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The Importance of Collaboration Between Parents and School in Special Education: Perceptions From the Field

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The Importance of Collaboration Between Parents and School in Special Education:

Perceptions From the Field

by

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Abstract

Each student receiving special education services in the public school system, roughly 6.4 million students, has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA). IDEA dictates that a team of people familiar with the student, including the parents, should create the IEP. Unfortunately, research indicates that many parents believe their participation is not welcome. While only a small percentage of parents may actually be dissatisfied with the IEP process, the cost of dissatisfaction is high, further stretching already limited resources that could be better used in the classroom.

The purpose of this study was to investigate parents' and school personnel's beliefs about and experiences with collaborative activities that took place prior to the annual IEP or 504 plan meeting. Participant perceptions and suggestions about improving the special education process were also explored. In-depth interviews were conducted with an assistant principal, a self-contained ESE teacher, a resource ESE teacher, a regular education inclusion teacher, and three parents whose children were receiving special education services. All participants were involved in the special education process at the elementary school level.

The study's findings indicated that while school personnel perceive that they are providing opportunities for parents to be involved in a collaborative manner, parents do not perceive that a fully open and transparent collaboration exists. The school made an effort to generate a comfortable environment inviting collaboration during formal meetings; however, parents expressed frustration with the more informal aspects of the special education process including initiation of services. Teachers and parents identified

similar concerns and frustrations with the IEP process and suggested similar ideas for improvement. Both school personnel and parents identified scarcity of resources within the school, which seemed to create a barrier to open communication and collaboration. Suggestions for improvement included access to outside support and advocacy groups to increase parent understanding of the special education process and facilitate its process. It is concluded that, ultimately, policy makers should become more involved at the classroom level in order to understand the implications of policy change.

Chapter One: Introduction

Background

There are approximately 49.5 million public school students in the United States. Roughly 6.4 million, or 13%, of public school students are receiving special education services (Kober & Usher, 2012). Each student receiving special education services has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA). The IEP is both a process and a document (Rodger, 1995) that details the goals and objectives for each individual student's education for the term of one year. IDEA (2004) dictates that the IEP is to be created by a team of people familiar with the student and should consist of, at least, the child's parent(s), a special education teacher, a regular education teacher, a representative of the public agency, an individual who can interpret the instructional implication of evaluation results, and, when appropriate, any related services provider(s) such as a speech and language pathologist.

Laws protecting the rights of, meeting the individual needs of, and improving the results of children with disabilities and their families date back to 1975. These laws mandate parental participation during the identification and development of a student's educational goals and objectives. However, research indicates that many parents believe their participation is not well received (Davern, 1996; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Pruitt, Wandry, & Hollums, 1998; Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010; Reiman, Beck, Peter, Zeller, Moses, & Engiles, 2007) and parental participation is less than what is

prescribed by the law (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Pruitt et al., 1998; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988; Werts, Mamlin, & Pogoloff, 2002; Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, & Maxwell, 1978). Unfortunately, lack of parental involvement may lead to parental dissatisfaction resulting in due process appeals and severe fiscal consequences for public school districts. Reiman, Beck, Coppola, and Engiles (2010) reported that public school districts spent "$146.5 million on special education mediation, due process hearings, and litigation during 1999–2000" (p. 7). A further concern, as Martin (2005) pointed out, is that "most schools and districts have no mechanism in place by which to assess the level of satisfaction in their IEP environment" (p. xv). Therefore, analysis of the way IEP teams are functioning may be conducted "through review of formal interventions being requested by those who are dissatisfied with their IEP team experience" (Martin, 2005, p. xvii).

Given the evidence for parent dissatisfaction and the lack of parental involvement with the IEP process, an interesting phenomenon becomes evident in the literature: Despite a plethora of suggested methods to improve the IEP process there continues to be an abundance of literature reporting parental dissatisfaction with the IEP process. Some suggestions in the literature to improve parent relations include strategies to educate special education teachers on averting and resolving conflicts (Lake & Billingsley, 2000) and improving collaboration (Handler, 2006). Several recommendations to improve the IEP process propose implementation of systemic changes at multiple levels within teacher preparation programs, the school, and the district (Handler, 2006; Mueller, 2009). Other proposals to improve the IEP process involve abstract concepts such as reflection and analysis following IEP team meetings (Dabkowski, 2004). Suggestions to improve

the IEP process that are offered in the literature may be considered sensible. However, after decades of research indicating that parental involvement improves student achievement (Carter, 2002; Epstein, 1995; Goldstein et al., 1980; Heeden, Moses, & Peter, n.d.; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mahon, 2010; Muscott, 2002; Pruitt et al., 1998) and after 37 years of laws mandating the inclusion of parents of children with special needs in the IEP process, there remain continual concerns about the lack of and quality of parental participation (Habing, 2004; Mueller, 2009; Oleniczak, 2002; Reiman, Beck, Coppola et al., 2010; Rodger, 1995; Weishaar, 2010; Werts et al., 2002). It can be concluded that the suggestions in the literature are either not being implemented or are not effecting a change that impacts parent satisfaction.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the present study was to investigate parents' and teachers' beliefs about and experiences with collaboration activities that took place prior to the annual Individualized Education Program meeting and the influence of collaboration on the quality of parent participation during the annual IEP meeting. The present study investigated parents' and school personnel's perceptions of benefits related to collaborative efforts throughout the IEP process. Additionally, the present study explored whether parents and teachers were satisfied or dissatisfied with the current IEP process, in general, as well as with specific aspects of the IEP process. Perceptions about what parents and school personnel believe are barriers to collaboration as well as what they can do to improve the IEP process were also explored.

Significance of the Study

For several reasons, the present study is significant. First, evidence is ample to suggest that although the laws stipulate parents must be involved in the IEP development process, it is often perceived to be a less than satisfactory experience (Habing, 2004; Mueller, 2009; Oleniczak, 2002; Reiman, Beck, Coppola et al., 2010; Rodger, 1995; Weishaar, 2010; Werts et al., 2002). Despite abundant evidence showing that parental involvement in education improves student achievement (Carter, 2002; Epstein, 1995; Goldstein et al., 1980; Heeden et al., n.d.; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mahon, 2010; Muscott, 2002; Pruitt et al., 1998), this vital, potentially powerful, dimension of special education is persistently problematic and in need of improvement. Additionally, 98% of teachers surveyed reported parental involvement "was essential to good teaching" (Swap, 1993, p. 46; Muscott, 2002). However, the evidence in support of parental involvement in student achievement, the legal requirement for parental participation, and the agreement of teachers that parent participation is necessary has not been enough, as is usually the case with mandates and laws, to ensure positive parental involvement (Davern, 1996; Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000; Tucker, 2009). The present study explored why parent/school collaboration in the IEP process is often unsatisfactory and how it can be made more helpful.

Second, the public school system is facing increased accountability and regulation while also enduring budget cuts and a continual reduction in resources. Given the reduction of resources along with the costs involved in mediation and due process proceedings (Reiman, Beck, Coppola et al., 2010), it is imperative that public schools find cost-effective solutions to parent dissatisfaction with the IEP process. The present

study investigated the nature of the early stages of parent/school collaboration in the development of a child's IEP—a potentially low-cost and proactive method of positively engaging parents in their child's education—and its impact on parental involvement and satisfaction with the IEP process.

Finally, while research, teachers, and parents alike confirm the necessity of parental involvement in a child's education—especially when the child has been identified with special needs, a disconnect occurs in achieving meaningful parental involvement in a way that allows parents to feel that they are valued members of their child's education team. As Lake and Billingsley (2000, p. 249) pointed out, "there is much written about parent-school partnerships but little is written about maintaining effective collaboration" in these relationships. The present study explored and attempted to identify the key beliefs and perceptions about collaboration between school personnel and parents in the development of a child's IEP in order, ultimately, to identify ways to improve this important phase of developing a working relationship between parent and school, a relationship that is critical to the well-being and educational success of a special needs student.

Overview of Theoretical Framework

There are multiple theories that contribute to an understanding of the IEP process. Because the study will address several facets of collaboration prior to the annual IEP meeting, concepts and principles from several theories will be used to frame the study. The primary purpose of IEP teams is to develop a student's annual educational plan; therefore, concepts and principles from goal setting theory will be considered (Locke & Latham, 1990; Locke & Latham, 1994). Because the IEP team is tasked with working

together as equals to produce a functional individual educational plan, concepts and principles that form collaboration theory will also be explicated (Austin, 2000; Gajda, 2004; Martin-Rodriguez, Beaulieu, D'Amour, & Ferranda-Videla, 2005; Montiel-Overall, 2005; Patel, Pettitt, & Wilson, 2012; Perrault, McClelland, Austin, & Sieppert, 2011). The theory of group dynamics is likewise important because it could help explain how an IEP team should interact to accomplish its goals and objectives, especially when one considers that the IEP team is made up of disparate individuals from diverse backgrounds (Levi, 2007; Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Finally, concepts and principles from conflict transformation theory could help explain why IEP teams do not function as efficiently as they should (Galtung, 2004; Lederach, 2003; Miall, Ramsbotham, & Woodhouse, 1999). And, because research related to conflict transformation could also shed light on strategies and techniques IEP teams could use to resolve differences within the teams, this theory also will be examined in more detail in Chapter 2.

Research Questions

The principal research question was this: *How does collaboration between parents and teachers that takes place prior to the annual IEP meeting influence active parental participation in developing their child's IEP*? More specifically, the study explored the following:

- What is the nature of existing collaboration between teachers and parents prior to annual IEP meetings?

- What are parents' and teachers' perceptions and beliefs about the benefits, drawbacks, and key issues related to collaboration prior to the annual IEP meeting?

- How do teachers and parents perceive their roles in the IEP process?

- What are parents' and teachers' suggestions to improve parental involvement and parent and teacher satisfaction with the IEP process?

Definition of Terms

Special Education: Specifically designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (IDEA, 2004).

IEP: Individualized Education Program. A written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting including (a) present levels of academic achievement and functional performance including how the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum; (b) a statement of measurable annual goals designed to meet the child's specific educational needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum and meet each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability; (c) a statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable, to be provided to the child; (d) a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided to enable the child to advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals, to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum; (e) a statement of any individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the

academic achievement and functional performance of the child on state and district wide assessments; and (f) the projected date for beginning of the services and modification and the anticipated frequency, location, and duration of those services and modifications (IDEA, 2004).

IEP Team: A group of individuals that are responsible for developing, reviewing, or revising an IEP for a child with a disability, composed of the parents of the child, not less than one regular education teacher of the child, not less than one special education teacher of the child, a representative of the public agency (who is qualified to supervise the provision of specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities, is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum and is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency), an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results; and at the discretion of the parent or the agency, other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child, including related services personnel as appropriate (IDEA, 2004).

Parents: A natural, adoptive, or foster parent of a child, a guardian, or an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child's welfare (IDEA, 2004).

Parent Participation: The parents of a child with a disability must be afforded an opportunity to participate in meetings with respect to-- (a) the identification, evaluation, and educational placement of the child; and (b) the provision of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to the child. Each public agency must take steps to ensure that one or both of the parents of a child with a disability are present at each IEP team meeting or are afforded the opportunity to participate, including notifying parents of the meeting early

enough to ensure that they will have an opportunity to attend and scheduling the meeting at a mutually agreed on time and place. Parents must be provided a notice that indicates the purpose, time, and location of the meeting and who will be in attendance and that informs the parents of the provisions relating to the participation of other individuals on the IEP team who have knowledge or special expertise about the child and identify any other agency that will be invited to send a representative. If neither parent can attend an IEP team meeting, the public agency must use other methods to ensure parent participation, including individual or conference telephone calls (IDEA, 2004).

Parent Involvement: A parent of each child with a disability is a member of any group that makes decisions on the educational placement of the parent's child (IDEA, 2004).

Collaboration: Collaboration is a trusting, working relationship between two or more individuals who give up some degree of independence to engage in interaction with others within a single episode or series of episodes working towards a common mission to realize a shared goal not otherwise attainable as entities working independently (Gajda, 2004; Montiel-Overall, 2005; Patel et al., 2012; Perrault et al., 2011).

Assumptions

The following factors were assumed to exist for the purpose of the present study:

1. Special education teachers strive to make the IEP process a positive experience for parents.
2. Parents desire to actively participate in the creation of their child's IEP.
3. Parents and teachers differ in their understanding of their roles in the IEP process.
4. Collaboration efforts impact team decision-making and the potential of a student's academic success.

Summary and Organization of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to investigate parents' and school personnel's beliefs about and experiences with collaboration prior to the annual IEP meeting and the influence of collaboration on the quality of parent participation during the annual IEP meeting. The present study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 of the study provides an overview of the study. The overview includes background information on IEPs in the public school system along with preliminary research on parental participation and satisfaction with the IEP process. A statement of purpose for the study as well as the significance of the study is identified along with an overview of a theoretical framework. The research questions are explained as well as definitions of terms and assumptions of the study.

Chapter 2 of the present study includes a description of the theories that help frame the study and explains the history and development of the IEP. A comprehensive review of related literature and empirical research related to parent and teacher perceptions of parent involvement in and satisfaction with the IEP process as well as best practice recommendations within the IEP process are included in this chapter. The review of the literature focuses on a synthesis of empirical studies with the purpose of identifying gaps, themes, and trends in the literature.

Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology of the study including the research setting, population and participants, and data management, including data collection and data analysis. Delimitations and limitations of the present study along with ethical considerations that include protection of participants are also detailed.

Chapter 4 provides a review of the purpose of the present study along with a review of the study methodology. Details about participants and data analysis and a thorough description of the present study's findings are also provided.

Chapter 5 includes a summary of the present study's findings followed by detailed discussion related to the research questions and connections to the literature reviewed in chapter two. The discussion concludes with the importance of the present study's findings. Conclusions along with implications and recommendations for future research, policy development and implementation, and practice are also provided. This final chapter closes with a conclusion of the dissertation.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Organization

The purpose of the present study was to explore parents' and school personnel's beliefs about collaboration prior to the Individualized Education Program (IEP) annual meeting. The present study investigated the extent to which collaboration among parents and school influences active parental participation in the IEP process. More specifically the present study examined the nature of existing collaboration prior to the annual IEP meeting as well as perceptions and beliefs about the benefits, drawbacks, and significant issues related to that collaboration among the key stakeholders in the education of special needs children.

This chapter includes a discussion of theories that framed the present study, a history of the development of the IEP, and a review of the extant research base with the purpose of identifying gaps, themes, and trends in the literature related to IDEA, generally, and to collaboration prior to the annual IEP meeting, specifically. The review should clarify understanding of the complex nature of the IEP process as it relates to parental participation and satisfaction. The theories relevant to the present study include goal setting theory, collaboration theory, group dynamics theory, and conflict transformation theory. The review of the related literature includes key empirical research related to parent and teacher perceptions of parent involvement in and satisfaction with the IEP process and best practice standards within the IEP process.

Competing perspectives on parent participation and collaboration are reviewed followed by a summary of the chapter.

Theoretical Framework

The complexity of the IEP process is better understood by examining the concepts and principles from several theories, particularly goal setting theory, collaboration theory, group dynamics theory, and conflict transformation theory. Thus relevant concepts and principles are examined along with an explanation of how the theories clarify aspects of the IEP process and how its relevance undergirds the present study.

Goal Setting Theory. Goal setting theory has its roots in experimental psychology and can be traced from the early 1900s and the Wurzburg school in Germany where interest in mental processes led to further development of the concept of intentions. In the 1930s, ideas of specificity and difficulty were identified in the earliest experimental studies using goal setting as an independent variable (Locke & Latham, 1990). Unlike the preceding approaches to motivation, goal setting theory emphasizes purposeful and conscious human action and addresses why, given similar tasks, some people perform better than others (Locke & Latham, 1994).

One aspect of goal setting theory is that specific and difficult goals "motivate individuals to search for suitable task strategies, to plan, and utilize strategies that they have been taught" (Locke & Latham, 1994, p. 108). While the task of participating in an IEP meeting for a special education teacher may be routine, parents often do not have suitable knowledge and strategies for developing and accomplishing the goal they are then challenged to achieve (Oleniczak, 2002). In the absence of preparation and knowledge of IDEA and the IEP process, it is unfair to expect any individual, including a

parent, to contribute to the development of a functional IEP. Collaboration prior to the annual IEP meeting may provide the scaffolding necessary for parents to play an effective role in developing the IEP as well as offer a productive strategy for accomplishing the tasks at hand.

A second facet of goal setting theory is the performance of an individual in relation to the specificity and difficulty of a task. According to goal setting theory, when goals are specific and difficult, an individual will develop a sense of satisfaction only after achieving at a high level of performance (Locke & Latham, 1994). Thus, it can be concluded that parents who are not active participants will not achieve a high level of performance and, thus, will not likely attain a high level of satisfaction. Research indicates that parents are often the receivers of information at an IEP meeting (Goldstein et al., 1980; Yoshida et al., 1978). Therefore, it is not surprising that studies report parents are often not satisfied with the IEP process (Davern, 1996; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Pruitt et al., 1998; Reiman, Beck, Coppola et al., 2010; Reiman, Beck, Peter et al., 2007).

Along with the difficult task of developing the educational program, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 also specifies that a team of individuals conduct meetings to create the IEP and do so as equal participants. Bearing in mind the individuals who comprise the IEP team are from disparate disciplines and fields of study, have different levels of expertise, and do not interact on a regular basis, developing a functional and effective IEP collaboratively can be a monumental challenge. Therefore, collaboration theory should also be considered.

Collaboration Theory. "The twenty-first century will be the age of alliances" (Austin, 2000, p. 1). Austin believes this is the case since "rapid structural changes are being generated by powerful political, economic, and social forces" and are "creating an environment that strongly encourages collaboration" (p. 7). In addition, trust in the federal government is waning and there is "major rethinking of the role and size of the government" (Austin, 2000, p. 7). Austin argues that these monumental shifts are increasing demands on various sectors and "pushing them toward collaboration" (p. 7). The education system is no exception and according to Friend and Cook (2007), the collaboration trend in special education "is simply a reflection of the direction of many endeavors in society" (p. 18). While collaboration is a trend across the various aspects of education, "special education collaboration has become so much a part of policy and practice that it merits separate attention" (Friend & Cook, 2007, p. 20).

