The power of team in IEP meetings

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THE POWER OF TEAM IN IEP MEETINGS

An abstract of a dissertation

submitted

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Approved:

Dr. Susan Etscheidt, Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine school-family collaboration for students with disabilities by exploring how communication during Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings supports or limits parental participation. Research has indicated strong school-family partnerships lead to better educational outcomes for students. The IEP meeting is a critical component of the educational process for a child with a disability. The interactions between parents and school personnel during IEP meetings are complex events that can leave parents feeling frustrated or uninvolved in their child’s education. This qualitative study examined one IEP team meeting through in-depth interviews, participant observation of an IEP meeting, and document analysis of the IEP. The research questions focused on the supports and barriers to authentic parental participation during IEP meetings and the role of discourse during the IEP meeting. This study utilized several theoretical frameworks to examine the perspectives and interactions of the IEP team: Basic Communication Fidelity, Listening Fidelity, Communication Competence, Communication Accommodation Theory, Problematic Integration, and Relational Dialectics. These frames helped develop an understanding of the communication interactions of the IEP team members and how team relationships and expectations impacted communication fidelity during the IEP meeting. Five themes emerged in response to the first research question examining supports to authentic parental participation in IEP meetings: (a) welcoming relationships, (b) shared context of the purpose and process of IEP meetings, (c) adaptability of school staff, (d) empathy for families and (e) parent knowledge of self, child, and rights. The data analysis revealed
five barriers to authentic parental participation, including: (a) emotion and perception, (b) prior written goals, (c) the negative influence of outsiders, (d) the disruptive effects of educational jargon and the prescribed IEP process, and (e) the challenge of maintaining relationships. The discourse analysis also revealed that identities and practices enacted during an IEP meeting can influence parental participation.

Several recommendations to address the barriers to authentic parental participation were suggested, including relationship building through frequent positive communication and establishing a shared context for IEP meeting purpose and process that is communicated with parents. Schools must also find ways to educate parents regarding their rights and participation during IEP meetings. Empowering parents will allow for parents to have increased involvement in the IEP process. Suggestions for future research included the need to develop ways to empower parents, examine relationship building strategies for parents of secondary students, and exploring the role of fathers on IEP teams.
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Doctor of Education

Approved:

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Dr. Susan Etscheidt, Chair

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July 2017
DEDICATION

To Kylie and Joey, you have taught me more about perseverance, patience and enjoying the simple things in life than you will ever know, I love you.

To Paul, for sitting beside me in so many IEP meetings along the way. I appreciate your patience with educators and gentle advocacy for our children.

To my mom and dad, thank you for your endless support and guidance. Thank you for teaching me to value honesty, integrity and hard work.

To the many parents who have endured challenging IEP meetings and work tirelessly to advocate for their children.

Finally, to educators, especially the educators in this study, who understand the importance of working with parents and finding ways to create a supportive team environment.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Access to quality education has been described as a right for all students in our democratic society. The education a child receives is linked to opportunities and success once they leave the school system and enter society. Historically school systems fell behind when educating students with disabilities and providing adequate educational support; communities, schools and families worked to make changes to the system so that all children would have access to an appropriate education.

Educating All Children

The education a child receives is a contributing factor to his or her success in life as a productive and functioning adult. Families play a critical role in passing on knowledge, customs and information to their children; however, in the United States we have created a public education system that shares this duty with families. Public schools carry a social and ethical responsibility to educate children well. School and family partnerships are recognized as a critical component that contributes to student success in the educational system. Parents look to schools to work with them to create opportunities that maximize the educational benefits for their children.

School-Family Partnerships

The engagement of parents and families in the education of their children is widely recognized as being an important factor in a child’s academic achievement (Fish, 2008; Pepe & Addimando, 2014). Improved adolescent student outcomes occur when parents feel welcomed in their child’s school, trust the individuals that work with their
children, and have positive interactions with school personnel (Froiland & Davison, 2014). Collaborative school-family partnerships are connected to positive outcomes for students (Miller, Colebrook, & Ellis, 2014) and parents defined collaboration as schools that actively seek parent input, teachers who are accessible to parents and communicate frequently (Rodriguez, Blatz & Elbaum, 2014). Parents are more likely to be active participants if they determine the school values a collaborative partnership. Positive outcomes that occur when parents are active participants in their child’s education include: improved academic achievement, increased social success, higher graduation rates, and increased vocational opportunities (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004).

Five qualities contribute to collaborative school-family partnerships: commitment, equality, skills, respect, and communication (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Collaborative school-family partnerships were formed when parents received frequent communication, both the school and the family were perceived as being committed to a child’s education, all members involved in decision making felt they were treated equally, members believed that the individuals demonstrated competence in their ability to fulfill their roles, and these participants trusted and demonstrated respect for each other and the child (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). In contrast, parents were dissatisfied with school-family partnerships when they were not listened to and their contributions were not valued.

School Family Partnerships for Students with Disabilities

While school-family partnerships are extremely critical for all students, this is especially true for students with disabilities. “Despite its need and importance, however,
many parents have little or no involvement in children’s special education services” (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003, p. 228). Effective school-family partnerships support increased educational and social opportunities for students with disabilities. Two important characteristics that contribute to effective school-family partnerships for students with disabilities are collaboration and communication (Rodriguez et al., 2014).

Collaboration efforts can vary across different school settings. Collaboration asks that schools actively seek input from parents and welcome their ideas. Parents of students with disabilities have unique knowledge of their children; they are grateful when they can share this information with school personnel. These parents feel collaboration is strongest when schools are receptive to their ideas (Rodriguez et al., 2014).

Strong communication efforts is another strategy schools can use to build effective partnerships with families of students with disabilities. Parents need information regarding services, goals for their child, progress their child is making, and how they can work with the school to support learning. When schools actively communicate with families and listen to their concerns, student outcomes improve (McNaugton & Vostal, 2010).

Communication and collaboration have been identified as critical components of school-family partnerships for students with disabilities; however, consistency across settings as to how and when this occurs remains a challenge. In order to support these partnerships, the federal government has created guidelines for parental participation through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004). These guidelines
recognize that in order to allow for appropriate educational opportunities for students with disabilities, schools and parents must work together.

Requirements for School Family Partnerships for Students with Disabilities

Students within the school system who have been diagnosed with a disability have increased needs for collaboration with school personnel. Individualized Education Plans (IEP) are often needed to meet the needs of the child. Individualized plans may require a modified curriculum, academic accommodations, behavior supports, assistive technology and related services such as physical therapy. These interventions should be determined using collaborative efforts between schools and families. “Parents’ involvement leads to improved developmental outcomes for the child and reduced family stress” (Porter & McKenzie, 2000, p. 5).

The needs of students with disabilities vary greatly; therefore, it is critical that parents are involved in any decisions regarding the education of their child. Parents have knowledge regarding the child across multiple settings and at various times (Porter & McKenzie, 2000). This knowledge can lead to enhanced educational decision making. Mueller, Singer and Draper (2008) found that a major source of parent dissatisfaction with special education services was the result of parents feeling excluded from decision-making around their child's educational plan.

Curriculum modification and educational accommodations are common practice for individuals with disabilities. Parents often struggle to participate effectively in these decisions as they lack expertise in curriculum. Parents feel they are ill equipped to advocate for their child’s needs and educators often do not understand how to build
relationships and encourage greater parental participation (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Wakelin, 2008).

Assistive technology can pose a significant challenge for parents. They are often unfamiliar with available technologies and how to incorporate them into life at home. In order for students to maximize the benefits from assistive technology use, parents need to be involved in the selection of the device and training (Bailey, Parette, Stoner, Angell, & Carroll, 2006). School-family partnerships are an important part of assuring success with assistive technology (Angelo, 2000).

Related services include: transportation, audiology services, speech-language services, occupational and physical therapy, psychological and counseling services, recreation and nursing care. Providing these services can be a challenge for schools due to resources and availability of providers (American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Children with Disabilities, 2007). Another challenge is that parents may not be aware of services that are available (Wakelin, 2008) and educators are not taught specifically how to advocate for their students to obtain needed services (Whitby, Marx, McIntire, & Wienke, 2013). Educators may feel uncomfortable or fear disapproval from administration if they advocate for increased services. While these services can provide educational benefits to students, there is often disagreement about what services are needed and how often these services can be accessed by the student.

**Protections for Special Education Services**

Historically these needed supports have not been provided, and collaboration with parents was lacking; consequently, laws were introduced to ensure the student needs were
being met. Following the civil rights movement, the education of children with special needs received greater consideration than in the past. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), Public Law (PL) 94-142 was passed. This act included the rights of least restrictive environment and free appropriate public education. (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012; Osgood, 2005). Prior to this act, “U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities, and many states had laws excluding certain students” (Aron & Loprest, 2012, p. 100). EAHCA was a result of efforts from disability rights groups and parents of children with disabilities (Fish, 2008; Itkonen, 2007). Parents and civil rights groups filed lawsuits in several states and lobbied congress to ensure that federal legislation would guarantee the right of a free appropriate public education to all children.

The reauthorization of the EAHCA and its transformation to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, P.L. 101-476) in 1990 shifted the emphasis from access to education to improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012) by ensuring all students were entitled to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). The amendment in 1997 (IDEA 1997, P.L. 105-17) required students with disabilities to participate in statewide testing and required the use of performance indicators to assess their educational progress. To ensure FAPE, this reauthorization added additional rights for parents including being a member of the IEP team, the right to examine school records, the right to aid in the determination of eligibility and the right to an independent evaluation of the child (Daniel, 2000; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007).
In 2004 IDEA was reauthorized with increased emphasis on student progress. The name was changed again with the addition of the word improvement, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), further emphasizing the importance of improved educational outcomes for all students (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012). IDEIA calls for increased qualifications for teachers and further accountability for student learning. The 2004 reauthorization also increased the emphasis of using peer-reviewed teaching practices for special education services (Conroy, Yell, Katsiyannis, & Collins, 2010).

The fundamental avenue to ensure students are receiving an appropriate education is the individualized education plan (Daniel, 2000; Fish, 2008). In the 2004 reauthorization, congress emphasized the importance of school-family partnerships when they reauthorized IDEA.

Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home. (IDEA 20 U.S.C. Section 1400 (c)(5)(B))

Due to the conflict that can arise between parents and schools in deciding the best approach to educating a child with a disability, procedural safeguards were put into place in IDEA. These safeguards act to ensure students receive the supports they need to attain FAPE. The safeguards include the following: prior written notice to parents of all procedures available, the right of the parents to examine the records of their child, parental participation as full members of the IEP team, secure and independent evaluation for their child, the right to receive an impartial hearing and a judicial review if necessary. Although the U.S. court has emphasized the significance of parent involvement in their
child’s education and outlined clear procedures that must be followed, there is little criteria for determining what is included in an appropriate education (Conroy et al., 2010; Daniel, 2000). This gray area causes challenges for parents and schools as they work together to meet the needs of students. While we like to believe everyone has the best interests of students at heart, schools must carefully watch resources and balance the needs of faculty and other students enrolled in the school.

IEPs were designed to allow parents to have a voice in the decision making for their child’s educational needs and is one of the most important components to ensuring collaboration between parents and schools. “The IEP is the cornerstone or IDEA” (Yell, Katsiyannis, Ennis, & Losinski, 2013, p. 56). However, when parents and school personnel meet, IEP development can be stressful due to conflicts arising between parents and educators as to what constitutes an appropriate education. Honest and open communication can be a challenge, as parents can feel frustrated and are concerned that their voices are not included in decision making. Despite federal legislation that parents are partners in decision making, educators often assume the role of experts in the room with the decision-making power.

IEP meetings for students with disabilities are a critical moment when schools and parents come together to address the educational needs of students. Creating collaborative environments for IEP meetings enhances the effectiveness of these meetings. Parents recommend they be given increased education around special education law, and want IEP goals to be determined at the meeting, not before (Fish, 2008).
Limitations to IDEA

IDEA works to ensure that all children receive FAPE. However, it also asks parents to act as watchdogs to ensure their child is receiving FAPE. Parents are expected to determine if they should advocate for their child or trust that the school is doing what is in the best interest of their child, and if what the school is doing is enough to be considered appropriate. Local and federal enforcement of IDEA is weak. "Federal enforcement fails because the mechanism mandated by the IDEA is not utilized with any regularity" (Wakelin, 2008, p. 263).

Criteria outlining what constitutes an appropriate education are unclear (Daniel, 2000). Schools have to balance budgets and resources versus the needs of individual students. This inherently puts schools and parents at odds with each other. The Supreme Court ruling in the Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley (1982; hereafter referred to as Rowley) case set a low bar for special education. "If individualized instruction allows the child to benefit from educational services and is provided in conformity with the other requirements of the law, the student is receiving FAPE" (Yell, Katsiyannis, & Hazelkorn, 2007, p. 11). Courts continue to follow the ruling in the Rowley case; schools are not required to maximize student potential, but only to ensure some educational benefit for the child.

Barrier to Parental Participation in the IEP Meeting

Several barriers to effective parental participation in IEP meetings have been identified. One of the barriers is that schools and parents often see the child differently.
Discrepant views of the child can lead to different ideas of the child's skills, areas of interest or services that might support his or her learning (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Another dimension that creates barriers is the disparate knowledge around special education services between school personnel and families. Parents often see the educators as the experts and do not feel comfortable participating actively in IEP meetings (Dabkowski, 2004; Saleh, 2014).

A related barrier is the uncertainty parents have around services their child may receive or qualify for under IDEA. Parent participation in discussions regarding services for their child is often limited as they defer to educators who they perceive as having a better understanding of what is available or appropriate (Murzyn & Hughes, 2015).

Time and financial constraints often require schools to be protective of services fearing they may be costly for the school or require too much of the staff (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). The desire of schools to protect resources and families wanting the best possible services for their child can quickly put schools and families at odds.

While schools work to protect resources, parents may feel that the needs of their child are not valued. Parents fear that their ideas are not listened to and given serious consideration during IEP meetings (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Parents feeling devalued can create significant barriers to collaboration during IEP meetings.

Another barrier to effective parental participation in IEP meetings is the power imbalance between schools and families. Schools have the ability to make final decisions regarding the IEP document as long as they have listened to the parent. This only sets the stage for ceremonious parental participation, not authentic partnerships.
Lack of trust is another serious impediment to true parental participation in the IEP process. If parents do not trust that school personnel are acting in the best interest of their child, they will question suggestions made by individuals in the school system and have lower expectations for positive outcomes (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Communication challenges can also create significant barriers during the IEP process. The nature of communication during an IEP meeting can be difficult for all participants. Individuals negotiate identities (Tracy, 2007), make judgments about others (Pavitt, 2007) and work to influence others’ ideas and opinions during interactions (Wilson, 2007). Conflict can arise as time, money and materials are all being negotiated between schools and families (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Discourse can be used to support or challenge the roles of others or the role the individual sees themselves in. Careful use of talk and speech must be enacted to ensure that parents and educators feel their role in IEP meetings is being validated. Communication between schools and families of students with disabilities is extremely critical.

Communication can be problematic between individuals; adding an entire IEP team can increase the challenges. Parents must understand the systems that exist within the school. Parents are often expected to adapt to the structures the school personnel have established (Williams, Sanchez & Hunnell, 2011). Understanding how systems work and how they impact communication and collaboration is critical.

School Systems

Schools are small organizations that operate with great interdependence. Each member contributes to the performance, the values, and the shared goals (Reichers &
Schneider, 1990; Smirchich 1985). Educators within schools work to maintain their membership within the group and do not easily deviate from the expected norms (Van Houtte, 2006). This can pose a challenge for teachers and parents. Teachers may feel the goals of the parents do not align with the goals of the school and parents are often seen as outsiders instead of as a member of the organization. Pepe and Addimando (2014) argue that parents need to be seen as part of the organization to ensure the school’s success.

School leaders are charged with the task of balancing between the resources of the school and the needs of the child. This can easily put parents and educators at odds. Teachers participating in IEP meetings may feel hesitant about advocating for a student in the presence of their administrator, “People strive for conformity and look for a solution accepted by their fellows. There are powerful incentives not to deviate from the ways established in one’s group” (Van Houtte, 2006, p. 276). The leadership style and willingness of the school leader to collaborate can impact the communication that occurs during IEP meetings.

**Problem Statement**

Home school relationships are vital for student success, particularly for students with disabilities. Although there are legal protections afforded to parents, limitations to those protections and barriers exist that impede effective parental participation. Despite the need to work cooperatively, several challenges exist to effective collaboration; discrepant views of the child, disparate knowledge of special education, service delivery, time and financial constraints, devaluation, power imbalances, lack of trust,
communication and existing school systems. IEP meetings can cause stress for both family members and professionals.

Parents feel they are ill equipped to advocate for their child’s needs and educators do not understand how to build relationships and invite greater parent participation (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Wakelin, 2008). Participants feel pressured in IEP meetings to walk a careful line between being honest and not offending other individuals involved in the meeting to maintain relationships. Parents may sit passively as educators make all the educational decisions regarding their child. Parents fear they do not have the expertise needed for participation; they may not understand their role as an outsider in a room filled with educational experts, or worse, they may fear retaliation against their child if they question the educational decisions of school personnel.

Teachers may come to IEP meetings fully prepared with their educational recommendations outlined. Teachers worry if they are not prepared, parents may make unreasonable requests for their child’s education. They may fear the response of their principal if they advocate for increased resources without having this discussion with administrators prior to the meeting and there may be pressure to appear knowledgeable and confident in front of their peers.

Administrators are protective of scarce resources that need to be used for all students. They may be wary of adding services or implementing new strategies that would require staff training. They also feel responsible for protecting staff to maintain supportive working environments.
These barriers, limitations and perspectives limit the development of effective school-family partnerships and parent-school collaboration. Importantly these barriers prevent the collaborative IEP planning required by the IDEA and may negatively impact the provision of FAPE for students with disabilities.

**Claim**

The interactions between parents and school personnel during IEP meetings are complex events that may invite and encourage parental participation and school-family collaboration or restrict and limit parental involvement. Parents are fighting for the best possible education for their child, while school personnel must take into account the resources to support the child's education. This immediately puts educators and parents at odds with each other (Wakelin, 2008). The discourse that occurs during IEP meetings is filled with attempts by participants to assert their roles carefully, persuade others to their point of view and work to maintain positive relationships. “The IEP varies greatly depending on the willingness of the IEP team to work together to create an appropriate educational program” (Wakelin, 2008, p. 267).

Research Propositions that will be considered in this study are:

- If participants communicate effectively, then participation is enhanced.
  Ineffective communication results in limited, meaningless participation.
- If participants listen attentively and seek to understand, interaction is enhanced. Fear, confusion and anxiety inhibit the ability to listen attentively.
• If the people, terms or topics are unfamiliar, then communication is compromised. However, if parents are perceived as equal partners and topics are presented in a clear manner, then effective collaboration results.

• If relationships are strained or volatile, then there is a potential for misinterpretation and miscommunication. Home-school interactions are enhanced when parents are perceived as equal partners and trust is intact.

• If participants employ strategies that invite convergence and consensus, then decision-making will be shared. Divergent or divisive tactics highlight differences and criticisms that will lead to strained and fractured decision-making.

• If participants choose to support relationships during IEP meetings by accommodating their speech to match the needs of the individuals, then collaboration will be supportive. Alienating the participants by highlighting the differences between them restricts collaboration.

• If participants do not openly communicate their goals during IEP meetings, authentic discussions will not happen. Open communication of goals during IEP interactions will reflect parent and school intent.

• If participants have had negative interactions during previous IEP meetings, then those experiences will impact their ability to communicate effectively. Positive interactions between parents and school personnel during IEP meetings enhances collaboration and listening.
• If negative judgments or blame for previous student outcomes are assigned to participants during IEP meetings, then individuals will be less willing to collaborate. Neutral, nonjudgmental approaches produce more productive collaboration.

• If participants focus on how their ideas are being perceived by others, their effective communication will be hindered. If the focus is on the goals of the IEP, participants are more open to collaboration.

• If participants refuse to integrate struggles by using language such as "never" or "obviously" then they will alienate participants and effective communication will not occur. Participants should work to strengthen relationships by balancing contradictions using language such as "maybe" or "a little."

Using these research propositions allows for close examination of IEP meetings and the interactions that occur during these meetings. Effective, clear and inclusive communication that involves all team members is essential to creating an effective IEP document, therefore establishing a plan that will support student learning. Failure to communicate and work together will hamper the creation of the best possible IEP.

Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical or conceptual perspectives were utilized to help understand communication interactions that occur during IEP meetings. A variety of lenses helped examine the perspectives of teachers, school administrators, representatives from area educational agencies and parents in multiple ways. Using multiple frameworks allowed
for broad understanding of the phenomena and leads to new insight (Wilson, 2008). Each theory added value to the understanding of experiences (Littlejohn, 2007). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) argue that multiple theories allow verification of data through triangulation. This study utilized the theories of Basic Communication Fidelity, Listening Fidelity, Communication Competence, and Communication Accommodation Theory to gain insight into the communication interactions of participants during IEP meetings. The theories of Problematic Integration, Attribution Theory, and Relational Dialectics were frames that helped develop an understanding of the relationships between individuals on the IEP team and how those relationships impacted communication fidelity.

Communication Fidelity

Communication fidelity (CF; Powers & Witt, 2008) refers to communication which occurs between two or more individuals that demonstrates congruence between the intended message and the message received. The ability to achieve communication fidelity can significantly impact the outcomes of communication events. “Each participant engaged in a communication event is affected by the degree of understanding that is achieved as the sender's cognition is produced in some variable format within the mind of the receiver” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 254).

Communication fidelity offers 4 propositions to enhance congruence between sender and receiver.

Proposition 1: “Communication fidelity is enhanced when the source and recipient possess ample physiological and cognitive information processing skills. Thus, the greater the information distribution, reception, and processing skills of the participants in
a communication event, the greater the potential for achieving communication fidelity” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 257). Communication fidelity is connected to the ability of the source and recipient to process information and their skills to speak and listen effectively. **Proposition 2:** “Communication fidelity is enhanced when the source and recipient are sufficiently aware of the socio-cultural, relational, and contextual factors influencing the communication event. Thus, the greater the awareness of culture and context during a communication event, the greater the potential for achieving communication fidelity” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 258). Participants in a communication event can increase communication fidelity by understanding the context of the event, the relationship between the individuals within the communication event and the cultural elements that could potentially impact the communication event. Recognizing these elements as an integral part of communication can increase the fidelity achieved. **Proposition 3:** “Communication fidelity is enhanced when the source and recipient have current information about the other's knowledge and predispositions relative to the target cognition” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 259). A cognition is “internalized information such as a mental image, thought, feeling, or orientation” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 247). A target cognition, refers to the topic or matter being discussed. “Conversely, fidelity will be compromised in a communication event involving new acquaintances or expression of topics/concepts unfamiliar to one or both participants” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 259). When communication participants understand the prior knowledge the other participants have around the target cognition, communication fidelity increases. If participants do not
have a strong understanding of the topic or the knowledge the other participants have of the topic, communication fidelity can be negatively impacted.

**Proposition 4:** “Communication fidelity is enhanced when the source creates messages based upon the recipient's knowledge base and communicating style. Thus, communication fidelity is greater when the source represents the target cognition using signals and symbols consistent with the recipient's cognitive framework and knowledge of denotative and connotative meanings. The use of unfamiliar concepts and/or unfamiliar language will reduce the fidelity of a communication event” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 259). The source plays a critical role in achieving communication fidelity. The source must take into account the communication style of the recipient, the recipient's knowledge of the target cognition and the recipient’s understanding of the topic’s explicit or associated meanings. Using unknown terms and messages will damage communication fidelity.

To achieve successful communication fidelity, the cognitions, or internal information, between the speaker and the listener need a high level of congruence (Powers & Lowry, 1984). It is important to understand the contributions of the source and of the receiver to gain a better understanding of the communication event and the fidelity achieved. Communication fidelity involves an interdependence of two constructs in determining the success of the communication event. The first construct is Basic Communication Fidelity (BCF; Brandt & Powers, 1980; Powers & Lowry, 1984).
Basic Communication Fidelity

Basic Communication Fidelity (BCF) includes what the source intends to communicate and the ability of the source to communicate the content effectively. BCF examines the source of the communication and the sensory output from the source contributing to the communication event. This includes the verbal, nonverbal and image the source presents. Individuals that share a common spoken language were found to have greater BCF, indicating the importance of understanding the similarity and the differences of the participants in achieving communication fidelity.

Powers and Love (1989) found that the image the source presents to the listener impacts his or her effectiveness as a communicator. Individuals that were perceived to have more credibility and interpersonal attraction correlated positively with their BCF. Yet, BCF is variable across settings and individuals, as cognitions change during a single communication event through decision-making or inappropriate behaviors (Powers & Sawyer, 2011). For example, during a meeting, if one individual constantly interrupts others, his or her behavior would seem inappropriate to other participants. The perceived competence and credibility of the individual may decrease, impacting his or her ability to communicate with fidelity, and the motivation of the receivers to listen with fidelity. The tense and often emotional framework of an IEP meeting combined with the communication skills of the participants involved (Burleson, 2007), the relationship of the individuals outside the IEP meeting (Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015), participants' awareness of the prior history individuals have had in IEP meetings
and the use of familiar or unfamiliar terms and ideas (Powers & Witt, 2008) restrict the ability of individuals to communicate effectively.

Recognizing the impact of perceived competence, the receiver’s anxiety level and the knowledge the receiver had on communication fidelity, researchers began to investigate the role of the listener in greater depth. Understanding how the listener receives information involves a second construct, listening communication fidelity (LCF; Mulanax & Powers, 2001; Powers & Sawyer, 2011)

Listening Communication Fidelity

Communication is a complicated social interaction that involves more than one individual. Miscommunication can result in serious relational consequences and emotional distress (Powers & Bodie, 2003). Therefore, not only is the encoding of the information from the source critical, but also the decoding of information by the receiver, which can significantly impact communication fidelity (Fitch-Hauser, Powers, O’Brien, & Hanson, 2007).

LCF involves the ability of an individual to receive and interpret another individual's output: "The degree of congruence between the cognitions of a listener and the cognitions of a source following a communication event" (Mulanax & Powers, 2001, p. 70). Listening includes the decoding and the retention of auditory as well as visual symbols (Powers & Sawyer, 2011) and is important to achieving communicative goals (Bodie, Gearhart, Denham, & Vickery, 2013). Listening fidelity is impacted by cognitive processing (Fitch-Hauser et al., 2007) and the motivation an individual has to achieve fidelity (Powers & Sawyer, 2011). For example, a young teacher who is struggling with
classroom management may not be motivated to listen to advice from a more experienced teacher if he feels his teaching style is different from that of the veteran teacher.

An individual's ability to accurately interpret messages may be hindered due to fear, confusion or anxiety (Mulanax & Powers, 2001). Individuals in stressful situations may be confused or easily misinterpret the speaker’s intent. One example would be during a traffic stop. The person who is stopped may have to ask the officer to repeat him/herself, or the individual may be slow to react to verbal directions due to the stress felt in that particular situation.

Another important condition that impacts listening fidelity is the relationship between the listener and the speaker (Cornelissen et al., 2015; Powers & Sawyer, 2011). The cognitive capacity and the relationship of the individuals involved impact communication fidelity. Listening attentively and showing appreciation for the speaker’s point of view can increase communication fidelity (Bodie et al., 2013). On the other side, "exchanges involving persons in a strained or volatile relationship are more likely to result in misinterpretation and miscommunication, given the heated emotional context of the communication event" (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 258). In this case, interpretation may also be influenced by the choice of the receiver to ignore the source. The relationship between the individuals cannot be ignored when seeking to understand a communication event.

Communication fidelity involves both BCF and LCF and is a key part of every communication event (Powers & Witt, 2008). BCF is the degree of accuracy that the source is able to communicate their intended message and LCF is the degree of accuracy
with which the receiver interprets the message. In the context of an IEP team meeting, the theoretical construct of BCF may assist in examining the team members’ perceptions regarding the abilities and intentions of the communication sender. BCF may help determine if factors such as image, credibility and interpersonal appeal influence those perceptions. The construct of LCF may assist in understanding how team members interpret communications and in identifying factors that may enhance or restrict those interpretations.

If IEP team members do not have the ability to communicate content effectively, or accurately interpret content, will decisions concerning a child’s educational program be affected? Does the image of the credibility of a team member contribute to BCF? Do stereotypes communicators hold affect BCF? For example, do administrators communicate differently with parents they see as difficult, demanding, or unreasonable? Does parental fear, confusion or anxiety impact LCF and accurate interpretations? Do parental internal judgments of others affect their interpretations of communication events? Both BCF and LCF will provide useful lenses from which to study IEP team communication. An additional theoretical construct that will be valuable to the research is Communication Competence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

**Communication Competence**

Communication competence (CC) refers to the speaker's ability to communicate through words or symbols that represent his or her current cognitions. Competence theorists argue determining good communication can be a subjective endeavor, however there are standards that can be used to examine the level of competency. Two important
standards that can be used to determine the degree of competence are effectiveness and appropriateness (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

Effectiveness is determined if the communicator achieved their intended objective (Spitzberg, 2000). Effectiveness includes the knowledge and skills necessary for communication (Salleh, 2008). Skills include use of language, interaction skills, and organizing ideas (Sanders, 2003); however, a definitive list of what skillful communication entails has not been widely established (Brink & Costigan, 2015). Effectiveness used alone poses several problems. An individual can communicate effectively due to perceived power, objectives may be obtained by accident, or the objective was reached through morally questionable means (Spitzberg, 2000). A communicator may achieve his or her intended objective through deceit, manipulation or by having power over others during a communication event. This is not setting a morally high standard for communication.

Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) argue the additional standard of appropriateness allows us to examine if a communicator’s behavior is fitting in a given social context. “Appropriateness is generally defined as conformity to the rules of the situation” (Spitzberg, 2000). Appropriateness would involve using humor in certain situations and not in others. It also involves using legitimate behaviors such as politeness, rule following, and representing authentic beliefs. “Communication that is both effective and appropriate is likely to be higher quality than communication that is one, but not the other” (Spitzberg, 2000, p. 109). These two standards together provide a framework for examining communication competence.
Other standards that may contribute to communication competence include efficiency, verisimilitude, satisfaction, and task achievement (Spitzberg, 2000). Efficiency relates to the idea if the outcome was worth the investment of time and resources. Verisimilitude requires that there is coorientation between communicators’ minds. Each participant has a similar understanding of the messages conveyed or the target cognition. Satisfaction is described as the affective response to reaching the communication objective. It answers the question whether participants view the interaction as positive or negative. Finally, task achievement refers to the degree that certain task criteria were accomplished during the communication event.

Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) stated that an additional part of being competent in communication is the ability to adapt to the context of the situation. Humans vary in their ability to recognize what is appropriate in certain situations or their understanding of how they are viewed by others (Pavitt, 2007). Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) describe that CC is impacted by the traits of the communicator and state of the communication event. They argue that communication traits, such as knowledge of language usage, occur across settings, and state implies that the time, context, and activity may impact an individual’s communication competence. Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) argue that state plays a stronger role in communication competence than has been previously discussed. An individual’s level of appropriateness will change based on his or her motivation, knowledge of the context of the situation and the relationship with individuals involved in the communication event, which in turn will have an impact on his or her communication competence. Effective communicators must adapt to the environment of
the communication event. For example, during an IEP meeting, educators need to be able to adapt their language to fit the cognitions of the parents. If they use terms and messages that are not familiar to the parent, their choice of terms will have a negative impact on communication fidelity.

Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) describe four areas that researchers have looked at to explore these differences of awareness during communication events. The areas include: objective self-awareness, self-consciousness, self-monitoring, and interaction involvement.

Objective self-awareness refers to an individual’s focus inward. Individuals are concerned with the impression that others have of them and vary their behavior accordingly. These individuals often behave in socially appropriate ways and are perceived to be competent in their interactions. They are able to view themselves free of bias and be objective in their reflections on their behaviors. The downside is that their concern over how others perceive them may lead to increased anxiety during interactions and to behave less casually in their interactions.

Self-consciousness is similar to objective self-awareness in that individuals are concerned with how they appear to others. However, self-consciousness in high levels makes individuals overly sensitive to feedback from others and they can demonstrate uncertainty in social interactions. They become more concerned with how they appear to others than accomplishing their goals or tasks.

Self-monitoring involves individuals being aware of others' perceptions and being able to make necessary accommodations based on social cues. High self-monitors are
“attentive, other-oriented, and adaptable to diverse communication situations, and it gives
them the ability to manage effectively the impressions of others by presenting themselves
in desired ways” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, p. 80). Self-monitoring is more governed
by focusing outward on situations than self-consciousness where individuals mainly
focus inwards.

Interaction involvement refers to an individual’s willingness to engage in a social
situation or conversation. This idea reflects the notions of responsiveness, perceptiveness,
and attentiveness, all important components of communication competence.

Individuals also vary in their cognitive complexity, which may impact
communication competence (Bruch, Heisler, & Conroy, 1981). The cognitive schemata
that an individual utilizes to process and interpret information about the social
environment will impact the traits he or she use to communicate appropriately and
effectively (Powers & Love, 1989). Cognitive complexity will also impact the goals
communicators form (Sanders, 2003). This aligns with Burleson’s (2007) argument that
communication is a developmental process with individual differences. “People differ in
the complexity of their interpretive schemes (or constructs), and these differences in
cognitive complexity have important implications for social perception skills, message
production skills and message reception skills” (Burleson, 2007, p. 125).

In summary, CC can be impacted by the competence of the communicator along
with standards applied to quality communication events. Using the standards of
effectiveness and appropriateness can assist in determining the quality of the
communication event. Efficiency, verisimilitude, satisfaction and task achievement can
also help to understand how the communication event was perceived by all of the participants involved in the communication event.

During an IEP meeting, communication competence may aid in understanding how team members are able to adapt to the needs of the individuals on the IEP team. IEP team members may adapt in ways that improve communication competence or in ways that diminish communication competence. For example, during an IEP meeting, educators must be able to adapt their language to fit the cognitions of the parents. If they use terms and messages that are not familiar to the parent, their choice of terms will have a negative impact on communication competence. Parents may not represent their beliefs accurately to avoid conflict or protect the image of another individual during the meeting. If the communication is not authentic and appropriate to the situation, individuals could leave the meeting with very different interpretations of what occurred within the meeting, therefore diminishing communication competence.

Are members of an IEP team competent in communicating content? Do they have the knowledge and skills to communicate effectively? Do members communicate appropriately by matching the communication content to the context of the meeting? Do members of the IEP team make necessary adaptations to ensure necessary outcomes are achieved and that members are satisfied with those outcomes? Do they have the cognitive complexity to identify and discuss appropriate goals? Although the literature revealed that there are challenges in creating a consensus of what is appropriate and what defines communication skills (Salleh, 2008), the theoretical construct of communication
competence will provide a useful framework for studying the communication events of an IEP team meeting.

Communication competence is a key piece to achieving fidelity. However, it is important to remember that fidelity is dependent on all participants. What transpires during interactions contributes to the meaning that is co-created. Tracy (2007) gave a structure for understanding the role of the interaction to achieve communication fidelity through language and talk.

Language and Talk (Tracy, 2007)

The importance of adaptation in achieving communication competence is also emphasized in Tracy’s 2007 conceptualization of language and talk. Tracy argued that distinguishing between the two gives researchers a clearer frame for understanding communication events.

Language involves the codes, grammatical rules and the pragmatics of language use. Language codes consist of the sounds we use to construct thoughts and ideas, also known as phonemes. Language also includes the grammatical rules associated with those codes, for example, which verb tense to use in certain situations. Often, knowledge of these rules is intuitive. Individuals use them instinctively without being consciously aware of the rules they are using (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Language additionally includes the pragmatics, or situational context, of using language in different situations. One example would include understanding when to use informal language, such as "Hey man," versus a more formal way of speaking, such as "Good morning."
Although the language frame can be helpful for understanding communication, Tracy (2007) stated the talk frame allows for a greater understanding of what is occurring during discourse. The talk frame includes the context of the situations, the relationships of the individuals who are communicating and the cultural elements of the speakers.

