IEP meetings: What are the strategies that make an IEP meeting successful?

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IEP MEETINGS: WHAT ARE THE STRATEGIES THAT MAKE AN
IEP MEETING SUCCESSFUL?

An Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Approved:

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May 2006
IEP MEETINGS: WHAT ARE THE STRATEGIES THAT MAKE AN IEP MEETING SUCCESSFUL?

A Dissertation

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

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Dr. Robert Decker, Committee Member

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May 2006
ABSTRACT

All students who receive special education services have one thing in common. They each have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) designed specifically for him/her. The IEP is a valuable document that guides the special education services for a student. It is imperative that parents have a significant role in the development, implementation, and review of the IEP.

For this study, interviews were used to understand the strategies that assist parents in achieving active participation during their child’s IEP conference. Six parents of sophomore, junior, and senior high students were interviewed. Three parents were identified as “involved” which means they were active participants in their child’s IEP meeting, and they attended the majority of meetings. The other three parents were identified as “uninvolved” which means they were not seen as active participants in their child’s IEP meeting and they had missed two or more IEP meetings during their child’s school career.

Results revealed three main themes of information: Meeting Structure, Parent Identified Difficulties, and Parent Identified Solutions. Meeting Structure data revealed that most IEP meetings are located in the child’s special education classroom. Meeting participants varied depending on if the meeting was at the elementary level or the high school level. Participants at the elementary level typically included the child’s special education teacher, general education teacher, and principal. The only consistent participants at the high school level were the parents and the special education teacher. Data from the Parent Identified Difficulties theme revealed that parents do not feel that
they are equal members of their child's IEP team. They feel that teachers do not ask for or listen to their input. Parents reported that school personnel utilize unfamiliar language that they do not understand. Parents also reported that there is a lack of respect between parents and teachers. Finally, data from the Parent Identified Solutions category revealed that involved parents suggested parents attend all IEP meetings, research their child's disability, and ask questions during their child's IEP meeting. All parents suggested that school personnel increase the level of communication between school and parents.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends. Without their love and support, this research would never have been completed. To Darci Axmear, my friend through thick and thin, who encouraged me and supported me when the “going got tough.” Thank you for listening to me for hours on end while I talked through my research and struggled to finish this doctorate. Your support is appreciated more than you will ever know.

To my parents, Maurice and Peg Cashman, who instilled in me a love of reading and learning. Your love and support over the years has enabled me to fearlessly attempt new endeavors. Thank you for helping me grow into the person I am today.

To my brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, and friends who saw much less of me in recent months due to my need to study and work. You never complained of my absence and offered only encouragement as I strove to reach my goals. Thanks for your support.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

All students who receive special education services in Iowa schools have one thing in common. They each have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) designed specifically for him/her. This IEP is a complex document of 12 pages that summarizes the current performance of the student and establishes measurable goals for his/her future performance in the area of concern, i.e., reading, math, behavior. It contains documentation of the types of special education and related services that the student will receive and the amount of time that the student will spend away from the general education classroom in order to receive those special education services. A list of appropriate accommodations that are necessary for the student to be successful as well as the projected frequency, location, and duration of special education services must be included in the IEP. The IEP must be reviewed annually and if the child continues to be eligible for special education services, a new IEP is written.

Despite the complexity of the IEP, it is a valuable document that guides the special education services for a student. The IEP is written by a team of people including the general education teacher, special education teacher, school administrator, professional who can interpret data, and the parent(s). It is imperative that parents have a significant role in the development, implementation, and review of the IEP. Unfortunately, many parents feel inadequate during the IEP conference. They feel ill-equipped to handle the questions that school personnel ask them and do not believe they are equal members of their child's IEP team.
School personnel serve on the IEP teams of many children. Because of this, they establish strong relationships with one another and feel comfortable in each other’s presence. Parents on the other hand, usually serve on just one child’s IEP team: their own. Consequently, they do not see the other members of their child’s IEP team on a frequent basis, making it difficult to establish strong, trusting relationships. This sometimes prevents parents from effectively participating in the development of their child’s IEP.

When a parent enters the room where their child’s IEP will be held, they are usually greeted by a number of school professionals seated around a large table. These professionals are typically highly educated. The parents seat themselves among these professionals and attempt to establish themselves as equal members of the team. Depending on the education level of the parent, it may be difficult for him/her to feel as though they are equal members of the team. School personnel do not intend to establish this inequality, but by the very nature of their jobs, the inequity is created.

According to Lytle and Bordin (2001, p. 41), “parents can… feel frustrated by a perception of inequality on the team, being unfamiliar with school/legal procedures and policies, or not understanding special education terminology and jargon.” “I felt intimidated by the process and unsure if I was up to making the right decisions for Daniela [the author’s daughter]” (Goldstone, 2001, p. 61). Because of these feelings, parents may not be able to effectively participate in the development of the IEP for their child.
Statement of the Problem

Parents are required members of each student's IEP team. While most IEP meetings have a parent seated at the table, many do not have a parent participating during the meeting. Some parents may have difficulty understanding the language and educational jargon that school personnel use during meetings. Others may have difficulty expressing their wishes during a meeting where they are “surrounded” by educators. Still others may be intimidated by the educational levels of the school personnel seated next to them.

As a result, parents of children with special education needs may not be as engaged in the development of their child’s IEP as they could be. Due to their fear or feelings of inadequacy, they may sit passively as decisions about their child’s education are made. They may sign a document with which they don’t entirely agree simply to conclude the meeting and allow them to exit an environment that makes them uncomfortable. Many parents are not active participants in the education of their child.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to understand the strategies that assist parents in achieving active participation during their child’s IEP conference. The parents’ perspective will be examined to determine how they could have improved their own performance on their child’s IEP team as well as how they believe school personnel could have made them feel more a part of the process. Finally, this study will examine the advice veteran parents would give other parents who are beginning the special education process with their children.
Conceptual Framework

"Qualitative studies typically include an emic (insider to phenomenon) in contrast to quantitative studies’ etic (outsider) perspective. By focusing on participants’ personal meanings, qualitative research ‘gives voice’ to people who have been historically silenced or marginalized” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 199. This study is designed to “give voice” to parents of special education students who may not have a strong voice during their child’s IEP meeting. It is the intent of this study to provide an environment where parents feel comfortable sharing their successes, frustrations, and observations about a process in which they must participate but may not feel comfortable providing input.

Definition of Terms

Disability: mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities and who, by reason thereof, need special education and related services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004).

FAPE: free, appropriate public education means special education and related services that have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; meet the standards of the State Education Agency; include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the State involved; and
are provided in conformity with an individualized education program (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004).

**Level I Services:** when a student is determined to be eligible for special education services, a weighting is assigned that designates a level of service. The level of service refers to the relationship between the general education program and specially designed instruction for an eligible individual. Level I is a level of service that provides specially designed instruction for a limited portion or part of the educational program. A majority of the general education program is appropriate. This level of service includes modifications and adaptations to the general education program (Iowa Department of Special Education, 2000, p. 50).

**Level II Services:** when a student is determined to be eligible for special education services, a weighting is assigned that designates a level of service. The level of service refers to the relationship between the general education program and specially designed instruction for an eligible individual. Level II is a level of service that provides specially designed instruction for a majority of the educational program. This level of service includes substantial modifications, adaptations and special education accommodations to the general education program (Iowa Department of Special Education, 2000, p. 50).

**Level III Services:** when a student is determined to be eligible for special education services, a weighting is assigned that designates a level of service. The level of service refers to the relationship between the general education program and specially designed instruction for an eligible individual. Level III is a level of service that provides specially designed instruction for most or all of the educational program. This level of
service requires extensive redesign of curriculum and substantial modification of
instructional techniques, strategies, and materials (Iowa Department of Special
Education, 2000, p. 50).

*LRE*: least restrictive environment means children with disabilities will be educated and
participate with non-disabled children to the extent appropriate (Individuals with
Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004).

*OSEP*: Office of Special Education Programs which is the principal agency in the
Department of Education for administering and carrying out IDEA and other programs
and activities concerning the education of children with disabilities (Individuals with
Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004).

*Parent*: a natural, adoptive, or foster parent of a child; a guardian; an individual acting in
the place of a natural or adoptive parent with whom the child lives, or an individual who
is legally responsible for the child's welfare; or an individual assigned to be a surrogate
parent (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004).

*Special Education*: specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the
unique needs of a child with a disability including instruction conducted in the classroom,
in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and instruction in physical
education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004).

*State Educational Agency*: The State board of education or other agency or officer
primarily responsible for the State supervision of public elementary schools and
secondary schools, or, if there is no such officer or agency, an officer or agency
designated by the Governor or by State law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004).

Limitations

Every research study has limitations that should be noted. Due to the interview procedures utilized for this study, limitations that restrict the generalizability of the findings exist. Data was gathered through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Parents of sophomore, junior, and senior high school students with IEPs who participated in the interviews were selected by the heads of the special education departments of the three major high schools in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Because of this limited sampling group, generalizability of these findings to other parent populations is limited.

It is also difficult to isolate the reasons some parents are more successful participants than others during IEP meetings. Assumptions can be made that some strategies will assist parents in increasing the effectiveness of their communication, for example, but it is difficult to measure the interaction of multiple variables on communication style.

Finally, only parents of sophomore, junior, and senior high school students were interviewed. Comments may, consequently, be focused primarily on the most recent years, high school.

Despite these limitations, this study addresses parent knowledge, opinions, and attitudes about the IEP process. Consequently, this study provides pertinent and useful information on which future research can build.
Assumptions of the Study

For the purpose of this study:

1. It was assumed that parents of students with disabilities who were randomly selected would be representative of parents of students with disabilities in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

2. It was assumed that parents answered all interview questions truthfully.

Organization of the Paper

This study is organized into five distinct chapters. Chapter I presented an introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, conceptual framework, definition of terms, limitations and assumptions of the study, and organization of the paper.

Chapter II provides a review of the literature regarding the participation of parents in the IEP process. The history of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, current legislation regarding IDEA, and the impact of IDEA on parent participation in IEP meetings will be provided. Finally, this chapter will focus on difficulties that parents encounter when participating in IEP meetings and how parent participation can be improved in IEP meetings.

Chapter III describes the methods used in the study including an explanation of participants, instruments, and procedures used by the researcher for data collection. The results of the study will be reported in chapter IV. Finally, chapter V is a discussion of the results of the study including recommendations, implications for parents and school personnel who participate in IEP meetings, and recommendations for further study.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter will review the current literature related to parent participation in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. Topics that will be discussed include: (a) the history of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), (b) the current legislation regarding IDEA, (c) the impact of IDEA on parent participation in IEP meetings, (d) the difficulties encountered by parents when participating in IEP meetings, and (e) the current research on how to improve parent participation in IEP meetings.

History of IDEA

In 1975, the United States Congress and President Gerald Ford enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act also known as Public Law 94-142. This law was the precursor to the law now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA. "The basic premise of this federal law is that all children with disabilities have a federally protected civil right to have available to them a free appropriate public education that meets their education and related services needs in the least restrictive environment" (National Council on Disability, 2000, p. 5).

Prior to the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, the majority of children with disabilities did not attend school. The National Council on Disability (2000, p. 6) reported that "schools in America educated only one in five students with disabilities. Many states had laws excluding certain students, including those who were blind, deaf, or labeled 'emotionally disturbed' or 'mentally retarded'". Parents of children with disabilities were forced to care for their children at home with
little or no school support or place their children in a residential facility where children received little or no educational services.

Since the enactment of this important legislation, the schoolhouse doors have been opened to children from the ages of three to twenty-one. All children, including those with disabilities, are now provided a free and appropriate public education. This education is to be provided in the least restrictive environment which means that children with disabilities are educated with their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible. Parents of children with disabilities are no longer forced to keep their children at home or place them in residential facilities. Children with disabilities board school buses with their peers on a daily basis and are taken to school to receive an appropriate education.

**Current IDEA Legislation**

IDEA is divided into four sections: A, B, C, and D. Part A contains the general provisions of the law including definitions of terms used throughout the legislation, rationale for passing the legislation, and provisions for the establishment of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Part B provides assistance for education of all children with disabilities. This section outlines how states, local education agencies, and area education agencies will provide a free, appropriate education for students with disabilities. It delineates who are required members of a child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) team and the responsibilities of each team member. Part C contains information regarding infants and toddlers with disabilities. Finally, Part D discusses national activities to improve education of children with disabilities.
For the purposes of this research, the provisions of Part B of the IDEA legislation will be further outlined as it relates to parent involvement in the development of an IEP. IDEA states, “The term ‘individualized education program team’ or ‘IEP Team’ means a group of individuals composed of—(i) the parents of a child with a disability; (ii) not less than one regular education teacher of such child (if the child is, or may be, participating in the regular education environment; (iii) not less than one special education teacher; (iv) a representative of the local educational agency who is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of specially designed instruction, is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum, and is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the local educational agency; (v) an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results; (vi) at the discretion of the parent or the agency, other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child; and (vii) whenever, appropriate the child” (IDEA).

Part B of IDEA further states, “In developing each child’s IEP, the IEP Team...shall consider—(i) the strengths of the child; (ii) the concerns of the parents for enhancing the education of their child; (iii) the results of the initial evaluation or most recent evaluation of the child; and (iv) the academic, developmental, and functional needs of the child.” As these sections outline, the parents of a child with a disability are an important component of every IEP team and their concerns must be considered in every IEP.
Impact of IDEA

In the early 1800's, American parents were almost totally responsible for the education of their children. Children from wealthy families typically received formal educations, but children from middle and lower class families were typically educated at home. Their educations consisted mainly of learning to read well enough to read the Bible and complete basic money transactions.

In the mid to late 1800's, "schools accepted more responsibility for academic learning. Professional educators began to assume the responsibility for communicating with parents, instructing them on ways of helping their children for school, and even educating parents about children's growth and development" (Barbour & Barbour, 1997, p. 188). Parents were viewed as less knowledgeable about what was best for their children, and parents were usually not welcomed into the decision making process at school. Teachers and administrators saw themselves as experts on child development and frequently dominated parent-teacher communications.

These attitudes continued into the 1950s and 1960s. During this time, according to Barbour and Barbour (1997 p. 33), "the American public, for the most part, viewed all education as the responsibility of schools, and parents were expected to support teachers and their programs." The expectation of parent involvement in schools at this time was complete agreement to whatever school administrators and teachers recommended for the education of their children.

Upon passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), the importance of recognizing parents as partners in the process of educating children was
acknowledged. Parents were recognized as being a child's first teacher and the most important influence in a youngster's life. Teachers and administrators were, consequently, encouraged to establish strong partnerships with parents of children with disabilities. "The goal of this approach was to empower parents to act as advocates for themselves and for their children" (Sussel, Carr, & Hartman, 1996, p. 54).

According to the National Council on Disability (2000, p. 57), "almost a quarter century following the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), students with disabilities and their families still commonly face obstacles to securing the free appropriate public education (FAPE) that the law promises." Despite the fact that IDEA provides every parent the right to pursue legal action in order to ensure their children's right to an appropriate education, most parents are unable or unwilling to take this step. Consequently, many parents attend IEP meetings, listen politely to school officials as they outline their recommendations for the education of their child, and sign off on the necessary paperwork. The process is not always collaborative or inclusive and parents are rarely seen as equal partners in the process.

Difficulties Encountered by Parents when Participating in IEP Meetings

Developing an IEP for a student with disabilities can be a complex and challenging assignment. As the student progresses through his educational program, parents will encounter many different teachers, administrators, and educational professionals. Kathleen McCoy (2000, p. 62) stated, "Students and their parents are the only members of the IEP team that remain constant across all school settings and levels."
Knowing this, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of parents in the IEP process.

Despite the awareness of the importance of the parental role in the successful development of a quality IEP, many parents express frustration at their inability to participate more effectively in the process. In a study by Soodak and Erwin (2000, p. 36), ten parents of children being served in Early Childhood settings were interviewed. Parents were asked questions regarding their experiences with the schools in planning their child’s educational plan. A parent named Dina was quoted regarding her involvement in her child’s team process. “I think ‘team’ is almost a funny name for the meeting. I think team implies that the right hand knows what the left is doing. What happens in these meetings is that everyone takes a piece of the pie—they’re vested in their half hour a week. It’s like separate input on different aspects of the same child.”