Collaboration has "become a catchall to signify just about any type of inter-organizational or inter-personal relationship, making it difficult for those seeking to collaborate to put into practice or evaluate with any certainty" (Gajda, 2004, p. 66). According to researchers, collaboration is an inherently complex (Patel et al., 2012) and elusive concept (Gajda, 2004; Patel et al., 2012) that has yet to be clearly defined (Friend & Cook, 2007; Montiel-Overall, 2005; Patel et al., 2012). In the past 10 years, collaboration has received attention "from a number of disparate fields" yet there remains "a lack of unified understanding of the component factors of collaboration" and how best to support and improve collaborative efforts (Patel et al., 2012, p. 1). While there is no consensus on a definition (Patel et al., 2012) or the theoretical foundation (Montiel-Overall, 2005) of collaboration, there are similarities in the research literature on the

topic. For the purposes of the present study, a summary of the findings related to collaboration will be provided to engage the reader in the potential impact of collaboration in the IEP process.

Effective collaboration is not composed of one set of elements but rather is made up of uniquely different characteristics tailored specifically for each particular collaboration (Austin, 2000; Perrault et al., 2011). This convoluted facet of collaboration confounds the collaborative effort further thwarting a successful collaborative experience. Despite the shifting nature of each element dependent on the collaboration, foundational factors for successful collaborative efforts include a culture of openness, time spent on relationship building, and communication (Austin, 2000; Martin-Rodriguez et al., 2005; Montiel-Overall, 2005; Patel et al., 2012; Perrault et al., 2011).

As Gajda states, "Collaboration is a journey not a destination" (2004, p. 76); Austin agrees that it "is best treated as a continual learning experience" (2000, p. 121). Due to the inherent complexity of collaboration and the difficulty resulting from approaching the collaborative process in a one-size-fits-all manner, a culture of openness and willingness to change (Patel et al., 2012) is a necessity. Being open to change is especially important when the organizational culture "harbors deep cultural values that run counter to the spirit of collaboration" (Martin-Rodriguez et al., 2005, p. 134). The traditionally autonomous culture among school professionals is contradictory to the concept of collaboration. Fortunately, case studies of successful collaborations reveal that individuals approaching collaboration as a valuable learning experience have increased flexibility and openness (Perrault et al., 2011).

In his book *The Collaboration Challenge*, Austin (2000) provides insight into cross-sector collaboration, specifically collaboration between nonprofit organizations (NPOs) and corporate businesses. It could be suggested that collaborative efforts among parents and school systems are cross-sector and thus comparable to NPO-corporate collaboratives. NPOs are dependent upon others for their funding and to maintain their course. Similarly, parents are dependent upon the school system to effectively educate their child. Austin pointed out that for collaboration to work successfully, NPOs (parents) "need to escape the gratefulness syndrome" and "corporations (schools) in turn must get beyond the charity syndrome if their engagements with NPOs are to become strategically central to their business operations" (Austin, 2000, p. 175). Overcoming the "traditional philanthropic relationship" mindset will move the relationship from a *them and us* perspective to a *we together* perspective (Austin, 2000, pp. 176). Unfortunately, there is evidence that often parents recount the IEP process as an *us versus them* experience (Bateman & Herr, 2003; Davern, 1996; Habing, 2004; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Pruitt et al., 1998).

Building a culture of collaboration within the IEP team must begin with a focus on relationship building. Friend and Cook (2007) assert that even those that believe firmly in the benefits of collaboration cannot suddenly engage in collaborative interactions without time spent on relationship building. True collaboration comes only after a period of time in which trust and respect are established. Additionally, as Austin (2000) points out, "the special nature of cross-sector alliances" requires adaptations to the familiar relationship building approaches within each sector (p. 15). The diversity inherent in cross-sector relationships may itself result in increased difficulties in

communication, cohesion, shared awareness and understanding, which may result in conflict (Patel et al., 2012). These barriers complicate building a relationship, so "work demands should be managed to allow time and activity for building relationships" (Patel et al., 2012, p. 10).

"It is also important to recognize that resistance to cross-sector partnering may reflect genuine differences in values and perceived missions rather than irrational stereotyping and aversion to change. "Sorting out the true causes of resistance is an important task" (Austin, 2000, p. 53). Differences in values and perceived missions may exist for many IEP teams. It would be important to confront this barrier in the beginning of the relationship rather than later in the process when conflicts ensue. As Austin points out, "Bad interpersonal relations alone can destroy a partnership" (p. 174) and events that occur early in the relationship can have lasting effects (Patel et al., 2012). Dabkowski (2004) discusses the need for schools to develop good experiences for parents during initial meetings to set the tone for future IEP meetings. Doing so will also provide the foundations of trust and respect further enhancing future collaboration.

Research indicates that a final factor essential to building and maintaining a collaborative relationship is communication. Communication underpins how people understand each other and is an element in the transfer of knowledge (Patel et al., 2012). Communication is most effective when collaborators work out in advance a shared language particularly when they are from different fields (Montiel-Overall, 2005). While jargon facilitates communication within a specialty, it leads to communication barriers within multidisciplinary teams. It is not uncommon that school personnel use jargon within an IEP meeting (Davern, 1996; Garriott et al., 2000); as a result, parents feel

alienated rather than included (Davern, 1996). Fortunately, some parents have reported school staff who were able to create a collaborative atmosphere by using parent-friendly language (Davern, 1996). The type of task also affects the need for communication; specifically, nonroutine and interdependent tasks require more communication and coordination (Patel et al., 2012). Parents have indicated effective communication is one of the positive aspects (Davern, 1996; Mueller, 2009; Pruitt et al., 1998; Tucker, 2009) in the IEP process whereas not being heard is a negative aspect (Davern, 1996; Mahon, 2010; Reiman, Beck, Peter et al., 2007). Communication links in a nonroutine, interdependent collaboration should occur "in both formal meetings and by informal conversations" (Perrault et al., 2011, p. 288). These findings support the proposal to engage in informal collaboration prior to annual formal IEP meetings.

According to Austin (2000), "The ultimate effectiveness of an alliance, is a function of how well the partners manage their interaction. Like any valued relationship, a collaborative alliance prospers to the degree that the partners invest in it" (p. 121). In an attempt to gain a better understanding of the investment needed and the interactive challenge an IEP team must overcome, a discussion and an understanding of group dynamics are necessary.

Group Dynamics. Prior to the 1920s, human relationships in the workplace were not formally studied. After that time, human relationships in the workplace became a focus due to the rise of worker organizations (Levi, 2007). The Hawthorne studies, originally designed to investigate the effect of environmental factors on work performance, actually demonstrated that employee performance improved when they were being observed (Levi, 2007). A decade after the Hawthorne studies, researchers

examined troops interacting during World War II and recognized that the troops used teamwork to accomplish their tasks and achieve their goals. Other research "showed that organizing people in teams was one way to improve operations of organizations and improve productivity" (Levi, 2007, p. 13). Kurt Lewin, whose work was greatly influenced by the treatment of Jews in the 1940s, created the term *group dynamics* (Smith, 2001). Lewin's work shaped the future of the study of groups. Each decade since has brought new approaches in addressing teams at work, and today "the study of group dynamics is an accepted academic discipline" (Levi, 2007, p. 15).

By definition, the IEP process involves a team of people tasked with making decisions together. Lewin argued the interdependence in groups creates a powerful dynamic (Smith, 2001). According to Levi (2007), a successful team requires the right people purposely assigned to a task that is suited for team decision-making, with clear goals, good leadership, a supportive external environment, and good social relationships among the members. Unfortunately, when lawmakers created the IEP team process, there was no scaffolding (e.g., IEP process training or training in collaborative decision making) put into place within the educational environment to support successful team interaction and processes.

While the interdisciplinary team approach is suitable for the types of decisions an IEP requires, providing that the goal of the IEP team is clear, IEP teams are often assigned based on the child's placement within the school rather than with consideration to the abilities, strengths, and weaknesses of the team members. Leadership within the team is also often assigned to the special education teacher (Bateman, 1996; Malone & Gallagher, 2010; Werts et al., 2002), who may or may not be able or willing to lead the

IEP team. A complex group dynamic, such as that of the IEP team, requires not only willing but also skillful leadership.

According to Levi (2007) and Perrault, McClelland, Austin, and Sieppert (2011), the skillful leader recognizes the responsibility to ensure the team receives information and does so in a supportive, participative environment and eliminates problems that impede the process. Effective leaders also require the support of the organization. Unfortunately, the educational environment is, in general, a barrier to IEP team processes and often limits the team based on the lack of available resources including money and time (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Swap, 1993; Tucker, 2009). Due to these limitations, IEP teams are often rushed through the decision-making process without spending the necessary time to appropriately develop the relationship foundations essential to functioning as an effective team (Bateman, 1996; Tucker, 2009; Weishaar, 2010).

In 1965, Tuckman explicated one of the best-known group development theories, later revised by Tuckman and Jensen (1977). The theory focuses on the stages of small-group development. The theory holds that groups develop in five distinct phases: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. The group comes together, performs the task, and disbands. All stages are considered significant to the social relationships within the group. Group development is especially important for IEP teams because the individuals who make up an IEP team typically come from a variety of backgrounds, have a wide range of experiences, and have disparate beliefs and views on what elements constitute an effective IEP.

In the forming stage, group members are polite and are not comfortable with one another, a situation which leads to tentative actions and compliance with the leader's

wishes (Levi, 2007). In the case of IEP teams, the special education teacher typically leads the team and usually develops the IEP with little or no input from other team members (Goldstein et al., 1980). If an IEP team is never given an opportunity to move into the other stages of development, the IEP meeting may simply become an arrangement of parents agreeing with and rubber-stamping the IEP. The forming stage of Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) model explains and provides insight about why many parents conform and engage in what is known as groupthink.

Groupthink is a term introduced by Irving Janis in his 1972 book *Victims of Groupthink* (Levi, 2007). Groupthink occurs when a small group of people gathered to make decisions become more focused on maintaining good relations and concurrence among members than reaching carefully considered decisions (Hensley & Griffin, 1986; Levi, 2007). Symptoms of groupthink situations include direct pressure on dissenters and self-censorship (Hensley & Griffin, 1986; Levi, 2007). Self-censorship is difficult to assess due to the fact that individuals are not likely to admit to self-censorship (Hensley & Griffin, 1986). One of the factors contributing to groupthink is acceptance of decisions without critical analysis (Levi, 2007). Some parents report feeling intimidated (Bateman & Herr, 2003; Davern, 1996; Reiman, Beck, Peter et al., 2007) during IEP meetings. Other parents may be reluctant to be perceived as troublemakers or individuals who "rock the boat" and, therefore, may agree publically with decisions while silently disagreeing. A group that does not move beyond the forming stage of development may be prone to groupthink decisions.

Group development moves from the forming to the storming stage when the members are comfortable with one another (Levi, 2007). This stage is defined by the

conflict the group experiences due to planning and defining roles and responsibilities (Levi, 2007). The conflict experienced in this stage is important for clarifying the group's goals as well as creating group cohesion by resolving conflicts (Levi, 2007). If the IEP team is unable to move beyond the storming stage, the annual IEP meeting may result in the need for mediation.

According to Tuckman (1965), once a group overcomes the resistance that characterizes the storming stage, the group enters the norming stage of development. During the norming stage, the group develops rules, norms, and social relationships (Levi, 2007). Without agreed upon social norms, the group can easily get caught up in conflict and, as a result, not actually perform the task assigned. According to Mueller (2009), ground rules should be established at the start of any IEP meeting. Some examples of IEP ground rules include these basics: one person may talk at a time; the meeting must start and end on time; no one may dominate the meeting, and everyone participates; complaints are allowed when accompanied by a solution (Mueller, 2009).

When a group has established responsibilities and ground rules, the group is able to enter the next stage of development, which is performing. While some groups never reach this point of development, a well-developed group is able to easily handle difficult tasks during this stage (Levi, 2007). After the group has accomplished its goal, the group enters the final stage-adjournment. This stage can be stressful to members as relationships were developed and strong bonds were created (Levi, 2007). This may be the case in highly effective IEP teams, those that advance through the stages of development. Many IEP teams are not well-developed and, therefore, are not likely to find the adjournment stage stressful.

In summary, group development is crucial to establishing healthy group dynamics and, ultimately, to successful performance of the assigned task. The dynamics of an IEP team are especially complex due to the significant nature of the goal assigned to the group as well as the interdisciplinary nature of the group. Unfortunately, collaborative arrangements in the public school system tend to fail due to the lack of systematic structural and administrative support (Handler, 2006). The systemic flaws resonate throughout K-12 as well as postsecondary education, including teacher education programs that neglect providing "opportunities to develop skills and attitudes to support" collaborative efforts (Handler, 2006). It is unlikely that a global systemic change will take place quickly; therefore, educators should consider available options to make the IEP team successful without the support of the external educational environment.

Given this lack of support or understanding of the importance for group development, effective leadership and social relationships among the IEP team are especially important. Collaboration prior to the formal IEP meeting may allow for the special education teacher to establish the leadership role and begin to work through some of the stages of group development with the parents prior to the annual IEP meeting. It may be possible for the IEP team to engage in the storming and norming stages of group development during collaboration prior to the formal IEP meeting. This would allow the IEP team to operate in the performing stage during the annual IEP meeting, an occasion when time constraints often impede the team development processes.

Even with effective group development, individuals will still encounter conflict. Conflict is inevitable in human relationships (Lederach, 2003), and without the foundations of group cohesion, the theory of conflict transformation must be included in

the IEP process. Conflict in groups is not uncommon, and when accepted and understood as necessary to group development, conflict can be productive (Levi, 2007).

Conflict Transformation. Following World War I, many people were motivated to establish a science of peace as a means of preventing future wars (Miall et al., 1999). In North America, researchers' primary focus was the prevention of war; in Europe, Johan Galtung (2004) was more concerned with the advancement of peace. "Whereas some early social scientists regarded conflict as dysfunctional and the job of the sociologist to remove it, most analysts in the conflict resolution tradition saw conflict as intrinsic in human relationships, so that the task became one of handling it better" (Miall et al., 1999, p. 45).

Speaking generally, conflict is normal in human relationships (Lederach, 2003). More specifically, conflict is expected during the development of teams and throughout team processes (Levi, 2007). Conflict and the way in which conflicts are resolved can have a lasting impact on the people involved as well as the relationships of those people. And most important, conflict can bring about positive and lasting change for the people involved as well as those to follow in the future (Lederach, 2003).

Scholars distinguish between conflict resolution and conflict transformation. Conflict resolution simply strives for ending the undesired conflict rather than building a desired solution (Lederach, 2003). According to Lederach (2003), conflict resolution carries the danger of cooptation, meaning that there is an attempt to dissolve the conflict despite the fact that important and legitimate issues are being raised. Conflict transformation, on the other hand, goes beyond conflict resolution in that its purpose is to

make positive constructive change rather than make a simple resolution of a specific problem (Lederach, 2003).

Conflict transformation, as defined by Lederach (2003), allows those in conflict "to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships" (p. 14). According to Lederach, there are two realities in conflict. First, it is a normal human experience to engage in conflict. Second, "conflict is a motor of change" (Lederach, 2003, p. 5). These realities are not readily considered in many settings; education is no exception. In order to fully transform conflict, one must consider the immediate situation as well as the underlying patterns and contexts (Lederach, 2003). Fortunately, many of the current IEP process recommended best practices take into account the underlying patterns and contexts relevant to conflict transformation. Unfortunately, significant change to underlying patterns and contexts may take generations (Galtung, 2004). We cannot afford to wait generations, not only for the sake of the well-being of the children involved but also because of the fiscal costs to the educational system as well as the emotional costs to parents and educators.

Galtung (2004) uses the Cartesian coordinate system as a means to map the potential outcomes of conflict (see Appendix B). In theory, conflict consists of two incompatible goals with five potential outcomes: *either-or*, *neither-nor*, *half-half*, or *both-and*. If the *either-or* outcome is achieved, then there is only one goal realized; there is a winner and a loser. *Neither-nor*, referred to as negative transcendence, can be the result of the parties postponing action or a solution. The *half-half* outcome or

compromise occurs when both parties give up each of their goals, and ultimately, no one is satisfied. Finally, the *both-and* outcome, or positive transcendence, is the preferred outcome. Positive transcendence requires that both parties engage in a creative approach to finding a solution that works to accomplish goals of interest to both parties (Galtung, 2004).

It is not unusual for conflict in IEP teams to end in *either-or* or compromise outcomes, especially due to strict time constraints inherent in an annual IEP meeting. It does not seem unreasonable to expect that IEP teams engage in positive transcendence that creates satisfied participants in every IEP meeting. It is, however, unreasonable to expect positive transcendence to occur in IEP meetings without participants engaging with one another throughout the IEP process, specifically, prior to the IEP meeting. Many IEP meetings take place without any of the participants meeting each other prior to the formal meeting or, much less often, collaboratively discussing their independent goals and objectives for the meeting (Goldstein et al., 1980).

It is expected that the reader has gained a more thorough understanding of the underlying concepts and principles of the IEP process through the review of the theoretical framework. Clarity may be further expanded through a review of the history related to special education along with a review of current trends in literature specifically related to parental involvement and satisfaction in the following sections.

Special Education History and Current Literature

History has played a vital role in the current structure of special education. Specifically, parental involvement has significantly impacted legal requirements in special education. The history of the development of the Individualized Education

Program process is reviewed in the subsequent section followed by an analysis of parental involvement and satisfaction within the IEP process. Best practice standards, including information on collaboration prior to formal IEP meetings and competing perspectives, close the review of the literature.

History and Development of the Individualized Education Program.

Historically, individuals with disabilities have experienced terrible atrocities such as institutionalization and invasive and dangerous medical procedures including sterilization, lobotomy, and even euthanasia. The sociopolitical context of the past allowed these practices to be widely accepted internationally and supported by the United States government. For example, in the 1920s, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld sterilization of disabled individuals as constitutional. In the United States prior to the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, individuals with full mental status and only physical disabilities had no protection against acts of discrimination under the law. More specifically, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act affords students with a documented mental or physical impairment access to necessary accommodations to meet their individual needs. Students meeting these criteria are eligible to receive a 504 plan, which details accommodations to provide equal access to the educational services that all students receive.

In 1975, Congress set forth the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) and introduced the concept of the IEP (see Appendix A). This law aimed to ensure that children with disabilities would receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) regardless of the severity of their disability (Hill, 2006). EAHCA also established that children should be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE),

meaning children with disabilities should, when appropriate, be educated with children without disabilities (Hill, 2006).

