



SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT AND THE RESTRICTIVENESS OF SCHOOL PLACEMENTS OVER TIME

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Introduction

A primary goal of the Dawn Project is to fully involve families in coordinating all the services and supports a child and family is receiving, while ensuring that service provision occurs in the community, as opposed to more restrictive settings (see Stroul & Friedman, 1986). The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the (a) level of involvement of schools from which children are participating in the Dawn Project and (b) restrictiveness of educational placement over time for student participants.

Methods

Study Participants. This study includes data from 165 participants, ranging in age from 7 to 17 years, with a mean age of 13.07 at the time of enrollment. Males comprised 66.7% of the sample; half of the group was African-American (50.3%) and 45.5% were Caucasian. On average, youth in this sample were enrolled in the Dawn Project for 15.53 months. Youth in this sample had an average of 1.28 contacts per month with their service coordinator and had an average of 0.48 school representatives present at each team meeting.

School Involvement. To understand the level of school involvement on Dawn Project child and family teams, information from service coordinator notes was quantified for two specific variables: (1) number of school representatives at each child and family team meeting and (2) number of contacts between service coordinators and school representatives over time for each team. The school involvement factor was represented by the average number of service coordinator-school contacts per month and average number of school representatives per team meeting. These two aspects of school involvement were also combined to create a total school involvement variable by adding their values. To facilitate additional analyses, cases were then grouped into three groups based on level of school involvement (high, medium, and low). Educational placement at disenrollment was dichotomized into (1) placement in school and (2) placement out of school.

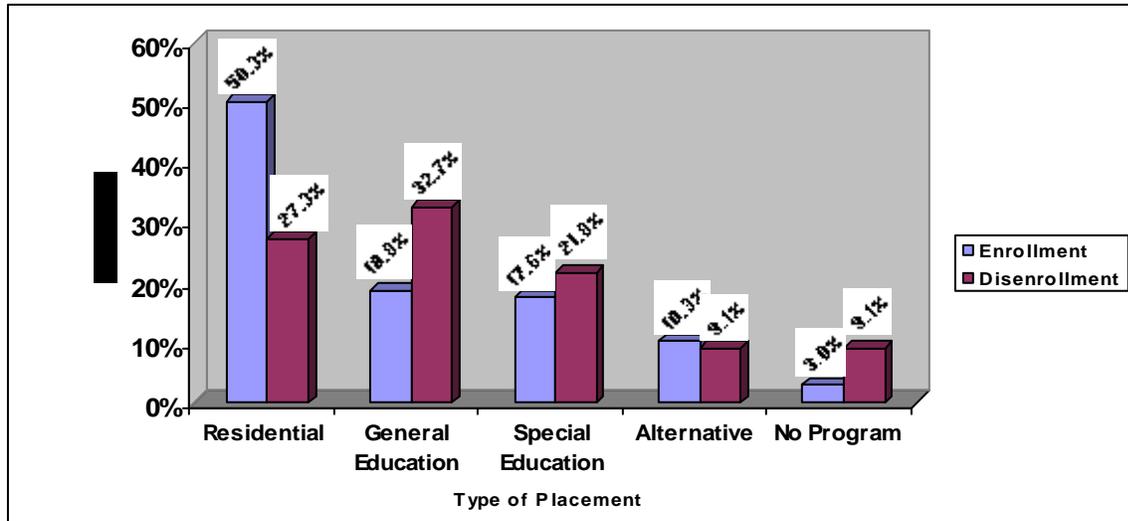
Analyses. Predictor variables were entered into regression analyses to test the hypothesis that they were associated with educational restrictiveness at disenrollment. Independent samples t-tests were used to compare means for various groups of cases. In order to qualitatively document the relationship between a child, family, school, and the system of care, four representative multi-axial life event timelines were also created (Epstein & Quinn, 1996) with accompanying case narratives that described specific events that occurred during Dawn Project involvement. Two timelines represented youth with high levels of school involvement and two timelines represented youth with low school involvement. Behavior, significant life events, and

services for each case, as well as changes in educational and placement restrictiveness during Dawn Project participation were documented on each timeline.

Results

Type of Placement. Figure 1 presents the placements of youth in this sample at both enrollment and disenrollment from the Dawn Project.

Figure 1. Youth placements at enrollment and disenrollment from the Dawn Project.



Predictors of Placement. The results of a regression analysis indicated that youth ethnicity, gender, age, and placement at enrollment were significant predictors of educational placement at disenrollment. However, the school involvement factors (i.e., school contact, school representatives at team meetings) were not significant predictors of educational placement at disenrollment (see Table 1).

Table 1. Regression analysis predicting educational placement at disenrollment ($N = 165$).

	B	SE	β
Months in Dawn	0.00	0.02	-0.02
Ethnicity	0.43	0.21	0.15*
Age at enrollment	0.18	0.05	0.26**
Gender	-0.53	0.24	-0.18*
Placement at enrollment	0.22	0.09	0.19*
School reps. per team meeting	-0.08	0.21	-0.04
School contacts per month	-0.13	0.14	-0.10

Note: $R^2 = .156^{***}$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

A series of independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare groups according to whether youth were placed in an out-of-school placement or in-school placement at disenrollment. Youth placed in in-school placements at disenrollment were younger, in a less restrictive placement at enrollment, and had more school representation at team meetings than youth in an out-of-school placement at disenrollment (see Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of in-school and out-of-school placements at disenrollment by study variables (N = 165).

	Outside of School		In School		<i>F</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Age	13.78	1.75	12.52	2.15	2.12**
Placement at enrollment	3.26	1.17	2.82	1.28	5.04*
School reps per team meeting	0.37	0.45	0.58	0.84	10.93*
School contacts per month	1.19	0.96	1.35	1.12	0.98
School involvement	1.56	1.30	1.92	1.81	4.20

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

Multiaxial Timelines. The two cases with high levels of school involvement differed from the low school involvement cases in that they were referred by the education system. Overall, when the two cases with high school involvement were compared to the two cases with low school involvement, the students with high involvement experienced more significant life events, received more school-based services, demonstrated more severe behavior problems, and experienced more changes in educational placement than students with low involvement.

Conclusions

The nature of children’s behavior can impact school involvement and outcomes. Research has demonstrated that youth who exhibit externalizing behaviors can be particularly difficult to support in the classroom, while those who demonstrate internalizing behaviors at school may be perceived as not needing direct or immediate intervention. When we look at the four cases that were examined using the multi-axial life event timelines, we can see that the students with high levels of school involvement also demonstrated more severe externalizing behaviors, including explosiveness and violence toward others. They also received more services in school, such as a classroom aide. This is consistent with descriptions of youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties in the literature and may account for the higher levels of school involvement experienced by the two cases.

Trends in the data suggest that higher school involvement may be associated with placement in settings outside of school. Although it is only speculative at this point, the reason for this may be that schools are more involved in cases where the youth is experiencing the greatest difficulty functioning at school. Such youth may reach a point of peak school involvement before being placed in a different setting. In other words, the relationship between school involvement and educational placement may be curvilinear, with less restrictive educational placement occurring with moderate levels of school involvement. There are several possible reasons for the relationship between school involvement and educational placement. For

example, it may be that the nature of the school/educational involvement was negative or due to an increase in school difficulties.

References

Epstein, M. H., & Quinn, K. (1996). A case study approach to analyzing the relationship between children and services in a system of care. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 4, 21-29.

Stroul, B., & Friedman, R. (1986). *A system of care for severely emotionally disturbed children and youth*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center.