

Development of the NCSEAM Parent/Family Surveys

One of the goals of the National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring (NCSEAM) has been to focus attention on the importance of family participation in early intervention and special education. In January 2002, NCSEAM established the Parent/Family Involvement Workgroup to provide guidance on the development of a set of survey instruments that would yield reliable, valid, and useful measures of families' perceptions and involvement in the early intervention and special education process. The instrument development work has been coordinated by Dr. Batya Elbaum, Associate Professor of Education and Psychology at the University of Miami. Dr. William P. Fisher, Jr. of MetaMetrics, Inc. has served as the project's measurement consultant.

Several important principles guided development of the surveys:

Content. Instrument content should be generated and vetted by all important stakeholders in the early intervention and special education systems, especially families.

Construct definition. Hypotheses concerning the constructs defined by the stakeholder-generated items should be tested through the application of Rasch modeling.

Reliability. Measurement tools should have a minimum measurement reliability of .90 and yield at least four statistically separable measurement ranges.

Interpretability. The meaning of the measures should be transparent and easy to understand.

Acceptability. The length and readability of the survey should be kept within parameters acceptable to the intended respondents.

Usefulness. The measures should have significant, demonstrable relevance to services and results for families and children.

Survey content

The measure development process began with a comprehensive review of the literature on (a) legal requirements and best practice regarding family involvement in early intervention and special education; (b) theoretical perspectives and empirical studies on the relationship between parent/family involvement and outcomes for children with disabilities and their families; (c) models of parent involvement and relevant empirical findings in general education; and (d) instrumentation, particularly surveys and interview protocols, related to the aforementioned topics.

In spring of 2003, NCSEAM sponsored stakeholder input sessions in 6 states: New Mexico, New Hampshire, Mississippi, Kentucky, California and Florida. In each state, participants were asked to generate items representing important aspects of families' experience with the early intervention and special education process.

The complete list of almost 500 nonduplicated items was submitted to an expert panel convened by PACER. The panel was asked to rate the importance of each item using a 4-point scale from "not so important" to "extremely important." 384 items (78%) were

rated as very important or extremely important. These items were deemed to constitute the core of the NCSEAM survey item bank.

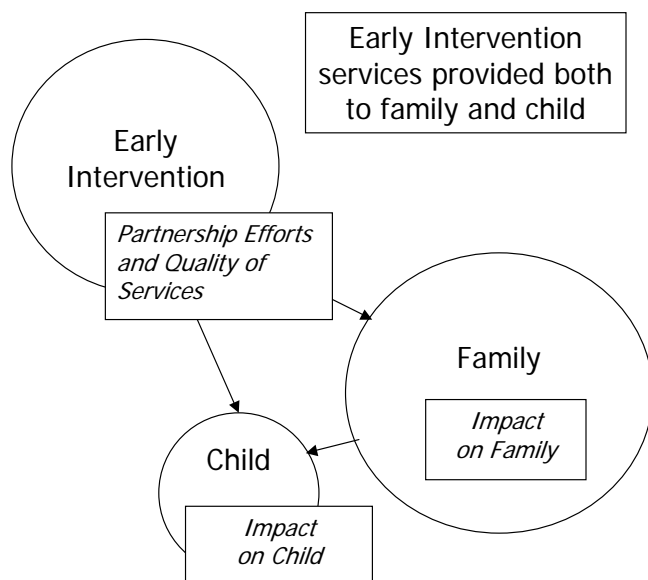
PACER also sent an email inquiry to organizations in its network, asking whether these organizations had used any survey instruments to evaluate parent involvement in and/or perceptions regarding services for children with special needs and their families. Several organizations forwarded questionnaires whose items were checked against the existing item bank to locate any items with new content.

Project Forum, which works collaboratively with NASDSE, conducted a survey of state directors of special education to ascertain whether any other states were implementing parent surveys. Several states provided copies of their existing parent surveys.

Concurrently, Dr. Fisher and Dr. Elbaum undertook a re-analysis of five years of data from the parent survey that Florida's Part B monitoring division had administered since 1999, through a discretionary project to the University of Miami, in districts participating in its focused monitoring activities. Data were available for over 30,000 respondents. Results of Rasch analyses indicated that the items did not reveal a unitary variable structure but rather articulated four separate constructs: (a) schools' efforts to partner with parents, (b) parents' perceptions of the quality of the special education services provided to their children; (c) parents' perceptions of outcomes of services for their children, and (d) parents' reports of the ways they are involved in the special education process. Item calibrations and person measures were calculated for each of the four constructs. The items generated through NCSEAM's stakeholder process were then grouped into these four categories plus a fifth category, not represented in the Florida survey items, addressing family outcomes.