The IEP was the "cornerstone of the EAHCA" (Smith, 1990) and for some is considered the primary means of communication amongst parents and school personnel (Armenta & Beckers, 2006). The IEP was designed to serve as both a process and a document (Rodger, 1995). The process of the IEP includes an annual meeting designed to allow parents and school personnel to contribute as equals to the decision of educational goals and objectives for a child. The IEP document is the written record of those decisions (Rodger, 1995). As early as 1976, there were concerns about problems with the multidisciplinary team approach to development of the IEP (Smith, 1990).

Since the original act in 1975, there have been various revisions including a title change in 1990 to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This amendment added new categories of disability, including autism, and also added transition planning as a requirement of the IEP team (Hill, 2006). The IDEA 1997 amendment made several further modifications, such as including a regular education teacher in the IEP meeting and allowing parental participation in eligibility and placement decisions (see Appendix A for summary outline of IDEA changes). The latest revision of IDEA in 2004 included further revisions to the requirements of the IEP document, IEP meeting, and IEP team bringing IDEA in closer alignment with The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Hill, 2006).

The NCLB Act brought about greater accountability for outcomes and an emphasis on empirically supported interventions (Hill, 2006). IDEA and NCLB have both similarities and differences. Similarly, they both are funding statutes with strings

attached and a focus on outcomes, emphasis on parental participation and choice, and requirements for personnel and assessments. They differ in that NCLB is collective with an emphasis on all students while IDEA has an individual emphasis on children with disabilities (Hill, 2006).

While amendments to the original legislation continue to transform and expand the requirements of the IEP team, the literature continues to note concerns and needs for improvement in the IEP process. Specifically, emerging patterns in empirical literature related to IEP improvement will be addressed later in this chapter. It should be noted, however, that as a nation we have made great gains since individuals with disabilities were institutionalized and often treated with dangerous and invasive medical procedures. The difference in the number of children with disabilities being educated today, in contrast to years past, serves as evidence to these advancements. Prior to the passage of EACHA in 1975, only 20% of children with disabilities ages 6 through 17 were educated in U.S. public schools. Conversely, in the 2008-2009 school year, 95% of children with disabilities ages 6 through 17 were being educated in the U.S. public school system (Kober & Usher, 2012).

Parental Involvement in Special Education. Parents' involvement in the education of their special needs child has evolved since the passing of the special education legislation of 1975. "Parents have been instrumental in effecting change" in special education; however, "they have often done so from outside the system" (Soodak & Erwin, 1995, p. 259). The traditional culture within schools does not facilitate parental involvement in educational decisions (Dabkowski, 2004; Garriott et al., 2000; Heeden et al., n.d.; Swap, 1993; Yoshida et al., 1978); as a result, parent concerns are "often heard

in courtrooms, not in schools" (Soodak & Erwin, 1995, p. 259). The result of "change imposed from outside the field has often led to ambiguous policies that correct one problem without consideration of the overall educational ramifications" (Soodak & Erwin, 1995, p. 260). Obviously, these changes "do not reflect or facilitate effective collaboration between parents and school personnel" (Soodak & Erwin, 1995, p. 260).

Parents and teachers alike report they desire parental involvement, yet parents overwhelmingly indicate that schools are often not successful in facilitating meaningful parental involvement (Garriott et al., 2000; Goldstein et al., 1980; Hill, 2006; Mahon, 2010; Oleniczak, 2002; Swap, 1993; Weishaar, 2010). The traditional culture within school systems is in direct opposition to collaborative parental involvement (Dabkowski, 2004; Swap, 1993). Traditional notions of parental involvement in schools include helping with homework, attending meetings, and volunteering in the classroom and school office (Heeden et al., n.d.). Historically parents have "assumed passive, inactive roles and educators, whether purposefully or inadvertently, have assisted in relegating them to this deferential position" (Garriott et al., 2000, p. 38). In a study conducted in 1978, just a few years after the initial IEP mandate, Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, and Maxwell found that only 36% of teachers surveyed agreed that parents should be involved in students' IEP and just 26% agreed that parents should be involved in finalizing decisions. Yoshida et al. (1978) also observed that "unless efforts are made to enlarge" the role parents play during IEP meetings, the attitudes of school teams will limit that role (p. 532). According to recent literature, welcome parental involvement, generally speaking, remains limited (Oleniczak, 2002; Weishaar, 2010; Werts et al., 2002).

Various studies about the IEP process survey parents and teachers about their perceptions of parental involvement (Garriott et al., 2000; Mahon, 2010; Malone & Gallagher, 2010; Muscott, 2002; Pruitt et al., 1998; Swap, 1993; Tucker, 2009; Weishaar, 2010; Yoshida et al., 1978). Overwhelmingly, these surveys indicate teachers' desire to involve parents, and yet most parents also consistently report they are not as involved as they would like to be. There is an obvious breakdown in facilitating parental involvement in part due to the traditional top-down communication with teachers retaining position of authority (Heeden et al., n.d.). In fact, in one study, 98% of teachers surveyed reported parental involvement "was essential to good teaching" (Swap, 1993, p. 46); however, in another study reported in *Teaching and Teacher Education* by Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, and Reed (2002) 31% of new teachers also acknowledged that parental involvement and communication with parents were their greatest challenges (as cited in Mahon, 2010, p 46). This finding is consistent with an observational analysis of parent participation conducted by Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, and Curry (1980), which reported that parents were far more likely to be the recipients of statements made in annual IEP meetings rather than active participants. In a more recent study, Weishaar (2010) reported that only 33% of families surveyed re-counted being involved in decisions. According to Swap (1993), "Parents are more likely to get involved when their involvement is meaningful and something they can understand and are likely to be successful" (p. 3). Unfortunately, "IEP meetings are not always conducted so that the parents' views are adequately considered" (Hill, 2006, p. 74).

Parent involvement in special education and parent satisfaction has been studied from various angles. Research studies indicate parents often "feel like less than equal

partners in the IEP process" (Oleniczak, 2002, p. vii; Davern, 1996; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Pruitt et al., 1998; Reiman, Beck, Coppola et al., 2010; Reiman, Beck, Peter et al., 2007). In fact, according to a survey conducted by Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000), merely 45% of parents expressed they were treated as equal, respected members of the IEP team. Moreover, Habing (2004) reported that just over half of parents reported feeling other team members were interested in the parent's contribution. Garriott et al. (2000) cited overall structure of conferences, in which school personnel deliver most of the information, as a deterrent to parental involvement in the IEP process. One example of this is that often, in an attempt to save time, school personnel develop the IEP prior to the meeting. When parents are presented an IEP in this manner, parents are put in a "position to agree or disagree" (Weishaar, 2010) and many parents are ill-equipped to disagree with a room full of school personnel (Goldstein et al., 1980; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Oleniczak, 2002; Reiman, Beck, Peter et al., 2007; Vaughn et al., 1988). As discussed in the section on goal setting theory, parents who are not actively involved in the IEP process will not likely attain a high level of satisfaction.

Parental Satisfaction with the Special Education Process. Surveys in the research report mixed findings about parental satisfaction with the IEP process, and actual percentages of parent satisfaction are difficult to find in the literature. Some surveys of parents' satisfaction indicate as many as 50% of IEP participants are "completely satisfied" (Habing, 2004, p. 4) while other surveys reveal as many as 83% of parents experience conflict with their school team including disagreement within the IEP process (Tucker, 2009). While there are not many hard statistics about parent dissatisfaction, many authors draw general conclusions that parents are generally

dissatisfied with the process (Bitterman, Daley, Misra, Carlson, & Markowitz, 2008; Weishaar, 2010; Vaughn et al., 1988). For example, following a review of the literature, Hill (2006) stated there is "great dissatisfaction" with the IEP process. Unfortunately, there are no reliable means currently in practice to assess overall parental satisfaction (Martin, 2005). However, according to Martin (2005), an analysis may be conducted "through review of formal interventions being requested" (p. xvii). The $146.5 million spent by school districts on formal intervention in 1999-2000 (Reiman, Beck, Coppola et al., 2007) serves as evidence that many parents are dissatisfied with the process.

While hard numbers are often not available in the current literature, detailed information about negative aspects of parent experiences are readily available. Common negative examples include unprofessional behavior such as lack of cooperation, lack of communication, and using educational jargon resulting in what some parents refer to as school personnel displaying the "expert syndrome" (Davern, 1996; Garriott et al., 2000; Habing, 2004; Rodger, 1995; Tucker, 2009). In addition, many parents realize the IEP is written prior to the annual IEP meeting and are then "confronted" with the school's best effort of the goals and objectives (Tucker, 2009). While school personnel cite time management as a reason for pre-planning the IEP (Weishaar, 2010), parents often view this as "bullying and intimidation" to agree to whatever they are given in the prewritten IEP (Tucker, 2009, p. 143). The negativity of the situation in which parents are invited into a meeting of school personnel, often with a pre-planned IEP, is often exacerbated by their lack of knowledge about the IEP process rules and regulations (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Oleniczak, 2002). Thus, many parents experience the IEP development process as intimidating, frustrating and pointless (Bateman & Herr, 2003). While some parents

report they are aware of their lack of knowledge related to the IEP process (Oleniczak, 2002), others indicate they did not realize their lack of knowledge until they were facing their first conflict over their child's education program (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Either way, according to Lake and Billingsley (2000), who conducted interviews with parents, school personnel, and mediators involved in an IEP appeals process, parents report the imbalance of knowledge as frustrating.

Communication, a foundational factor in successful collaborative efforts, was rated by 91% of parents who were surveyed as "very important" (Tucker, 2009). Unfortunately, the surveys conducted by Tucker (2009) also indicated that patterns of contact were minimal and paired with only negative experiences, often related to student behavior concerns or the parents' request for the contact. According to some parents, the most negative aspect of the IEP process is feeling as if they are not being listened to and having to fight for the services their child needs (Habing, 2004). While advocating is not a novel role for parents of children with disabilities, research by Peterson reported in an unpublished dissertation from University of Southern California, Los Angeles (2010) indicates that not only do parents often have to advocate for resources, they also have to "advocate within their relationships" within the school "because hierarchical relationships between parents and professionals are prevalent, with parents having the lower-status position" (Heeden et al., n.d., p. 5). Given this information, it is not surprising that most participants view the IEP process as a "disempowering experience" (Werts et al., 2002, p. 414).

In fact, many parents report that annual IEP meetings were some of the most difficult interactions they experienced (Davern, 1996). These parents also report feeling

intimidated (Bateman & Herr 2003; Davern, 1996; Reiman, Beck, Peter et al., 2007), outnumbered (Davern, 1996; Reiman, Beck, Peter et al., 2007), and as if they were token participants (Davern, 1996). Furthermore, some parents report they view themselves as inarticulate (Engel, 1991 as cited in Reiman, Beck, Peter, et al., 2007) and lacking knowledge about the IEP process (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Parents may not feel comfortable participating due to their limited knowledge, particularly given the expertise of the other conference members (Vaughn et al., 1988, p. 87), and unfortunately, some parents report experiencing the IEP process as pointless (Bateman & Herr, 2003). Parents indicate they recognize the need to be informed to be equal IEP contributors, yet often they do not know how to prepare for the IEP meeting (Oleniczak, 2000). Fortunately, some research indicates that over time parents become more knowledgeable about the IEP process and report more positive experiences in the child's later years of education (Reiman, Beck, Coppola et al., 2010).

Developing positive parental experiences during initial meetings can set the tone for future meetings (Dabkowski, 2004). "The initial responsibility for setting the stage for a successful IEP meeting is on the district, and usually specifically on the special education teacher" (Bateman, 1996, p. 63). Further, it is suggested that it is the special education teacher's responsibility to make sure "parents understand the kind of input that will be most helpful and that their role is as full and equal participants in the IEP meeting" (Bateman, 1996, p. 63). Parents report some school staff were able to create a collaborative atmosphere with parents by using parent-friendly language and interaction styles (Davern, 1996). Common positive aspects identified by parents included communication and partnership with the school (Habing, 2004). Most importantly,

Wanat in The School Community Journal article titled Challenges balancing collaboration and independence in home-school relationships: Analysis of parents perceptions in one district (2010) states that "parents who were involved with their children's school–especially in a manner involving direct contact with teachers–were more satisfied with the school" (Heeden et al., n.d., p. 3).

Best Practice Standards in Developing Individualized Education Programs. There is evidence that major overhauls in district special education resources are necessary to improve parent relations and will result in a drastic reduction in due process hearings (Mueller, Singer & Draper, 2008). Unfortunately, overhauling every school in every district in every state across the nation is an extremely complex and potentially expensive venture. As the authors of a 2007 literature review so eloquently stated, "Existing anecdotal descriptions of current and idealized process and practice are simply not sufficient to advance our field's response to increasing demand for effective strategies" (Reiman, Beck, Peter et al., 2007, p. 9). Best practice recommendations include communication throughout the IEP process, comprehensive annual IEP meetings that include agenda creation, and full parental input during the development of goals and objectives.

Communication is key to maintaining a collaborative effort and has a tremendous effect on parental satisfaction (Davern, 1996; Habing, 2004; Mahon, 2010; Tucker, 2009; Weishaar, 2010). According to Mahon (2010), who conducted a review of the literature relevant to the training of educators, teachers must be able to adjust their level of communication based on the population with whom they are interacting. Teachers interact with a wide array of people on a daily basis including regular and special

education students, peers, administrative staff, and parents (Mahon, 2010). Researchers indicate various ways to increase and improve communication with parents, including talking to parents personally and asking about their concerns (Weishaar, 2010), listening to parents' contributions (Pruitt et al., 1998), and gathering ideas and developing an agenda with parents prior to the annual IEP meeting. Improving communication may also include training parents in IEP roles (Goldstein et al., 1980). Many parents who may want to participate actively in the IEP process may lack the skills necessary to navigate the process; therefore, parent training in the IEP process may benefit the process (Goldstein et al., 1980).

The facilitated IEP is one comprehensive and proactive strategy that has been shown to be effective in reducing due process hearings (Mueller, 2009). The facilitated IEP consists of a neutral facilitator, a known agenda including goals from each team member, setting team goals and rules at the start of each meeting, establishing a collaborative environment, equal communication strategies, and a parking lot for off-topic ideas (Martin, 2005; Mueller, 2009). Developing a known agenda requires participation of all team members and is best done prior to the IEP meeting. The facilitator should ensure that everyone is satisfied with the close of one agenda item before moving to the next (Mueller, 2009). As explained by group theory, established ground rules are important for effective group functioning. The facilitated IEP process identifies this as one important step (Mueller, 2009).

An observational analysis in 1980 revealed only one in 14 IEP meetings that were observed involved creating goals and objectives; and, in all of these cases, the IEP was written in advance (Goldstein et al., 1980). It remains common practice today for special

education teams to create a "rough draft" of the IEP in an effort to save valuable time during the annual IEP meeting (Weishaar, 2010). These attempts to save time also prevent parents from participating as equal participants. Bateman & Herr (2003) assert one way of establishing a genuine opportunity for parent participation is by creating IEPs with parents along with a full discussion with the parents regarding the child's needs. A formal systematic change in pre-planning the IEP will take time to implement. Therefore, it is suggested that special education teachers become proactive about informally involving parents in pre-planning which may allow parents the opportunity to more fully participate.

Collaboration Preceding Formal Meetings. There is at least one common theme that seems to emerge in the best practice recommendations for IEP meetings. The ideal IEP meeting includes pre-conferencing between parents and staff to ensure participants will come adequately prepared (Bateman & Herr, 2003; Bateman & Linden, 2006; Davern, 1996; Garriott et al., 2000; Goldstein et al., 1980; Habing, 2004; Heeden et al., n.d.; Mahon, 2010; Martin, 2005; Mueller, 2009; Muscott, 2002; Pruitt et al., 1998; Swap, 1993; Tucker, 2009; Weishaar, 2010). As collaboration theory postulates, foundational factors for successful collaborative efforts include a culture of openness, time spent on relationship building, and communication. Bateman (1996) places the initial responsibility for setting the stage for a successful IEP meeting on the district and, more specifically, on the special education teacher. She also stated that special education teachers should ensure parents understand the kind of input that will be most helpful and establish that parent roles in developing the IEP are as equal participants. All of these foundational factors may be addressed in collaboration preceding formal IEP meetings.

While Handler (2006) suggests that teachers cannot initiate or sustain the systemic changes necessary, change must start somewhere. Teachers have the unique ability to directly interact with parents, unlike lawmakers, district personnel, and school administrators. Collaboration prior to an annual IEP meeting is an approach that may be undertaken by some special education teachers without the need for additional training and in-services; this cooperation may create positive, lasting change that improves the initial IEP experiences for parents.

Successful approaches to parental involvement include direct communication and a welcoming environment (Heeden et al., n.d.). Additionally, Bateman and Linden (2006) recommend that parents must have a "genuine opportunity for full participation in the IEP process" (p. 38). Unfortunately, parents often cite the imbalance of knowledge about the IEP process as intimidating and frustrating (Lake & Billingsley, 2000) and report they do not know how to prepare for the IEP meeting (Oleniczak, 2002). Working with teachers prior to the annual IEP meeting to pre-plan the IEP may allow parents to develop the skills necessary to navigate their role as IEP participants. Meeting prior to formal IEP meetings may allow teachers the opportunity to answer parents' questions as well as provide detailed information about the IEP process and what to expect in the annual IEP meeting, a practice that may better prepare parents for the annual meeting.

Collaboration prior to annual IEP meetings may be as simple as asking parents for their input and explaining to them what to expect at the IEP meeting (Habing, 2004; Swap, 1993) or as complex as defining participant roles, establishing ground rules, creating an agenda, and developing equal communication strategies as is the case in a facilitated IEP (Martin, 2005; Mueller, 2009). It is common practice that parents are not

asked for their input prior to the development of the IEP (Habing, 2004), setting a tone of inequality and potentially putting parents in a defensive position at the onset. The most important aspect of collaboration is inviting the parents into open two-way communication (Swap, 1993). This practice alone asserts that the school is interested in parent input (Swap, 1993) and sets the tone for a collaborative environment.

Competing Perspectives. While much of the research in special education focuses on parents being dissatisfied with the IEP process, there is evidence that parents are satisfied (Bitterman et al., 2008; Goldstein et al., 1980), that schools are actively involving parents (Habing, 2004; Tucker, 2009), and that when schools do not directly include parents it may be an attempt to save face rather than alienate parents. Goldstein et al. (1980) points out that it is important to note that all parents do not want to be directly involved in the creation of goals and objectives for their child. While parents report they are willing to be involved, less than half actually attend a school meeting annually (Swap, 1993). According to Habing (2004), roughly half of parents involved in the IEP meeting indicate they are satisfied. Taking these two studies into account, one may conservatively conclude that of the half of parents who participate in the IEP meeting, half of those parents are also satisfied, leaving only 25% of parents dissatisfied with the process. Further substantiating this conclusion, the authors of one study, Bitterman, Daley, Misra, Carlson, and Markowitz (2008) find that, contrary to the literature they reviewed, the parents involved in their study reported general satisfaction with the quality of services they received.

