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Parental Understanding of Special Education Legislation and Case Law, Advocacy, and Perceptions of the IEP Process for Children With Autism

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Parental Understanding of Special Education Legislation and Case Law, Advocacy, and
Perceptions of the IEP Process for Children With Autism

by
Rachel A. Treshan

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education
and School of Criminal Justice in Partial
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Approval Page

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Statement of Original Work

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Rachel A. Treshan
Name

October 19, 2021
Date

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Ever since I was a little girl, I knew that I was going to be a perpetual student and always had a drive to learn. I am very fortunate in that I have been afforded the opportunities to further my education to this point with the love and support of my family and friends. I want to thank the wonderful, dedicated staff and faculty at Nova Southeastern University for all their support and encouragement and for not giving up on me, even when I felt like giving up on myself, most especially Dr. Katrina Pann for being what felt like my biggest coach and cheerleader. I am eternally grateful.

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Abstract

Parental Understanding of Special Education Legislation and Case Law, Advocacy, and Perceptions of the IEP Process for Children With Autism. Rachel A. Treshan, 2021: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: autism, special education, individualized education programs, parent attitudes

Despite the legal statutes in place that mandate parental participation in the individualized education program (IEP) process, the decision-making process is mainly dominated by educators. In addition, information on parental perceptions of IEP meetings is limited, especially in regard to parents of children with autism. Parental understanding of special education legislation and case law, advocacy, and perceptions of the IEP process for children with autism was explored in this study. Using a generic qualitative approach, 11 parents of children ages 3 to 13 years old with autism were interviewed via Zoom to develop an understanding of their experiences. Data were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The themes identified were as follows: Strong Feelings Overall About the IEP Process; Perceptions of IEP Process Consistent With Those on Meeting Child's Needs; Open Communication Is Coveted; Parents Desire Equal Participation; Knowledge Is Power; Parental Input Is Key, and They Have Ideas for Change; Help Comes in Many Forms; Outside Services Come at a Cost: Both Emotional and Monetary; Legal Escalation Is Often Not Necessary and Avoidable; Case Law Does Not Play a Formidable Role in Parents' Perceptions; Knowing Your Child's Rights Can Drive the IEP Process; and There Is No Better Advocate Than an Educated Parent.

This study found that open dialogue between parents and educators is coveted and would ultimately produce a more satisfying perception of the IEP process from the parents' perspectives. Parents felt that, to be able to be equal participants at the table, they needed to do their own research and consult with advocates and Master IEP Coaches so that they were able to project their thoughts and ideas in a way that would be taken seriously. Findings from this study may assist educators in promoting a more balanced approach to IEP meetings. The results may also be used to develop educational training for parents and educators to form a more collaborative IEP team.

Table of Contents

	Page
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	1
Definition of Terms	7
Purpose of the Study	8
Chapter 2: Literature Review	9
History and Prevalence of ASD	9
The IEP Defined and Its Implications	10
Background on the IEP and Parental Participation	15
Importance of Parental Involvement	17
Parent Experiences	18
Communication	22
Benefits of Collaboration	24
Positive Effects of Parent Training	27
Benefits of Support Groups	28
Characteristics of Successful IEPs	29
Summary	31
Research Questions	32
Chapter 3: Methodology	33
Aim of the Study	33
Qualitative Research Approach	33
Participants	34
Data-Collection Tools	34
Procedures	36
Data Analysis	36
Ethical Considerations	38
Trustworthiness	39
Potential Research Bias	39
Limitations	40
Chapter 4: Results	42
Introduction	42
Research Question 1	44
Research Question 2	47
Research Question 3	49
Research Question 4	52
Research Question 5	54
Research Question 6	56
Summary	58
Chapter 5: Discussion	59
Overview of the Study	59
Interpretation and Context of Findings	60

Implications of the Findings	67
Limitations of the Study.....	68
Recommendations for Future Research	69
Conclusion	70
References.....	71
Appendices	
A Preinterview Survey.....	81
B Interview Protocol	83
Table	
Age of Child, Educational Setting, and Planning Meetings Attended for Each Study Participant.....	43

Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Wong (2008) defined parent involvement as “the extent to which parents are interested in, knowledgeable about, and willing to take an active role in the day-to-day activities of the children” (p. 497). Changes in special education legislation, such as the most recent passage of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), as well as recent case law have changed the landscape of parental involvement in the individualized education program (IEP) process for children with autism. With these changes has come a greater misunderstanding of parental rights, leading in many cases to a lack of parental involvement. Unfortunately, this is not a new phenomenon and has been seen since the inception of special education law.

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was originally enacted by Congress in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This was the first time in history that there was a mandate set forth on parental involvement in the education of their child with disabilities. Prior to 1975, parental involvement varied according to the interests and commitments of the involved parties. Furthermore, decision making was traditionally relegated to professional educators, psychiatrists, and psychologists.

The federal statute set forth by IDEA requires the assembling of an IEP meeting once a school year to set forth a plan for an educational program tailored to the individual needs of the child. The determination for placement, evaluation, and instructional decisions all take place during the IEP meeting and are established and set forth by the IEP team members. Members of an IEP team must include, but are not limited to, “the parents of the student receiving special education services, a special education teacher, a

general education teacher, service providers, and an administrator” (Drasgow et al., 2001, p. 359). Students may also be included if deemed appropriate, as well as local education agency representatives or any other deemed necessary or beneficial by anyone in the IEP team.

Parents of children with autism, or those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), have been shown to possess differences in their involvement than those of children with differing special education needs. Parents of children with ASD have been found to be more likely than parents of children without the disorder to attend parent-teacher conferences, communicate with school counselors, or even to assist with the child’s homework. Furthermore, these parents have shown that they are more dissatisfied with the level of communication provided by the school (Zablotsky et al., 2012).

The problem explored in the study was that, despite the legal statutes in place which mandate parental participation in the IEP process, the decision-making process is mainly dominated by educators and not parents. In research performed by Fish (2006), the author exemplified that, more often than not, “IEP meetings have failed to build an equal partnership among parents of students with autism and educators” (p. 56). Furthermore, numerous school districts across the country have been “unsuccessful in building quality relationships with parents of children with autism” (Fish, 2006, p. 56).

Phenomenon of Interest

The phenomenon of interest in the study involved parental perceptions of the IEP process for children with autism, specifically in relation to how they feel their children’s needs are being served and the communication that takes place during the meetings. In addition, a secondary phenomenon of interest is parental knowledge regarding legislation and case law impacting their children as well as available advocacy services. The

majority of the literature on the IEP process covers the educators' perceptions of IEP meetings. Information on parental perceptions of IEP meetings is limited, especially with regard to parents of children with autism. This study sought to explore these parental perceptions in hopes of identifying procedural safeguards that can be implemented in helping parents and educators become equal partners in IEP meetings to bridge the gap. Through the identification of various barriers, such as communication, or lack thereof, cultural diversity, demographics, and so forth, between parents and educators, cohesively developed IEPs can be devised and implemented.

Educational outcomes are more likely to be viewed as positive when educators and parents work together as one team with the same goal: to provide an education deemed as appropriate and meaningful for a child with autism. Moreover, the procedural safeguards now in place through legislation and case law serve to assist parents in protecting the rights and education of their children. The factoring in of these legal decisions have shaped the IEP process to date; however, there are still discrepancies faced within the process. This study explored parental knowledge of special education law to determine how such knowledge may be used to foster more comprehensive and intelligible connections throughout the IEP process. Knowing precedents that have been set and legal decisions that have been made enables parents as well as educators to know what is legally acceptable throughout the IEP process.

Background and Justification

The justification for studying this phenomenon is grounded in the fact that, although there is significant research on the issue of parental perspectives of the IEP process for students with special needs in general, there is a lack of research on that process involving children with autism specifically. The increasing prevalence rates of

children with ASD, legal mandates requiring parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities, and increased litigation all exemplify the importance of understanding the interaction between parents of children with ASD and education professionals. Garbacz et al. (2016) stated, “Parental involvement, which encompasses the patterns and nature of parent-professional interaction, has been established as a key to building a strong and effective educational experience for children with ASD” (p. 478).

Studies on parental perspectives of the IEP process for the general population of children with special needs indicate that educators still tend to dominate the decision-making process and set the tone for the meetings (Dabkowski, 2004). Further studies also showed that successful implementations of IEPs are driven by the belief that all stakeholders viewed themselves as valued contributors in the process (Reiman et al., 2010).

What we do know is that positive collaborative experiences are more likely to occur when educators treat parents like partners, focus on the child’s strengths, explain ideas and policies clearly, and are flexible and willing to learn and try new things (MacLeod et al., 2017). MacLeod et al. (2017) gathered qualitative data from 35 parents of students with disabilities, all of whom have collaborated with school teams to develop IEPs for their children. The findings provided insight that parents may have suggestions for how the IEP process can be more successful (MacLeod et al., 2017). By researching the parents of students with autism exclusively in this study, there may be a greater understanding of the parents’ perspectives of the IEP process.

It is also important to note how conflict during the IEP process is counterproductive for all involved parties, especially for the student. In 2015, Mueller conducted a study on Congress’ implementation of dispute resolution procedures that

could be used to encourage a more meaningful process. Mueller asserted that partnerships and student outcomes can be improved by the willingness to try new strategies to build such collaborations (Mueller, 2015).

Interestingly, Zablotsky et al. (2012) gathered research indicating how parents of children with ASD are more involved than parents of children without ASD in all facets of the IEP process and addressing the educational needs of their children. The study also presented the fact that these parents studied were also more dissatisfied with the communication process with the school (Zablotsky et al., 2012). Although Zablotsky et al. showed that there was a “significant positive correlation between parental school involvement and parent school satisfaction” (p. 316), the question remains as to what can be done to further bridge that gap. What can we do to further strengthen the bond between parent and school for children with ASD?

Deficiencies in the Evidence

Because autism is the most prevalent disability in the country with the astounding rate of one in 68 children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2017) and there is literally a spectrum within the diagnosis, it is important to fully understand the impact of the partnerships between parents and educators. Regarding research focusing solely on students with autism, particularly about parental perspectives of the IEP process, there are deficiencies. The literature reviewed above highlighted the issues at hand when investigating parental perspectives of the IEP process. There are deficiencies present in the evidence in relation to a viable solution in order to have a more cohesive and cooperative IEP process. Spann et al. (2003) stated the following:

Despite its need and importance, many parents have little or no involvement in their children’s special education services. Earlier studies have indicated that

although parents attend their child's IEP meeting, they often have no involvement in developing objectives, interventions, or methods of evaluation. (p. 228)

Furthermore, the limited research available in parental involvement and school satisfaction for families of children with ASD provides a great deal of contradictory evidence. For example, Spann et al. (2003) also reported only a "36% level of parent satisfaction with services received by their youngest subset of school-aged children" (p. 229). However, Zablotsky et al. (2012) uncovered a parent satisfaction level of over "86% for services received from the school district for their ASD child, although parents of children with ASD were significantly less satisfied with various services when compared with families with children with other developmental disabilities" (p. 316).

Audience

Parental involvement is an integral part in the education of a child with disabilities, especially when it comes to the IEP process. However, many parents may feel uneasy, intimidated, and frustrated with multiple school personnel sharing more needs than strengths about their child during the meeting (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). Parents of children with autism, as well as any parent of a special needs child, will benefit from reading this study. Moreover, educators and administrators as well as any other stakeholder in the education process will also benefit from reading this study in that they might also have preconceived notions as to how parents feel about the IEP process and perhaps may alter the way in which they approach conferences, planning, communication, and so forth. The main goal is to provide a fresh look at an ongoing problem facing the education system regarding the extent of parental involvement and satisfaction in the IEP process for students with autism.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this applied dissertation, the following terms are defined.

