers often lack sufficient training or resources to implement such approaches effectively, and class sizes may limit the level of individualized attention students with multiple disabilities require. Furthermore, the presence of co-occurring disabilities means that students may struggle in areas such as communication, self-regulation, and social integration, which can hinder both their academic success and emotional well-being (Turnbull et al., 2019).

For students with physical disabilities, the school environment may not always be physically accessible, further exacerbating their challenges. For example, a student with both physical and cognitive impairments may struggle to engage with digital learning tools that are not designed with accessibility in mind. In these instances, teachers and schools must find creative and adaptive solutions to ensure students' participation. The lack of accessible materials and technologies, along with inadequate staff support, creates significant barriers for students with multiple disabilities (Borg & Mayo, 2021).

The Role of Families in Supporting Education

Families of students with multiple disabilities play an indispensable role in the educational process. They are often the first advocates for their children and are central to the development of an individualized educational plan (IEP). Research indicates that family involvement in education is strongly correlated with positive academic outcomes, particularly for students with disabilities (Epstein, 2018). For families, the experience of raising a child with multiple disabilities can be overwhelming, requiring ongoing coordination between healthcare providers, therapists, and educators. The burden of navigating complex systems and advocating for their child's needs can cause significant stress for families, particularly if they feel unsupported by the educational system.

Effective communication between families and educators is crucial in overcoming these challenges. Collaboration allows for the sharing of insights about a student's needs,

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strengths, and preferences, which can inform the development of tailored educational plans (Hornby, 2014). Additionally, family members can provide valuable information about their child's daily routines, behaviors, and medical needs, all of which can contribute to creating a more holistic and supportive educational environment. As part of the IEP process, families and schools should engage in open and respectful dialogue to ensure that the student's academic and personal needs are being met.

Strategies for Inclusive Education

The provision of inclusive education, where students with multiple disabilities are educated alongside their typically developing peers, is a key strategy for supporting these students. Inclusive education promotes social integration, enhances self-esteem, and offers students opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives (Stainback & Stainback, 1999). However, the effective implementation of inclusive education requires careful planning, including appropriate staff training, adaptations to the physical environment, and modifications to teaching methods. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which emphasizes flexibility in teaching and assessment, is an effective tool for supporting students with multiple disabilities (Meyer et al., 2014). By offering multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, UDL ensures that all students, regardless of their disabilities, have equal opportunities to succeed.

Assistive technologies can play a crucial role in supporting students with multiple disabilities by providing them with tools that cater to their individual needs. From speech-to-text software to specialized communication devices, these technologies enable students to participate more fully in the educational process (Alper & Raharinirina, 2006). When used in conjunction with other instructional strategies, assistive technologies can help bridge the gap for students who might otherwise struggle to keep pace with their peers.

Addressing the needs of students with multiple disabilities in the educational process is a complex and multifaceted challenge. It requires a coordinated effort between educators, families, and specialists to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment. With the right resources, training, and strategies, it is possible to foster academic success and emotional well-being for these students. Families must be engaged as partners in the educational process, advocating for their children and ensuring that their voices are heard. Ultimately, inclusive education, individualized plans, and the use of assistive technologies are vital components in creating equitable educational opportunities for students with multiple disabilities.

Objectives:

- To study the impact of multiple disabilities on the educational process within the student's family.

Hypotheses:

- There is no significant difference in the educational process for students with multiple disabilities and their families.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the role of families in the education of students with severe multiple disabilities (SMD), we employed data collected from a comprehensive quality-based survey focused on the educational experiences of students facing severe physical, mental, and communication impairments within special schools. This primary dataset was enriched by

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additional insights obtained from a targeted survey designed specifically to explore various aspects of family involvement and dynamics in the educational journey of students with SMD. This dual approach allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of how familial factors contribute to the learning processes and overall support systems for these students in educational settings.

Study of the Educational Process for Students with Multiple Disabilities: The methodology of this research was outlined in a previous paper (Kantor et al., 2014), so this summary will focus only on the key research data. The study analyzed the educational process using a framework described by Průcha (2009), which includes input determinants, the course of the educational process, and its outcomes. The objective of the research was to map the various educational processes that affect students with Severe Multiple Disabilities (SMD), emphasizing the analysis of social interactions as a fundamental educational phenomenon.

The research design employed a mixed-method approach, primarily utilizing qualitative procedures and supplemented by a questionnaire survey. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with 45 teachers, content analysis of 30 individual educational plans, 30 verbal assessments, and full-day observations of teacher-student interactions involving four students. The questionnaire survey engaged 60 teachers and aimed at exploring specific topics for which the dataset provided insufficient justification and which could not be triangulated with data from multiple sources.

For data analysis, we applied open, axial, and selective coding. This process helped to develop models for educational practices in areas such as adaptation, interaction, development of interpersonal relationships, stimulation, diagnostics, evaluation, self-care, addressing cognitive and aesthetic needs, health-related supports, coping with risk behaviors and other challenges, personality development, and student-environment interactions.

