

**ENGAGING PARENTS IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION TRANSITION PROCESS:
PERSPECTIVES OF PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES**

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This qualitative study examined the perspectives of parents of students with significant disabilities about the Secondary Transition Process. Significant disabilities were defined as students with intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and autism. Federal regulations require that parents participate fully in the IEP transition process once their children reach age 16, and in some states age 14. Using snowball sampling, ten parents were interviewed to determine their knowledge about transition, what their roles are in the process, and what issues were important to them. The interview data was analyzed to identify major themes.

The data suggested that most parents are satisfied with the transition process in general and view themselves as very involved. In fact, parents who described themselves as advocates spoke more about a parent-driven process. However, deeper questioning showed that parents do not possess a clear knowledge about the process and what their roles should be. The results also showed that parents receive more information from other parents and outside agencies than is provided by their own school districts.

Four main themes emerged. The first is that parents possess limited understanding about transition. Second, parents described themselves as playing a variety of roles, which ranged from passive to active. They mostly all characterized themselves as informants. The other roles that emerged were advocate, adversary and liaison. The third major theme centered on collaborative practices. Parents described the need for communication with school staff and the

importance of relationship building. The fourth and final theme was the need for communication and collaboration. As a result of parent information, this study provides recommendations to school districts for improvements they can make regarding engaging parents in the special education transition process based on parent perspectives and review of research on best practices.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the parents who agreed to participate in my study and honored me by sharing the experiences and challenges they have faced in raising children with significant needs. It is my desire that the knowledge I gained from their perspectives will allow me to provide school districts with information that will help improve the transition process for other parents in the future.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Parent involvement is an important component in the development of programs for students with special needs. Arguably, it becomes more important as students get older, especially when they near the age when they will be transitioning to life after high school and making decisions about further education, jobs, and daily living needs. Approximately six and a half million students from ages 3 through 21 received some form of special education services in the United States in the 2009-10 school year and 33 percent of those students were of the age of transition between 14 and 21(US Department of Education, 2012). Newman et al. (2011) reported that students with disabilities were less likely than their typical peers to attend any post-secondary education programs. They also found that when students with disabilities became adults, they were less likely to hold jobs, have a checking account or credit card and be married than their non-disabled peers. These statistics suggest the importance of transition planning while students are in school.

Federal special education regulations (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004, or IDEA) mandate that when a student reaches the age of 16, planning for the transition to life after school begins. IDEA defines transition planning as follows:

A coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that: (a) is designed to be within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational

education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation; (b) is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests; and (c) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (34 CFR §300.43(a))

As the regulations further require, transition planning must be a collaborative act of the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, which includes not only school personnel, but also the students and their parents. Transition planning is essential in preparing students with disabilities to be productive members of society. The harsh reality is that "the status of people with disabilities has changed little. They remain below their non-disabled counterparts in many key areas where 'more is better', such as employment, household income, and educational attainment, and above their counterparts in other areas where a lower rate is preferable, such as poverty and material hardship" (National Council on Disability, 2008, p.22). The goal of transition planning is to ensure that students with disabilities have access to appropriate future opportunities akin to those of their non-disabled peers.

IDEA Part B, which is the section of the Federal statute that discusses performance indicators that each state must uphold and report to the federal government, also utilizes the term parent involvement. Indicator 8 of IDEA (2004) is written specifically to address "facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities" (20 U.S.C. 1416(a) (3) (A)). In the literature reviewed for this study, the term *parent involvement* is often synonymous with the terms parent engagement and parent participation.

Throughout this paper, the author used the term parent involvement unless the source directly cites a different term.

1.1 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study investigated the perspectives of parents of students with significant disabilities regarding their experiences with the special education transition process. For the purposes of this research, significant disabilities include intellectual disabilities, autism, multiple disabilities, and orthopedic impairment, as defined under IDEA (34CFR§300). Further explanation and definition of those disabilities is provided in the definition section. The study examined what parents of students with significant disabilities understand the special education transition process to be. It also examined parental perspectives on the roles that they play in the transition process based upon their lived experiences. The purpose of examining these perspectives is to gain a better understanding about how schools engage parents to be full participants in the special education transition process beyond the statutory requirements of parent involvement.

1.2 DEFINITION OF TERMS

In order for the reader to have a clear understanding of terms and acronyms cited throughout this paper, this section provides a list of terms and their definitions.

FAPE – The acronym for Free Appropriate Public Education, the basic tenet of IDEA. FAPE refers to the right given to all students, including those with disabilities to be included in public education.

IDEA – The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), or Public Law Number 108-446, contains the federal regulations pertaining to special education. A subsequent revision is entitled the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act; however, most professionals continue to refer to the regulations as IDEA.

IEP – Acronym for Individualized Education Program. This is the basic special education document developed for a student with a disability by the IEP team, which consists of school personnel, parents and student. The IEP addresses a student's strengths and needs and outlines goals and objectives for the next calendar year. Prior to the end of that year, the team must meet again to develop a new IEP.

LEA – The acronym for Local Education Agency. Signifies the school district or its representative/designee.

PARENT – This term refers to the child's birth parent, foster parent, or legal guardian. It can also refer to anyone with whom the child resides that may be granted custodial rights (such as a grandparent). It can also refer to an appointed surrogate parent. This definition is outlined in IDEA (2004).

PARENT ENGAGEMENT—For the purpose of this research, engagement specific to the special education IEP transition process is evaluated. Engagement is defined as the process of involving parents.

PARENT/FAMILY INVOLVEMENT – The term used in IDEA (2004) to indicate the requirement that a parent is included in all aspects of the special education process. In this paper, the term is used interchangeably with parent/family participation and parent/family participation.

SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES – For the purpose of this study, only students who have the following disabilities are included in the study: intellectual disabilities (formerly mental retardation), orthopedic impairment (physical disabilities), multiple disabilities, or autism. These disabilities are identified in IDEA and defined as follows in Table 1.

Table 1. Disability Definitions under IDEA

Disability Category	Citation	Statutory Definition (directly quoted from the regulations)
Intellectual Disability	34CFR§300.8(6)	Previously known as mental retardation- means significantly sub average juncture general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period that adversely affects a child's educational performance.
Autism	34CFR§300.8(1)	Means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before the age of three, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences
Multiple Disabilities	34CFR§300.8(7)	Means concomitant impairments (such as mental retardation – blindness or mental retardation – orthopedic impairment), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments. Multiple disabilities does not include deaf – blindness.
Orthopedic Impairment	34CFR§300.8(8)	Means a severe orthopedic impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes impairments caused by a congenital anomaly, impairments caused by disease (e.g., poliomyelitis, bone tuberculosis), and impairments from other causes (e.g., cerebral palsy, amputations, and fractures or burns that can cause contractures).

TRANSITION- Synonymous with “post-secondary transition,” according to IDEA (2004), this term signifies that a student is nearing the age when he or she is preparing for life after high

school. The federal regulations require that the IEP must address goals related to this transition beginning at age 16, but some states (including Pennsylvania, where this research is being conducted) must begin the process at age 14.

