This case study investigated parental perceptions of students with autism towards the IEP meeting from one family support group chapter in the north Texas area. Participants were asked to share their experiences of previous IEP meetings and to provide input regarding not only measures that school districts may take towards improving IEP meetings, but actions that parents can take to serve as better advocates for their children. Findings revealed that parents believed that educators did not value parents as equals, properly adhere to IEP objectives to facilitate student success, and routinely train families regarding special education law. Findings should not be generalized across the entire population of students receiving special education services. Further investigation into parental perceptions among different disability categories, school districts, regions, and other family support groups are suggested.

The individualized education program (IEP) was the primary component of Part B of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 and has maintained importance through the reauthorization of IDEA 2004. The IEP serves to direct and monitor all components of a student’s special education program. These components include educational needs, goals and objectives, placement, evaluation criteria, present levels of educational performance, and duration of programming modifications. (Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001; H. Res. 5, 1997). The IEP functions as the blueprint for the delivery of services to be provided for students receiving special education services, as IEP regulations identify meeting dates, parental and student consent and accountability, as well as responsibilities of educational agencies (Huefner, 2000).

Despite the fact that parent participation is mandated by law, legislation alone is not enough to get parents involved in schools (Deslandes, Royer, Potvin, & Leclerc, 1999; Valle & Aponte, 2002). Parental roles have not increased in IEP meetings, and positive relationships between parents and educators have not been ensured despite the conceptualization and intent of the law under P.L. 94-142 (Simpson, 1996).

Rock (2000) labeled the traditional IEP meeting as a “meaningless ritual,” as educators implement and expect parents to approve pre-determined educational programs. Decreased parental feedback and participation towards IEP meetings have facilitated legally inappropriate and educationally unsound educational programs for students receiving special education services.
After analyzing forty-five public due process hearings, Yell and Drasgow (2000) concluded that 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 and determining placement for students prior to determining goals and objectives is a violation that educators frequently practice during IEP meetings (Drasgow et al., 2001).

Many parents feel guilty, intimidated, disenfranchised, and alienated towards educational systems (Goldstein, 1993; Kroth & Edge, 1997). Parents often view the IEP meeting as an opportunity for educators to brief them on the failures of their child. Parents are therefore, embarrassed to encounter educators resulting in their providing little input during IEP meetings. Passive participation among parents towards the IEP process is likely to hinder productive planning of a student’s education (Werts, Mamlin, & Pogoloff, 2002).

Many parents feel ill-equipped to address the educational needs of their children as they are unable to understand special education jargon and terminology (Goldstein, 1993; Lytle & Bordin, 2001). Parents are at a disadvantage as they often lack the expertise of their professional counterparts. Parents who feel ill-equipped in making educational decisions regarding their children allow educators to easily convince parents that decision-making should be left to them (Rock, 2000).

While some parents choose to limit participation, many other parents believe that educators deter participation. Despite the emphasis of family-centered interactions towards educational planning under IDEA, education professionals still tend to dominate the decision-making process in educational planning (Dabkowski, 2004; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Parents believe that some educators fail to understand the significance of parental participation, as many have been unsuccessful in promoting positive collaboration and facilitating successful parental involvement (Pruitt Wandry & Hollums, 1998).

Effective communication among the IEP team members is essential in providing best possible programs for students receiving special education services (Lytle & Bordin, 2001). Factors which attribute 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). Parents often complain that teachers do not initiate enough communication, and they fail to communicate with parents until problems worsen (Harniss, Epstein, Bursuck, Nelson, & Jayanthi, 2001; Munk et al., 2001). Schools can effectively facilitate communication between parents and teachers through the employment of non-threatening and positive communication strategies (Polloway, Bursuck, & Epstein, 2001).

Climate or tone established by the IEP team members in addition to team culture can influence parent participation in IEP
meetings (Dabkowski, 2004). The culture of the IEP team typically dictates the way the IEP team members share information, who speaks, how influential each member is towards the decision-making process, and determination of outcomes. Parents should possess equitable roles during IEP meetings, as the essential insight they possess concerning their children facilitates the success of the IEP process (Pruitt et al., 1998).

Despite the passage of P.L. 94-142, which mandates parental participation in the educational planning of students receiving special education services, educators are likely to dominate the decision-making process regarding educational outcomes of these students. Often times, IEP meetings have failed to build an equal partnership among parents of students with autism and educators. Many school districts have been unsuccessful in building quality relationships with parents of children with autism. Due to parental perception of unequal status, many parents may become discouraged from becoming actively involved in their child’s education while other parents are likely to attempt to obtain equal status with educators in IEP meetings through due process or other forms of litigation measures.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how parents of students with autism from one particular family support group chapter perceived IEP meetings as well as how they perceived being valued by educators during the process. This case study attempted to determine factors that contributed to the belief held by parents that their children were or were not being properly served through IEP meetings. This study further investigated participant input regarding measures that both parents and educators can take to improve IEP meetings.