Salembier and Furney (1997) interviewed the parents of 78 students with special needs. They found that parents did not always have positive experiences when participating in team meetings regarding their son or daughter. “First, while parents participated in a variety of ways during their son/daughter’s final transition meeting, almost a third of the parents interviewed talked just one or two times. Second, a majority of parents were satisfied with their participation in the transition planning process, but 30% were not satisfied” (p. 39). These results indicate that IEP teams may need to examine their current practices and make some changes to better involve parents in the IEP process.
Review of the literature regarding difficulties with parent participation in the IEP process revealed three distinct themes: equity issues, difficulties with communication/collaboration, and differences in perspective between school personnel and parents.

**Equity Issues**

When a child is identified as being eligible and entitled for special education services, an IEP is written by a team of professionals and the parent. During this team meeting, some parents report a feeling of inequality on the team. According to a study by Dembinski and Mauser (1977, p. 52), "one-third of the parents reported that they felt comfortable when interacting with a professional. The majority of the parents described themselves as feeling awkward, nervous, and to some extent, as if they were imposing on the professional when they questioned him." "Because the majority of parents will have had little or no prior contact with either the other IEP participants or the guidelines of having a child with an exceptionality, it should come as no surprise that many have reported a great deal of apprehension and discomfort at these sessions" (Simpson, 1996, p. 216). This feeling of inequality is sometimes the result of the use of jargon by professional staff. Dembinski and Mauser (1977, p. 53) concluded that "the language used between professionals is not appropriate for communicating with the layman." Because of this feeling of inadequacy and lack of knowledge of the jargon and professional literature surrounding their child’s disability, parents report feeling overwhelmed throughout the process. Anita, a parent from the study by Soodak and Erwin, stated, "I mean the books, the footwork, interviewing people, talking to people,
talking to professionals, talking to parents. It’s a lot. It is a lot.” Another parent described her involvement as “exhausting” (2000, p. 36).

School staff typically find it relatively easy to form a cohesive team. They work closely together on a daily basis, interact informally in the teacher’s lounge, and serve on a variety of committees together. Parents, on the other hand, are not able to interact with their child’s team on a regular basis. “If parent experts and school professionals are seldom or never in the same environment and communicate only during an IEP meeting once a year, they are unlikely to develop a strong team cohesion or bond...School professionals may have known one another for years and interact easily and informally with each other, chatting and joking. These kinds of interactions come with familiarity. For this reason, school professionals must help parents become part of the team” (Lytle & Bordin, 2001, p. 41).

Parents and school personnel in several studies expressed that parents were viewed as suppliers of information during the IEP process rather than true partners in the process (Lynch & Stein, 1982; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982; Lytle & Bordin, 2001). According to the study by Lynch and Stein, “nearly one-third of the parents perceived themselves as not involved...although nearly 70% of the parents interviewed reported that they were active participants in their child’s IEP, only 47% of those reported that they had made any suggestions in that meeting” (1982, p. 62). In the McKinney and Hocutt study, it was found that “one fourth of parents did not recall the IEP document itself, and few of those who did had any direct knowledge of its contents... the majority
of parents felt that they had not participated fully and that only a few could identify a specific contribution they had made" (1982, p. 71).

Finally, parents are able to establish a trusting relationship with individuals with whom they interact on a more regular basis. Typically, relationships with their child’s teacher are positive and fulfilling due to regular, informal communications. Parents express more concern about their relationships with district personnel with whom they have less frequent, more formal contact. One parent stated that “she believed that she was kept informed of changes in her son’s education by the administration primarily as a result of her own insistence (and the district’s fear of litigation)...She frequently had to remind the administration that she is part of the decision-making team, and she often felt like a ‘thorn in their side’” (Erwin, Soodak, Winton, & Turnbull, 2001, p. 135). Families in the study by Alper, Schloss, and Schloss “identified an ‘us versus them’ atmosphere as a serious impediment to communication and collaboration with professionals (1995, p. 262).

Issues with Communication/Collaboration

Salembier and Furney (1998, p. 62) interviewed 36 parents of high school students with disabilities. The focus of their study was to understand the experiences of parents as they participated in IEP and transition planning meetings. They discovered that “parents did not like it when it seemed that IEP/transition plan goals and activities had been written or decided upon by teachers and service providers prior to the meeting. This made them feel excluded from the planning and decision-making processes.” In a study by Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, and Curry (1980), researchers observed 14 IEP
conferences. "Of the 14 conferences observed, in only one instance was the meeting actually devoted to specifying goals and objectives jointly between the parent and educators" (p. 282). In a study by Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000, p. 43), 70% of parents surveyed expressed that they had “ample input into the development of their children’s IEP goals. This group appeared to be somewhat discouraged, however, that goals had been developed in advance of the meeting and that their suggestions may or may not have been incorporated into the plan.” While educators may feel that they are reducing parent anxiety about the IEP meeting by completing as much of the paperwork as possible ahead of time, they may actually be increasing parent anxiety because they are effectively removing them from the collaborative process of IEP development.

Communication with parents can take many forms. Some communication can be extremely formal as when people communicate at an IEP meeting. Other communication can be informal as when a parent and teacher visit when the parent picks up his/her child after school. Soodak and Erwin (2000, p. 39) found that parents “were more satisfied with their relationships with school personnel when there were trust, informal communication, and ongoing involvement that was not limited by time or other restrictions.” Similarly, in the study by Erwin et al. (2001, p. 143), parents “spoke of being most satisfied when communication was open, ongoing, and informal…unrestricted communication meant that they could have frequent and unscheduled contact that for most parents extended beyond the school day.” A parent in Dabkowski’s study (2004, p. 35) “did not actively participate during the IEP meeting, yet she did so when meeting alone with the special education teacher. When the teacher
provided Mrs. Jones with a debriefing period in an environment more suited to her needs, she was able to participate in the discussion about her son's new IEP." Because IEP meetings inherently require more formal communication, parents may feel uncomfortable before the meeting even begins.

Ruby Payne has completed research regarding the impact of poverty on language. Her research concludes that every language has five registers: frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate. For the purposes of this research, only formal and casual will be addressed. The formal register is "the standard sentence syntax and word choice of work and school. (It) has complete sentences and specific word choice" (Payne, 2001, p. 42). In contrast, the casual register is "the register between friends and is characterized by a 400- to 800-word vocabulary. Word choice is general and not specific. Conversation is dependent upon non-verbal assists. Sentence syntax is often incomplete" (Payne, 2001, p. 42). Payne (2001, p. 43) goes on to say that the "ability to use formal register is a hidden rule of the middle class...In the formal register of English, the pattern is to get straight to the point. In casual register, the pattern is to go around and around and finally get to the point. For students who have no access to formal register, educators become frustrated with the tendency of these students to meander almost endlessly through a topic." If educators might become frustrated with students who do not have access to formal register, they might also become frustrated with parents who do not have access to formal register. Lack of parent access to the formal register of language could greatly impact the success of an IEP meeting.
Topics discussed during IEP conferences appear to typically be restricted to evaluation results, eligibility criterion for special education, and goals of the IEP. "When parents were asked whether school personnel had discussed ultimate goals or exit criteria with them at the time of initial placement, nearly three quarters of the parents (71%) said they had not" (Green & Shinn, 1994, p. 278). This discussion should be critical for both educators and parents in order to ensure that there is a well-planned road map for the child’s education.

**Differences in Perspective Between School Personnel and Parents**

Teachers, school administrators, and parents naturally have different perspectives of school, school policy, and IEP meetings. Teachers and administrators tend to have more understanding of the school and how it functions within the larger system of the school district. Teachers have intimate knowledge of how their classrooms work. Parents, have the deepest understanding of their child and his/her needs. Parents may quickly become frustrated when they are searching for answers about their child and professionals take the “wrong” perspective and offer information about the larger system rather than provide information specific to the immediate needs of the child and parent. According to the study by Dembinski and Mauser (1977, p. 54), “parents emphasize the need of receiving immediate relevant advice...as opposed to offering long-term recommendations regarding future educational or vocational outcomes.”

In stark contrast to the previous study, Alper et al. (1995, p. 263), found that “parents are faced with a growing need for information that can assist in planning for the future of the child with a disability...This task is complicated and can generate anxiety
because the adult service system is often fragmented." Similar results were found in a study by Sussel et al. in which surveys were distributed to 300 families of children with special needs. These families "indicated that more accessible information about additional resources available in the community and about programs and services available after graduation were top priority needs (1996, p. 54). These studies imply that parents are hungry for information regarding not only their child but also how to access assistance from a complex and often disjointed system. School professionals must find ways to provide information to parents to meet both of these dichotomous needs.

While parents may attend IEP meetings seeking information and assistance, they also attend meetings expecting to be full participants in the IEP process. School personnel may have different expectations regarding parent participation. In a study by Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, and Maxwell (1978), school personnel who had served on individual student planning teams were asked a number of questions about "activities they thought parents should participate in during the planning team meeting... Only two activities elicited a majority of positive responses from planning team members: presenting and gathering information relevant to the student’s case... In short, parents are expected to provide information to the planning team, but they are not expected to participate actively in making decisions about their child’s program (p. 532). "Although parent involvement was emphasized by several students and parents, most of the educators who were interviewed focused on the school’s role in transition planning and some communicated reticence about parent involvement” (Powers, Turner, Matuszewski, Wilson, & Loesch, 1999, p. 21). This difference in expectations regarding parent
participation in meetings may prevent collaborative teaming and the building of trust during the IEP process.

Finally, parents sometimes are overwhelmed by the IEP process. Consequently, they may not fully participate in IEP meetings. School professionals could misconstrue this lack of involvement as apathy or disapproval of teacher efforts. School personnel as well as parents must be constantly aware of the perceptions they form about those who sit at the table with them during IEP conferences. Some of those perceptions may be inaccurate and may influence the success of the conference.

Ideas to Improve Parent Participation in IEP Conferences

A review of the literature regarding ways to improve parent participation in IEP conferences centers around four main themes: preparation for the IEP conference; parent perception of the school’s willingness to allow their participation; communication; and parent perceptions about participation in school activities and decision-making.

Preparation for the IEP Conference

Historically, parent-teacher conferences have been an opportunity for teachers to share information with parents about their son/daughter’s progress. Much of the communication and sharing was one-way. Parents may have become more enlightened about their child’s progress in school but teachers rarely gleaned valuable information regarding their student. “As schools begin to develop a sense of partnership, conferences, although not different on the surface, will become forums for mutual exchange. IEP conferences may then be known as ‘partnership conferences’” (Barbour & Barbour, 1997, p. 189).
Meetings should always be scheduled at a time that is convenient not only for school personnel but also for parents. Yona Leyser (1988, p. 365) interviewed two groups of parents about possible reasons for the low levels of parent attendance at school meetings. "45% of parents in one group and 25% of parents in a second group responded that timing of school meetings poses a difficulty for them" due to transportation or work schedule constraints. Schools must be sensitive to the needs of parents regarding time away from work, transportation, and childcare responsibilities when establishing meeting times. "Scheduling meetings and phone conversations at times of day that are equally convenient to both parent and teacher help promote the recognition of equality in terms of each partner’s time and commitments to activities other than those associated with the student" (Walker & Singer, 1993, p. 300-301).

According to the study by Salembier and Furney in which 36 parents of students with disabilities were interviewed, the physical environment where a meeting was held was very important. "Parents found it helpful when meetings were held in places that were home-like, comfortable, had access to food, and in some cases, were not in school. Parents liked rooms that were not too large for the size of the group and allowed team members to sit in a circle" (Salembier & Furney, 1998, p. 62). Barbour and Barbour (1997) recommended that school personnel should sit beside parents during meetings rather than across a table in order to establish a sense of equity between participants.

"Parents liked meetings that were both well-organized and flexible, and included agendas that they had helped to develop (Salembier & Furney, 1998, p. 62). Parents appreciate when agendas are provided in advance to give them time to prepare for the
meeting. While parents voice frustration when it appears that decisions are made prior to the meeting, they do appreciate appropriate preplanning such as clear, well-thought out agendas.

Both parents and teachers should prepare artifacts of the child’s learning that can be shared at the meeting. “Assemble materials from areas of the curriculum that demonstrate children’s classroom work over time. Invite parents to bring products their children have produced at home, demonstrating the value placed on parental teaching” (Barbour & Barbour, 1997, p. 191). When everyone at the table shares evidence of student learning, all participants are placed on equal footing and all individuals are more likely to share during the meeting.

According to Lytle and Bordin (2001, p. 41), “to beneficially meet the child’s educational needs, each person on the team plays a specific, clearly defined role...A parent or caregiver has intimate and important knowledge of the medical history of the child and his or her daily routines, habits, likes and dislikes, behaviors, and family needs, and sees the child within his or her natural context.” This is critical information for a team who is making decisions about a child’s educational program. The parent is an expert on their child and should be treated as an equal member of their child’s IEP team.

Sometimes during IEP meetings, parents will become emotional. Information that may be difficult for them to accept may be presented regarding their child’s cognitive or emotional development. Parents may feel overwhelmed and may need social support in order to successfully participate in the meeting (Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Greenspan, 2004; Goldstone, 2001). School personnel should be prepared to provide emotional support as
needed and as appropriate. A list of local support groups may also be helpful to parents as they learn to cope with their child’s disability.

“The issue of trust was perhaps the single most significant indicator of how parents perceived their relationships with school personnel (Erwin, Soodak, Winton, & Turnbull, 2001, p. 141). According to Turnbull and Turnbull (2001, p. 115-116):

When professionals interact with parents, respect is a necessary ingredient...One of the most meaningful interactions I have had as a parent with a professional since Jay has been home was with a psychologist. As I shared some very personal concerns with her related to planning for Jay’s future, tears came down her cheeks. We sat in silence for a long time, both considering the course of action that would be in Jay’s best interest. The silence was beautiful. It confirmed that she was hearing what I was saying and was sharing my feelings on the subject. There was no easy answer. An immediate response, telling me not to worry about things, would have insulted my sensibilities. I knew she respected me when she poignantly shared my feelings. The result of that interaction was that my respect for her as a professional grew one hundredfold.

A trusting relationship must be forged over time between parents and school personnel. When trust is broken, parents frequently feel that they are unable to truly voice their viewpoints or concern for fear of reprisal. “It is ironic that parents must let those whom they do not trust make decisions about and assume responsibility for the most important people in their lives—their very own children” (Erwin, Soodak, Winton, & Turnbull, 2001, p. 142).

Parent Perception of School Willingness to Allow Their Participation

According to Barbour & Barbour (1997, p. 266), “parents and community members have feelings and attitudes about school that date back to their own childhoods. Parents who had unpleasant school experiences are often reluctant to become involved with their children’s schools.” This reluctance may prevent any significant participation
in a child’s IEP conference. Consequently, teachers and school officials must be sensitive to a parent’s feelings toward school. Helping the parent feel welcome and successful at the initial meeting will promote feelings of good will and will make the parent feel more positive about participating in future meetings.

“The willingness of the school to have parents be present and involved played an important role in shaping parent participation. Parents who were free to enter the school or classroom at any time and for any reason believed that they were genuinely welcome and that the school had nothing to hide” (Soodak & Erwin, 2000, p. 35). According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, p. 18-19), “the overall value of multiple invitations, opportunities, and requests presented by children and their schools appears to lie in the welcoming and proactive demand they create for parents’ involvement. “When parents saw themselves as partners in the educational process, they perceived teachers and principals as being more receptive to their input and felt that their child benefited both academically and socially from his/her peers” (Abramson, Willson, Yoshida, & Hagerty, 1983, p. 193). When schools practice an “open-door policy” with parents, their trust in school officials deepens. This trust is an essential element at IEP meetings. If it’s not present on a day-to-day basis, it won’t be present at IEP meetings. This lack of trust will significantly impede a team’s ability to plan a successful educational program for a student.