TRANSITION AGED STUDENT – Refers to any student aged 16 through graduation or age 21, in some cases. The age of 16 is dictated by the IDEA regulations, but some states begin transition planning at age 14.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

DeFur, Todd-Allen and Getzel (2001) studied parents of students with disabilities in Virginia, utilizing focus groups to discuss the parents' involvement in the transition process. Following their research, the team developed a model for use by school districts as a means of determining how well schools empower parents to be active participants in the IEP transition process. Their research focused on parents of students with all types of disability levels, a third of whom had mild disabilities (such as a speech or language impairment or a specific learning disability). This research intended to fill the gap in the literature by examining perspectives of parents of students with significant disabilities. When a student has significant disabilities, there is a presumption that there will be additional challenges for future education, employment and future living arrangements, thus necessitating full parent involvement.

The current study was conducted to provide practitioners in the field of education with information regarding what parents of students with significant disabilities understand about the transition process and their role in it, what they perceive their level of involvement to be with

regard to transition planning, and what improvements may need to be made to ensure parent engagement in the process. According to Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, and Zane (2007) “further investigation is needed to determine how to actively engage parents in the educational process” (p. 365). This study was intended to provide schools with guidance on how to engage parents in the important role of co-facilitator for their children’s transition to life after school.

1.4 SUMMARY AND ORGANIZATION OF STUDY

The following chapters present a summation of the current research study. The review of literature presented in Chapter 2 examines special education legislation regarding parent participation and reviews case law relevant to the topic. It also examines the research on the barriers inhibiting parent involvement, as well as best practices regarding parent involvement. Next, Chapter 3 discusses the methodology employed in the current study, including the conceptual framework and research questions. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the current study. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a summary of the current study and provides recommendations for future research, as well as suggestions for school districts regarding the findings.

2.0 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of the first section of this literature review is to provide a review of the federal statutes and regulations that discuss the requirements of parental involvement in special education in the United States. In addition, an examination of significant case law regarding parent involvement is included to provide the reader with an overview of the cases that have influenced this important facet of special education. The legislative and case law overview provides a context for the issue of parent involvement in special education as the reader progresses through the subsequent two sections of the literature review.

For the purpose of this paper, the researcher uses the definition of parent involvement from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 and from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), Part B. Although not specific to the area of special education, the federal government in NCLB provides a clear definition of parent involvement in the following manner:

The participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities including:

- Assisting their child's learning;
- Being actively involved in their child's education at school;
- Serving as full partners in their child's education and being included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and

- The carrying out of other activities such as those described in section 1118 of the ESEA (National Coalition for Parent Involvement, 2012).

2.1 BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Before beginning a discussion about legislation and case law, it is important to have a general understanding of the history behind the legislation. This section provides the reader with an historical context of special education law, which has changed significantly over the past 40 years. Prior to the passage of Public Law 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act) in 1975, children with disabilities often were not educated in the public schools (Cohen, 2009). In fact, “until the mid-1970s, laws in most states allowed school districts to refuse to enroll any student they considered “uneducable,” a term generally defined by local school administrators” (Martin, Martin, & Termen, 1996, p. 26). Two significant cases that started the movement that eventually changed the exclusionary practice were the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1971) and Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia (1972). In the PARC case, parents contested a law that allowed the exclusion of children with significantly low cognitive skills from schools. In the consent decree that followed, “the state [Pennsylvania] agreed to provide full access to a free public education to children with mental retardation up to age 21”(Martin et al., 1996 , p. 28). The Mills case, filed a year later, was slightly different from PARC in that parents were fighting against both denial of school entrance and disciplinary exclusion because of students’ disabilities. In both class-action

cases, parents sought to have schools recognize the importance of access to public education for all children, including those with special needs.

The passage of Public Law 94-142, or the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, followed a few years later in 1975. It became effective in 1977. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act eventually evolved into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 ,which has been revised several times, the latest being the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. The Act is currently in the process of reauthorization. Cohen (2009) notes that when PL 94-142 was passed, “for the first time, parents of children with disabilities were legally permitted, indeed required, to be allowed to participate in the decision making process concerning their children (p. 15).”

There are many citations regarding parent participation in the special education process in the Federal regulations. The next section provides a synopsis of the different parent involvement requirements in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004).

2.2 FEDERAL REGULATIONS – IDEA

A review of the Federal regulations identifies 11 specific areas in which parents are included. The table below lists the specific regulation and the citation for each section. More information about each of the parent involvement requirements follows the table.

Table 2. Parent Involvement in IDEA

Regulation Pertaining to Parent Involvement	IDEA Section (34 CFR)
Parent Definition	§300.30 (a)
Procedural Safeguards	§300.500-504
Informed Consent	§300.300(a), 304(a), 615(b) & (c)
Evaluations & Re-evaluations	§300.304(a), §300.305(a) & (d), §614(4)(C)(1)(A) & (B)
Identification of a Disability	§300.306(a)
Input in Programming & Placement Decisions	§300.327, §300.324(a)(1)(ii), §300.344(a)(6)
Involvement in Meetings	§300.501(c), §300.321(e)
FAPE	§300.300
Due Process	§615.(b)(6)
Parent Training	§650(11), §654(a)(2), §671(b), §672(a)(3)
Mandated Professional Development	§663(c)(4), §654(a)(3)(B)

2.2.1 Parent Defined

Before beginning a discussion on parent involvement, it is important to define the term *parent*. IDEA provides a very specific definition of parent in 34 CFR § 300.30(a). In fact, there are five different definitions of parent, according to the statute. The first is the child’s birth parent or the parent who gained legal rights to the child through adoption. Next, is a foster parent, unless there are restrictions within the specific state saying that a foster parent cannot be considered a parent. Third, a legally appointed guardian who has educational rights is also a parent under IDEA definitions. Fourth, if a child resides with a grandparent or relative, and that person has assumed responsibility for the child and his/her education, then that person is a parent. Last, an appointed surrogate may also act as parent under IDEA. Depending upon the circumstances of

the child's life, any of the above-mentioned parents has the right to be involved in the child's education, as is discussed in more detail in the following sections.

2.2.2 Procedural Safeguards

In addition to the definition of parent, IDEA defines parent rights and the local education agency's (LEA, i.e., the school district) obligation to protect those rights. The regulations set forth the requirement "that parents receive a document explaining their educational rights and responsibilities any time their child is referred for an evaluation, and at other times throughout the special education process...These documents may be called Procedural Safeguards, Parents Rights and Responsibilities, or Child and Parent Rights in Special Education" (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006, p. 497). School districts are required to provide these written documents to parents of students receiving special education services at least one time per year. The information contained in the documents is meant to ensure the rights of parents whose child receives special education programming within his or her educational environment (34 CFR §300.500, 501, 503 and 504). According to Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, and Katsiyannis (2009), "One of the most important of these rights is the requirement that the parents of students with disabilities be meaningfully involved in the special education process. In fact, parental involvement has been one of the cornerstones of the IDEA" (p.69). Scattered throughout the extensive regulations are specific parent involvement requirements. Next, the author discusses each of the specific requirements mentioned in the regulations.

2.2.3 Informed Consent

IDEA emphasizes the importance of parental notification regarding any actions involving their children. It requires that parents are involved from the beginning of the special education process (34 CFR §300.300(a)). Informed consent means that parents understand and agree to an evaluation before it takes place. If the parent disagrees, the school district used to have the right to pursue due process to force an evaluation, unless the individual state regulations specifically prohibited due process in that instance. In the most recent version of IDEA (2004), if parents do not give permission to evaluate, the district is not able to proceed.