Autism

Faras et al. (2010) stated the following:

Autism is a developmental disability that adversely affects a child's educational performance due to deficiencies in social interaction, as well as both verbal and nonverbal communication. Common characteristics associated with autism include engagement in repetitive activities, resistance to changes in daily routines and environmental change, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. (p. 295)

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

The IEP is the primary component of Part B of IDEA, as well as Part B of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142). Huefner (2000) stated, "The IEP functions as the blueprint for the delivery of services to be provided for special education students" (p. 195). IEP regulations identify the following:

Meeting dates, parental and student consent, accountability, and responsibilities of educational agencies. The IEP must include statements of a child's present levels of educational performance, annual goals, short-term instructional objectives, projected dates for initiation of services, and evaluation procedures for determining the success of short-term objectives. (Huefner, 2000, p. 195)

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Formerly entitled the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142), the legislation includes the following:

IDEA provides federal mandates for schools to strengthen academic opportunities for children with disabilities. IDEA mandates that each special education student

be entitled to an individualized education plan. IDEA additionally mandates active parental participation in all aspects of educational programming for youth with disabilities. (Huefner, 2000, p. 200)

Natural Setting

Research is conducted in a natural environment or within the environment of the study.

Parent

This term refers to the biological parent, appointed guardian, or foster parent who attends and represents the special education student throughout the IEP process and meeting (Elbaum et al., 2016; Haley et al., 2013; Jinnah & Walters, 2008; Lee et al., 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore parental perceptions of the IEP process with children of autism, specifically in relation to communication during IEP meetings and suggestions for improvement in the process. In addition, parental understanding of the most recent legislation and case law and their use of advocacy services and case law to help advocate for their children was studied. The research in this study was enhanced by parent responses revolving around the school district professionals' practices in improving IEP meetings as well as actions that could be taken as parents to serve as better advocates for their children. Furthermore, parents were questioned regarding if they used any form of advocacy agency or legal counsel for assistance in the IEP process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In an effort to understand the effects of special education case law and legislation and its effect on parental involvement in the IEP process for children with ASD, researchers have taken various approaches. Some researchers have surveyed the legalities and political changes allowing for more parental involvement; others have focused their efforts on ways to train advocates, while many researchers aim to show the efficacy of parental involvement on educational outcomes of children with ASD.

The topics covered in this literature review include the prevalence and history of ASD, background on the IEP, parent experiences, benefits of collaboration, effects of parent training, and benefits of support groups. A definition of the IEP is included, as well as details on the historical evolution of IEP law. There is also discussion focusing on the devising and implementation of IEPs and the inconsistencies discovered in the IEP process and implementation. Furthermore, this chapter also focuses on the parental experiences and perceptions of IEP meetings.

History and Prevalence of ASD

The CDC (2017) reported, “ASDs are child neurodevelopmental disorders characterized by impairments in social interaction and communication as well as by repetitive behavior” (p. 1). The CDC also described ASDs as “a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges” (p. 1). Often, there is not a visually recognizable difference between an individual with ASD and one without, but people with ASD may “communicate, interact, behave, and learn in ways that are different from most other people. The learning, thinking, and problem-solving abilities of people with ASD can range from gifted to severely challenged (CDC, 2017, p. 1). In 2016, the CDC’s Autism and Developmental

Disabilities Monitoring reported that approximately “one in 68 children in the United States has been identified with ASD (CDC, 2017, p. 1).

The IEP Defined and Its Implications

The IEP was the primary component of Part B of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 and has maintained its significance through the reauthorization of IDEA 1997 and 2004 as well as the passage of the ESSA in 2015. The IEP directs and monitors all components of a student’s individual special education program. Drasgow et al. (2001) stated, “These components include educational needs, goals and objectives, placement, evaluation criteria, present levels of educational performance, and duration of programming modifications” (p. 359).

While functioning as the educational blueprint, IEP regulations function to identify meeting dates, parental and student consent and accountability, as well as responsibilities of educational agencies. In the article written by Huefner (2000), the author analyzed the IEP changes since the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 and their implications for the effective delivery of special education and related services. Huefner noted that, although the IEP change created increased opportunities for collaboration, the changes also created new risks of backlash.

Huefner (2000) emphasized that the mandates of IDEA 1997, which were maintained in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, “require educators and parents to effectively collaborate during the evaluation, eligibility process, placement decisions, as well as during the IEP development and revision” (p. 195). Working relationships should be fostered between educators and parents in hope to build a full partnership rather than becoming adversaries regarding IEP development (Murray & Mereoiu, 2016; Pruitt et al., 1998; Razalli et al., 2015). Moreover, parents and educators share responsibility to

provide input into each other's domains, as regulated by the IEP process. Huefner concluded the following:

When these crucial changes were being placed in the law, much of the debate focused on discipline and financial issues. Less attention was given to the implications of the IEP changes, and too little input was sought from general and special education teachers in the field. (p. 201)

According to IDEA 1997, as well as the future reauthorizations, student educational plans are to be reviewed annually, at a minimum, to address progress being made toward annual goals and objectives, results from periodic re-evaluations, changes in parental information, as well as the anticipated future needs of the student. Furthermore, a due process hearing can be requested by either parents or school district personnel in order to resolve disagreements that may arise during the process. Drasgow et al. (2001) concluded that a "properly implemented IEP increases the likelihood of students receiving meaningful educational benefits. Schools are provided strong legal stability when programs are specifically designed to benefit special education students, and document progress on a continual basis" (p. 359).

According to IDEA, "parents are to be notified regarding changes in a child's educational program. Furthermore, parents must give consent for changes and invited to planning meetings for their children" (Huefner, 2000, p. 195). Under IDEA 1997, the following must happen:

Parents must be provided written notification prior to a student's evaluation, prior to a placement team meeting, and prior to the implementation of the special education program recommended by the placement team. Written consent provides school districts with a means of involving parents early in the decision-

making process of a child's education plan. (Huefner, 2000, p. 202)

In 2004, there was a reauthorization of IDEA dubbed the Education Improvement Act of 2004. Several significant changes were made in the 2004 reauthorization. Some of these changes included the following:

Requirements for highly qualified special education teachers; a track that will result in full funding; changes in the composition of IEPs and committee involvement in the IEP process; transition from school to post school; identification procedures for students with learning disabilities; due process hearings; expulsion and suspension of students with disabilities; and a host of other, less significant changes. (Smith, 2005, p. 314)

On December 11, 2015, President Obama signed the ESSA into law. The ESSA replaced No Child Left Behind and reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Russo, 2016). The ESSA "set new mandates on expectations and requirements for students with disabilities. Most students with disabilities will be required to take the same assessments and will be held to the same standards as other students" (Russo, 2016, p. 13).

A big change set forth in ESSA was the allowance of only 1% of students to be excused from the usual standardized testing, reserving the ability for students with severe cognitive disabilities to take an alternate assessment instead. Furthermore, the Department of Education does not define disabled in ESSA. From now on, each specific state is now in charge of defining the disability in regard to taking alternative assessments. The challenge that may be faced is that comparing students to one another might be difficult since the definition of disabilities may differ from state to state (Dean et al., 2016).

In a 2005 article by Gartin and Murdick, the authors discussed how the cornerstone of IDEA 2004 is the IEP. Parents and educators have both lauded this facet of the legislation from prior reauthorizations with complaints of the amount of paperwork that compliance engenders. With the 2004 reauthorization, “changes had been enacted that also brought IDEA into alignment with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001” (Gartin & Murdick, 2005, p. 327).

In the research article by Finch (2010), the author discussed how, with the passage of No Child Left Behind, requirements were set forth to organize programs of parental involvement. Finch used quantitative methods to survey the way in which school districts address parental involvement. The author stated, “Parental involvement is examined through teachers’ responses concerning their engagement of parents in student achievement” (Finch, 2010, p. 108). Finch also found that parental involvement decreases as students make the transition through school.

Prior to the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), parental participation in educational programs was of secondary importance. Decision making was relegated to professional educators, psychiatrists, and psychologists. Fish (2008) concluded that “parents were often viewed simply as recipients of information from educators” (p. 8). Furthermore, “according to IDEA, parents must be members of the IEP team decision-making process and have opportunities for meaningful, active participation” (Fish, 2008, p. 8). Yell et al. (2009) emphasized the following:

Parents must provide consent before a special education evaluation can be initiated. To ensure that parents act as an accountability mechanism, schools must inform parents of their procedural safeguards, which detail ways to actively

resolve educational disputes if parents disagree with the school regarding the child's education. (p. 68)

The Chen and Gregory (2011) quantitative research study addressed the academic gap stemming from the lack of knowledge about parental involvement in the prereferral process, which is the process by which modifications and accommodations are implemented and tried prior to the assessment for special education services. This study analyzed 88 student records from 14 elementary schools within one school district.

Muhlenhaupt (2002) wrote a case study of a 9-year-old boy with visual impairments and mental retardation. Her study illustrated the importance of family-school-community partnerships when planning for students with visual impairments, and more broadly students with disabilities. Muhlenhaupt cited that "IEP teams can utilize the unique interests that support students receiving special education services by relying on active parental participation" (p. 175). Rock (2000) discussed methods for more fully including parents in the development of a child's IEP. She summarized what the law and research say about parental participation and decision making, identifies barriers to said participation, and further offers suggestions to teachers to facilitate meaningful parental participation and decision making. Rock also stated that "effective collaboration between parents and educators can improve IEP practices" (p. 30).

A facet of parental involvement not readily explored is that of the prereferral intervention team (PIT) process. Chen and Gregory (2011) conducted a study using a stratified sample of 88 PIT student records from 14 elementary schools within one district. Upon analysis, Chen and Gregory noted that "greater parental involvement, which was measured in two ways (a) parent presence at PIT meetings, and (b) parent implementation of PIT interventions, was associated with an indicator of the quality of

the PIT process” (p. 447). Therefore, it can be deduced that, when parents “attended more PIT meetings, there was a decreased likelihood of referral for special education evaluation” (Chen & Gregory, 2011, p. 447).

Background on the IEP and Parental Participation

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, along with reauthorizations of the IDEA and the ESSA reauthorization in 2015, mandated “active parental participation in all aspects of educational programming for students receiving special education services” (Thomas et al., 2015, p. 452). Thomas et al. (2015) stated the following:

Public Law 94-142 was created for schools and parents to share responsibility in ensuring accessibility of equal educational opportunities for students receiving special education services. The parental participation provision stems from the idea that parental involvement would likely benefit both parents and professionals while simultaneously serving as an intermediary holding schools accountable to both parents and students. (p. 453)

According to Rock (2000), under P.L. 105-17 (H. Res. 5, 1997), it was Congress’ “intent to strengthen parental participation in educational decisions, and to increase parent/educator collaboration through the creation of a cooperative environment between parents and schools” (p. 30). The ability for parents to effectively communicate with educators as well as having the ability to pose input into the educational programs of their children constitutes meaningful parental involvement (Drasgow et al., 2001).

According to the IDEA (Public Law 105-17, IDEA 1997) and subsequent reauthorizations, “school systems must ensure that the IEP team includes the parent of the child with a disability” (Blamires et al., 2013, p. 11). Teachers often report the challenges of getting parents to attend IEP meetings, which lead to the assumption that there is a

lack of interest on the parent's behalf with involvement in their child's education and school activities (Blamires et al., 2013).

Many researchers have found that involving parents in a variety of activities throughout the school year will send the message to educators and administration that parents are members of a real team working together to create a nurturing learning environment for their children (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). As a result of the involvement, parents tend to “feel able to participate equally during IEP meetings and provide school personnel with insight on the child and family culture not observed at school” (Staples & Diliberto, 2010, p. 58).