**Context.** Context involves the communication event in which the discourse is occurring and "who said what and when" (Tracy, 2007, p. 22). Each utterance and speech act is critical for understanding the communication event. Each of the utterances is a type of action that takes place between the individuals. The use of metaphors, idioms, or jargon can have a direct impact on individuals involved in the communication event (Cornelissen et al., 2015).

Participants in communication events must understand the frame of the situation in which the speech act is happening within a work meeting, a chat with a friend or other everyday interactions. Often it is assumed that participants understand the situation frame of the interaction and the frame is not openly discussed. Confusion occurs when participants have a different understanding of the situation and do not adapt to the state of the communication event.

**Relationships.** Interactional meaning is a key element of understanding the talk frame. "More challenging than the literal meaning is to figure out the interactional meaning of utterances. Interactional meaning is what separates talk from language. The interactional meaning refers to the meaning intended by a speaker or taken by a listener" (Tracy, 2007, p. 21). If the speaker's interactional meaning is not clear, it leads to confusion with the listener.
The relational aspect of talk involves the concept of identity. Identity not only reflects how individuals see themselves, but also how they view the individuals they are interacting with. Examples of identity-work include how individuals choose to address someone and the level of formality he or she uses. The style and type of talk individuals use with others can support or challenge the identity they have for themselves, which is known as altercasting. According to Kitzinger and Mandelbaum (2013), “identities are not the static possessions of individual speakers, but are negotiated, challenged, and affirmed in interaction” (2013, p. 178). Terms that individuals choose to use or not use says something about how they are identifying themselves and the listener during communication events (Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013).

Tracy (2007) identified examples of identity influencing interactions. The first is person-referencing practices. During communication events, participants are often required to refer to other people. The choices they make in how to refer to others often shows what they wish to emphasize about a person or highlight as a difference they see. For example, if a person referred to a judge as a female judge, this could indicate that he/she views this role as a typical male profession and wanted to make note that it was a female. "By marking something that is usually left unmarked, it conveys a mild challenge of what society takes to be 'normal'" (Tracy, 2007, p. 25).

A second example is the use of speech acts. Words we use can have a variety of purposes such as to "criticize, praise, request, account, beg, warn, threaten, and so on" (Tracy, 2007, p. 26). Participants choose words to direct the actions of others and work towards their goals during communication events (Wilson, 2007). The speech acts used
can occur in direct or indirect ways. Direct speech acts occur when the meaning is clear and included in the speech act itself. Indirect speech acts require the listener to infer the speaker's meaning. Indirect speech may be used with individuals who want to appear more thoughtful or less aggressive (Goldsmith, 2007). Individuals often communicate in ways that allow other individuals to retain their pride. Tracy (2007) argued that one downside of using indirect speech is that others can perceive this as evasive and deceptive, rather than tactful.

Identity also influences turn taking, who speaks more often, interrupting others and one speaker's attempt to make connections to what the speaker prior to him/her stated. For example, if a person is speaking and he/she is interrupted by another individual with a comment that is not connected to what they were speaking about, the person who interrupted is minimizing the importance of that person's role in the communication event (Courtright, 2007, Tracy, 2007).

Culture and Rhetorical Frames. Talk and identities connect through cultural or rhetorical lenses. The cultural lens examines how individuals act during communication events based on who they are and the roles they are playing. People with different ethnic backgrounds will have different expectations for behaviors during communication events as will men and women, students and teachers, or younger and older individuals. Tracy (2007) claimed, "In adopting a cultural perspective, we treat identities as relatively stable things, existing prior to particular conversational moments, best thought of as 'brought to' interaction, and as capable of explaining patterns we see in talk" (p. 30).
Using a rhetorical lens, differences are explained by highlighting the choices that individuals make about how to talk during communication events. Tracy posited the choices a person makes contribute to his or her unique identity and how the individuals see themselves. Often an individual’s original intentions shift during the communication event (Cornelissen et al, 2015) based on the back and forth interaction while communicating. The cultural perspective views an individual as stable and not easily changed; the rhetorical lens describes that people reflect on speech acts and develop their identity through them. Tracy (2007) claimed, "Recognizing these contradictory truths, I would suggest, is an essential part of understanding communication" (p. 31).

Examining speech acts allows the researcher to understand the relationship and the roles of individuals involved in communication events. How individuals choose to speak to others or allow others to speak can add insight into how they see themselves and others within the context of the communication event.

In the context of an IEP meeting, both the language and the talk of team members may reveal certain patterns in the communication events occurring. Team members may report or be observed using identity-influencing interactions, such as person-referencing or purposeful speech selection, to effect actions or decisions regarding educational programs or services. This theory leads to several questions that may be of importance in this study. What types of person-referencing occurs during IEP meetings? Do titles, “Dr. X,” or roles, “the parent,” establish certain identities in communication events? Do word choices of IEP team members reveal certain purposes or goals? Does word choice influence action either directly or indirectly through jargon, metaphor, praise, threats,
criticism, or affirmation? What patterns of interactions are evident? Do members take turns? Does one person monopolize? Are interruptions frequent? Are parents invited to join in the conversation? Tracy’s (2007) conceptualization of language and talk provides a unique lens for examining how meaning is constructed through the communication events of IEP meetings.

Communication Accommodation Theory

Tracy’s (2007) recognition of the dynamic process of choice making in communication is an important component of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) introduced by Giles and Ogay (2007). Individuals may choose to accommodate others during communication events or choose to stay with their own style and approach to support or strain their relationships with others during the communication event. Toma (2014) stated, “communication accommodation is not just a matter of exchanging information or facilitating information flow, but rather a way to manage interpersonal and intergroup relationships” (p. 158). Accommodation may work to reinforce identities or challenge them.

CAT examines the adjustments that individuals make during communication events. Giles and Ogay (2007) explained that individuals change their communication style to accommodate others in an attempt to create, sustain, or decrease social relationships during interactions.

CAT includes linguistic adjustments as well as accommodations made through clothing, eating habits and other ways that individuals identify themselves. For example, individuals may change their style of clothing to accommodate for settings where a
different style is expected. If he or she usually dresses casually, the individual may dress formally for a meeting with his or her boss or in a meeting where the individual is trying to impress others.

CAT rests on four basic principles. The first is that communication is embedded in a larger socio-historical context that contributes to the communication between individuals. For example, when an elder is speaking or giving advice, there is an expectation that younger individuals should listen respectfully. The idea of respecting our elders is an ingrained cultural expectation in Western society.

The second principle involves understanding that conversations are more than just exchanging information. Conversations involve negotiating social roles and relationships. Individuals shift their communication style or accommodate their communication partner to belong more to a group or to distance themselves from a group. One example of this could be a teacher dressing formally for parent conferences. He or she may do this to distinguish his or herself as a professional and an authority figure on education.

The third principle includes the knowledge that individuals have expectations regarding the accommodation needed in certain circumstances. These expectations involve stereotypes that people have regarding outgroups, or groups that they are not members of as well as the expected social norms of the situations. For example, a college professor may expect students to address them in a formal manner during a communication event and accommodate to his or her style of communication. Another
example would be when an individual chooses silence when his or her opinions differ from the majority, such as expressing political views.

The final principle argues participants use specific communication strategies during communication events. These strategies primarily include convergence and divergence. These strategies are used to communicate attitudes towards others and their own social group. Individuals work to balance their need to belong in certain social interactions, as well as differentiate themselves from others.

Convergence is a strategy that a communicator uses to adjust his or her speech and behaviors to match that of his or her conversation partner. Examples of how individuals adjust his or her speech includes changing their accent, pauses, and terminology. Several ways communicators adjust behaviors include smiling, eye contact, or gestures. Individuals also accommodate by asking clarifying questions and choosing topics of conversation that are familiar to individuals in the communication event. An important motive for convergence is the desire to “gain approval from one another” (Giles & Ogay, 2007, p. 296) and to build relationships. “Accommodation is enacted strategically when one wishes to be perceived favorably by another individual or integrated within a group” (Toma, 2014, pp. 158-159). Convergence is generally viewed as a positive and validating way of communicating (Giles & Ogay, 2007) and establishes more productive communication events (Ayoko, Härtel, & Callan, 2002). A common expectation is that individuals in the subordinate position display convergence towards those considered superior.
The strategy of divergence or non-accommodation is used to highlight differences between communicators (Toma, 2014). This is done by emphasizing speech differences such as accents or formal and informal styles of speech. Individuals also show differences through dress, hairstyles, and mannerisms. One possible motive for divergence is an individual's desire to remind his or her communication partners he or she belongs to different groups. It is a way to demonstrate value for self-identity and the group that one belongs to. Divergence can be seen as less cooperative than convergence, or even as hostile by the communication partner.

CAT has been studied in several settings, including communication between cultural groups, intergenerational interactions, interability interactions and different genders. While accommodation is seen as a skill in communicators, individuals vary in their ability to accommodate in certain communication situations. The context of the situation, stereotypes of individuals involved in the situation and perceived expectations of accommodation can create challenges for the communicators.

CAT gives researchers a framework for understanding how individuals adapt or accommodate based on participants in communication events. Accommodation can be used to build relationships and increase trust; whereas, non-accommodation can be seen as a lack of respect for individuals (Giles, 2008). Non-accommodation can also be used to avoid seeming vulnerable in certain situations. For example, a parent in an IEP meeting may not want to accommodate to the style of the principal to feel that he or she is able to maintain some control over the situation.
Individuals face a dilemma in communication events. The individual must determine how much to accommodate to the group (Toma, 2014) and when to non-accommodate to maintain his or her autonomy. This dilemma poses a real challenge for parents during IEP meetings. They are an outsider, walking into an established group and system. If the parent chooses to accommodate to the style of the group to maintain positive relationships, he or she may lose his or her ability to fulfill his or her goals for the child.

Who accommodates more during an IEP meeting, the school personnel or the parents? Is there mutual adaptation in the IEP meeting? Does the historical context of schools lead teachers to traditional accommodations with administrators, such as not challenging comments or options given by the administrator? Are social roles for team members negotiated in the conversation during IEP meetings? Do professional members of IEP teams hold expectations for certain accommodations from parents - perhaps that the parent listen more and speak less? Do the communication accommodations that occur during IEP meetings reveal certain stereotypes or beliefs? Do the communication strategies used by IEP members encourage convergence and consensus or divergence and divisiveness? For example, do team members attempt to match talk and behavior to be perceived as similar, agreeing, positive, familiar or validating? Conversely, do the communication strategies used by team members highlight the differences between members’ positions and ideas? Often decisions about accommodations and the selection of communication strategies are influenced by each member's goals for a communication event.
**Communication Theory and the Concept of Goal**

Individuals participate in communication interactions for specific reasons—to accomplish a goal (Wilson, 2007). The type of goal that an individual is seeking will impact his or her approach to the situation (Dillard, Segrin & Hardin, 1989). Goals involve two types, primary and secondary. Primary goals are proactive and include influencing another individual to gain assistance, share an activity, give advice, escalate or deescalate a situation, enforce an obligation, obtain permission, or elicit support for another individual (Cody, Canary, & Smith, 1994). For example, a child may have the goal of asking a parent for permission to go on an outing with friends. In this instance he or she will approach the event with a different tone than he or she would if the child were defending a grade he or she received on an assignment. Different individuals also have various skill levels when seeking to influence others.

Secondary goals involve maintaining a relationship or avoiding arousing anger or frustration in the individual receiving the communication. Secondary goals concern the perceptions of the recipient. Senders must weigh the cost/benefit when advocating for their goals. Dillard et al. (1989) identified four types of secondary goals:

1. "Identity goals objectives related to the self-concept" (Dillard et al., 1989, p. 20). As an individual communicates, he or she attempts to maintain his or her identity and behave in a way that is true to his or her beliefs and values. For example, the individual may work to control his or her temper if he or she believes anger does not contribute to effective communication.
2. Interaction goals "Represent the source's desire to manage his or her impression successfully" (Dillard et al., 1989, p. 20). The individual cares about his or her public persona and want to maintain the respect of others. During interactions individuals concerned with how they are perceived will work to maintain a professional and appropriate demeanor, he or she will not intentionally put someone on the spot to avoid damaging the relationship. One example of this might be approaching a problem with a question, instead of accusing someone of not doing something that should have been done.

3. Resource goals are concerned with maintaining valued assets. The assets can include relationships, material items or physical assets such as one's health (Dillard et al., 1989). During communication events, individuals may work to maintain resources that he or she already has or work to gain new resources. For example, if an employee is communicating with his or her boss about the challenges of his or her job, they may be aiming to add support staff to increase the resources he or she has access to for completing the work.

4. Arousal management goals refer to individuals wanting to be comfortable in certain situations (Dillard et al., 1989). Communication events that involve decision-making or requesting changes can be replete with emotional aspects. Some individuals may strive to communicate in a way that reduces tension or anxiety around the topic. For example, he or she may smile or make a joke to put himself or herself or others at ease.

Primary goals relate to an individual's motivations for participating in communication interactions. Individuals vary in the ability to communicate his or her
intended goals effectively, therefore impacting communication fidelity. Secondary goals are also in the minds of individuals participating in communication events; however, these goals are not shared with the others involved in the communication event. “Secondary goals act as a set of boundaries which delimit the verbal choices available to sources” (Dillard et al., 1989, p. 32).

People decide what to say, and what not to say, during influence interaction based on concerns such as being true to themselves; looking favorable in the eyes of significant others; protecting others' self-esteem; maintaining desired relationships; meeting the norms for cooperative interaction; and not wasting time, energy, or other valued resources. (Wilson, 2007, p. 95)

The type of goal or goals that an individual is pursuing during a communication event impacts his or her planning and strategies. The goals he or she is pursuing, primary or secondary, play a part in what an individual will choose to say or not say during a communication event. Primary goals are shared with the group, while secondary goals are typically not shared, yet have an impact on the communication event.

During an IEP meeting, a shared goal of creating an educational plan which will benefit the identified child is openly discussed. However, individuals may have secondary goals that are not being shared. A principal could be working to protect valuable school resources, a teacher may be trying to maintain a positive relationship with another teacher by not calling into question his or her ideas or strategies and a parent may be working to preserve his or her identity as a calm and rational human being, while feeling quite emotional on the inside. If too many things are left unsaid during an IEP meeting, then the outcome may not be satisfactory to all members.
What is not said during an IEP meeting? Who communicates the shared primary goal? What tactics are used to influence others in IEP meetings? Do members of IEP teams attempt to influence the ideas, decisions, and actions of others through their communications? Do members of IEP teams seek to establish certain identities through their communications, such as power, empathy, or advocacy? Do members sanction true feelings and emotions during IEP meetings to achieve interactional goals and demonstrate socially appropriate behavior? Do members select communication strategies to maintain valued assets such as parental cooperation or administrator approval? Are comments used during the IEP meeting attempts to decrease anxiety and fear?

Communication fidelity, competence, and accommodation are further influenced when participants in communication events experience relational problems, dilemmas, and contradictions. Several theoretical frameworks illustrate these complexities. They include Problem Integration Theory, Attribution Theory, and Relational Dialectics Theory.

**Problematic Integration Theory**

Problematic integration theory (PI) concerns itself with the beliefs or knowledge that individuals hold around certain topics, ideas and the world around them. Individuals hold onto these convictions as they are part of an individual’s reality and have been influenced by events that have occurred during an individual’s lifetime. Babrow (2007) refers to these as probabilistic orientations. "Probabilistic orientations are often held as basic assumptions about life and the world" (p. 183). For example, a student may have the belief that algebra is a waste of his or her time and not feel that it is relevant for the
future. This belief would impact his or her motivation and interaction with algebra, and influence communication events relative to this belief.

Individuals form probabilistic orientations about what outcomes might happen in his or her world based on his or her beliefs, expectations and knowledge. Individuals also form evaluative orientations about those beliefs, expectations and potential outcomes as either positive or negative. "Evaluation is a basic element in human psychological and social being" (Babrow, 2007, p. 184). Based on experiences, individuals form views of what is likely and if those likely outcomes will be good or bad. New experiences or new narratives can cause individuals to reflect, reaffirm or change his or her beliefs (Russell & Babrow, 2011). When both orientations match, such as a student deciding to study for a test because he or she believe it is important to do well, the integration of both is routine. When there is a clear probability combined with a positive evaluation of that outcome, integration is familiar, consonant and unproblematic.

When the expectations and evaluations don’t match, or when the probable outcome is less clear or less consistent, integration is problematic. When a disparity exists between expected outcome and evaluation of that outcome, the integration of both orientations presents complexities. When the probabilistic and evaluative orientations are in conflict, the individual will experience discomfort, often evident in communication. The mismatch between expected outcome and evaluation may occur in one of four scenarios, divergence, ambiguity, ambivalence, and impossibility.

Divergence represents a discrepancy between what the individual believes is true and likely to occur and what the individual actually desires. Divergence may include
situations in which bad outcomes are likely or good outcomes are unlikely. For example, divergence in an education setting exists when a parent wants an inclusive educational setting, but realizes that such an outcome is unlikely.

With ambiguity, probable outcomes are unclear. These uncertainties often create fear, anxiety or discomfort for individuals. For example, a parent may be uncertain of a teacher’s perceived ability to understand and provide necessary educational supports for his or her child. These uncertainties may be addressed through changing forms, changing focus or level of experience.

Changing forms is brought about when individuals encounter dilemmas. Dilemmas entail uncertainty and individuals may have to convince themselves to hold on to hope or believe that something might be possible. For example, a parent of a child with a disability may change his or her form from thinking inclusion is impossible to convincing his or herself that inclusion might be an appropriate avenue for the child. The uncertainty around what may happen if this occurs could impede his or her ability to communicate his or her ideas effectively or with conviction.

Changing focus is when attention shifts from one problem to another. Continuing with the example above, the parent may change his or her focus to the child’s learning and educational progress. He or she has changed his or her focus from worrying about the placement to the academic achievement of the child.

Levels of experience occurs when an individual’s orientation or uncertainty is shared by others. When his or her feelings are shared, individuals feel less isolated. The shared uncertainty then becomes part of the group process. For example, if a parent
shares a concern in an IEP meeting and that uncertainty is also shared by other members of the IEP team, understanding the problem and possible outcomes becomes part of the social process of the group.

An ambivalence scenario would involve an uncaring, uninvolved understanding of either outcome or the evaluation of that outcome. For example, a member of an IEP team demonstrated disinterest in the parent’s preference concerning educational methods and does not make that a focus of the discussion.

Impossibility involves an individual’s hope for something that may be viewed as not ever possible. If an individual holds the belief that an outcome will not occur, responses may range from a sense of futility to a detail of the impossibility. For example, a parent may hope to access speech/language services, but realizes the impossibility due to the school’s refusal in previous years. Lloyd and Hastings (2009) found families of students with disabilities were frequently frustrated with professionals who viewed parental hopes as unrealistic. The application of PI theory to educational contexts may reveal communicative responses to situations that involve tensions between the likelihood of certain outcomes and the perceived value of those outcomes. PI may provide a useful lens to examine how communication events illustrate perceived expectations and outcomes of various IEP members, while also illustrating how incongruence between probability and values are negotiated. PI theory might also be a helpful framework to study how communication may assist individuals to cope with uncertainties, particularly when expectations differ from desires.
Magnuson (2013) applied PI theory to examine parental uncertainty and fears concerning transition of students with disabilities to post-school environments. When expected outcomes differ from desires, the tension between desired hope and fear possibilities are illuminated through the lens of PI theory. Extensive uncertainties about the future of the children may create feelings of anxiety, disappointment, or fear. An analysis of communication events can detect this problematic integration, and communication may also be viewed as a resource in helping individuals cope with these uncertainties. Interactions can result in strategies for creating new possibilities.

Understanding PI theory illuminates hope-fear conflicts, encourages parents to share fears and frustrations as part of the post-school planning process, and invites an exploration of alternative outcomes with positive values. Similarly, Polk (2005) applied PI theory to family caregiving to understand uncertainty and stress, and concluded that individuals use communication to help integrate probabilities and evaluation of those outcomes when incongruent. Conflicting probabilistic and evaluation orientations make it difficult for individuals to interpret messages, maintain attitudes, make decisions, and behave consistently. When PI theory concerns were shared with others, concerns were transformed from isolated and individual struggles into a discursive group process. With others affirming family fears, steps to reframe those fears into more positive outcomes were taken.

During an IEP meeting, integrating new ideas can be a challenge based on the probabilistic orientations of the members of the team. Data may be an integral part of decision making, but it is impossible to remove values and orientations from the decision-
making process (McPhee & Zaug, 2001). While behaviors can be observed, beliefs are often hidden (Wilson, 2007). Individuals in an IEP meeting may have very different probabilistic orientations; therefore, integrating new ideas may be a challenge for some. Meeting the needs of all students is challenging, based on previous experiences, teachers may have beliefs on what works best or what has worked well in the past. The danger with this approach is that it removes the idea of the individual from an IEP.

Does the communication that occurs in an IEP meeting reveal a congruence of probabilistic and evaluative orientations of team members or an incongruence? Could the incongruence observed or reported for IEP members be described as representing divergence, ambiguity, ambivalence, and impossibility? Do conflicting probabilistic and evaluation orientation make it difficult for IEP team members to interpret messages, maintain attitudes, make decisions, and behave consistently?

Along with values and judgments of how the world works, individuals also form judgments about each other. Communication events may be impacted by how others are perceived and predictions that are made about how he or she will act in certain situations (Heider, 1958). Attribution Theory gives a perspective on how the judgments individuals make about themselves and others could possibly impact communication fidelity.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory (AT) is based upon the premise that individuals attach meaning to their own behavior and the behavior of others. Attribution theory seeks to understand how people view the world and the relationships they have in it. Heider (1958) suggested that individuals, as novice psychologists, make judgments about individuals based on
their behaviors. Pavitt (2007) outlined how we form impressions of others based on behaviors and then make evaluations of those individuals based on what we see. For example, if we see an individual come in late to a meeting, we may judge them as irresponsible or self-centered.

Some proponents of using AT to examine communication events argue attributes assigned to individuals impact interpersonal encounters (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008) and judgments are made about individuals based on the behaviors used during communication events, such as eye gaze or use of humor.

When individuals are examining themselves, the individual explains behaviors based on external situations, not on character traits. Pavitt (2007) stated when making judgments on the behavior of others, individuals over dramatize the connection between behaviors and the connection to the character of the individual. Individuals often arrive at explanations for behaviors by focusing on one of four features: correspondence, covariation, responsibility and bias (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008).

Correspondence refers to the idea that behaviors can illuminate an individual’s nature or personality. For example, an individual who is argumentative may be seen as stubborn, instead of examining the reasons that he or she does not want to consider a new idea or approach.

Covariation is when attributes are connected to dispositions, as well as a specific event. For example, a teenager who is considered rebellious may become defiant when rules or regulations are discussed. This defiance is attributed to specific factors that are occurring.
A focus on responsibility is when individuals weigh who or what is responsible for certain behaviors or outcomes. Individuals are likely to feel more empathy for individuals who he or she does not blame for certain events than those he or she sees as responsible for what has occurred. For example, a parent who misses an IEP meeting will be given more support if the perceived responsibility was on lack of transportation; if the responsibility was viewed as a lack of caring or planning by the parent, little empathy would be given to them. Where responsibility is placed can have extensive repercussions on events and relationships (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008).

A focus on bias can be demonstrated in a variety of ways. One example is that individuals tend to view his or her own actions as a result of circumstances, where he or she makes judgments about other’s character based on the individual’s actions. Bias is also demonstrated during conflict situations. Individuals tend to view his or her actions as more appropriate and competent than the actions of others involved in the conflict (Canary & Spitzberg, 1990).

Heider (1958) emphasized several important concepts related to how attributes are assigned to individuals or events. Individuals gain information through observation, or transmission of information, such as stories, rumors and gossip. Individuals then use inference skills to arrive at conclusions that fit into their current contexts. For example, if a child is seen having a tantrum in a store, the child may be perceived as spoiled. Other factors that contribute to judgments assigned to people are beliefs in whether a person can or cannot do something or the motivation the individual exhibits to create change. These factors impact attitudes towards the individuals and predictions for his or her future
behavior. A final element that impacts attitudes towards others is belonging. Belonging is when a sense of connection or similarity is established between two or more individuals. When individuals feel connected to another, they are more likely to attribute positive characteristics to that individual.

Heider (1958) contended that all individuals have life experiences and interactions with other people. These experiences determine how we react and relate to those people. In the context of an IEP meeting, participants may have made predictions of how individuals will behave based on past observations or stories he or she has heard. Participants will be closely observing the behaviors of others and making judgments about his or her character based on the behaviors exhibited. If an individual has made previous claims of change or improved practice, and then not followed through, this will impact the belief that he or she is invested in the process and his or her ideas may not be supported by others.

Do the attributes and evaluations that individuals make about other team members impact decisions that are made at IEP meetings? Do attributes assigned to team members impact their encouraged participation in the IEP process? Do predictions about how individuals will behave impact what members are willing to share or ask for in IEP meetings? Do attributes impact the willingness of team members to work together? Are individuals on IEP teams assigning responsibility for events or behaviors to certain individuals? Are teachers blamed for lack of progress? Are administrators blamed for lack of resources or willingness to try new strategies? Are parents blamed for behaviors their child exhibits? Assigning responsibility and attributes to members of an IEP team
could affect willingness to communicate with individuals during the meeting, which will have a direct impact on the communication fidelity achieved.

Relational Dialectics Theory

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) argues that relationships are part of a process and are not fixed entities. “It is a theory of the meaning-making between relationship parties that emerges from the interplay of competing discourses” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 349). Discourses are systems of utterances that are used to make meaning. Contradictions or discursive tensions exist within communication events. These tensions create and challenge relationships as individuals interact. The tensions are neither positive, nor negative. They can be used to create shared meaning over time or during specific communication events. Shared meaning making occurs through this struggle (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010).

Contradictions are unified opposites. For example, an individual’s desire to be connected and have autonomy are feeling and individual might have at the same time. Baxter and Braithwaite (2007) stated that within each relationship, communication is used to organize and manage contradictions. There are many approaches to relational dialectics, but three main postulates are: "the presumption that relating is a process of contradiction; the presumption that contradiction is central to relational change; and the presumption that communication occupies a central place in the enactment of contradiction" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2007, p. 276). According to RDT, meaning making is viewed as a fragmented, tensional, and multivocal process. Rather than communication serving to achieve consensus, communication involves “dissensus”
production, where different, often competing, discourses present struggles to individuals involved in communication events.

Baxter and Braithwaite (2007) described contradictions in three different ways: unified opposites, opposites and dynamic interplay. Unified opposites refers to contradictions that are interdependent. In relationships for example, there is a desire to be open and closed. One has to determine how open to be in his or her relationships and what information to withhold or close off from the other individual to maintain some autonomy. There can be degrees of openness and closedness, but the status of one proposition directly influences the other. For example, as one becomes more open in a relationship, the degree of closedness is modified.

Opposites refer to things that cannot both exist in the same space and time. One example of this in relationships would be the idea of being honest and lying cannot exist together. This poses a challenging contradiction in relationships as individuals may desire an honest relationship, but tell small lies to avoid hurting the feelings of the partners.

The third contradiction, dynamic interplay, examines how opposites interact with each other. "Contradictory phenomena are tied together in interdependence at the same time that they negate each other. This simultaneous 'both-and' dynamic produces an ongoing tension, one that keeps the relating process vibrant and alive" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2007, p. 277). Individuals can hold contradictory positions; how they negotiate those positions impacts the relationship. Speech communication is represented by links or places where competing contradictory discourses interact. These discursive
struggles or contradictions may involve dyads, such as integration—segregation, expression—reservation, public—private, stability—change, or conventional—unique.

Communication can be used to negotiate contradictions and the role they will have in relationships. Baxter and Braithwaite (2007) and Baxter and Montgomery (1996) highlighted several communication strategies individuals used to work around contradictions; they include, but are not limited to: spiraling inversion, segmentation, balance, integration, recalibration, denial, and disorientation.

In an educational context, an illustrative contradiction may be individual choices or autonomy contrasted with a rule or regulatory proposition. Spiraling inversion and segmentation refers to parties moving back and forth between the contradictions, focusing on each in turn. One example of this might include; the need for regulations for compulsory attendance and then spiraling to the need of parental choices between public and private schools. Within segmentation partners agree that in certain situations, one type of behavior or attitude is acceptable while in another, it is not. Student behaviors must be managed to assure school safety and in some instances, student choices regarding behavior would be acceptable.

The strategies of balance, integration and recalibration allow for contradictions to coexist (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Balance involves working towards a compromise so each dialectic polar is partially represented. For example, teachers must use curriculum that addresses the common core curriculum, but may individually select materials to build on student interests. Integration requires that both contradictions exist in full. Baxter and Braithwaite (2007) gave the example of a celebration that is both private and
public. Individuals can follow the traditions or ideas of a big gathering, while incorporating special ideas that are personal to the individuals involved.

Recalibration requires that individuals rethink their contradiction so that it is not seen as oppositional. These strategies are important as it shows a willingness on the part of individuals to work on improving and maintaining the strength of the relationship. In education, contradictory beliefs regarding the place of arts in education may be nuanced to appear balanced, not oppositional. On the other side, denial and disorientation are not helpful in resolving contradictions or building relationships. In denial, individuals ignore the contradiction and pretend that it does not exist. Baxter and Braithwaite (2007) believe contradictions cannot be ignored and will eventually require a response. Disorientation occurs when individuals are overwhelmed by the contradictions and view no way to resolve them. While Baxter and Braithwaite (2007) argued for the existence of these strategies, they advocate that more research is needed to understand these dysfunctional strategies completely.

According to RDT, communication events involve a “contrapuntal analysis” in which discursive markers illustrate the contradictions of the methods used to negotiate contradictions. The analysis focuses on the collision of counter points of talk representing contradictions or examples of strategies such as balance, integration or recalibration. For example, the analysis of the text of discourse may reveal “halting qualities” that suggest discursive struggles through hesitations, disfluencies, or an individual’s reservations to express views. The analysis may illustrate the use of “authoritarian” or absolutist talk such as “always,” “never,” “naturally,” “obviously,” or “of course.” Markers may signal
the consideration of alternative propositions, with words such as “sort of,” “maybe,” or “a little.” Attending to discursive markers in talk locates contradictions with works like “but” or “however.”

Relational dialectics are not meant to predict behaviors; they allow us to align our understanding of what contributes to certain behaviors within relationships and communication events. Contradictions internal and external do have an impact on behaviors. Communication is a key to understanding contradictions and the work they do to strengthen or challenge relationships.

RDT may be useful in examining the discourse of IEP meetings. Certain discursive markers may reveal contradictions or colliding beliefs expressed by IEP team members. Are contradictions evident in the observed discourse or reported views of IEP team members? Can specific dyads of dissensus be discovered? Are the contradictions of dyads represented or reported more by certain members of the IEP team, for example parents? Do IEP members attempt to negotiate contradiction involved in discourse?

These theoretical perspectives assisted in gaining a better understanding of the communication interactions that occur during IEP meetings and the relationships of the individuals participating in the IEP meeting. Using multiple lenses allowed a broader examination of the multiple perspectives that exist in an IEP meeting and how communication fidelity is enhanced or reduced through participant interaction. The answers to the questions identified in these frameworks guided the data collection and analysis.
Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research was to explore school-family collaboration for students with disabilities by exploring how communication occurs during IEP meetings that limit or encourage parent participation. Several studies have explored the frequency of communication and the type of communication schools use to build collaborative partnerships with parents outside of IEP meetings, (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rodriguez et al., 2014; Zablotsky, Boswell, & Smith, 2012), but few studies have explored the discourse that occurs during IEP meetings and how discourse works to promote or hinder authentic parental participation in designing an appropriate educational plan for his or her child.

Research Questions

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. What does the discourse during an IEP meeting and perceptions of IEP team members reveal about supports to enhance authentic parental participation?
2. What does the discourse during an IEP meeting and perceptions of IEP team members reveal about barriers to authentic parental participation?
3. How do communication interactions in an IEP meeting influence parental participation?
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter will review the current literature around school-family partnerships, specifically examining the challenges parents of students with identified disabilities encounter as they navigate IEP meetings and parent teacher interactions. Topics that will be discussed include: (a) school family partnerships; (b) school family partnerships involving students with disabilities; (c) legal requirements for school-family partnerships for students with disabilities; and (d) barriers to parental participation in IEP meetings.

School-Family Partnerships

When schools and families work together, many benefits accrue for children. One of the main reasons to support partnerships is to help students succeed in school and later in life (Epstein, 2010). A positive relationship between parent involvement and academic achievement has been established (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Students whose parents are involved in their education have increased academic and social outcomes. The role of the family is critical to student success and has academic and social benefits for students (Jeynes, 2007).

School-family partnership is defined as collaborative, with school personnel and parents having joint-ownership of responsibility for student outcomes (Glueck & Reschly, 2014). Parent involvement is no longer solely about keeping parents informed or having them volunteer at school, but rather inviting parents into the process of educating their child. Partnerships are created through two-way communication, collaborative
problem solving and shared decision-making. Effective school-family partnerships are critical for providing students the opportunity for their best educational outcome.

**Qualities of School-Family Partnerships**

Strong school-family partnerships has been identified as a source for increased student learning. Researchers have been attempting to determine what practices contribute to quality partnerships. Blue-Banning, et al. (2004) conducted a study to determine specific characteristics of collaborative family and professional partnerships. They collected data using focus groups to describe positive partnerships. The researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with families who had limited English proficiency and the professionals who worked with those families. The first sessions were separated into groups by families and then practitioners who worked with these families. The goal was to “identify primary components of collaborative partnerships” (p. 170). The second round of focus groups were mixed groups of parents and practitioners and were held primarily to verify responses and clarify any questions. Individual interviews were conducted with 18 families to ensure their voices were included.

Six themes were identified as important to collaborative family-professional partnerships. The six themes include: (a) commitment, (b) equality, (c) skills, (d) trust, (e) respect, and (f) communication. While each category is important, the researchers felt it was important to note that these categories are interrelated and changes in one significantly impacted other areas.

**Commitment.** Blue-Banning, et al. (2004) found that commitment included being loyal to the child and family, valuing the relationship with the family and believing in the
importance of the goals for the child. Families as well as practitioners identified the need to go the extra mile for a child and to see them as a person. Both families and school professionals agreed commitment was an essential component of building relationships.

**Equality.** Families reported “establishing equality required active effort from professionals to empower families” (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, p. 176). Parents wanted to work with professionals who valued their point of view and listened to their opinions. Parents wanted to be viewed equal and not less than professionals. Professionals also felt that it was important to encourage parents to participate and listen to their perspectives.

**Skills.** Parents described skills as educators who could make things happen and adapt instruction to meet the needs of the child. Professionals appreciated colleagues who were up to date on current practice and willing to try new ideas. Professionals also noted that it was important to adapt to meet individual needs of the students.

**Trust.** Trust was defined by parents as meaning three things: reliability, safety and discretion. Reliability involved professionals following through on what they said they were going to do. Safety involved parents knowing they could leave their children with individuals who would treat them with dignity. Discretion involved trusting professionals with confidential or private information. Professionals also believed it was important to work with colleagues who were reliable and followed through with expectations.

**Respect.** Families and parents identified respect as another important component of strong partnerships. For parents, respect involved “valuing the child as a person rather than a disability or a diagnosis” (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, p. 179). Respect also
included courtesies such as returning phone calls, being on time for meetings and recognizing parents’ contributions to their child. Professionals believed it was important to demonstrate respect by not judging parents and recognizing where they were. “The lack of respect displayed by some programs was responsible for a great deal of damage to families ranging from loss of their sense of empowerment, to an unwillingness to access services because of the stigma and humiliation attached” (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, p. 180).