The notion of informed consent also refers to consent to placement following an evaluation for special education services. According to a memo from the Office of Special Education Programs (2010), when

obtaining parental consent under the IDEA, public agencies are required to provide the parent all information relevant to the activity, so that the parent can signify in writing that he or she understands that the public agency is asking their permission to conduct an initial evaluation of their child, to initially provide special education and related services to their child, or to conduct any reevaluation of their child. (Letter to Johnson)

Also related to informed consent, is the parent's right to prior written notice (34 CFR §300.304(a)). The concept of prior written notice is usually referred to when discussing an evaluation or re-evaluation, but can also refer to placement and programming. It essentially requires that school districts notify parents, in writing, prior to any action that will affect their children. The required contents for the prior written notice are very explicit. Specifically, the prior written notice is required to include the following:

- (A) a description of the action proposed or refused by the agency;

(B) an explanation of why the agency proposes or refuses to take the action and a description of each evaluation procedure, assessment, record, or report the agency used as a basis for the proposed or refused action;

(C) a statement that the parents of a child with a disability have protection under the procedural safeguards of this part and, if this notice is not an initial referral for evaluation, the means by which a copy of a description of the procedural safeguards can be obtained;

(D) sources for parents to contact to obtain assistance in understanding the provisions of this part;

(E) a description of other options considered by the IEP Team and the reason why those options were rejected; and

(F) a description of the factors that are relevant to the agency's proposal or refusal.

(34 CFR §615 (b) (c))

Parent involvement is required from the beginning of any special education referral. It is important that school districts keep parents informed at each step and that they clearly understand their rights. IDEA explicitly explains how school districts are to inform parents and how often they should do so. Moreover, parents must agree to any actions taken on behalf of their children. It is evident in reviewing the informed consent regulations that parent involvement is of the utmost importance in special education.

2.2.4 Evaluations and Revaluations

As stated in the earlier section, written parent consent is required prior to conducting an evaluation or re-evaluation (34 CFR §300.304(a)). Likewise, parents have the right to provide

input into the evaluation (34 CFR §614, (4) (c)(1) (A)(B)). The input includes parents' own information, as well as any outside evaluation reports they may wish to provide. Parents, as members of the team, have the opportunity to determine whether additional data are necessary to complete the report and to determine eligibility and need for special education.

In re-evaluations, which are completed every two or three years (depending upon the child's disability), if a school district determines that no additional evaluative data are necessary to complete the re-evaluation process, the parents must be informed of this determination in writing. Parents have the right to disagree with the determination of eligibility or non-eligibility. Parents must also be informed that they have the right to request additional assessments (34 CFR §300.305(d)).

By obtaining parent input, the school team is able determine if additional information is needed to complete the re-evaluation (34 CFR §300.305(a)). The IDEA regulations stress the importance of parent involvement in the evaluation and re-evaluation process. Parents can provide essential information to include in the evaluation as well as help to determine whether additional evaluation is necessary.

2.2.5 Identification of a Disability

Parents are also required to be involved in the process by which a student is identified as having a disability. According to the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, an

Initial evaluation of a child is required by IDEA before any special education and related services can be provided to that child. The purposes of conducting this evaluation are straightforward:

- To see if the child is a “child with a disability,” as defined by IDEA
- To gather information that will help determine the child’s educational needs
- To guide decision making about appropriate educational programming for the child.

(nichcd.org)

As a required member of the team, the parent is part of the decision-making group in determining if the child has a disability. Following an evaluation, parents must then be provided with a written copy of the evaluation report which contains the eligibility determination (34 CFR §300.306(a)). The parent can agree with the decision or disagree with the decision, in which case due process would follow.

2.2.6 Parental Input in Programming and Placement Decisions

Parent input is also an important part of the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) process. In 34 CFR §300.327, IDEA regulations state, “the public agency [school district] must ensure that the parents of each child with a disability are members of any group that makes decisions on the educational placement of their child.” The IEP team is responsible for making all placement and programming decisions. The required team members are delineated in 34 CFR §300.321(a)(1), where parents are again mentioned as required participants of the IEP team.

Not only is parent input required in the child’s IEP, but the IEP team must give parents the opportunity to voice any concerns they may have regarding their child’s education and those concerns must be considered when developing the IEP (34 CFR §300.324(a)(1)(ii)). Moreover, when any updated information is provided by the parents, the IEP team needs to consider if the

IEP should be revised to better meet the student's educational needs (34 CFR §300.324(b)(1)(ii)(C)).

All IEP team members (including parents) are permitted to bring additional members who have knowledge about the child who is being discussed or about his/her disability (34 CFR § 300.344(a)(6)). In a letter from the U. S. Office of Special Education Programs (Letter to Pungler, 1999), Acting Director Patricia Guard wrote, "The Department takes the view that IEP meetings should serve as a vehicle for constructive dialogue between parents and school officials. It is essential that parents be given the opportunity to participate meaningfully as members of the child's IEP team." In noting that parents may feel intimidated by the meeting and may sometimes lack a strong understanding of the process, the intent of IDEA was to allow parents to bring someone to meetings who may assist them in their understanding to allow their "meaningful" participation as noted in the letter. Educational advocates often accompany parents to meetings to help them understand the process, serving as a bridge between parents and school staff.

2.2.7 Parent Involvement in Meetings

Parents are required participants in every formal meeting regarding their child's special education placement and programming and school districts are obligated to make reasonable efforts to ensure that parents attend. If parents cannot attend in person, IDEA mandates that "the public agency must use other methods to ensure their participation, including individual or conference telephone calls, or video conferencing" (34 CFR §300.501(c)). There is no federal definition regarding what constitutes reasonable attempts to have parent involvement in meetings. However, many states define "reasonable" as three attempts made through various

modes of communication, such as by mail, by telephone, or via email (West Virginia Department of Education, (n.d); Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2011)).

It is required that parents receive notice of who will be attending the IEP meeting when they are sent an invitation to attend. Parents must also agree if other required members are not able to attend. The excused IEP team member is required to submit information to the parent in writing if their area of expertise is to be discussed at the meeting (34 CFR §300.321(e)).

Parent involvement in decision-making meetings, such as involvement in IEP meetings, is of the utmost importance. It is the intent of the Federal regulations that parents are active and equal participants in decision-making meetings. Parents can be equal participants only if know when meetings will take place and they are able to attend. School staff should ensure that parents have the opportunity to provide their input into their children's special education programming.

2.2.8 Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

In the earlier historical review of information pertaining to special education law, the author discussed the previous practice of excluding children with disabilities from public schools. From its onset, IDEA placed a great deal of emphasis on the rights of children with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate public education, also referred to as FAPE (34CFR§300.300). According to Yell (2006), "FAPE is defined primarily in accordance with the procedures necessary to ensure that parents and school personnel would collaborate to develop a program of special education and related services that would meet the unique educational needs of individual students" (p. 218). Under the latest revision of IDEA, if parents refuse consent to an evaluation, if they refuse to an initial placement in special education, or if they wish to revoke consent to a

program, they have the right to do so. School districts no longer have the option of due process to force a student to receive special education programming.