Spawning from the IDEA, there have been multitudes of litigation that have surfaced whereby parents of children with disabilities and school districts disagree over the content of a student's special education. As described by Yell et al. (2009), much of this litigation has occurred in the federal district courts. Furthermore, the authors pointed out that “in the 30 years since the passage of the IDEA, from 1975 to 2005, the Supreme Court had only heard seven cases that directly involved students with disabilities and the IDEA” (Yell et al., 2009, p. 68).

In the period from 2005 to 2007, the Supreme Court heard four cases on special education and issued rulings in three of these cases. Yell et al. (2009) stated the following:

This is representative of a significant increase in the special education cases heard by the high court. These rulings are of great importance to students with disabilities, their parents, and school districts. Moreover, the three rulings delivered by the Supreme Court all addressed the procedural rights of parents. (p. 68)

Since 2007, only two cases involving special education have been heard by the Supreme Court.

The emphasis of special education law is on long-term relationships between school districts and parents rather than individual interpretation of rights. Basically, the laws set the guidelines and the courts interpret individual cases based on due process proceedings. Most parents and school districts work to avoid due process involvement because it is a costly process, monetarily as well as the damage that can result in the parent and school district relationship (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Therefore, the maintenance of a continuing relationship with the school district can be perceived as a barrier to parental advocacy. Many parents feel as if speaking out as an advocate for their child's educational rights will be viewed as adversarial, and it may be damaging to their relationship with the school district (Chopp, 2012).

Importance of Parental Involvement

Considerable research over the years point to the increased likelihood that successful parental involvement weighs very heavily on successful educational achievement. Castro et al. (2015) stated the following:

Parents cannot simply practice passive, surface level participation. Parents have the potential to be productively involved towards facilitating effective instructional planning for their children. Parents must involve themselves in their children's schools based upon individualized needs, parental constraints, and changing needs of the school itself. (p. 33)

As previously stated, Muhlenhaupt (2002) cited that "IEP teams can utilize the unique interests that support students receiving special education services only through active parental participation" (p. 175). In a more dated but poignant article,

Kirschenbaum (1999) stated that “family participation in schools results from educators making parent involvement a top priority through well planned, consistent, and persistent efforts” (p. 20).

Parent Experiences

While there are parents who choose to limit participation for one reason or another, numerous parents believe that there are educators who deter participation in IEP meetings. Although IDEA emphasized the need and mandated family-centered interactions towards educational planning for students with disabilities, the decision-making process of educational planning is still an educator dominated practice (Dabkowski, 2004). Dabkowski (2004) stated, “Climate or tone established by the IEP team members in addition to team culture can influence parent participation in IEP meetings” (p. 34). With that in mind, the author set forth tools and processes that could potentially help welcome parents into school as equal partners in their children's education. As it has been addressed, IEP meetings can be a source of stress for parents. Dabkowski elaborated on the fact that “professionals could take action to reduce potential stress by recognizing the effect of their team practices on parental comfort levels” (p. 35). Therefore, educational professionals need to engage in ongoing self- reflection and analysis to ensure a team structure that reduces stress and promotes active parent participation.

Furthering Dabkowski's ideologies, Reiman et al. (2010) concluded that the IEP meeting between educators and parents is the focal point for collaboration in the development of an educational plan. The significant determinant of the effectiveness of special education programs is contingent on the quality of the said collaboration. Successful implementation of the IEP depends on all stakeholders viewing themselves as

valued contributors in the process. It was further concluded that by “shedding light on the perspectives of parents and schools, individuals further an understanding of how each views the special education process and from this they gain insight that is vital to developing best-practice guidelines for conducting IEP meetings” (Reiman et al., 2010, p. 12).

MacLeod et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study exploring the parent perspective in relation to disability and schooling. A collaborative research approach was used in this study where, interestingly, two parent participants assisted in co-creating the study’s research questions as well co-wrote the article. Their study highlighted four points of interest and findings, first being how “parents in the United States view the experience of collaborating with educators to support their children with disabilities in general education settings” (MacLeod et al., 2017, p. 381). Second, the study highlighted the shared concerns of the parents regarding collaborating with educators and highlighted the parents’ anxieties and fears stemming from a lack of communication, trust, and negative perceptions of disability.

MacLeod et al. (2017) provided findings highlighting that “positive collaborative experiences were more likely to occur when educators treated parents like partners, focused on the child’s strengths, explained ideas and policies clearly, and were flexible and willing to learn and try new things” (p. 381). Furthermore, educators are provided with specific ideas and strategies to use when collaborating with parents showing how to make the process of creating IEPs more collaborative (MacLeod et al., 2017).

Rock (2000) labeled the “traditional IEP meeting as a ‘meaningless ritual,’ as educators implement and expect parents to approve predetermined educational programs” (p. 30). Rock also asserted that “decreased parental feedback and participation towards

IEP meetings have facilitated legally inappropriate and educationally unsound educational programs for students receiving special education services” (p. 31).

Conflict between “parents and school districts has been a topic of high importance during previous IDEA reauthorizations, with Congress focused on the implementation of dispute resolution procedures that encourage meaningful problem solving and shared decision making” (Mueller, 2015, p. 135). The study conducted by Mueller (2015) indicated that “due process hearings can reach extreme costs and diminish opportunities to repair the parent–school partnership” (p. 135). The author further asserted that those “outcomes are not productive for any of the parties involved, especially the student” (p. 136). Through research, Mueller concluded that “while litigation and special education has evolved significantly over the past four decades, much of the message remains the same” (p. 136). The author closed with the thought that partnerships as well as student outcomes can be inherently improved by the willingness to incorporate new strategies in the partnerships (Mueller, 2015).

After analyzing 45 public due process hearings, Yell and Drasgow (2000) concluded the following:

Many schools failed to develop educationally beneficial and legally valid IEPs. These court cases involved parents of students with autism challenging school districts. Several school districts lost court cases due to making procedural errors by not making parents equal partners in IEP meetings. Substantive errors included lack of individual programming to identify student needs. (p. 205)

Moreover, determining placement for students prior to determining goals and objectives is a violation that educators frequently execute during IEP meetings (Drasgow et al., 2001).

In an older study that still resonates in its validity, Fish (2008) explored parental perceptions of the IEP process by surveying 51 parents from a family support service agency whose children were receiving special education services. Survey questions were provided pertaining to the following areas: “(a) IEP meeting experiences, (b) knowledge level of special education law, (c) relations with educators, (d) IEP meeting outcomes, and (e) recommended areas for improvement” (Fish, 2008, p. 9). The bulk of the parents responded positively and favorably regarding the IEP process as well as the valuation of the parents’ input and respect, they had been shown in the IEP process.

Conclusions from Fish’s (2008) study revealed that it is “important for educators to build positive relationships with parents during IEP meetings” (p. 11). Furthermore, “by treating parents equally during IEP meetings, educators create fewer adversarial and intimidating experiences for parents with children who receive special education services” (Fish, 2008, p. 11). Through Fish’s research, it is believed that “having an equal voice regarding their child’s education enhances parents’ abilities to influence outcomes positively toward their child’s process of obtaining quality services and therefore building positive relations with educators” (p. 11).

Mueller and Buckley (2014) conducted an investigative study researching parent experiences with the special education system from a fathers’ perspective since research regarding parent experiences is largely dominated from mothers’ perspectives. The authors conducted a qualitative interview study where “20 fathers were interviewed about their experiences navigating the system for their child” (Mueller & Buckley, 2014, p. 119). Through the study, three key experiences surfaced during data analysis: the IEP meeting, collaboration with educators, and conflict. The fathers overwhelmingly reported that “IEP meetings exemplify an insufficient process in need of restructuring.

Furthermore, the findings indicated that the fathers expressed that effective collaboration with educators require building relationships, establishing communication, and listening to the parent voice” (Mueller & Buckley, 2014, p. 120).

Zablotsky et al. (2012) described in their study how “parents of children with ASDs were found to be more likely than parents of children without the disorder to attend parent–teacher conferences, meet with school guidance counselors, and help with homework” (p. 316). Furthermore, the study highlighted the fact that “parents of children with ASD were more dissatisfied with the level of communication provided by the school” (Zablotsky et al., 2012, p. 316), thus exemplifying a positive correlation between parental school satisfaction and parental school involvement (Zablotsky et al., 2012).

Strong and positive parental partnerships are imperative for a successful school culture. Francis et al. (2016) developed a study that identified the idea that “the theme of positive school culture that promotes a sense of belonging among all stake holders emerged as the overarching, influential factor in facilitating trusting family professional partnerships between families and school staff” (p. 281). Furthermore, it was concluded that participants in the study had indicated that school principals were the driving force behind that school culture, which principals achieved by (a) demonstrating strong, effective leadership; (b) being directly and actively involved; and (d) having great expectations (Francis et al., 2016).

Communication

An effective communication channel for educators, parents, and students to enhance and develop educational programs should be served by IEP meetings. Lytle and Bordin (2001) stated, “Effective communication among the IEP team members is essential in providing the best possible programs for students receiving special education

services” (p. 40). Verbal, nonverbal, and written communication are the three variations of communication utilized during IEP meetings. Nonverbal communication is based on body language and includes, but is not limited to, facial expressions, gestures, and posture and accounts for the majority communication implemented by the IEP team members (Patel, 2014). With that being stated, educators should be more cognizant of nonverbal communication since, understandably, communication perceived as positive will facilitate and foster more effective communication during IEP meetings with parents while nonverbal communication that is perceived as negative will harbor stronger feelings of resentment and dissatisfaction with the IEP process.

Factors that may contribute to “communication problems between teachers and parents of children receiving special education services include having insufficient opportunities to communicate, differences in attitudes and expectations, and lack of teacher knowledge pertaining to students receiving special education services” (Munk et al., 2001, p. 189). The complaint often exists that educators tend to not only fail to communicate with parents and caregivers until problems have worsened, but that overall, the educators do not initiate enough communication to be considered acceptable (Munk et al., 2001). Munk et al. (2001) asserted the notion that schools can effectively “facilitate communication between parents and teachers through the practice of positive communication strategies” (p. 189). This research was also addressed in a 2016 study that showed that “there is a strong need for increased teacher awareness and understanding of parent experiences and needs” (Schultz et al., 2016, p. 344).

Prior to the IEP meeting, parents should request information and prepare questions in an effort to enhance communication with educators. During IEP meetings, Lytle and Bordin (2001) concluded that “parents should dress professionally, as well as

take notes to organize thoughts while educators should provide parents with ample notice to allow them sufficient time to effectively prepare for the IEP meetings” (p. 41). Other ways that parents can prepare for the IEP meeting is by arranging schedules so that the meeting can be attended, gathering all pertinent information, consulting for advice wherever needed, and, lastly, obtaining pertinent school records and reviews.

Benefits of Collaboration

Parents and educators working together to identify the strengths and needs of the student is the concept of collaboration. According to Lytle and Bordin (2001), “meaningful parental involvement consists of parents being able to effectively communicate with educators and having input in the educational programs of their children” (p. 40). Their article discussed how “more effective and cohesive teams are developed using the practical strategies to create and maintain linkages among schools, families, and social service agencies” (Lytle & Bordin, 2001, p. 41). Collaboration can be facilitated by parents by using logbooks, which can be further used to communicate with service providers. On the converse, communication can be facilitated by educators by refraining from use of special education lingo that may be unfamiliar, phone calls and community visits, as well as an invitation for parents to visit the classroom.