**Design of Study**

This study utilized qualitative methodology in the form of audio-recorded semi-structured interviews to obtain the perceptions of parents of students with autism from one family support group chapter towards the IEP meeting. Qualitative research is appropriate in dealing with potentially multiple realities, mutually shaping influences, and value patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews serve the purpose of “obtaining here-and-now constructions of persons, events, activities, organizations, feelings, motivations, claims, concerns, and other entities” (p. 268). According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), semi-structured interviews encourage interviewees to expand upon ideas, which provide the researcher opportunities to generate abstract ideas through descriptive material.

**Participants**

Respondents participating in this study consisted of parents of students with autism who had attended public school districts in the north Texas area. All respondents were members of a family support group chapter within the Association for Neurologically Impaired Children (AFNIC). AFINIC is a Texas-based, non-profit family support group advocating quality educational services for children with neurological disabilities including autism.

Seven out of ten families from the sup-
Port group chapter participated in this study. The demographics of parents who participated in this case study consisted of three single parent households and four married households from various educational and occupational backgrounds. All families were of middle class socio-economic status. Participants had at least one child diagnosed with autism currently attending or had previously attended either primary or secondary school, and all had previous experience attending IEP meetings.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interview questions conducted for this study focused on the experiences between satisfied and non-satisfied parents towards IEP meetings. Parents were asked to share their experiences of previous IEP meetings and to provide input regarding not only measures that school districts may take towards improving IEP meetings, but actions that parents may take to serve as better advocates for their children. Interview questions were created utilizing literature review research and experiences of IEP meetings by the researcher. Participants in this study were asked the following open-ended questions pertaining to parental perceptions of IEP meetings.

1. Describe the quality of services that your child has received as a result of your child’s IEP meetings.
2. How are you treated and perceived by IEP team members?
3. What changes would you desire pertaining to your child’s IEP meetings?
4. What can school districts do to improve IEP meetings?
5. What can parents do to improve IEP meetings?

Each interview participant was audio recorded for accuracy, and audio recording was transcribed verbatim by the researcher for facilitating increased in-depth knowledge. Inductive data analysis was utilized once interviews were completed and transcribed. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), researchers are likely to identify multiple realities, fully describe the setting, and likely to identify mutually shaping influences during the implementation of inductive analysis.

Data were analyzed by both researcher and an independent coder based upon categories to construct meaning through the constant comparative method. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined constant comparative method as a “means for deriving theory”. Stages of constant comparative method include the comparing of incidents applicable to each category, the integration of categories and their products, the delimitation of theory, and the writing of theory (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Within the transcribed data, single pieces of information were uniquely identified by particular ideas or units through color-coding. This method was utilized to label and distinguish among categories of the data. Data were then organized based upon seeking emergent categories revolving around similar characteristics.

Findings

Findings from this study are addressed in the sequential order of the five interview questions.
Describe the Quality of Services that your Child Has Received as a Result of your Child’s IEP Meetings?

All of the participants indicated that their overall initial IEP experiences had been negative. Parents were surprised to discover that the views of educators were often not consistent with the implementation of ideas that parents believed to be the best approach for serving their children.

Factors contributing to the beliefs held by parents that their children were or were not being properly served by IEP meetings revolved around how school districts handled student discipline and quality of services for students with autism. One parent summarized that her son’s IEP meetings resulted in the implementation of ineffective discipline plans, aggravation among both parent and student, and inappropriate placement of student.

I think it has hurt him more because of them putting him in the transition unit. They took him out of general education and put him in the transition unit. They didn’t know what else to do and that was his total downfall. He became suicidal there.

Five out of the seven participants disagreed with educators regarding services that should be provided for their children. Parents expressed concern over the lack of transition and occupational services provided by local school districts. They believed that students could be better served by having their children become periodically exposed to community settings. One parent noted:

I want my son at Pizza Hut taping coupons on a box. I want him at Garden Ridge and they don’t start that until they are 16 or 17. That is just not enough time to learn job skills. I would like for (my child) to go to the barber shop one day, to the grocery store, out in the community for about an hour or hour and a half each day. Daily living skills, transition, and getting out in the community – transition big time.