This revision to IDEA (the notion that a parent cannot be forced to allow the school to provide special education services) caused a great deal of concern to school districts because they felt it inhibited them from being able to provide FAPE to a student whom they identified as needing special education. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) addressed this issue in a Letter to Frufrost (2004) by stating, “Under the IDEA, a parent’s refusal to consent to the initial provision of special education and related services relieves the school district of the obligation to provide FAPE to that child until the parent provides that consent.”

2.2.9 Due Process

Another required area of parent involvement is in due process. When conflicts occur, parents, as well as other members of the team, have legal rights. Due process applies “to any matter relating to the identification, evaluation, or educational placement of the child, or the provision of a free appropriate public education to such child” under IDEA (34 CFR §615 (b) (6)). Many times, when both parties agree to allow it, mediation is conducted rather than proceeding to a formal hearing (34 CFR §615 (e)(2)(A)). When both parties reach a consensus, they prepare and sign a settlement agreement, which legally binds both parties as to expectations (34 CFR §615 (f) B (iii)) for the student and/or for the school system.

A consent decree is similar to a settlement agreement, but consent decrees are usually the result of class action lawsuits (e.g., *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971); *Chanda Smith v. Los Angeles Unified School District* (1993)). A judge issues the decree with the purpose of bringing about system-wide changes. This legally binding document delineates the

problems that need corrected within the system, in the Smith case, it outlined what changes needed to be made by the school district.

Due process provides an additional means for individual parties to settle conflicts in special education. It affords both parties, including parents, the right to air their grievances before an impartial party, such as a hearing officer or mediator.

2.2.10 Parent Training

Another area where the Federal regulations require parent involvement is in the area of parent training. IDEA declares, “Parent training and information activities assist parents of a child with a disability in dealing with the multiple pressures of parenting such a child” (34 CFR §650 (11)). In the regulations, IDEA emphasizes the importance of open lines of communication between parents and school staff as well as parent involvement in all school processes. It also mandates that school districts train their teachers in using technology to assist them in not only improving their instructional techniques and data collection, but also in better communicating with parents (34 CFR, §654 (a) (2)).

Additionally, IDEA requires that states develop parent-training centers where parents can learn more about their child’s disability and methods of instruction, which can enhance their communication with school staff and give them a better understanding about the special education process in general. Reaching parents of students considered “underserved” (minority, rural population, low income, non-English speakers) is of special interest (34 CFR §671 (b)).

Community resource centers are also a mandated component, with the following required activities:

- (1) provide training and information that meets the training and information needs of parents of children with disabilities proposed to be served by the grant, contract, or cooperative agreement;
- (2) carry out the activities required of parent training and information centers under paragraphs (2) through (9) of section 671(b);
- (3) establish cooperative partnerships with the parent training and information centers funded under section 671; and
- (4) be designed to meet the specific needs of families who experience significant isolation from available sources of information and support. (34 CFR §672)

The Federal regulations emphasize the importance of parents having appropriate training in order to understand the special education process. By ensuring that states develop training centers to address the education of all parents, they demonstrate how vital parent training is.

2.2.11 Mandated Professional Development

Although indirectly related to parent involvement, IDEA also addresses professional development for teachers and other school personnel using scientifically based instructional methods (34 CFR §663 (c) (4)). One of the areas the regulations address involves training to enhance parent involvement. Specifically, IDEA indicates that school districts should “provide training to enable personnel to work with and involve parents in their child’s education, including parents of low income and limited English proficient children with disabilities” (34 CFR, §654 (a) (3) (B)).

2.2.12 Summary

IDEA stresses the importance of parent involvement from the beginning of, and throughout, the special education process. From initial permission to evaluation to identification of a disability to placement and programming, parents can provide valuable insight and input into the process. Although school teams must be cognizant of the legislative requirements, they should also recognize the value of having parents included as equal participants.

2.3 CASE LAW

The purpose of the next section is to provide the reader with an overview of significant case law surrounding the issue of parent involvement in special education. The major cases within the Federal court system, which includes US District Courts, US Circuit Courts of Appeal and the US Supreme Court, are included in this section. The author also included a select number of cases settled at the state level if they were pertinent to the topic of parent involvement. There are many more special education cases involving reimbursement of attorney fees or reimbursement for tuition of parentally placed children in private schools, but these are not included unless the issue of parent involvement is also a factor in the case.

2.3.1 Exclusion from Public Education

The first section addresses early legislation in special education. As late as the 1950's and 1960's, school districts were legally permitted to exclude students with disabilities from public schools despite laws that made education compulsory. In fact, the state statutes and court cases allowed the discrimination to occur. For instance, an Illinois Supreme Court decision in *Department of Welfare v. Haas* (1958) found that the Illinois "compulsory attendance legislation does not require that state to provide a free public education for the 'feeble minded' or to children who are 'mentally deficient' and who, because of their limited intelligence, are unable to reap the benefits of a good education" (Yell, 2006, p.63).

As noted earlier, the two groundbreaking cases responsible for a national change in position concerning the education of students with disabilities were *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971) and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972)). Both had far-reaching consequences and set a precedent for special education law as it is today in that school districts are now required to consider general education for all students before looking for a different program outside of the school district. Because of these cases, school districts are also mandated to examine all supports and services that can be delivered in the general education setting (34CFR§300.114(2)(i)).

2.3.2 FAPE

Subsequent to the cases that paved the way for mandating that students with disabilities must be educated in public schools, several important cases addressed appropriate educational programming within the schools. In a landmark special education case before the United States

Supreme Court, the Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley (1982) set the benchmark for deciding if a school district has met the requirements for delivering FAPE to a student with a disability. The two-part “Rowley Standard” asks the following questions: “Has the [district] complied with the procedures in the act [IDEA]? And is the IEP reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits?” (Yell, 2006, p. 228). These criteria are now the yardstick used to examine many of the cases that have come before the courts in the years since the Rowley case.

Although many decisions tend to favor children and their families, in another Supreme Court case dealing with FAPE, Burlington School Committee v. Massachusetts Department of Education (1985), the Court ruled in favor of the school district. In this case, the school district developed an IEP for a student in third grade and a proposed a placement, which parents felt was not adequate to meet the student’s needs. Thus, they moved their son to a private school placement and sought to have the district reimburse the cost of the private school because they claimed the school district had not provided FAPE. The Supreme Court ruled that the district had proposed an adequate placement and the parents were not due reimbursement because the parents had declined the adequate placement.

Some cases have led to systemic change. In Chanda Smith v. Los Angeles Unified School District (1993), a group of parents filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of students with disabilities who were not provided FAPE. The suit focused on lack of child find procedures and record keeping, citing a specific case where a student (Chanda Smith) transferred within the district to another school and waited two years for a special education evaluation, despite having failed twice and having parent requests for the evaluation. Other students with disabilities in the school district suffered similar circumstances. The result of the case was a consent decree,

which resulted in 17 implementation plans in July 2000 (Kerr and Barber, 2000). The district has since filed an appeal and the court modified the consent decree to include 18 measurable outcomes, which will be discharged as the goals are reached (Ramanathan, 2004). The outcome of the lawsuit was the identification of a need for systemic change to the entire special education system of the Los Angeles School District.