Communication

According to Soodak and Erwin’s research (2000, p. 38) in which ten parents of children with disabilities were interviewed, “all parents indicated that they wanted
frequent and consistent feedback with school personnel.” This finding was echoed in the research by Salembier and Furney (1997, p. 39) and Leyser (1988, p. 367). This frequent feedback could take many forms: notes home, telephone calls, conversations in the hallway, and/or daily journals about the child’s day. Parents expressed a preference for informal communication but were willing to participate in more formalized meetings as necessary. Informal communication on a regular basis promotes more successful communication during the more formal IEP meetings. “If teachers have been trying out accommodations and the parents and teachers have been in daily contact, discussion at IEP meetings can focus on concrete rather than theoretical examples of appropriate instructional delivery” (McCoy, 2000, p. 67).

“The quality of existing and future program models is dependent upon clear communication and collaboration between the parents of learning disabled children and the professionals concerned with the learning disabled child’s development” (Dembinski and Mauser, 1977, p. 55). This communication between the school and parents must begin before the child is entitled to special education programming, continue at the IEP conference, and resume during every interaction between parent and school personnel.

School personnel should also be aware of the differences in language register that may be present when visiting with parents. Most teachers are middle class and use the formal register of language when speaking. Many parents live in poverty and use the casual register. “An understanding of the culture and values of poverty will lessen the anger and frustration that educators may periodically feel when dealing with these students and parents (Payne, 2001, p. 62). Educators must work hard to use language that
is easily understood by all parents in order to build an environment where everyone can actively participate in IEP meetings.

**Parent Perceptions about Participation in School Activities and Decision-Making**

Most parents have perceptions about their child’s school before they walk through the doors for the first time. Parents have visited with friends, family, and neighbors about their experiences and have consequently formed opinions about what their own experiences will be like when their son or daughter attends school. For many parents, the initial interaction with school personnel has a lasting effect on future interactions (Erwin, Soodak, Winton, & Turnbull, 2001; Walker & Singer, 1993). Positive community perceptions about the school will help parents walk in the door on the first day of school with positive presuppositions. These positive feelings will help create positive initial interactions with school personnel that will carry over to the first IEP meeting. Parents who enter these first meetings with positive feelings will participate more effectively and will consequently be stronger IEP team members.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The Purpose of the Study

For this study, interviews were used to understand the strategies that assist parents in achieving active participation during their child’s IEP conference. Six parents of sophomore, junior, and senior high students were interviewed. Three parents were identified as “involved” which means they were active participants in their child’s IEP meeting and they attended the majority of the meetings. Three parents were identified as “uninvolved” which means they were not seen as active participants in their child’s IEP meeting and they had missed two or more IEP meetings during their child’s school career. The parents’ perspective was examined to determine how they could have improved their own performance on their child’s IEP team as well as how they believe school personnel could have made them feel more a part of the process. Finally, this study examined the advice veteran parents would give other parents who are beginning the special education process with their children.

The Research Question

The basic research question of this study was: What strategies do parents identify that make an IEP meeting successful?

The Model of the Study

For this study, interview methods were utilized to investigate the strategies that parents believe would help them become more active participants in their child’s IEP conference. These strategies may be things that parents believe school personnel should
do in order to assist in their inclusion in the IEP process or they may be strategies that parents wish they had done in order to help themselves become more active participants. Face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were utilized that allowed six parents to share their thoughts, feelings, and advice about the IEP conference.

Permission was obtained from the Human Subjects Review Board (See Appendix B) from the University of Northern Iowa. Permission was also obtained from the Cedar Rapids Community Schools to perform the study with parents from their district (See Appendix C).

The interviews took place in a location mutually agreed upon by the parent and researcher, usually the parents’ home. The interviews did not take place during the two weeks either before or after a scheduled IEP meeting to avoid the misperception that the researcher had any influence or connection to the IEP process.

Participants

The Cedar Rapids Community School District is located in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a city located in the east central portion of the state. There are 24 elementary schools, six middle schools, and four high schools for a total of 34 schools in the district. The Cedar Rapids schools serve a total student population of 17,837 (Cedar Rapids Community Schools website: www.cr.k12.ia.us/aboutUS/index.html, 09/13/05). Of this total student population, 2,959 students receive special education services. 1,911 students receive Level I services, 615 students receive Level II services, and 433 students receive Level III services. (IMS Data from Grant Wood AEA, 03/02/06).
A total of six parents were interviewed for this study. The decision was made to include only parents of sophomore, junior, and senior students because these parents were deemed to have the most potential experience with IEP meetings. At a minimum, these parents would have attended one annual IEP meeting over several years. Two participants from each of the three major high schools in Cedar Rapids were nominated by the head of the Special Education Department based on consultation with individual teachers. Terry (2000, p. 31) stated, "The peer-nomination method asks each participant to nominate others according to a specific stimulus criterion... A strength of this method is the ease with which the data can be collected." The nomination criterion was verbally explained to each department head and a handout outlining the information was provided. The following criterion was utilized to select the parents who participated in this study:

1. The parent(s) must have a child receiving special education services who is a sophomore, junior, or senior in high school during the 2005-2006 school year.

2. Their child must have been identified as being eligible to receive special education services during their elementary years (Kindergarten-Fifth Grade).

3. Their child must currently be receiving between two and five hours of special education services in an academic area each day (Level I or Level II).

4. Their child must have spent their school years from when they were identified as being eligible for special education services to the present time in Cedar Rapids Community Schools.

One parent was identified by the head of the Special Education Department based on consultation with individual teachers in each of the three major high schools in Cedar
Rapids as being an involved parent. Involved parent was defined for purposes of this study as a parent who has missed no more than two scheduled IEP meetings since their child was identified as being eligible for special education services. Involved parent also meant that they verbally participate during IEP meetings in a manner that promotes collaborative interactions with school personnel to best meet the educational needs of their son/daughter.

One parent was identified by the head of the Special Education Department based on consultation with individual teachers in each of the three major high schools in Cedar Rapids as being an uninvolved parent. Uninvolved parent was defined for purposes of this study as a parent who has missed more than two scheduled IEP meetings since their child was identified as being eligible for special education services. Uninvolved parent also meant that they do not verbally participate during IEP meetings in a manner that promotes collaborative interactions with school personnel to best meet the educational needs of their son/daughter.

Potential participants were first contacted by the department chair of the school in which the participant's child was attending. The department chair provided the potential participant basic information about the study and provided the researcher's contact information. Permission was obtained for the researcher to then contact the potential participant.
Demographic Data

Parent Demographic Data

The sample of this study was limited to six parents of children enrolled in Cedar Rapids Community Schools. The children were attending one of the three major high schools and were either a sophomore, junior, or senior at the time of the interview.

For the reporting of the findings in this study, all names and identifying information have been changed to protect the identity of the parent participants. Last names of the involved participants begin with the letters “A,” “B,” and “C”: Anderson, Black and Cartwright. Last names of the uninvolved participants begin with the letters “L,” “M,” and “N”: Lane, Mason, and Nielsen. Please refer to Table 1 for the names that will be utilized for the purposes of this study and the grade level of the children belonging to each parent.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade Level of Child</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Involved/Uninvolved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Anderson</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>Involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Black</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>Involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Cartwright</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Lane</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>Uninvolved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Mason</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Uninvolved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Nielsen</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>Uninvolved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data showed that three out of six participants were parents of senior students, two out of six parents were parents of junior students, and one out of six parents was a
parent of a sophomore student. Four were parents of male students, and two were parents of female students. All parents and their children were white/Caucasian. These data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade Level</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
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<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
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<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Individual Interviews

The interviews took place at a location mutually agreed upon by the parent and researcher. Five out of six of the interviews took place in the parents’ home. In one case, the interview took place at the parents’ self-owned business. Parent comments were tabulated by category and subcategory. These data are presented in Table 3.

Mrs. Anderson

The interview with Mrs. Anderson, an involved parent, was held in her home. Her husband was also present for the first 30 minutes of the interview and the final 60 minutes of the interview. Mrs. Anderson’s three children were present for the final 30
minutes of the interview. They participated in the interview in a positive manner and
shared their views on school. Two large Labrador dogs sat at the feet of the researcher
and Mrs. Anderson during the interview. Occasionally, Mrs. Anderson would reach
down and play with the ears of one of the dogs. There were no interruptions during the
course of this interview.

Mrs. Anderson had strong emotions throughout the interview. She spoke
passionately about the difficulties she and her family had experienced in their attempts to
actively participate in her daughter’s IEP meetings. Mrs. Anderson became teary
several times during the interview but never allowed herself to completely break down.
She spoke passionately and convincingly throughout the interview. Out of 72 total
comments, 66 were on-topic and analyzed for this study. Six comments were off-topic
and placed in the Miscellaneous category. All of the comments placed in the
Miscellaneous category pertained to her other daughter or her son. Of the 66 on-topic
comments made, ten involved meeting structure, 34 involved parent identified
difficulties, and 22 involved parent identified solutions. Mrs. Anderson emphasized
communication difficulties, lack of respect between parents and teachers, and the
importance of parent advocates in IEP meetings.

Mrs. Black

The interview with Mrs. Black, an involved parent, took place in her home at 8:00
a.m. She met the researcher at the door and was dressed in her work uniform as she had
just gotten home from work. The researcher sat on a couch and Mrs. Black sat in a
nearby chair in the living room. Large high school graduation pictures of three of Mrs.
Black’s four children hung on the wall of the living room over the couch. Mrs. Black explained that one of her sons did not graduate from high school. Consequently, his picture did not hang on the wall over the couch with the others. Mrs. Black had copies of all the IEPs and other paperwork that had ever been completed for her son ready in case they were needed for the interview. There was no one else in the house during the interview and there were no interruptions.

Mrs. Black was very positive throughout the interview about her interactions with school personnel. Out of 62 total comments, 57 were on-topic and analyzed for this study. Five comments were off-topic and placed in the Miscellaneous category. The comments placed in the Miscellaneous category were comments relating to when Mrs. Black was a child and how she was raised by her own mother. Of the 57 comments that were analyzed for this study, eleven pertained to meeting structure, 17 involved parent identified difficulties, and 29 involved parent identified solutions. Mrs. Black emphasized transition difficulties and the importance of parent participation in IEP meetings.

Mrs. Cartwright

The interview with Mrs. Cartwright, an involved parent, took place in her place of business. She owned a small business that sells herbs and healing arts. Mrs. Cartwright greeted the researcher at the door of the shop and ushered her into the back room. Mrs. Cartwright showed the researcher a picture of her son and said, “I think it’s important for you to see who we’re talking about today.” The interview was held in the back of the shop at a small table. Boxes of unused inventory were stacked around us and there were
occasional interruptions as Mrs. Cartwright left the interview to wait on customers. These interruptions were infrequent, numbering three over the course of a two hour and thirty minute interview.

Mrs. Cartwright was very animated during the interview. She willingly showed her emotions, laughing often and crying once when an interview question reminded her of a painful memory. Out of 65 total comments, 56 were on-topic and analyzed for this study. Nine comments were off-topic and placed in the Miscellaneous category. These comments pertained to interactions with her son at home and references to an accident that her son had at school. Of the 56 comments that were analyzed for this study, ten pertained to meeting structure, 18 involved parent identified difficulties, and 28 involved parent identified solutions. Mrs. Cartwright emphasized communication and transition difficulties as well as the importance of parent participation in IEP meetings.

Mrs. Lane

The interview with Mrs. Lane, an uninvolved parent, took place in her home. The researcher and Mrs. Lane sat on a couch in the living room. The walls were bare and there were no objects or statues visible in the room. A parrot sat in a cage just over Mrs. Lane’s head. Occasionally, during the interview, the parrot would squawk and Mrs. Lane encouraged him to speak at those times. One of Mrs. Lane’s daughters who was six years old was home from school on the day of the interview. Mrs. Lane was taking her to a doctor’s appointment after the interview to determine if the child had Attention Deficit Disorder. This little girl was in a room next door watching a movie on television during the interview. There was a closed door separating the rooms but the girl came into the
room frequently during the interview to interact with her mother and the researcher. Mrs. Lane spoke tenderly about her seven children. She was very patient with her daughter when she interrupted the interview and addressed her needs quietly and efficiently as she answered the interview questions.

The researcher occasionally had to redirect Mrs. Lane's comments back to the main topic of discussion as she sometimes lost her train of thought due to her daughter's interruptions. Out of 55 total comments, 29 were on-topic and analyzed for this study. Twenty-six comments were off-topic and placed in the Miscellaneous category. These comments pertained to other family members, descriptions of events at school, and interactions with her ex-husband. Of the 29 comments that were analyzed for this study, ten pertained to meeting structure, seven involved parent identified difficulties, and twelve involved parent identified solutions. Mrs. Lane emphasized the importance of parent participation in IEP meetings.

Mrs. Mason

The interview with Mrs. Mason, an uninvolved parent, took place in her home. Mrs. Mason met the researcher at the door on a cold day in early January with a hot cup of coffee in her hand. She immediately offered the researcher a cup saying, "Coffee is the only thing that will keep a body warm on a day like today." The researcher and Mrs. Mason sat on the couch in the small living room. The researcher asked the parent to turn the television off prior to the interview in order to facilitate hearing and better communication. Mrs. Mason readily agreed and complied with this request. The researcher did not notice any pictures in the room but there were several handmade
Christmas decorations on a small table in the corner. Mrs. Mason explained that she and
her children made Christmas ornaments every year and distributed them to families
throughout the neighborhood who were in need. There was no one else in the house
during the interview and there were no interruptions.

Mrs. Mason was less focused in her comments and the researcher had to frequently re-direct her responses back to the main topic of discussion. Out of 66 total comments, 29 were on-topic and analyzed for this study. Thirty-seven comments were off-topic and placed in the Miscellaneous category. These comments pertained to her other children, perceptions of education when she attended school, perceptions of education in other states where she had lived previously, and the military. Of the 29 comments that were analyzed for this study, seven pertained to meeting structure, 14 involved parent identified difficulties, and eight involved parent identified solutions. Mrs. Mason emphasized her perception of a lack of respect between parents and teachers and the importance of parent participation in IEP meetings.

Mrs. Nielsen

The interview with Mrs. Nielsen, an uninvolved parent, took place in her home. A large, friendly Labrador Retriever and Mrs. Nielsen met me at the door. The dog immediately jumped up on the researcher as Mrs. Nielsen struggled to make him sit. After greeting the dog, the researcher shook hands with Mrs. Nielsen, and we sat at the kitchen table. Pictures of her children covered the refrigerator. There were no interruptions during the course of the interview. As the researcher was ending the
interview and preparing to leave, Mrs. Nielsen’s two sons came home from school. Mrs. Nielsen introduced the researcher and a brief conversation ensued about the boys’ day. Mrs. Nielsen spoke passionately about her frustrations frequently raising her voice to make a point about things the school should change. Out of 47 total comments, 45 were on-topic and analyzed for this study. Two comments were off-topic and placed in the Miscellaneous category. One comment was about her son’s friends and the other was about her son’s schedule at school. Of the 45 comments that were analyzed for this study, twelve pertained to meeting structure, 22 involved parent identified difficulties, and 11 involved parent identified solutions. During her interview, Mrs. Nielsen emphasized communication difficulties.
Table 3

*Frequency Distribution of Parent Comments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Category</th>
<th>Mrs. Andersen Involved</th>
<th>Mrs. Black Involved</th>
<th>Mrs. Cartwright Involved</th>
<th>Mrs. Lane Uninvolved</th>
<th>Mrs. Mason Uninvolved</th>
<th>Mrs. Nielsen Uninvolved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who Involved</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formality</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Planning</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total: Meeting Structure</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Communication Difficulties</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Difficulties</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: Parent Identified Difficulties</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication Strategies</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Organization</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Development of Resources</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table Continues
### Sub-Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Category</th>
<th>Mrs. Andersen Involved</th>
<th>Mrs. Black Involved</th>
<th>Mrs. Cartwright Involved</th>
<th>Mrs. Lane Uninvolved</th>
<th>Mrs. Mason Uninvolved</th>
<th>Mrs. Nielsen Uninvolved</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition Ideas for School</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participate at IEP Meetings</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Volunteer</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Transition Activities</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: Parent Identified Solutions</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous Comments</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Comments</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>47</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Comparison of Involved and Uninvolved Parents

After examination of the data, several patterns were noted about the individual interviews. Two out of three of the uninvolved parents were less focused in their comments and required that the researcher help them stay on topic during the interview. All of the involved parents stayed on topic independently and were more focused during their comments.