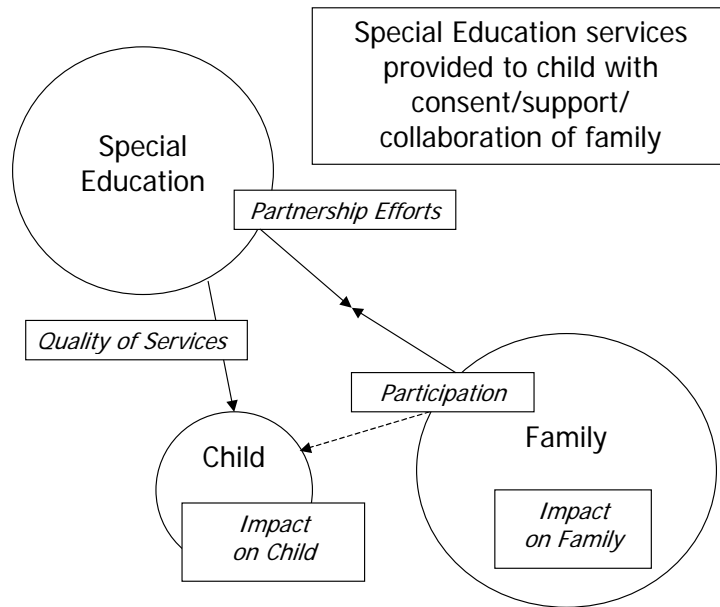
Two conceptual models were developed reflecting the relations among constructs for Part C and Part B. These are represented below.

Early Intervention Model



Given that efforts to engage families in a collaborative relationship are central to the provision of early intervention services, partnership efforts and quality of services are conceptualized as a single construct reflecting family-centered services.

Special Education Model



In the special education model, partnership efforts on the part of schools or districts are reciprocated through parents' active involvement in the special education process.

Examination of survey instruments being used in other states revealed a number of tools with similar item content. Permission was obtained from the New York Part B lead agency and the Connecticut Part C lead agency to analyze their survey data, redacted of any identifying information. Survey items for each tool were separately calibrated using the same measurement approach that was applied to the Florida survey data. Items from the New York survey were found to group into the same four categories as those from the Florida parent survey. The item calibrations of seven items with similar content from the New York and Florida surveys were found to have a correlation of $r = .98$. Calibrations for four Connecticut and Florida survey items with similar content had a similarly high correlation. These findings provided strong support for the consistency of the NCSEAM construct definitions and the invariance of item calibrations across different populations of respondents.

In October 2003, draft items articulating each of the posited constructs for Part B and Part C were reviewed by the NCSEAM Parent Involvement Workgroup. The Workgroup made the following recommendations:

The Part B items exhaustively covered all content that stakeholders had identified as important to families. It was noted that some items might be excessively long and/or at too high a reading level. The Workgroup recommended that further input be sought out with regard to the Part C instrument. Consequently, in November and December, 2003, the Part C items were reviewed by parent groups in Florida (one location), Tennessee (two locations), and New Jersey (three locations). The Florida and New Jersey groups included significant representation of Spanish-speaking families. All the groups provided general feedback on the survey as well as specific recommendations regarding item additions, item deletions, and rewording. Additional input was obtained from university experts in the field of early intervention.

The Workgroup also considered the applicability of either the Part B or Part C items, or some combination of the two, to 619. The consensus of the Workgroup was that further work was required in order to produce relevant and unambiguous items for families receiving early childhood special education services. Item development for a 619 family survey is expected to be completed in 2006.

Between October 2004 and February 2005, NCSEAM conducted the National Item Validation Study in order to obtain item responses from a nationally representative sample of families. Eight Part C Lead Agencies (NM, FL, LA, MA, IA, CA, NJ, GA) and 6 SEAs (NM, FL, NH, NJ, MS, GA) agreed to solicit the participation of families in their states. To reduce the response burden on participating families, the number of items to which any given family would be asked to respond was reduced by dividing the the Part B and Part C items, separately, into three groups: a common group, to appear on each of two alternate forms; and two unique groups of items, each of which would appear on one form only. Optically scannable forms were printed and distributed to participating states. Each SEA was provided with a target sampling plan and instructions on administration of the survey. Participation recruitment strategies and modes of administration of the survey differed by state. Mode and language of administration of the survey were recorded so that it would be possible to examine whether these variables were associated with variance in item calibrations. Survey responses were obtained from a total of approximately 1750 families receiving Early Intervention services and 2600 parents of children receiving special education services.

Data analyses from the National Item Validation Study confirmed the high reliability and validity of the measurement scales. Summary information on these analyses is included in the NCSEAM powerpoint presentation from the August 2005 OSEP Summer Institute. Output from these analyses, as well as additional technical information, is also available on the NCSEAM website.