Lawsuits focusing on the issue of FAPE mainly focus on school districts not meeting up to expectations in the provision of an appropriate education. In contrast, a California District Court case took a different position. *Goleta Union Elementary School District v. Andrew Ordway* (2001) was one of the first cases in which the courts held a school official personally liable for violating FAPE requirements under IDEA. In this case, the special education administrator failed to provide a student who had an identified emotional disturbance with an appropriate educational program. The administrator had moved the student to a different school without an evaluation to determine if the student's placement was appropriate. The court found in favor of the parents and they were subsequently reimbursed for fees they incurred by providing their son with services outside the school district in a residential group home. This case may become the standard for future lawsuits in which parents allege the schools violation of FAPE by making school district officials individually responsible for the provision of FAPE.

FAPE is an essential component in special education regulations. The decisions found in the case law surrounding FAPE make it clear that the topic is an important one for students with disabilities. Protecting those students' rights to receive a public education that is appropriate to meet their needs is one of the key issues in special education.

2.3.3 Procedural Safeguards

The next issue examined concerns parents' rights and the legal safeguards provided to them. Several important cases cite a school district's failure to provide parents with notice of their rights. In *Hall v. Vance County Board of Education* (1985), a U.S. Circuit Court case, "a school was found to have denied a FAPE because of its repeated failure to notify parents of their rights under IDEA" (Yell, 2006, p 229). In this case, the school district failed to give parents any notice of their rights during a three-year period when their son was making little to no progress in reading. They also continued to offer an IEP with the same goals each year. Parents placed their son in a private school, where he began making progress almost immediately. The court ruled that the school repeatedly failed to explain procedures to the parent and hindered their son from receiving FAPE.

Parents' rights to provide input into the special education process is another important component of their procedural safeguard rights. In *Honig v. Doe* (1988), a school district attempted to suspend a student indefinitely for violence toward another student. Parents refused a change in placement. The U.S. Supreme court ruled that, even if school district officials are concerned for the safety and welfare of other students, they are not permitted to indefinitely suspend that student. However, schools do have the ability to seek a court ruling to change placement (Hersh & Johansen, 2007). It is important to note that in this case, the court ruled that IDEA "guarantee(s) parents both an opportunity for meaningful input into all decisions affecting their children's education and the right to seek review of any decision they think inappropriate" (Yell, 2006, p. 335). In *Honig v. Doe*, the school district did not offer the parents that opportunity.

Another procedural safeguard involves parents' rights to an evaluation. In 2001, *Amanda C. v. Clark County School District and Nevada Department of Education* was a case in the ninth Circuit Court, which centered on instruction of a student with autism. The school district did not evaluate the child as parents requested, which the court ruled "adversely affected the parents' ability to make decisions which in turn damaged their child and was a violation of FAPE" (Rutledge, n.d., p.1). The outcome of this case focused on the school district's failure to carry out its duty to ensure the procedural safeguards of parents by completing an evaluation to help them and the school staff make sound educational decisions for a student.

Parents also have the right to receive information that is easy for them to understand. In *AK v. Alexandria City School District (2007)*, parents sought damages through the Appellate Court because their son did not receive FAPE due to an imprecision in the IEP. The school district wrote in the IEP that the child would attend a private day school, without naming the actual school. Although the court noted that a school must not necessarily be named in an IEP, "certainly in a case in which the parents express doubt concerning the existence of a particular school that can satisfactorily provide the level of services that the IEP describes, the IEP must identify such a school to offer a FAPE" (*AK v. Alexandria, 2007*). The court agreed with the parents that they did not have a clear understanding of placement options, which was in contradiction to the requirements of the procedural safeguards in IDEA.

Apparent in the court case examples is the importance of providing parents with procedural safeguard rights. Not only do parents need to know and understand their rights, but school districts also need to ensure that they follow the regulations regarding those parents' rights. School personnel should provide information that is clear and easy to understand. Parents should actively participate in the special education process and given opportunity to

provide input into the educational decision-making process for their children. The next section provides information regarding specific cases that focus on parent input in IEP's.

2.3.4 IEP Parent Input

IDEA outlines parent involvement in IEP meetings in numerous sections. Parents have the right to provide input regarding their concerns about their children's education and information about their children's strengths as one of the required members of the IEP Team. Several cases have focused on the topic of parent involvement in the development of IEPs.

In *W.G. & B.G. v. Board of Trustees of Target Range School District No. 23* (1991), the Circuit Court ruled in favor of the parents because the school district developed an IEP without the involvement of the parents or the regular education teacher. The district had the IEP prepared in advance without any parental input. The court ruled that this constituted a denial of FAPE under IDEA, which explicitly requires parent participation in the development of IEPs.

In a related case in 1992 (*Big Beaver Falls Area School District v. Jackson*), a "state court in Pennsylvania wrote that impromptu meetings between a student's mother and school officials did not satisfy the IDEA requirement of affording parents the opportunity to participate in the development of the IEP" (Osbourne & Russo, 2006, p. 84). IEP meetings, by definition, are to be formal meetings with all required members in attendance, with the exception of those whom the parents formally excuse.

Parent involvement in instructional decision-making was a major focus of *Deal v. Hamilton County Board of Education* (2004). This case centers on a student with autism. Parents had evidence to show the student was making progress using a specific method of instruction (Lovaas-ABA) in preschool and requested the same instructional program as he

entered kindergarten. The school district did not have Lovaas instruction available for any student within the district and prescribed a generic methodology for the student's instruction. Parents rejected the IEP and sent their child to a private school where he made progress in the Lovaas method. As part of their findings, the Circuit Court noted, "educators could not predetermine a child's placement in an IEP where doing so prevented his parents from having a meaningful opportunity to participate in its development" (Osborn & Russo, 2006, p. 87).

Although much of the case law regarding parent participation in decision-making shows that the court protects parents by finding in their favor, some parents attempted to use the parent input regulations to win their case. The next case is one such example. In *Laddie v. Department of Education, State of Hawaii* (2009), the father of a student with autism was in dispute with the school district concerning moving the student from a private school to a public school placement. One of the key complaints that the father had was that the district failed to get his participation in the placement decision-making, resulting in denial of FAPE. The parent attended the IEP meetings, but disagreed with the resulting IEP. In its ruling, the court stated, "the mere existence of a difference in opinion between a parent and the rest of the IEP team is not sufficient to show that the parent was denied full participation in the process" (Laddie, 2009). In other words, disagreement does not negate the fact that the parent was a participant in the process.

IDEA guarantees parent participation in educational programming decisions, but that does not ensure that there will always be agreement by both parties, only that the members' input are given equal consideration. Parents are supposed to collaborate with school teams to develop a plan for their children, which is mutually agreeable to both parties.

2.3.5 Due Process Rights

Several cases are included because of their importance to parents of children receiving special education services. Those cases concern parent rights in due process proceedings. *Schaffer v. West Montgomery County Public Schools* (2005) is a U.S. Supreme Court case that places the onus of proving a case on the presenting party. In other words, no longer is it up to a school district in every case to prove that they are providing FAPE. *Schaffer v. West* sets a precedent for future court cases between parents and school districts. Now, if a parent is suing a school district, then it is up to that parent to prove what they are alleging is true. This is different from the past where the school district had to build a case to defend their actions any time a parent brought a special education lawsuit.