**Communication.** Communication was a final area that both parents and professionals indicated as an important component for creating positive partnerships. Comments from parents focused on quantity and the quality of communication. Parents wanted frequent communication, but more importantly they wanted communication that was open and honest. Parents wanted professionals to give them accurate information, but to do so with tact. They wanted communication to include positive comments along with challenges. Parents also wanted more access to information about services that may be available for their child. Parents also noted the importance of listening to them and felt communication needed to be two-way. Professionals also commented that communication should be frequent and honest. They, too, felt professionals needed to listen and share appropriate information with parents on a consistent basis (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

This study gave strong indicators for examining what contributes to positive parent professional partnerships. The majority of the comments from both professionals and family members in this study were directed at professional behaviors, implying that
both groups perceive an increased responsibility on the professional to create strong partnerships. A high level of agreement between professionals and parents was evident in the indicators identified for positive partnerships.

Another study (Williams et al., 2011) examined the meanings of school-family partnerships with African American parents and school personnel in an inner-city high school. The authors wanted to understand how the environment of the school impacted the school-family partnerships. Using an ecological perspective as a framework they considered the interdependence, cycling of resources, adaptation and succession. Within the school context, interdependence was identified as recognizing schools have many parts and one piece may affect change in others. Cycling of resources involved understanding how resources are “defined, used, created, conserved, and transformed” (Williams et al., 2011, p. 690). Adaptation was described as the ability of individuals to adapt to the norms or demands of the environment. In order to remain in an environment, adaptation of the individual is critical; “Within home school partnerships, the principle of adaptation explains how the fit between the needs and beliefs of parents and school personnel shape these interactions, and the responses of the broader family and school environments” (Williams et al., 2011, p. 690). Succession involves the recognition that change is constant.

Four themes emerged from the study concerning school-family partnerships. The themes included: initiation of contact, provide and protect, contextual conditions, and effective communication.
Initiation of contact was related to the ecological principle of adaptation. School personnel felt that parents who initiated contact had better adapted to the school environment. They saw initiation as a positive indicator of a parent who cared about his or her child’s success. The school-initiated contact was usually seen as a sign of trouble, causing frustration for the parents, making it difficult for parents to adapt to the typical reasons for communication. Williams et al. (2011) noted that individuals faced more pressure to adapt to the school system; the system rarely adapted to meet the needs of the parents.

Williams, et al. (2011) linked “provide and protect” to cycling of resources. Parents in the community often supported their child’s friends through meals, places to stay and emotional support. This practice is common in Black communities where individuals who are not biologically related often act as support figures for youth. Parents and school personnel recognized that resources were sometimes unavailable to all students, so individuals needed to step in and support them.

Contextual factors were linked to the idea of succession. Changes occurred over time as students moved from one school to the next and changes in the educational system itself occurred. Parents commented that past generations trusted schools more than parents today trust schools.

The final comparison made by Williams, et al. (2011) was around the idea of effective communication and the principle of interdependence in an ecological system. The school-family partnership has multiple related components. Change in one component that impacts others. Participants in the study noted that effective
communication could strengthen the environment. Both parents and school personnel commented on the benefits of the school’s open door policy, parents communicating about changes in the student’s home life, and parents and teachers sharing cell phone numbers and e-mails to expand the methods of communication. School personnel and parents both indicated they believe the school needed to increase e-mail communication to encourage greater parent awareness and participation.

One of the critical components of this study was recognizing the school-family partnership as part of a complex system. “School-family partnerships in education should be examined with the understanding that both the context and actions of the involved parties are important” (Williams et al., 2011, p. 695). Relationships are important and contribute to, or diminish the school-family partnerships.

Satisfaction in School-Family Partnerships

Wanat (2010) conducted a case study to examine satisfied and unsatisfied parents within one school district. The researcher examined parents' perspectives about their involvement in school to the extent that “parents and school professionals respect one another’s knowledge, identify areas for collaboration and recognize their unique roles to help children” (Wanat, 2010, p. 160). The study identified themes around satisfaction and recognized all parents agreed that relationships with teachers and administration encouraged or discouraged parent involvement.

Emerging themes found that parents who were satisfied with their school-family partnership felt the schools invited parents to contribute. Parents were also involved in
decisions about student learning and curriculum and appreciated clear school policies around parents visiting classrooms (Wanat, 2010).

Parents dissatisfied with school-family partnerships felt that their questions were not heard and their knowledge was not valued. Some of the parents commented they received help only when teachers wanted them to stop complaining. One dissatisfied mother commented that her input was not valued because she did not have a college degree.

Both satisfied and dissatisfied parents felt that parents and teachers needed to have equitable relationships. They felt teachers were trained to make educational decisions for children, but input from parents could help support good decision making.

The satisfied and dissatisfied parents felt that the attitudes of the teachers contributed to feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Both sets of parents felt that teachers often judged parents’ lifestyles and their casual remarks conveyed the idea that some parents were not “good parents.” The parents of students with special needs specifically noted they felt there was a lack of communication about their child’s progress. All parents felt it was the role of the teacher to maintain professional relationships with parents and help them understand their roles.

This study demonstrated that within the same district, parents can be satisfied or dissatisfied with school-family partnerships. The researcher noted parents who volunteered had more opportunities to build relationships with teachers and administrators; those relationships led to more satisfaction with additional opportunities to communicate and collaborate. Dissatisfied parents often only interacted with teachers
and administrators when they were unhappy. Wanat (2010) advocated for more informal interactions between schools and parents.

Cardona, Jain, and Canfield-Davis (2012) examined how diverse families with various nationalities and immigration status understand home-school relationships. The researchers selected three early childhood centers based on the criteria that these sites were committed to home-school relationships, and they had student enrollment that represented different nationalities and immigration status. Six families were selected that included six mothers and three fathers. The families identified as 32% Asian, 16% European, 16% Latin, and 36% Euro-American. Two themes were identified: “(a) home-school relationships, and (b) families’ wishes and wants for their children” (Cardona, et al., 2012, p. 11). Additional sub-themes within the home-school relations were found and included: social respect, personal regard, and perceived competence.

Cardona et al., (2012) determined that home-school relationships were valued by the parents. Parents identified three areas they felt contributed to home-school relationships. The theme of social respect was described as viewing others as equals and truly listening to what each person is saying. When parents did not feel respected they did not become involved in their child’s education.

The second theme Cardona et al. (2012) noted under home-school relationships was personal regard. Parents described personal regard as “professionals behave in ways that reduce families’ feelings of vulnerability or dependence” (p. 12). Parents commented that their trust increased with professionals who tried to connect with them and understand their situations. Parents were frustrated when information was not shared with
them on how their child was doing. One parent noted that the teacher did not call her by name; she interpreted this as a lack of personal regard.

The third theme contributing to home-school relationships was identified as perceived competence. Parents identified that the way professionals treated them influenced their involvement. Parents appreciated teachers and administrators who were inviting and supportive. Teachers who invited parents into the classrooms were seen as welcoming and the action was viewed as a sign of trust. Parents also appreciated open and frequent communication: “They wanted to be not just informed, but they desired to have their perspectives heard” (Cardona et al., 2012, p. 14).

Examining parents’ wishes and wants for their children was the other theme emerging from this study. The researchers determined that parents wanted daily communication about their child’s day, wanted more of a connection between activities at school and at home, and wanted more informal interaction with other families to build relationships. Parents felt if these strategies were utilized, they would feel more supported and connected.

Within the diverse lives of the parents involved in this study, several similar points about school-family partnerships emerged. The importance of communication was significant as well as the idea of treating parents as valued partners by inviting them into the classrooms and listening to their perspectives.

Effective school-family partnerships are important for the academic and social success of all students. Strong school-family relationships are characterized by qualities such as commitment, equality, trust, respect and communication. Research has found that
parental satisfaction with school-family partnerships is influenced by opportunities for parents to meaningfully contribute, parental involvement in decision-making, and encouragement from teachers and administrators. Families expect social respect and personal regard. Parents also desire to be viewed as competent by professionals. The quality of school-family partnerships is directly related to the educational benefits a child receives. These qualities are particularly important for families of students with disabilities.

**School-Family Partnerships for Students with Disabilities**

While school-family partnerships are important for the success of all students, the partnerships are especially critical for the success of students with identified disabilities. Although the partnership is important, schools and parents often have different understandings of the roles, skills, and knowledge involved in creating effective partnerships (Applequist, 2009).

**Characteristics of Effective School-Family Partnerships for Students with Disabilities**

The following studies indicate two significant factors that contribute to effective school family partnerships for students with disabilities. The first involves schools' efforts to involve families in their child's education through collaboration and the second involves the schools' communication efforts with families. These two factors are essential to effective IEP meetings.

**Collaborative Relationships.** An important component of effective school-family partnerships for students with disabilities is having an established collaborative relationship with parents. Rodriguez et al. (2014) conducted a study to examine parents’
views of schools’ involvement efforts. Their study included 96 parents of children with disabilities from 18 different schools across eight districts. The schools included seven elementary schools, seven middle schools and four high schools. Ten of the schools were from smaller districts and eight were in larger districts. The results revealed several themes, including the variability in parent-school collaboration, communication frequency and effectiveness, and parental trust, as well as a theme that parental involvement was dependent on a child's progress and parent initiation. The researchers found transitions and schoolwork are stressful for parents, and that the experience and knowledge of the parents affects their views of the school. Parents reported that the interactions with individual teachers or professionals also influences family-school collaboration.

Several of the themes are of particular importance to this study. Rodriguez, et al. (2014) found that collaboration varied across different schools. Parents who had strong collaboration with their schools commented that teachers were receptive to their ideas, they found teachers to be accessible, and they felt the school accommodated parents for IEP meetings. Parents who felt they did not have good collaboration with their child's schools commented that the school does not seek their input and the school was rigid in providing services.

Another theme of importance was the variety of communication that parents received from schools. Schools that had favorable comments from parents noted that schools communicated regularly and kept parents informed on the IEP progress. These schools also provided communication in a variety of ways.
A third theme to note is the variance of trust that parents have in the schools. Parents all felt it was important to trust the schools. Trust was built when schools implemented the IEP as stated and provided parents frequent updates. Parents felt trust was broken when schools did not involve them in decisions regarding their child's educational placement or inform them of their procedural safeguards.

Overall this study found schools that were the most successful at creating collaborative partnerships "actively solicited parent input, had teachers who were accessible, and communicated frequently with parents through a variety of means" (Rodriguez et al., 2014, p.90). This study demonstrates the variability across settings that parents encounter in special education. A second factor influencing school partnerships was the efforts of schools to communicate with families of students with disabilities.

**Communication.** Humphrey, Lendrum, Barlow, Wigelsworth and Squires (2013) highlighted the importance of parent school communication as contributing to improved school outcomes for students. Their study specifically sought to identify teaching and communication practices that improved social outcomes for students with disabilities by examining the impact of The Achievement for All (AFA) program. The AFA program implemented three strands that worked to increase teacher knowledge of strategies to use, training on communication with parents, strategies to increase or build on school programs that support attendance and strategies to support participation in school life.

Training on parent communication is particularly relevant to this study. Using the AFA program, teachers were trained to have three targeted conversations with parents during the school year. The conversations lasted for approximately 40 - 60 minutes, contracts
were created that outlined the purposes of the conversations and educators followed a model for communication. This model included exploring the parents’ perspectives through listening, paraphrasing and understanding, then focusing on priorities, next creating a plan with desired outcomes, and finally reviewing, clarifying and arranging for further communication.

The results indicate that students in the AFA groups experienced increases in positive relationships and reductions in bullying and problem behaviors. Students in the control group experienced increases in problem behaviors and decreases in positive relationships. “AFA was clearly successful in promoting positive relationships and preventing/establishing bullying and behavior problems when compared to usual practice” (Humphrey et al., 2013, p. 1222). The authors stated that improving outcomes for students with disabilities requires comprehensive approaches that are inclusive of parents.

Listening has also been found to be an important component of communication practices linked to effective family-school partnerships. McNaughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, and Schreiner (2007) followed a pretest-posttest control group design for their study. They conducted a pretest with teacher candidates, then taught the strategy of listening, asking questions, focusing on the issue, and finding a first step (LAFF), and gave opportunities for students to practice their strategies. Participants included 10 undergraduate teacher candidates. Five participants were in the control group and five received the intervention. Thirty parents provided feedback on the validity of the active listening strategies. The parents included 15 men and 15 women. Three identified
as African American, five as Asian American, four as Native American, two as Hispanic and 16 identified as White.

Prior to the intervention, participants were involved in role-plays. The participants played the part of the teacher and held conversations with graduate students acting in the role of parent. Scenarios were provided to the participants. The interactions were videotaped. Two-weeks after training, all participants again participated in role-plays that were videotaped.

Participants' videos were scored using a 5-point scale, one scale for each active listening strategy. Researchers also gathered perspectives from parents who watched the videotaped role-play. Parents were asked to identify in which tape the teacher did a better job of communicating and describe what the teacher did differently in the tape that he or she preferred.

Results showed candidates who received the intervention reported feeling more confident in their communication skills. Of specific interest in this study are the perspectives of the parents. All of the parents involved in the study, despite culture or linguistic difference, selected the post intervention videos as being better examples of strong communication. Parents preferred that the teachers were taking notes, discussing next steps, and appearing attentive and concerned with what the parent was saying. This study demonstrates that active listening can be taught to individuals. It is also important to note that active listening creates a positive environment and parents see this skill as an important part of effective communication.
Both collaboration and communication are essential elements of effective family-school partnerships for parents of students with disabilities. Further, these qualities are crucial to crafting appropriate IEPs.

Effective School-Family Partnerships and the Development of IEPs

The IEP meeting is a cornerstone of creating effective school-family partnerships with families of identified students. Successful IEP meetings represent collaborative efforts between school personnel and families, characterized by effective communication (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010). Special education teachers report collaboration in IEP meetings as being beneficial to the student (Williams-Diehm, Brandes, Chestnut & Haring, 2014). Collaboration requires that all participants are listened to and included in the decision-making process. Other elements that create opportunities for successful IEP meetings include arrangement of seating that does not separate school personnel from parents, conducting meetings during mutually agreed upon times, not having pre-written IEP goals, and sharing information with parents ahead of time (Valle, 2011). True collaborative partnerships “include dispositions and actions such as mutual regard, joint decision-making, and joint action” (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007, p. 308). While several studies have worked to define effective school-family partnerships, Dunst and Dempsey (2007) argued there is "little agreement about the number and characteristics of indicators of parent-professional partnerships" (p. 309).

Fish (2008) identified several indicators that contribute to parents having favorable IEP experiences. This study included 51 parents located in one southwestern state. Information was gathered using 32 Likert scale questions and two open-ended
questions in a survey related to parents’ perceptions of IEP meetings. Analysis was broken down into six sections: (a) demographic information, (b) IEP meeting experience, (c) knowledge of IEP process and special education law, (d) relations with educators, (e) IEP outcomes, and (f) recommended areas for improvement. Findings revealed that 47% of parents agreed and 16% of parents strongly agreed that their overall experiences with the IEP process were positive and 72% of parents either agreed or strongly agreed that educators created welcoming environments during IEP meetings. Parents attributed their positive experiences to educators who treated them as partners and listened to their input. “Having an equal voice regarding their child’s education enhances parents’ abilities to influence outcomes positively toward their child’s process of obtaining quality services and building positive relationships with educators” (Fish, 2008, p. 13). Although a majority of parents viewed their IEP experiences as positive, parents offered suggestions for improvements, such as increased participation and more parent education on special education law. Other ideas for improvement included educators being more honest and not determining IEP goals prior to the meeting.

Martin, Marshall and Sale (2004) conducted a study in 2004 to determine the participant perceptions of IEP meetings based on the roles of the individuals involved in the meetings. They also examined whether participants' perceptions changed when different team members or the student attended the IEP meeting. They focused on IEP meetings of older students that included discussions of transition services.

The results of the study indicated that special education teachers did most of the talking and reported helping to make decisions more frequently than other participants.
Administrators also identified themselves as helping to make decisions. General education teachers reported the least amount of help in making decisions. Examining changes that occurred when the student was present allowed researchers to determine that when students attended IEP meetings, parents, general educators and related services personnel felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. Parents also indicated that they had a greater understanding of what was being said and what they needed to do next. General educators also reported that they felt better about the meetings when the student attended.

Martin, et al. (2004) found that when general education teachers attended meetings, it led to five positive outcomes. These included participants talking more at the meetings, increased discussion of student strengths and needs, participants feeling more empowered to make decisions, participants having increased knowledge of what to do next and participants feeling better about the meetings.

Although general education teachers rated themselves low in talking and helping make decisions, the perceptions of other individuals at the IEP meetings indicated there was a significant benefit to their participation in IEP meetings. This study highlights the benefits of having students and general education teachers attend IEP meetings. It also emphasizes the importance of having parents with increased understanding of what is being discussed at meetings, parents and service providers being more comfortable saying what they are thinking and participants feeling better about IEP meetings. This can lead to more collaborative efforts and help to avoid contentious relationships between parents and school personnel.
Garriot, Wandry and Snyder (2000) conducted a study to determine parents’ perceived involvement in IEP meetings and their level of satisfaction with these meetings. The four questions included:

1. I attend my child’s IEP conference. (Why do you or do you not attend?)
2. My spouse/partner attends my child’s IEP conference. (Why?)
3. I feel that I am treated as an equal, respected member of the IEP team. (Why do you feel this way?)
4. I feel that I have been allowed to have ample, direct input in the formation of IEP goals and objectives for my child. (In your most recent IEP experience, how was this input solicited?) (p. 40).

The survey was distributed across one state using pre-service teachers to recruit participants from their home communities. Participants were selected based on two criteria: (a) the participant had to be the parent of a child with a disability, and (b) the child had to be currently receiving special education services or have exited the school system within the last five years. The study included 82 participants with children or young adults ranging in age from 3 - 31.

The results from the study indicate school-family partnerships are complex relationships. Of the participants in this study, 89% always attend IEP meetings. The reason that parents reported attending fell into three categories: (a) to provide input, (b) to fulfill their responsibilities as a parent, and (c) to be their child’s advocate. Findings revealed 45% of the participants felt that they were treated as an equal member of the IEP team. The reasons parents gave for these feelings included the perceptions that they were
listened to, they were invited and encouraged to participate and educators asked for their opinions. These participants shared very positive comments regarding the process and the educators they work with. One parent commented, “I am contacted prior to the IEP as to my input on his goals and objectives. I am allowed to discuss my opinions and feel they listen to me” (Garriot et al., 2000, p. 42). Those who did not perceive they were treated fairly experienced meetings in which their input was not respected or valued. They commented that goals were often decided prior to the meeting, and they felt overwhelmed during the meetings due to the number of school personnel that were involved.

Further, 46% of participants felt that they had sufficient input in framing IEP goals. Participants' comments included encouragement from educators to participate, asking for parental input, and being provided a draft of the IEP plan prior to the conference. Most participants perceived that they were usually included, yet others reported frustration with the idea that goals were set before the IEP meeting and that their input was not utilized to create meaningful IEP goals.

This study demonstrates that a high percentage of parents, 89%, regularly attend IEP meetings. This provides an excellent opportunity for collaboration. These meetings can be positive experiences if parents are invited to participate and their input is included in developing goals. Listening to parents proved to be a key element in creating collaborative partnerships for IEP meetings. When parent participation is limited even some of the time, the parent will take a more adversarial view of school personnel, which could negatively impact collaboration.
Effective school-family partnerships are essential to the development of appropriate IEPs for students with disabilities. Successful IEP meetings involve collaborative efforts and effective communication. Parents report positive IEP experiences when they are treated as equal partners in IEP development and when their input was valued. Positive perceptions of IEP meetings were also linked to equal opportunity for input across parent, teacher, administrators, and studied participants.

The value of effective school-family partnerships and parental participation in IEP development has been a cornerstone of the laws governing the rights of students with disabilities and their families. The structure of IDEA and its legal requirements provide schools and families some basis for common expectations.

Legal Requirements for School-family Partnerships for Students with Disabilities

History and Purpose of IDEA

On the heels of the civil rights movement, the education of children with special needs received greater consideration than it had in the past. In 1975 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), Public Law (PL) 94-142 was passed. This act included the rights of least restrictive environment and free appropriate public education (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012; Osgood, 2005). Prior to this act, “U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities, and many states had laws excluding certain students” (Aron & Loprest, 2012, p. 100). EAHCA was a result of efforts from disability rights groups and parents of children with disabilities (Fish, 2008; Itkonen, 2007). Parents and disability rights groups filed lawsuits in several states and lobbied congress to ensure
that federal legislation would guarantee the right of free appropriate public education to all children.

After EAHCA was implemented, the Supreme Court was asked to weigh in on several cases to resolve conflicts between parents and schools. One landmark case was Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley, 458 U.S. 176. The ruling in this case made clear that schools were only responsible for providing a "basic floor of opportunity"; schools were not required to maximize a student's potential (Mead & Paige, 2008). The Rowley case also established that parents should be included in developing a child's special education according to the guidelines outlined in EAHCA.

The reauthorization of the EAHCA and its transformation to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, P.L.101-476) in 1990 shifted the emphasis from access to education to improving educational outcomes for student with disabilities (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012). The amendment in 1997 (IDEA 1997, P.L. 105-17) required students with disabilities to participate in statewide testing and required the use of performance indicators to assess their educational progress, as well as the increased rights of parents discussed earlier.

In 2004 IDEA was reauthorized again with increased emphasis on student progress. The name was changed with the addition of the word improvement, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), further emphasizing the importance of improved educational outcomes for all students (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012). IDEIA calls for increased qualifications for teachers and further accountability for
student learning. The 2004 reauthorization also increased the emphasis of using peer-reviewed teaching practices for special education services (Conroy et al., 2010).

From the enactment of the EACHA through IDEA 2004, several provisions of each law reveal the importance of parental participation and parental rights. These provisions include the right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE), the development of an individualized education plan (IEP), behavioral supports, procedural safeguards, and dispute resolution options.

**FAPE**

The law requires that students with disabilities be provided a free, appropriate education. Yet the specific components of FAPE are often debated. The Supreme Court has stepped in to provide some clarity around defining appropriate education. In Rowley (1982) the Supreme Court ruled, "IDEA does not require any particular substantive standard to measure whether the education provided by school officials is appropriate" (Daniel, 2000, p. 14). The plan must provide some benefit so that the child has the potential to pass and move from grade to grade. The Court clarified that lower courts need to establish two criteria when reviewing cases: "1) Has the school district complied with the Act's procedural safeguards; and 2) Is the IEP 'reasonably calculated' to enable the student to receive educational benefits" (Daniel, 2000, p. 15).

The IDEA and the Court has established that FAPE includes specially designed instruction (SDI), related services, and supplementary aids and services (SAS). These three components combine to ensure an appropriate education.
Specially Designed Instruction

SDI confirms that schools are required to adapt to meet the educational needs of eligible students [20 U.S.C. §1401(29)]. Schools must meet the unique needs of the child and ensure he or she has access to the general curriculum. Focusing on the two standards outlined by the Supreme Court, following procedural safe guards and ensuring some educational benefit, gives schools the power to determine methodologies used to educate the child. Lower courts have interpreted this to include decisions on appropriate placement and educational methods. If parents argue for their preferred methods, the courts will make determinations on what is educationally appropriate for the individual child, not what is preferred by the parents. In Shaffer v. Weast (2005) it was determined that the burden of proof to determine if an IEP was inadequate was on the parents. The Supreme Court ruled that the school was in the best position to make educational decisions. The Federal Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit has ruled that the school does not have to consider methodologies proposed by the parents as long as a FAPE is provided. "Rowley explicitly confers methodological decisions to the district's discretion" (Daniel, 2000, p. 25).

There have been cases where students needed specialized instruction and the courts have decided in favor of the parents arguing that the IEP the school provided was not adequate to ensure access to an appropriate education. Hearing officers stated schools must listen to a parent's suggestions to ensure that decisions are not made prior to IEP meetings. Schools are responsible for creating plans specific to the child and not use a one-size-fits-all model. In Duarte vs. Unified School District, Alhambra City Elementary
School District the Court outlined three factors that needed to be considered: "1) Is the plan designed to meet (the student's) unique needs?; 2) Does the placement conform to (the student's) IEP?; and 3) Is the placement designed to provide educational benefit to (the student)?" (Daniel, 2000, p. 20). School districts should not be using the same curriculum with every child; they must consider the needs of the individual child.

Related Services

A critical component that is written into IEPs are related services. Related services include transportation, support services such as speech language pathology, physical and occupational therapy, audiology services, interpreting services, psychological services, recreation, and medical services required to assist a child to benefit from their education. The 1997 IDEA amendment included language around related services to enable students with disabilities to be educated with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible.

In Irving Independent School District vs. Tatro (1984) the Court ruling helped to define related services and strengthened the ability of parents to advocate for their child. This ruling created a two-part test to determine if a service fell under "related service" under IDEA. The service must be considered necessary for the child to benefit, or if it is excluded under the definition of a "medical service." The Court took the stance that if the service did not require a doctor, it was a related service for which the schools were responsible. This ruling also reinforced that parents had the right to seek judicial relief regarding special education and related services.
This related service decision was reaffirmed in Cedar Rapids Community School District v. Garrett F. (1999). The school district claimed that providing a one-on-one nurse for a student was too much of a financial burden. The Court ruled cost is not considered if a "related service" is needed to achieve FAPE and it did not fall under "medical services" as a doctor was not required. This ruling gives parents the ability to advocate for their children who have extensive medical and support needs (Mead & Paige, 2008).

Supplementary Aids and Services (SAS)

Students who qualify for special education services must be evaluated for supplementary aids and services. Supplementary aids and services include aids, services, assistive technology and other supports. These supports can be provided in regular education classes, education-related settings, and in extracurricular and nonacademic settings. The intent is to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children as much as possible. The law 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(IV) requires that IEP teams create a document that outlines program modifications and supports required for the child to advance in his or her individual goals and participate in the general education curriculum. These include modifications and supports for extracurricular participation and nonacademic activities.

The IEP must clearly document information regarding the supplementary aids and services that will be provided for the child. Etscheidt and Bartlett (1999) argued that four dimensions must be explored when determining what related services are needed. These dimensions include: (1) physical space, (2) instructional planning, delivery and
assessment, (3) a social dimension that includes needed behavior supports and finally (4) a collaborative dimension pertaining to teacher associates and cooperation of the teachers.

A defining case related to supplemental aids and services was Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education (1989). In this case the Fifth Circuit outlined that the preference was for a child to be in the regular education classroom and steps must be made to accommodate the child. The Eleventh Circuit in Greer v. Rome City School District ruled IEP teams must give full consideration of all supplemental aids and services necessary to support the child in a regular education placement (Etscheidt & Bartlett, 1999).

The Minnesota Supreme Court ruled in Independent School District No. 12 vs. Minnesota Department of Education that extracurricular and nonacademic activities may be included on an IEP. However, it is up to the IEP team to determine which activities should be included on the IEP. The IEP team must work together to determine which activities are appropriate for the child and what accommodations are needed to support the activity (Meyer, 2011). “Accommodations for extracurricular activities can currently be provided only if the accommodations are listed in IEPs” (Meyer, 2011, p. 664).

A FAPE must be provided to all students with disabilities. The related and supplementary services determined to be necessary for FAPE are included in the IEP. The IEP is the legal document necessary to ensure a child is provided with an appropriate education.
IEPs

IDEA is very clear that parent participation is an expectation of educating children with identified disabilities. One key component of ensuring parent participation is the IEP meeting. School districts are required by law to create and utilize IEPs for qualifying students (Salleh, 2014).

IEPs are created at a meeting by the IEP team. “The IEP meeting provides the ideal opportunity to facilitate quality collaboration between educators and parents” (Fish, 2009, p. 150). IDEA requires schools create an IEP with the cooperation of parents as equal IEP team members (Clark, 2013). Parent involvement is critical as he or she is likely to be the only member of the IEP team that remains constant throughout a child’s education (McCoy, 2000). Fish (2008) described, “The IEP functions as the blueprint for services to be provided for students” (p. 8). The IEP must include the child’s present level of performance, goals, accommodations, modifications, the environment the child will be educated in, and related services (Wakelin, 2008).

The 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations of IDEA included specific language identifying who must be at an IEP meeting. According to IDEA 20 U.S.C. § 300.321, the IEP must include a parent, one regular education teacher, one special education teacher, a representative of the public agency that can ensure SDI is provided for the child and has knowledge of the general education curriculum and availability of resources, an individual who can interpret evaluations and the child when appropriate. Parents are specifically listed first, highlighting their expected participation in educational decision-making.
Other new IEP provisions included measurable goals, the requirement that progress toward goals be shared with parents, the requirement that parents be given a copy of the IEP and that students with disabilities are included in statewide assessments. "According to the Act, the IEP is to be developed by persons familiar with the child, especially school officials and parents" (Daniel, 2000, p. 10).

The most recent reauthorization of IDEA was in 2004. IEPs were changed in a few ways. Short term objectives were no longer needed unless the child is not participating on statewide assessments and language allowing a team member to be excused from an IEP meeting was included if the parent agreed to that excusal. Finally, the reauthorization allowed an IEP to be amended without a team meeting if the parent and the public agency agree to not call an IEP team meeting, and if the team is informed of the changes.

As stated earlier, IEPs must include considerations for related services, supplementary aids, goals and accommodations the student needs. Another important aspect of the IEP meeting is to discuss behavior supports.

Positive Behavior Support

Providing positive behavioral supports is a critical element of ensuring a student receives FAPE. IDEA 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(3)(B)(i) states that schools must consider the use of positive behavior supports for students whose behavior interferes with their learning or the learning of other students. Behavior supports have evolved from the early use of EAHCA through the current reauthorization. Students cannot be removed from their educational setting while their misbehavior is reviewed, unless both the parents and
the school agree to a change of placement. Mead and Paige (2008) described the case of Honing v. Doe (1988). In this case the Court ruled that the “stay put” provision made it clear that a school district could not remove a special education student without significant parental input. However, the school has some power to remove students from the current educational setting. The Court stated removals of less than ten days did not constitute a change in placement and could be enacted without parental consent.

The 1997 IDEA reauthorization contained language that acknowledged cumulative suspensions could be considered a change of placement and created a process for determining if the behavior was a manifestation of the disability. The language put the burden of proof on the school for determining if the behavior was not a manifestation of a disability.

If the behavior is determined to be a manifestation of the child's disability, the IEP team must conduct a functional behavior assessment. Once that is complete, the IEP team needs to begin a behavioral intervention plan if one had not been previously developed according to 20 U.S.C. §1415(k)(1)(F).

New language around discipline practices for students with disabilities was added in the 2004 reauthorization. The new requirement asks that the IEP team examine all relevant information to determine if the behavior was a manifestation of the disability or if the behavior resulted due to lack of implementation of the IEP. If the behavior is a manifestation of the disability, a student cannot be removed from their educational placement. Dickinson and Miller (2006) posited that determining if the behavior is a manifestation of the disability is still a gray area that needs clarification.
Along with those changes, schools now have the authority to remove a child for 45 school days for weapons, drugs or "serious bodily injury" (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004). Schools can also use an expedited hearing process to remove a child for 45 calendar days if there is evidence a child is a danger to themselves or others.

Behavior supports work to protect the rights of students with disabilities. Procedural safeguards were put in place to protect the rights of parents as well.

**Procedural Safeguards**

IDEA has clearly indicated that parents have the right to participate in the decision-making process regarding their child's education (Daniel, 2000). Procedural safeguards were put in place to ensure parent participation. "IDEA safeguards ensure that the presence of parents or guardians in the IEP is not simply a formality. Parents or guardians are seen as equal partners; the requirement is that their voice is heard, not merely encouraged" (Daniel, 2000, p. 11).

Procedural safeguards outlined in IDEA include: the right to participate in all meetings, the right to review all educational records, the right to obtain an independent evaluation, the right to written notice when an educational agency proposes or refuses a change in a disabled child's identification, educational placement, or purposes an evaluation of the child. The educational agency is also required to inform parents of these rights.

The Supreme Court upheld the importance of procedural safeguards in School Committee, Town of Burlington v. Department of Education, 1992. In this case the Court
ruled that the failure of the school district to follow procedural requirements could inhibit the participation of parents, therefore denying the child FAPE.

In Hall vs. Vance County Board of Education, the Federal Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, 1985, the Court found that in the school district's failure to inform parents of their procedural rights, the district failed to provide the child with FAPE. Schools are required to inform parents of their procedural rights and ensure that procedural safeguards are provided.

Procedural safeguards work to ensure that parents have a voice in their child's education. Despite these safeguards, disagreements between schools and families still occur. These disagreements can lead to the need for dispute resolutions.

**Dispute Resolution**

From the beginning with EAHCA, parents have had an avenue to advocate for their child when they feel the school is not providing FAPE. The 1997 reauthorization included a voluntary mediation process. “Mediation is designed to be less adversarial and less costly to both parties” (Mead & Paige, 2008, p. 138). A parent can request mediation to resolve areas of conflict, and the school has thirty days to resolve areas of conflict through mediation; otherwise a due process hearing will occur (Clark, 2013). Entering into mediation is voluntary for the Local Education Agency (LEA) and the parents, either can choose to go straight to due process (Zirkel & McGuire, 2010). Mediators are required to be impartial and mediation typically does not involve lawyers.

Due process occurs when parents or LE’s file an official complaint. The majority of complaints are filed by parents, but on occasion LEAs file complaints if a parent
changes a child's placement or requests payment for an independent evaluation. Once a
complaint has been filed, the LEA must hold a resolution meeting within 15 days. Then
the LEA has 30 days from the meeting to resolve the complaint through mediation or the
resolution process. The use of lawyers during this process is discouraged; however, if
parents bring a lawyer, the LEA is allowed to have one present. According to CFR §
300.510(a)(ii), if the parents choose to not bring a lawyer, the LEA may not have a
lawyer present.

If the parents and the LEA reach an agreement during resolution meetings, that
agreement must be put in writing and it becomes legally binding. If an agreement is not
met within 30 days, a due process hearing is held. A due process hearing occurs and is
presided over by an Impartial Hearing Officer (IHO). "IHO's have broad-based
jurisdiction with regards to identification, evaluation, placement and FAPE of children
with disabilities" (Zirkel & McGuire, 2010, p. 103). The IHO must issue a decision
within 45 days. From this point parents can still choose to pursue a complaint through the
state or federal court; however, they must have exhausted the process available through
the IHO. In some states parents and LEAs may appeal the decision of the hearing office
directly to state or federal court. In other states the decision is appealed to a second
hearing officer prior to the state or federal level (Zikel & Skidmore, 2014).

If parents choose to challenge an IEP decision, it can be a costly endeavor.
Originally the Court ruled in Smith vs. Robinson (1984) that parents could not shift
attorney fees to the school district if they were successful in their court case against the
district. This placed a significant financial burden on parents bringing a suit against
districts. In 1985 Congress revised EAHCA to allow parents to recover attorney fees (Mead & Paige, 2008). However, the cost of expert witness testimony is not transferable. In Arlington Central School District Board of Education vs. Murphy, the Supreme Court ruled that parents could not recover the cost of expert witness even when they prevailed in the ruling (Meyer, 2011).

In 2005 the Supreme Court case of Shaffer vs. Weast, it was determined that the burden of proof to determine if an IEP was inadequate was on the parents. The Court ruled that the school was in the best position to make educational decisions (Meyer, 2011). Therefore, parents are responsible for proving the school district did not provide their child with FAPE; but unless they hire experts, it is their word against the school district who is viewed as better equipped to make educational decisions. Winkelman vs. Parma (2007) did grant parents the right to represent themselves if they were unable to hire an attorney. While helpful in some instances, this would pair parents without knowledgeable legal representation against experienced and well-funded school districts.

In regards to how complaints against school districts are handled, the 2004 reauthorization requires parties to attend resolution meetings. The Act also recognized any settlement entered into during mediation is enforceable by law and must be written down (Kotler, 2014). If parents choose to have legal representation at the mediation, those fees are not recoverable.

Other language clarified that parents were bound to a statute of limitations of two years on complaints, parents must participate in a resolution session prior to a hearing, and parents cannot prevail in hearings based on procedural errors. Parents can only
prevail if their child is denied FAPE or if the process errors produced significant barriers to parental participation (Mead & Paige, 2008).