Uninvolved parents made 168 total comments during the interviews. Involved parents made 199 total comments during the interviews. Involved parents suggested more solutions (79) than difficulties (69) while uninvolved parents suggested more
difficulties (43) than solutions (31). Finally, uninvolved parents made more off-topic comments (65) than involved parents (20).

**Student Demographic Data**

The first series of interview questions asked about the strengths and challenges of the participants' children receiving special education services. Because the question was open-ended, the parents could list as many strengths and challenges as they wished. Consequently, when the responses were tallied, each parent's response may fit in more than one category.

The data indicated that all parent participants were typical in the demographic areas considered for this study. For example, when discussing their child's strengths, four out of six parents mentioned mathematics as an area of strength. Four out of six parents also mentioned a positive personality trait such as "loving," "personable," or "well-mannered" when describing their child. Three out of six parents said that their child's strength was physical activity and two out of six parents said that their child was good at artistic or creative activities. When discussing their child's challenges, four of six parents discussed reading difficulties. Two of six parents discussed one or more of the following challenges: communication/socialization, writing, and/or behavior/staying in school. One parent discussed challenges with staying on task. Another parent discussed concerns with functional living skills.

The next interview question addressed the children's and parent's plans following high school graduation. Because the question was open-ended, some parents provided more than one response. For example, Mrs. Black stated that her son planned to get a
job, take classes at Kirkwood Community College, and eventually live independently. Each of these responses was tallied and is reported in separate categories.

Five out of six parents reported that their son/daughter plans to attend the local community college. The careers in which their children were interested were varied and included social work, artist, lab technician, and motorcycle repair. One of six parents reported that her child plans to enter the military upon completing high school. One parent reported plans to help their child get a job. Another parent plans to help their child learn to live independently.

The final interview question regarding basic background information related to when the children were entitled to special education services. This information was gathered either by asking the parent during the interview or referring to the child’s IEP records housed at Grant Wood Area Education Agency. Permission was obtained from parents before any records were accessed. One parent did not provide written permission for the researcher to access her child’s file and this file was not reviewed. Please refer to Table 4.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
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<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Grade</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
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<td>Second Grade</td>
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<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Grade</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comparison of Involved and Uninvolved Parents

After examining the data, there was no clear pattern noted between the involved and uninvolved student demographic information.

Interview Protocol and Pilot Study

This study consisted of one major research question. What strategies do parents identify that make an IEP meeting successful? An interview protocol was developed with semi-structured, open-ended questions. See Appendix A. According to Brantlinger 2005, p. 202), quality indicators for studies involving interviews are: “appropriate participants are selected, interview questions are reasonable, adequate mechanisms are used to record and transcribe interviews, participants are represented sensitively and fairly in the report, and sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality.” Each of these indicators was addressed when the interviews were designed and conducted.

Each section of the interview was designed to answer an element within the overall research question. Part one of the interview was designed to establish a level of comfort and trust with the researcher. It was also designed to gather demographic information about the parents and their children. Part two of the interview was designed to gather general information about the parents' interactions with school staff. Part three was utilized to glean information about the parents' experiences with IEP meetings, the decision-making process, and the parents' role on their child's IEP team. The next section of the interview was designed to gather information about strategies that were utilized to make an IEP meeting successful and barriers that prevented parents from successfully participating in their child's IEP meeting. The final section of the interview
was designed to gather information about specific strategies that parents would suggest for parents to utilize to promote successful participation in their child's IEP meeting. This section of the interview also asked parents about strategies for school staff to utilize to ensure that parents successfully participate in their child's IEP meeting.

According to Glesne (1999, p. 38), "Pilot your observations and interviews in situations and with people as close to the realities of your actual study as possible. Ideally, pilot study participants should be drawn from your target population."

Consequently, the interview protocol was piloted with two parents of high school students. One of the interviews was conducted at the parent's place of employment. The other interview was conducted in the parent's home.

The researcher asked the parent participant each interview question in order and the parent responded. Verbal comments from the participants were recorded. The researcher had designed each question to elicit specific information from the parent. If the parent responded with information that the question was not designed to elicit, the researcher then knew that the question needed to be redesigned. If the parent expressed confusion regarding the meaning of the question, the researcher knew that the question needed to be redesigned.

Both parents expressed confusion on question eight. The original question said, "Was there pre-planning for your child's IEP? Describe the pre-planning." Both parents stated that they did not understand what was meant by the word "pre-planning." Because neither parent was able to answer the original question, the researcher re-wrote the question stem. The question was consequently re-written to ask, "Did you prepare for
your child's IEP? Describe your activities when you prepared for the IEP meeting.” Both parents expressed understanding of the new questions and were able to respond with information that the questions were designed to elicit.

The researcher then asked the parents if there was anything else they would change about the interview questions. One parent said that the researcher asked about the decision-making process at two different points during the interview. Upon examination of the interview protocol, the researcher discovered that question seven mirrored the content in question ten. The only difference was that question ten went into greater depth than question seven. The researcher determined that it was appropriate to combine these two questions into one question in order to avoid duplication. Consequently, the interview protocol was modified to combine these two interview questions.

All other questions in the interview protocol elicited the information that they were designed to elicit. The parent participants answered each question immediately with no lengthy delays due to confusion about the content.

This pilot study not only served to assist in the finalization of the interview protocol, it also solidified the researcher’s thinking about the importance of this research topic. Both parents in the pilot study expressed pleasure that someone asked their opinion about IEP meetings. They expressed their perception that many things could be done to improve IEP meetings for parents. For example, one parent said, “There are too many people at the IEP meetings. It is completely overwhelming for the parent to walk into a room full of teachers.” These parents also expressed their hope that this study would help change the process to improve meetings for all participants. One parent said,
"IEP meetings really need to change in order to make it better for everyone involved. I sure hope parents and teachers read your research and make changes so things can start to get better."

After the initial interviews, a second round of questions was developed. These follow-up questions were based on individual responses during the first round of interviews. The researcher initially asked for validation of the initial comments. Then, the researcher asked the follow-up question seeking additional information. Follow-up interviews confirmed and validated the three themes and the subcategories established in the first round of interviews.

Data Collection

Participants were assured complete confidentiality in the final reporting of the findings of this research. After the completion of the dissertation and its approval, the interview tapes will be destroyed. Each interview lasted approximately 90 to 120 minutes.

The finalized protocol was utilized during the participant interviews (See Appendix A). Glesne (1999, p. 68) stated, "Questions may emerge in the course of interviewing and may be added to or replace the preestablished ones; this process of question formation is the more likely and the more ideal one in qualitative inquiry."

Brantlinger et al. (2005) concurred by stating, "Because as qualitative researchers we are constantly evolving instruments and because settings and people also are dynamic and diverse, data collection is most productively done in creative ways. This might involve using a tentative interview protocol in a flexible way (rather than using a rigidly
structured protocol in the same way with all 'subjects') so that questions might be modified or added to as preliminary evidence emerges.” Consequently, the interview protocol was not followed verbatim. The researcher ensured that all questions on the protocol were addressed during the interview, however, not all questions were formally asked. The researcher found that most participants spoke freely and sometimes addressed upcoming questions while answering other questions. The researcher also asked questions that did not appear on the interview protocol as themes emerged during the interviews that were not anticipated.

Data Analysis

The Constant Comparative Method was utilized to examine the data gathered from the interviews. According to Boeije (2002, p. 393), “By comparing the researcher is able to do what is necessary to develop a theory more or less inductively, namely categorizing, coding, delineating categories and connecting them.” Initially, data from participant interviews was coded using broad categories that demonstrated trends in the data. These broad categories included: Demographic Data, Formal vs. Informal Communication, Communication Difficulties, and Trust. The researcher started with these categories for two reasons. First, the parent comments seemed to focus on these broad issues. Second, the information gathered in the literature review revealed that communication and trust would likely be topics that parents would address when discussing IEP meetings.

Large pieces of poster board were utilized as “containers of data.” Each parent interview was printed on a specific paper color. For example, Mrs. Anderson’s interview
was printed on yellow paper and Mrs. Danforth's interview was printed on blue paper. Every parent interview was cut apart into distinct quotes, and each quote was categorized.

As data collection continued and the data analysis became more refined, the researcher's coding process also became more focused. Categories that initially appeared to be discrete were combined to form new themes with interrelated elements. Five distinct themes emerged: Demographic Data, Meeting Structure, Parent Identified Difficulties, Parent Identified Solutions, and Miscellaneous. The following definitions were utilized for each of these themes.

Demographic Data: Comments were categorized as Demographic Data if they pertained to identifying information about the parent, information regarding the strengths or challenges of the child, or information regarding student plans following high school graduation. Comments also belonged in this theme when they pertained to the grade level when the child was initially identified as being eligible to receive special education services. Example quotes include: "My son is very personable. He likes adults. He likes conversation. He has good manners." "My daughter is having difficulty with reading and writing and stuff." "(My son) wants to go to MHI. Which is a, it's a motorcycle mechanic school." "He started special education in fourth grade."

Meeting Structure: Comments were categorized as Meeting Structure if they pertained to a physical part of the IEP meeting, the process of the IEP meeting, or who attended the IEP meeting. For example, information pertaining to the location of the meeting, the formality of the meeting, or who led the meeting belongs in this theme. Example quotes include: "I think Grant Wood led the IEP meeting the last time. A gal
from Grant Wood and one of the teachers talked and I think she’s the coordinator of special education services." “I like those (formal meetings), but I also like the ones where I’m one-on-one where if there’s a problem, the teachers know they can come to me, or if they see me in the hallway or whatever they can say something.”

**Parent Identified Difficulties:** Comments were categorized as Parent Identified Difficulties if they related to a problem or difficulty related to IEP meetings that the parent identified. For example, information pertaining to communication difficulties or transition difficulties; parent comments related to concern about educational budgets. Example quotes include: “We can e-mail her (the teacher), write her letters, um she’ll e-mail us about John’s attendance and not being in class and giving us his grades, but she doesn’t e-mail me and let me know, okay, there’s gotta be a problem somewhere.” “No, there was one point where...they were talking about decisions for (my daughter) and it’s like I wasn’t even there and I was sitting right there and they were like, I think we need to do this, no I think we need to do this. And I’m like, excuse me.”

**Parent Identified Solutions:** Comments were categorized as Parent Identified Solutions if they pertained to any positive comment about the IEP process or an IEP meeting. Any suggestion about ways to improve the IEP process or IEP meetings was also placed in this theme. Example quotes include: “I don’t think I’ve ever been to an IEP where there wasn’t open communication back and forth. They on the curriculum side would tell me what (my son) needed and I would tell them on the personal side what he needed.” “She’s the one I talked to when we decided to move (my daughter) to high
school. She was awesome because she knew that there was a problem and did everything she could to make sure the transportation would be there.”

Miscellaneous: Comments were categorized as Miscellaneous if they did not pertain to IEP meetings or the IEP process. For example, comments about children other than the sophomore, junior or senior child that was the focus of the interview; comments about the weather or frustrations expressed about education that did not pertain to the IEP meeting. Example quotes include: “(Middle school) did good. (Middle school) was working with him, in my eyes, they were just too easy and I don’t like easy. They did the same thing to my daughter.” “Yes, it runs in the family. My grandmother’s like that. Can look at a picture and draw it and she does it. She does not trace. She don’t copy anything.”

Boeije stated that the Constant Comparative Model “results in an extension of the amount of codes (the code tree) until no more codes are needed to cover all the various, relevant themes contained in the interviews.” These five themes were deemed distinct after careful study and analysis. No more codes were needed to cover the salient themes from the parent interviews. This information was discussed with another qualitative researcher. Through this conversation, the researcher further examined and analyzed the data and determined that these five themes were distinct.

Glesne (1999, p. 152) stated, “As you are planning, collecting and analyzing data, and writing up your findings, do not forget the invaluable assistance of others. Ask friends and colleagues to work with portions of your data—developing codes, applying your codes, or interpreting field notes to check your perceptions.” This researcher asked
a colleague who has a Masters Degree in Education and twenty years of teaching experience to code parent comments. This would determine if the themes utilized by the researcher were discrete and if the definitions used for coding the comments were valid.

The researcher reviewed the definitions with the coder and then provided five randomly selected parent comments as practice. The coder correctly categorized all five practice comments. The researcher then provided the coder thirty randomly selected parent comments printed on white paper. The comments were presented in three sets of ten. The coder took a five minute break between each set of comments. The coder placed 26 of 30 comments in the same theme as the researcher. Consequently, there was 87% agreement between the researcher and the coder.

While these five themes are distinct, they are aligned with each other. The information contained in each theme related to IEP meetings. The meeting structure provided information about the basic structure for all IEP meetings. The parent identified difficulties and parent identified solutions provided information about what happens during IEP meetings from the parent perspective. The student demographic information provided information about the most important aspect of an IEP meeting: the student.

After the researcher concluded that the five identified themes were distinct, further analysis of the data was completed. The researcher grouped comments from the involved parents together and comments from the uninvolved parents together in each theme. Patterns in the data were identified based on what involved parents said versus what uninvolved parents said.
The information placed in the Miscellaneous theme was not pertinent to the overall research question and will not be discussed in this research report. The information in the other four themes: Demographic Data, Meeting Structure, Parent Identified Difficulties, and Parent Identified Solutions will be discussed at length in Chapters IV and V.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Introduction

This study consisted of one overall research question: What are the parent-identified strategies that make an IEP meeting successful? Following the examination and analysis of the data, three main themes were identified and will be reported. These themes are: Meeting Structure, Parent Identified Difficulties, and Parent Identified Solutions. The Meeting Structure theme evolved from four categories of data: the location of IEP meetings, who was involved in IEP meetings, length of IEP meetings, and pre-planning for IEP meetings. The Parent Identified Difficulties theme included categories of: participant roles on the IEP team, paperwork, communication difficulties, parent perception of lack of respect, and transition difficulties. Finally, the theme of Parent Identified Solutions emerged from two categories: parent solutions for school personnel and parent solutions for parents.

Meeting Structure

This theme focused on the parts of the IEP meeting, the process of the IEP meeting, or who attended the IEP meeting. Parent comments centered on the location of the meeting, who was involved in the IEP meetings, the length of the meeting, the formality of parent interactions with school personnel, and pre-planning activities.

Location of IEP Meetings

All involved parents said that their child’s IEP meetings were usually held in a classroom in the school. The majority of meetings were held in the special education
teacher’s classroom. Occasionally, meetings were held in the school library or in a conference room next to the principal’s office. The parents concurred that meeting in the teacher’s classroom was acceptable. Mrs. Anderson stated, “When she was smaller, it would be in the teacher’s classroom or library...And then at (high school), we sit in a classroom and that’s been very comfortable...The location is unimportant. The content is what I care about.” Mrs. Black said, “We meet right in the classroom.” Mrs. Black expressed criticism of meeting in elementary classrooms because the chairs were designed for small children and were uncomfortable for adults to sit in for a meeting. She said, “That was probably the worst part, you know, going to school and stuff and having to sit in those.” In the follow-up interview, Mrs. Black also said, “Because of my work schedule, we met before school. When we met in the classroom it was really disruptive because the other kids kept coming in and out of the room...I wish schools had a meeting room where we could meet for an IEP and not be interrupted.” Mrs. Cartwright said, “we meet in just a room...we have to find an available room. Usually, it’s in his classroom.” When asked about the importance of the location of her child’s IEP meeting, Mrs. Cartwright said, “What’s important is what comes out of our mouths and what’s on paper. Who cares what the chairs are like.” In the follow-up interview, Mrs. Cartwright added, “It’s not about how pretty the room is. It’s about making sure the parent rights are reviewed and that we’re all working for (my son) to make things work for him.”