In addition, there are two important cases on the topic of parents representing themselves *pro se* (without legal representation) in IDEA cases. The first is a Circuit Court Case (*Maroni v. Pemi-Baker*, 2003), a lawsuit in which the reviewing magistrate judge threw out the case before it went to district court. Parents appealed and the appellate court overturned the case, citing that parents are aggrieved parties when they have a minor child and, as such, have the right to represent themselves in cases involving IDEA issues. A similar case went before the U.S. Supreme Court. In *Winkelman v. Parma City School District* (2007), “the Supreme Court ruled that parents may represent their children's interests in special education cases *pro se*, and are not required to hire a lawyer before going to court. The Court held that parents have legal rights under the IDEA and can pursue IDEA claims on their own behalf, although they are not licensed attorneys” Rutledge (n.d.). Thus, the argument about parent *pro se* representation has been silenced for the time being.

2.4 BARRIERS TO PARENT PARTICIPATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION TRANSITION PLANNING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

When the most recent federal special education law (Individuals with Education Act, 2004) went into effect, parents were, as they had been in the past, mandated participants in all aspects of the special education process. In actuality, however, “parent involvement is typically passive in nature and perceived as such by school personnel” (Dabkowski, 2004, p. 63). The research on parent involvement in special education often cites parent passive participation in the process (Dabkowski, 2004; Heatherington, et al., 2010; Turner, 2001). Parent passivity occurs in all aspects of the special education process where school district personnel drive the process. Because parent input is required as part of the annual paperwork, the parent’s role is often limited to information provider. Nevertheless, the purpose of the law was to create partnerships with parents in their children’s educational programs. Partnership implies active engagement, which does not appear to be the norm.

The objective of this section is two-fold. First, it provides a brief explanation of the role of the parent in the special education process, particularly with regard to post-secondary transition planning, a required component of any student’s special education program when they have reached the age of 16 and beyond. The second purpose of this section is to identify what researchers cite as barriers to active parent participation in the secondary transition process.

2.4.1 Parent’s Role in the Transition Process

In IDEA (2004), as a student reaches the age of 16, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team must meet to develop a transition plan. The Team is comprised of at least one special

education teacher, a regular education teacher, a local education agency (LEA) representative, the student's parents, and the student. The transition plan sets forth goals for the student as he/she approaches the time to leave school and move on to life after high school. The plan addresses not only academic and vocational goals needed to reach the final objective, but also community participation and home living goals.

Research studies demonstrating that parent involvement in children's schooling helps to increase their achievement are numerous (Carter, 2000; McDonnall, Cavanaugh, & Giesen, 2010)). In addition, parent involvement in special education post-secondary transition program development can improve post-school outcomes (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008). Geenen, Powers, and Lopez-Vasquez (2001) found a statistical correlation between parents being involved in students' special education transition planning and their ability to hold jobs for longer periods. Thus, there is sufficient evidence to show that the role parents play in the success of students with disabilities is very important and it is crucial that schools find a way to improve the participation of parents in all areas of special education, including the transition process. According to Bakken and Obiakor (2008), "only transition plans that represent a thoughtful unified vision will lead to a course of action that will result in optimal postsecondary school outcomes for students" (p. 80). When parents and school staff come together to formulate that vision, all students benefit. Unfortunately, parent involvement in the transition process is often limited. As noted in research by Katsiyannis and Ward (1992) and Knopf and Swift (2008), there are numerous reasons as to why parent involvement may be limited, including time factors and lack of knowledge about the process. The next section discusses those potential barriers to parent involvement in more detail.

2.4.2 Barriers to Parent Involvement in Special Education Transition

Because the literature specific to barriers to parent involvement in the transition process is not abundant (See Footnote¹), the author chose to include general information regarding barriers to parent participation in children's schooling. Where possible, the emphasis is on participation of parents of secondary students (ages 16 to 21) because that is the age range where transition planning takes place. However, the author has also included general research concerning barriers to parent participation in school processes, as they are also relevant to special education participation and the transition process.

Three major themes concerning barriers to parent involvement emerged from a review of the extant research and these themes provide the organizational framework for this section of the paper. The themes include school-generated barriers, parent-generated barriers, and societally generated barriers. The following is a review of the literature on each theme. The reader will note that some of the barriers overlap in each of the three theme areas.

2.4.3 School-Generated Barriers

School personnel, including teachers and administrators, create numerous barriers to active parent participation in many school processes, including the special education process. Some of

¹ In an attempt to find research pertinent to parent involvement in transition, the author searched the terms *barriers to parent involvement in special education transition, parent participation(involvement/engagement) in post-secondary transition, parent engagement (involvement, participation) in special education, parent engagement (involvement, participation) in IEPs , obstacles to parent involvement in special education, and special education transition barriers, and barriers to parent participation in school.*

these barriers are intentional and others occur because of the bureaucratic nature of school systems. Although the barriers noted in the research are numerous, the focus of this section is on the major issues that repeatedly appear in the literature.

2.4.3.1 Communication Barriers

Inadequate communication is one of the most frequently cited reasons for parents' lack of participation in school processes in general. According to Downer and Myers (2010), communication, as intended by the federal regulations in No Child Left Behind, is defined "in terms of regular, bidirectional and meaningful interactions between parents and schools that ensure that parents play a central role and are actively encouraged to be involved in their children's" (p. 16) educational experience. In the special education transition process, communication involves informing parents of meetings, providing parents with information regarding programs and services, asking questions of the parents regarding their children and their disabilities, listening to parents' concerns and ideas, and ascertaining what knowledge the parents have or may need.

A breakdown in communication processes can produce parental distrust toward school staff (Adams & Christenson, 2000). They defined trust as "confidence that the other person will act in a way to benefit or sustain the relationship, or the implicit or explicit goals of the relationship" (p. 480). In their research, Adams and Christenson (2000) surveyed approximately 1,500 parents and teachers regarding how often they interacted with each other, whether they trusted each other, and what each would recommend for increasing the level of trust they had with each other. Their findings suggest parents have more trust in teachers than teachers do in parents. They also showed that the level of trust decreases for both teachers and parents as their

children progress from elementary school to middle school and then high school. This phenomenon can be explained by the decreasing amount of parent involvement as students get older. Likewise, several authors suggest that the frequency with which school personnel communicate with parents decreases as a student progresses into the higher grades (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Halsey, 2005). Only one study found that parents receive increasingly more communication from schools as they move into the higher grades (Cameto, 2005).

Language barriers may be another aspect of communication that inhibits parent involvement. Language barriers are always a possibility when working with students who come from culturally and linguistically diverse families (Karge & Lasky, 2011; Lo, 2008). School personnel do not always communicate effectively with these families using their native languages, which can impede the effective exchange of information inherent in good communication practices. IDEA (§300.500-504) requires parents to be provided with information about their rights in language that they can understand. Despite these requirements, school personnel often use technical jargon, which even those who speak English as their native language may have difficulty understanding (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006).

One further barrier to effective communication is when parents are not given the opportunity to provide appropriate input into their children's IEP. This occurs when they are not asked by school staff to provide information that may be pertinent for their child's IEP or when their information is not included in the IEP despite having provided it. According to Bakken and Obiakor (2008),

Parents hold information most vital to educators during this time in their children's lives [transition to postsecondary education]. Strengths, weaknesses, likes, dislikes, dreams, and hobbies are all aspects of a young person's life that need to be discussed and

documented to design an appropriate transition plan which will benefit him/her in the future. To come together in a productive teaming situation, educators must learn to appreciate the parents' role as teachers, understand the family structure, and develop ways to effectively communicate to ensure success for the student. (p. 70)

Two-way communication is a valuable component in working with parents during all school processes, especially when preparing a student to transition from school into the world beyond school. In fact, "improving home-school communication [is] identified as a primary way to enhance trust" between parents and school staff members (Adams & Christenson, 2000, p. 477).