Parents are satisfied, according to some, when schools follow the letter of the law (Habing, 2004) and also attempt to involve families to a high degree (Tucker, 2009).

Tucker (2009) reported that schools attempt to involve parents by encouraging input into the pre-planned IEP. In the same study, parents report that school professionals help parents by quickly responding to questions, engaging in open and honest communication, taking parent suggestions into account, and providing leadership in the student's program (Tucker, 2009). Lake and Billingsley (2000) interviewed school personnel who indicated that when parents are dissatisfied it is a result of the parent being unwilling to accept available program offerings rather than a failure on the part of the school to include parents in the IEP process.

Additionally, school personnel may be attempting to establish a perception of competence by drafting the IEP and meeting as a team prior to parent inclusion. There is some evidence that teachers are fearful their work will be criticized and their fear of conflict may lead to avoidance and boundary defensiveness (Mahon, 2010). One school official validates this fearful perspective by commenting in an interview that parents seeking outside support are an indication that the school has failed (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

It is important to note that there are studies that indicate parents are both satisfied and dissatisfied with the current IEP process. While only a small percentage of parents may actually be dissatisfied with the IEP process, the cost of dissatisfaction is high, further stretching already limited resources that could be better used in the classroom. Therefore, studies exploring cost-effective improvements in the IEP process are warranted and necessary.

Research Summary

The literature review included an interspersed and representative mixture of both experiential knowledge as well as empirically based research. It was deemed appropriate to include both sources of information as both are considered critical to gain a full understanding of the collaborative nature of the IEP process. Given the novelty of empirical exploration into the collaboration efforts during the IEP process, it is important to rely on people's wealth of experience and their best advice for improvement as well as the empirical studies that support those recommendations.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 of the study explains the theories that help frame the study and provides an overview of the history and development of the IEP. A comprehensive review of related literature includes empirical research related to parent and teacher perceptions of parent involvement in and satisfaction with the IEP process as well as best practice recommendations within the IEP process. The review of the literature focuses on a synthesis of empirical studies with the purpose of identifying gaps, themes, and trends in the literature.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology and research design of the study. The chapter includes a discussion about the setting, population and sample, data collection, data management, and data analysis. Delimitations and limitations of the study are reviewed along with ethical considerations that include protection of participants.

Chapter 4 provides a review of the purpose of the present study along with a review of the study methodology. Details about participants, data analysis, and a thorough description of the present study's findings are also provided.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the present study's findings followed by detailed discussion related to the research questions and connections to the literature reviewed in chapter two. The discussion concludes with the importance of the present study's findings. Conclusions and implications and recommendations for future research, policy development and implementation, and practice are provided. This final chapter closes with a conclusion of the dissertation.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction and Organization

The purpose of the present study was to investigate parents' and school personnel's beliefs about and experiences with collaboration prior to the annual IEP meeting and the influence that collaboration has on the quality of parent participation during the formal IEP meeting. The principal research question was this: *How does collaboration between parents and teachers influence active parental participation in developing their child's IEP?* More specifically, the study explored the following questions:

- What is the nature of existing collaboration between teachers and parents prior to the annual IEP meeting?

- What are parents' and teachers' perceptions and beliefs about the benefits, drawbacks, and key issues related to collaboration prior to the annual IEP meeting?

- How do teachers and parents perceive their roles in the IEP process?

- What are parents' and teachers' suggestions to improve parental involvement and parent and teacher satisfaction with the IEP process?

This chapter provides the framework of the study's methodology, including the research design, setting, population and sample, data collection, data management, and data analysis. Researcher as tool and delimitations and limitations of the study are

detailed along with ethical considerations including confidentiality. A summary closes the chapter.

Research Design

This phenomenological study used a qualitative, in-depth interview strategy. Qualitative research is the preferred method of gaining exploratory, in-depth information about the complexities of personal experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The sensitive and complex nature of information gathered in educational research lends itself to qualitative research.

Phenomenology was selected to conduct the present study because of the focus of the qualitative research questions, which "attempt to understand how one or more individuals experience a phenomenon" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 48). More specifically, a phenomenological study allows exploration of "how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness" (Patton, 2002). The present study examined personal experiences of various participants within the IEP process. Exploration into relevant variables of positive and negative experiences warranted a qualitative examination of the phenomenon of IEP experience.

Interviews were chosen over observation because research indicates many parents experience the IEP process as intimidating (Bateman & Herr 2003; Davern, 1996; Reiman, Beck, Peter et al., 2007). Adding an observer to an already stressful process may have created added stress and may have influenced the IEP participants' behavior and responses. In-depth interviews allowed me to "capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants' own words" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 55). As Marshall and Rossman point out,

Human actions cannot be understood unless the meaning that humans assign to

them is understood. Because thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive

worlds are involved, the researcher needs to understand the deeper perspectives

that can be captured through face-to-face interaction. (p. 53)

Interviews also allow for immediate follow up for clarification if needed (Marshall &

Rossman, 2006). Participants were provided a transcribed copy of their interview to give

them an opportunity to confirm the content was what they intended it to be. The

participants were also provided a short follow-up survey to allow for triangulation of the

data.

Procedures

The present study was expected to occur over a 3-month period of time. In fact,

the study occurred over the course of 8 months. There were five phases: (a) contact with

the district and elementary school principals, (b) recruitment of participants, (c) in-depth

participant interviews (see Appendix E), (d) transcription of interviews, and (e) data

analysis and interpretation. During the first phase, I contacted the district administration

(see Appendix C) to gain approval to involve the elementary school(s). The district was

provided (a) a brief description of the study, including a description of confidentiality

measures (see Appendix D) and interview protocol (see Appendix E), (b) a detailed

explanation of the expected time commitment for those involved in interviews, and (c)

the expected time frame of the study.

Initial district approval was received by a written authorization via email

following two months of weekly follow up with the secretary of the person responsible to

approve outside district research. Once district approval was attained, I proceeded by

contacting school principals. Eight elementary school principals were contacted. Five principals responded; one indicated no interest, and four indicated interest. Of the four principals who indicated interest, two principals failed to respond to follow-up emails. The assistant principals at these schools were then contacted directly neither of whom responded. The assistant principal at one of the four schools in which principals showed interest failed to indicate interest. One principal showed great interest and a surprising level of participation (referred to as School One hereafter).

School One's principal gave me direct contact with the assistant principal who showed little interest in participating and did not respond to follow-up emails. After repeated failed attempts to gain assistant principal interest, I was fortunate to gain contact with a former assistant principal of a school at which the principal had originally not responded (referred to as School Two hereafter). School Two's assistant principal was the only assistant principal that showed interest in participating in the present study.

The assistant principal is usually the professional designated as the IEP liaison in the public school district. Therefore, the assumption was made that the assistant principal would provide insight into the IEP process from an administrative or district perspective as well as identify teachers and parents who might be included in the study. I expected to employ snowball sampling (Johnsen & Christensen, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2006), in which each interviewee recommended other individuals who might offer valuable information and might be willing to participate in the study. The one assistant principal who participated did refer one parent who also participated in the study.

It was expected that interviews would be scheduled directly with the participants via phone or email, with phone calls being the preferred contact method. However,

School One's principal designated a person staffed in the front office to make contact with the teachers she felt would best provide input to the present study, schedule the interviews, and arrange a meeting space. Due to this request, which differed from the original request to have the principal investigator contact potential participants directly and affected the participants' confidentiality, I sought an amended IRB approval to contact teachers in this manner. Once IRB approval was retained, I contacted the designated office staff to schedule interviews. Following a number of failed attempts to schedule interviews in this manner, I received the teachers' email addresses from that office staff to initiate direct contact with the teachers.

During the scheduling process, the participants were provided (a) information about informed consent, (b) a brief description of the study, (c) a detailed explanation of the expected time commitment, and (d) the expected time frame of the study. Three teachers at School One were contacted, two of whom indicated interest. After a date and time were set directly with the two teachers, I coordinated with the office staff to ensure there was a meeting space available in the front office. Both originally scheduled interviews were rescheduled due to an unexpected early birth of my child. After this, I contacted three additional teachers, one from School One and two from School Two. The one additional teacher contacted from School One showed interest and participated in an interview in a study room at a local public library.

Despite snowball sampling attempts, teachers interviewed did not respond to follow up contact to identify parent participants. Therefore, I used a classmate who referred two parents involved in special education in the selected district, both of whom showed great interest and participated in the study. The assistant principal who

participated in the study provided my contact information to at least one parent who followed up directly with me and participated in the study. All three parents contacted showed interest, followed up with me quickly, and participated in the study.

The interviews consisted of a pre-determined set of open-ended interview questions and probes (see Appendix E) and were digitally recorded. I expected that interview questions would be revised during the study resulting in elimination or addition of questions and altering the specific questions participants may have been asked depending on whether they were interviewed early or late in the study. However, the addition of questions took place during the first interview, and, therefore, all interview protocols were similar. Changes to the protocol included the addition of the following questions. For school personnel, following the first question, this question was added: What is your position here at the school? For all interviewees, the final question was added: Is there any other information you would like to provide that I have not asked about? Once each interview was complete, I began the transcription process. As expected during immersion in the data, I identified themes in the data, which allowed for identification and analysis of patterns in the data.

During the data analysis phase of the study, participants were provided a transcribed copy of their interview to allow them an opportunity to confirm that the content was what they intended it to be. Participants were also provided a follow-up survey that consisted of five questions directly related to the interview questions. Response options consisted of a 3-option Likert-type scale. It was expected that survey responses would strengthen the conclusions drawn from the data by supporting the interview responses for each individual.

Setting

The setting for the present research study was two elementary schools within one northeast Florida public school district. The district in northeast Florida was selected primarily because of convenience—I live in northeast Florida. A secondary reason is that I had entrée into the particular district.

Of the approximately 200,000 residents in the district, 89% are reported to be Caucasian, 5% African American, 5% Asian, and 5% Hispanic. The students attending public school in the district are reported as 87% Caucasian, 8% African America, and 5% other. Of the approximately 32,000 students in this district, approximately 4,600 are students with disabilities. This number is approximately 14% of the students, which very closely matches the national average of 13%. Class size in the district elementary school ranges from 1:14 to 1:19. The school district is the largest employer in the county. Approximately 90% of the teachers are reported as Caucasian and 76% female.

I conducted interviews with two of the three teachers and the assistant principal in a room near the front office. Two teachers were interviewed at School One. The assistant principal was interviewed in the school in which she worked summer school. The available room was different for each interview; however, the rooms used were vacant of any other persons. There were two interviews in which another person entered the room during the interview; the interview was paused until that person left the room. One teacher interview was conducted in a study room at a public library. I conducted two of the three parent interviews in the parents' homes; one was conducted in a study room at a public library. Interviews were expected to last approximately one hour, and

actual times of interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes with the average interview lasting 49 minutes.

Population and Sample

The study population consisted of public elementary school assistant principals and special education teachers as well as parents of elementary students receiving special education services in the public school setting involved in the IEP process in a northeast Florida school district. The study sample consisted of a nonrandom convenience sample of volunteers from elementary schools within the selected district. The sample of seven participants for the present study included one assistant principal from School Two; one regular education inclusion teacher, one special education resource teacher, one self-contained special education teacher, all from School One; and three parents with children receiving special education services from various elementary schools within the district. All participants were English-speaking Caucasian females. Each parent participant had only one child.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews that consisted of open-ended interview questions facilitated by an interview protocol (see Appendix E) and each interview was recorded digitally. An interview protocol provides an advantage over other interview formats by ensuring the interviewer will use the limited time efficiently, approximately 1 hour per interview, by allowing the researcher to select appropriate interview questions prior to conducting the interviews (Patton, 2002). The interview protocol also permits for a more systematic and comprehensive interview and is essential

for keeping focus on the issues to be explored allowing for shared personal experiences to emerge (Patton, 2002).

I contacted each participant directly by email (six of seven participants) or phone (one parent). I preferred to contact potential participants by phone; however, email contact was provided and preferred by six of seven participants. I scheduled interviews at a time convenient for the interviewee. Each interview took place in a setting that was most convenient and comfortable for the participant and included the school, the parents' homes, and study rooms at a public library. I made an effort to dress similarly to a public elementary school teacher. It was anticipated that this would make me more approachable and establish a relaxed tone that allowed for the interviewee to be comfortable, and thus, open to respond candidly and freely to the interview questions that delved into participants' personal experiences with the IEP process. Each participant appeared comfortable with me; additionally, all of the teachers commented that they were comfortable discussing sensitive issues due to the assurance of confidentiality.

At the onset of the interview, I reviewed with the interviewees the informed consent form (see Appendix D) along with the digital recording procedures. I ended the interview by offering the interviewees further information about transcription of their responses and the dissertation. I asked participants for their mailing addresses to mail a copy of the transcribed interview for their review and to confirm the accuracy of their responses. All participants provided their mailing addresses, and one parent participant declined the review of her transcribed interview. All seven participants were provided a follow-up survey (see Appendix F) to which five participants responded-two teachers and

all three parents. The follow-up survey consisted of five questions directly related to the research questions. Response options consisted of a 3-option Likert-type scale.

At the close of each interview, I reminded the participants that they could contact me or my dissertation chair if they had any questions or concerns about the study. There were no contact attempts for any reason on the part of the participants. I followed each interview with an email to thank the participant and, in the case of two of the three teachers and the assistant principal, to solicit referrals for other potential participants. No referrals were provided by email responses.

Throughout the study, I made use of an audit trail allowing for verification of the rigor of the fieldwork conducted (Patton, 2002). The audit trail began with notes on literature review searches, contact with potential participants including the date and method of contact (i.e., phone, email, in person), memos on my thoughts following interviews and during data analysis including beginning category assignment and description. Memoing was also included throughout data collection and data analysis. "Memos are reflective notes that researchers write to themselves about what they are learning from their data" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 532). For example, this is an excerpt from my memo upon reviewing and reflecting on the theories that framed the study, specifically, collaboration and group dynamics:

> Parents are not part of the "team" because they are not active in the daily "team" activities, they are not part of the **culture** within the school, they cannot effect change amongst the team. In an area of their life in which they have total decision-making (their child), this is foreign territory.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), the process of writing thoughts and insights is instrumental in moving "analysis from the mundane and obvious to the creative" (p. 161).

Data Management

I assigned each participant a code consisting of a number and a letter, the number being associated with the school to allow for emerging patterns correlated to a specific site. However, the method of correlating data back to a specific site was abandoned due to the lack of elementary schools with principals willing to participate as well as the fact that parents recruited to participate were not from the schools in which the teachers worked. I maintained a list of participants along with their contact information (see Appendix H) as well as a separate list of participants, including only first name and last initial, and the assigned number-letter code (see Appendix G). These lists were stored in separate locked locations. Recorded and transcribed interviews included only the number-letter code to identify the participant.

Interviews were simultaneously recorded digitally on two recording devices. One of the recording devices was Livescribe, which allowed for digital voice recording as well as digital recording of written notes that could be directly linked to the audio recording. Notes on nonverbal body language were written during the interview using the Livescribe pen and paper. All recorded data, both audio and written, were digitally stored on the University of North Florida (UNF) secure server within 24 hours of the interview. The information was then erased from the recording devices and hand written notes were shredded.

After each interview was completed, I began the transcription process, "the process of transforming qualitative research data into typed text" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 534). This process included listening to the digitally recorded interviews and typing the interviewer questions and interviewee response. I acknowledged that transcription is a process that involves painstaking efforts to represent the spoken word in a written format (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). For this reason, I made an effort to take written field notes describing body language including detailed information about the interviewee during pauses in the interview. The Livescribe pen and paper allowed for any written text to be directly linked to the digital voice recording at a precise moment in time which allowed me to more easily take notes on nonverbal language during a particular moment in the interview. These notes did not prove as beneficial as I originally thought. Interviewees were candid in their responses, and nonverbal information such as an eye roll was evident in the verbal response and written text.

Interviews were transcribed on my laptop using headphones, and the transcribed interviews were stored on the UNF secure server. Confidential information was omitted from the actual copy of the typed interview. Once the interview was transcribed and edited twice, a printed copy was mailed directly to the participant's address along with a second copy of the informed consent, instructions on making notations or edits to the interview, the follow-up survey, and a self-addressed stamped envelope (return address was the researcher's address to ensure confidentiality). Participants were asked to contact me with any corrections to their transcribed interviews. No participants initiated

contact with me for corrections. Participant codes were included on the follow-up survey prior to being mailed to allow for the responses to be linked to the particular participant.

Data Analysis

I developed meaning from the data through the use of inductive analysis, which "involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one's data" (Patton, 2002). Transcription of data allowed me to be immersed in the data. Throughout the transcription process, themes and patterns began to emerge, which allowed me to identify similarities in the IEP experience across participants. As themes and patterns were identified, I began using open coding, or marking segments of data with category names (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). These inductive codes were assigned to "phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) that aligned with a particular theme or pattern identified through direct examination of the data. A master list of all codes included the category and a description of the category. The master list was reviewed prior to any transcription and at least every two hours during ongoing transcription to allow for intracoder reliability. Intracoder reliability is consistency within a single individual (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Axial coding followed open coding of the data; transcribed interviews were reread to allow for the narrowing of categories and subcategories of themes. At the close of each transcription, categories and subcategories were revised to reflect more accurately the patterns as they advanced to a more narrow focus. As patterns in the data were identified, I "critically challenged" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) the patterns by considering alternative explanations. These alternative categories were coded and tracked similarly to the other patterns identified. Within the identified categories, both positive and negative cases, those that did not fit

within the identified patterns (Patton, 2002), were sought and included. For example, in the category *empathy from the school*, much of the data from the school personnel supported the notion that the school's intent was to empathize with families, yet one parent apparently did not see empathy from the school. She stated, "I think that the school just needs to look at things from the parent perspective." Negative case information was included in the categories during coding as it was just as important to represent insensitivity as well as empathy. Both negative and positive cases were informative to the findings and conclusions.