Furthermore, Lytle and Bordin (2001) stated that “educators often perceive the apathy of parents to their lack of understanding concerning special education practices” (p. 42). Moreover, Lytle and Bordin emphasized the following:

Subjectivity of parents may deter positive relationships with educators. Educators are likely to have objective perceptions of student needs. Parents, on the other hand, are likely to be more emotional, subjective, and narrowly focused when discussing educational programs for their children. (p. 43)

These findings were further exemplified in the Cavendish and Connor (2017) research series where they illuminated the “complexities of parent-school partnership and provided practical recommendations to facilitate stronger school-family relationships” (p. 32).

Through his research, Jung (2011) exemplified how being a culturally and linguistically diverse parent adversely affects the level of their involvement in their child’s education. Jung further examined how, since IDEA was enacted, ideally “parents have become equal partners with school professionals when deciding the educational issues on behalf of their children” (p. 21). Jung explored the various literatures emphasizing the “positive impact of parents’ involvement on children's success in school, and further proposed diverse strategies to promote and facilitate the collaboration between families and educational professionals” (p. 22).

Jung (2011) proposed that first, a “workable and constructive relationship with school professionals as well as an effective intervention strategy for their children must be established” (p. 21). He then stated that “school professionals should examine the underlying principle imbedded in their current value system and the nature of their special education recommendations, which too often represent only one aspect of holistic human nature” (p. 21). Jung concluded that “human perspectives need to be rejuvenated, broadened, and deepened in our pluralistic society by accepting that diversity is a valuable part of holistic human nature” (Jung, 2011, p. 21).

The quantitative research study set forth by Burns and Harris (2014) focused on “parental involvement in response to intervention in educational planning, especially for students with disabilities” (p. 1), as per the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA and the updated state guidelines. This study enhanced the theoretical perspective by showing how with

response to intervention, parental involvement may be neglected due to the set processes.

In an article in the *Yale Law Journal*, Phillips (2008) discussed the questioning of one of “IDEA’s key assumptions:

Parents possess the tools to advocate for their children in special education matters. Many parents need assistance to achieve optimal outcomes for their children because of the complexity of both the disabilities involved and the formal rules of the system itself. (p. 1802)

Phillips also spoke of the need of external advocacy in special education, in hopes that local educational agencies might be compelled to implement pilot programs to further explore the benefits of such advocacy.

In a study conducted by Schultz et al. (2016), it was concluded that “positive parent-professional collaboration is critical for the educational success of students with ASD” (p. 344). The researchers did, however, claim that little is known about teacher perceptions of parent-professional collaboration. Schultz et al. described the study as “34 teachers participating in the study to gain a better understanding of teachers’ perceptions of helpful parental involvement and advocacy strategies to ensure the success of students with ASD educated in inclusive settings” (p. 345).

Even though it was previously mentioned that parents are to be considered equal partners in the IEP process, research shows that “parents continue to report challenges to participation in IEP meetings” (Cavendish & Connor, 2017, p. 32). These barriers include a lack of opportunity to provide input, communication challenges, and a lack of a strengths-based approach by the school in educational planning (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Specific critiques of the process by parents have included parents noting feelings of alienation in the IEP planning process and meeting and feeling coerced into signing

documents that they do not fully understand. In the Zeitlin and Curcic (2014) study, the authors presented research offering a variety of methods that could be used to make the IEP process as well as the document itself more meaningful in the long run. The overall message is distinct and calls for “more collaboration; improved communication; parent-friendly language; and a focus on progress in learning instead of a focus on deficits” (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014, p. 386).

Positive Effects of Parent Training

Ingersoll and Dvortcsak (2006) stated the following:

Parent training has been shown to be a very effective method for promoting generalization and maintenance of skills in children with autism. However, despite its well-established benefits, few public-school programs include parent training as part of the special education curriculum, especially in the early childhood setting. (p. 79)

In a research article by Burke (2013), two distinct special education advocacy training models were examined: the special education advocacy training and the volunteer advocacy project. This article examined the two models by looking into the models’ goals, competencies, participants, and lessons learned. Both advocacy trainings are important first steps in understanding and improving parent-school collaboration in special education. From this article, two lessons seem obvious: “(a) parents of children with disabilities require support in navigating the special education process and (b) they offer two promising special education advocacy training models” (Burke, 2013, p. 233).

Furthermore, Burke (2013) used qualitative research methods in order to exemplify the need for this study by delineating each training model and functions. The author stated, “Given that most parents of students with disabilities have difficulty

navigating the special education system, advocacy training offers one way to aid parents in securing appropriate educational services for their children with disabilities” (Burke, 2013, p. 233). Burke also noted the benefit of special education advocacy to assist parents in asserting their rights and how these advocates are mainly trained in special education law and how their advocacy can benefit the whole the process.

Patterson et al. (2009) conducted a study where “parents, who all had children with disabilities, participated in a simulated individualized education program meeting that was embedded in a teacher-preparation course to bring authenticity to the experience” (p. 41), dubbed Family as Faculty. Results from the study indicated that using parents as co-instructors strengthened the partnerships between educators and families. Implications included the importance of educators directly involving parents in preparing teacher candidates to collaborate positively with families.

Benefits of Support Groups

The opportunity providing families the ability to exchange knowledge and experiences with other families in similar situations is a benefit and function of support groups. Singer (2002) conceptualized that “family and social supports enhance the quality of life, maintain well-being, and provide autonomy for families who have children receiving special education services” (p. 148). The McCurdy et al. (2003) article described a study that investigated the “relationship between ethnicity and retention among families participating in a national network of home-based family support programs” (p. 3). The authors concluded that “family support programs promote positive parent behaviors in addition to assisting parents in coping with the stress of raising a child receiving special education services” (p. 3). In a study of mothers of children with ASD, Boyd (2002) concluded that “stress and depression prompted their seeking of social

supports” (p. 208). The “most effective source of formal support for mothers of children with autism” (Boyd, 2002, p. 208) is parental support groups. In these meetings, mothers could express their thoughts and concerns freely and, in turn, were able to actively decrease their anxiety and depression.

Spann et al. (2003) conducted an investigation into examining families’ involvement in and perceptions of children's special education services. A telephone survey was conducted with 45 families of children with autism who were part of a parent support group. The interview pertained to the following areas:

1. The child’s educational placement and type of special education services received.
2. The frequency and nature of parents' communication with school personnel.
3. Parents’ knowledge about and involvement in their child's IEP process.
4. Parents’ priorities for their child and overall satisfaction with school services.

(Spann et al., 2003, p. 228)

Results from this study indicated that families and schools communicated on a regular basis and for a variety of different reasons. Moreover, “the majority of parents believed that they were moderately to highly knowledgeable and involved in their child’s IEP process but reported that schools were not doing enough to address their child’s most pressing needs” (Spann et al., 2003, p. 228).

Characteristics of Successful IEPs

Successful IEPs are derived from the process of decision making that fully incorporates all members of the IEP team as well as provides documentation that follows protocol and is recorded properly. Additional attributes include positive social support, proximity, distinctiveness, similarity, and fairness. Individual commitment from all IEP

team members in making parent involvement a top priority will facilitate trust, effective communication, and rational decision-making (Kirschenbaum, 1999; Lytle & Bordin, 2001).

Rock (2000) stated, “Steps that educators can take to increase parental involvement include having educators examining parent perspectives, evaluating teacher expectations, respecting differences, and creating a duplicate IEP for parents to utilize” (p. 30). Rock further asserted that “teachers should conduct monthly parent meetings and utilize district parent-teacher conference days to schedule pre-IEP planning sessions” (p. 31). Parents should also be helped by educators to understand all procedural components of the IEP process, as mandated by law. Dabkowski (2004) stated the following:

Educators can reduce parental stress during the IEP meetings through analyzing the dynamics of the IEP team to ensure that the structure promotes active parental participation as well as through focusing on shared visions, resources, training, monitoring, and school culture. (p. 39)

The concept of shared visions is established in the collective input provided by all IEP team members in the decision-making process. This fosters the idea that parents are more likely to continue participating in their child’s education throughout their schooling, especially if they are initially supported and are encouraged to actively participate in the IEP process. Dabkowski (2004) stated, “The IEP teams should provide a private, distraction free, and comfortable environment” (p. 38). Furthermore, steps for creating a welcoming environment include, but are not limited to, “using round table seating if possible, distributing agendas and copies of the IEP for each participant in the meeting, as well as having each IEP team member introduce themselves at the beginning of the meeting” (Dabkowski, 2004, p. 34). The belief exists that rather than having the team

members sit apart or across from each other during the IEP meeting, team members should sit together in a roundtable setting, which leads to a more positive experience by eliciting the perception of equality among team members.

Summary

The IDEA 1997, followed by the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, mandated that there be parental involvement in the development of their child's IEP. Through this legislation, Rock (2000) stated, "Congress intended to strengthen parental participation in pertinent educational decisions as well as to create a cooperative and collaborative environment between parents and schools" (p. 30). Litigation and special education have evolved significantly over the past four decades, though the majority of the implications remain the same. Mueller (2015) added, "Throughout the reauthorizations of IDEA, Congress has encouraged parents and district members to partner with the shared goal of providing children with disabilities educational opportunities that support the provision of a free and appropriate public education" (p. 135). This ongoing relationship and educational partnership carries with it varying personal perspectives, goals, beliefs, and thought processes. As in many similar relationships, participation will be driven and may fluctuate based on the participants' knowledge, experiences, belief sets, and skills. Rock stated the following:

The increased probability of successful educational achievement is dependent on parental involvement. Parents cannot simply practice passive, surface level participation. Parents have the potential to be productively involved towards facilitating effective instructional planning for their children. Parents must involve themselves in their children's schools based upon individualized needs, parental constraints, and changing needs of the schools. (p. 39)

Research Questions

The following research questions were established to guide this applied dissertation:

1. What are parents' perceptions regarding how their autistic children's needs are being served during the IEP process?
2. What are parents' perceptions of the communication that takes place during IEP meetings?
3. What do parents believe could be done by the school districts to improve IEP meetings?
4. What are parents' experiences regarding the use of advocacy services to assist in the IEP process?
5. What are parents' experiences with the use of case law in the IEP process?
6. How aware are parents of children with autism of the rights bestowed on them through the current legislation as well as familiar with the case law that has furthered the educational opportunities of their children?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore parental perceptions of the IEP process with children of autism, specifically in relation to communication during IEP meetings and suggestions for improvement in the process. In addition, parental understanding of the most recent legislation and case law and their use of advocacy services and case law to help advocate for their children will be studied. Despite the passage of IDEA and the subsequent amendments and reauthorizations that mandate “parental participation in the educational planning of students receiving special education services, educators tend to dominate the decision-making process regarding educational outcomes for these students” (Phillips, 2008, p. 1802). On the contrary, the IEP process should be an equal partnership between educators and parents. Moreover, many parents are not fully informed nor properly educated on resources and programs available to them (Phillips, 2008).

Qualitative Research Approach

In order to gain an understanding of the parental perspectives regarding the IEP process, qualitative data were gathered by invitation to a preliminary online questionnaire to attain interest, basic demographic, background information, and then ultimately an interview conducted either in person or via video chatting software such as Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, or WhatsApp. The complexity of factors influencing parent perspectives necessitates gathering and analyzing data in this fashion (Robinson, 2014). Furthermore, participants were invited to extend and move beyond the given questions by adding their own addendums providing their understanding of parental perspectives of the IEP process.

The specific strategy of inquiry used to explore this research was a generic qualitative approach. There are some topics for qualitative research, such as this one, “which cannot be adapted to the traditional qualitative designs such as case study, ethnography, grounded theory, or phenomenology” (Percy et al., 2015, p. 76). Furthermore, “generic qualitative inquiry investigates people’s reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences, of things in the outer world (Percy et al., 2015, p. 76).