2.4.3.2 Barriers to Collaborative Practices/Relationship Building

Communication is also a key component to building a collaborative relationship that is based in trust and respect. In fact, Starr and Foy (2012) indicate that the "variables of collaboration and communication may be the key determinants of parent satisfaction" with the special education process (p. 213). One of the barriers to being able to collaborate effectively is the unequal role of teacher and parent. Harry (1992) describes "parents in the role of consent-giver in a grossly asymmetrical form of discourse" (p. 123). As written in the federal regulations, parents are to be partners with the school staff in developing transition plans. In actuality, rather than being co-contributors to the process, parents often interact less as collaborators and more as passive participants (Dabkowski, 2004, Heatherington et al., 2010; Rehfeldt, Clark, & Lee, 2010; Turner, 2001).

Another barrier to collaboration is that, although school personnel tend to make the effort to comply with the federal regulations by having parents participate, they often fail to recognize

the value of the information parents can provide. Thus, they fail to “make an effort to foster empowerment through collaboration” (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997, p. 231). The authors suggest following a family-centered approach to effective collaboration, which involves building relationships by fostering a high regard for parent input and is in contrast to a school approach where the district dictates the outcome. A school-centered approach is demonstrated when school district personnel have pre-meetings to discuss the individual student and predetermine what the IEP will provide, which Fish (2008) recommends should be discouraged as a practice if there is to be true collaboration. Characteristics of a family-centered versus a school-centered approach, along with the researchers that cited each trait, are presented in Figure 1.

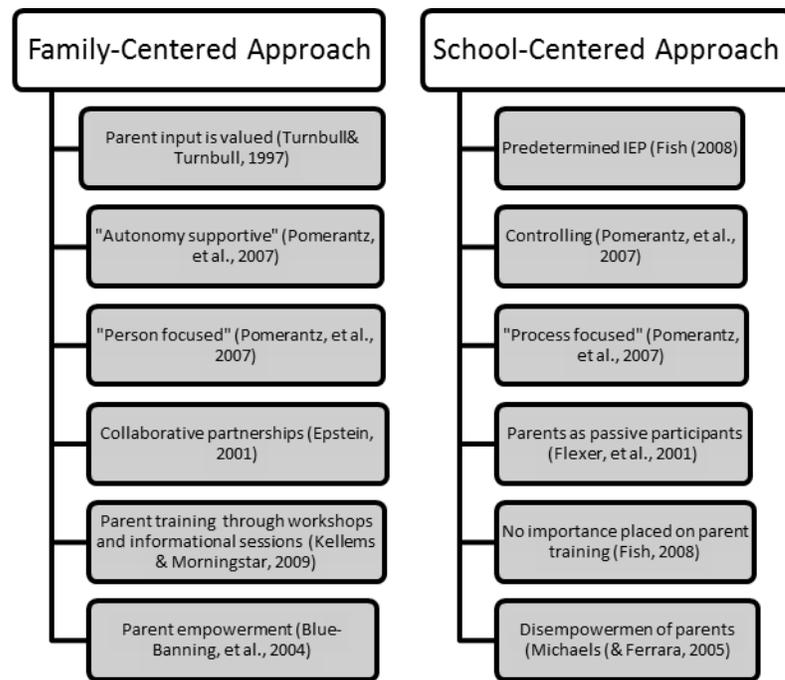


Figure 1. Family-Centered vs. School-Centered Approach to Collaboration

2.4.3.3 Barriers Due to Insufficient Training and Education

Along with communication and collaboration, parents need to have an understanding of the special education process and their role in it. The Federal regulations in IDEA specifically mandate that parent training be made available by school districts and in fact, makes provisions for parent training centers to be developed (34 CFR § 650 (1) (11) (B)). Research conducted by Heatherington et al. (2010) found that parents felt unprepared to participate in their children's transition planning because of their lack of understanding of the process and their role in it. Katsiyannis and Ward (1992) noted that in order "for parents to participate fully, they must have an understanding of the process and their rights" (p. 55).

In addition to parents needing training, teachers and school personnel must also have a strong understanding about students' disabilities and how they will affect the students' educational progress (Phillips, 2008; Starr & Foy, 2012; Valle, 2011). Teachers should improve their knowledge about the services available to students and their parents as the students make the transition to life after school, such as health-related services like SSI (Social Security Supplemental Security Income) or food stamps (Grigal & Neubert, 2004). Teachers should also be able to direct parents to what is available for their children when they graduate and help them to navigate the systems.

Lastly, both parents and teachers benefit from training in effective collaboration (Whitbread, 2007). This would assist them in building skills in negotiation, which parents note they are lacking themselves (Heatherington et al., 2010). Best practices for building effective collaborative teams will be discussed later in this chapter.

2.4.3.4 Barriers Due to Team Dynamics

The structure of IEP teams can sometimes become a barrier to parent involvement. What members comprise the team, which member assumes the role of team leader, and which members tend to dominate the meetings can set the tone for future parent participation (Dabkowski, 2010; Trussell, Hammond, & Ingalls, 2008). If parents feel they are valued team members, who are free to offer their opinions, and if they feel respected by the other members of the team, then they are more apt to be active participants in future meetings (Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992).

2.4.3.5 Scheduling and Logistical Barriers

School personnel sometimes cause logistical barriers unintentionally. Special education regulations mandate that parents receive an invitation to participate in IEP meetings. The invitation provides parents with the time and date of the meeting, as well as whom the other participants will be. In a study done by Katsiyannis and Ward (1992) examining school compliance in special education, the authors found that sometimes special education teachers failed to send parent invitations or that they were sent too late, not allowing the parents sufficient time to arrange their schedules in order to be able to participate. In addition, because school staff members work on a set schedule, they commonly only plan meetings during school hours. Parents note that because they also work, the times available for meetings are often not mutually convenient, which hinders them from participating (Harry, 1992).

Furthermore, many parents have other children in the home and either do not have a babysitter available or are unable to pay for childcare. Schools do not offer to help with the other children, thus inhibiting parent involvement (Harry, 1992). Transportation can also be an

issue that keeps parents from attending meetings (Harry, 1992; Knopf & Swift, 2008). In order for schools to be better able to meet parents' needs, they need to consider important logistical issues that may hinder parents' ability to be present at meetings.

2.4.3.6 Barriers Due to Attitude

Teacher attitude can also play an important role in parent involvement in special education. Not only are teacher attitudes towards parents a factor in the team process, but also their attitude toward the parents' role in the process and their attitude about the students' disabilities are factors as well (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parents often feel devalued when their input is not seen as important by teachers and other school staff, or is not included in the IEP (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008; Lo, 2008). In another study, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) noted that there can be a disparity between the goals parents have for their children and the ones that teachers have. In fact, teachers often report that parents are unrealistic in the goals they set for their children. This lack of shared perspective can interfere greatly with the team building process (Karge & Lasky, 2007).