Uninvolved parents agreed that their child’s IEP meetings were usually held in their child’s classroom. Mrs. Lane stated, “The classroom is fine. She’s got all of her
stuff there. They keep their folders there and if they need something it’s right there…Besides, there’s nowhere else in the school to meet. It’s either there or nowhere.”

Mrs. Mason said, “We met in (my son’s) classroom.” Mrs. Nielsen said, “Usually in his IEP teacher’s room.”

Who was Involved in the IEP Meeting

Attendees at IEP meetings varied depending on the grade level being discussed. When describing who attended their child’s IEP meetings from the school at the elementary level, parents stated that their child’s special education teacher, a general education teacher, and the principal were usually present. Parents perceived that these participants were in attendance for the entire meeting.

When describing who attended their child’s IEP meetings from the school at the middle and high school level, the only consistent participant was their child’s special education teacher. Parents stated that the Associate Principal, the school counselor, a Grant Wood AEA staff member, or a general education teacher would be occasionally present.

When discussing who was involved in IEP meetings, involved parents made the following statements. Mrs. Anderson said,

One I can remember was at elementary school…I went to meet (the special education consultant) thinking that it was (my daughter’s) teacher and (the special education consultant) and I and maybe another representative. And the principal was there and three other teachers were there and it was a whole room and the psychiatrist from the school who hadn’t even met (my daughter) was there trying to tell me how (my daughter) was and that he disagreed with the doctor’s report, though he had never met (my daughter).
In the follow-up interview, Mrs. Anderson stated, “Now, I know who is supposed to be there and what they do for (my daughter). I make sure that everyone is there that should be there.” Mrs. Black said, “Well, you have all your teachers. Sometimes the counselors get there. When he was younger, they were there. Not so much when he got into middle school and high school. Basically in middle school and high school, it was just the special education teachers.” Mrs. Cartwright said,

Like I said, all three years (in high school), it had been just me and the resource teacher… I know now that everyone is supposed to be there. I didn’t have everyone there for a lot of meetings, but I know now who is supposed to be involved in meetings and I make sure they’re there.

Uninvolved parents agreed that meeting participants varied depending on grade level. Mrs. Lane stated, “In elementary school, they were all there. Now (in high school), like I said, everyone that comes in, they stop in and say she’s doing this and doing that and she’s fine so we don’t worry about it… It’s just real fast. They come in and say we love her. Bye. That’s basically it.” In the follow-up interview, Mrs. Lane said, “I don’t really care who comes to the meeting as long as everything is going OK. If there’s a problem, I guess everyone will be there because they don’t like problems.” Mrs. Mason said, “I don’t go up there that often… why bother? When he was younger, everybody came but now, nobody even bothers to show up. So, why should I?” In the follow-up interview, Mrs. Mason stated, “They should have everyone at IEP meetings. Period. They shouldn’t be talking to me through a piece of paper. They should come to the meeting and say what they have to say to my face.” Mrs. Nielsen said, “Elementary, um, their meetings are lovely meetings. It’s always their homeroom teacher, their IEP teacher, it was a Mrs. (Name), the principal, and me… In high school, it was a bunch of
people and half of them I don’t even know and they don’t stay long enough for me to know why they are there.”

Length of IEP Meetings

The length of IEP meetings varied depending on the grade level being discussed. Most parents agreed that meetings at the elementary level lasted longer than meetings at the high school level.

The following comments were made by involved parents. Mrs. Anderson said, “I would say a good couple hours for the meetings...if it’s any shorter, we’re not problem solving, we’re filling out paperwork.” Mrs. Black said, “They were really good about it. Because of my shift they usually did them first thing in the morning. They would come in early to school and let me come in...They were typically about 45 minutes....(My son) was involved in a lot of the meetings and he can’t tolerate much longer than that.” Mrs. Cartwright said, “Oh, I don’t know, they were longer when he was in elementary school. I’d say an hour and a half in elementary and an hour now (in high school)...It doesn’t really matter how long they are. We get there and get the work done.”

Uninvolved parents made the following comments. Mrs. Lane said, “Not very long. Maybe, not even, unless there are problems. I’d say not even a half an hour.” Mrs. Mason said, “They don’t take very long. I get up and leave if it takes more than a half hour. You give them an exam the way they give us when they come in there and let them see how they feel. You’d leave, too.” Mrs. Nielsen said, “Oh, yeah, they were longer (in elementary school). About an hour, hour and a half, you know...(in high school) they
probably lasted half an hour, 45 minutes, maybe...length really doesn’t matter. It should last long enough to get the work done.”

**Formality of Interactions with School Personnel**

The formality of interactions with staff and IEP meetings also varied depending on the age level being discussed. All parents stated that they had both formal and informal interactions with teachers at the elementary level. Parents regularly visited with teachers when picking up their child from school or at school functions such as concerts. When describing the formality of interactions at the high school level, parents said their interactions occurred mainly at formal IEP meetings.

Mrs. Anderson said,

I think when she was younger, we did have more informal conversations, yeah. When she was younger and we had to go to school more for concerts and things like that. When they get older they don’t have as many of those things...it’s too bad because I knew more about what was going on when I talked to the teachers more. I have to beg for information now because they don’t call me and tell me what’s going on.

Mrs. Black stated, “The formal meetings were great to set up his goals. That was great for that, but going in once a week or however many times I went in was good for them to know (my son), for me to know them, for them to know us and what kind of parents we are.” Mrs. Cartwright said, “There’s a fine line between an elementary school where the mom’s there all the time and the kids aren’t getting embarrassed. You get to middle school and your kid doesn’t want you to come anymore, does not want to see you at school. You know, that’s embarrassing.”

Uninvolved parents agreed that they had more informal conversations with teachers at the elementary level. Mrs. Lane said, “I like those (formal meetings), but I
also like the ones where I’m one-on-one where if there’s a problem the teachers know they can come to me. Or if they see me in the hallway or whatever they can say something.” Mrs. Nielsen stated, “I could find out anything I wanted to know at any given time, any given day when my son was in elementary school. I could walk right into that school and go to (my son’s) teacher whether she was having a class or not. She’d be more than willing to walk right outside her door and talk to me…I could not and cannot do that now (in high school).” In the follow-up interview, Mrs. Nielsen validated her earlier statement and added, “The informal conversations with teachers when (my son) was in elementary school made me want to be there more. I knew more about what needed to be worked on. I wish teachers at the high school level made time for me like they did when he was in elementary school.”

Pre-Planning for IEP Meetings

Involved parents agreed that teachers plan in advance for IEP meetings. Mrs. Anderson stated,

I know they have to keep track of so much. I honestly don’t know how they do it with the goals, the percentage of reading scores, and the math percentages, and her goals, this goal and how she’s done…I can only imagine who much work it takes to get all the goals and all the reading scores and math scores and everything else.

Mrs. Black said,

Well, I’m glad they knew what they were doing. I’m glad that they knew what was going on before we all walked in…Sometimes they were already, they would have the IEP already written up what they wanted…I’m glad they did because otherwise we probably would have been sitting there for hours discussing (my son’s) next steps.”
Mrs. Cartwright said, "I think the teachers did their job going through what was already written and reviewing what was written before."

Two out of three of the uninvolved parents said that teachers plan ahead for meetings. Mrs. Lane stated,

(My daughter's) teacher? Not really. She has forgotten some of the stuff. We’ll get there and she’ll say I forgot we had a meeting or I forgot this or, she’s forgetful. I don’t think she does too much planning...It kind of makes me wonder how she became a teacher...(Teachers should) get the charts ready...if you are going to show something, then have it ready. Know what you are going to say when you get there. If you don’t have the stuff that you want, how are you going to talk about it? You can’t talk about it if you don’t have your stuff ready. You should be prepared.

When asked if her son's teachers plan ahead for meetings, Mrs. Mason said, "Yes. That’s fine." Mrs. Nielsen said, "Yes, they plan ahead and they should."

Five out of six parents stated that they do some planning prior to IEP meetings.

Mrs. Anderson said,

I would get copies of all the physicians, the psychologist reports, make sure there was enough copies. That would be one folder...I did one for her whole history and I have a condensed version with the last two years. That’s one folder, and then I have one with all her IEPs, one with all email, notes I’ve taken and kept. I have a notebook of notes and documentation of things that were supposed to be followed up on. I bring that along with her diagnoses...and the medication information...I have a binder that’s probably two inches thick of things like that.

Mrs. Black said, "I may have glanced at the last one (IEP).” Mrs. Cartwright said,

I wrote pages...I would just kind of look over what he struggled with for the year, what we learned, any kind of testing that he had. I would just outlined out what you’re writing about his spelling needs, about his writing needs, his fluency in his reading.

Uninvolved parents, also plan prior to IEP meetings. Mrs. Lane said, "No, I just go. When they tell me the time to go, that’s when I go." Mrs. Mason said, "I’m gonna
ask her what are you going to do to bring his reading up? Why isn’t his reading brought up? Why isn’t he enjoying wanting to go to his class and do anything?” Finally, Mrs. Nielsen said, “They tell me when to show up and I’m there…I think about questions I want to ask them at the meeting.”

Summary for the Meeting Structure Theme

After examining and analyzing the data based on comments made by involved parents versus comments made by uninvolved parents, five patterns emerged. First, when discussing the location of IEP meetings, involved and uninvolved parents agreed that IEP meetings were typically held in their child’s classroom. Location of the meeting was relatively unimportant as long as the room was free of disruptions.

Second, involved and uninvolved parents stated that school participants in IEP meetings varied depending on the grade level being discussed. Typical participants at elementary meetings were the special education teacher, the general education teacher, and the principal. The only consistent participant at the high school level was the special education teacher. Other participants attended portions of the meeting. Most parents agreed that they want all involved school personnel in attendance at their child’s IEP meeting.

When discussing the length of typical IEP meetings, involved parents said that IEP meetings lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. Uninvolved parents said that IEP meetings lasted 30-45 minutes. There was no consensus on the ideal length of an IEP meeting.
Involved and uninvolved parents stated that they interacted both formally and informally with school personnel when their children were in elementary school. All parents also stated that when their children reached high school, they only interacted with school personnel during formal meetings. Parents no longer interacted informally with their children’s teachers.

Finally, the three involved parents planned ahead for their child’s IEP meeting. Two out of three of the involved parents documented their child’s progress and wrote down important information for the meeting. One out of three of the involved parents reviewed the previous year’s IEP. None of the uninvolved parents wrote things down prior to their child’s IEP meeting. Two out of three of the uninvolved parents reported that they thought of questions they wanted to ask their child’s teacher but did not record these questions in order to remember them.

Parent-Identified Difficulties

This theme focused on any problem or difficulty related to IEP meetings that the parent identified. Parent comments were organized in categories of: participant roles on the IEP team, paperwork, communication difficulties, parent perception of lack of respect, and transition difficulties.

Participant Roles on IEP Team

When discussing their role on their child’s IEP team, parents used words such as “protector,” “advocate,” and “supporter.” Involved parents made the following comments. Mrs. Anderson stated, “I never feel like it’s a group thing. I feel like I have to come in and fight for (my daughter).” Mrs. Black said, “I was always (my son’s)
supporter.” Mrs. Cartwright said, “I was his protector. I shouldn’t have to play that role, but I did.”

Uninvolved parents also made statements regarding their role in IEP meetings. Mrs. Lane said, “I’m always there for my kids. I go to every meeting. I’ll be there.” Mrs. Mason said, “I’m his protector. Who else can protect him? They don’t give a, I mean they care, but they really don’t care.” In the follow-up interview, Mrs. Mason said, “I have to be his protector. The teachers get all defensive because they can’t tell me why my son can’t read so I get defensive right back.” Mrs. Nielsen said, “I don’t think I have a role on his IEP team now. No, I don’t even, not at all.”

The purpose of IEP meetings is not only to communicate with parents and complete paperwork but also to make decisions about a student’s education. Five out of six parents expressed frustration at their inability to effectively participate in the decision making process. Mrs. Anderson said,

They were talking about decisions for (my daughter) and it’s like I wasn’t even there and I was sitting right there and they were like, I think we need to do this, no I think we need to do this. And I’m like, excuse me... I would say excuse me and interject... That makes me so mad. I mean why should I have to interrupt someone in order to talk about my own daughter? They should be asking me for all kinds of information. But they never do. They never do.

Mrs. Black said, “I don’t think I’ve ever been to an IEP where there wasn’t open communication back and forth. They, on the curriculum side would tell me what (my son) needed and I would tell them on the personal side what (my son) needed.” Mrs. Cartwright said,

The principal was very annoyed that I was demanding a real IEP meeting, making me feel like I was being unreasonable, when I knew it was my legal right... I feel
sorry for parents who don’t know the rules and their rights. I mean, I know my
rights. I know they have to let me participate. What happens to kids when their
parents don’t know? Who looks out for their interests?

Uninvolved parents also expressed that they have difficulty participating
effectively in the decision making process. Mrs. Lane said, “I’ve had a couple of
teachers say this one’s doing fine so you don’t have to be involved in it (the IEP
meeting)...that doesn’t seem right. They should have us in for meetings even when
they’re doing good.” Mrs. Mason said, “They just like the paperwork. They don’t care
about me, my kid, or what I think. Well, I’ll sign it and walk away. They’re going to get
paid no matter what I think or what happens to my son.” Mrs. Nielsen stated,

It’s just like they are going to do what they want to do no matter how I feel about
it or what my husband feels about it...because obviously you people have your
mind set on something which granted it’s working for (my son), but do you ever
think he might do even better if there were different thinks being done about it?”

Paperwork

Three out of six parents (one involved, two uninvolved) specifically mentioned
that the IEP paperwork was overwhelming. They expressed understanding about the
need for the paperwork but said that they wished the number of pages needed for each
IEP could be reduced and that the paperwork could be simplified. These parents
expressed belief that the need to complete the paperwork sometimes prevented high
quality dialogue during the decision-making process.

Mrs. Black, an involved parent said, “They need to do something different with
writing on the carbon and stuff. It’s hard to read...I wish they could cut down on the
paperwork a little bit, but I understand that they need to have it.”
Mrs. Lane, an uninvolved parent, said, "That's all you do is sign papers. I know that (middle school) is starting electronic (IEPs) so we only had one paper to sign. And I won't have a whole, I think I came home with seven pieces of paper and that to me is just crazy. Wasting the poor trees." Mrs. Mason, another uninvolved parent said, "There's a lot of paper, too much, but it's understandable. You have to have it because they have government watching you. You have to have it so that don't bother me." When asked at the follow-up interview if the amount of paperwork affected her participation, Mrs. Mason stated, "Yeah. I don't want to sit there and read your damn papers for 45 minutes. Talk to me."

Communication Difficulties

Three parents (two involved and one uninvolved) expressed that now that their son/daughter is in high school, they (the parents) initiate all communication. Mrs. Anderson said, "We initiate, you know, we want an IEP review. We want to meet with staff, we want to meet with teachers." When asked if her child's high school teachers have ever initiated those meetings, Mrs. Anderson responded, "Not that I have recalled, no." Mrs. Cartwright said, "That was a struggle so I went down and I asked for a meeting with the teachers and it was, I really got the brush off like this was too much work." During the follow-up interview, Mrs. Cartwright added,

I can help teachers more if they talk to me. We need to work together to make things better for (my son). I would rather not wait until it's a last-ditch effort to make things better. Talk to me early enough that we can work through the problem together before it gets to be a terrible problem.

When asked who initiated communication at the elementary and middle schools, Mrs. Nielsen, an uninvolved parent stated,
I believe it was probably (my son’s) teacher. They, you know, even if I wanted them to, they’d call me every day and let me know how (my son) did. You know. But now I get this baloney that well, that was a smaller school. It’s easier to do it that way. I don’t care. Send a letter home. Well, we don’t have time for that either.

In the follow-up interview, Mrs. Nielsen validated her earlier response and added, “Since I last talked to you, my husband and I have made a decision. We’re so frustrated with the teachers here that we are actually moving to a different district next month because the teachers here won’t talk to us.”