The value of effective school-family relationships and parental participation in IEP development has been a cornerstone of the laws governing the rights of students with disabilities and their families. Students with disabilities must be afforded a FAPE that includes SDI, related services, and SAS. Those services are crafted into an IEP, which is developed with parent and student participation. To ensure these services are provided, parents are entitled to procedural safeguards and the right to dispute school-proposed plans. Yet despite these rights and protections, many authors argue that these provisions are insufficient.

Limitations of IDEA

Although the intent of IDEA is to ensure all students have access to an education, few criteria exist for determining what is included in a free appropriate public education (Conroy et al., 2010; Daniel, 2000). This gray area causes challenges for parents and schools as they work together to meet the needs of students. According to Johnson and Duffet (2002), one in six parents of children that receive special education services have considered a lawsuit. Reasons for this dissatisfaction include a minimalistic standard, lack of enforcement of the law, and failure of schools to fully disclose information.

A Minimalistic Standard

In the Supreme Court ruling of the Rowley (1982) case, the decision added to the distrust that parents have for schools. By ruling that schools were only responsible for providing a “basic floor of opportunity” parents are fearful that schools are not working
to ensure their child has the best opportunity for learning (Kotler, 2014). “Lack of trust is a major factor impeding the realization of the collaborative model envisioned when the Act was first introduced” (Kotler, 2014, p. 498). The Supreme Court ruled, "IDEA does not require any particular substantive standard to measure whether the education provided by school officials is appropriate" Daniel, 2000, p. 14).

Schools have the authority to determine methodologies used to educate the child providing the FAPE standard is satisfied. "Disagreements regarding the concept of appropriateness have been an ongoing source of conflict between parents and educators" (Kotler, 2014, p. 490). In some cases where students have needed specialized instruction, the courts have decided in favor of the parents arguing the IEP the school provided was not adequate to ensure access to an appropriate education. Hearing officers stated schools must listen to a parent's suggestions to ensure that decisions are not made prior to IEP meetings. Schools are responsible for creating plans specific to the child and they should not use a one size fits all model. In Duarte vs. Unified School District Alhambra City Elementary School District the court outlined three factors that needed to be considered: "1) Is the plan designed to meet (the student's) unique needs?; 2) Does the placement conform to (the student's) IEP?; and 3) Is the placement designed to provide educational benefit to (the student)?" (Daniel, 2000, p. 20). School districts should not be using the same curriculum with every child; they must consider the specific needs of the child.

**Enforcement of IDEA**

Understanding who and how to challenge school districts regarding their implementation of IDEA is a daunting task for parents, yet parents are the ones
challenged with making sure IDEA is being followed. Wakelin (2008) argued the three main enforcement areas of IDEA are weak. First, federal enforcement is typically not utilized with regularity. Second, state reporting relies on self-monitoring at the local level and is often insufficient to ensure compliance with the law. Finally, parental challenge is limited since parents often do not know their rights under IDEA. Parents do not feel they are capable of being equal members of the IEP team, do not feel confident about making due-process claims, and do not have the financial means to get legal assistance. Parents are also in the position of attempting to find lawyers with knowledge of special education laws. The availability varies greatly from location to location (Zikel & Skidmore, 2014).

Although parental rights have been addressed in IDEA, parents have been given little input as to what they would include or change. Burke and Sandman (2015), conducted a study to understand parent perspectives on current legislation. The purpose of the study was to determine what changes parents would want in the next reauthorization of IDEA. The authors noted that in the previous reauthorization, parents only provided 3.2% of the 7,526 comments provided to the Office of Special Education Programs, OSEP. The study found three overarching themes across all families; a) specific supports b) greater specificity, and c) main or increase of certain stipulations. Parents wanted specific supports added to IDEA reauthorization. Nine of the parents interviewed said Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy should be specifically listed and five wanted specific regulation of student and teacher ratios included in the language of IDEA. Parents want greater specificity to existing provisions, 15 wanted to strengthen transition services by starting earlier and listing specific transition services in IDEA,
parents wanted to ensure that least restrictive environment (LRE) is available to every child and to have stronger language regarding LRE and inclusive settings. Three parents wanted more guidance on Response to Intervention (RTI). Parents wanted stronger language in how a learning disability is defined so that eligibility would be more consistent for learning disabilities. Parents felt that the ambiguity in the language led to different understandings and interpretations of the terms. The final finding was maintenance or increase of stipulations. Twelve parents wanted the next reauthorization to include full federal funding. One parent wanted paperwork provisions to continue so that parents of children with disabilities could communicate better with the school.

From 2008 to 2012 there has been a drop in the frequency of cases and IC rulings (Zirkel & Skidmore, 2014). This may be attributed to IDEA's latest reauthorization with includes the resolution process or the expanding of other dispute resolution methods. Zirkel and Skidmore (2014) stated that continued research and data needs to be collected on due process hearings. Data regarding frequency of due process hearings and their outcomes that could possibly reflect national trends is challenging to compile, as states do not have a uniform system for reporting disputes.

While the IDEA seeks to provide full parental participation in the IEP process, a minimalistic standard and failure to enforce the legal requirements limit the intended school parent collaboration. Additional barriers to establishing effective school-family partnerships include discrepant views of the child, disparate knowledge, uncertainty concerning service delivery, time and financial constraints, devaluation, power imbalances, lack of trust, and communication barriers.
Barriers to Parental Participation in IEP Meetings

Parents are intended to be equal partners in IEP decision-making. In reality, the participation level of parents will vary from school to school (Dabkowski, 2004).

Although the law brings parents and educational professionals together to determine children's educational services, it does not give them guidance on how they are to work together to determine the terms of an appropriate education. Therefore the quality and the substance of an IEP varies greatly depending on the willingness of the IEP team to work together to create an appropriate educational program. (Wakelin, 2008, p. 267)

Parents are often the recipients of information rather than full partners in the decision-making process (Burke & Sandman, 2015; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2006). Martin et al. (2006) found that family members spoke 15% of the time at IEP meetings while the special education teacher spoke 51% of the time. IDEA is clear that parents are to be treated as equal members of the IEP team; however, “parent and professional collaboration consistently falls short of the spirit of the law” (Valle, 2011, p. 186).

Several factors could potentially be described as barriers to parent participation in IEP meetings. Studies have found that parents and schools having conflicting knowledge of the child, differing views on special education services, and differing values between the schools and parents can create conflict and lead to frustrated IEP team members.

Lake and Billingsley (2000) conducted a study to analyze parent-school conflict in special education. Lake and Billingsley interviewed 22 parents, 16 school officials, a combination of principals and special education directors, and 6 mediators that had all participated in a special education appeals process at one point in their career or their child’s educational years. All of the parents who participated had rejected the educational
plan for their child and filed an appeal. The ages of the children ranged from four to 20 years.

Interviews were conducted using open-ended interview questions. The interviews lasted about 30 - 90 minutes with the interviewer asking clarifying questions as needed. 

The primary questions included:

1. What were the critical incidents that led to the request for mediation?
2. Are there things that you or the school could have done to decrease the conflict? 
3. Were there factors that contribute to the conflict other than the actual issues of disagreement?
4. Why do you think the conflict was not resolved at the school level?
5. Are there things you wish you had done differently at the first sign of conflict or in the midst of a parent-school conflict?
6. What other actions could be taken to help parents and schools resolve special education conflicts? (p. 242)

The authors identified eight factors that escalate or deescalate conflict in special education: discrepant views of a child or a child’s needs, knowledge, service delivery, constraints, valuation, reciprocal power, trust, and communication. These factors will serve as a framework to examine the challenges that occur during IEP meetings.

**Discrepant Views of a Child**

Lake and Billingsley (2000) found that parents were frustrated as schools did not see their child as an individual with unique needs but rather as a deficit, “Parents reported that schools focused too often on a child’s weaknesses and did not seem to take into
account what the whole child was like” (p. 244). School personnel would often discuss in detail what their child could not do. Parents would have to argue that their child was capable and little recognition was given that children respond differently in different circumstances.

Stanley (2015) conducted a study to understand the advocacy efforts of African-American mothers of children with special needs. A variety of themes regarding the advocacy experiences of the African-American mothers were identified. One important theme that relates to this study was the barrier to participating in IEP meetings when parents felt that the school did not care for or value the child.

Meyer (2011) argued parents do not have the power to determine what activities should be included in the IEP based on their child's interests and wishes. It is up to the team to determine what is appropriate, and all team members may not take into account the wishes and interests of the child. "In reality, parents' role in the IEP team is not that of a team player, but merely a cheerleader" (Meyer, 2011, p. 659).

Parents and educators have unique interactions with the identified child across a variety of settings. Therefore, these members of the IEP team see the children in different roles and under different circumstances. The discrepant views of a child's behavior, abilities and needs can easily lead to conflict if IEP team members do not value the perspectives of all members. Along with diverse perspectives of a child's interests and capabilities, IEP team members have a varied level of understanding about special education and services available to children.
Disparate Knowledge

Parents have unique knowledge of their child (Dabkowski, 2004), but often do not have the same knowledge around special education and school-based interventions as educators. Parents have reported feeling excluded due to the use of jargon and educators devaluing their perspective (Valle, 2011). Wakelin (2008) also recognized knowledge as an important component of participating in IEP meetings. She stated parents lack the educational knowledge to successfully challenge IEP decisions, "Although parents are equal team members under the IEP model, the balance of power in this relationship is significantly tipped towards the parties with knowledge" (p. 279).

Educators are often viewed by parents, and themselves, as the professionals who have the knowledge to make the best educational decisions for the child (Mueller et al., 2008; Salah, 2014). Kalyanpur, Harry and Skritec (2000) argued "the greater weight given to professional expertise in the hierarchy of knowledge skews the balance of power away from parents” (p. 129). Asking a parent to participate equitably in this environment is a challenge. The expectation that parents will contradict or question an educator’s professional knowledge could be seen as impractical. Parents can feel uncomfortable when expressing their views to professionals.

Stanley (2015) found that the mothers she interviewed perceived the educators as the professionals and did not feel it was their place to question them. Two mothers told stories of wanting to try inclusion for their children, but did not question the educational decisions made by the school professionals. The mothers felt they should trust the teachers to make appropriate decisions for their child.
Parents are at a distinct disadvantage during the process of drafting the IEP (Saleh, 2014). The lack of knowledge of parents around special education services has created a power imbalance as “the more experienced party takes the lead in drafting the instrument” (p. 381). Advocating for services for a child is also complicated by the fact that some terms and services are not clearly defined in IDEA. As stated in the Burke and Sandman (2015) study above, parents want more clarity around terms such as “least restrictive environment” and a clear definition of what is meant by transition services. Having unclear language and terms leads to different interpretations and conflict.

In a 2002 telephone survey of 510 parents from a random national sample, Johnson and Duffet (2002) found that 70% of parents of special education students feel that they were unaware of what services their child might be entitled to, and 55% of parents surveyed felt that schools did not volunteer that information. In the Mueller, et al. (2008) study described above, the researchers found that parents were not informed about services that might support their child and had to do their own research. “Parents described the previous district climate as one where they did not feel they were honored as educational partners. These parents talked about having to gather information on their own” (p. 214).

Disparate knowledge also occurs around terms and ideas in IDEA. The terms free appropriate public education and least restrictive environment have different meanings to different people. Kotler (2014) declared, “the concept of appropriateness has been an ongoing source of conflict between parents and educators” (p. 487).
Fish (2009) conducted a study to examine educator perceptions of IEP meetings. A non-random sampling of 274 public school educators using a Likert scale survey instrument and two open-ended questions was conducted. The participants included 96 general education teachers, 57 special education teachers, 42 administrators, 32 diagnosticians, and 47 others. Sixteen served early childhood programs, 131 worked in elementary buildings, 63 in middle school buildings and 64 in high school buildings. The results indicated that overall, educators had positive experiences with IEP meetings. They believe time was used wisely and parents were treated as equals. However, an area of concern arose that is of significant importance to this study. In the open-ended questions educators felt parental lack of knowledge pertaining to special education law made parents fearful of participating.

Applequist (2009) used semi-structured interviews to examine the experiences parents of students with disabilities have under IDEA. The researcher asked parents to describe their experiences to future special educators. Common themes were identified across urban and rural settings. These themes included feelings of isolation and incompetence, limited awareness of IDEA services, need for complete and unbiased information, questions concerning the continuum of educational services available to their child, uncertainty around transitions, and concerns about safety.

Disparate knowledge around IDEA, special education services and special education law leads to parents feeling ill prepared to actively participate in IEP meetings. Parents want the best education for their children, yet aren't sure how to advocate for
those services. This lack of knowledge of what is available is directly related to the idea of service delivery within special education.

**Uncertainty Concerning Service Delivery**

Often parents are unclear about information regarding what services are available and the different options for their children. In the Fish (2009) study described above, educators felt that parents needed to be better educated about possible services that could be provided. One mediator felt that parents should be involved in the design of the program their child needed to feel more involved and supportive of the plan (Mueller et al., 2008). Parents felt programs were often predesigned and not based on the individual needs of the child.

Stanley (2015) found the mothers perceived being in a rural location as a barrier. They felt the rural areas lacked the services their child needed. Mothers also felt being in a small community would cause a problem for their child if they were a vocal advocate. They worried that if they raised concerns it would get back to the child’s teacher, and their child would not receive fair treatment in the current placement and in the future as they continued to work with the same school district personnel.

Murzyn and Huges (2015) conducted a multiple case study to describe the experience of case managers making mathematics placement decisions for high school students with high incidence disabilities. The researchers found that the process of placement decisions were based on a team decision; however, participation in the meeting varied by participant. Parents participated to a degree, but their participation was limited. “Although parents wanted to be more active in their child’s education and
planning, they reported that they did not know how to best participate or what questions
to ask at meetings” (p. 49). Parents expressed concern of their lack of knowledge of the
process. The urban parent felt that the placement was predetermined and the meeting was
just a formality, and the rural parent felt unaware of what options were available to their
child for mathematics instruction. Several parents commented that they would like
information ahead of the scheduled meeting to process the information. “Information
gathered from this study indicated that not all IEP team members are equally active
within the placement process” (p. 53).

To fully participate in IEP meetings parents need information around the services
that are available to their children and how those services can be used. This lack of
information impedes their participation in IEP meetings. Constraints of time and money
may impede the willingness of school districts to share this information with parents.

**Time and Financial Constraints**

In the Lake and Billingsley (2000) study, all groups of individuals referred to
limitations of time, money, personnel and materials as being a source of conflict. School
administrators are often put in a tough position of managing inadequate budgets. Lack of
funds is not a sufficient reason for denying services, but parents in this study often felt
that was the hidden reason their child was denied services they viewed as important.
Meyer (2011) warns that school districts may make decisions based on extracurricular
activities not based on student needs, but based on financial resources involved in
providing the service.
In the Stanley (2015) study described earlier, constraints on time were found to be a common barrier to parental participation. The mothers often worked multiple jobs and had long hours making it difficult to attend IEP meetings. Several participants indicated that professionals were not accessible to them due to their varying work schedule. This created a serious barrier to their participation and advocacy in their child’s education.

Clark (2013) found that many parents lacked the economic, social or cultural capital to advocate for their child. “Deep knowledge of the special education process and parental rights are crucial in protecting children from inappropriate placements. Only the most knowledgeable parents will be able to act on an equal footing with school officials” (p. 31). Cultural capital allows parents to connect with other parents to understand existing options for their child; parents who lack these connections will not be able to advocate for their child as effectively. This lack of cultural capitol disproportionately impacts poor and minority families.

Resources in schools are often limited. The constraints of time and money put schools and parents at odds. Schools feel the pull to protect scarce resources while families feel that schools are withholding resources and are frustrated as they lack the skills to adequately advocate for their child. These areas of conflict could lead to parents feeling their ideas, and the needs of their child, are not valued by school personnel.

**Devaluation**

Another important finding from the Lake and Billingsley (2000) study was the importance that individuals put on feeling valued. Parents and school administrators both felt it was important to be valued as a partner in the relationship. Both felt devalued if
important information was not shared with them. Parents also noted that it was important for the school to value their child. Parents wanted the schools to provide hope about their child’s future and see their child’s strengths.

Mueller and Buckley (2014) also highlighted the importance of feeling valued to support effective collaboration. They conducted a qualitative study to examine the experiences of fathers within the special education system. They used open-ended phone interviews ranging from 19 - 70 minutes with 20 fathers that had at least one child with a disability. The ages of the children ranged from 1 - 24 years of age. Fathers were selected based on the criteria of: a) having at least one child with an IEP, and b) having attended most or all of the IEP meetings of their child to date. The researchers found seven themes including: “(a) IEP, overwhelming; (b) IEP, insufficient process; (c) collaboration with educators, building relationships; (d) collaboration with educators, establishing communication; (e) collaboration with educators, hearing the parent voice; (f) conflict, fighting the battle; and (g) conflict, coming together for a resolution” (p. 124).

The fathers all recognized that the IEP meeting was identified as a critical component to support their child’s educational experience, but they were not happy with their IEP experiences. Despite the importance placed on the IEP meeting, the fathers felt the process was overwhelming and intimidating due to their lack of understanding of educational jargon and the procedures used to make decisions. They felt that IEP meetings moved too quickly for parents to fully process what was happening. Several fathers mentioned the need to educate themselves on special education law in order to prepare for meetings. During the meeting they felt testing data was thrown at them and
the amount of paperwork needing to be completed during the meeting took away from the benefits of any discussion that might have occurred.

Collaboration with educators was identified as an important element for the fathers involved in the study. Several commented on the importance of relationships and how these relationships changed depending on the individuals they were working with. The fathers felt that positive relationships with educators who listened to their ideas and valued their suggestions led to more productive IEP meetings, and differences of opinion were easier to discuss if a relationship had been established. Fathers identified establishing communication as a key to building relationships. They commented on the importance of open, honest communication and listening to parents. If positive relationships were not established, and the parent voice was not included in decision making, fathers commented their “level of involvement was more contentious than collaborative” (Mueller & Buckley, 2014, p. 126).

Conflict was mentioned as a common occurrence with school personnel. “The fathers described their experiences with conflict in two ways: fighting the battle and/or coming to a resolution” (Mueller & Buckley, 2014, p. 127). Fathers often felt torn as to how to respond during conflicts. They recognized there was knowledge the school had that they did not. They wondered if they should be aggressive and fight or passive and agree with the school. Not knowing which method would end in the best result for their child left them frustrated.

Mueller and Buckley (2014) found that fathers understand the need for collaboration and positive relationships with school personnel to have productive IEP
meetings. Fathers found meetings could be successful if the relationship with the school was seen as a true partnership, communication was open and honest and they felt their voice was valued and listened to. It is evident that effective communication significantly contributed to the fathers’ attitudes towards IEP meetings.

Parents have identified feeling valued as an important component of true collaborative school-partnerships. They are more likely to participate in IEP meetings if they feel they are listened too and their child is respected. Open and honest sharing of information contributes to members feeling valued and a common understanding of shared power during IEP meetings.

Power Imbalances

IEP meetings can be stressful for parents and school members. “The majority of conflict between parents and school officials takes place during IEP meetings” (Mueller et al., 2008, p. 194). Parents that advocate for their child are often seen as challenging or difficult. One administrator commented, “There were people that were in the system that were really anti-parent for lack of a better word. I mean they saw the parent as the enemy” (p. 206). Fish (2009) also found that educators wanted parents to come into IEP meetings with a positive attitude, and not make assumptions that the educators do not want to help the child. Parents who take demanding, dictatorial posture in IEP meetings risk damaging honest and open communication with IEP team members.

Contentious parties, who come to IEP meetings with specific demands, exhibit a posture inconsistent with the collaborative ideal of the IDEA. IDEA does not envision either party making unilateral decisions regarding what is appropriate for the student. Parents who come to IEP meetings with specific demands are generally seen as attempting to dictate methodology. (Daniel, 2000, p. 27)
Although parents are considered members of the IEP team, there is a power imbalance that exists between parents and education service providers (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Ware, 1994). “Despite good intentions and carefully considered procedures, strategies, and protocols developed to enhance parent-professional collaboration, collaborative interactions in public schools privilege the interpretation of the professional over that of the parent” (Ware, 1994, p. 339). Wakelin (2008) believed a parent’s ability to challenge an IEP is dependent on wealth, knowledge and education level.

Lake and Billingsley (2000) found that both parents and schools used power to try and resolve conflicts. One parent commented:

No matter how angry I got, the angrier they got back. The angrier I got, the worse the response was. I’m sure I was very annoying to them, . . . but they’re very good at wearing you down. And I was worn down a number of times. It was fighting, all the time. It was like pushing back the water. No matter where you pushed, you were met with resistance everywhere. (p. 247)

Both parents and school officials recognized that using power damaged the relationships and made everyone miserable. Some parents felt it was the only way their child received needed services because they pushed until the school backed down.

Power struggles between schools and parents can have lasting negative impacts on school-family partnerships. Schools do have considerably more power than parents. This strains the relationship as parents are often forced to be adversarial to enact change. Parents that feel powerless or have had to battle schools to receive appropriate services for their children potentially lose their trust in educators and find themselves expecting a fight.
Lack of Trust

Trust can be defined in two ways (Kotler, 2014). Parents want to trust individuals working with their children had the skills needed to help their child. They also want to trust an individual will act in a morally responsible way that puts concern for the child above their own interests. Both of these aspects of trust are critical in school-family partnerships.

Data from the Lake and Billingsley (2000) study found that when trust was intact, parents felt secure that school personnel were acting in the best interest of their child. When trust was broken, parents, “described having difficulty accepting suggestions from school personnel” (p. 248). Parents also reported expecting fewer positive outcomes and did not see the point in family-school partnerships.

Kotler (2014) described that the Supreme Court decision in the Rowley case damaged trust between schools and parents. Parents in this case wanted the school to maximize their child’s potential. The Court determined appropriate meant only “some educational benefit” was expected for the child.

The Court’s decision resulted not only in limiting the substantive educational goals of the Act, but also created a schism between parents of disabled children and the educational establishment. As any policy commentator seeking to identify the sources of parent-school conflict within the context of special education must ultimately acknowledge, lack of trust is a major factor impeding the realization of the collaborative model envisioned when the Act was first introduced. (p. 498)

Parents also worry that if they advocate for their child, they will not receive fair treatment from the school. Wakelin (2008) described two court cases where parents felt their child was victimized due to their advocacy efforts. In Mosley v. Board of Education of the City of Chicago (2006) the mother claimed after she started advocating for an improved
special education placement for her child, the child was targeted by the school and referred for suspension hearings. In another case an Arkansas parent claimed their child was being denied FAPE. The superintendent was quoted in the local paper as saying the parent was not wanted at the school and the parent was a "radical with a personal agenda" (p. 276). Wakelin cautions that parents are fearful of advocating for their child and there is merit in their fear, as school personnel may retaliate.

Dispute resolution is an area where trust is critical. Parents and school personnel want to work towards a solution knowing that each party is disclosing all relevant information. “The dispute resolution process, however, depends on each of the parties believing that the other is acting in good faith. That becomes impossible once there arises the perception that information is being withheld” (Kotler, 2014, p. 551).

Another common worry for parents related to trust identified in the Applequist (2009) study is the safety of children. Parents wanted not only physical safety, but emotional safety and support for their child as well. Parents worried about their children being teased about their differences.

Suspicion and lack of trust damages the ability of parents and schools to work cooperatively. Parents argued, to be empowered to help make decisions, they need to be fully informed. Parents felt schools did not share with them all of the information they had (Applequist, 2009).

Both educators and parents fear that the other party is withholding information. Parents also fear their actions may result in their child being retaliated against. Open
honest communication is one area that could work to support school-family partnerships if it is enacted with fidelity.

**Communication Barriers**

Several aspects of communication were noted as factors that could be problematic in the Lake and Billingsley (2000) study. They included “frequency of communication, lack of communication, lack of follow-up, misunderstood communications and timing of clarifying attempts” (p. 248). When conflict occurred, all individuals withdrew from communication efforts to avoid conflict.

Lake and Billingsley (2000) found the mediators interviewed felt that school personnel lacked knowledge of communication strategies. School personnel did not communicate to parents what services were available and how they might be helpful to that child. They found that parents felt the schools needed to do a better job of passing on their knowledge of services and supports for their children. Parents felt that too often they had to seek outside sources for information to figure out what services their child might benefit from.

A significant aspect of school-family communication which increased conflict, was withholding information or being deceitful. Parents felt uncomfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas due to the large number of individuals in the room. Parents viewed the number of school personnel that were brought in as intimidating.

The evidence from this study suggests that during IEP meetings, parents do not always feel their knowledge is valued; they do not feel comfortable communicating to a large group of school personnel and feel their child is not seen as an individual.
Communicating effectively around these ideas is a hurdle to successful school-family partnerships. "Although the law brings parents and educational professionals together to determine children's educational services, it does not give them guidance on how they are to work together to determine the terms of an appropriate education. Therefore, the quality and the substance of an IEP varies greatly depending on the willingness of the IEP team to work together to create an appropriate educational program" (Wakelin, 2008, p. 267).

Communication was also seen as an important contributing factor in another study that examined parental dissatisfaction with special education conducted by Mueller et al. (2008). This case study examined two school districts that were selected due to an initial high rate of due process hearing requests and then had a 50% decrease in hearing request rates. Participants were recommended that were “information rich” and had an above average understanding of the district's problems and their recent changes. Parents were selected who had experienced conflict, but had then absolved the district of any blame following the changes the district made. School personnel were selected based on their knowledge of the school system prior to and after the district changes or were purposefully hired to assist with the changes.

Three themes were identified around parent dissatisfaction: “They included: (a) lack of leadership, (b) not keeping up with the law, and (c) parents excluded” (p. 203). Parents commented that “trust was lost because they did not feel listened to or honored as educational partners” (p. 206). Changes that were identified as important included: “(a) new leadership, (b) not keeping up with the requirements of law, (c) creative use of
resources, (d) updated educational practices, (e) relationship building, (f) teacher and parent support, and (g) alternative dispute resolution” (Mueller et al., 2008, p. 204).

New district personnel met with the parents who had formed a support group due to their dissatisfaction. The new leadership felt it was important to listen to what the parents had to say. “The partnership ultimately began to ease the parents’ dissatisfaction and they said they began to 'trust the district more’” (Mueller et al., 2008, p. 209). New leadership also recognized the importance of partnering with parents. Communication was recounted as one of the essential indicators that contributed to relationship building. All of the participants talked about the importance of maintaining good communication skills. The communication sub-themes included: (a) listening, (b) understanding each other’s perspective, and (c) maintaining ongoing contact. Parents felt better after their involvement was promoted. School officials felt better when they were able to listen to the parent to gain insight into the child. “The study begins to support the notion of moving from reactive to proactive measures when dealing with conflict in the field of special education” (p. 224). Communication was a significant barrier to establishing productive partnerships with parents. Prior to the changes their views were discounted and the parents did not feel the schools were listening to their concerns.

The Applequist study described previously also noted the importance of communication as a contributing factor of the relationships between families and school personnel. Professionals who were perceived as dedicated and caring had positive relationships with families. Other professionals were seen as unskilled and focusing on the limitations of the children. Many parents expressed frustration at the lack of
communication from the professionals who worked with their child. These professionals who did not communicate well were not viewed as effective partners by the families. Several parents noted the importance of ongoing communication in order to have a better understanding of how their children were doing.

Parents also described the need for communication during times of transition. Transitions for students between schools or between teachers caused parents stress and anxiety. Parents feared how their child would react and how individuals would treat their children in their new settings. Parents noted that communication and prior planning helped to make transitions successful.

Zablotsky, et al. (2012) conducted a study to determine parental satisfaction and involvement of parents with students who have a diagnosis of autism. The authors utilized the 2007 Parent and Family Involvement in Education national survey to gather data. Several questions were identified as relating to parental participation, including: attending a general school meeting, attending a parent-teacher organization meeting, attending a parent-teacher conference, attending a school event, volunteering at the school, participating in a fund-raiser, serving on a committee, or meeting with a guidance counselor.

To examine parental satisfaction a Likert scale was used that included: “very dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, somewhat satisfied, and very satisfied” (Zablotsky et al., 2012, p. 319). The questions that related to satisfaction included satisfaction with child’s school, academic standards, teachers and staff interaction. Parents also used the same Likert scale to rate their satisfaction with their child’s IEP. One final satisfaction
area of note for this study was the perception of school communication. Parents used a Likert scale that included: “very well, just O.K., not very well and doesn’t do it at all” (p. 319). The questions around communication included providing progress updates, guidance in assisting with homework, explanations for student placement in specific classrooms, and information regarding a parent’s expected role in the school. Results indicated that parents of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) were more likely to have attended a parent-teacher conference, to have met with the school counselor, and more likely to be involved in their child’s homework than parents of students in the general population. Although these parents are more likely to participate in school, they were less satisfied with school communication regarding their child’s placement and communication regarding their role in the school.

Communication continues to be highlighted as a significant area that parents of students with disabilities feel needs improvement. Preparing for and conducting IEP meetings offers an opportunity for schools and parents to communicate effectively; however, parents are dissatisfied with the frequency and clarity of schools' communication efforts and their own participation in IEP meetings.

Barriers to parental participation can cause a significant challenge to creating effective IEPs and establishing effective home-school partnerships. Parents feel they are at a disadvantage interacting with school personnel who are more knowledgeable about the IEP process and special education services available. Parents also feel their contributions and knowledge of their child are not valued. Parents felt that schools held the power in making decisions and were leery of getting into power struggles, which may
impact the treatment of their child. Trust and communication were also viewed as barriers. Parents want to trust that individuals will act in the best interest of their child and they can communicate openly and honestly with school personnel, yet they often struggle to do this. While IEP meetings are intended to bring families and schools together for strong partnerships, barriers impede the active participation of families in the creation of the IEP and interfere with creating school-family partnerships vital to a student's academic success.

**Summary**

Chapter two provided an overview of several critical components for families and schools. The research demonstrates that school-family partnerships are beneficial for all students' academic and emotional success. Those partnerships should be founded on commitment, trust and effective communication. School family partnerships regarding students with disabilities require similar components. Families want true partnerships where their input is valued and they are perceived as competent and valued members of the IEP team. It is especially critical that school-family partnerships of students with disabilities have a strong foundation so that both parties can work to create effective IEPs. IDEA has set the requirements needed to promote parental participation in IEP meetings; however, obstacles still exist. The literature is clear. Barriers exist to establishing effective school-family partnerships and active parental participation in IEP decision-making. Improvements surrounding effective partnerships and effective communication must be made.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand how communication during IEP meetings encourages or discourages parental participation. The importance placed on the IEP document, as well as the emotional toll of IEP meetings on parents and educators, necessitates an examination of those encounters to better understand the interactions and communication that occurs during IEP meetings. This study focused on one IEP meeting experience from the perspective of the parent, the special education teacher, and the general education teacher present at the IEP meeting. Additional emphasis was placed on understanding the discourse team members used during the IEP meeting in relationship to their enacted identities and practices. This study also focused on the knowledge and experience of the school administrator. The school administrator was not in attendance at this specific IEP meeting; however, she has extensive familiarity with this team and IEP meetings that occur in her building.

The focus of this study was to understand the experiences of the IEP participants in relationship to the process and communication during the IEP meeting. Brantlinger, Klingner and Richardson (2005) described, "the general sense in special education that the purpose of research is to produce and validate classification systems and effective interventions. However, this technical rational agenda tends to dismiss the voices and preferences of classified people and their concerned others" (p. 96). Parents are clearly concerned others when it comes to the IEP meetings of their children. Authentic parental participation from parents is essential and should remain a strong focus of IEP teams.
Qualitative research allows the researcher to capture points of view and different perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Each of the participants of an IEP meeting brings their own history, ideas and knowledge to the meeting. Capturing their unique perspectives is best suited to a qualitative study. "There are many reasons for choosing to do qualitative research, but perhaps the most important is the desire to step beyond the known and enter into the world of participants, to see the world from their perspective, and in doing so to make discoveries that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 14). Approaching research through a qualitative design allows for discovery and understanding that has the potential to improve practice and make a difference in people's lives (Merriam, 2009). Gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences individuals have during IEP meetings could lead to improved practice.

It is also important to note that as the researcher, I am not neutral on the topic of IEPs and parental involvement. I have sat at the table of an IEP meeting as a frustrated and alienated parent. My personal experiences continue to impact the lens through which I view IEP meetings. Mindful of my own assumptions and dispositions, this study provided the opportunity to understand and represent the story of another IEP team and the experiences the individuals on this team have encountered on their own journey. It also encouraged reflection on the contrasting experiences I have endured as a parent participant during IEP meetings. The reflection on my own experiences allows the reader to see my perspective and add meaning to the interpretation of this IEP meeting (Grbich, 2013).
Research Design

Qualitative research has the ability to "inform policy and practice in special education" (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 195). In order to gather information that may inform practice, I collected data using careful observation, document analysis and interviews. A constant comparative method was utilized to analyze the multiple data sources.

Site Selection

The site was chosen due to proximity and willingness of the research participants. I choose to approach a district that was close, but one where my own children and I had not had personal experiences.

District

The school district serves a Midwestern community with a population of approximately 68,000 people. The district has 11 elementary schools, four middle schools, and two traditional high schools. It also includes one alternative high school. The district averages 69% of students with free and reduced lunch and serves a diverse population. The specific school where I conducted my study includes 20.47% minority students.

Participants

Recruitment began by contacting school district administration in my target school district to obtain a letter of cooperation (see Appendix A). Once permission was obtained from the school district. I contacted a special education coordinator in the district to act as a conduit for locating a possible IEP team. The conduit was given a
description of the criteria for research participants and was asked to reach out to teams that met the criteria on my behalf. The research criteria included: a parent who has attended at least four previous IEP meetings for their child. It was also a preference that the child have significant needs that would require SDI.

This conduit was given a script (see Appendix B) to use with possible research participants. The district conduit then gave out my contact information to individuals who were interested in participating. When participants communicated to me that they were interested in allowing me to research their IEP team, I arranged a time to meet with each participant individually to go over the consent form (see Appendix C). I met individually with the four members of the IEP team who would be my primary focus prior to the IEP meeting. The focus members included the mother, the special education teacher, the general education teacher and the school principal. The additional members of the IEP team were provided the consent form the day of the IEP meeting.

The critical focus member of this study was the mother of the child with the IEP. She is in her late thirties, has a college education, describes herself as Caucasian, and works as a nurse in the office of a mental health professional. She is married to the father of her three children. Her child who is on the IEP has a diagnosis of autism and is currently in the third grade. When he was first diagnosed, immediately before his second birthday, it was determined he had PDD-NOS (pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified). Since his diagnosis he has been receiving services through the local AEA and the school district. He has had an IEP since his early preschool years and the IEP meeting I observed was the child’s sixth IEP. The child, who I will refer to as Adam,
is described as nonverbal. Three months prior to the IEP meeting, he was given a
communication device called a Nova Chat. He is currently in the process of learning how
to use it to increase communication. Mom is pleased with the progress he is making with
the device and wants to see this continue.

The special education teacher was another member of the IEP team that was a
focus participant. She is in her mid-twenties, describes herself as Caucasian and is in her
third year of teaching. She has been a special education teacher since beginning her
teaching career. She is considered the extended core teacher for second, third, fourth and
fifth grade students in the building. Being the extended core teacher means she works
with students with the most significant needs in the building. Some of the students spend
most of the day in her classroom, Adam currently comes into her class for language arts
support. This is her second year working with Adam and she was the teacher in charge of
writing last year’s IEP.

Another focus participant is the general education teacher. She is in her late 40s,
also describes herself as Caucasian and has been a classroom teacher for 16 years. She
has taught grades K-4 and was also Adam’s general education teacher last year when he
was in second grade. Next year she plans to go back to teaching in the younger grades
which she prefers, but is happy that she had Adam for two years. She believes inclusion
is important and wants Adam to spend as much time in her classroom as possible. This is
her second IEP meeting with Adam. An important point to note regarding the general
education teacher is that she also has her own child in a district school who is on an IEP.
She has the added experience of sitting on both sides of the IEP table. She has a close
relationship with Adam’s mom and has asked for advice from her regarding her son’s IEP.