Participants

Participation is a key component for any research study. Within this study, participants were recruited using Facebook groups on the social media platform of Facebook. By using Facebook, the participant sample was not homogeneous and would hopefully show more diversity. Upon receiving approval by the Institutional Review Board, a recruitment flyer was posted in several Facebook groups, inviting parents to participate in the study with a link being given to the pre-interview survey screener. The parents were required to meet the given criteria in that their child must be diagnosed with ASD and have a current IEP. The goal was to recruit approximately 10 parents to participate in the interview process, with children aged from preschool up to middle school age: 3 to 13 years old. Demographic information was not collected in this research.

Data-Collection Tools

Seidman (2013) stated the following:

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions... At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience....At the heart of

interviewing research is an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth. (p. 9)

Data collection in a generic qualitative approach “typically uses data collection methods that elicit people’s reports on their ideas about things that are outside themselves. This approach requires semi- or fully-structured interviews, questionnaires, surveys, content- or activity-specific participant observation, and the like” (Percy et al., 2015, p. 76).

The preliminary survey (see Appendix A) and the interview questions (see Appendix B) were developed using the four phases of Interview Protocol Refinement: “Phase 1: Ensuring interview questions align with research questions, Phase 2: Constructing an inquiry-based conversation, Phase 3: Receiving feedback on interview protocols, and Phase 4: Piloting the interview protocol” (Castillo-Montoya, 2016, p. 811). Appendices A and B include final versions of the instruments.

As part of Phase 1 of Interview Protocol Refinement, copies of the interview protocol were forwarded to a fellow special education teacher as well as a principal of a special education preschool. Through the feedback and collaboration, the researcher was able to adjust the questions to better align with my research questions while also attempting to elicit responses that could be used to further my research. Regarding piloting the interview protocol, the researcher piloted the interview protocol with a parent of a preschool child who has been diagnosed with ASD with the permission of the principal at the school, with the understanding that the information received from the interview would not be used nor recorded as part of the research. From that piloted protocol, the researcher revised three of the questions to not only better align with the research questions, but also to elicit more concise answers to further the research.

Procedures

The researcher presented the initial proposal to the Institutional Review Board, seeking approval of the study to garner participants by using Facebook groups. Upon securing approval, the researcher began advertising the study in various Facebook groups that had been created for parents of students with disabilities and more specifically autism. Parents who met the participation criteria were sent an invitational link to a questionnaire, which was created using the Survey Monkey software. By using this software, the researcher was able to keep clear and concise records so that analyzing data would be less complex. In order to begin completion of the questionnaire, respondents had to electronically sign an informed consent agreement in order to participate in the study. The parents were also informed that all information would remain confidential and that no participant would be identified by name in the study.

Parents who were interested in participating were given a link to a preliminary questionnaire utilizing the Survey Monkey software. The questionnaire asked basic questions about their children to assist in selecting respondents who meet the needs of the research. At the end of the questionnaire, parents were informed that if selected to participate in the research, they would receive an email or phone call from the researcher to set up a time and place to conduct the interview, as well as be asked for their preference for the virtual platform to use in the interview.

Data Analysis

This study was completed by using an initial questionnaire and then ultimately interviews. Once the questionnaires were completed, the researcher sorted through the responses in order to find respondents who met the criteria (a child with ASD, attended IEP meetings, child currently enrolled in school, as well as the child meeting the age

criteria of 3 to 13 years old) and reached out to them so that they may partake in the interview process.

Data were analyzed using an inductive approach. Thomas (2006) stated the following:

The purposes for using an inductive approach are to (a) condense raw textual data into a brief, summary format; (b) establish clear links between the evaluation or research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data; and (c) develop a framework of the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the raw data. (p. 237)

This approach provided a systematic set of procedures, which has a greater ease of use for analyzing qualitative data that can produce, most importantly, reliable and valid findings.

The specific data analysis strategy used in this research was thematic analysis. Developed by Braun and Clarke in 2006, thematic analysis has been a “widely used method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). By using thematic analysis, collectively shared meanings, experiences, and commonalities across a data set are more easily identified and ultimately understood. For those who are new to qualitative research, thematic analysis provides an entry into a way of performing research that may otherwise seem “vague, mystifying, conceptually challenging, and overly complex” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58). Thematic analysis consists of six steps:

Familiarizing yourself with your data, assigning preliminary codes to your data in order to describe the content, searching for patterns or themes in your codes across the different interviews, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes,

and finally producing your report. (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 311)

There is a bit of overlap with the first and second steps since the familiarization of the data is completed by taking notes and begin to make preliminary ideas for codes that can describe your content concurrently. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), “What is important is that the transcript retains the information you need, from the verbal account, and in a way which is ‘true’ to its original nature” (p. 60).

The third step in thematic analysis is used to identify interesting information in your data and to begin to discover broader themes. Some codes will not adhere to a central theme but may still be used to see the big picture. In the fourth step, the researcher reviews and revises the themes in order to delve into the themes in a more meaningful way, leaving them more distinct and coherent. In the words of Braun and Clarke (2012), “Data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes” (p. 65). These two phases of thematic analysis lead to the fifth step, which is when themes throughout the data are named and defined. At this point, the researcher is able to describe the theme and identify what the theme tells us and how this knowledge relates to other themes as well as to the research questions at hand.

The final phase of thematic analysis is producing a report (i.e., putting it all together; what are the nuts and bolts of the research and data?). The write up of the results entail enough information about the project and process so that the readers will be able to determine and evaluate the quality of the research. In doing this, there will be a clear account of not only the research that was carried out, but the analysis as well.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics of this study were maintained in numerous ways. Alphanumeric coding of

the respondents helped to preserve confidentiality. Documents were kept on a flash drive that contained nothing but the research. The only ones with access to the files on the drive were the researcher and research assistant who would be peer reviewing the interview protocol and responses from the participants. The flash drive was kept in an in-home safe guaranteeing the flash drive's security. The data would be kept for 36 months upon the conclusion of the dissertation and then destroyed.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, “validity or trustworthiness are discussed in terms of the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the instrumentation and results of the study” (Golafshani, 2003, p. 597). One would hope that parents taking part in the study would be as honest and open as possible. Since this study was based solely on parental experience, it was subjective to those particular families. To assure credibility in a qualitative research study, there are various strategies that can be implemented such as “triangulation, prolonged contact, member checks, saturation, reflexivity, and peer review” (Golafshani, 2003, p. 597). The researcher used peer review in this research study to maintain credibility.

Potential Research Bias

The researcher's potential bias was derived from her own experience with IEP meetings for her son. The researcher's son was speech delayed and, through this delay, exhibited certain red flags that initially led to the assumption that he had ASD. As not only a mother, but as an educator, as well as someone trained in autism studies, the researcher challenged the district as well as the evaluations that were used to assess him. Through an immersive language program, the researcher's son has begun to develop stronger and more age-appropriate language skills. With this emerging language, his

maladaptive behaviors have diminished or become extinct. Without the researcher's own knowledge of the IEP process and her complete involvement in his educational planning, he most likely would have received services that very well may have hindered his development. Keeping this in mind, the researcher hoped to ensure that her feelings and experiences throughout this process do not carry over into the research and hinder the outcomes.

According to Baskarada (2014), "Confirmation bias occurs when a researcher forms a hypothesis or belief and uses respondents' information to confirm that belief" (p. 1). The author added the following:

Confirmation bias is deeply seated in the natural tendencies people use to understand and filter information, which often lead to focusing on one hypothesis at a time. To minimize confirmation bias, researchers must continually reevaluate impressions of respondents and challenge preexisting assumptions and hypotheses. (Baskarada, 2014, p. 4)

In this study, the researcher intended to have a second independent individual peer review of interview questions for neutrality and the data to check for any biases that the researcher may have inadvertently introduced.

Limitations

Conducting a qualitative research study carries numerous limitations. First, the research quality is heavily dependent on the actual individual skills of the researcher. There is the notion that the study can be more easily influenced by the researcher's potential personal biases and thought processes (Anderson, 2010). Moreover, the volume of data collected for analysis makes for a more time-consuming approach. Anderson (2010) stated, "Issues of anonymity and confidentiality often present problems when

presenting findings” (p. 141). Furthermore, the researcher’s presence during data gathering can often affect participant responses. Finally, the scientific community often does not accept or fully understand the research as comprehensively as they accept quantitative research (Anderson, 2010).

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore parental perceptions of the IEP process with children of autism, specifically in relation to communication during IEP meetings. Furthermore, parental understanding of the most recent legislation and case law as well as the parents' use of advocacy services and case law to help advocate for their children was explored. Finally, parents were also asked to give suggestions for improvement in the IEP process. The specific research questions addressed in the study are as follows:

1. What are parents' perceptions regarding how their autistic children's needs are being served during the IEP process?
2. What are parents' perceptions of the communication that takes place during IEP meetings?
3. What do parents believe could be done by the school districts to improve IEP meetings?
4. What are parents' experiences regarding the use of advocacy services to assist in the IEP process?
5. What are parents' experiences with the use of case law in the IEP process?
6. How aware are parents of children with autism of the rights bestowed on them through the current legislation as well as familiar with the case law that has furthered the educational opportunities of their children?

A generic qualitative approach (Percy et al., 2015) guided the study procedures. The researcher advertised the study on various Facebook groups pertaining to parents of special education students. Respondents were given an informed consent form to fill out via email utilizing the program called DocuSign and then were directed to complete a

prescreening survey on Survey Monkey. Selected participants were then contacted by email and asked to partake in a Zoom interview with the researcher. A total of 11 parents participated in the study. All but one respondent agreed to the Zoom format; one respondent asked for a phone interview due to a personal ASD diagnosis and asked for that particular modification to feel more comfortable, to which the researcher obliged. Details regarding the age of each participant's child, educational setting, and number of IEP meetings attended can be found in the Table.

Table

Age of Child, Educational Setting, and Planning Meetings Attended for Each Study Participant

Participant	Child's age	Educational setting	No. IEP meetings attended
1	3	General	1
2	4	Self-contained	5
3	8	General	20
4	8	Special education/general split	14
5	10	Self-contained	15+
6	10	General	6
7	10	Self-contained	20+
8	8	ASD classroom	20+
9	9	Self-contained	20+
10	13	ASD classroom	20+
11	5	Alternative	5

Note. IEP = Individualized education plan. ASD = Autism spectrum disorder.

Each participant shared individual experiences during the interviews, after which the interviews were transcribed using Dragon Dictate, an application on the computer. The responses to each interview question were then analyzed by the researcher, following the steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Excerpts from the transcripts are reported below as evidence of significant themes and findings adhering to the presented research questions. The themes identified for Research Question 1 included (a) IEP meetings set the tone for parental perceptions of the process and (b) perception of IEP

meeting is synonymous with meeting of needs. For Research Question 2, themes were (a) open communication is coveted and (b) all stakeholder roles are not created equally. Research Question 3 resulted in the following themes: (a) Knowledge is power and (b) parental input is key, and they have ideas for change. Research Question 4 included the themes of (a) help comes in many forms and (b) outside services come at a cost. The themes derived from Research Question 5 were (a) legal escalation is often not necessary and avoidable and (b) case law does not play a formidable role in parent's perceptions. Finally, Research Question 6 had the following two themes (a) Knowing your child's rights can drive the IEP process and (b) there is no better advocate than an educated parent.

Research Question 1

What are parents' perceptions regarding how their autistic children's needs are being served during the IEP process? This question was answered with data collected from Interview Protocol Questions 1 and 2.