Three of six parents (two involved and one uninvolved) expressed that school personnel do not consistently respond to their e-mail and voice mail. When discussing communication with the school, involved parents made the following comments. Mrs. Anderson said, “The doctors would call (school personnel) and they would never return the doctor’s calls...They would never, ever call them back. Before I called down there to (school personnel), I had called numerous times and never got a reply...I just can’t figure out how they get away with not calling parents back. It’s not right that they think they can do that.” Mrs. Cartwright said, “We’ve had teachers that we were struggling with that I couldn’t get email from that teacher to save his life.”

Mrs. Nielsen, an uninvolved parent, stated, “I can call that school and I’ll get the teacher’s voice mails or whatever and they never return my calls. I’ve had it up to here.”

Four of six parents expressed that teachers rarely ask for their input during the IEP meeting. Mrs. Anderson, an involved parent, said that she offered information during IEP meetings despite the fact that teachers rarely asked for her input. When asked what meetings would be like if she was not assertive, she responded, “They would
probably say here's what we have, here's how (my daughter) is doing, here's her goals right here and that would be it.”

All of the uninvolved parents stated that teachers do not ask for their input. When asked if teachers at the high school ask for her input during IEP meetings, Mrs. Lane said, “No. They usually just wrote them (the goals) up...I guess it’s OK with me that they did that. If there’s no problems, it makes the meeting go faster.” Mrs. Mason said, “No, not unless I enforce it.” Mrs. Nielsen said, “No. not really. And that's why I felt I was getting nowhere with them. Where I felt like why should I even go to these IEPs. It's not going to do (my son) any good to go to them because obviously my input doesn’t even matter.”

Two parents (one involved and one uninvolved) expressed that the language teachers use during IEP meetings can be confusing. Mrs. Anderson’s husband, an involved parent, was present for part of the interview with his wife. He said,

I went to school in a small town in Southeastern Iowa and I’m thinking it can’t be that bad and then I went with her to an IEP meeting and I’m like how can you make sense out of what these people are telling you? I mean they are spouting off these terms and it’s like I have no idea what’s going on and I can’t make heads or tails out if it and I’m almost forty years old. How do they decipher this stuff and expect parents to know what is going on?

Mrs. Mason, an uninvolved parent, concurred when she said, “I hate those percentile words. Yeah he’s eighteenth percentile, well, what the hell is? What is nineteenth percentile?...Why talk the big words and just come right down and tell them what’s going on?” In the follow-up interview, Mrs. Mason said, “Teachers need to stop using their college words and get right to the point. I don’t wanna hear their college 45
minute speech on something. We're ordinary people doing ordinary things and we need ordinary language."

Two parents (both involved) expressed concern that school personnel are more concerned about school budgets than about providing high quality service to their children. Mrs. Anderson said,

It has to be one of the most unpleasant fiascos that I've ever been involved with because talking about how the kids are weighted for different things. That's all well and good but they're worrying more about the school budget than what the child needs...to me it just seems like it comes down to more dollar amounts than what the kids actually need...There was one lady sitting there talking about how (my daughter) was weighted. They just kept going back to what she was weighted at, and she wasn't weighted to get into this other program. We kept saying this is where she needed to be. They just kept going back to this weighted thing...Parents don't understand that and they shouldn't have to. Parents and teachers should be worried about what's best for my child. They should figure all that other stuff out later.

Mrs. Cartwright said,

I don't know if they don't tell you because it was going to cost the school a lot of money to provide those things for your child or how that exactly works...I wish I knew more how that works and what the people are being told by their bosses in terms of what do you offer? You know are you trying to get away with as little as possible with this child, are you really trying to offer everything that this child could possibly use? And this is where, you know, what are you doing? Trying to make your job easier or harder or trying to save the school system money...Are they protecting their interest or are they protecting my child?

Parent Perception of Lack of Respect

Five of six parents shared that they feel a lack of respect from school personnel at the high school level. Mrs. Anderson and Mrs. Cartwright, both involved parents, expressed this feeling. Mrs. Anderson said,

The last IEP meeting we had copied all of the diagnoses for years and gave every one of the teachers, everybody involved one of those, and they just flipped through it and didn't really pay any attention to it, and then they're sitting there...
telling us what she needs... We take the paperwork to the meetings that explains the information from the doctor and the people from (school) would set it on the desk and when they get ready to go, they would leave it there and walk out. If you actually care about my kid, read the damn paper, take the time to look at it.

Mrs. Cartwright said,

There is an air when a person treats with either respect or condescending attitude in the behavior and I tell you, I can pick up on that real fast because it doesn’t feel good when someone does that to you and that’s the type of thing like I said that will set me off.

Uninvolved parents discussed similar feelings. When asked about her role on IEP teams, Mrs. Lane stated, “Someone to deal with me, I guess you could say. And so they kind of made you feel like you shouldn’t have been there. I’ve had that happen a couple times.” Mrs. Mason said,

They wouldn’t listen to me. I don’t know anything. That grinds me even more when you are at the table and have all of this so called education and all these degrees. They don’t know my son. They don’t live with my son and these people are telling me what’s wrong with my son but try to tell them what’s wrong with them in their so called bull crap sessions. I’m wrong and they’re right... you know, they try to be smarter than us. Well, you know, I never went to college but I’ve been around a little longer than all of them. We’re what’s keeping you a job lady, boy think about it if it wasn’t for us you wouldn’t have a job. You walk in with your big boys, you walk in with all that power sitting there and you’re being judged and you are going wow. And we start doubting ourselves and you make us feel like it’s all our fault.

Mrs. Nielsen said, “My thoughts and my opinions mattered (at the elementary level) and now I don’t think they do. Or I feel they don’t. They probably do but that’s the way I’m beginning to feel because I know nothing.”

Two out of six parents (one involved, one uninvolved) described similar situations when they approached teachers to talk about their child. They both described that when
they were talking to the teachers, the teachers continued to eat in front of them. They perceived this as disrespectful. Mrs. Cartwright, an involved parent said,

I have the one negative experience with teachers going on their break and they were so busy eating that they weren't giving me attention. I don't think they were hard to get along with. I felt like they were annoyed that I had asked them to meet, that I had taken their time during one of the only times that ever happened.

Mrs. Mason, an uninvolved parent, described a similar situation when she went to the school to discuss her son with his teachers. She said,

That woman stood there for 45 minutes talking about real life eating her candy, drinking her Diet Coke in front of me and these kids...How would you feel if you came into your boss and he's sitting there sloppin' down food in your face and drinking a Coke and telling you blah, okay get up and do this. Where's your attitude gonna go?

**Transition Difficulties**

Finally, four out of six parents (three involved, one uninvolved) expressed concern about the transition process when their children went from one building or one program to another. These transitions happened when children transfer from fifth grade to sixth grade, from eighth grade to ninth grade, and twelfth grade to post high school activities. They commented that the transition was not as smooth as it could be or that their children were not placed in appropriate classes upon their arrival at the new school. Mrs. Anderson said,

When she was going to go from (middle school) to (high school)...we wanted to have a meeting before she even left (middle school) to get things in line for (high school). It never happened...they had a meeting on their own, never said anything to us. They just had their own little meetings and said this is what's going to happen for (our daughter)...Teachers and parents need to work together on transition and all the time. They need to talk to each other. That's the way to make it go better for the kids.
Mrs. Black said, “I called social security, and they had no idea what I’m talking about. I don’t know what I’m talking about. They don’t know what I’m talking about. Someone please help me.”

Mrs. Cartwright said,

He goes off to middle school, I’m assuming the IEP goes there, that the teacher’s are aware that they have the skills or they wouldn’t put them in there. Well, my son basically got put into all regular classes. He didn’t have a resource teacher, he didn’t have any support and they sent home Ds and Fs and I was ticked off.

Mrs. Lane, an uninvolved parent said,

There’s been a couple things like when she was in 8th grade going into 9th grade we had trouble with it. She was just adjusting to middle school and had to go to high school and not used to it yet. With high school we had a little bit of problems getting her started with it, her classes got messed up.

**Summary for the Parent Identified Difficulties Theme**

After examining and analyzing the data based on comments made by involved parents versus comments made by uninvolved parents, several patterns emerged. Involved parents as well as uninvolved parents expressed frustration at their inability to adequately participate in the decision making process. Despite the fact that this is a critical role for all IEP meeting participants, parents did not feel that they were allowed to fully participate in this part of the meeting.

Two involved parents and one uninvolved parent expressed that the IEP paperwork was long and overwhelming. They stated that they understood the need for the paperwork but expressed a desire to have the number of pages for an IEP reduced.

Involved and uninvolved parents expressed frustration about communication difficulties with the school. These frustrations included difficulties communicating by
phone and e-mail, lack of communication in general, language barriers, and communication about the budget that parents viewed as inappropriate.

Two out of three of the involved and two out of three of the uninvolved parents stated that the school never asked for their input during IEP meetings. They, however, stated that they volunteer information despite the fact that the school never asks for the information.

Two out of three of the involved parents discussed difficulties regarding a lack of respect between teachers and parents. All of the uninvolved parents discussed this lack of respect as an area of concern.

Finally, all involved parents expressed a need for more transitional activities when their child moved from building to building or program to program. One out of three of the involved parents expressed this need.

**Parent Identified Solutions**

This theme focused on any positive comment from parents about the IEP process or an IEP meeting and any suggestion about ways to improve the IEP process or IEP meetings. The theme was based on two categories: parent identified solutions for school personnel and parent identified solutions for themselves.

**Parent Solutions for School Personnel**

**Communication Strategies**

A solution that five out of six parents (three involved and two uninvolved) identified for school personnel was to increase their communication. They reported that
any type of communication would suffice including phone calls and e-mails. Mrs.
Anderson said,

That’s at the point we realized how valuable (staff member) was, because she
would always make sure, you know, I would email her and she would want to be
at the meetings and she made sure I knew about the meetings, so, she was just
awesome. Why can’t more teachers communicate like that?

In the follow-up interview, Mrs. Anderson stated, “More teachers need to be like (staff
member). She talked to us, and listened to us, and understood us.” Mrs. Black said,
“They cared about (my son), they cared about us as parents and wanting to help him. All
teachers should give parents extra information like that.” Mrs. Cartwright said, I want
teachers to “report back to me on how is he doing each quarter on his IEP.”

Uninvolved parents also saw a need for school personnel to increase their
communication. Mrs. Lane said, “At the beginning, I tell them straight up if there’s a
problem you better call me right then and there. Don’t wait two weeks and don’t tell
me...I don’t care if you call me or e-mail me but you better get ahold of me right away as
soon as there’s a problem.” Mrs. Nielsen stated, “I wish they would e-mail me more. I
want them to e-mail me every day and tell me how (my son) did that day.”

Three out of six parents (all involved) stated that they believe teachers should
communicate more with each other regarding students especially during years that
children transition from one building to another. Mrs. Anderson said, “Teachers should
talk to each more. If a teacher figures (my daughter) out, I want them to pass that
information on to next year’s teacher.” Mrs. Black said,

I guess they (teachers) could communicate, too. I mean, they felt comfortable
communicating with each other. They could call and say this is what (my son) is

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like and these are things to look for. He gets frustrated real easy. To watch for
things...They passed this on which really made a big difference.

Mrs. Cartwright said,

They got an email you know that was sent around by, it was almost like someone
who had those materials of (my son's) sent around a list that said these are the
names of kids who have IEPs or special ed needs or I don't know exactly how it
works. But, it was like they all talked and everyone knew what worked for (my
son).

Mrs. Cartwright went on to say that communication was improved when the
teacher talked about her child in a manner that showed that the teacher knew and cared
about her son. She said,

You know really I would like to them and when they would talk about my child, I
could always tell, you know, if they understood my child. Then, it just showed
me that they took the time to notice him.

Finally, two out of six parents (both uninvolved) stated that communication
improved when teachers spent time talking to them in less structured settings. Mrs.
Mason stated,

We laughed, we talked, we sat by the window and watched the kids out there, and
she told me some of the plans that she wanted to do and some ideas that she had.
She didn't make you feel like you were stupid.

Mrs. Nielsen agreed when she stated that IEP meetings were better when
you know, you are sitting around drinking coffee and you are discussing things.
Like sitting down at the kitchen table eating dinner and talking to your kids...We
all had a cup of coffee and talked about what (my son) needed to do and what I
expected of them.

Organization

A solution that two out of six parents (one involved, one uninvolved) identified
for school personnel was to increase their organization. These parents believed that
organization was a key element in every IEP meeting. Mrs. Cartwright, an involved parent, said, “I did like teachers who were organized, thoughtful, that didn’t seem to be overwhelmed, stretched out.” In the follow-up interview, Mrs. Cartwright added,

IEP meetings should be a creative think tank of formulating ideas for how to build a successful program for (my son). Right now, teachers organize IEP meetings to get the paperwork done. I want a meeting where we can be creative. If we need a meeting organized around paperwork, let’s do that, but then let’s have another meeting where we can be creative.

Mrs. Lane, an uninvolved parent, said, “Her teacher was prepared. She had all her paperwork in order on the table. She had everything she needed and it was all right there...Everything’s right there and it didn’t take very long.”

Development of Student and Parent Resources

Mrs. Black, an involved parent, stated that she liked it when teachers sent home materials for her son to work on during the summer months. These home programming activities helped her address her son’s IEP goals during time that school was not in session. She said, his teacher “gave me math sheets ‘cause he always liked math. Some reading, he hates to read.” She saw this as a positive way for teachers and parents to work together to increase her son’s educational progress.

Mrs. Black also recommended that a book be written for parents describing the IEP process and transition activities in detail. She said,

I want someone to have a book that tells me (my son) can get this, this, and this. This is how you go about doing this...Something for the parents, so they can have something to go by; when their child starts from the beginning to the end. What’s going to happen, what they need to know; resources that they can contact if they need anything.
Mrs. Black encouraged the researcher to develop this book after she completed her current research project. She offered to assist in the project in order to build a resource that would be beneficial for all parents.

**Transition Ideas**

Three parents (all involved) also encouraged school personnel to offer more transitional activities when students move from one building to another. They stated that taking students with disabilities on a tour of a new school one time before the transition is not enough to help the child feel comfortable in their new surroundings. Mrs. Anderson said,

> Like when they make the transition from (middle school) to (high school). You have these kids that are going in there and have special needs and they are going to have them come for one day for one tour? They ought to have someone there to help them get through the first week or something instead of having five kids standing in the hall crying their eyes out because they don’t know how to get from point A to point B in a school that size... Then, they should have something for parents so they can talk to their kids ahead of time to help prepare them for what it’s going to be like at the new school.

The Andersons’ also advocated for more transitional IEP meetings when a child transfers from one school to the next. Mrs. Anderson said, “I think one of the big things with transition...is to have the IEP team meet with the student and the family so they actually see the student and get to know the family and not just be a name on a piece of paper.” Mrs. Black said, “We’re supposed to be having a transition night in February where hopefully I’ll get some information there. We need more things like that to help parents.” The follow-up meeting with Mrs. Black occurred after the transition night. Mrs. Black stated, “Now that I’ve gone to the transition night, I have an idea about where I can go. It would have been nice to know in his sophomore or junior year to get the ball
Mrs. Cartwright said,

It (transition night) was at the Educational Center, um, we went to something they were offering for special ed kids that was more vocational. But through the vocational workshops that they had available there that were resource people from like the job center and stuff. It was really interesting.

Parent Solutions for Parents

Participation at IEP Meetings

The second portion of this theme involved solutions that parents identified for themselves that would improve IEP meetings. Four out of six parents (three involved, one uninvolved) stated that it is important to attend all meetings regarding their child. Mrs. Anderson said, “Be an advocate for your child and go to every meeting.” Mrs. Black said, “Being open and attending every meeting. Every single one. You can’t miss any if you want to know what’s going on.” Mrs. Cartwright said, “You have to go to the meetings.”

Mrs. Nielsen, an uninvolved parent said, “When they are going to set up a meeting, make sure you make it because them are important.”