Additionally, participants believed that students would be better served through periodic interaction with the general education student population. One parent argued to IEP team members that his son should had been provided with opportunities to generalize learned social skills by interacting with the general education population within his school. When the parent asked IEP team members for opportunities for his son to interact with a general education physical education class, she was told that “we (school) do not have anyone trained in that”.

Through heavy persistence and becoming knowledgeable of special education law, these parents were able to assist their children in acquiring the services and IEP implementation necessary for students to be successful. Additionally, through parents’ building positive relations with school districts, educators became more empathetic towards the disabilities of students.

How are You Treated and Perceived by IEP Team Members?

Most of the participants indicated that they had previously experienced negative treatment at one time or another by educators during IEP meetings. Parents were
Perceptions

accused by IEP team members as being unreasonable and were often blamed for the behavioral and academic deficiencies of their children. Three of the subjects interviewed discussed how they had been blamed by educators for their child's academic and behavioral deficiencies. Instead of educators attempting to find effective ways to manage inappropriate behaviors, parents indicated that IEP teams tended to implement zero-tolerance practices.

They would intimidate me and act like I was doing something wrong. 'Are there any changes going on?' (IEP team members would ask). They would always try to make it like that there was something wrong with the home, and there really wasn't. They pointed fingers at me, and they asked 'did you do drugs when you were pregnant? Did you drink alcohol when you were pregnant? You and your husband?'

Parents were perceived as being unreasonable due to requesting services that school districts believed to be unnecessary or too expensive. Educators additionally found parents to be unreasonable when discussing measures pertaining to student discipline. One participant stated:

In the beginning it was very much that I was being unreasonable because they would just flat point out to me – 'are you trying to say that your son's disabilities are what could be keeping him from making right decisions all of the time?'

Advocacy presence

One common theme that emerged from interviewing parents revolved around educators treating parents more positively within the presence of an advocate, particularly an advocate from AFNIC. Most of the parents indicated that they were treated more respectfully and professionally by educators when an advocate attended IEP meetings. Additionally, educators tended to adhere more carefully to IEP meeting protocol and preparation when an advocate was present in IEP meetings.

When asked if she was treated differently by IEP team members with an advocate present, one parent responded: "Yes, they were more respectful. I thought when my advocate was present." In addition to being treated more respectfully by educators, one participant elaborated how IEP meetings appeared to be more of a group effort in the presence of an advocate. According to this parent, educators were more willing to include his input in making decisions regarding his child's educational program.

Relationships then and now

Several of the interviewees indicated that current relationships with educators had improved since the time their children were first placed in their respective school districts. Most of the parents stated that they initially encountered resistance from school district personnel regarding the receiving of appropriate services, diagnoses, and empathy that these individuals believed should have been granted to their children. Relations between educators and parents strengthened through increased awareness of student disabilities among
educators in addition to parents becoming more knowledgeable of the IEP process. One participant stated:

Before, yeah – I was treated very differently. Currently things are good, but we had to fight for a long time to get them where they are now. Before I gained any knowledge, we were just falling through the cracks and he wasn’t learning. Right now, we have the best teacher we’ve ever had, but it’s been the longest road.

What Changes would You Desire Pertaining to Your Child’s IEP Meetings?

Participants desired that IEP meetings serve as more of a cooperative venture and less of an adversarial encounter. Adversarial IEP experiences that parents encountered were primarily due to the lack of educators’ understanding towards student disabilities and improper IEP implementation.

Lack of understanding

According to parents, the lack of understanding among educators toward student disabilities led to disagreements regarding disciplinary issues between educators and parents during IEP meetings. Parents believed that educators’ reliance on traditional punitive discipline practices was indicative of school district personnel misunderstanding of student disabilities. Three of the subjects interviewed indicated that educators interpreted student inappropriate behavioral acts as intentional instead of manifestations of their disabilities.

She (school counselor) was telling me, “yeah, you know. I’m going to have to draw a line with (student) and - I’m going to have to draw a line with him.” And I thought, you are going to draw a line with him? That’s the worst thing that you could do. I knew she was setting him up to fail, setting herself up to fail and setting herself up for a lot of frustration.

Another parent stated that her son was placed into a transition unit following the child’s cursing at a teacher. In addition to placing her son in a transition unit for violent students with emotional behavioral disorders, the student was also arrested for cursing at a teacher. “In my mind it (the arrest) was ridiculous. It was not a violent outburst or anything – he just cursed. If they could manage his disability then they wouldn’t need the police. Don’t arrest kids for their disability.”

Implementation of IEP objectives

Parents pointed out that IEP objectives set forth in IEP meetings were often not fully implemented among educators. Parents believed that formality and rigidity of IEP meetings created barriers toward implementing necessary changes to educational programs.

