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**MAKING DECISIONS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF
FACTORS AFFECTING DECISION MAKING PROCESSES
FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS OF STUDENTS WITH
SPECIAL NEEDS**

A thesis submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education (Special Education) Massey University
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New Zealand

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that it has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation or report submitted to this University or to any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen McLachlan". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a dotted horizontal line.

Karen J McLachlan

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the experiences and perspectives of parents and caregivers and professionals in the education of students with special needs. Special education is reviewed and the move towards parent-professional partnerships is examined. In the past, there has been little critical evaluation of the role of parents in educational decision-making. This study recognises the difficulties encountered by parents, caregivers and professionals in creating efficient partnerships. Without documenting the experiences of the people significantly concerned in the education of children with special needs, many erroneous assumptions may be made.

The study involves using semi-structured interview questions to record the narratives of 21 parents and caregivers of children with special needs and 7 professionals. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with each person. The findings suggested that whilst professionals considered their open approach enabled parents and caregivers to be fully informed, comments made by parents contradicted this view. Many parents expressed feelings of isolation and neglect as they remained ignorant of educational decisions and starved of information. Comments by participants are used to illustrate significant themes which emerged from the interviews.

A participant questionnaire summarises relevant issues derived from the interview questions and provides the data presented in computer generated charts. In most cases, the responses indicated agreement with the statements.

An analysis of the data shows many parents and caregivers have not been included in significant aspects of their child's education. Although there are compelling reasons for their non-participation, if recent educational policy aims to include students and their families in educational decision-making, there is much work to be done by educators to foster effective parent/professional partnerships.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

i)	Declaration	i
ii)	Abstract	ii
iii)	Acknowledgements	iii
iv)	Table of Contents	iv
x)	List of Tables	x
 CHAPTER ONE – Introduction		 1
1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Background to the Study	3
1.3	Organisation of the Thesis	5
 CHAPTER TWO – Literature Review		 6
2.1	Introduction	6
2.2	Special Education	8
2.3	Partnership and Parents	12
2.4	Implications for the Present Research	18
2.5	Research Questions	20
 CHAPTER THREE – Methodology		 21
3.1	Introduction	21
3.2	Ethical Requirements	21
3.3.	Recruitment of Participants	22

3.4	Data Gathering	23
3.5	In-depth Individual Interviews	25
3.6	The Purpose of Individual Interviews	26
3.7	Agenda of Topics	27
3.8	The Interview Environment	27
3.9	Interview Structure, Content and Process	27
3.10	Analysis of Narrative Data	29
3.11	Summary	30
CHAPTER FOUR – Results		31
4.1	Introduction	31
4.2	Section 1: Results of Parent Interviews and Questionnaires	32
4.2.1	Statement 1: I feel that I take an effective part in my child's education	32
4.2.2	Statement 2: I am fully involved in making decisions about educational programmes for my child	32
4.2.3	Statement 3: I have been told about a variety of educational options and choices for my child	33
4.2.4	Statement 4: I have made decisions based on the information I have been given	33
4.2.5	Statement 5: My expectations about my child's education have been met	34
4.2.6	Statement 6: I have helped my child achieve success at school	34
4.2.7	Statement 7: Special education provides the best educational opportunities available for my child	35
4.2.8	Statement 8: I have a positive relationship with teachers	36
4.2.9	Statement 9: Teachers communicate with me mainly when there are problems with my child at school	36

4.2.10	Statement 10: I am satisfied with the level of involvement in my child's education	37
4.2.11	Statement 11: I am actively involved in the IEP process	37
4.2.12	Statement 12: The advice given by teachers has been helpful	38
4.3	Section 2: Results of Professional Interviews and Questionnaires	39
4.3.1	Statement 1: The parents of the students with whom I am involved take an active part in their child's education	39
4.3.2	Statement 2: I fully involve parents when making educational decisions about their child	39
4.3.3	Statement 3: I inform parents about a variety of educational options and choices available for their child	40
4.3.4	Statement 4: Parents have made decisions based on the information I have given them	40
4.3.5	Statement 5: I feel that I am aware of parental expectations regarding their child's education	41
4.3.6	Statement 6: I feel that I meet parental expectations regarding their child's education	41
4.3.7	Statement 7: Parental participation helps their child to achieve success at school	42
4.3.8	Statement 8: For students with special needs, the 'advantages' of special education outweigh the 'disadvantages'	42
4.3.9	Statement 9: I have a positive relationship with parents	43
4.3.10	Statement 10: I communicate with parents mainly when there are problems with their child at school	44
4.3.11	Statement 11: I am satisfied with the extent of parents' participation in their child's education	44
4.3.12	Statement 12: I actively involve parents in meetings to discuss the progress of their child	45