The final focus participant was the building principal. She is in her early forties, describes herself as Caucasian and had been working in education since 2002. She began her career in a large urban district in the southwest as a secondary English teacher. She spent 10 years in the southwest district during which time she transitioned to administration as an assistant principal in a high school. One of her roles during this time was to oversee special education services in the school. She remarked that in her previous district, IEP meetings had a different name, but they were still often stressful events. After moving back to the Midwest, she was a lead teacher in her current building before transitioning back to administration. This is her first year as principal in the current building.

Due to a family illness, the principal was unable to attend the IEP meeting that I observed. However, she has extensive knowledge of IEP meetings and this particular IEP team and their style. She has led IEP teams in two districts and also has the personal experience of having a child on an IEP. This child has since exited the school system, but she has vivid memories of what it was like to be a parent in an IEP meeting.

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected from December 2016 through March 2017. I observed and audio recorded one IEP meeting. During the meeting, I took detailed field notes. Prior to the meeting, I examined the old IEP document, and following the meeting, I studied the IEP document that was created during the meeting. The Parent’s Rights Handbook was
also used as a data source. Finally, I conducted a series of interviews with the four primary research participants. I interviewed the mother and the special education teacher three times and the general education teacher and the principal two times. After the interviews, I e-mailed the transcripts to the participants to ensure they were accurate and to give them an opportunity to clarify information or add detail if needed.

Participant Observation

The study began with an observation of one IEP meeting. The IEP meeting lasted one hour and 15 minutes. The IEP meeting was conducted in the conference room at the elementary school. The meeting included nine participants. It was attended by a district representative, an AEA representative, the para-educator, the speech language pathologist, the occupational therapist, the general education teacher, the special education teacher, and both parents. The meeting began 45 minutes before the end of the school day. The father left the meeting after 45 minutes to take Adam and their two other children home.

This purpose of the IEP observation was to discover and audio record the interaction of the participants. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) described participant observations as, "a way to collect research in naturalistic settings by ethnographers who observe and/or take part in the common and uncommon activities of people being studied" (p. 2). As the researcher, I acted only in the role of a pure observer and did not participate in the meeting. My role as the observer was communicated to the members of the IEP team through the consent form and through personal communication at the beginning of the IEP meeting. Corbin and Strauss (2015) described one reason for doing
observation is to understand what occurs during interactions that individuals may not be aware of. The observation of the IEP meeting provided context to the interviews with the IEP meeting participants.

It is important to recognize that my attendance as an observer of the IEP meeting may have altered what was being observed. Participants may have been more apt to behave in a socially appropriate manner and may have felt discomfort with my note taking during the observation. Following the IEP meeting with interviews provided the opportunity for participants to clarify their actions or the actions of others.

Detailed field notes were taken during the IEP meeting to describe the setting, beginning routines, individuals in attendance, physical arrangement of people and overall structure of the meeting. "Effective observation means 'seeing' as much as possible in any situation" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p. 69). I also made notes of incidents that appeared significant. I did not follow a specific observation guide in order to allow for discovery during the meeting. I did have a grid containing important words connecting to the theories described in the literature review. These key words were utilized to understand interpretive data I was receiving. For example, regarding Listening Fidelity, I included the words confusion, fear/anxiety and positive vs. strained (see Appendix D). The key words acted as reminders of moments that might go unnoticed. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) argued that the use of detailed notes allows observers who are familiar with the context of the observations to "see old events with new eyes" (p. 74). With this idea in mind, I was aware that the notes would guide me to focus on what was happening in the specific meeting I was observing.
Immediately following the IEP meeting I transcribed the audio recordings. Detail was added to the field notes based on the transcription. I also journaled following the IEP meeting to record thoughts and perspectives regarding what had occurred during the meeting.

**Participant Interviews**

One benefit of combining interviews with observations is it allowed me to follow up with questions to the participants ensuring I did not misinterpret what was happening or how individuals were participating in the meeting (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Interviewing is a common method for collecting qualitative data. Merriam (2009) argues that interviews are important to gain an understanding of a participants' feelings or interpretations of events. The participant interviews added depth to the information observed in the IEP meeting by uncovering and allowing individuals to describe why he or she thinks or feels a certain way (Brantlinger, Klinger et al., 2005).

A responsive interview approach was utilized to build rapport with the interviewees and be empathetic to the emotions they displayed during the interviews. Listening respectfuely was a key element of allowing the participants to share their knowledge and understanding of the events without being manipulated (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). There was one instance that I offered to turn off the recording device for the general education teacher, but she wanted to keep going and finish her thoughts. After the interview, she did want to continue discussing her son’s IEP off the record.

Following the IEP meeting I interviewed the four primary research participants. Initial interviews lasted approximately one hour. Each of these individuals brought a
unique perspective to the IEP meeting. It is important that each of their voices were heard. "There are multiple socially constructed ways of knowing the world, and diversity is achieved in and through the voices of diverse people brought forward in the act of doing research as well as in representing it" (Finley, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 101).

Interviews were conducted at a time and place designated by the interviewee. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed following the interview. I attempted to schedule three interviews with each of the focus participants; however, the schedules of the principal and general education teachers allowed for only two interviews each.

The first interview followed a semi-structured format to allow for some consistency across participants, while still allowing individuals to add information they felt was important to the topic (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). A series of initial questions were developed to guide the conversation. Probing and follow-up questions were used as needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I also included an opportunity for open-ended conversation at the end of each interview. It is important to allow the voices of the participants to be heard clearly (Fontana & Frey, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Examples of first round interview questions are below.

Tell me a little about yourself

How would you describe your child's school experiences?

What do you consider important in school-family partnerships?

What have you experienced regarding school-family partnerships?

Describe your previous experiences with IEP meetings.

How would you describe successful IEP meetings?
Can you give an example of a previous IEP meeting where you felt uncomfortable?

What is your understanding of the role of the IEP team?

How would you describe your role on the IEP team?

How are decisions made during an IEP meeting?

How well do participants understand IDEA and the services that can be included for students with disabilities on the IEP?

How is consensus reached if there is a disagreement?

How do you feel the last IEP meeting went?

Were you happy with the participation of all IEP team members?

Do you feel that your participation in the IEP meeting was encouraged?

What aspects of the IEP meeting led you to feel this way?

Were there any questions you wished you had asked?

What do you believe to be contributing factors in parental participation during IEP meetings?

What issues do you consider most important in creating effective IEP documents?

What feelings did you experience during the IEP meeting?

What advice would you give to parents going into their first IEP meeting?

What advice would you give to teachers going into their first IEP meeting?

Do you feel IEP meetings are an appropriate way to determine the educational needs of a child?

If you could change IEP meetings in anyway, what would you change?
What else would you like to tell me about your IEP meeting experiences?

Follow up interviews were conducted after the original interview data was analyzed using initial coding. The second round of interviews were used to verify participant responses and meanings, as well as expand on initial categories that were identified through the first round of data collection. The final interview involved member checks to ensure that the participants agreed with the descriptions and interpretations of the data. The transcripts for each participant’s interviews were e-mailed to them once identifying information had been removed. Participants were invited to clarify or add meaning to what was discussed in the interview.

I maintained a reflective journal after each interview to provide an audit trail. This also supported my research as it created the opportunity to reflect on what I was hearing from the participants and identify follow up questions that needed to be asked. It also allowed for reflection on my one contradictory experiences with IEP meetings.

Document Analysis

I gathered additional data by examining the Parent’s Rights Handbook used at IEP meetings. After initial interview rounds it was clear that I needed to examine this document as it came up in several of the interviews. I also analyzed the old IEP of the identified child along with the new IEP that was generated at the IEP meeting I observed. Specific areas of the IEP that were examined included: (1) present level of academic performance, (2) goals, (3) specially designed instruction, and (4) support or related services. Merriam (2009) argued that documents provide stability to research. "The presence of the researcher does not alter the data" (p. 155). I examined the language used
in the documents following the coding techniques described below. Careful attention was
given to determine how decisions regarding the IEP discussed at the meeting were
incorporated into the written document.

Coding of Data

Following the IEP meeting, examination of the IEP documents and the interviews
of each participant, the data were transcribed and coded using the three-part approach
described by Corbin and Strauss (2015). During open-coding I looked for categories
within the data. Categories enable researchers "to group 'raw data' with other 'raw data'
that share a common meaning or characteristic" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 220).

Categories and subcategories were then identified. Merriam (2009) described
categories as the same as a theme, pattern or a finding. The initial themes of relationships
and communication emerged across all participants. Both of these themes required further
investigation and informed second round questions with research participants. For
example, during the second-round interview I asked the special education teacher why
she felt it was important to keep in touch with the families of her students over the
summer (see Appendix E).

Once axial coding was utilized with each individual research participant to
identify emerging themes and subthemes the literature review was used to link categories
to conceptual frameworks and add more context to what was being discovered. I utilized
the constant comparative method to determine final themes across all participants. These
themes were also integrated into the open coding from my participant observation. "The
challenge is to construct categories or themes that capture some recurring pattern that
cuts across your data" (Merriam, 2009, p. 181). As coding was occurring, I applied the constant comparison method to look for similarities and differences between new data and previously gathered data, thus strengthening the codes and categories that were discovered.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis and data collection occurred concurrently. I gathered data, attempted to make sense of the data, and then collected more data to continue to refine my understanding of the emerging themes and categories. One discovery that occurred as I was trying to understand the relationships of the IEP team members was the importance of the role of communication within the relationships of team members. Communication became a subtheme of relationships. It was clear that the relationships between members would not have occurred without the foundation of their frequent communication.

"Research is a continuous process of data collection, followed by analysis and memo writing, leading to new questions and more data collection" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 240). Data was triangulated using information from the IEP observation, participant interviews and the analysis of the IEP documents.

Discourse analysis was also applied to the communication and conversations that occurred during the IEP meeting. "In using language, social goods are always at stake. When we speak or write, we always risk being seen as a "winner" or "loser" in a given game or practice. Furthermore, we can speak or write so as to accept others as "winners" or "losers" in the game or practice in which we are engaged" (Gee, 2014a, p. 7). Discourse is also used by individuals to position themselves and their values within a
socio-cultural environment, (Adjei, 2013). Discourse analysis will contribute to the understanding of the identities individuals assumed during IEP meetings, the identities they assigned to others during the IEP meetings and the practices they enacted through discourse during the meeting.

**Credibility and Trustworthiness**

It is important at this point to again recognize the experiences I have had as a member on an IEP team. My experiences as a parent during IEP meetings has occasionally produced feelings of frustration with the IEP process and the lack of services offered to my own children. On several occasions, I have wondered how a parent would navigate this system without a background in education. I recognized this bias, but used this opportunity to understand other perspectives and possibly find ways to advocate for change. "All research is interpretive; it is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 31). Through observing and interviewing another research team, I have a clearer sense of the contrast with my own IEP experiences.

I understand there is not a single reality of IEP meetings. However, the information gathered may work to inform practice that improves the communication and parent participation that occurs during IEP meetings. Brantlinger, Jimenez et al. (2005) described that qualitative research in special education, "can explore the nature and extent to which a practice has a constructive impact on individuals with disabilities, their families, or settings where they tend to work reside, or be educated" (p. 196). By seeking to understand the different perspectives of the individuals involved in the IEP meetings, it
adds depth to the themes that emerge in creating effective school-family partnerships and the impact current practices have on those partnerships.

Corbin and Strauss (2015) described one way to control bias is to understand it and keep a journal. The journal should address why the researcher wants to undertake the project and make note of their own reactions during the data collection. I was able to keep a detailed journal throughout this process and examine my personal thoughts. I did check for signs of bias as I was analyzing data and in the meaning I attached to responses from participants. I recognize the responsibility that qualitative researchers have to work diligently to ensure quality research. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) argued that qualitative research must include the perspectives of the individuals, understand the constraints of the social world and use rich description to understand the context of the situation.

The journal allowed me to include my contrasting experiences through personal narrative (Grbich, 2013). I did not separate myself from my life experiences, but used them to examine the unique experiences of this team in contrast with my own personal experiences of IEP meetings.

To increase trustworthiness and credibility, triangulation, peer debriefing, an audit trail, member checks and detailed description were all utilized (Brantlinger, Jimenez et al., 2005). Triangulation also involves using multiple sources of data. Data from observations, interviews and documents were all employed. Member checks were implemented to ensure that accurate information and interpretations were gathered during the IEP observation and interviews. Following the study, I shared findings with my research participants to ensure their voice was respected in the process. I also engaged the
support of a critical friend and my dissertation advisor to discuss and explore the findings as they emerged within the study (Merriam, 2009). Finally, the use of a journal throughout the process added to the audit trail that strengthened my data by allowing me to examine my experiences as I was going through the data analysis.

Limitations

This case study included the examination of one IEP meeting and the perspective of four IEP team members. Hence, one limitation of this study is that it cannot be generalized across all IEP team experiences. This study provided a detailed account of what one elementary team’s experience included; therefore, teams working in the context of middle school or high school IEP meetings may have different experiences. A third limitation is the knowledge and education of the mother on this IEP team; not all parents are as well equipped to understand the process of the IEP meeting. She also was culturally and linguistically similar to other members of the IEP team. Cultural and linguistic differences were not examined in this study. Finally, this mother had significant experience with the IEP process; parents that are new to IEP meetings will have different experiences.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Through data analysis, several themes emerged in response to the research questions. These themes are reported for each research question with first the primary data source, which is the participant interviews, and then supplemented by participant observation from the IEP meeting and document analysis. The final research question was examined through a discourse analysis of communication interactions during the observed IEP meeting. Three theoretical frameworks related to communication were identified as significant for allowing me to balance my own personal IEP experiences with the IEP team I observed.

Supports for Parental Participation

The first research question examined what the discourse during an IEP meeting and perceptions of IEP team members revealed about supports to enhance authentic parental participation. Several themes emerged related to this question in regards to supporting parental participation. These themes included welcoming relationships, shared context of IEP meetings, adaptability of IEP team members, empathy of IEP team members and parental knowledge of role, child and rights during an IEP meeting.

Welcoming Relationships: Important to Everything We Do

One important theme that emerged from examining supports needed to enhance authentic parental participation was the importance of welcoming relationships. All participants described the power of inviting and welcoming relationships for creating a supportive IEP environment. The principal stated, “We have done some (professional
development) this year around relationships, they’re not just important to kids, they are important to everything we do.” Participants described how welcoming relationships were developed through three dimensions: informal interactions, frequent positive communication through a variety of means and trust. Mom described the impact of relationships on IEP meetings, “The relationship piece, it's super important to take away the scariness.” She values the relationships she has with these educators and knows they have contributed to the process of successful IEP meetings.

Informal interactions: Getting to know you. The principal described relationships as being built over time and through informal interactions. She emphasized this by stating, “Knowing your families is really important.” She works hard and is committed to building those relationships with staff and families. She explained that the previous administrator had a different approach, and she wants to be as visible as possible.

I spend time asking parents, hey what are you doing for the holidays, or what do you have coming up this weekend or summer vacation, just asking those questions to get to know those families. And with kindergarten we do a transition meeting in the spring from preschool to kindergarten if they’ve attended preschool. But it's not a state requirement so we run into those roadblocks, anytime that you get to interact. We invite parents to come up and participate; we just did one for all students, for all KG students. We did leadership binders. We have kids doing their leadership notebooks and we invited parents to come in and have breakfast with their kids and have their kids show them their binders. What an awesome opportunity. And I walked around the cafeteria and a couple of people who were new and they were like, ‘Who are you?’ ‘I'm the principal’, Oh well let me tell you, just having those conversations, being visible and open makes a difference.

The general education teacher also commented on the importance of building strong relationships with families that go beyond the clinical relationship of teacher to parent that only focuses on how a child is doing academically or behaviorally.
Yes, and I feel like you know with the parents, they are people. And you need to have a relationship on a person–to-person level. It can't all just be clinical. Because then it's just not, I don't know. It's just cold, and if I feel like you don’t care about me, then do you care about my child?

In addition to those informal interactions which help team members get to know each other, participants also discussed the importance of frequent, positive communication to build strong working relationships.

**Positive communication.** Participants were all compelled to share the significant impact communication had on the relationships of the IEP team. The general education teacher stated, “Make sure the communication is strong. Make sure the parents are, felt welcomed. Pay attention to their feelings, their needs, their questions, their concerns. When it comes down to it in terms of an IEP, the parents are almost as important as the kid you are writing the IEP about. And they need to be treated as such. And included.”

All of the research participants described the value of communicating relevant information to each other and including positives when possible. The principal reinforces with her staff the importance of communicating with each other to meet the needs of the child and to work together effectively. She stated,

And communication, there's never enough communication. So, I push that pretty hard, with my staff. And making sure, have you shared your lesson plans, have you taken a look at the accommodations, the IEP teacher, have you given them their at a glance, so they know what accommodations they are supposed to provide. And if that if those pieces are not in place then yeah, there is a lot more friction.

It is clear she values the communication between all members of the IEP team. The teachers and specialists need to communicate with each other, as well as with the parents.
Participants commented that communication during the IEP should also include positives. Mom explained,

"It's supposed to be people communicating back and forth, throwing ideas onto the table, talking about the positives, bring up the negatives, but not negatives that don't need to be brought up. Like negatives about things with the goals, not negatives of issues other than what needed to be discussed. It was a little over an hour, but it wasn't more than an hour, we didn't hold up a lot of people. I just felt like everything was very much, the gen ed teacher got to say what she needed to, the special ed teacher said what she needed to, everybody just zinged, zinged off of each other."

The general education teacher also felt strongly that positives must be included in all discussions. "Positive communication, asking parents for advice, you know your child better than I do. What can I do, how can I best meet your child's needs? And that's not just the kids that I have with special needs. It's every kid." She also discussed the importance of making sure you talk about what the child can do, not just what they can’t do. "And I feel like when you're sitting here saying okay your kid is this much below everybody else and your kid is this much below in this, but your kid can be successful. Your kid can learn, your kid can make progress on this goal here. And we're going to make it happen." The special education teacher likewise remarked on the importance of including positives in what you say. "Again, that communication piece, it's not being afraid to kind of give them some of the negatives, but also giving them the positives all the time too, whether it is just phone calls, emails, you know some of that stuff." It was clear that all participants believed positive communication contributed to welcoming relationships. They also described the importance of frequent communication with all IEP team members.
Frequent communication, IEP team members felt it was critical to communicate outside of the IEP meeting with the parent and with each other. The general education teacher strongly believes the frequency of communication between the team members has a positive impact, “Well in the IEP you attended, there is an abnormally amazing amount of communication between all of us as a team.” She continued,

It goes back to what I said about parents being included. The IEP meeting that you attended was like every parent's dream. I really think a lot of it has to do with the fact that we do communicate so much outside of the IEP meeting process, (special education teacher) and I and in that case (para-educator), we all communicate on a regular basis, and then prior to the IEP meeting, we sit down and kind of brainstorm.

The general education teacher values frequent communication as a needed support for strong relationships, not as an additional burden.

The special education teacher felt it was critical to communicate with support staff and specialists prior to the IEP meeting to ensure the meetings are productive, “Talk with some of the service providers in advance. I know usually I like to have a few ideas of maybe different kinds of goals, not having anything really set in stone. But you know some direction to maybe look into. To kind of support where their last goals were at, and maybe where to head next.”

She also believes in communication with the families prior to the meeting. The special education teacher noticed the benefit of sharing the document with parents and going over some of the details ahead of time. She also makes sure parents are sent the IEP after the meeting and asks them to comment and check to make sure they are okay with what she has written. She described this by stating, “We do a lot of back and forth, can you double check, kind of what I wrote in this little area. Let me know if that makes
sense to you. I know we did that a few times last year before I got it submitted so she at least understood what was in there and what it meant and that kind of stuff.” Being open with the IEP document and actively soliciting thoughts and comments from the parents has been a valuable process for the special education teacher.

Mom also commented on her perspective of having some parts of the IEP document communicated to her prior to the meeting,

Having it (the IEP) ahead of time gives us a chance to get it fixed, get it corrected and make changes so we're not spending the whole meeting debating everything. Everything in the IEP is important, however, there is this huge chunk at the beginning, which is stuff that really never changes. But we always feel like we need to go through it with a fine-tooth comb. I don't feel like we need to go through it with a fine-tooth comb because it is all stuff that obviously, we've already discussed, otherwise it wouldn't be in the front part.

Mom truly values this aspect of communication prior to the IEP meeting. She feels included and respected when she is given this opportunity.

The special education teacher also mentioned the importance of regular and frequent communication with families throughout the school year and summer,

I mean granted, a lot of my kids I have year after year, but making sure you make those contacts and keep up and follow along over the summer. Not only to kind of show the families you care, but you get to know more about what they've done over the summer and kind of where they are with things. Yeah, it's that communication piece, for sure. And like I said, establishing that a few weeks before the school year so that way you've kind of got a better understanding of where you were and where things should be set for their child.

The special education teacher believes that this communication over the summer will create a stronger start to the school year and better relationships with the families.

Mom also appreciates frequent communication from her child’s para-educator who she has developed a strong relationship with, “Adam's para has been with him now
since Kindergarten. She writes me notes home; if she sees me, she comes and talks to me and lets me know what's going on.” This daily information allows Mom to stay connected to what is happening at school and feel more informed about Adam’s progress.

Communicating in a variety of ways was also seen as important.

Variety of communication. The principal described teachers communicating through home logs to keep parents informed of school happenings, “A lot of my teachers do home logs, and so they communicate back and forth with the families so the parents know what is going on in the school day, anything that is happening that is out of the ordinary, or unusual, or really great. You know it's also a good tool to communicate the great things that they're learning.” She encourages her teachers to utilize written communication when possible.

The special education teacher values multiple approaches to communication and works hard to stay in touch with parents,

We use communication books that get sent home and we just write about each child's day. It gets sent home back and forth to every parent or guardian. And then phone calls. I also provide my cell phone number to a lot of the parents, just because I know sometimes it’s easier to send a text message. So, I know there's some people that just want to strictly do e-mails or phone calls, but sometimes it’s that convenience piece. And I know that sometimes you need that, you're running late, or hey I just wanted a reminder, I wanted to tell you this really quick, this happened this morning. So, I did open that up, and so far, everyone has been very respectful of my number, so I'll continue to do that.

She believes that the preferences of the parents for how they want to receive communication needs to be taken into consideration. She also values the communication they send to her, and want to make it as easy as possible for parents.
The general education teacher commented that listening is an important part of how you communicate. “I think their feelings need to be honored, whether they are feelings of sadness, anger, frustration. Don't take it personal, but you need to listen; you need to value it. Because this really isn't about you, this is about the kid in the middle.”

She went on to comment again on the importance of listening to the parents.

Listen, listen, be open, be accepting of the communication, demonstrate that you care about my child. Tell me the good things. I don't want to just hear my kid is behind in this, my kid is behind in this. We have to set a goal for this cause we're not there. What's my kid doing right? Where's the success? Because bottom line is this is a little person and a little person that means an awful lot to me.

The general education teacher feels strongly that listening is about a part of how you communicate. She believes it is essential to ensure that communication is happening in both directions.

The final dimension contributing to the development of welcoming relationships was establishing trust between IEP meeting participants. Research participants described how positive communication contributed to building trust, and trust was a central part of having successful relationships and open communication with IEP team members.

**Trust: Together, not sides.** Three participants commented on the role relationships had in working together and trusting that the team had the best interests of the child in mind when making decisions. The participants agreed that by working together as a team, and not taking sides, contributed to the development of trusting relationships. The general education teacher commented,

You have to have good communication with the parents. You have to build, just like with kids, and you have to build a relationship with a child and create trust. If you have a relationship with the child they're going to learn, right? And I think the same thing applies to parents. If you have a good relationship, open
communication, they're going to feel better about dealing with you and you're going to feel better about dealing with them, and that trust comes.

Through this comment, she clearly describes how trust is built with parents and the critical role it plays in working together for the best interest of the child.

The special education teacher described that by communicating to families you are open to trying new approaches and listening, you can build trust with parents and create opportunities to work together for the success of the child.

I mean together, we're all learning how to move forward and what new things to try out. It really does rely a lot of times on us (the educators). But again, that's why you know it's important that open communication. I know a lot of times it's put like, where do you think it needs to go for them? For parents to be able to hear, I'm puzzled too, I think that opens up that trust more, to admit that sometimes I don't even know and we have to work together.

In this response, the special education teacher also describes how trust is built through effort and communication. She wants parents to know she is interested in hearing their ideas, she doesn’t have all the answers.

Mom described how the relationships created the sense of team and wanting to work together to support Adam.

But I also think that if you don't have some sort of a relationship with the teacher, or teachers I should say, it’s hard. You go into there feeling like it's me against them. So, walking into Adam’s IEP, I never feel like it's me against them. I always feel like the special ed teacher is, part of our team. It’s not a side situation. It's very much routine, we're all here for the same thing, let's get that done, leave the politics at the door, leave all the nonsense at the door. Let's just get our goals done.

Mom feels strongly that this team wants to make the best decisions for Adam, she feels like she is part of the team and not on the sidelines.
The importance of welcoming and trusting relationships came through in the interviews with all of the research participants. Data from the participant observation of the IEP meeting confirmed this theme.

**Participant Observation of Welcoming Relationships.** Observations during the IEP meeting that demonstrated the relationship of team members included the relaxed demeanor that Mom had coming into the meeting room and choosing a seat where she felt comfortable. She easily joked with other team members prior to the meeting commencing and continued conversing at the end of the IEP meeting. Team members sat around a square conference table with two to three individuals on each side. During the meeting itself, several comments were made that showed the welcoming, positive, and trusting relationships between participants.

At the beginning of the meeting, as Mom was sharing positives regarding Adam and his progress, she added,

The other thing that I’m excited about anyway, this is the first time we have ever had, the person who wrote last year’s IEP goals is the person that is here when those goals are being reviewed. We’ve always had a different special ed person just because of how it’s been. So just the repetitiveness of having the team has been huge. I know (district rep) hasn’t been here before, but everybody else has been here, and it’s just a huge relief, it helps out a lot.

She also offered praise for the team by stating, “I tell people all the time our kids are in the right school. We’ve been at the right school at the right time. I mean everything has fallen into place.” and continued, “We’re just very lucky to have the group we do have.” She clearly values the group she is working with and is happy to keep working with them.
The role of inside and outside communication between team members was also evident. The special education teacher described discussions she had outside of the IEP meeting with specific team members, “I guess that is something because I know that (speech language pathologist) and I have been talking about it a little bit, (general education teacher) and I have been talking about it quite a bit too, about just how to teach that or maybe have him work on that.” She also commented, “When we are working on writing, (general education teacher) and I talked about this, and we weren’t really sure which way to go with it. So when he types stuff out, ‘I want play trucks’ should I be having him type it out properly? Like, ‘I want to play with trucks’?” Conversations regarding what the team believes is best for Adam and what strategies they might use to support him are part of the interactions this team consistently has.

The special education teacher also worked to avoid jargon to ensure she was communicating in a positive and welcoming way with the families. During the discussion of academic supports the term AIM (alternative instructional materials) was brought up. She stopped to clarify for the parents, “for AIM, I am marking yes. Are you guys aware of what AIM even is? And you know what, I will let you jump in (points to district representative to explain) cause you can explain it better.”

At one point in the meeting after a long discussion on establishing an appropriate mathematics goal for Adam, Mom demonstrated her trust for the team by stating, “I’m good, as far as math goals go. I trust whatever you guys feel needs to be, to move forward with I mean.” Up to this point Mom has participated in the conversation and had given
her input. She felt comfortable the team would make the correct final determination of how the math goal would be written.

The participant observation reinforced the role that communication builds in creating the welcoming relationships between team members. Members were comfortable participating, sharing ideas and communicating about Adam’s strengths and challenges through positive exchanges.

**Personal Experiences with Welcoming Relationships.** Relationships have had a huge impact on my personal IEP experiences through the years. My son’s first special education teacher was with him for four years and we developed a very close and trusting relationship. However, this did not always happen with the classroom teachers, and a lot of this had to do with communication. I can remember walking into my son’s second grade IEP meeting, which was in February, expecting to be talking about academic goals, where he was having some success and what we needed to work on moving forward. Instead, I was bombarded by frustration from the classroom teacher about his behaviors.

Now, at the time, I was under no illusions about the challenge of educating my son in the general education setting. He has autism and is prone to humming, jumping and other sensory seeking behaviors. What I was not aware of was the frustration this was causing his teacher or the frequency of his behaviors. I had no previous communication from her asking for suggestions to support his behavior or indicators that he had a rough day in class. So, from the very beginning of the meeting, I was put on the defensive of defending my child and his sensory seeking behaviors, instead of problem solving his IEP goals.
The special education teacher on our team did use communication logs to document my son’s day and let me know how things were going. Occasionally she would send an e-mail if she had a question or wanted to remind me of something important. In contrast, the lack of communication from the general education teacher created a tense relationship, instead of one that encouraged collaboration and problem solving. I saw us as being on opposing teams with different ideas. She wanted my son out of her classroom, and I wanted him included with his peers. It is hard as a parent to imagine that your child is spending the day with someone that does not want him. There was no positive communication from her, and I lost my ability to trust she was able to act in the best interest of my child. If she was not comfortable keeping me in the loop about what behaviors she was seeing in the general education classroom, what else was she not telling me in regards to his academic progress?

Shared Context of the Purpose and Process of the IEP Meeting: Everyone’s Voice

Another important theme in response to the question concerning supports to enhance authentic parental participation in IEP meetings was the idea of a shared context of the purpose and process. Members commented on the importance of keeping the child at the center of the meeting, utilizing a process that set a positive tone, developing the IEP goals collaboratively at the IEP meeting and working to ensure that it was a team effort and everyone’s voice was included through shared decision making.

*Child-centered purpose.* An important component of the purpose and process of the IEP meeting involved keeping the child as the center of their focus. This came through clearly from the principal when she stated, “Kids are always at the center of our
discussions.” She went on to describe the importance of this focus in regards to IEP decision making, “And at the point where if we keep open minds and we keep the student interests always at the focus, we can't really go wrong.” She clearly believes that decisions need to be made based on what is best for the child, not based on desires of the staff or district resources.

The special education teacher also discussed this idea and how it came through at the meeting I observed. “It was just a very relaxed, very comfortable environment, I mean people are not afraid to put anything out on the table, just very open, open for discussion and very much thinking about the student. Definitely the student and his needs every time. So just keeping that focus.” The special education teacher echoed the sentiment of the principal, decisions must be made based on what the child needs.

Mom also felt very strongly about the focus staying on her child during the meeting.

Because at the end of the day, it's about my son, it's about my child. It's about what's gonna happen for him, what's best for him. I do try and make sure we have that all in place the way it needs to be. And so my viewpoint is, it's our chance to celebrate what we've done. and what we've accomplished. But it is also our chance to figure out how to make him the best possible him that we can.

This clearly demonstrates Mom’s expectation and trust that the school and district will do what needs to be done to support her child. She continued by describing that it is important for the teacher to understand, “Remember that this is still a kid. No, it’s not your kid, but it is still a child who has a right to the same education as every single child in the building. They still have a future to whatever their future is. It’s your responsibility and your job as a teacher to do the best you can to be a positive influence
on that child.” She wants teachers to be aware of the important role they have in the child’s future, and that must be the goal of the meeting.

The principal commented that during meetings participants needed to be open to what the parents were saying and communicating they were all there for the child, “Being open, making sure that families know that we have their best interests at heart and we want what's best for their kids just as much as they do. So we have to work together to make that happen. And the more we can learn from families about what they need, and what their kids need, the better we can meet their needs.” She shows through this statement the importance of verbalizing to parents the care and dedication they have for the child’s success. She wants to ensure parents know this, and don’t have to assume how the staff is feeling.

Participants clearly indicated that keeping the child at the center of the meeting created a shared goal and purpose for the meeting. It increases collaboration, eases parental fears and contributes to setting a positive tone.

Process with a positive tone. IEP team members had a clear understanding of the process that they would use during the IEP meeting. They believed in setting a positive tone by welcoming the family and sharing accomplishments of the child. Several participants commented on the importance of setting a positive tone at the IEP meeting. The principal commented,

We started looking at starting the meeting off with, welcome to our meeting. We're so excited that you are here. You are a critical part of this, and if the kid is sitting there especially you might hear a lot of things that are negative and talk about what you can't do. But there are a lot of really great things that you can do. And we know that and we see that and we want you to recognize that. And so we'll talk about some of those things, but the main purpose of this meeting is to
figure out ways to help you with those things that you're struggling with. And, that you can just see the parents sigh with relief, just knowing that somebody else sees good in your child makes a difference.

The principal believes that the meeting has to start with a positive tone and making sure the family feels welcomed. She discusses this with her staff to ensure they all understand how meetings will begin.

The special education teacher illustrated why she likes to start with positives, “I think that kind of just sets the floor, like we're here to talk about where they currently are, not about what they can't do. We are going to talk about some of those challenges, those struggles, but this is what we are truly focusing on.”

The special education teacher explained even the school staff likes to hear the positives to start the meeting,

Positives set the tone, right away, right off the bat. I always like to start with that too. It was actually very nice that even the mom with her being able to jump in and she wanted to start out with the positives, cause that's even more powerful. So for us, who are here every day with him and the fact to be able to hear that from his own parents, they even see all the things that are happening. And how appreciative they are of everything that they're seeing happening. And the growth he's making and all of it.

She believes starting meetings with the positives relaxes everyone and lets them know that progress has been made. Now it is time to talk about where they are going next.

The general education teacher described,

I don't want parents to walk out feeling like, my kid is so far behind, my kid doesn't know what they need to know. How will we ever get them caught up? No, look at what your kid has done. We're not comparing your kid all the time to everybody else, but look at what your child has done. So, when they walk out feeling good about the accomplishments that their child has done over the last year, that's success to me.
Participants felt very strongly about supporting parents and letting them know they believe in their child.

Through positive comments and celebrating the success of the child, they are able to work with parents to set goals to move the child forward. Including parents in the goal writing process was viewed as critical by all team members.

Collaborative goal development at the IEP meeting: It’s a team. All participants commented how writing IEP goals at the meeting was a vital part of the shared context of the purpose and process of the IEP meeting. They understood the time constraints of an IEP meeting, but felt time could be better managed by having other parts of the document prepared ahead of time. The principal observed,

Having the rest of the document filled in, is great, because then you are prepared. But those goal areas, that's a team decision. That's where everybody provides their input. AEA is usually there, we have the principal, we have the classroom teacher. Collaboration time amongst gen ed and special ed teachers is stretched so thin, you need that input and you need it to make a goal together. So it's a team working towards this goal, and not just one individual dictating to the rest of the people what's happening.

Having an administrator understand that writing the goals at the meeting is important for the comfort level of the special education teacher. She did not feel she would look unprofessional if the goals were not determined ahead of time.

Mom also saw the value of working on parts of the document prior to the meeting to save time and allow the focus during the meeting to be on the goals, “Going over some of the pages prior to the IEP meeting allowed the focus of the meeting to be on the goals.” Mom stated, “So it gave us time to focus on those four goals, which really is the meat of it. It should really, when you're talking a grade school kid, or even a middle
school age kid. That's the stuff you need to get to, because those are the goals that are going to help you get to the next place.” Having time to discuss the goals at the meeting was an important element for her.

Mom described the first time that she realized working on some parts of the IEP document ahead of time was a possibility. It happened when her son’s first grade special education teacher sent home a proposed copy prior to the meeting. She described the first time this happened as an amazing experience,

So then we get to, it’s time for IEP in first grade. He has this wonderful woman named Alex Smith that’s his special ed teacher. So I get a call three weeks before the IEP. ‘I sent a copy of the IEP with Adam.’ ‘I already have a copy of last year’s.’ ‘No, no, this is a draft of what I want to do.’ ‘What, what, you can give them to me ahead of time, what? Every day I fall in love with you a little bit more Alex Smith.’