Triangulation of the data was established through the inclusion of multiple perspectives within the IEP process and content analysis of transcripts by participants as well as the follow-up survey. According to Eisner (1998), who refers to triangulation as "structural corroboration," triangulation is a process of linking multiple types of data "to support or contradict the interpretation and evaluation of a state of affairs" (p. 110). The present study included perspectives of various participants in the IEP process. These various participants allowed me to identify experiences and perspectives from all sides of the table. In addition, each participant was given an opportunity to complete a follow-up survey that consisted of questions similar to those posed in the interview. The survey responses consisted of "agree," "disagree," or "neither agree or disagree" options allowing for direct confirmation or contradiction of the patterns and themes identified. Survey responses were analyzed by means of comparison with interview responses as well as across and within participant subgroups.

Researcher as Tool

Qualitative inquiry is distinguished from quantitative inquiry in that the researcher is considered the instrument in qualitative inquiry. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the credibility of the researcher as well as the researcher's bias. The role a researcher plays in qualitative research is partially explained by the concept of educational connoisseurship.

Connoisseurship is defined by Eisner (1998) as "the ability to make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualities" (p. 63). He goes further to say connoisseurship is the art of appreciation and requires perceptivity, awareness, and the ability to experience each distinct quality within a given setting. Eisner also describes connoisseurship as "aimed at understanding what is going on" (p. 82). It was expected that my past experiences, knowledge, and awareness of bias—educational connoisseurship—would influence how I discerned nuances in the data.

I am employed as an applied behavior analyst. As an applied behavior analyst, I work directly with families and children with developmental disabilities on acquisition of pre-requisite learning skills and verbal language as well as on reduction of inappropriate behaviors. In this role, I have supported families in the IEP process, both as a knowledge resource and support in IEP meetings. Over the years of work in the field of behavior analysis, I have attended annual IEP meetings as a representative of the school as well as an invited participant of the parent. I have also taken part in meetings that were called for various reasons, primarily related to student behavior concerns that occurred both prior to and following annual IEP meetings.

The first annual IEP meeting I attended, over 10 years ago, was memorably contentious and continued for a record breaking 6 hours, at which time the team decided to reconvene at a later date with lawyers for both sides present. In this first experience, I was an invited participant by the parent and immediately developed an interest in parents' rights to have an equal vote in IEP team decisions. Contrasting experiences occurred when attending annual IEP meetings, as an invited participant of the parent; the parent had tunnel vision in the goals for her child and, as a result, was not open to suggestions from the other IEP team members. In some cases, I supported school personnel in advocating for what the IEP team, aside from the parent, believed was in the student's best interest. While I acknowledge that school personnel should have an equal voice in IEP team decisions, it is not often the case that school personnel are in need of an advocate to enforce their right to participate equally as can be the case for some parents.

As a practicing behavior analyst, during the few years following the first IEP experience, I openly acknowledged that my limited IEP experiences shaped my recommendations to parents on IEP pursuits. Recommendations were made with the assumption that schools would not necessarily highlight available services unless specifically requested by the parent. This parent-centered bias continued throughout the years as I was employed within a special needs private school setting. Despite the fact that the public schools in the area referred students to this private program, it was, in my opinion, a desperate, final recourse on the part of the school district to avoid due process proceedings rather than an honest effort to afford the student a free and appropriate public education.

In recent years of practice, I have had significantly more positive than negative experiences with public schools. These have included schools initiating additional services and/or accommodations for the student as well as transfer to less restrictive environments prior to parents' request. I have also been afforded the opportunity to engage directly with public school site coaches and behavior specialists, contact which allowed for collaborative decisions in the best interest of the child to be made outside formal IEP meetings. It is my impression that public school staff are becoming more experienced with educating students with special needs, specifically students with autism, and in working with outside service providers. As a result, public school staff are becoming, more receptive to accepting additional support from private providers. It should also be noted that private providers have gained more experience working cooperatively with the school districts and are better educated on available accommodations in the public school system.

It should be stated that the majority of my negative experiences with the school system have been related to cases of students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). While ASD is not a new disability, treatment for ASD is considerably more recent, so many still debate the best course of treatment. In 1999, the Surgeon General concluded that research was sufficient to support Applied Behavior Analysis as an effective treatment for children with ASD. Grassroots efforts in the last decade have brought about insurance reform and coverage of ABA therapy in private settings. Also within the last two years, legislation has passed in the state of Florida mandating that private ABA providers may be allowed to support students in the public school setting if it is deemed appropriate. As a result of these advances in the autism community, public

schools have experienced increased pressure from parents to offer more services to children with ASD.

The district chosen for the present study has employed a collaborative approach with private providers prior to the mandated requirement. The district also has a reputation of using collaborative approaches with parents in annual IEP meetings. I have had experiences, primarily positive experiences, with this district. I also had entrée to the district through a variety of contacts and was encouraged by these individuals to pursue the research topic within this district.

At the time of the study, I had gained an appreciation for both sides of the IEP team. With this appreciation, I could value the passionate pursuit of the development of IEP goals and objectives that both school personnel and parents practice. It was, however, expected that I would be predisposed to react with bias against teachers who approach IEP development with a school-centered attitude. Therefore, in an attempt to neutralize my bias, bracketing was employed. Bracketing is the practice of setting aside preconceptions in an attempt "to experience the phenomena 'as it is'" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 396). I expected that through bracketing, the search for alternative themes, or negative cases, along with continued engagement in "mental cleansing processes" (Patton, 2004), I would better be able to represent an accurate analysis of the similarities and differences experienced in the IEP process across various points of view.

Educational criticism plays a major role in the present study. Eisner delineates connoisseurship from criticism in that the former is a private event while the latter is public. The purpose of educational criticism is to increase perception and deepen understanding (Eisner, 1998). The four dimensions of educational criticism include

description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics. My aim was to understand participant perceptions of the various roles in the IEP process and to provide a thorough and reflective description of those perceptions. I provided interpretation through explanation of the rationale behind particular perceptions. And comparisons across and within participant perspectives were made resulting in the development of themes.

Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

The preceding sections have delineated the necessary elements of establishing the present study as credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. This section will define each of these four constructs suggested by Lincoln and Guba in their book *Naturalistic Inquiry* (1985) (as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006) as a means of establishing trustworthiness of a research study.

The credibility or believability of a study rests on the study's validity. According to Howe and Eisenhart (1990), internal validity of qualitative research is established by conducting research ethically. Of utmost importance is the treatment of participants. External validity in qualitative research is established through the study's ability to inform and improve educational practice (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990). The significance of the study is specifically discussed in Chapter 1 and is communicated throughout. Transferability and generalizability to a variety of settings is difficult to establish in qualitative research, and this is the case for the present study due especially to the nature of the limited sample. A strong theoretical framework as a basis for data collection and analysis as well as triangulation—the use of multiple sources of data—was used as a means of strengthening transferability of the present study. Dependability refers to the ability to show that findings are consistent and repeatable. Confirmability means that

throughout data analysis researcher bias is limited and findings are objectively shaped by the data.

Delimitations

The delimitations of the present study included participants who were involved in IEPs for elementary students receiving special education services in the public school setting in a district in northeast Florida and who were interviewed at a single point in time about their perceptions of the IEP process.

Participants in the present study consisted of public school education personnel and parents of children receiving special education services in the public school setting. This composition did not allow for analysis of the perceptions of parents or school personnel who have either never been involved in the IEP process or were involved in the IEP process in public schools and have left the public school system. However, it should be noted two of the three parents interviewed were new to the IEP process and the third parent was in the process of enrolling her child in a private school setting. The exclusion of private schools in the participant pool may have eliminated interviews with parents who have specifically moved their child from the public school system due to concerns with the IEP process. Private schools were not included in the present study for two reasons: Data may have been skewed by negative parent experiences and these families were no longer involved in due process proceedings or otherwise involved in the allocation of special education resources in the public education system.

I was particularly interested in exploring parent experiences in the early years of the IEP process. Therefore, I selected only participants who were included in the IEP process for elementary students receiving special education services. This choice did not

allow for analysis of the perceptions of parents who are more experienced in the IEP process. However, it should be noted that one of the three parents interviewed had many years of experience in the IEP process and offered the perspective of an experienced parent. The inclusion of participants involved only at the elementary level did not allow for analysis of the perceptions of parents or school personnel involved in different educational areas or levels such as vocational training and transition services at the junior high and high school levels.

The present study took place in a district in northeast Florida due, primarily, to its proximity to where I live. In addition, the district was chosen over other nearby districts because of ease of approval—I had entrée. This choice in district eliminated another nearby district that is exceptionally large, culturally diverse, and at the time of the present study, making efforts to improve special education services. The choice in district may have had an effect on the demographics of the participants involved in the study and, therefore, transferability of the results.

Participants were interviewed at a single point in time about their perceptions of the ongoing IEP process. The participants were not directly observed during the IEP process for various reasons, including time limitations of the study, potential reactivity of an observer, and the need for additional approval due to the confidential nature of information discussed during IEP meetings. I acknowledge that interviews alone do not provide information about actual participation in the IEP meetings. However, interviews allow for insight into personal perspective in a way that observation of actual behavior does not (Patton, 2002). The interviews consisted of predetermined questions, which allowed for obtaining reasonably consistent information from each participant. While

following a protocol allows for ease in data analysis in comparing how participants respond to specific questions, it does not allow for further exploration outside the boundaries of the interview questions. I expected that interview questions would be revised during the study resulting in elimination or addition of questions altering the specific questions participants may have been asked depending on whether they were interviewed early or late in the study. However, the addition of questions took place during the first interview, so all interview protocols were similar. It should be noted that many of the participants were allowed to expand on different aspects of the IEP process that they found particularly important yet were not necessarily included in the interview protocol. I acknowledge that interviews are somewhat reliant on the researcher's interpersonal skills as well as the openness of the participant. Participants appeared very candid in their responses and many school personnel participants commented that their candid responses were attributed to the confidentiality of their responses.

Limitations

The limitations of the present study included my experience with the IEP process, the participants who volunteered to be involved in the study, and the inability to generalize findings to the general population.

The majority of my experience with the IEP process has been as a private service provider contracted by parents receiving special education services in the public school system. I directly advise parents involved in the IEP process, so I entered the present study with a slight bias toward a parent-advocate perspective. I saw the need to improve the IEP process specifically for parents who would like to be more directly involved in the writing of goals and objectives for their child's IEP.

Individuals voluntarily participated in the interviews. The type of participant who chose to participate in a study of this nature may have been different from those who chose not to participate. Because they volunteered, the participants may have been more interested in changing the IEP process. Additionally, participants may have been engaged with varying levels of commitment and thoughtfulness in their responding to interview questions.

Findings from the present study cannot be generalized to the larger population due to the small sample size and limited scope of the sample participants from only one school district. Though findings cannot be generalized on a larger scale, the findings can contribute valuable information to others who are willing to take a closer look at the IEP process as it relates to the collaborative culture within the school setting.

Ethical Considerations

I reviewed the informed consent (see Appendix D) with each participant prior to conducting the interview. The informed consent included a description of the purpose of the study, the expected time commitment involved in the interviews as well as the expected time frame of the study. It was explained to interviewees that participation was completely voluntary and they might withdraw from the study without penalty at any time prior to, during, or after the interview. No participants chose to withdraw from the present study after the interview was scheduled. Measures to maintain confidentiality, including the use of coding for participant identification, were described. To further ensure confidentiality, participants were not asked to sign the informed consent but rather were asked to give a verbal indication that they understood and agreed to participate and have their responses included in the study.

Due to the sensitive nature of the personal experience information being collected, I made every attempt to remain neutral during interviews. This included intervals of eye contact, reviewing the interview protocol, and taking and reviewing notes. I also employed active listening skills that involved head nods to encourage the interviewee. I made every attempt during the interviews not to indicate my values and beliefs about the IEP process. However, there was discussion on two occasions, with two interviewees, of the vastness of the IEP process and the need to address changes at a systemic level. These discussions did not impact the results as they took place after the formal interview.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 provides the framework of the present study's methodology along with the procedures used to conduct the study. The research design is detailed as well as the setting, population and sample, data collection, data management, and data analysis. It describes researcher as tool as well as delimitations, limitations, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 provides a review of the purpose of the present study and the methodology of the study. Details about participants, data analysis, and a thorough description of the present study's findings are also provided.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the present study's findings followed by detailed discussion related to the research questions and connections to the literature reviewed in chapter two. The discussion concludes with the importance of the present study's findings. Conclusions as well as implications and recommendations for future research, policy development and implementation, and practice are provided. This final chapter closes with a conclusion of the dissertation.

Chapter Four: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction and Organization

The purpose of the present study was to investigate parents' and school personnel's beliefs about and experiences with collaboration activities that took place prior to the annual Individualized Education Program meeting and the influence of collaboration on the quality of parent participation during the annual IEP meeting. The present study also investigated parents' and school personnel's perceptions of benefits related to collaborative efforts throughout the IEP process. Additionally, the present study explored whether parents and school personnel were satisfied or dissatisfied with the current IEP process, in general, as well as with specific aspects of the IEP process. Perceptions about what parents and school personnel believe were barriers to parental involvement as well as what can be done to improve the IEP process were also explored.

This chapter consists of a review of the methodology, including the research design and data collection. Detailed information about the participants is followed by a description of the findings, including the data analysis procedures. A chapter summary closes the chapter.

Review of Methods

This phenomenological study was conducted with qualitative in-depth interviews. Phenomenology was the philosophy used to support the present study because of the focus of the qualitative research questions, which, in the present study, examined, personal experiences of various participants within the IEP process. Exploration into

relevant variables of positive and negative experiences warrants a qualitative examination of the phenomenon of the IEP experience.

Interviews were chosen as the primary means of data collection. In-depth interviews allowed me to "capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants' own words" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 55). The interviews were structured using an interview protocol (Appendix E). Interviews were transcribed and copies of transcribed interviews were provided to six of seven participants for their review. The participants were also provided a short follow-up survey (Appendix F) to allow for triangulation of the data.

Participants

Assistant principals were included because they are usually the legal representatives for the school in an annual IEP meeting. The role the assistant principal plays includes ensuring that the legal requirements of the IEP are being met within the meeting and on the document. The assistant principal included in the present study did perceive her role as the legal representative. The assistant principal may also set the tone for the way special education teachers approach parental involvement in the IEP process. Leadership within each school, including the assistant principal, has an influence on the culture within that school. The assistant principal included in the present study discussed the importance of the culture within her school. The special education teacher plays a significant role in the IEP process and is typically at the core of parent-school communication. The special education teachers included in the present study did indicate their role was to act as the primary point person for parents as well as the remainder of the IEP team. Parents have a unique role in the IEP process because they are not

necessarily knowledgeable about writing educational objectives for the IEP. However, they play an important role as the common link for identifying their child's needs and advocating for them across the span of the educational years. I was particularly interested in exploring experiences during the early years of the IEP process. Therefore, participants included only those involved in the IEP process for elementary students receiving special education services.

I expected to use snowball sampling beginning with the assistant principal of each school that agreed to participate. It was expected that the assistant principal would recommend one or two special education teachers who would, in turn, suggest one or two parents of children receiving special education services. This method was ineffective as teacher participants were secured prior to the assistant principal and the teachers who participated did not respond to follow up attempts to gain contact information of potential parent participants. The assistant principal interviewed assisted with identifying one parent involved in the study, but no other participants were selected through snowball sampling.

Another assumption was that at least four assistant principals would be included. Unfortunately, only one assistant principal was interested in participating, and she was considered sufficient due to her wealth of knowledge and experience in a large special needs school. It was projected that at least two special education teachers from four elementary schools would be identified as potential participants, totaling at least eight special education teachers. It was expected that at least four special education teachers would volunteer to participate. In fact, three teachers from various perspectives in special education participated. These perspectives included regular education inclusion,

resource support, and self-contained. Each teacher provided insight into the special education process from a different yet interestingly similar point of view.

It was expected that at least two parents would be referred from each special education teacher, totaling at least 16 potential parent participants. In fact, only one parent was referred from another participant, the assistant principal. One of my classmates referred the remaining two parents who participated. Another expectation was that at least half of the parents referred would volunteer to participate in the study. In fact, of the three parents contacted, all three participated.

The participants consisted of (see Table 1) one assistant principal, three teachers, and three parents currently involved in the formal process of creating and documenting special education services for individual students. The teachers included a self-contained Exceptional Student Education (ESE) teacher, a resource ESE teacher, and a regular education inclusion teacher. The parents interviewed included two parents who had just undergone initial experiences in the special education process and a parent with several years of experience with the IEP process. Gathering insight into the experiences of individuals involved in the special education process through various participant perspectives allowed me to gain insight into the process through different lenses, which advanced the triangulation of the data.

Table 1

Participants

Participant	Title	Experience	School
Assistant Principal	Assistant Principal	10 years regular education inclusion teacher; 2 years instructional literacy coach; 3 years Assistant Principal	School Two
Teacher	Self-Contained ESE Teacher	2 years Self-Contained ESE Teacher	School One
Teacher	Resource ESE Teacher	25 years K-5 ESE Teacher	School One
Teacher	Regular Education Inclusion Teacher	24 years Regular Education	School One
Parent	Parent	Less than 1 year; Initial 504 plan	Other
Parent	Parent	Less than 1 year; Initial IEP	Other
Parent	Parent	Several years (at least 5 years); IEP	School Two

Assistant Principal. The assistant principal included in the present study had 10 years of experience as a regular education teacher, typically with inclusion students in her class. She had two years of experience as an instructional literacy coach and three years of experience as an assistant principal. During her three years as an assistant principal, she served in a large ESE school and participated in approximately 200 meetings. The assistant principal described her role as the person responsible for adherence to the IEP

procedural requirements. She referred a parent, with whom she had direct IEP experience, to participate in the study, who is also included as a participant.

Teachers. The three teachers included in the study were all from the same school setting and all had different roles within the IEP process. Two of the three teachers had many years of experience while one teacher had just two years of experience.   One teacher had taught K-5 special education for 25 years and participated in approximately 20-30 IEPs annually totaling hundreds of IEP meeting experiences. One teacher had 24 years of experience teaching regular education and was a regular education inclusion teacher. She indicated she had participated in about 40 IEP meetings. The teacher with the fewest years of teaching had taught self-contained ESE for 2 years; however, she had participated in approximately 50 IEP meetings.   Both ESE teachers described their roles as IEP facilitators and case managers. The regular education teacher described her role as directing IEP decisions by providing details on regular education classroom standards to the IEP team.