Theme 1: Strong Feelings Overall About the IEP Process

Parents interviewed had strong feelings about the IEP process, with a little more than half feeling very positively about the experience, and the others feeling very negatively about it. Of the 11 participants, seven claimed that the IEP meetings were positive in nature. From this notion, the rest of the interview was dictated by the perceptions of what was positive or negative in the process. Participant 1 stated:

It was my first IEP meeting and was held over Zoom. It was a little intimidating because there were so many professionals on the call, but they were all very nice. It didn't feel like there were any "sides;" that everyone was on the same team. They had all the records from the doctors and therapists. The whole meeting

lasted about 30 minutes and when we walked away, we felt it was very successful and that our son was going to be in good hands.

Many of the other parents expressed the same sentiment as Participant 1.

Participant 3 also felt that the IEP meeting went “very well,” and the team was very focused on the specific needs of the child. Participant 8 stated that due to COVID, it felt as though the educators were less stressed since they mostly were not being pulled from a classroom to partake in the meetings, leading to a more positive experience. Participant 10 felt the IEP meeting was “excellent and all were very prepared while meeting the needs of their child.” Participant 4 claimed that the IEP process had been a “neutral one;” neither good nor bad. Moreover, Participant 6 conceded that this IEP meeting was a “good experience but followed on the heels of a horrible IEP” meeting whereby this meeting was called for as an addendum to the previous one.

There were some parents who felt very strongly that the IEP process was a negative experience. For example, Participant 7 had a harrowing experience which she detailed in great length. Participant 7 answered the first interview question with the following:

The last IEP meeting was absolutely awful. It was over three hours long. We had our neuropsychologist, audiologist, and educational consultant there. The school district brought in my son’s ICT teacher, general ed teacher, special ed teacher, speech teacher (who discharged him from speech 2 years ago), the head of elementary pupil personnel for the district, as well as his self-contained special ed teacher from the previous year. The meeting basically went through his IEP for a third time to recommend more things. Where his speech teacher told us two years earlier that she’s done all she can, and he no longer required services; our

audiologist evaluated him privately finding a severe auditory processing disorder. When questioned, the speech therapist started quoting her audiology professor which happened to be my personal audiologist who then requested that the speech teacher leave. This set the tone for the rest of the meeting. After 3+ hours, the meeting ended and 5 minutes after that, we served the school with a 10-day notice and pulled my son from public school.

Participant 4 expressed that this last IEP meeting was called after a reevaluation request by her and her husband.

The reevaluation was to cover everything for his cognitive development and everything with PT and adjustments of services to see how he was. It was disclosed in the June meeting by the school psychologist that he did have an intellectual disability diagnosis. She admitted that she had only gone and sat down with him for 30 minutes which to an individual with intellectual disabilities, also on the spectrum with sensory issues and stuff like that to get him to comply with your request is not going to come very quickly. So, we are taking some of her feedback with a grain of salt.

As a result of this feedback, the district recommended putting the child in a life skills class rather than an autism support class, which the participant did not agree with since the child had been doing well in the support class.

Theme 2: Perceptions of IEP Process Consistent With Those on Meeting Child's Needs

The needs of an autistic child can be viewed as subjective. Not every child with autism has the same needs, as children with autism fall along a spectrum, and the needs of these children fall on a spectrum as well. According to the participants in this study, if the parents perceived the IEP meetings as running smoothly, they overwhelmingly felt

that their children's needs were being met. It did not come as a surprise that the seven parents that stated that they had positive experiences in the last IEP meeting all stated that they felt that their child's needs were being met in the process. Participant 10 went as far as to say that her child's needs were "being met 100%," while Participant 11 said that "not only was it positive, but that the team gave my daughter a 1:1 paraprofessional without even having to inquire for one."

When parents did not feel that their child's needs were being met, they were very vocal and expressive in the interview regarding their feelings. Participant 9 went as far as to state that "Over the course of all the IEP meetings we have had, my son's needs have never been served." Participant 8 went a step further and stated the following: "Overall, my son's needs are not being served in IEP meetings. Even when we come up with a good IEP, there is no follow through. We just reopened a due process case against the district."

Research Question 2

What are parents' perceptions of the communication that takes place during IEP meetings? This question was answered with data collected from Interview Protocol Questions 3 and 4.

Theme 3: Open Communication Is Coveted

Communication can come in many forms: oral, physical, written, and so forth. Participant 3 highlighted the big difference that she encountered this past year, in the height of a pandemic, where meetings turned virtual and were not in person. She stated, "This year was very different because it was on Zoom. In the past, you could see everyone in the room and read the body language and facial expressions and this year we were limited on what we could see." When the parents were questioned about

communication, every parent highlighted the fact that open communication among stakeholders is imperative. From that standpoint, two dichotomous experiences emerged; parents who were satisfied and felt the communication was open and fluid and those who did not.

Participant 10 stated, “Our team has a very good rapport. We have been working together as the core team for years now, so we have really good communication, and we email often. We are also very respectful of each other.” Participant 5, a member of a military family, whose child has had IEP meetings in three different states due to moving to different military bases, chronicled how she felt the communication was in Virginia based on her previous experiences in Nevada and Texas:

Communication is good. I’m going to brag about Virginia because this is the first district and school where I felt that I was part of the IEP team. They allowed me to speak. They allowed me to talk in reference to my son. They even allowed my son to speak in the IEP meeting even though he is only 10. It was very caring towards the educational needs of my child. They also let him speak on his own behalf to see what would make his educational experience better, which is an unheard-of practice.

Unfortunately, not all experiences with communication during IEP meetings are viewed similarly. Participant 6 explained that since they know what kind of parent they are, that the communication has gotten better but took “5 years” for them to be more open communicators.

Participant 8 detailed her experiences by noting:

Meetings for my son are very large. Communication during the meetings is very separated. There are school people on one side and community people that I

brought are on the other. They are always having side conversations and whisper things to one another making the meetings more uncomfortable. One person, typically the principal, makes sure my voice is heard, but that is as far as the communication goes.

Theme 4: Parents Desire Equal Participation

An IEP team is comprised of many working parts; individuals all working “together” for what is best for the child; or so we hope. Participant 11 took an unconventional approach in that she stated:

I feel like I’m the team leader. I didn't always feel that way, but I do now so I take a leadership role in the IEP meetings rather than sit and let things happen around me, so I feel it equal to them.

When asked, Participant 1 stated that she felt that “we all have different roles on the team” but that she is her son’s “number one advocate.” Participant 9 shared the following, giving a look into her experiences of a parent’s role in the IEP meeting:

I'm an equal participant. That's what the law states, even though I am not treated as an equal participant. I stand by what I have told other families that I have worked with, which is that they are equal participants as well. No one is going to know these children as well as the parents. They are going to have the best advice on how to make the children more successful. The IEP teams that I have been with don't care and do not want to hear what the parents have to say even though we are supposed to have equal say and be equal participants.

Research Question 3

What do parents believe could be done by the school districts to improve IEP meetings? This question was answered with data collected from Interview Protocol

Questions 11 and 12.

Theme 5: Knowledge Is Power

Parents felt strongly they should not be kept on a “need to know” basis. Of the 11 respondents, nine participants stated that they would like to receive all reports from testing, service providers, etc. before the IEP meeting so that they have the opportunity to review everything in the meeting. The parents want to be kept up to speed so that once they enter the IEP meeting, they know what to expect. Participant 2 stated that she would like to receive “the annual reports ahead of time so that they can be reviewed and go over what services are needed.” She also furthered the conversation by stating that she would like to see “more measurable goals so that I can see the progress that has been made throughout the year.”

Participant 7 shared a similar sentiment in saying that “reports should be sent home more than a day before the IEP meeting.” She further stated that she would love the district to “explain all the options that might exist for the child.” Participant 3 turned the tables on the school district by expressing her feeling that school districts can improve IEP meetings and attain better results for autistic students by having “better training in autism and what it means to be on the spectrum.” She furthered her thoughts by stating that her son is “high functioning and is able to speak and communicate which leads him to getting lost in the way they look at him since they think he is more neurotypical.”

Participant 6 claimed the adage, “think before you speak,” or at least do their research. She stated:

Speech pathologists told me there's nothing else we can do for my daughter, and I looked at her and I said “I can't believe you just told me that. I can't believe you just told a parent that there's nothing you can do.” They were claiming that they

went through all the possible resources for her and there's nothing you can do. So, they really need to think about what they are going to say before the IEP meeting; not just give a questionnaire. Speak with the parents; interview them. Don't do it just a week before the meeting. Take your time and learn about the child. They are relying on you. There should also be time given for a draft copy of the IEP so that everyone can go over it together before it is finalized.

Theme 6: Parental Input Is Key, and They Have Ideas for Change

Millman (2006) stated, "The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new" (p. 105). This quote is very poignant and representative of the ideas that parents have towards change in the IEP process. The overarching idea is that parents' voices need to be more heard, listened to, and respected. Participant 1 felt that the districts should "reach out to parents sooner and to encourage their involvement," also stating that parents are "very overwhelmed with the whole process" and that there needs to be more "fostering and acknowledgment of parents' ideas."

When asked in the interview, "In your opinion, what can the school district do to improve IEP meetings and attain better results for autistic students?" Participant 9 answered with the following:

Maybe they need to give the parents ideas and chance and try to see if they make a difference. If you never give these ideas a try, you never know if it will work. You can't just always consciously rely on the school district's opinion. Moms and dads often come in and say, "Why don't we try this" and the committees tend to shoot down the ideas and we feel that how do you know if it works or not if you haven't even tried.

Interestingly, Participant 10 felt that all people involved in the IEP meeting should be in person, face to face. Although she understands that because of COVID, there has not been much of a choice, she claimed that “you never really knew who was talking on the phone/speaker; were they the teacher, a service provider, etc.” Participant 6 felt that the data that is taken for the IEP should be able to be generalized to the home environment and not just the classroom stating that “whatever happens at home affects the child in school and vice-versa.”

Research Question 4

What are parents’ experiences regarding the use of advocacy services to assist in the IEP process? This question was answered with data collected from Interview Protocol Questions 9 and 10.

Theme 7: Help Comes in Many Forms

While many of the participants did not need to use advocacy services, the overwhelming feeling is that they are very beneficial for those who have needed to seek these outside services. While participant 1 did not use an advocacy agency, she claimed to have used an “Early Head Start” program which provided in-home educators who assisted her in navigating the IEP process. She also stated that her mother is an educator as well as her aunt who did research for early intervention; both of whom assisted her in the process. Participant 2 used the advocate in the IEP process after the preschool had said that her son was behavioral without supporting data and wanted to assign him a 1:1 without evidence to support it. She stated, “The advocate intimidated everyone, and we got everything that my son needed. I felt that using the advocate and having her on our side really helped us.”

When asked, Participant 7 detailed her usage of an educational consultant:

Our educational consultant is amazing. We sent her all our documents. We then spent 6 hours with her as she does evaluations on my child, she explained to us “goal by goal” how they were in achieving these things. Our legal team is comprised of some of the smartest human beings I've ever met. Their job is to prove that the school district is unable to provide safe and educational environment and they do so by quoting cases so using my legal team and my advocacy agencies has been a lifesaving like a game changer.

One of the overarching concepts that really became more apparent through this question was the idea that even just speaking with an educational advocate has given many of the participants a stronger sense of confidence walking into the IEP meetings.

Participant 4 stated:

Speaking with an advocate gave me a bit more confidence walking into the room. It helped me know what to advocate for and how to speak as well as the appropriate language and phrasing to use as well. It's not what you say, it is all about how you say it. You can say the sky is blue but if said in the proper way, it will get you a lot farther in the IEP process. They take you more seriously when you know what to say, and how to say it. Being able to speak in this way they say has an impact had made me feel more confident in what I am saying and how I say it.