Having the IEP prior to the meeting was such a positive experience for Mom she has continued this practice with the current special education teacher,

And so, she sent it home and I was able to make notes, and I sent it back and we did this for three weeks leading up to the IEP. So when we sat down at this IEP meeting, we went over the good things, we went over the positives, we went over all of that. We opened up the IEP, we broke it down every page of it, then we went to the goals and it was like, what just happened? This is amazing, this is perfect.

Mom noted she appreciates seeing the document prior to the meeting and has now come to expect it as part of the process.

The special education teacher also reflected on the importance of writing the goals at the meeting, “It just gets you to look at other aspects, other viewpoints. And that is part of the reason why I don't go in with the goals written up. That way we can look at
some of those other avenues. We need to be factoring in some of those outside things that maybe I didn't think about, or someone else on the team maybe didn't think about.”

The general education teacher also felt working on the goals at the meeting was important. “Where the goals are being written in the meeting, I think maybe there can be some give and take, some conversation, some negotiation for lack of a better word. Some way to meet in the middle.” The general education teacher appreciates this approach the special education teacher takes and knows to expect it when this specific special education teacher is running an IEP meeting.

Part of that is just (special education teacher’s) style. She doesn't write the goals beforehand. She writes the goals with the parents present, to get their input. I've been in IEP meetings when they've done both and in my opinion, the way that the IEP meeting that you attended went, where the parents had the input where they could say, well what about this, or what about this? Or they can get their questions answered about the goals. That's important, because, then they know what their kid is working on, and they can possibly help at home, or look for things that their kid can do. You know, have fun and learn at the same time, that's working towards those goals. It goes back to them feeling valued and important and part of this whole process.

Clearly the educators in this situation understand writing the goals at the meeting allows the parents to have voice and input.

Having the clear expectation going into the meeting that goals would be written together allowed the team to focus on the task at hand. Members had considered options and had discussions prior to the meeting, but no decisions had been made. The team truly valued the process of sharing in the decision making with all IEP team members.

**Shared decision making: You get to chime in.** All team members also commented on the importance of making IEP decisions together. School personnel felt this had to be actively communicated to the parents. The principal explained,
The school has to do a really good job of making the parent feel comfortable when they come in and explaining that it's a process and we're a team. You're part of this team, you have a voice. You get to chime in, with what you think your child needs and how we should do that. While we might be considered the actual experts, parents are experts about their kid. And letting them know that they can give that input is big.

Making sure the parents understand the process and the important role they have, contributes to their ability to actively participate. This team works to ensure parents know they have a welcome voice at the table.

She also described if parents are reluctant to participate, schools could invite them to participate by using open-ended questions.

What do you notice as your child is working on their homework? What types of activities do you do with your child that promotes his positive behavior? I love the strengths interests and preferences that they do with the kids, but at the same time, I've also been at meetings where they've asked what do you think your child's strengths are? What do you think your child's interests are? How do you think they prefer to learn? Those are always good ones too.

Inviting parents into the conversation in this way creates opportunities for authentic participation and increases the feeling of team among participants. Opening the door for parents and asking them what they think or what they have seen is very powerful.

The general education teacher also explained the importance of encouraging parental participation, “It's a team, home support, school support. We have to be able to work together for the best interest of the kids. And if they (parents) don't feel valued, if they don't feel like their feelings matter, you've lost the game before it's even started.”

When describing her specific role on the IEP team, the special education teacher described,
Pretty much I see it as just being another member of the whole team. I don't feel like I have any more say over anyone else, on anything. I mean obviously, my role is to be the one initial person to write out the IEP, but a lot of times during the actual meeting I make sure that I take whatever notes I need, but I'm there to listen. That's what I feel like my role is during the meeting, to listen.

Through this comment, she articulated her view on the importance of everyone on the team having a voice and the importance of listening to each other.

Although not having the goals written ahead of time creates some anxiety for the special education teacher, she thinks it is important enough to put aside those feelings.

There's days I get nervous about going to them (IEP meetings), how we're going to end up planning things out. But I try not to really prep too much in advance because the whole purpose of the meeting is for everyone as a team to be together. I mean especially the parents and guardians, I mean that is the biggest thing, they need to have a say in everything. So, it may seem like it's more work on my end, but I feel like we've had a lot of good success from the way that I do it.

She continued, “I mean, every time I still get nervous and worked up over things and not making sure that I've got everything I need. But yeah, I also want to make sure that I'm not over preparing things specific to what I think or what some of the other members of the team think. It's the collaboration so, yep, it is definitely worth it.” She is clear that over preparing will lead to less participation from other team members.

Mom described her feelings of being part of the decision making as, “I feel like they are very much on the same page as me as far as having realistic goals for him and goals that are actually going to help him transition, cause right now we're building foundation.” She believes this team listens to her ideas and pays attention to what she says, especially in regards to Adam’s future.
The general education teacher also noted the effectiveness as a team and the effort made to keep parents involved. “I think as a team, we are pretty responsive to parents and take the time to listen and just slow down and not bulldoze through this, but talk to the parents as people, and just take a minute.” The special education teacher summed up the importance of everyone having a role when she stated,

Again, I want everyone to realize we are all in this, and that is not just one person making a decision, or a couple of us. That it has to be all of us to come to an agreement. That is what needs to be put in place. Even more so, even just to remind the parents or the guardians that, this is an opportunity for you to say, ‘actually I don’t know if I agree with that’. So, give them that voice.

She recognizes that parents play a vital role in the education of their children and wants them to know they can make suggestions and be involved.

Ensuring the entire IEP team was included in the IEP decision making was regarded as an expected process. The special education teacher appreciates the insight that other team members have from their work with Adam and other students. She values the knowledge of the parents. The rest of the team also understands the family has valuable information regarding the student and their input could lead to greater success for the child.

Participant observation of shared context of the purpose and process of the IEP meeting. During the participant observation, it was clear that the child was at the focus of the discussion. Mom started the meeting by putting a picture of her son in the middle of the table. She explained that this was an important reminder of why they were all there. Mom pointed out, “I went to a conference and they said to always make sure you bring a picture of the child who is involved in the IEP so that everyone remembers this is why
we’re here. And just how much, just how much growth he’s had.” The picture was one of her son at Halloween wearing a superman costume with large fake abdominal muscles. The group all chuckled and commented on the photo.

There was an obvious focus on sharing the positives during the meeting. The mom was worried she was taking too much time to share how proud she was of her son. The special education teacher interrupted and said, “Positives are good.” This is an example of her taking the time to confirm the intent of the mother to begin with positives; she knows it is important to mom and wants to give her the opportunity. The rest of the team indicated this was also appropriate. As mom was sharing, the team was nodding in agreement, and affirmations of ‘yes’ and ‘um hum’ could be heard from the group.

One of the comments Mom shared included, “And just how much, just how much growth he’s had. Even you know a year ago, he was not as outgoing, as smiley, or even interested in doing half of the stuff he does now, and it just makes a difference.” She also included, “The last 2 ½ years have been wonderful and he’s shown growth. He’s excelling and doing really well.” Keeping Adam at the focus she added, “Well, we just want to make sure that we put into place goals that can continue that upward—especially going into that next year with next year being a prep for him getting ready to go to middle school.” It was observed that Adam and his continued growth was very much at the center of the meeting. It was not about comparing him to other students in his grade or class; it was about what he was doing.

The para-educator also added positives by sharing the progress he has made on his school leadership job:
Can I say something about that? When it started, I would always point to the room number and then point to the classroom, and now I’ve just been standing back. The other day he took the wrong basket into the classroom and I knew it was the wrong basket, but I waited to see what he was going to do. He must have got in there and realized it was the wrong one and he came back out, looked at the room numbers and went to the right room. So, I’m just walking with him, but I’m just standing there and he is doing everything himself.

It was clear that the whole team was thinking about Adam and his progress.

The process of how the meeting would run was clearly indicated by the time spent on discussing goals and where they wanted Adam to go next. Goals were discussed and input was given by all team members. The special education teacher began the goal discussion by stating, “Okay, so I guess that is what we will work on next, I haven’t even begun to then look towards his goals and try to get anything written up or get any ideas that way, just because of wanting to make sure that we got a lot of that clarified. So I don’t know, open the table to you guys, I guess.” She encouraged others by stating, “So I just want to have that discussion as a team.” And often including comments that invited participation such as; “If other people want to go ahead and share anything else that they want to add about what they have seen with Adam and the progress and his growth.” These comments clearly indicated to other team members she was willing to listen and wanted their input.

When discussing specific goals, various comments were issued from several team members. The district representative added, “Well what if we, what if the goal is Adam will write a grammatically (correct sentence), or what do you want?” Mom added, “I like the idea of keeping the speech goal, what it is, and adding the why, and doing this separate. I still think eventually they could link, but for now I do think having them be
separate.” Mom was very clear about her thoughts regarding this goal. She was listened to and the goals remained separate.

The speech language pathologist (SLP) also encouraged discussion with her specific goal by stating, “For speech I was proposing maybe to continue with the books and having the visual support. But then with the who, what and where, now add in the why for a different skill and have that so it’s more concrete.” The SLP indicated here that she had a proposal; however, it was not set in stone. She would be willing to adapt her goal suggestion as needed. She indicated this by looking around at the group after she made her statement.

The para-educator was involved in several discussions about the child’s current level of academic ability that informed decision making around writing his goals. She shared with the team his progress regarding sight words.

At first I started laying 6 sight words out last year, and then I started 9. This year I was like we’re gonna try the whole 25. So I laid a whole list of 25 sight word flashcards out and he did very, very well. I laid them all on the table and I just said, Adam, give me this card. After he gave it to me, I would put it back, so he got 22 out of 25 on list one and 18 out of 25 on list 2.

The para-educator feels comfortable sharing what she has learned about Adam and what she is working on to support his learning.

Finally, the special education teacher concluded the meeting by asking, “Okay is there anything else we’d like to discuss. There’s obviously some more that I need to get put in and that kind of stuff.” She then looked around the table to make sure that everyone knew this was a final opportunity to add any important information.
At the beginning of the IEP meeting it was clear that the focus and tone were positive. Everyone was welcomed, individuals were chatting and several positive stories were shared. During the IEP discussion it was clear that members were offering suggestions for goals, listening to others ideas and weighing different options. No one tried to lead the discussion in one direction; it was a collaborative effort to ensure that decisions were made together through shared decision making.

**Personal experience with shared context.** When thinking back on my personal experience with shared context, there are two events that stand out to me from my son’s third grade IEP meeting. This was a big year, school officials kept reminding me there is a substantial change from third grade to fourth grade. We need to make sure that he is ready. I was somewhat prepared in advance for this to be a challenging IEP meeting. What I was not prepared for, was walking in and immediately being handed a box of tissues. It was clear that this meeting was not going to start with positives. Being handed a tissue box instantly made me nervous and apprehensive about where the conversation was headed. My guard was up from the minute we sat at the table to begin the discussion.

The meeting did progress from there. We had some push back about the amount of time my son would spend in the general education setting as he was constantly compared to what his peers were doing and he was not ready to do, however nothing too frustrating until we got to the end of the meeting. It was at this point I was told my son would not qualify for extended school year services despite having qualified every year previously. It appeared this decision had been made prior to the meeting without any input from our family.
At this point my frustration level increased. I told the other team members that I was not okay with this decision. I felt he needed the support to maintain progress he had made in following classroom procedures and communicating with others. After listening to my arguments, I was told they had no evidence that he would regress over the summer. I went on to ask what evidence did they have that he would not regress. He had attended summer school every year. I was very concerned about the extended gap in his exposure to school routines and communicating his needs outside of the home. The Area Education Agency representative at the meeting then commented, “We’re getting push back from the state about the number of kids we are recommending for extended school year services.” Instantly it became clear to me this decision was about more than what my child needed. The decision had been made to protect dollars, which would explain why I was not part of the discussion. I did leave the meeting letting them know I was not happy with that decision and would be following up with the district to express my concerns.

This was a frustrating meeting from my perspective. During the meeting, I felt we were focused on what my son could not do, instead of his strengths. I was also discouraged by the fact I did not have a voice in regards to extended school year services. I felt very little connection to the decisions made by the rest of the team; I felt I was an outsider being dictated to by the team, not sharing decisions with the team.

Adaptability: There’s Always Ways to Improve

Another theme emerging in response to the research question concerning supports to enhance parental participation was adaptability. During the interviews, it became clear that both the principal and the special education teacher recognized the important role
they played in setting the tone of the IEP meeting and making sure that parents felt included in the process. They discussed learning from their experiences and adapting to the needs of the parents. Through the interviews two dimensions of adaptability emerged: willingness to learn and meeting the needs of the parents/guardians of the child.

**Willingness to learn.** Both the principal and the special education teacher indicated they were still learning how to best serve their families and they needed to be open to trying new ideas. The principal specifically noted, “The more experiences you have the more you learn, and the more you grow as an educator. We know individuals never stop learning, and there's always ways to improve.” This is a powerful statement about recognizing the opportunity for growth as a school and staff.

The principal also illustrated the learning process that occurs through experience with the IEP process. “You learn from each meeting that you go to. Having an open mind is so (pause) I don't go in with any expectations other than we're gonna learn about a kid. And that changes each time I go into the room. It changes because of who the kid is. It changes because of the team.” The principal approaches each IEP meeting as an opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding regarding one child and their family. This is an important acknowledgement about one potential benefit of IEP meetings.

The special education teacher also described that she was still learning what parents needed and continued to adapt and change how she runs IEP meetings. “Since this is only my third year, I'm still very much always learning how to improve, make the meetings go a little bit better, smoother, whatever needs to happen.” She also noted that when she first started as a special education teacher, through word of mouth, she was told
to have everything prepared, goals written ahead of time for the IEP. She has since
learned this is not the best approach for her. She stated,

I mean once you kind of go through it a few times, you start to figure out how you
want the meeting to go, what the parents want, what their aspects and what kind
of things that they want. I know last year I tried sending a form home in advance
to kind of talk about, where do you see your child currently? What kind of things
do you want to talk about? To kind of provide a little clearer basis of what to
cover in the meeting.

The special education teacher clearly is not afraid of changing her approach to better
serve the parents and have more productive IEP meetings.

Differentiating the process based on the needs of parents/guardians. Through
sending out the IEP form to parents prior to the IEP meeting, the special education
teacher learned that some parents were receptive to this idea and some were not. She
commented on the different responses from parents. “Ones that I have very close
relationships with, they were right on board with it. But it did make it a little hard for
some of those other families. They felt like it was additional work, and I don't want it to
seem like it’s additional things.” Through this experience, she learned that parents would
need different strategies from her, and there was not a one-size-fits-all way for her to
interact with families.

The principal also stressed parents will need different approaches. She described
one guardian that was leery of changing the behavior plan for her grandchild. The
principal noted that she needed the school to clearly show her the evidence of the child’s
behavior.

We've even pinned together, behavior charts and the graphs from the IEP so that
we can see trends over time and not just from one year. I'm talking from several
years. We did that with a behavior goal that a kindergarten student had. He had
been in preschool for two years and we were looking at exiting him. Grandma
who has guardianship, was like, ‘No, no. He needs that behavior goal. He's had
all sorts of issues, no, he needs that behavior goal.’ So, we went back and we said,
‘let's look at this’, so we showed the graph and we showed the spike and a few
behaviors and then all the sudden it levels off. And we showed how that student is
not discrepant from their peers. So that data, changed their minds, and they're like
‘okay I'm okay with this. Let's do a trial.’

She described how important the clear visual supports were for the guardian of that child.

Through the explanation and clearly showing the growth the child had made and
explaining it would be a trial basis, the guardians trusted it was the right decision.

The principal values continuing to work on supporting parents by trying out new
ideas. She has asked her staff to examine using what she calls an IEP snapshot.

We actually created and I am working on what we call an IEP snapshot. It's
almost an agenda for the meeting; it puts it in parent-friendly language. We're
working on implementing it step-by-step, I'm meeting with a small group of
instructional strategists. I don't want it to seem like one more thing they have to
do, but a lot of times parents will sit in meetings and be looking around because
the teacher usually has her papers and her computer and goals in front of them
and they're going through it. They might have a draft for the parent, but they
might not, depending on how much is changing. But then usually I have my
computer and parents can sometimes feel a little bit lost. So I am having them try
out that snapshot. We're going to see how that goes. I’ve used it at the high school
level and parents love it.

Again, this shows that willingness from the administration to try new things and think
about what the parents might need to support them in the process.

The IEP team members have learned through experience that parents will need
different supports from them. The special education teacher understands she will have to
work to learn about different parental needs and adjust to accommodate for those needs.

Allowing for this adaptability in her approach supports the role of parents in the IEP
process. It also adds to the meaning of the word individualized by including individualization for parents.

Participant observation of adaptability during the IEP meeting. Through the observation of the IEP meeting there were several examples of educators adapting to the needs of the parents or demonstrating a willingness to learn. At one point the mother expressed confusion regarding which graph was representing which goal. The special education teacher noted, “And that is a pointer for me, that would be good for me to write on there (the document) math, reading (pauses, points to chart and says) so this is speech.” She is willing to openly admit that she can make adjustments to ensure parents are not confused during the meeting.

During another point in the meeting, the team was talking about the success of the child and noticing the impact that different strategies have had on supporting him in the classroom. The special education teacher stated, “I would agree with that too. I think that’s a lot of what goes into play, of what is really helping Adam be successful and being able to put those things in place—just our openness and being able to try different things and be able to make things work.” Again, this team has demonstrated an openness and willingness to change for the benefit of the child.

This team demonstrated openly they feel it is important to adapt and try new approaches, not only in regards to educational strategies, but how they work to build relationships and include parents in the IEP process. They also indicated their willingness to learn about what parents might need from them.
Personal experience with adaptability. Having school staff that are open to learning new approaches and willing to try new ideas was identified as important in creating a supportive IEP team. I have certainly come across teachers and administrators who have been willing to listen to some of my suggestions and provide new opportunities for my children. There have, however, been individuals who have resisted change, especially when it comes to using technology supports with my children.

One of the most frustrating instances of this was with my daughter’s IEP team; specifically, the SLP and her special education teacher. Through outside speech language services my daughter was evaluated and approved for an assistive technology device. Insurance covered a device she could control with her eyes to communicate. Her physical disabilities are such that she is not able to speak or use her hands intentionally. I will admit, that this is a complicated piece of equipment; however, it is critical that my daughter be given an opportunity to interact with the world and have a voice in the classroom. In order to effectively use her device, my daughter needed a lot of practice, which I assumed the school would be willing to provide during her school day. Minimal attempts were made to allow her time to practice and at one point, I was even told that when her para-educator was absent, the device was not used. The para-educator was the only one who knew how to turn it on.

After expressing my frustration with the lack of use of her device, the SLP made the comment that it was not a device the school had recommended, so they weren’t really required to use it. Thankfully, I was not alone in this meeting. It was a meeting being held to discuss my daughter’s transition to her next school. The speech language therapist
that my daughter would be transitioning to jumped in quickly and made several comments about the responsibility of the school to support student communication and learn what each student needed. It was a welcoming experience to have someone else stand up for my daughter. I think it was one of the few times I felt I had a true ally when it came to my daughter’s education experiences. Prior to that, I had always felt resistance from staff regarding her inclusion, and I felt I needed to defend her attendance at our neighborhood school.

As a parent, the lack of a willingness to learn about a new technology was frustrating. There was a company in town that would provide training for free. Change and learning takes effort, and it is a mindset of being open to new learning and opportunities. Sadly, it is not an attitude that everyone who has worked with my children has embraced.

**Empathy: Imagine if it Was Somebody You Loved**

Another theme concerning supports to enhance authentic parental participation that emerged through participant interviews with the general education teacher and the principal was that of empathy. The principal and the general education teacher both have personal experiences with their own children being on IEPs. This has allowed them to understand what it is like from the parent sides of the table. Their personal experiences have contributed to how they interact in IEP meetings.

The principal commented:

I have kind of a unique perspective, having taught special needs students in a gen ed classroom. I've been a parent at an IEP table, I've been an administrator at an IEP table, so not everybody can say that, and it brings kind of a unique perspective. So, when it comes to families I often times will stop in the middle of
an IEP meeting when we get into our jargon, our acronyms and I'll slow things down and say, 'wait, now let's communicate this the right way. Let's talk about what it is this specifically means.'

Although her child is not in school anymore, she clearly remembers how confusing and overwhelming the meetings can be for parents.

The principal also encourages teachers to see things from the point of view of the parents. “Imagine if it was somebody you loved and cherished and means the world to you. You're entrusting them in the hands of people you might not know very well. But you're trusting that they're going to make good decisions and do the best for your child.”

Through this she is encouraging team members to understand the perspective and emotion of the parents at the IEP meeting.

The general education teacher also challenges others to understand the perspective of the parents,

I think they (educators at an IEP meeting) need to understand the high emotion, there's almost, and again I can only speak about myself, there is . . (pause) it was like there was a sense of loss, because my child would not have the normal obstacles. They would have all those normal obstacles, plus. And what was my child's potential and because of these obstacles, was that going to limit the potential and the dream of the potential that I have for my child? And the fact that my kid was going to struggle, and I don't want my kid to struggle. No parent wants that. So I mean as a teacher for 17 years now, I've done IEP meetings where there hasn't been that warmth for the parent, and I've straight up said, ‘Look, put yourself in their shoes or in my experience as a mom of a kid who has an IEP. This is a whole different experience. This is what it feels like.’ And sometimes it makes a difference and sometimes it doesn't, but I feel like I have to say something for the kid and the parent.

It is clear, her personal experiences added to her understanding of the emotion that can go along with the process.
The general education teacher also described how her personal experiences have impacted her behaviors with her students and parents in IEP meetings. She commented, “Include the parent, ask their opinion, value their input, be pleasant, be positive, remember that there's a kid at the center of all of this. That kid is a little person with feelings and their parents are big people with feelings, and they both need to be handled with care and gentleness.” She feels strongly about including the parents in a positive way that values their feelings.

The general education teacher also described validating the emotions of the parents. When discussing supporting parents that were fearful or nervous, she suggested educators respond with,

What can I do to help you? What can I do to make you feel better? How can I help you get through this? I'm sure it is scary, or I know it's scary. You can come talk to me anytime, you know we're here for your child. We're going to get through this. It's going to be okay. And then keep that line of communication going. Keep checking back with them and saying, okay here's the final IEP. Do you feel any better about this? Are you still nervous? Are you still scared? Do you have any questions? And then like answer the questions in parent language, not teacher language.

The general education teacher was clearly able to articulate what should happen in IEP meetings based on her frustration as a parent on the other side of a table.

The principal and general education teacher have both had experiences as a parent in an IEP meeting. This has given them a different perspective than other IEP team members. They do want to encourage all teachers to try and understand the perspective of the parent and how challenging the meetings can be from the parent’s perspective. They feel supporting parents in this difficult situation will increase the comfort level of the parent and encourage their participation.
Observation of empathy during the IEP meeting. Empathy and support of parental emotion was evident during the IEP meeting. There was one instance where Mom expressed a specific fear regarding future school years for her child saying, “I am a little nervous about next year.” This comment was met with strong support from the IEP team. The district representative commented, “We’ll take it in steps.” The special education teacher stated, “And we are all still here. We’re here to support you and get what he needs in place.” Strong affirmations from the rest of the team were observed through nodding and verbal responses of, “yes” and “of course.”

Support for the parents was also observed as the special education teacher stopped to make sure the parents were looking at the correct graph for the goal they were discussing. She would pause when needed to ensure individuals were on the same page of the IEP document and often asked if anyone wanted to add anything. There was also a break in the meeting when the school day ended so Adam’s parents could make sure that he was attended to and their other two children knew they were going home with their father. Adam came into the meeting before he left with his father. He walked around the table as the team told him they would see him tomorrow and to have a good night.

During the IEP meeting it was clear that concern for mom and her IEP experience was evident. The team demonstrated empathy by clarifying information when needed and supporting Mom as she voiced concern for her child’s future.

Personal experience with empathy. As I was observing Adam’s IEP, I was immediately overwhelmed by the supportive tone from the staff when Mom expressed her fears regarding the transition to a new classroom. Acknowledging fears as a parent is
a difficult thing to do. It is almost as if you are afraid to put into words what keeps you up at night, or admit you are not sure what your child’s future will be. The response from Adam’s team was not to dismiss Mom’s fears, but to let her know they would be there to support her, to support Adam and build his skills so that he would be ready for the next challenge—even the move to middle school. They empathized with her position and her desire to get him ready for his uncertain future.

Observing this experience immediately brought to mind a time that I shared a fear with Kylie’s IEP team regarding her future. I admitted that it was scary thinking about her not being able to have a job or a purpose for getting out of the house each day. My shared uncertainty was met with silence. At the time, I was hoping for some acknowledgment that I wouldn’t be figuring this out by myself, but no one seemed to know how to respond. The possibility of my daughter not having gainful employment after her school career ends is real. I wasn’t expecting school personnel to have the magic answer, I just wanted to discuss these fears with others and feel supported.

Mother’s Knowledge of Self, Child and Rights: Challenge Accepted

A final support that enhanced parental participation in this IEP meeting was this mother’s knowledge and advocacy. During the interviews with the mother, it became very clear that she was confident in her role as an advocate for her child, she believed in her knowledge of her son’s abilities and finally she had made it a priority to understand her legal rights as a parent of a child on an IEP.

Self as advocate: Sorry not sorry. The mother has embraced her role as advocate for her child. She describes her jobs in life as being a mother, a nurse, a wife and finally,
“My fourth job would be being an advocate for my son, so I feel like my plate’s pretty full.” She realized she would have to be more involved in his education following her son’s kindergarten year. This year she describes as, “Kindergarten was a rough year. The special ed teacher left mid-year and was replaced with varying substitute teachers, so it lacked consistency.” The classroom teacher was selected, as she had prior experience with inclusion, an educational expectation that Mom preferred for Adam. Describing her experience with the general education classroom teacher, she explained:

When we went to conferences, she didn’t come to our meeting. I signed something so that it was okay that she miss the IEP meeting. She said she had something else going on. Whatever, it was fine. But then we ran into her at the school program in April and she goes, and who is this little guy, to which I looked at her and went, ‘this is Adam. He’s been in your classroom since the first day of school.’ ‘Oh, I’m sure I would remember him’, no, no, no, no, no I don’t know what just happened here, but that was the moment I realized, okay. Apparently, I’m not talking loud enough, I’m not getting through to the people I need to get through to. So, the following day I went to the principal’s office and said we are going to meet before school starts. I am going to know who Adam’s teacher is ahead of time.

This experience contributed to her taking a more vocal and active role in Adam’s education. She learned to ask questions and meet with his team prior to the beginning of each school year to explain her expectations.

She also did not have a favorable view of the IEP meeting during this year.

In kindergarten, the IEP meeting was not a good IEP meeting. Like the format, I’m looking at it, it was kind of all over the place. One of the pages wasn’t even Adam’s page. It was another kid’s page. It was this huge mess. The general education teacher wasn’t at the meeting, which by that time I had realized the whole format and documentation were not right. It was the first one I had ever gone to without Scott because he had to work. Everything was screwed up with the paperwork, by the time I had realized what had happened I was so frustrated I signed whatever so that if the general education teacher wasn’t there I didn’t care. I really didn’t need another person to add to my stress level.
This experience taught her the importance of carefully checking the IEP document. She couldn’t trust that it would be done the way it was supposed to be done.

Both of these experiences contributed to her deciding she had to be more involved and began viewing herself as an advocate. “I stepped up and said, okay this can’t continue this way. This is not how it’s going to be, this is how it’s going to be. And if you’re unhappy with that I’m sorry, not sorry.” She understood that at times she was going to have to be more forceful with her expectations for Adam’s education and not be a silent observer.

She did admit that occasionally she is still is a little uncomfortable being forceful, but recognizes she needs to do it. She described, “So, while the prim and proper me that my mother brought up with manners and etiquette and that wanted so badly to be nice and kind the other day when they kept trying to change what the math goal was going to be I kept going back to no, it needs to be something that he can utilize as a life skill. I don’t care if he can find the vertex angle of an isosceles triangle.” Mom is willing to push herself outside of her comfort zone to make sure that Adam is getting the supports he needs and feels comfortable doing that with this group.

She understands that being an advocate has its challenges for parents. “I think the biggest thing is that at the end of the day, I’m not there to be their friend, and so if I have to put my foot down and to push on it, I will.” She describes learning from other parents that you needed to advocate for your child. “I started meeting other moms. I met you in that time frame, and some other people in that time frame and discovered that my
chatting and big mouth was actually gonna be put to good use and I was going to advocate for him.”

Belief in knowledge of child. Through the years, Mom has been aware of Adam’s challenges and is proud of the growth he has shown. “Because whether he’s aware of it or not, he had overcome so many things that a lot of people had told us he would not be able to do. So he is kind of a superman in my mind.” She is confident that as his parents, they have valuable information to add to the conversation. “We are the ones that are his parents. We are the ones, that at this point in time, know what is best for him.”

She also commented that her goals for Adam are realistic, and she knows what he should be working on.

We don't have anything miraculous, like we would like him to be able to read out loud by the end of the school year. Please, make my nonverbal child read out loud by the end of the school year. That's crazy. I mean, I don't have any illusions that he's not ever going to talk, but I also don't have any illusions that he's going to walk into the kitchen and be quoting Shakespeare tomorrow.

Mom has a strong understanding of what Adam is capable of. She knows he has limitations, but just wants him to keep moving forward.

Knowledge of rights. Finally, the mother’s knowledge of her rights as a parent in IEP meetings has impacted her participation. She began exploring her rights after her first IEP meeting. “The very, very first IEP meeting I ever went to, they handed me the rights and said, ‘you can read this if you want to, most people don’t. Challenge accepted.’” She went on to comment on the importance of knowing those rights, “I've also read the parent rights, which I truly, truly feel it gets handed to parents, and I think parents throw it to the side. I really honestly think that everybody sits back and says nobody reads it.” She
continued, “The parent’s rights, as much as you don’t want to, and it’s not a fun read, I mean it’s not, but you need to know that you have every right in the world to tell them no.”

The special education teacher also described how the mother’s knowledge of her rights has helped her participate in IEP meetings,

I think she would definitely jump in if she didn't agree with something either way, but I think she has made herself become more familiar with some of the language and being able to understand what her rights are and when she can put input in. Which technically, she can put it in at all times. So, I think that has helped, and sometimes I wonder if that's where some of the other parents or guardians feel, not quite like they're even really in it. Maybe they don't know necessarily what they can partake in and what they can and what they can't say.

She feels Mom’s understanding of the process and her rights is a valuable piece. She worries other parents don’t have this knowledge.

Mom commented several times how connections to other parents helped her understand her rights and feel comfortable in her role as an advocate.

There is so much new information and there is so much emphasis put on learning it. At the same time, if I didn’t know people like you and Jane and my friends Megan and Taylor, and you guys have gone through your struggles, I wouldn’t have been able to stand up and say, ‘No. I’m sorry I’m putting my foot down, no.’ Because you guys made me aware that that was an option. You guys are all people that are the nicest people in the world and very willing to help me. I don’t ever want to be the one that has to face you down when it comes to your kids.

Mom stresses the importance of having resources and support from families that have gone through the journey.

I don't know how the parents that came before us, did this without becoming alcoholics or bald from pulling their hair out. Because seriously, I'll have moments where I'm like, I can't do this. I don't know how come I'm the one that got chosen to be his mom and then I sit back and say nope, I can do this. I just need to get in touch with so and so because she has boys. She'll help me
understand this. Or I'll get in touch with so and so because they have a communicative device, or they've gone through this or they've gone through that. It is what keeps me sane. It is what keeps me being able to take care of my other two children. It is what keeps me married.

She feels strongly that these connections have contributed to her ability to stand up when she needs to and be comfortable in her role as advocate.

The special education teacher also noted how connections to other parents would be a valuable support that not all parents currently have.

It would be nice if the district could maybe try and build a whole community. I think that would be very helpful, cause a lot of times I've even had parents come and ask me, ‘I don't even know where to go. I don't know what to look into?’ And I know they rely on the school a lot for some of that direction. It would be nice if we could give a little more of that to them.

She believes creating the social network for parents will allow them to deepen their understanding of their educational role as a parent of a child with a disability.

Mom has clearly embraced her role as advocate for her child. She views her knowledge as an important asset in supporting her son’s educational experience. She is confident in what she knows and feels comfortable sharing information about Adam’s behaviors at home and what he is capable of doing.

Observation of Mother’s knowledge of self, child and rights during the IEP meeting. Prior to the IEP meeting the mother made her role as advocate for her son known to the entire team. She arrived to the meeting wearing a bright red t-shirt with the words, “Mama Bear” printed boldly on the front. She felt comfortable choosing a seat and chatting with the team members that were already in the room.
During the IEP meeting Mom interjected comments frequently and was willing to ask questions. At one point, she wanted to make sure that they changed the wording in the document to represent his current means of communication. “When we go to write his stuff up, rather than to write POD, do you want to word it communication device?” Asking this question was her way of advocating he needed to have the term communication device replace his previous method of communication in the IEP. She is aware that what is in the IEP is what individuals will be required to use with him.

She was also very involved during the discussion around Adam’s reading goal. The team was discussing moving from sight words to focusing on reading comprehension, “I’m okay focusing on the comprehension and not sweating his reading level, because if he can comprehend it, he can read it.” She continued sharing her thoughts when it came to combining the literacy and speech goal. “I like the idea of keeping the speech goal what it is, and adding the why, and doing this separate.” She then elaborated by stating, “I still think eventually they could link, but for now I do think having them be separate is better.” She clearly had an opinion of what she thought was best for Adam, and was comfortable sharing this with the group of professionals around the table. Her comment was met with acceptance from the team and the goals remained separate.

Mom’s knowledge aided her ability to interject thoughts into the meeting and share her insight. She asked questions to guide discussion and felt comfortable giving her opinions regarding the goals they were discussing. Her view of herself as an advocate showed through out her engagement in the meeting and leaning in to the discussions.
Personal experience with knowledge of self, children and rights. I can relate to the experiences of this mother so well. It has taken time for me to overcome the desire to be polite and cooperative and truly advocate for my children. I grew up feeling an intense need to be liked, to be cooperative and included. I have transferred that desire for my children to be liked and included by the professionals that work with them on a daily basis. Every time I choose to pick a battle, I do it carefully. I have a fear that my anger or frustration will somehow impact the services my children receive or how they are viewed by others. I also do not want to intimidate other members of the IEP team. I have a concern that if they are afraid of me, or see me as combative they won’t tell me what they are really thinking for fear of how I will react.

Over time, I have had to learn the hard way that I need to speak up, and sometimes it has to be forcefully. There was one instance when my daughter was in junior high and every day that she had physical education class, her note home would say, “Kylie watched the kids play basketball.” Or “Kylie watched the kids run around the track.” This was frustrating as I was sure there was a better way. I could tell at my meetings with the special education teacher that she was also frustrated about what was happening, but the physical education staff was not willing to adapt and did not want to meet and brainstorm other options. One of the physical education staff members even complained to my husband because we had questioned what was happening.

After two months of nothing changing and seeing notes home about the new activities Kylie was watching in PE every day, I had had enough. It was time to be the advocate my daughter needed. I communicated my frustration regarding Kylie’s self-
esteem and the message we were sending her, and also the message her peers were receiving about what it means to include everyone. The e-mail was shared with the school administration and the principal was on the phone five minutes later telling me things would change tomorrow. I did not make any friends in the PE department that year, but adaptive warm up games were beginning to be included in the PE class, and Kylie was pushed around the track in her wheelchair instead of watching from the sidelines.

I often share with others that I feel like I am walking a tightrope between advocating for my kids and not wanting to create tension with the people who work with my children every day. In this instance, I reached a breaking point and had to speak up, but I avoid showing that level of frustration if at all possible. I still haven’t really developed that sense of team with the professionals who are working with my children. To this day, I still feel like we have opposing goals, and there is always an underlying tension of what is not said during IEP meetings.