This text includes unpublished results from the aforementioned research study, specifically relating to special education interventions at the family level. Regarding open coding, the family-related data was categorized into the following groups:

Groups:

1. Family needs regarding special education interventions.
2. Data regarding how parents cope with their child's disabilities and come to accept the child's true potential.
3. The process of special education intervention when working with the child's family.

The follow-up survey was designed to explore the significant role that families play in the educational process of students with severe multiple disabilities (SMD). In the previous research study, the collected data indicated a lack of sufficient saturation concerning family-oriented topics. As a result, the follow-up survey concentrated exclusively on these critical themes to gather more comprehensive insights.

The primary objective of this survey was to enhance the existing data on family involvement, ultimately aiding in the development of a model that describes effective special education interventions aimed at collaborating with the families of these children. To collect qualitative data, we employed semi-structured interviews with teachers specialized in educating students with SMD.

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Specific criteria were established for selecting the teachers who would participate in the survey:

1. Each teacher was required to hold a degree in special education, with a minimum qualification of a Bachelor's degree.
2. Participating teachers needed to have a minimum of five years of practical experience working directly with students diagnosed with severe multiple disabilities.

The survey involved a sample of five teachers, recruited through intentional selection, utilizing personal contacts within relevant educational institutions. Prior to conducting the interviews, we ensured that each class teacher was informed of the study's purpose and obtained their consent to participate.

The interview process followed a structured format, which included several stages:

1. **Preparatory and Initial Stage:** In this phase, the interviewees were motivated to engage in the discussion by thoroughly familiarizing them with the survey's objectives, the methods of data recording that would be employed, and the ethical principles ensuring confidentiality and anonymity.
2. **Core Stage:** This segment focused on the primary inquiries, allowing for in-depth exploration of the interviewee's insights and experiences.
3. **Conclusion and Termination:** At the end of the interview, we summarized the key points discussed and provided an opportunity for any additional thoughts or reflections from the teachers.

The duration of the interviews was approximately 30 to 45 minutes, although in one instance, the total time exceeded 60 minutes due to the depth and richness of the conversation. Each interview was carefully conducted to ensure a comfortable and open environment for the teachers to share their perspectives regarding the involvement of families in the educational process for students with severe multiple disabilities.

The basic interview structure:

The survey involved several key components aimed at understanding the dynamics surrounding special education intervention for families. Initially, we focused on establishing contact with participants and effectively conveying the survey's purpose to ensure clarity and engagement. A significant aspect of the research was to investigate the specific needs of families navigating the complexities of special education interventions, particularly in the context of supporting children with disabilities.

We aimed to intricately map out how the process of coping with disability shapes special education interventions. This involved analyzing various tasks and the overall course of the intervention as it relates to working collaboratively with the child's family. Throughout the survey, we conducted two short interviews with parents of students with Severe Multiple Disabilities (SMD). Although these interviews provided valuable insights, the relevance of their responses was somewhat limited, leading us to categorize them as supplementary sources of information rather than primary data.

After conducting all interviews, we meticulously transcribed the recorded conversations into a written format. This transcription process was crucial as it laid the groundwork for a subsequent quality-based analysis of the data. We employed open coding techniques, which allowed us to categorize the responses while also quantifying certain aspects of them. In our

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analysis, we actively sought out original and contradictory statements from the interviews, as these could provide a foundation for theoretical development in understanding the complexities of special education interventions.

To facilitate a comprehensive analysis, all data collected were systematically classified into distinct categories. We not only organized the responses but also compared the survey outcomes with data gathered from an in-depth analysis of the educational processes experienced by students with SMD. This comparative approach enabled us to deepen our understanding of the topics addressed in the survey, as we refined and expanded the categories related to our central focus on special education interventions.

CONCLUSION

This research examines the relationship between the family environment of students with multiple disabilities and their educational experiences. Despite some methodological limitations discussed within, it presents a well-supported summary of conclusions. These conclusions highlight the needs of families in relation to the educational process, the objectives and progression of special education interventions, and how the experience of managing a child's disability impacts their education.

Scope and Recommendations:

The summary of recommendations based on this research is as follows:

1. The educational documents must outline the objectives and outcomes related to the student's family and extracurricular environments. This includes professional guidance provided by parents and the transfer of skills acquired outside of the classroom.
2. Nursing activities should also be integrated into the educational process, as for some students, these activities may require more time than traditional education.
3. Effective communication between teachers and parents serves as a vital compensatory mechanism that helps address students' communication deficiencies. It enables both teachers and families to better understand students with specific developmental disabilities (SMD). Significant compensatory mechanisms discussed in this text include sharing experiences and situations from both the school and home environments, the teacher studying the student's personal history, visiting the student's home, and learning about the immediate context of the student's life.
4. The way parents cope with their child's disability significantly impacts their understanding of the student's actual educational capabilities. The educational journey often shifts from unrealistic expectations at the start of school to a more reasonable understanding of the child's abilities. Initially, parents tend to invest heavily in their child's education; however, this can lead to mental exhaustion over time. In some cases, this exhaustion results in neglect of the child and a loss of faith in the importance of continued support. It would benefit teachers to realistically assess the parents' capacity to invest in both their child's care and education.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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