Theme 8: Outside Services Come at a Cost, Both Emotional and Monetary

Most participants detailed the IEP process, only highlighting the emotional toll that it took on their family. The “cost of fighting” for what they believed their children needed held no monetary value and these parents described in detail the extents to which they have gone to ensure proper placement and services for their children. Participant 7

had discussed how she and her husband had to refinance the mortgage on her house so that they could afford all the legal and educational services that they had to employ in order to get what was needed for their child. They also had to be able to start paying for the private school they placed their son in while they fight the district to cover that expenditure.

Participant 9 described in detail the steps taken to work through the IEP process in her town in Wisconsin since there are very few educational lawyers or advocacy agencies nearby; and the ones that are there come at a tremendous cost. Because of that, Participant 9 has had to seek out a nonprofit organization which has not truly proved to be helpful:

In the past, I used a nonprofit organization of parents that come in and assist in the IEP process. What typically happens then is that these organizations come in and the IEP team is on their best behavior. They don't have a lot of people to spare to attend these meetings and they don't have a lot of resources so you're lucky to get a person there. A lot of times, it's just over the phone so then the school already knows this and uses it to their advantage. Basically, after this meeting, everything reverts to what it was and we're back to square one. The district just says what we want to hear. You need somebody constantly there on the district or will just go back on their word as soon as that person is gone. I even had cousins that were special ed teachers come to my meetings and witness what transpires. The district feels superior to parents, so many parents feel like failures when it's not their fault they are doing everything humanly possible.

Research Question 5

What are parents' experiences with the use of case law in the IEP process? This

question was answered with data collected from Interview Protocol Questions 7 and 8.

Theme 9: Legal Escalation is Often Not Necessary and Avoidable

When asked about her experience with the use of case law in the IEP process, Participant 10 explained how she became a Master IEP coach, a newer profession and credentialed professional whose focus is to avoid the use of legal counsel while fostering communication and collaboration with both parties: the family and school districts. She elucidated with the following:

I didn't know Master IEP coaches existed until I trained to become one. There are such deficiencies in advocacy agencies. In my experience, they tend to be angry, and their first course of action is to foster complaints and file due process claims. That's not our way and that's not the master IEP way. We work with collaboration and communication, so I don't really provide advocacy services. I find a lot of those advocate agencies are popping up are not fully trained in the communicating and collaboration and they're not as equipped to handle a lot of situations. Instead, they go for the jugular. I'm finding is that they are popping up more and more because there's such a lack of legal counsel available. What I have seen is that a lot of lawyers were scooped up by the school districts so that leaves only a handful of lawyers in the area. Then the next course of action is to go to advocacy agencies because they are more populous. So, these agencies are acting more like lawyers, but some cases don't warrant legal action which can be very damning and damaging to the whole legal and educational system.

Theme 10: Case Law Does Not Play a Formidable Role in Parents' Perceptions

The number of parents having to use case law and file a due process request would be considered statistically insignificant since only two participants had to go the

legal route to that extent. Yet, the participants did acknowledge the importance of knowing some case law and “legalese.” Participant 3 stated, “I’ve never had to state the actual case laws but have referred to some of the lingo in the cases, using buzzwords from the cases that are well known” but that she also feels that it really hasn’t “affected the process.”

When a parent has had to utilize case law, the outcomes of the IEP meetings are typically different. Participant 6 stated:

The legal team did what they were supposed to do. When I went in and asked for certain things for my child, I was refused. When my attorney came into the next meeting and cited case law, the district gave me everything that I had previously asked for on a silver platter. It was amazing the difference.

One of the big ideas that was seen in this research question and theme was how some districts, even when faced with case law, tried to turn the tables on the families and say that their particular cases weren’t subject to the case law provided. Participant 9 said the following:

The problem is that they like to say “we’re not seeing that the educational setting, so it doesn’t apply” then try to exclude it somewhere. Then they try and find another loophole to wiggle around. So even when you have a solid case right there in front of you, they state that it doesn’t apply to him, or we don’t see that the school. They just try and find any reason as to why something doesn’t apply so they can move on with their own agenda.

Research Question 6

How aware are parents of children with autism of the rights bestowed on them through the current legislation as well as familiar with the case law that has furthered the

educational opportunities of their children? This question was answered with data collected from Interview Protocol Questions 5 and 6.

Theme 11: Knowing Your Child's Rights Can Drive the IEP Process

While some participants felt that their knowledge of their children's rights were lacking, some felt that they were very well versed based on their backgrounds. Both Participants 1 and 2 felt that their knowledge was deficient but wanted to become more knowledgeable about the process in the coming years since both of their children are young. Conversely, there are parents such as Participant 7 who is a licensed special education teacher. She is also New York City advocate, so she still does the occasional IEP meeting. Her son's school hired her as a per diem advocate to help parents who are having trouble with the school district. Participant 9 had an interesting take on the question. She stated:

I am very knowledgeable about the special education case laws. When they told me I don't know the laws, I went out to research. When they told me the laws are always changing, now I keep up on the laws, so I know the most up to date information. I've reviewed statewide cases as well as federal cases and through all of my research I have been able to advocate for my son more successfully.

Theme 12: There is No Better Advocate Than an Educated Parent

While professional advocacy as well as the retaining of legal counsel are paths that may be pursued by families, personal education and knowledge are crucial. While participant 3 had been an attorney in Virginia before becoming a stay-at-home mom, she stated that she had kept herself up to date on more recent legislation through research. She followed up her statement with the following when asked about any research or reading that she had completed:

I have read many books advocating for Dyslexia as well as books on behavior. I have consulted with an attorney but didn't end up hiring him. I am also a part of a few IEP advocacy groups on Facebook to get more information. I do a lot of research online and have taken a lot of courses.

This form of active research and education on the parents' part has assisted in helping not only the child with autism, but through talking to other parents and advocacy groups, especially on something like social media where you can be in contact other families around the globe, strengthens a bond between families who might be facing similar struggles and forms a sense of community.

Participant 10 said that though her becoming a Master IEP coach, she has done so much research that has not only helped her but also all the families that she has worked with. Participant 11 stated that she has had informal conversations with advocates and that they put on presentations on how to handle an IEP meeting, specifically what you should be aware of in terms of your rights in the IEP meetings. She stated that she had been to many of these presentations and that they had helped her over the years.

Summary

If you were to ask a parent, "What do you want for your child?," the hope would be that they would answer "everything." The participants in this study showed through their answers that they truly want what is best for their child and will fight "tooth and nail" to get all the services and educational modalities that these children rightfully deserve and are guaranteed by legislation. Most of the parents interviewed were extremely knowledgeable in the rights bestowed upon their children through years of practice in IEP meetings.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview of the Study

Parental understanding of special education legislation and case law, advocacy, and perceptions of the IEP process for children with autism was investigated in this study. Data were collected through interviews with parents of children with autism and IEPs. The purpose of this study was to explore parental perceptions of the IEP process with children with autism, specifically in relation to communication during IEP meetings and suggestions for improvement in the process. In addition, parental understanding of the most recent legislation and case law and their use of advocacy services and case law to help advocate for their children was studied. The study consisted of 11 indepth interviews with parents of children with autism, and the information was transcribed and analyzed to develop an understanding of their perceptions and experiences regarding the IEP process. The researcher sought to answer the six research questions:

1. What are parents' perceptions regarding how their autistic children's needs are being served during the IEP process?
2. What are parents' perceptions of the communication that takes place during IEP meetings?
3. What do parents believe could be done by the school districts to improve IEP meetings?
4. What are parents' experiences regarding the use of advocacy services to assist in the IEP process?
5. What are parents' experiences with the use of case law in the IEP process?
6. How aware are parents of children with autism of the rights bestowed on them through the current legislation as well as familiar with the case law that has furthered the

educational opportunities of their children?

This chapter offers an interpretation of the study's findings and places it within the context of the existing literature. The chapter goes on to discuss practical implications of these findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research.

Interpretation and Context of Findings

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked the following: What are parents' perceptions regarding how their autistic children's needs are being served during the IEP process? The themes that resulted from this research question included (a) strong feelings overall about the IEP process and (b) perceptions of IEP process consistent with those on meeting child's needs. These findings indicated that more than half of the participants felt that the IEP process was a positive one with only four of the 11 participants viewing their IEP process negatively. One's experiences shape how the individual will internalize personal feelings about the IEP process (Burke & Goldman, 2015), and the participants in this study had an array of experiences. The overarching theme from the first research question is that not only is there a broad spectrum of where children fall in the actual autism spectrum, but also parents recognize that not all services and treatments for these children are the same; they have varying needs. The parents shared the sentiment that they wish that educators and coordinators realized that fact more since they have been perceived to put children with ASD in a "cookie-cutter, one size fits all" mold.

Prior research has been fairly consistent with the themes presented. Since there was a small sample size, only a handful of participants reported a negative experience, and it is difficult to say with absolute certainty that the prior research corroborates the findings in this study. Prior studies have showcased the benefits of fostering a

cooperative and positive relationship between parents and schools and this can be seen in this current study as well (Shepherd & Kervick, 2016; Staples & Diliberto, 2010). These findings are encouraging in the indication that relationships have been fostered by several parents with schools and gives hope that with further research and modalities of collaboration, stronger collaborative bonds can be made during the IEP process.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked the following: What are parents' perceptions of the communication that takes place during IEP meetings? The themes that resulted from this research question included (a) open communication is coveted and (b) parents desire equal participation. Although parent-teacher communication has been required by law since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, it was not prioritized in a meaningful way until the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (Burns & Harris, 2014). Findings from this research corroborate the research conducted by Woods et al. (2018), who elaborated with the idea that, although the focus is on communication during the IEP meetings, parents are often left feeling as adversaries who were not afforded as much input as they should have as well as the feeling that they had to fight for their children to receive services needed and necessary to their success; a theme that presented itself within the research.

The findings of this research question aligned with many prior research studies asserting the importance of an equal partnership between schools and families. Parents have long desired equal participation in the IEP process as well as open communication between the educators and themselves (Burke & Goldman, 2015). Unfortunately, that is not always the case, and that was highlighted in this research. One parent highlighted the fact that, due to military obligations, they had been residents in multiple states during

their child's education. So, while this interview was meant to elicit experiences from the most current IEP meeting, this participant was able to showcase differences in communication through her experiences in multiple states and districts. The general feeling presented in the research is that there are two sides in the IEP meetings and only a few participants felt as though they were a cohesive unit working together with educators to produce an acceptable education plan for all parties.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked the following: What do parents believe could be done by the school districts to improve IEP meetings? The themes that resulted from this research question included (a) knowledge is power and (b) parental input is key, and they have ideas for change. The analysis for this research question led to several concrete ideas that parents felt could be implemented by school districts to improve IEP meetings. The findings in this research were consistent with those from the Slade et al. (2017) study:

It appears that parent satisfaction is not measurably affected by the child's functioning or by the specific educational needs the child presents. Instead, aspects of parent-school connectedness, including parental school involvement and parent-teacher relationship quality, may contribute uniquely to parents' experiences of the IEP process. (p. 254)

This study aligns with the prior research in that none of the parents made mention of their level of satisfaction with the process based on their child's achievements but rather the quality and strength of their collaboration with the educators.

One general notion presented in the study is that parents do not want to be kept in the dark regarding testing and assessments performed on their children: a theme

consistent with prior research. These parents want to have all the information regarding their children prior to the meeting. IEP meetings are considered stressful enough according to the respondents. Hlibok (2019) stated the following:

For parents and teachers, Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings can be stressful. Worse, they can be ineffective—with parent, teacher, and student feeling that words were exchanged, and passions ignited—without meaningful discussion, let alone effective development of or change in the student’s educational program. (p. 12)

They also put forth the idea that, as parents of their children, they might have a better understanding as to what methods and practices may work for their children. Kurth et al. (2020) stated the following:

Parents’ satisfaction and relationships with teachers and administrators significantly impact their ability to have input in decision making. Thus, even when school personnel possess significant knowledge about ASD, if they are not actively developing positive relationships with parents, parents may experience dissatisfaction in the decision-making process and the implementation of their child’s education. (p. 36)

The Kurth et al. study delved into the idea that more positive relations would come of the collaboration between educators and parents if the school personnel truly listened to what the parents had to say. Similar ideas to this prior research were seen throughout the interviews in this study.