4.3.13	Statement 13: Parents fulfil the expectations I have of them regarding the education of their child	45
CHAPTER FIVE – Interviews		47
5.1	Introduction	47
5.2	Research Questions for and Comments by Parents	47
5.2.1	How did you and your child become involved in special education?	47
5.2.2	In what ways do you think that special education provides the best educational opportunities for your child?	53
5.2.3	What have been the benefits of special education for you/your son/your daughter?	55
5.2.4	Would you have considered a regular class placement for your child? Why?/Why not?	56
5.2.5	What do you consider to be the ‘disadvantages’ of special education?	59
5.2.6	On what occasions do teachers contact you regarding school and your child?	61
5.2.7	How do you view your relationship with teachers	63
5.2.8	What information have you been given about educational options and choices for (your child)?	68
5.2.9	What have been/are your expectations/goals for your son/daughter?	77
5.3	Research Questions for and Comments by Professionals	81
5.3.1	To what extent do you think parents should be involved in their child’s education?	81
5.3.2	How are parents approached to become involved in school-based activities?	83
5.3.3	In what way(s) do you involve parents when making educational decisions about their children?	84

5.3.4	What do you consider to be the reason(s) for parents' participation or their non-participation in the education of their children?	86
5.3.5	How and for what reasons do you communicate with parents?	88
5.3.6	Do you consider parents to be well-informed about the options and choices available to them?	90
5.3.7	In what way(s) do parents fulfil the expectations you have of them regarding the education of their child?	92
5.3.8	What do you consider to be critical factors in establishing positive relationships with parents?	94
5.3.9	For students with special needs, what do you consider to be the 'advantages' of special education?	95
5.3.10	How do you view your role as a teacher of students with special needs?	101
5.3.11	In what way(s) do you support the parents of your students?	102
5.3.12	What would you consider to be the major concerns of parents?	102
CHAPTER SIX – Discussion		104
6.1	Introduction	104
6.2	Interpretation of Themes	104
6.2.1	Reasons for placing children in special education	104
6.2.2	Parents' concerns about teachers	107
6.2.3	Teachers' concerns about parents	109
6.2.4	Why don't parents come to school?	111
6.2.5	Supporting parents	114
6.2.6	Supporting teachers	117
6.2.7	Family relationships and personal adjustment	118
6.2.8	Battles with bureaucracy	121

6.2.9	Culture and ethnicity	122
6.2.10	Listening to parents	125
6.3	Summary	126
CHAPTER SEVEN – Conclusion and Personal Reflective Evaluation		129
7.1	Introduction	129
7.2	The Aim of the Research	129
7.3	Conclusion	130
7.4	Personal Reflective Evaluation	132
REFERENCES		138
APPENDICES		144
A	Information Sheet for Parents and Caregivers	144
B	Information Sheet for Professionals	146
C	Invitation to Parents and Caregivers to Participate	148
D	Invitation to Professionals to Participate	149
E	Thank-you and Reminder Note	150
F	Confidentiality Agreement Between Participant and Interpreter	151
G	Consent Form for Participants	152
H	Interview Questions for Parents and Caregivers	153
I	Interview Questions for Professionals	154
J	Questionnaire for Parents and Caregivers	155
K	Questionnaire for Professionals	156

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER FOUR

Table 1	Parent Survey Statement 1: I feel that I take an effective part in my child's education	32
Table 2	Parent Survey Statement 2: I am fully involved in making decisions about educational programmes for my child	33
Table 3	Parent Survey Statement 3: I have been told about a variety of educational options and choices for my child	33
Table 4	Parent Survey Statement 4: I have made decisions based on the information I have been given	34
Table 5	Parent Survey Statement 5: My expectations about my child's education have been met	34
Table 6	Parent Survey Statement 6: I have helped my child achieve success at school	35
Table 7	Parent Survey Statement 7: Special education provides the best educational opportunities available for my child	35
Table 8	Parent Survey Statement 8: I have a positive relationship with teachers	36
Table 9	Parent Survey Statement 9: Teachers communicate with me mainly when there are problems with my child at school	37
Table 10	Parent Survey Statement 10: I am satisfied with the level of involvement in my child's education	37
Table 11	Parent Survey Statement 11: I am actively involved in the IEP process	38
Table 12	Parent Survey Statement 12: The advice given by teachers has been helpful	38
Table 13	Teacher Survey Statement 1: The parents of the students with whom I am involved take an active part in their child's education	39

Table 14	Teacher Survey Statement 2: I fully involve parents when making educational decisions about their child	40
Table 15	Teacher Survey Statement 3: I inform parents about a variety of educational options and choices available for their child	40
Table 16	Teacher Survey Statement 4: Parents have made decisions based on the information I have given them	41
Table 17	Teacher Survey Statement 5: I feel that I am aware of parental expectations regarding their child's education	41
Table 18	Teacher Survey Statement 6: I feel that I meet parental expectations regarding their child's education	42
Table 19	Teacher Survey Statement 7: Parental participation helps their child to achieve success at school	42
Table 20	Teacher Survey Statement 8: For students with special needs, the 'advantages' of special education outweigh the 'disadvantages'	43
Table 21	Teacher Survey Statement 9: I have a positive relationship with parents	43
Table 22	Teacher Survey Statement 10: I communicate with parents mainly when there are problems with their child at school	44
Table 23	Teacher Survey Statement 11: I am satisfied with the extent of parents' participation in their child's education	45
Table 24	Teacher Survey Statement 12: I actively involve parents in meetings to discuss the progress of their child	45
Table 25	Professional Survey Statement 13: Parents fulfil the expectations I have of them regarding the education of their child	46