In this chapter, several supports were identified to encourage parental participation in IEP meetings. They included: welcoming relationships, shared context of the purpose and process of IEP meetings, collaborative goal writing, adaptability, empathy and the knowledge of the mother. While these themes are critical for creating supports for parental participation, it is also important to identify barriers that may exist that discourage parental participation. The following barriers were identified through participant interviews and allow for a deeper perspective on how to work with parents to ensure IEP meetings are beneficial for the child, and supportive of the role of parents.
Barriers to Parental Participation

The second research question explored what the discourse during an IEP meeting and perceptions of IEP team members reveal about barriers to authentic parental participation. Several themes emerged during the interviews with IEP team members. Barriers included overwhelming emotion and perceptions of IEP meetings, goals being written prior to the IEP meeting, individuals outside the day-to-day interactions with a child interjecting “expert” ideas into a meeting, the disruptive effect of educational jargon, and the prescribed IEP process as evidenced in both the interviews and analysis of the IEP document and Parent’s Rights Handbook. A final barrier included the challenge of maintaining relationships.

IEP Emotion and Perception: An “Overwhelming” Experience

During the interview with Mom, she clearly articulated the reputation IEP meetings have of being stressful and emotional for parents. She explained her fears going into the first IEP meeting based on stories and experiences she had heard from others. “So I had this horrible feeling going in that I would have no control over any of it, that my thoughts, my opinions and what I wanted for my child would not be recognized at all.”

She went on to describe that the formal, legal aspect of the meeting added to the anxiety, “I think that the negativity comes from the people that look at it as it’s a legal document. We have to make sure whatever we put in there is stuff that we can back up. And yes, those are all true statements, but at the same time you’re going to take the time
to put it into a document, you should be able to back it up. It shouldn’t be, oh crap, we
shouldn’t put this in there because we might not be able to do it.”

When thinking about how to have better IEP meetings, she discussed if they were
more frequent, they might not be as intimidating for parents. “So my big thing is that I
wish that they met more. I wish that it wasn’t scary for people. I wish parents didn’t act
like it’s death to them. It honestly should be a celebration to figure out where you are
moving forward to. That’s how it should be.”

Mom also added that parents should not be surprised about what is discussed at
IEP meetings.

There should be no surprises. There should be no secrets. There should be
nothing, you know everything. It should be about the child, it should be about the
goals and really everything else should not be brought up there. It should be a
celebration of what you’ve accomplished not what you’ve accomplished, but what
the child has accomplished with you. It’s not and it’s unfortunate that it’s not.

While this mother has recently been experiencing positive IEP meetings, she is aware that
other families have different experiences.

The general education teacher also commented on the strong emotion of IEP
meetings. “This whole process is overwhelming. Absolutely overwhelming.” She
continued, “I think it's because, and I can only speak from my own experience as a
parent, it's the overwhelming emotion of here we go again. My baby needs something,
and I don't know what. I don't know how to fix this. This is a problem that I as a mom
cannot fix. And I don't know where to go to fix it.” The emotion of discussing
deficiencies instead of focusing on growth is very challenging for parents, especially if
they feel they do not know how to help them.
The perception of IEP meetings as stressful and emotional creates a sense of tension for parents prior to even entering the meeting room. This stress can limit their authentic participation as overwhelming emotions impact their ability to communicate their thoughts, remember important information they want to include in the meeting, and listen to what other individuals are including in the meeting.

Prior Written Goals: “Eliminating” Parental Participation

In contrast to the theme suggesting the collaborative IEP goal development as a support enhancing parental participation, the principal, special education teacher and the general education teacher all commented on the lack of parent participation if the goals were written prior to the meeting. They believed little discussion occurs when goals are already decided upon.

The principal stated, “I know they like to have, (pause) there are some teachers who like to have it all done ahead of time and they'll write draft on it. But they already have their mind made up. This is what I want the goals to be; this is what I want, but it's not. There are changes that need input, and there are serious things to take into consideration.” Speaking specifically about the impact on parental participation the principal added:

It limits it (parental participation), it almost eliminates it. It's frustrating. If you walk in there and the goal is already done, they're just presenting. It’s a presentation you're sitting through. You're not part of a team, and that's not what we want. Parents have a voice, they have an opinion to be able to add in and they do, a lot of time, know what is best for their kid or have information that we don't that they could share.

This administrator understands that to allow discussion on the goals, they cannot be determined prior to the meeting.
The special education teacher discussed that it should take a team to write the goals and not just one person. She described why she was originally told by other teachers and some teachers still to have them done prior,

I know that you want to have everything prepped and ready to go, but sometimes it's better if you don't. Because there's even been times where you think it's all good and grand and I've heard through the years that people have said, you know I had it all prepped and ready to go, and then I had to go back through and redo it. Well maybe you shouldn't have it prepped and ready to go, cause again it takes the whole team to create the IEP, and it's not just the teacher so that would be my biggest thing. Just reminding them that it is the whole team. Don't put more work on yourself in the aspect of having to redo things and make sure you're communicating with everybody before you get that written up.

Over time she has learned that this is not the approach that works for her. She wants others to be involved in the decision making.

The general education teacher was able to describe IEP meetings where she has seen both the approach of goals written ahead of time, and ones where the goals are written in the meeting. The general education teacher illustrated:

When you walk into a meeting and the goals are written, then the parent is not consulted or included in the goal making process, which I don't think is necessarily fair. And I've walked into meetings like the one where we had and everybody contributed and everybody had input. I think when you walk into a meeting and the goals are already written the parents are not happy, I'm not responsible for that, but I feel like it's important to listen to what that parent has to say. And okay, you walk in with a goal. It's written but if the parents say, well I think this needs to be added or I think this is too much, I feel like that should be respected.

Here again it was evident that some teachers still write goals ahead of time, but this team has clearly come to view prior written goals as a barrier to parental participation.

The educators on this IEP team feel strongly that goals written prior to the meeting do not invite parental participation. They see this as a way to dictate to parents
what the goals should be, and that is not creating an opportunity for the group to function as a collaborative team.

**Outsiders: “Experts” Negatively Influencing Parental Participation**

The mom and the principal also discussed that sometimes individuals that are not part of the IEP team can add stress to the meeting. This could be in the form of an expert in a certain area that the parents might bring in, or a district representative that is not familiar with the child. Either way, the balance of the team is thrown off.

The principal described one such occasion.

There's been a couple of times actually, one parent has brought in some recommendations from an outside source. Psychiatrist, doctors, that had done evaluations. They had some good things that they brought to the table that really benefitted, but then there were some things that were recommendations in there that didn't necessarily meet the kid’s needs in a long-term function. So, it's really difficult when someone from an outside source is saying, ‘Oh, well this is what would work’ based off of a one-time meeting, or maybe a short-term session.

The principal described that professional insight could be valuable; however, they should not override the experience of the team that works with the child at school every day.

The mother also described how knowing her child was an important component of her willingness to listen to suggestions from others. She specified:

However, I don’t always feel it’s appropriate to put somebody in the setting of, I’m gonna have this person from the district who’s never, ever worked with this child, couldn’t pick this child out of a line-up and be the one to help dictate what’s going to happen. If they’re there to say this is what the district can provide, great. As far as putting in any input, no thank you to that.

She further elaborated,

Unfortunately, I always walk into those meetings and whoever comes from the district has the feeling like they need to be the person in charge, which is part of the reason why I always try and get it back to the special education teacher. Cause
no, I'm sorry. You are spending one day, (the special education coordinator) is an exception to that, because she has worked with Adam. However, usually whoever the person is from the district couldn't pick my son out from a line up, so no, you don't get to lead this conversation. You don't get to dictate it.

Mom clearly would prefer to take advice and suggestions from individuals she feels know Adam and what he should be working on. This statement connects to the importance of relationships with the IEP team members. Mom added, “Now that's not to say if an expert did come in, I wouldn't take time to listen to what they have to say. However, I would also be figuring out in my head the entire time how it relates to my situation and my child.” Listening for her, would be impeded by the other considerations going on in her mind.

**Disruptive Effects of Educational Jargon and the Prescribed IEP Process**

The educators involved in this IEP team understand the need to avoid the use of jargon with parents. The special education teacher posited, “We use all those different acronyms, you know what those mean, and I know sometimes that can be very intimidating, I know that there are still parents that I have meetings with, they still get very intimidated by some of that kind of stuff.” The special education teacher is mindful to avoid using some educational terms when she can or explain them as needed. However, she cannot avoid the use of the IEP document, the IEP graphs or the Parents Rights Handbook.

**IEP document: Umpteen page document.** Despite the attempt to avoid the use of jargon in IEP meetings, the team is locked into using the required IEP document and graphs. The general education teacher stated, “You know, reading IEPs as a parent, is really, really overwhelming. Sometimes as the teacher it's overwhelming.” She added,
“Well you've got this umpteen page document that you are being handed that is not user friendly to someone who is not in education. For one thing, the graphs are confusing, they don't teach us to read graphs like that in high school, college, whatever.” The principal also commented during her interview on the IEP document, “It's not super parent friendly, it's really not.” All team members were aware the document was challenging for parents, but felt helpless in their ability to change the document.

The special education teacher also described the challenges regarding the contents of the IEP document. “There is so much slang, and that is something I don't like. Sometimes going through the IEPs with them, some of that wording and things, you know we're talking about minutes and it's just like, do you guys even really know. Do you guys even know how many minutes there are supposed to be in a day for each subject and what are the limitations to all of that?” She went on to explain some of her frustration with the document.

I feel like a lot of times it's very repetitive to write it. We hear all the time, oh you're supposed to clarify it a different way to specify this and that, well, what? What do we need to include to help clarify? I mean how many times do you technically refer to the A page the B page. Do you guys even understand what each page is supposed to be explaining. Again, they use so many of those acronyms throughout most of it and that's where I feel bad sometimes about it, even though you have to send copies home.

There is clear frustration on the part of the special education teacher with the requirements of the document.

**Parent Rights Handbook: Monster packet.** All three professional participants also discussed the required use of the Parental Rights Handbook. Participants felt this
document was not helpful for families. They thought the size and the language used deterred parents from reading it. The general education teacher described:

We're handed this monster packet. As a teacher, I've tried to read the packet, and I find it overwhelming cause it's written in legalese. I feel like somewhere there should be a version of the parents’ rights that is in down-to-earth, very clear cut plain English. Especially, sometimes we have parents that you know aren't college educated or maybe they've come from a special needs background themselves. I'm college educated and I couldn't understand it.

The principal commented on her first experience with the book in her role as a parent, “I don't know as a parent I ever read the book. It was daunting and overwhelming.” From the perspective of these professionals, the handbook does not contribute to parent knowledge in the way it was intended.

The special education teacher illustrated her frustration with the manual stating,

The Parent Rights Handbook, they take it in their car, maybe forget about it under the seat, maybe throw it on the counter, in the office, in the filing cabinet, boom done. And I know that on-line you can find like an edited condensed summary, but I still feel like that's overwhelming, cause my first year I used to print that off in addition to giving the handbook, and again, I felt like that was still so much jargon.

She would appreciate a different approach to keeping parents informed that would eliminate jargon completely.

The principal went on to describe that teachers don’t have confidence parents will read it. She explained one incident where she was attending an IEP meeting and the teacher discounted the value of the document for parents. “One of the most challenging, or I guess one of the worst IEP meetings was when the special ed teacher handed the parent the notebook, the parent rights book, and said oh, you probably don't even want this anyway. It could be used as a table leg or chair. And you just want to I just looked at
the teacher in that meeting and I said no. This has valuable information that can be used.”

The document frustrates teachers and parents alike. Very few individuals see the value of the information included or recognize how to change it to support parents.

Educators are keenly aware of the discomfort and confusion that educational jargon causes for parents. Despite this awareness, the legal nature of the IEP process, the IEP document and the Parent Rights Handbooks are rigid tools from which educators are not free to deviate. These unfamiliar documents create tension for parents and limit their ability to comfortably participate in the IEP process.

**The Challenge in Maintaining Relationships: Picking Battles**

Welcoming relationships was identified as one support that encourages parental participation. Maintaining relationships was reported as a possible barrier to parental participation. Participants reported that relationships could be disturbed by fear, devaluing and broken trust. Once relationships were disrupted, authentic parental participation was diminished.

**Fear of being labeled.** Mom indicated that the fear of being labeled could occasionally impact what she chooses to communicate to other IEP team members. She expressed, “I try to be as cooperative and pick my battles as best I can.” She continued:

You don't want to be marked as the mom that always complains. You don't want to be the mom that is always the problem, or the parent that is always the problem. You don't want to have the stigma of being constantly nit-picking and nothing ever makes you happy, and nothing is ever right. When at the same time, you have to take a step back and remember the people that are working with your child, at least have the assumption, unless they prove otherwise, also want what's best for your child.
She went on to describe that it was important to maintain relationships because you would be interacting with the individuals in the district for a long time. She explained:

So, trying to not get labeled, and trying to not give the impression that you're uncooperative and hard to work with so that you don't have problems down the road, especially if you are starting out. Adam was three years old when we started in the district, so you don't want to give the impression out of the gates, when he is three years old, that I am not going to cooperate. I am not going to do this. When you know at age three you've got 15 more years with the school district, and that's a long 15 years, so it's better for everybody.

These comments indicate, in this case, Mom is concerned about how she is perceived and wants to avoid a reputation of being uncooperative with people she knows she will be in a long-standing relationship. This fear has the potential to affect both relationships and her participation.

Devaluing team members: Voices not heard. Another barrier that was described by the general education teacher in regards to relationships of team members is ensuring all team members have value. She indicated that at times, the voices of parents and instructional assistants are not heard. She commented, “Parents have trouble speaking up. I feel like they don't feel like they have control or input or they're not valued in this process. They're coming to school and everybody else is telling them what's happening with their child, which I don't think is at all right.” She believes the mom in this team is capable of speaking up for herself; however, other parents are not comfortable interjecting into the conversation. The general education teacher added,

But somebody else who is not as able to speak up for themselves, sometimes they feel like maybe they come in and they're being railroaded. They're just being told what is going to happen and don't feel like they know enough about the process or they don't know enough about education to say no, that doesn't work. Or yeah, I really like that. They just don't have that.
The general education teacher also believes that instructional assistants should have a more consistent voice at IEP meetings. She communicated, “Para, or instructional assistants, whatever the new title is, I feel like their opinion isn't nearly as valued as it should be for that exact reason. Fine, they don't have a teaching degree, but that doesn't mean that they don't know about the kid. That doesn't mean that they don't know how to teach them something. They look at it maybe from a whole different perspective.” She would like to ensure the voice of the para-educators are heard during meetings when possible.

It is critical that voices from all team members are respected. If the parents do not feel they are valued or team members who have close relationship with their children are not valued, it will hinder their ability to participate effectively. Barriers exist when an IEP atmosphere does not support a collaborative team process.

**Broken trust: “Bruises” and “frustrations.”** In order to maintain relationships essential to enhancing parental participation in IEP meetings, participants commented that trust was important. The principal shared one story of an IEP team where the IEP was not being followed and how that impacted the relationship.

That can bruise that trust relationship. I know for a fact that the parent was over the moon frustrated. She now has the viewpoint that the IEP is only worth the paper it is written on unless it is implemented and followed. And she's 100% right. She was angry, she was very angry. And, not that she wants to point fingers, but we are accountable. We are responsible in every sense of the word for following that IEP. It took time to build that trust back up. There was a lot more doubt when we called and there were issues.
The general education teacher also explained a time when her child’s IEP was not being followed and the damage that had for her relationship with school personnel. In situations where the IEP is not followed, it is difficult to maintain relationships.

The principal emphasized the importance of choosing words carefully, being mindful of what you say in IEP meetings and remembering to be politically correct. She described one IEP meeting where the teacher was frustrated and did not select appropriate words to explain the relationship of the para-educator and the child to the parents.

Well it goes back to that whole, don't say, ‘Well I'm not going to follow the IEP.’ You don't say, ‘Well, his para can't stand him.’ That's an example of being politically incorrect. You can say things like, there may be a conflict of personalities between the para and the student, but you don't tell a parent that the para hates their child. That destroys that relationship again. That lessens their trust that you are able to make decisions about who to place where. You don't ever want to say anything that degrades or demeans the child or the family. And that can be difficult, not for me, but I mean that can be difficult for people that are frustrated.

She wants to remind her team that even if frustrated, you have to be mindful of what you say in IEP meetings, as maintaining relationships is important.

Relationships were identified as a key support of parental participation. If trust is broken and frustration between team members is occurring, parental participation will be negatively impacted.

**Observations of Barriers to Parental Participation During the IEP Meeting**

Few barriers to authentic parental participation were observed during the IEP meeting. The educational team worked hard to avoid the use of jargon that would disrupt the flow of understanding for the parents. At one time the special education teacher paused to make sure that AIM (alternative instructional materials) was explained to
Mom. The district representative then took the time to give Mom a clear explanation of what it might mean for Adam down the road as he transitions to middle school and high school. On another occasion, Mom stopped the meeting to ask, “What does FAST stand for?” When this question was asked, some of the educators around the room admitted that they could not remember.

Despite the attempt to avoid verbal jargon, the IEP document did create a barrier. At one point during the meeting Mom was observed flipping through the document trying to find the right page. She also struggled with the graphs in the IEP document when they were discussing the reading goal. She did not know which graph she should be looking at and commented, “My problem is I never know which one is for what.” She then asked for clarification on one of the graphs questioning, “Is it just one, or it just happens to be spread out on two?” Stopping and interrupting the flow of the meeting, the special education teacher explained which graph Mom should be looking at in regards to the reading goal.

The second research question concerned what the discourse during an IEP meeting and perceptions of IEP team members revealed about barriers to authentic parental participation? In analyzing the barriers that impede authentic parental participation in IEP meetings several key themes were identified and described above: the emotional context of the IEP meeting, goals written prior to the IEP meeting, outsiders attempting to influence the meeting, the prescribed nature and jargon inherent in IEP meetings and the challenge of maintaining relationships. These themes give insight into the struggles and frustrations that can occur for families and other IEP team members.
Understanding both the barriers and the supports to parental participation is critical in understanding interactions in IEP meetings. In order to understand more deeply the nature of team interactions during IEP meetings, selected exchanges were examined through discourse analysis.

**Discourse Analysis of IEP Communication Interactions**

To explore the third research question, how do communication interactions in an IEP team meeting influence parental participation, a discourse analysis of selected exchanges from the IEP meeting was conducted. Discourse analysis is used to understand what language is doing, not just what the speaker is saying. Gee (2014b) proposed seven “building tasks” (p. 94) of language-in-use to construct meaning. Based on a discourse analysis of the IEP meeting, two of those tools were evident: identities and practices.

**Identities Enacted During the IEP Meeting**

Using the question of how speakers identify themselves and others through discourse, I examined the communication of the special education teacher and the mother. Gee (2014b) argues that we use language to be recognized by others as having a certain role. Looking specifically at the special education teacher, three identities she enacted for herself emerged; facilitator, collaborator, and as a knowledgeable participant in the IEP process. Through discourse the mother identified herself as an advocate and part of the team through the use of her language and level of participation in the meeting. She also used language to identify her son as a competent student with the ability to learn and grow.
Special education teacher as facilitator: Keeping the ball rolling. Through her language, the special education teacher established an identity as meeting facilitator. One example of this was during the meeting when the team was a bit sidetracked discussing the child’s outside occupational therapist. She spoke to remind the team of the job in front of them by stating, “I just want to keep the ball rolling so we can get some of these other things done too.” She also prompted the group to keep moving after the completion of the writing goal when she prompted them by saying, “Moving along we can go ahead and discuss math. That has been one thing I kind of looked into a little.” These examples show that she viewed herself as the person responsible for keeping the meeting moving and on track. Through her nonverbal interactions, she also kept the meeting focused on task completion. She took notes, prompted the mother to find the right page of the IEP document and made sure that all participants had copies of the current IEP document.

Special education teacher as collaborator: Let’s discuss. Language was also used by the special education teacher to establish the identity of collaborative team member for herself and to indicate to others their role as IEP team members. She did this by using the term team, discussion and by asking the group questions in the course of the meeting. For example, when they were beginning to think about the math goal she stated, “So I just want to have that discussion as a team.” At another point in the meeting she commented, “I guess there will have to be some discussion, too, cause that will be based around a lot of other things.” When discussing the writing goal, she indicated she was open to suggestions from the team by asking questions such as, “When we are working on writing, (general education teacher) and I talked about this and we weren’t really sure
which way to go with it?” She often asked specific team members to chime in by stating, “And (district representative) you were wanting to jump in a little.” And “So, we’ll also need obviously, your help, (looks at SLP) in figuring out the right wording and how we want that written in there.” She also made sure that at the end of each discussion topic team members were invited to share other comments if they desired, “All right, anything else? Anyone else have anything to add?” This language served to invite comment and collaboration from the rest of the IEP team.

**Special education teacher as knowledgeable.** The special education teacher also communicated her identity as a knowledgeable professional in the field of special education, the IEP process and this particular child through her language. At the beginning of the meeting she clarified how she wanted the meeting to begin by stating, “Yes, most certainly, that is what I want us to start with, positives are good.” She continued by going over a few procedural items, “For this IEP I think we’ll have to have an up to date form. I have that so I can get that printed off too.” During the meeting, she communicated her opinions regarding the goals by stating, “I mean you could modify that goal to that, but I mean I feel that should definitely be a goal because that’s something he’s going to use his whole life.” She also showed she understood the needs of the child by communicating, “That was what I was thinking, I think it would be best for him.” She also added, “I would agree with that too, I think there’s a lot that goes into play of what is really helping Adam be successful.” The special education teacher communicates her knowledge of the IEP process and special education strategies, through these comments, her identity as the knowledgeable expert is established.
All three identities the special education teacher is establishing are appropriate and effective in an IEP meeting. The identities of facilitator, collaborator, and knowledgeable expert give her confidence to lead the meeting as well as working effectively with other participants.

Examining the discourse of the IEP meeting also uncovered identities the mother was establishing for herself in the IEP meeting. These identities included advocate and IEP team member. It was also clear that she wanted to identify Adam as a competent individual.

Mother as advocate: “Mama bear.” The mother clearly communicated her identity as advocate by walking into the IEP meeting wearing her bright red t-shirt that said, “Mama Bear.” She continued throughout the meeting to identify in this way by speaking up about his behaviors as his way of communicating. Adam in the past has pushed students and Mom wanted to make sure that the team recognized this was a result of his frustration. “I mean we know when he gets frustrated, and usually by the time he pushes. It’s just a sign that he’s been frustrated.” She also wanted to remind them he needed to be prepped for changes by stating, “He does not handle change well.” She clearly wanted to add information that would help others understand his behaviors.

Another example of Mom using discourse to establish her identity as advocate was during the discussion of technology use for Adam and how technology would be used to support his life goals. When discussing reading adaptation and the use of a text reader, she wanted a more human sounding voice. In the past when the voice was robotic Adam had tried to fast forward. She didn’t want the voice to get in the way and
emphasized this by stating, “Make sure the text reader is a person and not a robot, because clearly in his opinion, it’s a no on that.” During the meeting, she also pushed to make sure the team was helping him build his skills regarding the use of the Nova Chat, “He needs to know that the Nova Chat is for more than just requesting.” She viewed the ability to tell time as a life skill and did not want him to rely on digital clocks. She added, “I feel like that’s something that also falls under the whole life skills, which is always kind of in the back of my brain.” She was clear and direct when she strongly believed in what he needed or did not need.

Mother as IEP team member: We. During the IEP team meeting Mom worked to identify herself as part of the team by using the term “we” frequently when describing the team and discussing his goals.

At the beginning of the meeting when illustrating how the team was able to work together and the progress they had seen in Adam, she stated, “We’re just lucky to have the group we do have.” She also added, “I’d like to see him continue to have growth. He’s not as far behind as what he could be if we weren’t pushing.” During the discussion of the use of the term FAST and some confusion over its meaning she acknowledged, “We all live in the acronym world.” She wanted others to know that she was capable of using and understanding acronyms.

Around each specific IEP goal, Mom asked questions and again included the term “we” to identify as part of the team and not separate from. Examples include when she asked, “Do we have a solid reading level on him?” When the special education teacher directed the group to start thinking about the writing goal, Mom jumped in and included,
“He has met his writing, so we need a new one.” When the conversation shifted to the math goal, they discussed two different goals before settling on the goal of telling time that would be addressed first with Adam before changing to a different goal if the first one was accomplished quickly. Mom agreed by stating, “Then I think we should flip to that (working on story problems).” Mom stayed involved in the discussions surrounding his goals and used the term “we” frequently throughout the conversation.

**Mother identifying Adam as competent.** Discourse analysis also examines the identities speakers attribute to others (Gee, 2014b). During the IEP meeting Mom continually described the success that Adam has had and his capabilities to reinforce his identity as a worthy human being. “This is sort of our impression of Adam at this point, even a year ago he was not as outgoing, as smiley or even interested in doing half of the stuff he does now.” When others were considering that he might have trouble understanding what day of the week it is, she shared, “And see, that’s repetition, so he won’t have too many problems with that. anything repetition related, he doesn’t have that problem.” She described his success at church by recalling, “He follows along in Sunday school in the Bible the very, very small print when the kids are reading out loud because they go in circle and he’ll sit there and he’ll follow along with his finger.” She also brought up his self-awareness and his ability to use the Nova Chat, “He told me that he was proud once to; he’s used proud.” Finally, close to the end of the meeting she was telling stories of how we could be a bit sneaky. She described the time he hid the pencil grips she bought him under his bed and an incident with the library as well, “This is the child who did not want to bring his Brown Bear books or his Eric Carle books back to the
library last year, so he took the books out of their sleeves, brought back the sleeves and handed them to the librarian.” She views sharing the stories and anecdotes as a way to build a positive identity of who he is, what he is capable of and why they need to keep pushing him.

The identities Mom enacted of advocate and IEP team member allowed her to advocate and participate throughout the IEP team meeting. She also clearly identified Adam as a competent individual to ensure expectations were kept high and his learning continued. These identities contributed to the effectiveness of the IEP meeting.

Gee (2014b) also described how discourse can be used to enact practices. The discourse around enacting practices was evident during the IEP meeting.

Practices Enacted During the IEP Meeting

The IEP meeting is a practice or an activity that exists. Gee (2014b) described a practice as something that is socially or institutionally supported. IEP meetings are the institutionally recognized approach to determine the educational needs of identified children. Gee posited “these activities, identities, and institutions have to be continuously rebuilt in the here and now” (p. 91). Looking at the language used during this IEP meeting will allow us to understand how their specific IEP practice was built. It is clear that within IEP meetings there is variation in how they are conducted based on the specific individuals and setting, while still being consistent with the required expectations of IEP meetings.

**Enacting expected IEP practices.** During this meeting, members used language to meet the requirements of the IEP by focusing on the goals. Some examples of this
include, when the special education teacher detailed her requirement to document who was at the meeting, “Right now I’m just putting in who all is attending, I don’t want you to be wondering what I am doing on the computer.” She also went over other expected procedures when she stated, “Okay so we kind of went over behavior, talked a little bit about communication, so obviously, I marked yes, we use our Nova Chat, like you said, clarifying that as the communication device.” She made sure to check all the IEP boxes as she continued, “No health concerns, no limited English, no braille, but assistive technology.” She also made sure to ask the required question for parents, “Do you guys have any concerns with his education currently?” The district representative spoke to ensure that goals met the required standards, “I’m just looking at the standards; we could probably just focus on standard one, ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text.” She also added when discussing the math goal, “Your goals do need to be related to the standards, so that’s where I’m kind of pushing a little bit.” The discourse surrounding expected IEP practices was frequent and clear during the IEP meeting. This allowed the team to stay on task and accomplish the specified goals of an IEP meeting.

Encouraging collaborative IEP practices. Communication during the IEP also indicated this team was enacting the practices of the IEP meeting in a collaborative way. One example of this was when the special education teacher began the activity of goal writing by stating, “I haven’t begun to look towards his goals and try to get anything written up or get any ideas that way. I’m just wanting to make sure that we get a lot of that clarified, so I’ll open that up to everyone.” Team members often proposed ideas for
goals in the form of questions. For example, the SLP proposed her idea for a goal through a question instead of a declaration, “So I was thinking of doing it with something more concrete, like with visuals?” The district representative used words like “maybe” to propose ideas, “Well, maybe the standard we want to focus on for his goal would be to describe characters in a story?” She also added, “So that’s what I was thinking of, maybe I’m wrong.” The special education teacher also added to the conversation with the phrase, “I was wondering” regarding having him start using a planner, “Well, that’s what I was wondering. Otherwise, I was just thinking, would it be best for him to wait until all the peers have it?” She even ends the meeting by making sure that everyone has said what they needed to by asking, “Anyone have anything to add?” Team members felt comfortable collaborating and working together.

The discourse during the meeting revealed a sense of purpose related to the expected IEP practices. However, this team used language to enact those practices with a collaborative approach. Everyone agreed that goals needed to be written, and one person did not dominate the discussion as to what those goals would be. They suggested ideas and proposed ways to write the goals without dictating to the group.

Discourse analysis provided a unique lens to deepen understanding of the IEP meeting and the role of the participants in the meeting. Examining two of the key individuals, the mother and the special education teacher, and the identities they enacted allowed me to recognize their contributions to the overall effectiveness of the meeting. Discourse analysis also solidified my understanding of the shared context IEP team
members had of how the meeting would run, how the intent of the meeting was communicated and what contributed to the task completion of IEP goals.

Throughout the observation of the IEP meeting, the interviews with participants and the detailed investigation of the IEP discourse, I was constantly reflecting on my own IEP experiences. I found myself trying to understand my own discomfort and frustration with the process and wondering if there was something I could have done differently. Returning to the theoretical framework allowed me to identify some of what was occurring in those meetings and recognize links to the role communication played in those meetings.

Connecting the Theoretical Framework

Close examination of the theoretical frameworks, and the questions posed within, allowed me to understand my own personal narratives and their relationship to communication during IEP meetings. Three theoretical frameworks provided a helpful lens: Listening Communication Fidelity (LCF), Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Problematic Integration Theory (PI).

Listening Communication Fidelity

Not having the benefit of IEP recordings from my own experiences, I have to rely on memory. Examining LCF and understanding how emotional experiences impact the receiver’s ability to listen effectively, I wonder if I missed opportunities to contribute in meetings or perhaps I missed invitations to participate at a higher level from other IEP team members. There is no doubt that I dreaded going to those meetings and entered the meeting with elevated emotions. I dreaded having to discuss the academic deficiencies
that my children were seen to have. I cannot deny that I entered those meetings ready to be a bit defensive and protective. I also wonder if perhaps I was not always listened to as others were trying to protect their positions or responsibilities within the IEP team. They may have been only listening to protect their role, instead of listening to understand. One example of this comes to mind when discussing the amount of speech-language services that my son was receiving. I felt that the 15 minutes twice a week he was receiving was not adequate. The speech-language pathologist (SLP) argued back that according to the AEA rubric and his current level of communication he was receiving the required amount. I asked to see the rubric, but was told that she did not have it with her. I questioned whether the rubric was individualized as an IEP is supposed to be about what a specific child’s needs, not what a rubric says they need. We went back and forth a bit both stating our positions, me advocating for more, the SLP advocating for herself and the time she had available to give my son. I’m not sure either of us were listening to the other and no one from the IEP jumped in to offer discussion points. The time allowed for speech services stayed the same, and I left that meeting very frustrated with the outcome and feeling like I had not been heard.

Communication Accommodation Theory

Another theory that relates to my own experiences is CAT. This theory relies on individuals accommodating to the context of the situation and the expectations of the others involved in the communication event. In chapter one I described how a parent walking into an IEP meeting is an outsider coming into an established group. This is definitely a feeling I have going into IEP meetings. I believe in some instances, I may
have accommodated too much to the group expectations and did not ask questions when I should have. I especially believe I accommodated too much when advocating for an inclusive placement for my son. The rest of the IEP team had divergent views of inclusion from my own perspective. They were more of the mindset that he would learn better in a quieter space with more individualized attention from the special education teacher. They believed including him with his class for specials time, lunch and recess would be appropriate. I wanted him included as much as possible and felt they were doing what was easier for them, and not in the best interest of my child, although I never would have said that to them for fear of being seen as too combative. I felt the professional members of his team discussed inclusion as if it were important; however, their talk did not match their actions and behaviors.

Looking back, I wish I had gained my voice as an advocate earlier in my experiences. I often did not say what I was truly thinking in order to accommodate the wishes and the comfort level of the school personnel at the meetings. I made attempts to be cooperative and agreeing, in order to maintain working relationships with the school staff. I always felt like I was walking a fine line between advocating for my child and wanting to get along with individuals who work with my children. I continued to hope that somewhere along the way, they would say they wanted my child in the general education setting, but I was always the one that brought it up and carefully questioned when and how he could be included during more of the school day.
Problematic Integration Theory

PI allowed me to identify some of the frustration and isolation I was experiencing as a parent of two children with significant needs. I have hopes and dreams for their future, yet I also have nagging fears whispering to me that my dreams may not be realistic. IEP meetings are part of the journey to ensure students have opportunities for a successful and meaningful future. Allowing parents to share their hopes and fears within that context and be supported in those moments would build group cohesion and problem solving. Helping parents to understand they are not alone in the process could build shared decision making and create more of a welcoming IEP meeting atmosphere. This is one team concept I feel has been lacking in my IEP meetings.

This could be the result of individuals being uncomfortable acknowledging doubt when they are acting in the role of professional. PI argues that ambiguity does create anxiety and discomfort which others might perceive as unprofessional. It is easier to change the focus of the meeting rather than be open to the discomfort. I feel changing focus has been a common occurrence in the IEP meetings of my own children in order for individuals to remain comfortable and confident about what we are discussing.

Connecting with parents is not always an easy endeavor for educators. The relationships take time and effort to nurture. The relationships can be even more complicated to maintain within the difficult context of IEP meetings. Chapter 5 will explore interpretations of the research and offer several propositions for consideration, as well as recommendations for moving forward to support school staff and parents in
creating effective and collaborating IEP team meetings where all participants are valued and recognized as equal partners in developing the best IEP for the child.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mom summed up the feelings parents have regarding IEP meetings when she stated, “I wish that it wasn’t scary for people. I wish parents didn’t act like it’s death to them.” Too many parents have become naturalized to the idea that IEP meetings are horrible experiences. IEP meetings have developed a reputation as contentious, stressful and painful experiences for parents and school personnel. However, these meetings are a key component to developing an appropriate educational program for a child with a disability. Redefining IEP meetings as collaborative endeavors that welcome parent participation would benefit parents, school personnel and most importantly, the child.

The purpose of this study was to examine school-family collaboration for students with disabilities. Specifically, the research examined supports that contributed to meaningful parental participation, barriers that impeded parental participation and considered the role discourse played within the context of an IEP meeting. Data were collected through participant observation, participant interviews and document analysis. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method to locate themes that helped illuminate possible answers to the research questions. Discourse analysis also contributed to the understanding of the interactions that occurred during the IEP meeting. Self-reflection occurred throughout the process, as I analyzed my family’s contradictory experiences of IEP meetings and examined my own IEP journey in relationship to several communication theories. Hopefully, by examining the approach of one effective IEP
Findings

The data from this study was analyzed and themes emerged identifying supports and barriers to parental participation in the IEP process. The evidence indicated IEP meetings can be improved. If educators actively seek to work with families in support of educational endeavors, as opposed to creating barriers and separation from families, the possibilities are endless.

Supports

Research question one examined the supports that contribute to authentic parental participation in IEP meetings. Several themes emerged including: welcoming relationships, shared context of the purpose and process of IEP meetings, adaptability of IEP team members, empathy for parents and the mother’s knowledge of self, child and parent rights related to IEP meetings. These supports contributed significantly to the successful nature of this IEP meeting. Mom described the meeting by stating,

I’m not saying our IEP plan or meeting was perfect by any means whatsoever. But at the same time, I left there feeling better than I have ever felt leaving an IEP meeting. I felt like we accomplished a lot. And I felt like nobody should have left that room feeling like we had done anything but succeeded. And I mean it was positive. There was good conversation. It was realistic—we threw out yes, he does this well, he does this, you know sometimes he has these problems. I mean it was realistic conversation.