One parent indicated that her son’s teacher simply failed to update IEP goals in order to decrease levels of paperwork and lesson plan adjustments. “It is in the paperwork and on the recording. It is written in the minutes, but it’s just never done. It is a meeting they have to have, but really a lot of it is never really carried through.”

Participants indicated that IEP meetings tended to be more of a formality than
serve as a means for meeting student educational needs.

It seems that everyone would come up with very good ideas when you leave there (IEP Meetings). But if it’s the teacher who didn’t do what they were supposed to do, then you come up with these good ideas, but then if the teacher doesn’t do them, then that is very frustrating.

One parent added “note that these teachers hardly ever read the IEP’s. Most of those teachers get a folder and they never even open them up.” Another participant believed that classroom teachers documented sufficient student progress towards IEP goals in order to adhere to IEP documentation procedures despite objectives not having been fully mastered by his child.

Teachers went through the lesson plans with (student) and gave him check marks. He was quiet and you gave him credit for knowing it. And you ask him right now and doesn’t know what the heck you are saying.

What can School Districts do to Improve IEP Meetings?

A democracy

Participants believed that educators could improve IEP meetings by making these conferences more of a democratic process where parents felt they were equal contributors. Parents stated that they would not be as defensive in IEP meetings if educators viewed IEP meetings as more of a team effort between schools and families.

They have it all figured out before you get there, which I don’t think is right. Having some ideas, yeah – but don’t have it all. And it’s a done deal that everyone is going to agree with – the administrators, the psychologist, who is ever in charge.

One parent elaborated how parental input was rarely welcomed by educators in determining placement, discipline, and instruction.

Half of those boxes are already checked and filled out. It’s all just cut and paste. Just because one person is in charge says that that’s the way it’s going to be, it is assumed that everyone else in the room agrees.

Another parent further described the frustration that parents face when educators attempted to make decisions without parental input.

I noticed since we moved to (school district of student) 9 years ago, we walk into a meeting with a stack of papers already completed – and they read it and we are asked to sign it. So, all of the decisions have been made without parental input.

Participants emphasized that if school districts were more honest, friendly, and less deceitful, then IEP meetings would be a more positive experience for both parents and educators.

It’s like a chess game. If they make a move, then I have to figure out what their strategy is and what they’re thinking. I know that they
have staff meetings about my son all of the time. You know that I’m not included in. So I know that there is an agenda that they should probably share with me. I have to figure out what it is.

Instead of attempting to intimidate parents, participants believed that educators should try to work with parents in creating educational programs to better serve students receiving special education services. Parents indicated that their children were better served in IEP meetings when educators valued and listened to parental input. The students who were more successful as a result of IEP meetings were those children whose IEP meetings consisted of positive and equal interaction between educators and parents. As one parent stated “I don’t want to have an adversarial relationship. It’s a lose or lose to me. It can’t be adversarial.”

Fuzzy formalities

Parents expressed a need for making special education law and IEP meetings easier to understand. Many of the subjects interviewed mentioned that IEP meetings should be developed so that parents are provided more freedom to adjust to student needs. Furthermore, parents believed that IEP meetings needed to be more user-friendly and flexible to better serve students receiving special education services. If it’s about the kid, then they should be a little more accommodating and accountable. I think that there are simple, better ways to help kids if you really want too than the way they are doing it. They need to give parents more information in advance – not just check some boxes. You need to know what is going to be covered when you get there.

According to participants, school districts could further improve IEP meetings by educating parents about the IEP process. Measures that participants recommended to educate parents included formal training provided by school districts and workshops on special education law and the IEP process. “If they would have some kind of class for the parent about IEP’s. How the whole process works and if what you are agreeing too – the long term effects of that.” One parent went on to conclude that school districts educating parents about IEP meetings might give parents the impression that educators do care and really want parents to understand the process because “I never got the feeling that they ever really wanted me to understand it all.”

What can Parents do to Improve IEP Meetings?

Participants indicated the importance of becoming active participants in IEP meetings. Avenues that parents discussed in becoming proactive included becoming knowledgeable regarding special education law and being persistent in requesting appropriate services for their children. Participants recommended that parents take the initiative in educating themselves about special education issues. As one parent stated “my impact has definitely had an impact (positive) on my son’s IEP process.” Another parent highlighted “you need to be involved and don’t trust them to do it on their own.”
Five of the subjects interviewed indicated that their involvement in IEP meetings benefited their children. Parents were able to acquire educational resources and services that they believed their children would not have received if not for their parental involvement towards IEP meetings. This involvement created a cooperative atmosphere between themselves and educators in IEP meetings. IEP meetings provided these parents and educators opportunities to work together in discussing measures to better serve their students receiving special education services. Through teamwork, parents and educators decided on appropriate educational programs and services that provided maximum benefits to students with special needs. Two parents elaborated on the cooperation that they experienced during IEP meetings when they stated:

But I think it’s been really good for me, services wise. You know, anything that I’ve asked for or we’ve discussed as an issue that has to do with his behavior problems or his sensory problems or his motor problems. They have been really good in the IEP meetings to either accept whatever suggestions I make.