Research Question 4

Research Question 4 asked the following: What are parents’ experiences regarding the use of advocacy services to assist in the IEP process? The themes that

resulted from this research question included (a) help comes in many forms and (b) outside services come at a cost, both emotional and monetary. In Hlibok's (2019) study, parents pointed out that bringing in an Education Advocate can help reduce stress while expanding discussions and improving the IEP environment since advocates are trained in federal law as well as being familiar with IEP language, which, in turn, can help support parents in understanding the IEP process. Findings showed that, although many of the parents interviewed did not use advocacy services, the parents felt that the use of advocates is beneficial to the IEP process. The use of an advocate, according to the parents that used one, set gears in motion as well as helped their voices to be heard.

One pitfall of using an advocate that was disclosed was the cost of the services. The idea that a child with ASD, an already challenging diagnosis, might not be afforded the same interventions and accommodations due to the potential cost of who a parent has sitting alongside them at IEP meetings is disheartening. The participants did state that just the act of speaking with an advocate or educational consultant gave them a greater sense of confidence heading into the IEP meetings; a feeling that carries no price tag. Prior studies delved more into the implications of the "cost" of the services and its effect on the outcome of the IEP process, yet still aligned with the current research. For example, the Vivanti and Stahmer (2018) study delved into the cost-saving techniques districts use which highlight less expensive interventions that might not meet the recommended standards of education and intervention by claiming that while the intervention might not meet the standard, it is better than no intervention at all. While this idea was mentioned by a few participants, the research did not focus on the monetary conundrum facing some families throughout the IEP process.

Research Question 5

Research Question 5 asked the following: What are parents' experiences with the use of case law in the IEP process? The themes that resulted from this research question included (a) legal escalation is often not necessary and avoidable and (b) case law does not play a formidable role in parents' perceptions. Hill and Taylor (2017) found that the more knowledge and understanding of the substantive and procedural issues involved in special education case law, the easier it will be to educate students and provide services for students with ASD. Findings of the current study showed that parents who were well versed in case law had a greater sense of the legal jargon necessary to effectively influence the IEP process although it often made no difference in the outcome of the meetings. A small number of the participants went a different route, and although they became well versed in case law, they sought to become Master IEP Coaches as to not only help their own causes, but to also help others as well since the overarching idea is that legal escalation is often not necessary and can be avoided.

Prior research on this theme did not corroborate the findings in this study. Most of the participants in this study had not exercised the rights given to them under due process law and legislation. However, in the Burke and Goldman (2015) study, for example, the findings were that families of students with ASD were more likely to enact procedural safeguards such as due process and medication in comparison with families with children with varying other disabilities. Even though only two participants hired lawyers for their IEP meetings, the use of case law by the lawyers elicited the desired responses and accommodations that they had been initially denied in prior meetings. Ultimately, in the current study, case law did not play a formidable role in parents' perceptions of the IEP process. In more recent research, Goldman and colleagues asserted that children with

ASD have been found to be overrepresented in due process cases and litigation. This finding was not corroborated in the current study because most of the participants had not exercised the rights given to them under due process law and legislation.

Research Question 6

Research Question 6 asked the following: How aware are parents of children with autism of the rights bestowed on them through the current legislation as well as familiar with the case law that has furthered the educational opportunities of their children? The themes that resulted from this research question included (a) knowing your child's rights can drive the IEP process and (b) there is no better advocate than an educated parent. The IEP process can certainly be driven by knowing the rights afforded to your children. In a recent study, Harrison (2021) described an inclusive education while asserting that the IEP is an annually revised document intended to be drawn up by both district parents and district personnel. Harrison's statement describing the IEP states that the document is drawn up by both the (school) personnel and parents, not one or the other.

This collaboration comes on the coattails of years of legislation and cases that have attempted to foster this partnership. Many participants in the current study stated that if they did not know something pertinent to their child's rights or education, they completed research as to keep up to date and be able to advocate for their child appropriately; thus, leading to the theme that there is no better advocate than an educated parent. The prior research on parental education and knowledge correlates with this current study. Whether it be past, present, or future, the same idea is ever-present, the more knowledgeable the parent, the better the outcome in the IEP process. In the Ewles et al. (2014) research study, the authors concluded that effective advocacy is a product of parental education and understanding and familiarity of legislation, budgetary issues,

delivery of services as well as socioeconomic and political environments.

Implications of the Findings

This study has revealed many relevant issues involved in parental perceptions as well as an evaluation of the participants' knowledge and usage of case law and litigation in the IEP process. To be their child's best advocate, parents must be educated in all facets of the IEP process and know what rights are bestowed upon them under current legislation. Parents who possess a more comprehensive understanding of the IEP process have the tools necessary to formulate better outcomes for their children as well as a higher level of satisfaction with the process.

One recommendation that can be derived from this research is the need for school districts to offer workshops or at the very least, a conversation with the parents prior to the IEP meeting so that parents may walk into the IEP meeting knowing how to be prepared for what may be presented and ensue. School districts and education programs that would provide these services would likely provide the parents with the perception that the IEP team would work with the parents, and not against them, providing more of a collaboration.

The research also pointed to the fact that the parents who are more knowledgeable about special education law and their rights can be more proactive and authoritative in the IEP process. Results from the study cite the effectiveness of utilizing the services of advocates in providing the expertise necessary for parents help in assisting their children during IEP meetings. Furthermore, parents stated they felt less intimidated by educators when advocates or Master IEP coaches were present in IEP meetings.

Slade et al. (2017) stated, "When teachers are experienced, have received ASD-specific training, and feel well prepared to teach children with ASD, parents' satisfaction

with the IEP team and IEP process may be higher” (p. 244). Findings from the current study showed that perceptions of the IEP process are consistent with the needs of the child being met as well as being consistent with existing research and literature. The perception of the IEP process is contingent on the follow through as well. A more knowledgeable and steadfast educator will hopefully produce more follow-through in the classroom with the IEP devised. A recommendation to achieve this would be to further educate the educators as well; ensure that staff has been given the opportunity further their knowledge of students with disabilities, and for the appropriateness of this study, students with ASD.

Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations of the study. One limitation that rendered itself prior to the data collection stage was the recruitment process. The original intent for recruitment for the study was to be done in a single school district but due to the COVID pandemic, the researcher had to pivot her study and utilized Facebook to recruit participants. The researcher was able to secure only 11 participants who wanted to continue to the interview stage. While this proved to be an enlightening experience since the participants happened to be from all over the country, coordinating with the participants was more difficult due to different time zones.

Furthermore, since most things in the country had pivoted to using Zoom, that also included all the most recent IEP meetings that the parents had attended for this study as well as the interview process, which leaves the question: Would any of the outcomes of these IEP meetings have been different if the meetings had been in person? Furthermore, all accounts in this research were first-person experiences. While that is necessary for this type of research, it also leaves a lot of unanswered questions since the

answers given are subjective to the families' personal experiences.

Another limitation to the study was the researchers' lack of experience in doing interviews for research purposes; especially while using Zoom videoconferencing. Mirick and Wladkowski (2019) stated the following:

To be successful at qualitative interviewing, the researcher must be able to effectively build rapport with participants, elicit details, emotions, and facts that provide rich descriptions of events or experiences, and create feelings of trust so that participants share their stories honestly, without bias. (p. 3061)

While the researcher was able to build a rapport, the researcher questions if a stronger rapport could have been garnered if the research had not only been in person, but if the researcher had more experience in eliciting stronger responses from the participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to explore parental perceptions of the IEP process with children with autism, specifically in relation to communication during IEP meetings and suggestions for improvement in the process. In addition, parental understanding of the most recent legislation and case law and their use of advocacy services and case law to help advocate for their children was also studied. This study contributed to ongoing and current research investigating what can be done throughout the IEP process to garner a stronger connection between parents and educators thus leading to a more fulfilling and appropriate education for students with autism.

One recommendation for future research would be to repeat the study or a similar study in a year or two when hopefully IEP meetings will go back to being in person rather than being virtual. The researcher feels that there were limitations to the scope of the IEP meeting since the world and education system had to virtually shut down and

reinvent itself in such a short period of time due to the ongoing pandemic. No one could have ever foreseen the impact that this has had on the education system, let alone the families and world.

Another interesting take on this study for future research would be to interview educators rather than the parents. In life, there are always “two sides” to every story and the exploration of the educators’ perceptions of the IEP process might be interesting as well since they are dealing with the constraints of the education system as well as trying to meet the needs of the children with ASD and their parents’ or guardians’ hopes and desires for their children.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to identify parental perceptions of the IEP process regarding their children with ASD. Conducting the study helped the researcher better understand the experiences and viewpoints of participants as well as where there can be improvement in the IEP process. Furthermore, this study was able to identify certain themes regarding the parents’ use of case law and legislation in helping them navigate the IEP process. Understanding and applying these themes would not only benefit the parents but might enlighten educators as well which could potentially “bridge the gap” between parents and educators and make for a more positive and supportive IEP process for all involved.

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Appendix A
Preinterview Survey

Preinterview Survey

1. Please indicate the age of your child? _____
2. What grade is your child currently enrolled in, if applicable? _____
3. At what age was your child diagnosed with ASD? _____
4. How many years has your child been receiving special education services? _____
5. What type of classroom setting is your child spending their school day in?
(Self- contained, integrated, general education, or alternative placement)
6. Have you attended all IEP meetings for your child? If so, how many have you attended? _____
7. Would you be willing to participate in a more in-depth interview with the researcher?

If you check yes, please continue on to the bottom of this page and I will be in contact shortly. Please note that all submissions will be kept confidential.

Best method of contact:

Phone: _____

Email: _____

FaceTime/Skype: _____

Best time to contact:

Morning ____

Afternoon ____

Evening ____

* Please note that an alphanumeric code will be assigned upon completion of the screener and written intent to complete the interview.

Appendix B
Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Time:

Date:

Type/Location:

Alphanumeric Code:

- Question 1 Please tell me about your experiences in the last IEP meeting you attended. Please elaborate on what the meeting was like for you and how you feel it went. (RQ1)
- Question 2 How well do you feel that your child's needs were being served in the last IEP meeting? (RQ1)
- Question 3 Tell me about the communication during IEP meetings? (RQ2)
- Question 4 What do you feel your role is in relation to the education professionals on the IEP team? (RQ2)
- Question 5 How knowledgeable are you about special education case laws and the rights your child has in an educational setting? (RQ6)
- Question 6 Tell me about any reading or research that you have done on this topic, consultation with professionals, etc. (RQ6)
- Question 7 Tell me what experience you've had with using case law to assist in the IEP process, either yourself or in consultation with a professional? (RQ5)
- Question 8 If you do have experience with case law, how did using case law affect the IEP process? (RQ5)
- Question 9 Tell me about any experiences you have had with the use of an advocacy agency or legal counsel for assistance in the IEP process? (RQ4)
- Question 10 If you did have experience with advocacy agencies or legal counsel, how did using these professionals affect the IEP

process? (RQ4)

Question 11

In your opinion, what can the school district do to improve IEP meetings and attain better results for autistic students? (RQ3)

Question 12

If you were in charge of the IEP process, how would you improve the procedure? (RQ3)

Question 13

Is there anything you would like to tell me that I have not asked about that you think would be relevant to my study?