This comment by Mom showed how powerful and productive having what she described as a successful meeting was for her and Adam’s goals. By focusing on necessary IEP
structure and support, parents could leave IEP meetings feeling hopeful about what lies ahead for their child’s educational path.

**Welcoming Relationships.** Welcoming relationships was described by all four interview participants as creating an IEP atmosphere that supported parental participation. It was noted that these relationships were built through informal interactions and frequent positive communication that occurred all year through a variety of means. The consistent interactions created trust between individuals on this IEP team. This team worked to interact informally at school events and prioritized getting to know all team members as individual people. The principal commented, “I spend time asking parents, hey, what are you doing for the holidays, or what do you have coming up this weekend or summer vacation?” This finding is similar to Wanat (2010) who described the importance of informal interaction. He noted that parents who volunteered at school had increased opportunities to build relationships with school personnel.

The general education teacher also emphasized how important frequent communication was when she stated, “It goes back to what I said about parents being included. The IEP meeting that you attended was like every parent's dream. I really think a lot of it has to do with the fact that we do communicate so much outside of the IEP meeting process.” The special education teacher noted the importance of including the positives. She elaborated, “It’s not being afraid to give them some of the negatives, but also giving them the positives all the time too, whether it is just phone calls, emails, some of that stuff.” Frequent communication has been cited as an important means of building and maintaining relationships (Blue-Banning, 2004; Cardona et al., 2012; & Rodriguez et
Frequent communication allows parents to feel more comfortable interacting with school personnel.

Listening was evidenced by the general education teacher as another important piece of communication. She argued parents need to feel their voices are being heard. This finding agreed with the discoveries of Fish (2008), Humphrey et al. (2013), and Williams-Diehm et al. (2014). Parents appreciate school personnel who listen to their concerns and suggestions.

Mom described how the relationship piece allowed her to feel that she is part of a team with the educators; she is not on the opposite side. She explained she does not feel like it is her against them, “So, walking into Adam’s IEP, I never feel like it's me against them.” She trusts that the team is all there for the same goal, and that is to help Adam grow and support his learning.

Mom also appreciated being able to see some elements of the IEP document prior to the meeting. This gave her the opportunity to ask questions and get some of the details worked out ahead of the IEP meeting. She believed this created space so the actual meeting time could be focused on writing the goals. This is consistent with the finding of Valle (2011) who found that sharing information about the IEP with the parents prior to the meeting created a better working relationship with the parents. Seeing the document ahead of time can eliminate the fear parents have of being surprised in the meeting and unprepared to discuss what the school believes to be important.

Creating a true sense of team that recognizes the value of parents and their unique knowledge of the child is critical to supporting parental participation in the IEP team. If
the parents truly believe that everyone is there to support the child and have an honest discussion about where he or she is and what the next steps are, parents may lose the perception that IEP meetings are frustrating. Welcoming relationships where individuals take the time to communicate outside of IEP meetings, share information, and discuss positives allows parents to feel valued, and they are more open to trusting and listening to the individuals working with their child.

Many parents struggle with apprehension and fear days before the IEP meeting is scheduled. The uncertainty regarding what is going to be said or discussed during the meeting creates angst. Allowing the parents to see the IEP document itself, prior to the meeting, would greatly reduce the anxiety that comes with unknown situations. Having a prior understanding, or shared context of what will happen at the meeting, can also decrease anxiety related to the meeting.

**Shared Context.** Observing this IEP meeting and then interviewing four key participants after the meeting allowed me to understand how powerful it was for the team to have a similar expectation and understanding of what the meeting would entail. The meeting was focused solely on the child’s goals. The tone was positive, goals were written at the meeting, and they were written as a team. There was no question as to how the meeting would progress, it just progressed under the skilled facilitation of the special education teacher.

The meeting started with Mom sharing positive stories about her child and the progress she had seen this year. She also mentioned how she was grateful for the people on this team. The special education teacher commented on how powerful this was for all
of the participants to hear, “Positives set the tone right away, right off the bat.” Observing
the meeting start this way was amazing. It really signaled to the group why they were
there, the success the child was having and their focus was to help him achieve new
goals. The meeting was not about comparing him to other students. This is where the
discussion then led to establishing supports and goal setting.

It is not uncommon for parents to walk into IEP meetings and find the goals have
been written ahead of time by the special education teacher and support specialists.
Although the expectation of IEP meetings is to determine goals together, educators often
claim they have met this expectation as what they have written is only a draft. Even if the
term draft is written on the document, few parents feel comfortable asking professionals
to change goals that are already written down. Garriot et al. (2000) found that only 46%
of parents felt they had sufficient input in drafting IEP goals. This is not a number we
should be comfortable with.

In this IEP meeting, it was clear the expectation was goals would be written at the
meeting. The principal emphasized this point during the interviews. “Having the rest of
the document filled in is great, because then you are prepared, but those goal areas, that's
a team decision.” Having possible ideas, but nothing written down regarding specific
goals contributed to the authentic participation and shared decision making of all team
members.

Garriot et al. (2000) found parents have better perceptions of IEP meetings when
they feel listened to and treated as equal members of the IEP team. Parents also have
important knowledge about their child that should be included (Dabkowsi, 2004).
Making sure parents have a voice and are being invited to participate during goal discussion was an important element of a successful IEP meeting for several of the team members. The general education teacher commented, “It's a team you know, home support, school support. We have to be able to work together for the best interest of the kids.” Creating a collaborative team environment during IEP writing will increase shared ownership of the goals and increase support for goal accomplishment from all individuals.

While several studies have outlined the importance of writing goals at the meeting and working together to decide on the final IEP goals, this theme is unique in that the structure of the IEP meeting is shared knowledge of the IEP team. The entire team understands how the meeting will work which created a comfortable and collaborative environment. This team also demonstrated an ability to adapt as needed.

**Adaptability.** A willingness to learn and change when needed was an important strength of this IEP team. Rodriguez et al. (2014) found that being receptive to parents’ ideas was an important component of making them feel included. Williams et al. (2011) also believed that educators must understand that change is constant. Several members of this IEP team mentioned being open to trying new approaches and learning about new strategies. The special education teacher explained, “I'm still very much always learning how to improve, make the meetings go a little bit better, smoother, whatever needs to happen.” She also described different approaches for communicating with parents she has tried in her three short years as an educator.
IEP team members also recognize that parents will need different supports from them. Cardona et al. (2012) described the importance of professionals working to connect with parents. The desire to meet the unique needs of parents is a critical component of working effectively with the parents. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Educators should work to find out parental preferences in regards to communication. One example this team is working on developing is their IEP snapshot. The principal described the progress. “We actually created and I am working on what we call an IEP snapshot. It's almost an agenda for the meeting; it puts it in parent-friendly language.” She understands that during the meeting, some parents would benefit from a clearer representation of what is happening during the meeting. She also wants them to be able to quickly access the goals from the previous IEP.

The willingness to try new ideas, the ability to understand the needs of the parents, and adapt to those needs, was a clear strength of this IEP team. They also demonstrated empathy for parents that are going through the IEP process.

Empathy. Cardona, et al. (2012) found parental trust increased when professionals tried to connect with them and understand their specific situations. This idea was confirmed in this study. Several participants commented on the significance of trying to put themselves in the shoes of the parents. This IEP team is unique in that two members, the principal and general education teacher, both have children who require IEPs. Their personal experiences contributed to their understanding of what parents are going through and they worked to mitigate some of the stress of IEP meetings. While it would be impossible to expect IEP teams to have this level of perspective built on personal
experiences, the importance of empathy should not be overlooked. The general education teacher described how she reminds educators to see things from the perspective of the parents, “I think they (educators at an IEP meeting) need to understand the high emotion.” The principal advocated for this as well by asking teachers, “Imagine if it was somebody you loved and cherished.” Both of these professionals try to coach team members to understand the mindset of the parents in the IEP process.

Empathy can sometimes be a challenge for parents raising a child with a disability. They worry that what should be empathy and understanding will turn to pity (Calabrese et al., 2008). The mother in this IEP team defies the concept that her family should be pitied. Through a strong understanding of her role as an advocate, her belief in her knowledge of her child and her understanding of the IEP process, she has become an active participant on this IEP team.

**Mother’s knowledge of self, child and rights.** Much of the research described parental knowledge as a barrier to collaborative school-family partnerships. These studies included as barriers a lack of parent social capital to advocate (Clark, 2013). Parents feel ill-prepared to advocate (Applequist, 2009; Fish, 2009) and parents and schools having different views of a child’s ability (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). The mother in this case study demonstrated it is possible for parents to possess the knowledge and skills to effectively advocate and participate in a child’s IEP. She also demonstrated how her ability to advocate contributed to the overall success of the IEP meeting.

Mom’s identity as an advocate was developed through her social connections and one frustrating educational experience during Adam’s kindergarten year when his
schooling was less than appropriate. She quickly learned that she could not take a back seat in his education; she had to be an active participant. She described this as a revelation. “I stepped up and said, okay this can’t continue this way. This is not how it’s going to be; this is how it’s going to be and if you’re unhappy with that I’m sorry, not sorry.” She learned she had to embrace the role of advocate. She also described having a social network of parents, myself included, that helped her to understand she could say no to the school. She has since worked to build her social network of other parents who have children with disabilities and often finds herself in the role of giving advice to other concerned parents. She is still surprised by the stories she hears of how parents are treated in IEP meetings.

Mom had a clear belief that she knows her child well, and is able to help determine what is best for him. When she described her and her husband’s knowledge of their son, she explained, “We are the ones that are his parents. We are the ones, that at this point in time know what is best for him.” This knowledge of her son and his abilities, added to her confidence in being able to advocate for him. She is always pushing to move him one step further.

Finally, her knowledge of the IEP process, the IEP document and her rights as a parent strongly contributed to her ability to authentically participate in the IEP meeting. When told at her first IEP meeting, that most parents don’t read the Parents Rights Handbook, she thought to herself, “Challenge accepted.” She now strongly advocates with new parents that they must read the handbook. She knows it is not fun reading, but believes it is worth the effort. She wants parents to understand they have the ability to say
no if they don’t agree with the IEP goals. The special education teacher even commented on the mother’s knowledge of her rights. “She has made herself become more familiar with some of the language and being able to understand what her rights are.” This knowledge has increased her ability to effectively participate in IEP meetings.

While several studies have found the lack of knowledge around special education as a barrier to participation, it is clear the mother in this case study is an example of how the right knowledge can contribute to active IEP meeting participation. Knowledge of self, child and rights can greatly impact a parent’s ability to collaborate in meaningful ways during IEP meetings.

Working to build effective supports for families is important for improving the IEP process. We must, however, also identify the barriers that exist to authentic parental participation so they may be removed from the process.

**Barriers**

The second research question examined barriers to authentic parental participation in IEP meetings. Research participants identified barriers as: IEP emotion and perception, goals written prior to the IEP meeting, outside individuals, educational jargon and maintaining relationships with IEP team members. Barriers were uncovered through interviews with the four primary research participants. The IEP meeting I observed was described as successful. However, all participants had at one time experienced meetings that had not gone well and the parents had left frustrated. Understanding these barriers is essential to moving towards collaborative school-family partnerships.
**IEP Emotion and Perception.** Mueller and Buckley (2014) described the IEP process as overwhelming and intimidating. Parents often feel outnumbered by professionals, unclear how to participate and advocate for their child (Applequist, 2009). The general education teacher had very strong feelings regarding the emotion involved in IEP meetings. She described the process as, “This whole process is overwhelming. Absolutely overwhelming.” Mom articulated that stress was added to the IEP process because the document is viewed as legal and binding. The formal nature of what needs to be accomplished at IEP meetings creates a level of anxiety before the meeting even begins.

IEP meetings have also developed a negative reputation from parents and school personnel. Mom explains that she went into her first IEP meeting with the expectation that she would have no control and would not be invited to participate. This reputation contributes to the strong emotion individuals have when entering IEP meetings. The perceived negative atmosphere contributes to participants’ abilities to listen and participate effectively within the IEP meeting.

**Prior Written Goals: Eliminating Participation.** Prior written goals also create a barrier to authentic parental participation. The literature clearly confirms my finding that prior written goals construct a barrier to authentic parental participation. Garriot et al. (2000) stated goals written before the meeting creates frustration for parents. Fish (2009) found that one recommendation parents had for IEP meetings was not determining the goals outside of the meeting. Participants in this study explained that having predetermined goals eliminated the opportunity for parents to participate. The principal
described the experience of prior written goals. “It's frustrating. If you walk in there and the goal is already done, they're just presenting. It’s a presentation you're sitting through, you're not part of a team.” She understands that teachers want to be as prepared as possible, but strongly feels goals need to be written at the meeting with the entire team.

When commenting on prior written goals, the special education teacher mentioned that not having the goals written down ahead of time can make her a little nervous prior to the meeting. However, she is willing to put up with the nerves as she sees the benefits for parental participation by working on the goals together.

Meyer (2011) reminds us, “In reality, parents’ role in the IEP team is not that of a team player, but merely a cheerleader” (p. 659). Writing goals prior to the meeting removes the potential for parents to act as true team members and participate at a high level.

**Outside Individuals.** Occasionally, adding unexpected team members can create a shift in dynamics and reduce authentic communication in IEP meetings. Mom explained, “I’m gonna have this person from the district who’s never, ever worked with this child, couldn’t pick this child out of a line-up and be the one to help dictate what’s going to happen.” Mom feels very strongly that she would rather have input from individuals that know her son and have experience working with him.

**Educational Jargon.** IEP meetings are full of procedures, graphs, documents, and language that are not designed for individuals outside the world of education (Kotler, 2014). Mueller and Buckley (2014) described that the educational jargon contributed to the feeling of IEP meetings being overwhelming. In this study, the team worked
diligently to avoid the use of jargon, however they were unable to avoid the use of the required IEP materials.

The IEP document itself creates a barrier to parental participation. The general education teacher commented, “You know, reading IEPs as a parent, is really, really overwhelming.” The document is long, pages are oddly numbered, and the language used is not parent friendly. The special education teacher described, “There is so much slang especially, and that is something I don’t like.” Both educators feel the use of the required IEP document is frustrating.

The Parent Rights Handbook was frequently discussed as a non-tool for helping parents understand the IEP process. The handbook was seen as a joke and something that parents would not actually be able to utilize. Several studies found that parents wanted more knowledge regarding their rights (Saleh, 2014) and the services that might be available for their child (Fish, 2008; Murzyn & Hughes, 2015). Despite the desire for parents to have more knowledge, the Parent Rights Handbook is not serving as an adequate tool. The special education teacher commented on the jargon found in the on-line condensed version she has printed for families in the past, “I felt like that was still so much jargon.” Despite the requirement to provide a copy of the handbook for parents at each IEP meeting, parents still feel uninformed regarding their rights as the provided tool is not parent friendly.

The use of jargon in the form of an overwhelming IEP document, with confusing graphs and data points, limits the ability of parents to communicate effectively during IEP meetings. Parents can feel overwhelmed and unprepared to participate in the
discussions. In these situations, parents often feel the relationships are the lifeline for keeping them involved in the process.

**Maintaining Relationships.** Welcoming relationships has been described as critical to ensuring parental participation. However, challenges for maintaining those relationships exist. Parents often feel the pressure to maintain relationships with school personnel. If school-family relationships are not strong, several barriers can develop: fear of being labeled, devaluing team members, and broken trust. If present these barriers will negatively impact authentic parental participation.

Consistent with the literature, Mom described feeling hesitant to advocate on occasions and carefully considered which battles she would fight, “I try to be as cooperative and pick my battles as best I can.” She does not want to be labeled as a troublemaker for fear this might impact her relationships with people she knows will be in her life for 18 years. Wakelin (2008) also described that parents feel their child will not receive fair treatment if they advocate. Mueller et al. (2008) also found that parents who take demanding postures risk damaging future communication in the IEP meetings.

Maintaining relationships with the IEP team involved valuing all members of the team. When team members feel valued it supports collaboration (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). When individuals are devalued through ignoring their ideas and perspectives collaboration breaks down. Several studies described how parents can often feel their input is not valued (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Zablotsky et al., 2012). In this study, the general education teacher noted she has seen meetings where parents have the perception their input is not valued, “Parents have trouble speaking up, I feel like they don't feel like
they have control or input or they're not valued in this process.” She would also like to see an increased value placed on the voices of the para-educators, “I feel like their opinion isn't nearly as valued as it should be.” She recognized they have important information regarding the student and would like to see their voices included as true IEP team members.

A final consideration for maintaining relationships is the role of trust. Trust can be broken easily, and once it is broken, it is hard to regain. Kotler (2014) found that trust is damaged if parents feel they have to advocate in order for the school to maximize their child’s potential. Parents want schools to initiate supports that will maximize student learning without having to fight for them. Applequist (2009) and Lake and Billingsley (2000) found both schools and parents believed the other side was withholding information. This is concerning if we expect honest collaboration at IEP meetings. In this study both the principal and the general education teacher commented that not following the IEP will quickly damage the trust parents have for school personnel. The principal described one situation where the IEP was not followed. “I know for a fact that the parent was over the moon frustrated. She now has the viewpoint that the IEP is only worth the paper it is written on.” Broken trust will impede the ability of team members to work together collaboratively.

Building and sustaining welcoming relationships is needed for ensuring strong school-family partnerships. Positive efforts to maintain relationships can support the abilities of all team members to work together. However, the challenge of maintaining those relationships and the struggle this creates for parents cannot be ignored.
Understanding Practices and Identities in the IEP meeting

The third research question examined how communication interactions influence parental participation in IEP meetings. This question was explored using discourse analysis as, “We use language to get recognized as taking on a certain identity or role” (Gee, 2014a, p. 33). We also use language to enact practices (Gee, 2014a). Understanding the identities individuals took on and the practices that were enacted added depth to understanding what occurred in the IEP meeting.

Identities Enacted

Both the mother and the special education teacher enacted identities that contributed to the success of the IEP meeting. The special education teacher took on the role of facilitator, collaborator and knowledgeable individual to contribute to the collaborative tone and successful completion of the IEP meeting. While taking on the role of facilitator by keeping the meeting moving and on track, she also demonstrated a collaborative tone by asking for input and giving individuals the opportunity to share. Demonstrating her knowledge, she was able to steer the team towards task completion and the IEP meeting was successful.

The mother’s identities also contributed to the success of the IEP meeting. She advocated appropriately and confidently. She situated herself as part of the IEP team by using the term “we” and actively contributing during the goal discussion. And most importantly, she shared information to build the identity of Adam as a competent and capable individual.
Practices Enacted

The discourse during the IEP meeting also contributed to the shared context of the IEP team. Practices that encouraged collaboration while completing the standard expectations of an IEP team were observed. This is significant in that it demonstrated the possibility of working together to create a successful IEP meeting that included task completion and satisfied team members.

Significance and Implications

My own journey through the IEP process with my children led me to this study. There were several occasions where I walked out of meetings wondering, what just happened? If my personal experiences as a teacher with knowledge of educational systems did not prepare me to effectively participate in IEP meetings, how are parents with no background in education navigating the system effectively?

Studying a functional and supportive IEP team allowed me to understand the inherent potential IEP meetings are intended to have. With the correct structures and supports, IEP meetings can be truly collaborative and beneficial experiences that further the educational possibilities for children. It is time we change the narrative around IEP meetings. Parents must be recognized and invited to be authentic participants in their child’s IEP.

Through the experiences of this IEP team we now have a window into a better understanding of several important aspects of successful IEP meetings. We have learned that relationships are key to creating a foundation for strong, inclusive IEP teams. The foundation of team relationships is built outside the IEP meeting with informal
interactions and frequent communication. This is critical for administrators and educators to understand. Parents want to be able to discuss their child through funny stories, their plans for the weekend, and not just in clinical diagnostic ways. They need to feel their child is cared for as a human, and not a data point.

Another significant finding is the importance of the shared context of the purpose and process of the IEP meeting. Relationships have the potential to set up an IEP meeting for a productive outcome; however, what happens during the meeting will live up to the promise of collaborative school-family partnerships or destroy them. This IEP team had a clear understanding of a child-centered focus, starting with a positive tone, writing the goals at the meeting and inviting participation from all members when determining the IEP goals. It was apparent that all team members knew what to expect, followed the expectations and worked to accomplish the objectives of the IEP meeting.

The principal indicated that she talks to her teachers about creating the positive tone and making sure goals are written at the meeting. These shared expectations don’t happen by accident.

Additionally, it is critical that school personnel remain flexible, willing to adapt and work to understand the perspective of the parents. One of the most dangerous sayings in education is, “Well that’s the way we’ve always done it.” Just like the needs of students cannot be met with a one size fits all approach, the needs of parents regarding communication, participation, and relationship building will vary. Schools must consistently reach out to parents, listen to parents and adapt based on feedback. They must recognize the flawed application of the Parents Rights Handbook and the confusing
nature of IEP language and graphs. If schools truly believe in the benefit of parent involvement, they have to be able to meet parents where they are. Educators need to work to understand parents’ experiences, fears, and concerns for their child, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future. Through sharing these emotions in a welcoming space of educators, parents will realize they are part of a team and not an outsider fighting for services that might benefit their child.

Finally, it was very clear that the mother on this IEP team was well informed on the strengths and challenges of her child, her ability to act as an advocate and her rights as a parent. This knowledge was critical in making her an active participant on the IEP team. Often schools fear a well-informed parent. However, if educators truly have the best interests of the student at heart, shouldn’t we strive for informed parents who are actively involved in their child’s education? Informed parents can maximize the education of a child and play a more significant role on an IEP team.

**Communication Fidelity in the IEP Meeting**

The theory of communication fidelity invites four propositions to enhance the outcome of a communication event. The IEP meeting as an important communication event might be positively influenced by these propositions.

Proposition 1: “Communication fidelity is enhanced when the source and recipient possess ample physiological and cognitive information processing skills. Thus, the greater the information distribution, reception, and processing skills of the participants in a communication event, the greater the potential for achieving communication fidelity” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 257).
Proposition one invites school personnel to understand the parents and their communication styles. Some parents may need information represented visually, some parents may prefer to see information in writing. Adapting to this parental need will allow for enhanced understanding and communication for the parents.

Proposition 2: “Communication fidelity is enhanced when the source and recipient are sufficiently aware of the socio-cultural, relational, and contextual factors influencing the communication event. Thus, the greater the awareness of culture and context during a communication event, the greater the potential for achieving communication fidelity” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 258).

Ensuring that parents and educators on the IEP team have a shared understanding of the purpose and process of the meeting will create an opportunity for increased communication fidelity. The observed IEP team had a clear understanding of what was happening which allowed all members to contribute ideas and listen to others during the meeting.

Proposition 3: “Communication fidelity is enhanced when the source and recipient have current information about the other's knowledge and predispositions relative to the target cognition. Conversely, fidelity will be compromised in a communication event involving new acquaintances or expression of topics/concepts unfamiliar to one or both participants” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 259).

Educators must work to understand the parents’ level of understanding regarding services, assessments and IEP terminology to ensure parents are comfortable participating and fully understand what is being determined. If school personnel do not
work to understand their parents in this way, the parents will be robbed of the potential to be active participants in their child’s IEP.

Proposition 4: “Communication fidelity is enhanced when the source creates messages based upon the recipient's knowledge base and communicating style. Thus, communication fidelity is greater when the source represents the target cognition using signals and symbols consistent with the recipient's cognitive framework and knowledge of denotative and connotative meanings. The use of unfamiliar concepts and/or unfamiliar language will reduce the fidelity of a communication event” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 259).

When educators use unknown terms and messages, communication fidelity of the IEP meeting is diminished. “The greater awareness of environment and context during a communication event, the greater the potential for achieving communication fidelity” (Powers & Witt, 2008, p. 259). School personnel must work diligently to create meetings that are as free of jargon as possible, give explanations as needed, share relevant information with parents and work to educate them prior to the meeting.

Understanding the supports needed for authentic parental participation and the barriers that may impede parental participation in IEP meetings is essential to moving the process forward. I believe a new narrative that is built on cooperation, equitable participation, and teamwork is achievable.

**Recommendations for Improving the IEP Process**

In order to achieve inclusive IEP team participation, everyone should be on the same page regarding the supports needed. Everyone must understand and articulate that
relationships are critical, pre-IEP preparation needs to occur, goals must be written at the meeting with input from all team members, and the school must educate parents regarding their rights.

Relationships as Priority

Creating welcoming relationships must become a priority for educators. This should be done through informal interactions and frequent communication that includes positive messages when possible. Schools may have to work in creative ways to establish those interactions, but I believe it can be done. One way may be to increase informal communication through email or texting. I must say that I am a little jealous of this situation where the special education teacher in this study uses her cell phone to connect with parents. She explained that sometimes parents just needed a quick way to send her a message and texting gave them that opportunity. I was imagining this tool being used to share a quick photo of something fun a child did during the day or an assignment they were working on.

Keeping parents in the loop regarding potential problems should also be a priority for teachers. The IEP meeting is not the time to share surprise information with parents. Struggles or challenges require a phone call home, or at least an email allowing parents to be aware of concerns. It is imperative the email or phone call come from the teacher that has the concern. It is not solely the responsibility of the special education teacher to communicate with parents of children with disabilities. It is a shared responsibility with general education teachers and specials teachers. Parents will feel they are truly a part of
a team if all educators are reaching out to them with positives and challenges on a regular basis.

Relationships take work, and as unfair as it may seem, the burden to create and maintain the relationship falls on school personnel. It is part of the job of being an effective educator. Communicate often, communicate positive stories and communicate in a manner that makes parents receptive. Once parents know their child is truly cared for, the door to collaborative school-family partnerships will open.

School Personnel Preparation for IEP Meetings

Prior to the IEP meeting, parents should be given an opportunity to view the beginning pages of the IEP document that pertain to the child’s strengths, interests and preferences, any transition assessments, learning results and other information essential for the development of the IEP. They should be invited to ask questions and make suggestions. Parents should also be encouraged to think about what they would like to discuss at the IEP meeting or if they have concerns they want to bring up.

The special education teacher should discuss progress and challenges with other professionals and ask for input on what should be discussed. All team members should be upfront and honest to avoid surprises during the IEP meeting.

Completing the IEP Meeting

The team should have a clear understanding that the meeting will start with positives and success the child has demonstrated that year. Parents should be encouraged to share stories or even bring a picture as a reminder of the child-centered focus.
Goal writing should be the bulk of the discussion at the meeting. We have a wealth of research describing this as best practice, however time or other excuses often make special education teachers believe the goals can be written ahead, as long as they include the word draft on the document. Goals written ahead of time eliminates team participation.

During goal discussion, the facilitator of the meeting should solicit suggestions from the team and ask if anyone has more information to add. Team members should pay close attention to the body language and participation of the parents. If parents are not participating at a high level, they should be asked open-ended questions to gather their thoughts and ideas.

Jargon should be avoided and documents and graphs clearly explained. I would recommend having a projector, so parents can visually see what is being typed into the document to relieve anxiety. Finally creating a one-page IEP snapshot as the principal in this study suggested, with the current goals listed and progress towards those goals would alleviate parents having to flip through a lengthy document that is anywhere from 10 - 20 pages front-to-back during the meeting.

Following the meeting, the special education teacher and other specialists such as the SLP should finalize the wording for the goals, email those to the parents and ask for input. Parents should be invited to ask questions or suggest possible changes if they believe they are needed.
Parent Education

My final recommendation involves creating opportunities for parents to learn about the IEP process from educators and other parents. Handing someone a Parent Rights Handbook is not a sufficient means of educating them on the IEP process, possible services their child might benefit from, their rights as a parent and the rights of the child. I suggest school districts hold IEP information nights to explain the process, articulate how IEP meetings are conducted and detail the rights of the parents or guardians. These meetings should also be an opportunity for parents to ask questions, voice concerns and make suggestions for how the process could be improved. It needs to be a two-way street with opportunities for parents to speak and educators to listen. As Freire (1970) asked in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, “How can I dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from others?” (p. 90) and continued, “How can I dialogue if I am closed to and even offended by the contribution of others?” (p. 90). If IEPs are meant to be inclusive, then all stakeholders should have a voice in how they are conducted and executed. Parents cannot be viewed as “apart from” the team. We need to work to reduce the power imbalance between informed educators and worried parents.

Another important component of parent education nights would be to connect parents with other parents. The mom is this case study gained power and belief in her role as advocate through her connections with other parents. She knew who to go to for advice and guidance. Parents can be a fantastic support network for each other. Helping parents to find this network and provide opportunities to share ideas will increase the comfort level parents have for participating in IEP meetings. Parents should also be encouraged to
bring someone from their support network to the IEP meeting with them. Some parents will feel more comfortable participating if they know they have an ally at the table.

Finally, if possible, parents should be encouraged to bring their child to the IEP meeting. The final individual that needs a voice at the table is the child. Only then, will all stakeholders truly be included in the process. I understand that parents of younger students can be somewhat resistant to this idea; but hopefully, as the student reaches middle school age, they can be an engaged participant in their IEP meeting.

These recommendations are based on the assumption schools truly want to create IEP teams and value effective school-family partnerships. Hopefully schools will understand that by empowering parents, it doesn’t mean they have to give up their power. Having a stronger team with all participants working together will create a collaborative school-family partnership to increase the potential of the child.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined school-family collaboration for students with disabilities specifically related to creating IEP environments that support parental participation. As a whole, the IEP process itself can be controlled by the school personnel, with little thought to inviting parent participation.

This study found relationships are a key structural element for successful IEP teams, often those relationships are forged through frequent informal interactions. This IEP team had ample opportunity to interact outside of the meeting. The mom volunteered at the school, the general education teacher had been her daughter’s teacher and was in her second year of teaching her son Adam, all providing opportunities to build the
relationships. Future research should be undertaken to examine how informal interactions can be increased for families with middle school or high school age students. At these ages, parents feel disconnected to school staff due to the number of teachers working with their child and fewer opportunities to volunteer in the schools. It would also be important to examine how relationships can be built as parents transition to new IEP teams.

Another qualitative study might examine the role that fathers play in the IEP process. In this study, Mom was very involved and Dad spoke one time during the meeting. Whenever there is a problem with one of my children at school, I am the one that gets the phone call or e-mail, despite the fact that we have never specified who should be contacted. In this day and age, are we still assuming that the primary caregiver is the mother? How can we work to make fathers more involved IEP team participants?

We should continue to work to understand the complex relationships between team members at IEP meetings. No parent should go into IEP meetings feeling like, “It’s death to them.” It should be about progress, growth, and ensuring students receive the supports they need to be successful.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

SCHOOL DISTRICT LETTER OF COOPERATION
Letter of Cooperation

[Letterhead of Cooperating Institution/Organization]

Date

Name: Caroline Elser

Address: 2819, Willow Lane, Cedar Falls, IA, 50613

Dear Caroline Elser

The (School District Name) is pleased to collaborate with you on your project
“Understanding Communication During IEP Meetings.”

We understand that participating in this research will include parents of a child with
significant disabilities, special education teacher, general education teacher and a school
administrator. We had ample opportunities to discuss the research with you and ask for
clarifications. Furthermore, the PI and key personnel for this project will maintain
confidentiality of all research participants in all phases of this project.

According to our agreement, project activities will be carried out as described in the
research plan reviewed and approved by the University of Northern Iowa Institutional
Review Board.

We look forward to working with you, and please consider this communication as our
Letter of Cooperation.

Sincerely,

[Signature of representative]

[Name of representative]

[Title of representative]
APPENDIX B

DISTRICT CONDUIT COMMUNICATION
Script for District Conduit:

A graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa is wanting to do a research project on IEP meetings. She is looking for a family that would be interested in participating. Participation would involve allowing her to observe and audio record an IEP meeting, examine the IEP document and interview the families about the IEP process.

Would it be okay for me to give her your contact information so that she can share more information with you about the study and discuss your possible participation?

It is up to you if you want to participate.
APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW

INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: Understanding Communication During IEP Meetings

Name of Investigator(s): __Caroline Elser__________________________

Invitation to Participate: You are invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

Nature and Purpose: Home school relationships are vital for student success, particularly for students with disabilities. IEP meetings can cause stress for both family members and professionals. This study will seek to examine the communication that occurs during an IEP meeting to gain insight into the communication that works to support parental participation or hinders their participation.

Explanation of Procedures: This research study includes several phases. The first will be the recording of the IEP meeting. As the researcher, I will observe and audio-record the IEP meeting while taking notes. The IEP meeting discussion will then be transcribed. Closely following the IEP meeting I will conduct an interview with you. The initial interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be audio recorded and transcribed at a later date. Two follow up interviews will be conducted to clarify information and confirm with you the information I recorded. These interviews will also be recorded and transcribed at a later date and will take approximately 45 minutes. Interviews will be conducted at a time and place that are convenient for you. Interviews will focus on your experience with the IEP meeting and your perspectives on the process. I will also examine the IEP document created prior to the meeting and the IEP document that is created after the meeting.

Results will be written and conveyed in the form of a dissertation.
Discomfort and Risks: Risks for participation is minimal. IEP meetings may involve some emotion and stress. Since this meeting is being recorded you may experience some discomfort expressing thoughts and ideas. During the interview you may also experience minimal discomfort. If discomfort is great, we will be able to stop the interview.

Benefits and Compensation: Benefits for you may include reflection that leads to a change in meeting practices or beliefs about participation in IEP meetings. Such a change may lead to improved practices and outcomes for IEP meetings. Compensation will include a $15 Walmart gift certificate for participants.

Participation is voluntary.

Confidentiality: Confidentiality will be maintained. Contact information and coding will be kept separate from data in a password-protected file that is only accessible to the researcher. Identifying information will be kept until data collection is completed. Recordings will be destroyed once the interviews and IEP meeting are transcribed. Transcription will be maintained securely for four years. Information obtained during this study which could identify you, will be kept confidential. The name of the district and schools will not be used. Names of individuals will be changed to project identities. The summarized findings with no identifying information will be included in my dissertation and may be published in a peer-reviewed academic journal or presented at a scholarly conference.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw: Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all, and by doing so, you will not be penalized or lose benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Questions: If you have questions about the study or desire information in the future regarding your participation or the study generally, you can contact me, Caroline Elser, at 319-273-3310 or my faculty advisor, Dr. Susan Etscheidt at the Department of Special Education, University of Northern Iowa 319-273-3279. You can also contact the office of the IRB Administrator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-6148, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.”
Agreement:

I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement. I am 18 years of age or older.

_________________________________     ____________________  
(Signature of participant)                                  (Date)

_________________________________  
(Printed name of participant)

_________________________________     ____________________  
(Signature of investigator)                                (Date)

_________________________________     ____________________  
(Signature of instructor/advisor)                       (Date)

A copy of this consent form will be provided to you.
APPENDIX D

OBSERVATION CHART
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APPENDIX E

ROUND 2 QUESTIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER
Special Ed Teacher Interview 2

1. In the first interview you mentioned to keep in contact with families over the summer, show them that you care, why do you think this is important?

2. You mentioned that you had a lot to learn about holding IEP meetings when you first started. Can you give me some examples of things you've learned about IEP meetings?

3. In the previous interview, you mentioned opening trust with families, can you explain some ways that you try and accomplish that?

4. So, if you've got that open trust, how do you think that impacts IEP meetings?

5. In the earlier interview, you mentioned that you sometimes get nervous going to IEP meetings, can you tell me more about that?

6. In the previous interview, you mentioned the importance of having a relaxed friendly environment, in your experience what helps create that kind of environment.

7. So, what have you experienced that has discouraged parental participation, what barriers might exist to parental participation?

8. When thinking about those meetings, how do you think the word choice that the educators use impacts the parents.

9. So, if you have parents or if there are parents out there who may be resistant to listening to what the educators have to say, what can educators do to maybe encourage parents to listen.

10. So, thinking back to the last IEP meeting, how would you describe the communication as far as, the participants in the room, if you were going to describe that meeting to someone else thinking specifically about the communication what would you say?

11. How would you describe the roles of the individuals at the meeting?