I think it has been positive because at least they know what they are looking for with (student). I think (without parental involvement) they would be babysitting all day long. The only reason I get in my child’s IEP is because I go up and monitor what is going on.

_Becoming knowledgeable of special education law_

Participants mentioned how they were able to build more positive relations with school district personnel once they knew the parameters of the IEP process and laws as they pertained to students receiving special education services. According to all seven interviewees, being knowledgeable of the rights entitled to their children under federal law assisted parents in requesting and acquiring services for their students during IEP meetings. One parent elaborated on the importance in becoming knowledgeable about the IEP process by saying:

It is all about educating yourself too— it’s about— if you expect someone to do it for you, no one is going to do it for you. Everything isn’t always easy to understand. I mean, no one explains that to you. They hand you your booklet or procedural safeguards and so forth, but I think it can be difficult to understand. You’re just overwhelmed with the information that they give you and no one explains it to you.

Parents additionally indicated that educators were more prone to listen to parental concerns when they knew that they were knowledgeable of special education law. One parent highlighted how educators tended to be more willing to listen to her concerns and were more honest with her due to her persistence in becoming knowledgeable about special education services.

I think that they know that I know a
lot and the things I don’t know, I’m going to find out. I think that they know that and I think that goes a long way in how they deal with me and how they react to me and what they offer to me because they know that I’m going to find out what is available and what’s legal and what’s appropriate.

All seven parents cited that without their taking the initiative to become knowledgeable about special education law, they would have been unaware of all of the services that school districts were entitled to provide for their children. Parents were able to acquire educational resources and services that they believed their children would not have received if not for their acquired knowledge in the IEP process.

Study Limitations

This study consisted of limitations that should be taken into consideration when reviewing findings. While this case study simply investigated the perceptions of parents from one family support group chapter, further studies need to be conducted across multiple school districts, regions, disability categories and family support groups. Initially, parents were most likely to become members of family support groups similar to AFNIC due to experiencing negative outcomes from school districts which likely influenced the research findings. As a result, participants were prone to have emotional and subjective perceptions regarding their children that may have hindered the study. While this research highlighted parent perceptions of the IEP meeting, educators’ perceptions were not represented in the study.

Conclusions and Implications

Findings from the interviews revealed that parents of students with autism did not perceive themselves as being treated equally among educators during IEP meetings. Parents believed that their input was not valued or welcomed by most educators. Instead of being kept out of the decision making process, parents desired to be treated as equal contributors towards their child’s IEP meetings.

According to parents, student objectives agreed upon in IEP meetings were not always fully implemented for students receiving special education services. Those interviewed cited that educators tended to view the IEP process simply as a formality. Parents emphasized the importance of properly implementing and adhering to IEP objectives set forth in IEP meetings in order to facilitate positive outcomes for their students receiving special education services.

Participants in this study believed that school districts could further improve IEP meetings by educating families about special education law. Due to school districts’ inability to effectively educate families about IEP meetings from the perspectives of the interviewees, parents took the initiative to educate themselves. Through persistence and becoming knowledgeable of special education law, parents were able to properly assist their children in acquiring the services and IEP implementation necessary for them to become successful.
Recommendations for Further Study

Due to the small number of parents interviewed in this study, these findings should not be generalized across the entire population of parents of students receiving special education services. Therefore, the following recommendations are suggested for further research: 1) the investigation of parental perceptions of the IEP meeting across different disability categories, school districts, regions, and family support groups, and 2) educators’ perceptions of the IEP meeting.

The purpose of conducting IEP meetings is for all IEP members, including parents, to collaborate in implementing the best appropriate services for children receiving special education services. The student suffers when adversarial relationships exist between parents and educators. Parents who feel welcomed and respected by educators will more likely become open to accept educator input regarding the planning of educational programs for their children. Educators who value the input from parents providing unique insight toward their children will likely be able to create effective programs that tailor specifically toward the needs of students. Providing the consistency of educational programs that serve both academic and domestic settings of the student begin with collaboration between parents and educators in IEP meetings.

References


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