Parents. Two of the three parents interviewed had participated in only one formal meeting. One parent was involved in the IEP process, and one was involved in the 504 process. In contrast to an IEP, which addresses a student's educational program comprehensively with goals and objectives along with accommodations and modifications, a 504 plan consists only of accommodations necessary to ensure a student is successful. In addition, to qualify for a 504 plan the student must have needs directly related to a documented physical or mental impairment. In the case of the parent participant, her son was diagnosed with ADHD. The parental involvement component of the IEP is similar to that in a 504 plan and therefore it seemed appropriate to include a

parent involved in the 504 process in the present study. Both parents with only one formal meeting experience had students in regular education, kindergarten, and first grade. Both parents also viewed their role as providing input.

One parent had a child in self-contained ESE and had experience with the IEP process since her child started school at age 3. She had participated in six formal meetings, and her son had a rare accommodation of a one-on-one staff. She viewed her role in a much more complex manner than did the other two parents. She described her role as being responsible to call meetings if goals and objectives were not being addressed, being present at meetings, gathering necessary parties to attend the meetings, reading and being familiar with the current IEP, and "being an advocate in every way."

Review of Data Analysis

In-depth interviews were transcribed and edited three times. Immersion in the data during the transcription and editing processes allowed for the identification of common themes. During the coding process, categories and subcategories were listed in an Excel spreadsheet (Appendix I) and highlighted in the transcribed interview for each participant.   Each consecutive edit narrowed the subcategories and ultimately subcategories were grouped by larger themes. For example, the subcategories of "parent as an IEP team member" and "school team collaboration" were combined into the subcategory "team collaboration."   "Team collaboration" along with "support from leadership," and "transparency" were later refined into a larger theme of "culture."

I also engaged in memoing (taking critical notes) during the data collection phase and throughout the analysis of data. To further develop my perceptivity of the data, I reviewed the theories that framed the present study, drew main ideas from each theory,

and created an Excel spreadsheet organized into main theoretical ideas and overall thoughts and reflections of related participant perspectives. Further analysis consisted of creating a table of each interview question and every participant's response, which allowed for analysis of each open-ended question and comparison across and within participant groups. All Excel spreadsheets were constructed similarly to the subcategory spreadsheet example shown in Appendix I.

Findings

The findings presented include data from both the survey and from qualitative, in-depth interviews. The survey responses are delineated in Table 2 presenting total positive or "agree" responses from participants. Following an analysis of the survey findings, the overarching themes that emerged from the in-depth qualitative data are detailed. The consistency of responses across the two forms was mixed and is discussed.

Survey Responses

Two participants including the assistant principal and one of the teachers, the self-contained ESE teacher, did not return the follow-up survey. The survey responses provided mixed results for four of five questions (Table 2). All participants agreed that the first IEP they attended had an impact on their perceptions and beliefs about the IEP process. There were mixed responses on whether parents had opportunities to be active and whether they were active participants. Teachers responded with "agree" 100% of the time while parents responded with "agree" only 33% of the time. The teachers surveyed were mixed in their responses to the questions on satisfaction. While one teacher responded "neither agree nor disagree," the other teacher reported she was satisfied with the role the parents' played and with the overall process. While only one parent

responded positively to the questions of satisfaction, she responded "agree" to being satisfied with the role the special education teacher played. Only one parent reported being dissatisfied with the overall process. This parent reported that her child would have received an IEP one year sooner had she known the right verbiage. She also recruited outside support to assist her in creating the IEP goals and objectives for her son. As she described it, her experience in the IEP process was, "It got done, they did it, but it was bumpy." All others responded with "neither agree nor disagree." Overall, teachers responded to the follow-up survey questions positively 70% whereas parents responded positively for only 40% of the follow-up questions.

Table 2

Positive Survey Responses

	First IEP had impact	Parents had opportunity to be active participants	Parents were active participants	Satisfied with the other party's role	Overall satisfied with the IEP process	Total
Assistant Principal	*	*	*	*	*	
Teacher	*	*	*	*	*	
Teacher	+	+	+	+	+	100%
Teacher	+	+	N	N	N	40%
Total Teacher	100%	100%	50%	50%	50%	70%
Parent	+	N	N	N	-	20%
Parent	+	N	N	N	N	20%
Parent	+	+	+	+	N	80%
Total Parent	100%	33%	33%	33%	0%	40%

*Did not return survey

Overarching Qualitative Analysis of Themes

Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis of the in-depth interview data: advocacy, knowledge, and culture. Each overarching theme was divided into

subcategories.　　The overarching themes and subcategories are detailed in Table 3. Findings within each subcategory will be detailed in the following section of this chapter.

Table 3

Overarching Themes and Subcategories

Overarching Theme	Subcategory		
Advocacy	Empathy from school	The need for outside support	Lifelong parent advocacy
Knowledge	Access to and use of the right verbiage	Resources and legalities	
Culture	Leadership support	Team collaboration	Transparency

Advocacy

According to the parents interviewed, advocacy in the IEP process emerged out of necessity. School personnel also recognized the need for parent advocacy in order for students to receive full opportunity within the special education process. The perceived lack of empathy from the school is one contributing factor leading parents to become stronger advocates for their child. Both school personnel and parents acknowledged that parents require support from outside the school to become effective advocates. Through experience in the IEP process, parents begin to realize that they are their child's only lifelong advocate and commit to that role.

Empathy From the School. Interestingly, three out of four participants who directly referenced school empathy were school personnel. Consistent with best practice

recommendations, the data support the importance of empathy with families as a topic to which the school personnel are sensitive. The school personnel also indicated they employ methods of making parents feel more comfortable in formal IEP meetings. For example, the assistant principal expressed her concern that when parents walk into a room full of school personnel, the environment causes stress for them despite the fact that the meeting may be a "simple" evaluation of something considerably small on the "education side." She commented, "They still they don't understand any of it and they're so worried about what that means to say, because they're signing a piece of paper that says my child has a disability." One teacher expressed her recognition of the effect on parents by describing them as "nervous about the whole process and the labeling of their student." She further pointed out that parents often had similar experiences themselves: "They'll get teary-eyed and [say], 'I don't want my child to, you know, suffer the way I did in school and stuff."

While the data support that school personnel have an understanding of the parent perspective, parents report feeling as if the school did not consider the parent perspective. Specifically, school personnel make efforts to consider the parent perspective in more formal meetings while parents interviewed expressed concerns about initiating the formal process. For example, one parent said that she "wanted something in writing that says [teachers] have to [implement accommodations]" for her son. She also felt that the school "kind of made us feel very badly about requesting [something so formal]." One parent detailed the lack of empathy she experienced when the school personnel, who herself had a child with special needs, said to her,

"You know there are other kids with much more involved needs than [your son], mine is one." . . .How am I supposed to react to that? Your child has no bearing on mine, I want what's best for mine, just the same way she wants what's best for [hers]. . . .So, as a parent having gone through this process I expected more from her.

The lack of empathy substantiates the need for outside support in the IEP process.

The Need for Outside Support. Through the literature review, I uncovered a plethora of methods to improve the IEP process. Surprisingly, while it was not reflected in the literature, five out of seven participants interviewed identified *accessing outside support* as a method of improving parent involvement and satisfaction. Outside support included talking to parents experienced in the IEP process or to friends and family in the school system and gaining a better understanding of the IEP process through an IEP advocate.

Following negative experiences, parents sought information from others outside the school setting. For example, one parent indicated she learned how to get what she wanted written in an IEP "through talking with other parents who maybe had what I wanted." Another parent discussed her frustration with the school and, as a result, sought outside advice: "My mom's in [STATE] and has a teacher friend in [(SAME) STATE], she was like, 'Ask for this."

The assistant principal spoke of improving her own satisfaction with her role in the IEP process by doing more to assist parents including creating a parent support group, offering informational sessions to parents, and developing a parent buddy program. She

described a specific example of how a parent buddy in an IEP can create a better first impression of the IEP process:

> I thought it was just a beautiful experience, there was a single mom and her son was coming into our Pre-K program and it really, it was an organic thing, didn't happen through me, but someone from the community that knew her and knew how nervous she was, that had been a former parent at our school reached out to her and said, "would you like me to come with you?" And then they did, and it was amazing. It was great cause then when we, when people starting talking lingo she knew enough and we had enough of a relationship with her that she was able to say, "okay, let me tell her what you all are talking about."

Unfortunately, parents are not often encouraged to seek outside support. As evidenced by a new noncoercion form in the IEP process, someone was actually denied the right to have outside support in an IEP meeting. One parent explained her experience with the noncoercion form and the lack of encouragement for outside support:

> You have to sign something saying that you weren't coerced, that they didn't prevent somebody else from being there, which, you know, yeah we signed it but at the same time I said, "we didn't have enough time to get an advocate." [The school said,] "You don't need to advocate, we're here to advocate for your child." And I said, "that's fine, next time I'll have one, just so you know."

All three parents mentioned having access to IEP advocates as a means of outside support and as a way to better navigate the IEP process. One parent who is experienced in the IEP process reflected on the way her initial experiences would have been better if she had been guided to seek an IEP advocate:

I think it'd be nice if they like, they probably wouldn't do this, if they were like these are organizations that have IEP advocates that can better explain the IEP process to you. Because I think sometimes people go out and get attorneys because they feel like. . .you know, this is how I'm going to get what I want. But if they, if the school said, "hey listen these are not-for-profit organizations that offer IEP advocates, I'm going to hand you these procedural safeguards—they're not going to mean much to you but go sit down with somebody, understand the IEP process, and, you know, basically what it means for your child and what you need to make sure that you have everything ready for us to discuss and talk about."

Better preparing parents through outside support would establish more positive initial experiences for these parents and establish a much different tone for parent-school relations. Fortunately, without guidance from the school, parents were quick to recognize the need for proactive advocacy for their child.

Lifelong Parent Advocacy. All participants recognized the fact that parents must advocate for their child. While the parents seemed comfortable advocating for their child, they each indicated they were taken aback when they had to advocate so forcefully. And two of three parents as well as the regular education teacher expressed concerns that the school did not provide adequate information to explain why a child was struggling. The data indicated that, during the formal special education process, all three parents came to the realization that not only were they fighting the system to ensure their child's success, but also were advocating for their child for the rest of their life. School

personnel also acknowledged that parents of children with disabilities must have a lifelong commitment.

All three parents acknowledged that they initially assumed the school would provide for their children's needs. Unfortunately, parents consistently reported that not only did they have to "fight" with the school to address their children's needs, but also they were often left in the dark as to what those needs actually were:

It's just frustrating as a parent that in the education system they can't really make recommendations or, you know, a teacher can't say, "hey I see this going on with your kid"….I would think as an educator you would want to help these kids and I feel like they don't necessarily do that.

As another parent pointed out:

He's my only child, I'm an only child, I don't know what's normal. . . .It's my understanding that teachers can't come right out and say, "hey go get your kid tested." Because then the school becomes liable for the cost of testing and whatnot. . . .it would be really nice to have that feedback from the school. To say, listen, here's specific examples of things we're noticing. In other children this is indicated XYZ.

Parents were not alone in feeling frustrated about this; teachers expressed similar concerns. For example, one teacher described her frustrations:

I have to go way around, through the back door. Well, your child's really off task, often needs reminders, he's sweet but he can't stay in his seat. You know, I can't say I see the attributes of a child with ADHD, I would go get testing, you might want to consider some behavior modification, maybe some counseling,

maybe some medicine, you may want—NO. I never say that. I can't be completely forthright. I mean I've been in it for 20 some years and I've raised two children but I can't be honest.

One parent explained the isolated feeling upon realizing that the parent is ultimately the sole advocate for the child:

Eventually you mature just like anything else, age, otherwise, but you mature with having a child with special needs and you're like, no, people aren't going to see it this way, people aren't just going do it, I don't have to be mean to get it done, but no, I'm not going to take this, this isn't right, this is what I want, you don't want to give it to me, okay what do I need to do. . . .It's almost like how we feel like we get worn down with fighting I think you almost have to wear down the other side.

One teacher and one parent provided powerful explanations of parents' lifelong obligation to a child and how this played a part in the IEP process for parents:

I feel like most of the time you just have to understand that, you know, that they're, the parents are dealing with this all day long in their entire life and we only get them for a period of time of the day. So as long as you are open to listening to the ideas and what issues they're having at home usually every party's going to leave happy and satisfied or at least come to some kind of compromise on how we can best work together. . . .I feel like some of my parents that have been very very engaged it's because something, somebody let it slip along the line. And so they have to, they have to, they feel like they have to be involved because if they're not fighting for their child, who is. Which I totally understand.

But you don't know that feeling you don't know that burden that they carry with them and also the joys they carry with them. . . .I mean it's a whole 'nother level of like, this is my life, this is not like a period in my life, this is my life. And, I mean, just as much as you're trying to [do] what you need to do to protect yourself I'm trying to do the same thing because this just doesn't start on, you know, May 5th and then end, you know, in September. It's like every year we're going to be at this table and I'm going to be back here.

With these realizations, teachers in the present study voiced a desire to provide parents with more information yet also felt limited by the parameters of the system. Parents in the present study began to educate themselves about the formal IEP process without the support and guidance of the school.

Knowledge

As indicated in the literature review, parents often cited the imbalance of knowledge about the IEP process as intimidating and frustrating (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). As one parent said, "I figured it would be much parent friendly the process, but it's not." The lack of knowledge about where to start and what is available for their child were indicated as areas of concern for parents interviewed in the present study.

Access to and Use of the Right Verbiage. All parents interviewed referred to the use of "the right verbiage" as either a way to access the IEP process or to access resources to be included within the IEP. Each parent also indicated that she had trouble gaining access to and using the right verbiage. One parent explained how simple it would be for the school to provide the assistance:

The information is there, just show, just point me in the right direction even if you say it's on this page. I'll go and do the research on it but some parents, including myself last year when this started, I didn't know where to start.

As another parent put it, "It's very much we are going to give you as little as we can give you unless you know to ask for something differently."

Other statements from parents describe the same concern over access to and lack of knowledge of appropriate language needed to gain access to special education services:

So, she literally read verbatim line by line this whole document and some of the wording was very intense. "Yes or no, does the child have a severe physical or mental impairment?" Or disability, something like that. And [my husband and I] kind of looked at each other and looked at the teacher and said, "I wouldn't say he's got a severe, I mean it's not physical but a mental disability." You know, I don't know. It was very, the first time I had heard those words. And the school said, "Well, if the answer's no then this meeting's done". . . .And I said, "Time out. You've read this paper before, I haven't, this is the first time I'm ever hearing of this." So, basically the only answer was yes, I mean that was kind of a big kind of thing to label your kid with but the answer had to be yes.

Another parent described the same insufficiency:

I approached [my child's teacher] last year, nothing was done because I basically didn't use the right verbiage….I think if I would have known what I know now back then, we probably would have had the IEP placed in kindergarten.

One parent explained how parents can get additional resources listed in the IEP "if they say the right things." Another pointed out that "Getting the right verbiage is very frustrating. I feel like, rightfully so, the school tries to work in an area of grey so they can maximize things, you know." This theory was supported by the teachers interviewed who said that they are not expected to offer ideas to parents because such advice from school personnel would hold the school accountable to provide that service. Though none of the school personnel detailed any specific procedures that directed them not to offer information to parents, all of them alluded to the limited resources available to provide everything that some children need. Nevertheless, they are not allowed to tell parents specifically what their child needs or where they can go to get help. One teacher described the kind of situation when he or she would give advice to parents: "I've got to have a parent that I can trust that won't go tell on me and get me in trouble."

Resources Within the School and Legalities Involved in the IEP. Parents and school personnel alike expressed concern about meeting individual children's needs and the availability of resources. Teachers indicated their dilemma offering what is available because they know these resources are not sufficient to meet the child's needs. For example, as the assistant principal stated,

> Their struggle is wanting to write something in that IEP that's in the best interest of a child and not having the financial resources to do it, or the funding, or the personnel. You know, and so it's not necessarily the writing of the document, it's everything else that comes with, after that, you know. If I think this child needs to be seen individually for speech; well, I think that's necessary but that speech teacher already has fifty-five cases. . .you can write a great IEP but is it, can you,

do you have the resources to do what that document says and when you do that, that document's legally binding. So it's coming to that reasonability, this is, it's a free and appropriate public education, what does that look like, with what, and not getting, not taxing any one group or area so much that they just break.

In one teacher's perspective, the system has failed to support children struggling to keep up:

It's often set by the state, how much time you can have [support staff in the classroom]. It falls dramatically short of what these children need. By doing inclusion, it's often a way of actually reducing the time these children get….We're working harder, faster and, but we're scaling way back on what we do for these kids who need help. . . .These poor kids in the, you know, in the lower bottom of the regular ed classroom they're just not getting the support they need, and they're going to struggle, and I think it's all a money thing.

All the school personnel interviewed shared the desire to do more for the students to some degree; one teacher summarized this feeling:

You do the best you can with what you have. Everyday. But, I mean, there's always more you can do. It doesn't matter if you had unlimited resources, you might not even have the time. . . .As much as we do get in this county, and we are so very fortunate, it's never enough. . . .I just feel like if we could just put one more thing, if we can do just this much more.

This level of awareness along with the confines of open communication directly affected the culture of the participants' schools.

Culture

The culture within a school affects team collaboration, which is led by the school's leadership. A major component of the culture is the involvement of parents in the collaboration and doing so with transparency.

Team Collaboration. The data presented an interesting phenomenon in team collaboration: The school team is collaborating informally almost constantly; the school personnel indicated that opportunities for parents to collaborate are available, yet parents indicated they were left out.

The data suggested that school teams are consistently engaging in collaboration prior to IEP meeting specifically because they are available to engage in informal collaboration throughout the school day. Both teachers that responded to the survey agreed with the follow-up survey statement: "In the past year, I created opportunities for parents to interact with the school personnel involved in their child's education prior to the annual IEP meeting." So school personnel believe they are providing opportunities for parents to collaborate. When asked the same question, only one of three parents agreed. Unfortunately, most parents were not involved at the school level day-to-day and, therefore, did not see that the team was working together. Thus, their perception was that decisions were not being made in the best interest of their child. One parent, having called the district to begin the IEP process reported being told by someone at the district,

She's like, "oh, they have a meeting scheduled for Monday to discuss his what—his progress," whatever. I said, "oh, okay." So, I was like, a little taken back that

I didn't know about it but then also at the same time, glad that his teacher is aware

that, that something's not right.

All school personnel interviewed said they had informally met and collaborated

with the other school team members prior to the IEP. One participant explained that "a

lot of it nowadays is done through email. So there'll be a group e-mail, uh, with kids

initials and the team will just start talking"; school personnel also indicated they talk

"when they see each other in the hall." Unfortunately, the data indicated that parents

were not consistently involved in this collaboration and, therefore, felt like one parent

who, when asked if there was any collaboration prior to the meeting, said, "Only in the

fact that we were in the same room working on the same document, but I don't feel like it

was a heart to heart collaboration in the best interest of [my son]."

