**THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF PARENTS’ PERCEPTIONS ON SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF THEIR CHILDREN WITH SEVERE DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES**

**Sarah Bjornson, York University, and Adrienne Perry, PhD, York University**

**Objectives:** Education systems across Canada have adopted inclusive education policies for integrating children with Developmental Disabilities (DD) into mainstream schools and classrooms. However, research suggests that parents of children with DD frequently feel more supported by specialized schools and report lower satisfaction with mainstream classrooms. Additionally, parents of children with more severe DD report lower satisfaction with school services. Specific complaints from parents are that they lack choice in educational decisions and must fight for assistive services within schools. Additionally, adequacy of professional services and relationships with service providers have been linked to improved quality of life among families caring for members with DD but schools and educators have not been considered amongst these professional services and service providers. This is a critical oversight considering the significant role that schools play in the lives of all children and their families The purpose of this research is to investigate parents’ perceptions of school experiences for their children with severe DD.

**Method:** Data were collected through the GO4KIDDS project which was funded by a large team grant previously obtained by the Perry Lab at York University. Participants were 185 Canadian parents (89.9% mothers) ranging in age from 25 to 58 years (*M* = 42) of school-aged children with severe DD. The children were 73.0% male (*n* = 138) and ranged in age from 4 to 19 years (*M* = 11.08). Participants were recruited through websites and agencies providing services for children with DD, intellectual disability, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Of these children, 41.1% had DD only (*n* = 79) and 57.3% had an ASD with or without a comorbid DD (*n* = 110). The majority (72.6%) of the children attended a public school (*n* = 138). Within schools, 11.4% of children were placed in mainstream classrooms with minimal assistive services (*n* = 21), 33% were in mainstream classrooms with one-to-one assistance (*n* = 61), and 41.1% were in special education classrooms (*n* = 76). Parents provided brief written responses to open-ended questions (e.g., “please add any comments about your child’s school situation”). These responses will be analysed utilizing a Word Association Thematic Analysis method (Thelwall, 2021). Two raters will separately analyze responses to detect and contextualize word associations, so that inter-rater reliability can be determined. Coherent themes will then be established based on terms that have similar meanings or contexts.

**Results:** Results are pending thematic analysis. It is hypothesized that both positive and negative experiences will be reported within the school system. Specific themes expected to arise are regarding relationships with teaching and assistive staff, assistive services, types of classrooms, and institutional policies and procedures.

**Discussion:** Children with severe DD are often excluded from DD research. The proposed study will elucidate parental perceptions on the school experiences of these severely affected children. The results of the proposed study could have significant implications for families, schools, and service providers as they interact within the education field. A clearer understanding of the effects of school factors on families could be utilized to improve quality of life for those impacted by DD.

**Correspondence:**

Sarah Bjornson, York University, bjornson@yorku.ca

Adrienne Perry, PhD, York University, perry@yorku.ca