Four out of six parents (three involved, one uninvolved) stated that parents should ask questions at IEP meetings. Because it was sometimes difficult for them to understand all of the parts of an IEP, it was important for them to ask questions as the meeting progressed. Mrs. Anderson stated,

And I’ve only learned the hard way how to question and everything. Before when it was all laid out, we read through it. I mean I didn’t know there was a difference between this math test and this math test. I didn’t know if that was good or not, what her scores were, so I totally trusted the staff. Now I question everything.
Mrs. Black said, “I mean, it’s so important to ask questions but sometimes I don’t know how.” Mrs. Cartwright said, “I asked a lot of questions, too. I do, I’m like is this available for him? What can we write in here? What is a goal and what isn’t a goal?”

Mrs. Lane, an uninvolved parent, stated, “Ask a lot of questions. Just as much as you can do for them, do it...The only way to find out what’s going on is to ask so I ask the teachers all the time...I’m comfortable with it because I have to be...If I don’t ask, I might not know.”

Four out of six parents (three involved, one uninvolved) stated that researching their child’s disabilities was important. They expressed that knowledge was power and that it is much easier to do research today with the internet than when their son/daughter first started school. Mrs. Anderson said, “I even brought DSM criteria for diagnoses.” Mrs. Black said, “For me, I think I would have tried to be more educated and read more on knowing exactly what he needs and how I could help him better.” Mrs. Cartwright said, “I would say if your child is diagnosed with anything that contributes to them being in special ed, you need to research it and understand it especially if you don’t have it.”

When asked what strategies she thought parents should use to increase their participation in IEP meetings, Mrs. Mason, an uninvolved parent, said, “I would have more information behind me...Like now there’s the internet. We never had the internet. It was kind of hard to go to the library and look up stuff that’s not written down. Now it is. Methods have changed.”
Participation in Child’s School

Three of six parents (all involved) said that volunteering in their child’s classroom was a critical strategy they used to maintain open communication with the school. All three volunteered in elementary school only. Mrs. Anderson said, “Parents should get involved in their child’s classroom. They have to know what’s going on all the time.” Mrs. Black stated, “The minute I walked into the door, the kids would come up and hug me ‘cause I was one of those moms that I would be there a lot and they would know me and stuff…I’d walk into the doorway and it was hi, how are you, and what’s going on?” Mrs. Cartwright said, “I could see teacher’s eyes light up when we would say just let us know. We’ll be there and make the extra effort to keep us (parents) involved if possible.”

Parent Advocates

Three of six parents (two involved, one uninvolved) stated that parent advocates would be helpful for parents as they go through the IEP process. These parents identified specific teachers or specific Grant Wood AEA personnel who acted as advocates and supported them during IEP meetings. Mrs. Anderson said,

It’s kind of like going through a maze. There’s a lot of ways through it but you hit a lot of dead ends on the way through. I felt like Julia was my partner to make sure my daughter would succeed…she was very open-minded…and even after (my daughter) was done with (middle school), I still ask her a few questions and tried to get her advice on things. That’s how much I trusted her and like I said, she just seemed like she had (my daughter’s) best interest. She didn’t care what the school said or anything. She wanted to make sure what (my daughter) needed was going to be followed up on.

Mrs. Cartwright said, “I have to admit, my friend gave me a lot of ideas, you know, this could be in there, this could be in there, you know. Probably an advisor to really be an advocate for you…An advocate could give me direct answers to my questions.
Sometimes, I don’t even know what to ask and maybe an advocate could help me to know what to ask.”

Mrs. Nielsen, an uninvolved parent, said,

If she (her son’s teacher) doesn’t want to communicate with me then do me a favor (another teacher acting as her advocate). You communicate with her and you communicate with me. Somebody’s got to tell me something. And she (the advocate) usually gets the job done. She’s good at what she does...A parent advocate would know the system and could tell these teachers that we’re not crazy.

Summary of the Parent Identified Solutions Theme

After examining and analyzing the data based on comments made by involved parents versus comments made by uninvolved parents, several patterns emerged. All of the involved parent and two out of three of the uninvolved parents expressed an interest in increasing the amount of communication between school personnel and parents.

Involved parents wanted teachers to increase their communication between each other. These parents believed that if teachers talked more to each other, successful strategies that worked with their children could be passed from teacher to teacher each year.

Uninvolved parents wanted teachers to spend more time communicating with them in informal settings. They stated that talking over coffee would increase their comfort level and would encourage their participation in meetings.

One involved and one uninvolved parent expressed the need for well-organized teachers. They stated that teachers should be prepared for all meetings with all relevant information for their child.
All of the involved parents were interested in increasing the number of activities surrounding the transition of their children from building to building or program to program. None of the uninvolved parents expressed this interest.

All of the involved parents stated that attendance at their child’s IEP meeting was critical for the successful planning of their child’s education. One out of three of the uninvolved parents stated that attendance at IEP meetings was critical.

All of the involved parents stated that asking questions at their child’s IEP meeting was important. In contrast, one out of three of the uninvolved parents saw this as important.

All of the involved parents stated that researching their child’s disability was important in order to gain knowledge to be more effective IEP team members. One out of three of the uninvolved parents stated that this was important.

All of the involved parents stated that volunteering in their child’s classroom was a good way to stay involved in their child’s education. None of the uninvolved parents stated that volunteering would be a helpful strategy.

**Summary of Chapter IV**

In summary, interview data was organized and analyzed. In response to the overall research question: What strategies do parents identify that make an IEP meeting successful?, three main themes of information were revealed: Meeting Structure, Parent Identified Difficulties, and Parent Identified Solutions. According to the data, several strategies to improve IEP meetings were exposed. IEP meetings should take place in the child’s classroom as long as that classroom is free of disruptions. The meetings should
involve the child's special education teacher, general education teacher, principal, and any other pertinent staff.

Parents should interact with teachers both formally and informally. This will build a trusting relationship with school personnel that will assist in improving overall communication.

Most parents agreed that teachers plan ahead for IEP meetings. Involved parents also plan ahead by writing down questions, gathering documentation from physicians, and reviewing past IEPs. Uninvolved parents prepared for meetings by thinking of questions to ask their child's teacher.

Most parents expressed that they have difficulty participating in the decision making process at IEP meetings. They perceive that school personnel do not listen to their comments and do not ask for their input.

Half of the parents interviewed stated that the paperwork at an IEP meeting is overwhelming. They expressed a desire to have the paperwork reduced if possible.

Parents typically expressed that teachers do not ask for their input during IEP meetings. Involved parents expressed concern that school personnel were more concerned with school budgets than with the quality of service to their children. Uninvolved parents did not express this concern.

Almost all parents expressed that there is a lack of respect between school personnel and parents. They shared that school personnel ate food and drank beverages in front of them, did not review and consider documentation that parents had distributed at the meeting, and did not listen to their viewpoints.
Finally, Parent Identified Solutions data revealed that all parents were interested in increasing the amount of communication between school personnel and parents. Involved parents were interested in increasing the number of transition activities offered by the school when children move from one building to another. Involved parents tended to recognize the importance of IEP meetings and the importance of asking questions during meetings. Involved parents also expressed the importance of researching their child’s disability and participating in their child’s school in order to be well-informed. Finally, involved parents believed that the presence of parent advocates at IEP meetings might improve parent participation.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify and understand the strategies that assist parents in achieving active participation during their child's IEP conference. Parent participants identified strategies that would assist parents in improving their own performance on their child's IEP team. They also identified strategies that school personnel could utilize to get parents more involved.

Six parents of high school aged children who receive special education services in Cedar Rapids Community Schools were interviewed. Three parents were identified as involved and three parents were identified as uninvolved. These parents were identified by the Heads of the Special Education Department in collaboration with individual teachers from each of the three major high schools in Cedar Rapids.

Uninvolved parents tended to talk less during the interviews than involved parents. Analysis of the data revealed that uninvolved parents made 46% of the overall comments during the interviews, while involved parents made 54% of the comments. Of those total comments, however, uninvolved parents made significantly more off-topic comments (65) than involved parents (20).

Uninvolved parents also commented more on the difficulties that they had experienced during their child's IEP conference and less on potential solutions to improve IEP meetings. The opposite was true of involved parents. Involved parents
commented more on potential strategies to improve IEP meetings and less on difficulties they had experienced.

The interview protocol used in this study consisted of open-ended, semi-structured questions. The first section was designed to collect demographic information. The second section collected general information about parent interactions with school staff. Next, information was gathered about parent experiences during IEP meetings. The final section asked parents to identify strategies that made IEP meetings successful. This section also gathered information about strategies for school personnel that would promote more active participation from parents.

The interview data was examined and analyzed to gain insight into the research question for this study. The data analysis included frequency data and the Constant Comparative Method.

Conclusions

Meeting Structure

Parents in this study reported that typical IEP meetings were held in their child’s special education classroom. Occasional meetings would be held in a conference room or the school library. Parents stated that these facilities were acceptable to them for IEP meetings. These findings were in direct contrast to the findings of Salembier and Furney (1998, p. 62) when they stated that the physical environment of a meeting was very important to parents. They found that parents liked comfortable spaces for meetings where food was accessible.
Parents saw many differences between who attended IEP meetings at the elementary level and the high school level. In elementary school, attendees at a child’s IEP meeting tended to be stable. The child’s special education teacher, general education teacher, and school principal attended and each attendee stayed for the entire meeting. In contrast, attendees at a child’s IEP meeting at the high school level were less stable. The only consistent participant at this level besides the parent was the special education teacher. Parents reported that other attendees, including the general education teacher and school principal attended only portions of the meeting. This finding is similar to what McCoy reported when she said that the only two consistent members of an IEP team are the parents and the student (McCoy, 2000, p. 62).

In elementary school, IEP meetings typically lasted between one and two hours. IEP meetings at the high school level were typically shorter ranging from thirty minutes to two hours. IEP meetings were typically shorter for uninvolved parents when compared to meetings for involved parents. Meetings for uninvolved parents ranged from 30-45 minutes while meetings for involved parents ranged from 45 minutes to two hours.

Soodak and Erwin (2000, p. 39) found that parents had better relationships with school personnel when there were “trust, informal communication and ongoing involvement.” Thus, informal interactions between parents and school personnel are important for building strong relationships. In this study, the formality of interactions with school personnel changed from elementary school to high school. At the elementary level, parents reported that they interacted both formally and informally with school personnel. Parents reported that they interacted informally with their child’s teachers
when they picked them up from school or when they attended various school functions. In contrast, parents reported that they interacted more formally with their child's high school teachers. Parents stated that there were fewer opportunities to interact informally with teachers. They also stated that their children were less receptive to parents interacting informally with their teachers.

All parents agreed that teachers should plan ahead for IEP meetings. They agreed that teachers should gather information regarding their child's current level of achievement and progress. These findings agreed with the findings of Salembier and Furney (1998, p. 62) when they stated that parents liked well-organized meetings. Most parents (five out of six) agreed that parents should also plan ahead for IEP meetings. The types of activities that involved parents completed during this planning process, however, were different than the activities that uninvolved parents completed. Involved parents tended to review their child's previous IEP and document pertinent information regarding their child's progress. Uninvolved parents, on the other hand, tended to think of questions they wanted to ask their child's teacher. They did not document any information prior to attending the IEP meeting.

Parent-Identified Difficulties

Soodak and Erwin (2000, p. 36) found that parents do not feel they are a legitimate part of the IEP team. The researcher found that parent participants in this study had similar feelings. While two parents stated that they played a "supportive" role in meetings, the others stated they acted either as "protectors" or that they had no role at all in meetings. They stated that their child's special education teacher played the most
critical role in the development of their child's IEP. Parents stated that if the relationship between the special education teacher and the parent broke down, it was very difficult to have a successful IEP meeting.

Most parents expressed frustration because they felt they were unable to participate effectively in the decision making process of their child's IEP meeting. This finding is consistent with the findings of Dembinski and Mauser (1977, p. 52) stating that two-thirds of parents feel uncomfortable and awkward when interacting with school personnel. If parents feel uncomfortable during IEP meetings, they will be unable to participate effectively during the decision making process.

Half of the parents interviewed stated that the paperwork that must be completed during an IEP meeting was overwhelming. While all expressed understanding of the need for the paperwork, they all expressed hope that the IEP could be simplified.

Parents expressed a number of concerns around the area of communication. There was a difference between who initiated communication at the elementary level versus who initiated communication at the high school level. Half of the parents discussed that teachers at the high school level never initiated communication with them. All parents shared that when their children were in elementary school, teachers frequently initiated communication with them.

Parents expressed difficulty communicating with school personnel. Half of the parents declared that school personnel did not consistently respond to their voice mail and e-mail messages. This created a barrier when trying to establish strong communication with the school.
Salembier and Furney (1997, p. 39) found that almost a third of parents spoke only one or two times during their child’s IEP meeting. In this study, parent participants reported similar results but said that they didn’t talk because school personnel did not ask for their input. Parents expressed that they did not feel that teachers listened to them and they did not feel that they were equal members of their child’s IEP team. Parents expressed that school personnel made them feel like they didn’t know anything during IEP meetings and did not ask their opinion. Despite the fact that school personnel didn’t ask for their input, involved parents tended to volunteer information anyway. Uninvolved parents, in contrast, tended to not volunteer information if school personnel did not ask their opinion.

Two parents expressed concern that school personnel utilized unfamiliar language during the IEP meeting. School staff utilized words such as “percentile” and “weighting” that parents did not understand. Dembinski and Mauser (1977, p. 53) found similar results when they concluded that the language utilized between school personnel should not be used with parents during meetings. As a result of this language usage, parents perceived that school personnel were more concerned about test scores and school budgets than about providing high quality service for their child.

Lack of respect between parents and high school teachers was a recurring theme throughout five of six of the parent interviews. Two out of three of the involved parents and all of the uninvolved parents expressed this concern. When parents presented information from outside sources such as their child’s doctor, school personnel did not read or consider the information. This created frustration for parents as they spent much
time and money taking their child to the doctor. Parents considered school personnel’s lack of interest in this documentation disrespectful and inappropriate. Parents expressed that they did not feel school personnel listened to them during IEP meetings or valued their input. Finally, parents discussed that teachers ate food in front of them during interactions. Teachers did not offer parents anything to eat or drink and this, too, was seen as disrespectful to parents.

This lack of respect leads to a lack of trust that is detrimental to the relationship between school personnel and parents. According to Erwin et al. (2001, p. 141), trust is the "single most significant indicator of how parents perceived their relationships with school personnel." These findings concurred with the results of this study.

Finally, all of the involved parents and one of the uninvolved parents expressed concern about the transition process when children moved from one building to another. These concerns were discussed regarding the transition between fifth and sixth grades, between eighth and ninth grades, and from twelfth grade to post high school activities. This finding is similar to what Salembier and Furney (1997, p. 39) reported. They said that 30% of parents were not satisfied with their participation in the transition process.

Parent-Identified Solutions

There was a marked difference in this theme between the solutions identified by involved parents versus those solutions identified by uninvolved parents. Involved parents made 79 comments during their interviews that pertained to solutions. Uninvolved parents made only 31 comments regarding solutions.
All of the involved parents stated that researching their child’s disability, attending meetings concerning their child, and asking questions during meetings were important strategies. One out of three uninvolved parents expressed that these were critical strategies. These results were consistent with Barbour and Barbour’s (1997, p. 189) findings that stated that schools and parents must develop partnerships where information can be mutually exchanged. The best way for this to happen is to ensure that parent and school participants have done their research, attend the meetings, and ask questions of each other.

The study by Salembier and Fumey (1997, p. 39) reported that 30% of parents were not satisfied with their participation in the transition planning process. This study reported similar results. All of the involved parents saw the value of transitional activities for themselves and their children when moving from one building to another and expressed a desire for more of those types of activities. None of the uninvolved parents expressed awareness or a need of these activities.

Soodak and Erwin (2000, p. 35) found that parents who felt free to enter the school at any time felt more trust with school personnel. These findings were similar to what involved parents in this study reported. All of the involved parents volunteered in their child’s classroom in elementary school to facilitate better communication between themselves and their child’s teacher. None of the uninvolved parents volunteered at their child’s school.