Leadership Support. The assistant principal interviewed provided in-depth

insight into the responsibilities of a good leader in the special education process. She

often referenced the characteristics of a good leader: "A good leader recognizes that

[parents need to meet prior to the IEP] and I think someone who's got, that's built

relationships and that has good interpersonal skills you can tell in someone's voice over

the phone."

Unfortunately, the skills identified as "good leadership" were often traits that are

difficult to include on a checklist identifying what leaders should do to improve the IEP

process. According to one teacher, "A lot of times if you don't have supportive

administration you don't get anything." And another teacher stated, "Luckily, in this

school, the assistant principal now especially, is like I want to place your students first, so

they do take that as a priority." Though participants were neither asked to provide nor

offered in-depth information about leadership and the IEP process, these data indicate that leadership can have an impact on the IEP process.

Transparency. A final subcategory alluded to by almost all participants is transparency. Examples of transparency in the present study include clarification of paperwork and educational objectives, information about what is available to students as well as information about what is unrealistic for the school to provide.

One parent stated that she would have liked "a little bit more transparency in the process. "Here's the papers we're going to go over at the, the next meeting." Or as the assistant principal pointed out, "Stopping and saying, 'well this is what this looks like.' Sometimes I'll say to the teachers if, can you bring. . .a sample of what [one reading level versus another] looks like." Teachers seemed open to providing information to parents about "what possibilities there are and what accommodations they could possibly ask for." The teachers "want to be honest and forthright here." Unfortunately, teachers also felt that they had "to have a parent that I can trust that won't go tell on me." One parent described the moment she realized that the school would not be transparent:

> And I said to her then, I said, well, I don't know if that's all you have available or not, like where do I get this [information], and she didn't say anything. And that's when I knew at that point, we need to get help.

Consistency of Responses

The responses may have limited consistency since the survey was sent a couple of weeks following the interview, and the scale itself provided only limited options of "agree," "neither agree nor disagree," and "disagree." One teacher and one parent were

less consistent with their responses to the survey in comparison to their interview responses, while one teacher and two parents responded fairly consistent.

One teacher's survey responses were not consistent with her interview responses with the exception of being satisfied overall with the IEP process. One teacher's responses to the survey and interview were very inconsistent—many of her in-depth responses were mixed. For example, in her response to the role parents played she indicated that some were "significantly instrumental" yet some were less involved. When surveyed about satisfaction with the role parents played, she responded "neither agree nor disagree."

Parents' responses to the survey questions aligned with their in-depth interview responses with the exception of one parent. Her interview responses were mixed; in fact, her response to the question of the effectiveness of the special education teacher was "I'd say it's 50/50," suggesting that she neither agreed nor disagreed, yet her survey response was "agree." She responded similarly to the questions on the role the teacher played and opportunities to be an active participant. This parent was more experienced in the IEP process, and, therefore, her interview questions reflected both initial negative experiences and more recent positive experiences. The survey questionnaire was limiting, and perhaps her responses were weighted in favor of her more recent positive experiences.

Summary of the Findings

The data collected for the present study indicated that school personnel perceive that they are providing opportunities for parents to be involved collaboratively; however, parents do not perceive that a genuine collaboration exists. Schools are making an effort to generate a comfortable environment by inviting collaboration during formal meetings;

however, parents expressed frustration with the more informal aspects of the IEP process including initiation of services. Both parents and school personnel acknowledged that access to outside support, including advocacy groups, would increase parent understanding and facilitate the IEP process.

Both parents and teachers understand that schools are drastically limited by the lack of available resources. Parents were surprised that the school personnel were not often forthcoming about their child's needs due usually to scarce resources. While teachers tended to delicately straddle the invisible boundary of making recommendations for a child's best interest while preserving the scarce resources available, parents were strained to advocate more vigorously than they had expected they would need to in order for their child to have the resources needed to succeed in school.

It should be noted that findings of the present study are limited due to the delimitations and limitations of the study previously outlined. Further, the findings cannot be generalized to larger population due to the small sample size of seven as well as the limited scope of the sample participants from only one school district. However, it should also be noted that data from a small number of participants allowed me to dedicate significant time to the rich data and provide a level of deep analysis, which may not have been achieved with a larger sample. Though there was a desire to include a broader range of participants, I was surprised to find emergence of patterns early in the data collection process.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 provided a review of the purpose of the present study along with a review of the study methodology. Details about participants and data analysis and a

thorough description of the present study's findings are also provided along with a summary of the findings.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed discussion related to the research questions and connections to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The discussion concludes with the importance of the present study's findings. Conclusions as well as implications and recommendations for future research, policy development and implementation, and practice are provided. Chapter 5 will close with a conclusion of the dissertation.

Chapter Five: Results and Conclusions

Introduction and Organization

The purpose of the present study was to investigate parents' and school personnel's beliefs about and experiences with collaboration prior to the annual IEP meeting and the influence that collaboration has on the quality of parent participation during the formal IEP meeting. The principal research question was this: *How does collaboration between parents and teachers influence active parental participation in developing their child's IEP*? More specifically, the study explored the following questions:

- What is the nature of existing collaboration between teachers and parents prior to the annual IEP meeting?

- What are parents' and teachers' perceptions and beliefs about the benefits, drawbacks, and key issues related to collaboration prior to the annual IEP meeting?

- How do teachers and parents perceive their roles in the IEP process?

- What are parents' and teachers' suggestions to improve parental involvement and parent and teacher satisfaction with the IEP process?

This chapter includes a detailed discussion that connects the results of the present study to the extant literature. The discussion concludes with the importance of the findings. Conclusions as well as implications and recommendations for future research follow. Chapter five closes with a conclusion of the dissertation.

Discussion of the Findings

To my surprise, the data show common concerns and suggestions across participant perspectives rather than, as expected, within each participant subgroup. More specifically, both school personnel and parents identified similar concerns and frustrations with the IEP process and suggested similar ideas for improvement. For example, school personnel and parents had similar perspectives on the need for parents to have access to outside support. Not surprisingly, parents did not fully understand the role they would play in their child's education; they were often shocked at the reason they had to assume a more active role: lack of transparency on the part of the school personnel, specifically in relation to special education resources. The data in the present study support Habing's (2004) research finding which says that one of the most negative aspects of the IEP process for parents is feeling as if they have to fight for the services their child needs.

Both school personnel and parents expressed a sense that parents would have been better equipped to navigate the IEP process with access to outside support early in the IEP process. The data in the present study support findings from Engel's article title Law, culture, and children with disabilities: Educational rights and the construction of difference (1991) that show that parents feel inarticulate (as cited in Reiman, Beck, Peter et al., 2007). Parents expressed concern about their lack of knowledge of appropriate special education verbiage which would allow them to gain access to certain services and even to initiate the special education process. Parents in the present study reported that with access to outside resources they would have been better equipped with "the right verbiage." This present study's data reinforce previous findings that parents are

challenged by their lack of knowledge about the IEP process (Lake & Billingsley, 2000), and while they are aware of their limitation (Oleniczak, 2002), the parents whom I interviewed expressed frustration that they had no guidance from the school as to where to begin to become more knowledgeable. This frustration was compounded by the fact that, consistent with previous findings, they did not realize their lack of knowledge until they were facing their first conflict over their child's education program (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

The data also reveal a surprising answer to the research question: *How does collaboration between parents and teachers influence active parental participation in developing their child's IEP?* I expected that an increase in collaboration between parents and teachers would increase the active involvement of parents in developing their child's education program.   Interestingly, the reverse was true for the parents who participated in the present study; the perceived lack of collaboration actually fueled them to more assertively participate in their child's IEP.   The perception that the school might not identify or address their child's special needs set parents on a track of advocacy and repeated follow-through to assure that their child had access to the resources necessary to ensure their educational success. One parent described the moment she realized that the parents, not the school, had to be active advocates for the child:

> When we come to this next meeting like how do I know what our options are available? And she said, "Well, based on the testing that we do we'll give you suggestions." And I said to her then, I said, well, I don't know if that's all you have available or not, like where do I get this? And she didn't say anything. And

that's when I knew at that point, we need to get help or else this is not going to be, this is not going to turn out good.

The next research question was *What is the nature of existing collaboration between teachers and parents prior to the annual IEP meeting?* The present study's findings support what was found in the literature: Both parents and school personnel value parent involvement, yet despite efforts on the part of the school, they continue to fall short of successfully facilitating parental involvement (Garriott et al., 2000; Goldstein et al., 1980; Hill, 2006; Mahon, 2010; Oleniczak, 2002; Swap, 1993; Weishaar, 2010). Effective collaboration is not composed of just one set of elements but rather is made up of uniquely different characteristics tailored specifically for each particular collaborative relationship (Austin, 2000; Perrault et al., 2011). While schools have created a more collaborative formal environment, the data show that both parents and school personnel recognize the formal meeting is not the most appropriate place to have an open discussion about a child's needs. Both school personnel and parents viewed the formal meeting as the time designated for the legal formalities and approving the plan that had already been established through informal collaboration. School personnel in the present study collaborated informally during the school day when face-to-face opportunities arose; unfortunately, parents were not naturally a part of this organic process. School personnel also communicated amongst themselves through electronic communication without including the parent.

In the case of the present study, school personnel felt they had created opportunities for parents to be actively involved while the parents perceived the school's lack of transparency during communication early in the process as an obstruction to true

collaboration. According to Tucker (2009), communication, a foundational factor in successful collaborative efforts, was rated by 91% of parents who were surveyed as "very important." The data show that teachers and parents do communicate prior to formal meetings. However, this communication is not consistently positive, is almost exclusively initiated by the parents, and is laden with seemingly senseless obstructions. Habing (2004) found that common positive aspects of parental collaboration identified by parents included communication and partnership with the school. The element of partnership identified by Habing is often lacking in communication with parents. One parent provided a salient analogy of the partnership Habing references:

> It's like a marriage certificate, you're married but that doesn't mean they're always going to play by the rules. . . .I mean in marriage you do work, you do things to try and you know fulfill your partnership of it and I think with, uh with your child being in school and being governed by like these like things that are suppose to be met, you have to do your fair share.

Parents consistently reported multiple attempts to either initiate the special education process or initiate additional services and described school personnel as being aloof or dismissive creating the perception that the school was not willing to work collaboratively as partners in addressing the child's special need. This perceived indifference is, rather, the practice of vague communication as a means to protect scarce resources; however it often leads parents to believe the school is willfully denying their child the services needed to be successful.

The answer to the research question *What are parents' and school personnel's perceptions and beliefs about the benefits, drawbacks, and key issues related to*

collaboration prior to the annual IEP meeting? is complex. All parents and teachers interviewed indicated to some degree that the school is not forthcoming with information about a child's particular needs, and the reason for that veiled information is lack of available resources. The resources available are not sufficient to meet every need of every child and, therefore, the resources that are available must be rationed, as one teacher indicated, to do the best they can with what they have. As a result, it seems to be an unwritten rule that teachers should not express concerns about a particular child to that child's parent because the school will then be responsible to provide a service to address that need. This practice seems to be the result of "change imposed from outside the field [that] has often led to ambiguous policies that correct one problem without consideration of the overall educational ramifications" (Soodak & Erwin, 1995, p. 260).

Both teachers and parents identified this unwritten reality as a barrier to open communication and collaboration. This hurdle to candid communication has a direct effect on the research question *How do teachers and parents perceive their roles in the IEP process?* Traditional notions of parental involvement in schools include helping with homework, attending meetings, and volunteering in the classroom and school office (Heeden et al., n.d.). Historically parents have "assumed passive, inactive roles and educators, whether purposefully or inadvertently, have assisted in relegating them to this deferential position" (Garriott et al., 2000, p. 38). Contrary to the literature (Dabkowski, 2004; Swap, 1993), the traditional culture of the school does not appear to be the reason for the lack of parent collaboration as a finding in the present study. Rather the parents who participated in the present study seemed happy to fulfill the traditional parental roles of helping with homework, attending meetings, and volunteering in the classroom and

school office (Heeden et al., n.d.) while operating under the theory that the school would assume the role of advocacy for their child's educational needs. Parents in the present study assumed the more active role only after an unaddressed need surfaced.

Austin (2000) asserts that resistance to cross-sector partnering may reflect genuine differences in values and perceived missions (p. 53). It can be postulated that parents believe the mission of school personnel is to provide for the best interest of their child while educators aim to provide for the best interest of the collective child. Once parents in the present study had an experience which revealed that the school was not acting as their child's advocate and that their child's special needs were not being provided for, they quickly and convincingly assumed the role of advocate.   Some research indicates that parents become more knowledgeable about the IEP process and report more positive experiences in the child's later years of education (Reiman, Beck, Coppola et al., 2010). While it may be true that parents become more knowledgeable by directly experiencing the IEP process and by way of gaining access to the right verbiage, it is also possible that parents already have practice being active advocates for their child, but this is a role they had not expected to have to undertake in the education system.

As Friend and Cook (2007) explain, true collaboration comes only after a period of time in which trust and respect are established. In the experiences of the parents who participated in the present study, trust and respect were compromised early in the special education process due to the suppression of information about available resources. For example, one parent provided all the necessary paperwork, followed up with an email detailing what she had provided, and asked if there was anything else she needed to do to initiate the 504 process. A month went by, and, she went to the first meeting:

All we did in that first meeting was going in and say, yes, you want us to start this

process. Okay, well now we can actually look the paperwork that you gave us a

month ago. Because I had to sign their form. They could have sent that home in

a home folder had me sign it, or the person at the front desk could've said you

know what, honestly, you can give us this now but you're going to have to sign

this other form. If I wouldn't have been up there weekly, you know. . .I was like,

I am over this. You are, you guys know me up here now, you know why I'm

coming in, I'm really upset that I haven't gotten a phone call back.

This important finding is not described in the current literature. Group dynamics,

a theory central to the framework of the present study, might describe this situation as

static, fixed in the forming stage, not moving into the storming stage.   The storming

stage is defined by the conflict the group experiences due, in part, to defining roles and

responsibilities (Levi, 2007). As I approached this topic, I thought that the lack of time

was hindering the development of the IEP team from the forming to the storming stage.

The data, however, seem to support the premise that an alternative explanation is the

hesitancy of the school to define explicitly its role or responsibility due to concern over

resources, and, as one parent put it, the school must "operate in an area of grey."

Teachers interviewed openly admit that the lack of resources is directly linked to

recommendations they do or do not make.

Interestingly, all experienced participants in the study, all participants except the

two parents with only one formal meeting experience, volunteered that their positive

experiences in the IEP process were likely "not typical." Their reasons included being in

a good district with abundant resources and involved parents.   It should be noted that the

findings cannot be generalized to the larger population due to the small sample size as well as to the limited scope of the sample participants from only one school district that has been highly ranked in the quality of special education services. However, it should also be pointed out that the quality of the participants and their responses provided substantive in-depth insight into the perspectives of various members of a high functioning IEP team.

Major Conclusions

Knowledge gained through experience and access to outside support are paramount to improving parent satisfaction with the IEP process. In addition to gaining the knowledge of the right verbiage, parents may also gain a more realistic understanding of what a public school can offer their child and, as a result, have a better understanding of their role in the IEP process. It appears there are limited parameters in which the teachers can operate, and this limitation has a direct result on the school staff's transparency and ultimately is a barrier to establishing a collaborative partnership with parents.

According to Heeden, Moses, and Peter (n.d.), successful approaches to parental involvement include direct communication and a welcoming environment. With these components, the foundation of true collaboration has been laid. Teachers collaborate effortlessly within the school environment and desire to be more forthright with parents. While a culture of openness appears to be the ultimate desire of both parents and school personnel, it seems currently an impossible feat due to the practice of informal collaboration among the school team but not with the parents as well as the practice of preserving inadequate resources.

Being open to change is especially important when the organizational culture "harbors deep cultural values that run counter to the spirit of collaboration" (Martin-Rodriguez et al., 2005, p. 134). The data contradict the notion that the traditional autonomous culture is the problem. Rather it appears to be the top-down enforcement of policies and the fear of saying too much that hinder an open culture and collaborative partnership between the school and parents. Mueller, Singer, and Draper (2008) argue that major overhauls in district special education resources are necessary to improve parent relations and will result in a drastic reduction in due process hearings. While no one brought up due process, no one was completely satisfied. Everyone expressed some frustration with the unspoken need to preserve resources and, ultimately, with being able to recommend what is best for the child. Teachers in the present study want to do more, and parents want more provided for their child, but, at the same time, all seem to accept what is available and want to make those resources work. Both parents and teachers just want the child to get access to the resources the child needs even if they have to go somewhere else to get it.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the results of the present study, two recommendations will improve the collaboration and potentially effect positive change for both parents and teachers involved in the IEP process. First, schools should provide a more direct avenue of assistance to guide parents to outside support as a means of becoming more knowledgeable about the IEP process early in their experience. This is the first step to achieving transparency and a collaborative relationship. The second recommendation is outside the reaches of what a teacher or school can do on a day-to-day basis; instead, it

requires systemic change external to the school environment. It is imperative that policy makers truly experience the education system at the student-teacher level in order to understand the implications of policy change within the classroom. The leaders within the field of education as well as parents should support the efforts of teachers by more actively voicing the concerns that are so consistently represented in the present study's data.

Conclusion

There are several reasons why the present study is significant. First, the valiant efforts of researchers and experts in the field to provide direction to improve parental involvement has not been sufficient to ensure positive parental involvement. Second, the demand to improve parent experiences in a cost-effective approach is warranted as the public school system faces increased accountability and regulation while also enduring a reduction in resources. Finally, while there is consensus that parental involvement is preferred, there is a disconnect in gaining meaningful parental involvement in a way that allows parents to feel that they are valued members of their child's education team.

At the onset of this dissertation, I acknowledged potential researcher bias and detailed the initial IEP experience that framed the lens through which I viewed the IEP process. My parent-centered approach to providing outside support for parents was based on the assumption that schools would not consistently highlight available services unless specifically requested by the parent. To my surprise, this assumption was supported by the present study's data, and teachers and parents alike were vocal about their concern with this practice.

Of all the recommendations in the literature, *transparency in accessing what is best for the child*—resources aside—is not mentioned. The overarching themes in the present study revolve around the practice of transparency. Establishing a culture of openness while assisting parents to access outside support, support that will help parents navigate the IEP process and advocate for their child, is a first step to addressing the concerns raised by participants in the present study. A priority in improving meaningful parent-school collaboration is instituting transparency about the needs of the student, the available resources to address those needs within the school day, and, as needed, recommendations for additional services outside the school system to ensure a student's success.

One teacher expressed concern about the expectations placed on her students: "We're working harder faster and, but we're scaling way back on what we do for these kids who need help." The same can be said about teachers; we are expecting them to produce higher achieving students with less support and fewer resources. Teachers are entrusted to deliver a child's education and are the direct facilitator of educational collaboration with parents, yet teachers feel powerless to make honest recommendations for a student's success. Systemic changes in the approach to treating children and in dealing openly with their parents as partners should be more thoroughly researched and addressed if we are to improve the experiences of the key stakeholders in the IEP process. Such significant changes, rather than a focus on scant resources, ultimately will improve what is most important in the whole process: student success despite disability.

Appendix A

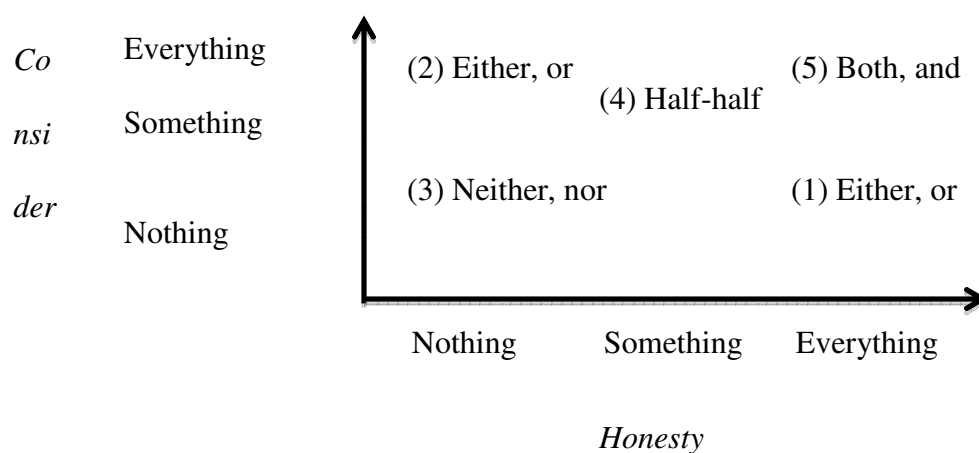*Evolution of Special Education Legislation*

1965	Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)	Designed to strengthen and improve educational quality and opportunity for individuals with disabilities in the nation's elementary and secondary schools; many individuals with disabilities lived in state institutions
1966, 1968	ESEA Amendments	Provided funding to state-supported programs for disabled students and created the Federal Bureau of Education for the Handicapped to assist states to implement and monitor programs, conduct research and evaluate federally funded programs, provide financial support for training, research, production and distribution of educational media; (1968) further authorized funding for the development of research and training facilities
1970	ESEA Amendment	**Title change: Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA)** Consolidated federal grant programs related to educating children with disabilities
1973	The Rehabilitation Act, Section 504	Addressed discrimination against all persons with disabilities; (Section 504) first federal civil rights law protecting the rights of the disabled establishing those with a handicap shall not, by reason of disability, be excluded from participation or denied benefits of any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance
1974	EHA Amendment	Focus of fully educating all children with disabilities: required states to establish a timetable toward providing full educational opportunities for handicapped children; provided procedural safeguards for use in identification, evaluation, and placement of children with disabilities; mandated children with disabilities be integrated into regular education when possible
1975	Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)	Designed to ensure children with disabilities receive an appropriate public education: established "zero reject," nondiscriminatory identification and evaluation, free appropriate public education (FAPE) regardless of severity of disability, least restrictive environment (LRE, children with disability should be educated with children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate), due process safeguards, and parent/student participation and shared decision making; introduced the IEP
1990	Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)	Guarantees equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities in regard to public accommodations and prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability
1990	EAHCA Amendment	**Title change: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** Additional categories of disability to include autism and traumatic brain injury; addition of transition planning as a requirement
1997	IDEA Amendment	Requires children with disabilities to participate in state and district-wide assessment; development of IEP must include a general education teacher; parents must be allowed to participate in eligibility and placement decisions; schools must report progress to parents of children with disabilities as frequently as they report for nondisabled children
2001	No Child Left Behind (NCLB)	Created accountability for results, more choices for parents, greater local control and flexibility, and an emphasis on empirically supported interventions
2004	IDEA Amendment	**Title change: Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)** Still popularly referred to as IDEA; wed IDEA with major features of NCLB; included changes specific to the IEP document, IEP meeting requirements, requirements for the IEP team, and for making changes to the IEP

Appendix B

Potential Outcomes of Conflict

Cartesian coordinate system

A theory of conflict according to Galtung (2004)

Co	Everything	(2) Either, or	(5) Both, and
		(4) Half-half	
nsi	Something		
der	Nothing	(3) Neither, nor	(1) Either, or

Nothing	Something	Everything

Honesty

No.	Position	Outcome	Process
1	Either, or	Victory	Struggle
2	Either, or	Victory	Struggle
3	Neither, nor	Withdrawal	Postponement
4	Half-half	Compromise	Negotiation
5	Both-and	Transcendence	Dialogue

Found in: Galtung, J. (2004). *Transcend and transform: An introduction to conflict work.*

Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

Appendix C

Initial Contact Template

(District/Principal/Assistant Principal)

Hello Mr./Mrs. [*Assistant Principal*]. My name is Heather Griffin and I am a doctoral

student at UNF currently working on my dissertation. I was provided your contact

information by [Mr./Mrs. *Name*]. Mr./Mrs. *Name* thought you might be interested in

participating in this study. No one associated with your place of employment will be

informed about your choice to participate or not to participate and your responses will be

kept confidential. Participation is entirely voluntary and you will not experience any

negative consequences if you decide not to participate in this research. I would like to

ask for about 5 to 10 minutes of your time to provide the details of this study and answer

any questions you may have about the study.

I am interested in exploring the IEP process in elementary schools in your county.

Specifically, I am interested in the perceptions of the various team members involved in

the IEP process including assistant principals, special education teachers, and parents. I

will be conducting interviews with individuals that would like to volunteer to participate

in the study and I would like to conduct these interviews at the school, as this is likely to

be the most comfortable setting for participants to be interviewed. It is expected that

interviews will take approximately one hour. The County, schools, and participants

involved in the study will remain completely confidential.

Are there any questions about the study I can answer for you? Would you be interested

in participating in the study? (If not,) Would you be interested in approving your school

to be included in this study and provide contact information for special education teachers or parents you think may be interested in participating in the study?

(Special Education Teacher/Parent)

Hello Mr./Mrs. [*Teacher/Parent*]. My name is Heather Griffin and I am a doctoral student at UNF currently working on my dissertation. I was provided your contact information by [Mr./Mrs. *Name*]. Mr./Mrs. *Name* thought you might be interested in participating in this study. No one associated with your place of employment will be informed about your choice to participate or not to participate and your responses will be kept confidential. Participation is entirely voluntary and you will not experience any negative consequences if you decide not to participate in this research. I would like to ask for about 5 to 10 minutes of your time to provide the details of this study and answer any questions you may have about the study.

I am interested in exploring the IEP process in elementary schools in your county. Specifically, I am interested in the perceptions of the various team members involved in the IEP process including assistant principals, special education teachers, and parents. I will be conducting interviews with individuals that would like to volunteer to participate in the study. It is expected that interviews will take approximately one hour. Your identity will remain completely confidential throughout the study.

Are there any questions about the study I can answer for you? Would you be interested in participating in the study? (If not,) Would you be interested in providing contact information for other special education teachers or parents you think may be interested in participating in the study?

Appendix D

Informed Consent

Dear Participant:

      My name is Heather Griffin and I am enrolled in the Educational Leadership (Ed.D.) doctoral program at the University of North Florida (UNF). I am currently completing the data collection aspect of my dissertation. The purpose of the study is to explore beliefs about and experiences with collaboration and its influence on the quality of parent participation during the annual Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting.

      To gather the information, I will be conducting in-depth interviews consisting of open-ended questions facilitated by an interview protocol. Interviews are expected to take approximately 1-hour. All interviews will be recorded digitally on two recording devices. One of these recording devices allows for digital voice recording along with digital recording of written notes that can be linked directly to the audio recording. Your responses as well as your name, or other information, will be kept confidential. Approximately 2-3 weeks following your interview I will transcribe, transferring audio-recorded interviews to textual interviews, your interview and will send you a copy so you may review the content of the interview. It is expected to take approximately 30-minutes to review the interview and complete a follow-up survey. At this time you will also receive a follow-up survey consisting of 5 questions.

      Taking part in this study and the follow-up survey is completely voluntary. There are no penalties for deciding not to participate, decline to answer a question, or withdrawing your participation, which you may do at any time throughout the study.

      Although there are no direct benefits to or compensation for taking part in this study, others may benefit from the information we learn from the results of this study, that is, your insights may increase knowledge and understanding of parent-school collaboration in meeting the needs of students and may be helpful to guide future research in this area. Additionally, there are no foreseeable risks for taking part in this project.

      By participating in the interview and follow-up survey you are consenting to allow your responses to be used for research. You will receive a copy of this consent today and when you receive the follow-up survey. If you have any questions or concerns about this study please contact me or my professor. A copy of this form will be given to you to keep for your records.

      If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or if you would like to contact someone about a research-related injury, please contact the chair of the UNF Institutional Review Board by calling   or emailing irb@unf.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.
Sincerely,
Heather R. Griffin   Sandra Gupton

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

(Parent)

1. How long ago was your child identified as a special education student?

2. Since your child has been identified as a special education student, how many Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings have you been a part of?

3. What part have you played in your child's IEP?

    a. (Probe) Have you attended annual IEP meetings?

    b. (Probe) Have you met with the your child's teacher prior to an annual IEP meeting?

    c. (Probe) Have you met with the your child's teacher after an annual IEP meeting?

    d. (Probe) What type of contact (email, phone call, letter, etc.) have you had with your child's teacher before an annual IEP meeting?

    e. (Probe) What type of contact (email, phone call, letter, etc.) have you had with your child's teacher after an annual IEP meeting?

    f. (Probe) Have you been involved in writing and/or revising IEP goals for your child?

4. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being very dissatisfied and 10 being highly satisfied) how satisfied were you with your part in your child's IEP?

    a. (Probe) How did your involvement in the IEP match what you expected it would be?

    b. (Probe) How did your child's IEP team receive your input?

5. What suggestions can you make to improve the involvement of parents in the IEP process before the annual IEP meeting?

6. What suggestions can you make to improve the involvement of parents in the IEP process during the annual IEP meeting?

7. What suggestions can you make to improve the involvement of parents in the IEP process after the annual IEP meeting?

8. What role did your child's special education teacher play in your child's IEP?

9. How effective was your child's special education teacher in his/her role?

10. What are the benefits of the IEP team collaborating on the development of the IEP prior to the annual IEP meeting?

11. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being very dissatisfied and 10 being highly satisfied) how would you rate your overall satisfaction with the IEP process?

12. What suggestions can you make to improve parent satisfaction with the IEP process?

(Teacher/Assistant Principals)

1. How long have you been a special education teacher/assistant principal?

2. Since you've been a special education teacher/assistant principal, how many Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings have you been a part of?

3. What part have you played in your students' IEPs?

    a. (Probe) Have you been involved in writing and/or revising IEP goals for your student?

    b. (Probe) Have you met with your students' parents prior to an annual IEP meeting?

    c. (Probe) Have you met with your students' parents after an annual IEP meeting?

    d. (Probe) What type of contact (email, phone call, letter, etc.) have you have with your students' parents before an annual IEP meeting?

    e. (Probe) What type of contact (email, phone call, letter, etc.) have you have with your students' parents after an annual IEP meeting?

    f. (Probe – assistant principal only) Have you met with special education teachers prior to annual IEP meetings?

    g. (Probe – assistant principal only) Have you met with special education teachers after annual IEP meetings?

4. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being very dissatisfied and 10 being highly satisfied) how satisfied have you been with your part in your students' IEPs?

5. What suggestions can you make to improve the involvement of parents in the IEP process before the annual IEP meeting?

6. What suggestions can you make to improve the involvement of parents in the IEP process during the annual IEP meeting?

7. What suggestions can you make to improve the involvement of parents in the IEP process after the annual IEP meeting?

8. What role has your students' parents played in your students' IEPs?

9. How effective were your students' parents in their role?

    a. (Probe) How did parent involvement match what you expected it would be?

    b. (Probe) How did your students' parents provide input to the IEP team?

    c. (Probe) How did your students' parents receive input provided by the IEP team?

10. What are the benefits of the IEP team collaborating on the development of the IEP prior to the annual IEP meeting?

11. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being very dissatisfied and 10 being highly satisfied) how would you rate your overall satisfaction with the IEP process?

12. What suggestions can you make to improve teacher satisfaction with the IEP process?

13. What suggestions can you make to improve parent satisfaction with the IEP process?

Appendix F

Follow-up Survey

(Parent)

Please read and respond to the questions below by checking the box of your response. Please return in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided.

	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree
1. The first IEP I attended had an impact on my impression of the IEP process.			
2. In the past year, I had opportunities to interact with my child's special education teacher prior to the annual IEP meeting.			
3. In the past year, I was given the opportunity to play an active role in writing goals and objectives in my child's IEP.			
4. In the past year, I was satisfied with the role my child's special education teacher played in the IEP process.			
5. In the past year, I was, in general, satisfied with the process.			

Thank you for completing this survey. Should you have any questions about this survey or the research you are participating in you may contact myself, Heather Griffin, at _____ or _____ or Sandra Gupton, UNF professor, at _____ or _____. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or if you would like to contact someone about a research-related injury, please contact the chair of the UNF Institutional Review Board by calling _____ or emailing **irb@unf.edu**.

Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Heather R. Griffin

(Teacher/Assistant Principal)

Please read and respond to the questions below by checking the box of your response. Please return in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided.

	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree
1. The first IEP I attended had an impact on my impression of the IEP process.			
2. In the past year, I created opportunities for parents to interact with the school personnel involved in their child's education prior to the annual IEP meeting.			
3. In the past year, the parents of students I attend IEP meetings for played an active role in writing goals and objectives in their child's IEP.			
4. In the past year, I was satisfied with the role parents played in the IEP process.			
5. In the past year, I was, in general, satisfied with the process.			

Thank you for completing this survey. Should you have any questions about this survey or the research you are participating in you may contact myself, Heather Griffin, at   or   or Sandra Gupton, UNF professor, at   or   . If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or if you would like to contact someone about a research-related injury, please contact the chair of the UNF Institutional Review Board by calling   or emailing **irb@unf.edu**.

Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Heather R. Griffin

Appendix G

Participant List Form

Participant First Name and Last Initial: _____

Parent/Teacher/Asst. Prin.   School No. _____   Letter: _____

Participant First Name and Last Initial: _____

Parent/Teacher/Asst. Prin.   School No. _____   Letter: _____

Participant First Name and Last Initial: _____

Parent/Teacher/Asst. Prin.   School No. _____   Letter: _____

Participant First Name and Last Initial: _____

Parent/Teacher/Asst. Prin.   School No. _____   Letter: _____

Participant First Name and Last Initial: _____

Parent/Teacher/Asst. Prin.   School No. _____   Letter: _____

Participant First Name and Last Initial: _____

Parent/Teacher/Asst. Prin.   School No. _____   Letter: _____

Participant First Name and Last Initial: _____

Parent/Teacher/Asst. Prin.   School No. _____   Letter: _____

Participant First Name and Last Initial: _____

Parent/Teacher/Asst. Prin.   School No. _____   Letter: _____

Participant First Name and Last Initial: _____

Parent/Teacher/Asst. Prin.   School No. _____   Letter: _____

Appendix H

Participate Contact Form

Participant Code (school number, letter): _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Address (to be completed only if participant elects to review transcribed interview):

_____

_____

Date Interview Scheduled: _____ Time: _____

Date Interview Conducted: _____ Room: _____

Time Interview Began: _____ Ended: _____

Date Interview/Survey Mailed: _____

Expected Interview/Survey Return Date: _____

Interview Return Date: _____

Survey Return Date: _____

Appendix I

Data Analysis Coding Sample

		Advocacy		
		Direct: the need for outside support	Life: lifelong parent advocacy	Sch emp: empathy from school
Admin	2c	the best time that, I thought it was just a beautiful experience . . .	So just, you know, some of them, I mean some parents are so active cause . . .	[walking into an IEP meeting] that's so stressful when someone is, is dealing . . .
Teachers	1a	some are very informed and they'll get on websites and read about their rights . . .	Some parents are just plain hostile about the fact that they have a child with . . .	nervous about the whole process, and the labeling of their student . .
	1b		And they get it on the calendar fast. So, kudos to them . . .	

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Vita

Heather R. Griffin, M.S., BCBA

EDUCATION:
University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida (July 2011 – ABD, currently enrolled)
Doctorate of Education, Educational Leadership

Florida State University, Panama City, Florida (May 2005)
Master of Science, Psychology (emphasis in Applied Behavior Analysis)

University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida (December 2002)
Bachelor of Arts, Major: Developmental Psychology, Minor: Criminal Justice

EMPLOYMENT:
Clinical Director of NE FL, Behavior Management Consultants, Inc., Jacksonville, FL
(Dec 2012-current)
- Oversee the provision of quality ABA services
- Lead a diverse team of individuals
- Continuation of the responsibilities listed below (Assistant Clinical Director)

Assistant Clinical Director, Behavior Management Consultants, Inc., Jacksonville, FL
(July 2007-December 2012)
- Development of structured supervision model resulting in a high-quality supervision experience
- Creation of an advanced parental involvement model including staff training, documentation of parent training and follow-up
- Supervision, training, and management of BCBAs, BCaBAs, and non-certified staff with varied experience in the field of Behavior Analysis
- Consultation with families, school districts, group homes, adult day training facilities, and Intermediate Care Facilities regarding behavior intervention and replacement behavior programs.

Coordinator of Behavioral Services, ACCEL, Phoenix, AZ (June 2005-June 2007)
- Developed a comprehensive behavioral services program and team for a non-profit school for students with developmental disabilities
- Trained, certified, and monitored staff in the implementation of Therapeutic Crisis Intervention including de-escalation and restraint techniques resulting in a reduction of the use of restrictive restraints
- Communicated and coordinated routine meetings regarding students' behavioral concerns with school districts, parents/caregivers, and other related agencies

CERTIFICATIONS:
- Board Certified Behavior Analyst (Certificate Number 1-05-2367)