Results from Soodak and Erwin’s research (2000, p. 38) indicated that parents want “frequent and consistent feedback with school personnel.” In this study, when
discussing strategies for school personnel, parent comments also focused on the need for increased overall communication. Parents wanted more e-mail messages and more phone calls from school in order to stay abreast of their child’s progress in the classroom.

Parents also suggested that teachers communicate more with each other. When a child is moving from one classroom or grade level to another, parents suggested that the previous teacher visit with next year’s teacher. This would allow the experience and expertise of present teaching staff to be passed on to next year’s teacher. Thus, precious time and energy would not be wasted trying to “discover” what works for a particular child.

Two out of three uninvolved parents suggested that teachers spend more time with parents in less structured settings. Collaborative, congenial relationship that help parents participate actively in IEP conferences could be built by visiting with parents over a cup of coffee about their child’s progress. This finding is similar to what Erwin et al. (2001, p. 143) reported when he said, parents “spoke of being most satisfied when communication was open, ongoing, and informal.”

Parents also suggested that teachers plan ahead and organize their materials prior to an IEP conference. Parents see organization as a key element to every IEP meeting and stated that well organized meetings tended to be more successful. These findings were consistent with the findings of Salembier and Furney (1998, p. 62) when they reported that parents liked meetings that were well-organized.

Sussel et al. (1996, p. 54) found that parents want and need information about services that could be accessed by their child. This finding agreed with the suggestion of
one parent in this study. This parent suggested that school personnel develop resources to assist parents through the IEP process. These resources might include books and home programs that parents could reference when they became confused about the IEP process or when they needed information regarding services that could be accessed by their child.

Discussion

All parents said that they were advocates or protectors of their children. These parents, however, were frustrated by their inability to actively participate in their child's IEP meeting. Parents expressed that despite their attempts at involvement, they had an adversarial relationship with school personnel at their child's school. Communication difficulties may be at the base of this adversarial relationship.

All IEP meetings had a similar structure. They were located in a child's classroom and a variety of people attended including the parent, the special education teacher, the general education teacher, and the principal. The purpose of the meeting was to update all participants on the child's current level of performance and progress and to write new goals for the student for the upcoming year. Although the process was structured and relatively standardized, many IEP meetings were successful and many others were not. This success or failure was probably due to the communication styles of the people involved.

Ruby Payne's (2001, p. 62) research asserted that most educators are middle class and use the formal register when speaking. Many parents live in poverty and use the casual register. This difference in register could dramatically impact IEP meetings. If
teachers utilize only the formal register and parents utilize only the casual register, misunderstandings and frustration could result.

The data from this study suggested that at least some of the parents interviewed may be living in poverty. These parents expressed a need for more time to talk informally during meetings. When describing good communication between parents and the school, they made statements about sitting with their child's teacher, drinking coffee, and having a discussion. This type of setting allows parents to utilize the casual register when talking. Because parents feel comfortable utilizing their casual register, their interaction increases, and more active participation in the meeting is attained.

Payne (2001, p. 59) also stated that for individuals living in poverty "personality is for entertainment. A sense of humor is highly valued." People living in poverty, therefore, entertain each other through stories. Two out of three uninvolved parents who participated in interviews for this study were off-topic much more frequently than other parents in the study. These parents told stories about their childhoods, their other children, and their friend's children. They seemed to have a need to relate what was currently happening to past personal experiences, the experiences of other family members, and the experiences of their friends. When these parents interact with their friends, it is a likely assumption that they interact through stories.

When parents attend IEP meetings, however, there is typically a time schedule that must be followed. The meeting facilitator, who is always an educator, keeps all participants on topic in order to maintain efficiency and ensure that the meeting is completed on time. This prevents parents living in poverty from interacting informally,
telling stories, and relating the information that they are learning to their past experiences. Because they are not allowed to tell stories, they experience frustration and their level of participation in the meeting is reduced. This may explain why IEP meetings for uninvolved parents in this study lasted 30-45 minutes, and IEP meetings for involved parents lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. Because uninvolved parents were not encouraged to communicate during the meeting with stories, their communication was reduced and the meeting lasted a shorter amount of time.

Data from this study showed that involved and uninvolved parents plan ahead for IEP meetings. Involved parents plan by documenting information about their child's current functioning and gathering information from doctor visits. In contrast, uninvolved parents do not document information. Instead, they think about the questions that they want to ask their child's teacher. Involved parents, consequently, may interact with school personnel by telling them information. Uninvolved parents may interact with school personnel by asking questions and dialoguing or conversing with them.

Communication difficulties were a recurring theme throughout the interviews. These difficulties appeared to be more significant for school personnel at the high school level than for school personnel at the elementary level. Parents stated that high school teachers did not initiate communication, did not consistently answer e-mail and voice mail messages in a timely manner, and did not ask parents for input during IEP meetings. They stated that high school teachers used educational jargon that they did not understand and discussed weighting issues which were a budgetary concern during their child's IEP meeting. These difficulties were reported by both involved and uninvolved parents and
served to reduce parents' ability to participate fully in the decision-making process for their child.

Most parents discussed a lack of respect between parents and school personnel. This lack of respect may be particularly damaging for parents living in poverty. People living in poverty value stories, and they build relationships with people based on the sharing of stories. If parents from poverty sense that there is a lack of respect between themselves and the school, the relationship could be significantly damaged. Damaged relationships result in a reduced likelihood that parents will share their stories with school personnel. This reduced likelihood of sharing may result in shorter IEP meetings where communication breaks down and parent involvement is at a minimum.

All involved parents and one uninvolved parent stated that there was a need for more transitional activities when children moved from one building or one program to another. These transitional activities are typically rather formal presentations where parents gather in a large auditorium and professionals speak about their programs to the group. These presentation style activities are presented in the formal register and may appeal to parents from the middle class who also speak in the formal register. These activities may be less appealing for parents from poverty who speak in the casual register. Data from this study indicated that some parents who were interviewed may have been parents living in poverty. For those parents, these transitional activities presented in the formal register may not have met their needs to interact with the information they were learning through storytelling.
One involved parent recommended that resources such as a book be developed for parents beginning the IEP process. This book would be a reference for parents where they could look up needed information throughout their child's education. It is possible that parents living in middle class would be more likely to ask for such a resource. A book would be written in formal register which is a comfortable register for individuals living in middle class. If this involved parent was living in a middle class situation, this book would be helpful to her. For a parent who is living in poverty and who uses the casual register, a book may be less helpful.

All of the involved parents and none of the uninvolved parents stated that volunteering at their child's school helped them maintain open communication with the school. This finding may not have anything to do with communication. This finding may be the result of some parents' need to work during school hours and their inability to leave work for school functions.

Finally, data from this study revealed that involved parents were more likely than uninvolved parents to express a need for a parent advocate during their child's IEP meetings. A parent advocate would most likely be another professional who utilizes the formal register. Parents from poverty may find this parent advocate less helpful because they do not speak in the same register as the parent.

**Recommendations**

Based on this study, the researcher proposes that school personnel ensure adequate time for all IEP meetings. Time should be scheduled for brief informal
interactions before, during, and after the meeting to allow parents to interact with their child’s teachers.

This researcher would recommend that school personnel ask parents about other family members before the IEP meeting. This allows parents to share personal stories and will assist parents in feeling comfortable with school personnel before the meeting starts. This need not take a great deal of time. One or two questions regarding the parents’ family will suffice to put them at ease and let them know that the school and their child’s teacher care about them.

After analyzing the data, it became apparent to the researcher that school personnel should send parents simple organizers before every IEP meeting. These organizers ask parents questions that allow them to briefly document their thoughts regarding their child’s progress. This advance organizer may help prepare parents to make relevant comments and actively participate during their child’s IEP meeting.

This researcher recommends that school personnel create a less formal environment for IEP meetings. Coffee or water could be offered to all participants including parents. A framed picture of the child being discussed could be mounted on a nearby wall or placed in the center of the table.

School personnel should avoid all educational jargon when talking with parents. The researcher sees this as vital to establishing strong relationships with parents. This will increase the parent’s comfort level and will avoid frustration and confusion regarding unfamiliar terminology.
Of critical importance to improving relationships with parents, school personnel should respond to all e-mails and all voice mails within 48 hours. This will prevent parent frustration when they have questions or concerns and are unable to reach appropriate school staff.

This researcher would recommend that school personnel ask for parent input at every stage of the IEP meeting. Parents are equal members of each IEP team and should have equal say in the educational planning for their child. The best way to ensure that parents participate in meetings is to ask for their input.

This researcher recommends that parents be encouraged to attend as many school functions as possible. Frequently, teachers are also present at these functions and informal interactions between parents and teachers could occur.

Of critical importance to establishing relationships with school personnel, parents should be encouraged to attend all IEP meetings. If a meeting is scheduled for an inconvenient time, the school should be notified, and the date changed. Parents should never skip a meeting. All meetings are important because they involve the educational future of their child.

Finally, this researcher recommends that parents ask questions during the IEP meeting. This will assist everyone in maintaining open, clear communication.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations for future research are offered based on the findings of this study:
1. This study's focus was limited to parents of high school students. Consequently, the roles of special education teacher, general education teacher, and principal were not investigated. Further research is needed to understand the perspectives of these groups and their roles in IEP meetings.

2. Because this study focused on parents of high school students, they may not fully remember their experiences with IEP meetings when their children were in elementary school. It is recommended that this study be replicated with parents of elementary students to fully gain perspective of IEP meetings at that level.

3. This study was limited to parents. Further research is needed to compare the perceptions of parents and the teachers involved with their son/daughter.

4. This study was limited to six parent participants. Further research involving larger numbers of parents would help to further investigate the research question defined in this study.

5. The parent participants in this study were all mothers. Further research should focus on the perceptions of fathers during IEP meetings.

6. The parent participants in this study were all Caucasian. Future research should focus on parents with other ethnic backgrounds to determine the similarities and differences in parent perceptions about IEP meetings.

7. Future research should further explore communication between school personnel and parents. Research should be pursued in which the researcher attends IEP meetings and explores the verbal language and non-verbal communication utilized during meetings. Behaviors that could be charted include spatial
arrangements, turn management, topic introduction, management, and transition, question solicitation, turn length, and use of jargon.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1) Thank the participant for their time and willingness to be interviewed
   a. Thank you for meeting with me.
   b. I appreciate your willingness to be interviewed for this study.

2) Ask permission to tape record the interview
   a. Would it be all right with you if I tape record this interview?
   b. If at any time, you feel uncomfortable with the tape recorder running, please let me know, and I will turn it off.
   c. Please remember that no one will listen to these tapes except my secretary who will transcribe the tapes and me.

3) Discuss confidentiality with the parent
   a. To ensure the confidentiality of this interview, your name and the name of your school will be changed in the final dissertation report.
   b. Anything that might be used to identify you as a source of information will be kept confidential.

4) With your permission, I would like to begin asking you questions.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) Tell me about your son/daughter.
   a. What are his/her strengths?
   b. What are his/her weaknesses?
   c. Does your son/daughter have a labeled disability? If so, what is it?

2) How did you learn about your child's disability?

3) What kind of support do you provide your child at home?
4) What are your son/daughter’s plans after high school?

5) Describe your interactions with school staff.
   a. Where do these interactions usually take place?
   b. How long do the interactions typically last?
   c. Are the interactions typically structured or unstructured?
   d. Are the interactions typically formal or informal?
   e. Who typically initiates the interaction?

6) Describe a typical IEP meeting for your child.
   a. Where do the IEP meetings typically take place?
   b. How long do the IEP meetings typically last?
   c. How often do you as the parent typically talk during the IEP meeting?
   d. Do you volunteer information at IEP meetings?
   e. What type of information do you volunteer?
   f. Did school staff ask for your input during the IEP meeting?
   g. How often did they ask for your input?
   h. What type of information were they seeking?
   i. How often does the school staff talk during IEP meetings?
   j. Does school staff volunteer information about your child?
   k. What types of information do they volunteer?
   l. Who led the IEP meeting?

7) Describe the decision making process.
8) Did you have a role on your child’s IEP team?
   a. Describe that role.
   b. Was there pre-planning for your child’s IEP?
   c. Describe the pre-planning.
   d. How many meetings do you typically attend in order to complete your child’s IEP?
   e. Describe your relationship with members of your child’s IEP team.

9) Did you feel more successful on some IEP teams than others?
   a. What was the best IEP meeting in which you ever participated?
   b. What made it such a good team?
   c. Describe the qualities of school staff that were very helpful.
   d. How does staff who were helpful behave at IEP meetings? After the meeting? Before the meeting?
   e. What year was the hardest year for your IEP team?
   f. What made it such a hard year?
   g. Describe the qualities of school staff that were not helpful.
   h. How does staff who are not helpful behave at IEP meetings? After the meeting? Before the meeting?

10) Did school personnel include you, as parents, in the decision-making process?
    a. What were the most important things done by school personnel to include you, as parents, in the decision-making process?
       i. Arrangement of chairs
ii. Food/Drinks

iii. Meeting Time

iv. Meeting Location

v. Trusting Relationship

vi. Agendas

11) Are there things that school personnel could have done to make you, the parent, feel more a part of the process?

   a. What are they?

   b. Arrangement of chairs

   c. Food/Drinks

   d. Meeting Time

   e. Meeting Location

   f. Agendas

12) Would you, as parents, do anything differently if you could re-live the special education experience with your child?

   a. What would you change?

   b. What would you remember to do again?

13) Now that your child is a junior/senior, and you are nearing the end of his/her high school experience, what have you learned about the decision-making process?

   a. Prompts

      i. Patience

      ii. Plan Ahead
iii. Visit School/Teachers Often

iv. Transitions are Critical

v. Work on Skills at Home

14) What advice would you as veteran parents give other parents who are beginning the special education experience with their children?
APPENDIX B

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT STUDY GRANTED BY UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW COMMITTEE
Date: December 19, 2005

To: Maria Cashman
241 Sussex Drive NE
Cedar Rapids, IA 52402

From: Dr. Mary E. Losch, Chair
UNI Human Participants Review Committee
(Institutional Review Board)

Title: IRP Meetings: What Are The Strategies That Make an IRP Meeting Successful?

Reference: IRP-05-0115

Your project, "IRP Meetings: What Are The Strategies That Make an IRP Meeting Successful," has been deemed minimal risk and reviewed through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 of the federal regulations.

Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behaviors or research employing surveys, interviews, oral histories, focus groups, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

You may begin enrolling human research participants in your project. If you modify your project in a way that increases the physical, emotional, social, or legal risk to the participants or change the targeted participants, you should notify the Human Participants Review Committee in the Office of Sponsored Programs before continuing with the research. Additionally, your project must be reviewed annually. You will receive a notification and continuing review form approximately 10 months from now asking for an update on your project. If you complete the project before that time, please complete a project closure form (available at http://osp.uni.edu/osp/grants/policies.html) and submit it to the Human Participants Office.

If you have any further questions about the Human Participants Review policies or procedures, please contact me at mary.losch@uni.edu or David Walker, the Human Participants Committee Administrator, at 319.273.6148 or email david.walk@uni.edu. Best wishes for your project success.

cc: Institutional Review Board
Greg Reed, adviser
APPENDIX C

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT STUDY GRANTED BY CEDAR RAPIDS COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
SUBJECT: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RESEARCH PLAN FOR MARIA CASHMAN-DOCTORAL CANDIDATE

I am happy to acknowledge that Maria Cashman will conduct research for her doctoral dissertation in the Cedar Rapids Community Schools.

I understand that the main purpose of this study is to identify strategies that assist parents in achieving active participation during their child's IEP conference. The parent perspective will be examined to determine how parent participants might have improved their own performance on their child's IEP team as well as how they believe school personnel could have increased their meaningful involvement in the process. Finally, the study will examine the advice veteran parents would give other parents who are beginning the special education process with their children.

It is my understanding that the information gained from the interviews will be used in Maria's dissertation entitled: IEP Meetings: What are the Strategies that Make an IEP Meeting Successful? I understand that the information gathered will be shared with me as we continue to look for strategies to better include parents in the IEP process.

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me at (319) 558-1233.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Blomme, Executive Director, Special Services
Cedar Rapids Community School District