2.4.3.7 Summary

A review of the school-generated barriers to parent involvement in the post-secondary transition process shows that although they may be unintentional, they do exist. School personnel need to examine carefully not only logistical issues, but also systemic issues to determine where they need to make improvements so that parents are more involved in the transition planning process.

2.4.4 Parent-Created Barriers

Less research is available regarding barriers to parent involvement because of the parents themselves than there is for school-generated barriers. The reason data are not available is unclear; however, one can postulate that researchers have more access to public school employees than to parents. Thus, the preponderance of the research discusses where schools are lacking as opposed to where parents may also be lacking. Another possible reason for less parent research may be that it may be too sensitive a topic to discuss parent issues, so it is easier to discuss system issues instead. Nonetheless, the next section focuses on the barriers that parents bring that inhibits their involvement in special education transition planning.

2.4.4.1 Communication Barriers

Similar to the communication barriers noted under the school-generated section, parent issues regarding effective communication also play a key role in special education teams. In their 2010 study, Rehfeld et al. advocated for using a structured communication tool (The Transition Planning Inventory) to allow parents to voice their concerns and facilitate meaningful conversations between school personnel and parents. The tool asks targeted questions that address specific transitional goals rather than relying on parents to provide detailed anecdotal information, which is sometimes not provided.

Parents often do not possess the same level of understanding regarding disabilities, special education terminology, and programming as school staff members do, which often makes it difficult for parents to communicate with school staff. In those cases, it is sometimes

necessary to bring in an outside advocate who can help to bridge the communication gap for the parent (Cohen, 2009; Phillips, 2008).

2.4.4.2 Barriers Due to Lack of Understanding

As previously mentioned, when parents do not have an understanding of the basic processes involved in special education, there is a large barrier to their participation in the process. It is important for parents to have a clear understanding of their rights in the special education process (Landmark & Zhang, 2012; Trainor, 2010). In IDEA, the school district has the responsibility to ensure that parents receive training in the areas where their knowledge is lacking (34 CFR §650 (11)). This includes not only information about their child's disability, but also information about their rights and role in the special education process.

2.4.4.3 Barriers Related to Trust

Collaborative teaming depends upon parents and school personnel developing a mutual trust. In fact, according to Starr and Foy (2012), school personnel should “focus on establishing a climate of trust through regular communication and collaboration with each child's parent” if they are to achieve a true partnership with parents (p. 213). When parents feel that the school does not value their input and feel like they are constantly in an adversarial position with school staff, it is virtually impossible for them to trust the professionals who work with their children (Hetherington, et al., 2010). Research has also shown that once conflict occurs, there is a loss of trust. This can damage the relationship between parents and school staff, sometimes beyond repair (Nowell & Salem, 2007).

2.4.4.4 Barriers Due to Previous Personal Experience

Previous experience not only refers to a parent's own experiences in school (which may not always have been positive), but also previous experience in the special education process as they navigated the system over the years their child was in school. In their book, Bakken and Obiakor (2008) suggest that when parents have a negative experience in the earlier years of their children's education, that can affect their participation in the future because "by the time transition planning takes place, parents have had years of experience in IEP meetings which have been plagued by such barriers" (p. 71).

Previous experiences, especially when there has been a due process proceeding, can also create a barrier to parent involvement (Nowell & Salem, 2007). Trussell, Hammond and Ingalls (2008) cite an "historical precedent of negative experiences and interactions between school personnel and families of children with disabilities" (p. 20). Thus, negatively perceived experiences can prevent a parent from becoming involved in the system where they have had those experiences.

2.4.4.5 Parent and Family Characteristics as Barriers

Parents may be less likely to participate in school processes due to numerous personal and family characteristics. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) refer to these characteristics as "parents' current life contexts" (p. 41). A parent's educational level may contribute to his/her understanding of school processes or lack thereof. A parent's job status also has an effect on how much they are able to interact with school personnel due to time limitations, especially if a parent works during school hours and is only available in the evening.

Additionally, family structure is a significant factor to consider (Knopf & Swick, 2008). Single parent households, dual-working parents, smaller family sizes, and children raised by grandparents or foster parents are all issues that may prohibit parents from being able to fully participate and contribute to the special education team process.

In addition, worthy of mention, is the issue of parent health concerns. Some parents have complications in their lives caused by physical disabilities or medical concerns. Mental health issues are a further complication for some families. All of these issues can affect parents' ability to participate in their children's educational programming (Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992).

Surprisingly, a family's socioeconomic status is not a predictor of a student's post-secondary success (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2011; Lindstrom et al., 2007). According to Carter et al. (2011), the expectations of the parents are more predictive about how successful a student will be after they graduate.

2.4.4.6 Parent Perceptions as Barriers

The following excerpt from *A Guide to Special Education Advocacy: What Parents, Clinicians and Advocates Need to Know* (Cohen, 2009) illustrates a negative attitude that a parent may have toward school personnel in the special education process:

The legally mandated individualized education program (IEP) planning meetings for students - intended to be forums for mutual sharing, collaboration and brainstorming - instead often function as a procedure for rote recitation of written reports, for stonewalling, or even for outright hostility and contentiousness. Rather than serving as a forum for promoting communication, these meetings can become the battleground for

conflicts over problems, real or imagined, big or small, between the parents and the school. (p. 18)

This passage typifies the anger and defensiveness seen by parents throughout the special education process (Evans, 2003). Parent perceptions regarding their treatment by school personnel in the past can have a powerful impact on future relationships. Likewise, the feelings parents have regarding being acknowledged as equal partners on the school team can also affect their relationships with school staff members (Hornby & Lavaele, 2011). If their experience has been that of a valued team member, then parents are less likely to have a negative attitude or perception that will have an influence upon the entire team process in the future.

2.4.4.7 Summary

Although the research is more limited in scope than the research on school-generated barriers, parent-created barriers also inhibit productive parent involvement in the special education transition planning process. It is important for school personnel to recognize that these barriers exist and to implement programs and improve communication in order to prevent these impediments from having an impact on the planning of a student's transition from school to work.

2.4.5 Societal Barriers

The next section explores barriers that exist due to law, culture, and the school system, in general. Although some of these barriers have been touched upon in the previous two sections, they merit mention as a larger societal barrier as well.

2.4.5.1 Barriers Due to Language of Special Education/Disability Law

Whether parent language difficulties are due to cultural/linguistic differences or whether they are due to a lack of understanding of the vocabulary, parents often have a difficult time navigating the special education system because of language barriers. Special educators have the tendency to use jargon and acronyms, with which they are very familiar, but parents are not (Lo, 2008). Like other areas of the law, special education law is often difficult to understand unless very familiar with the verbiage. This can create a gap between parents and educators unless parents clearly understand the law and the process.

There are several studies regarding the readability levels of special education procedural safeguards (Table 2). Procedural safeguards are the legal documents provided by school districts to parents outlining their rights with regard to special education. Although the regulations recommend that parents' rights handouts contain language that the average person can decipher, studies show that they tend to be written at a higher level than many parents are able to read (Mandic, Rudd, Hahir, & Acevedo-Garcia, 2012). This creates a literacy barrier for many parents and can hinder their understanding of the process or their rights.

Table 3. Readability Studies Summary

READABILITY STUDIES

Authors	Documents examined	Formula used	Grade level of text
Pruitt (2003)	Special education documents, procedural safeguards for one Tennessee School	Flesch	Mean = Grade 12
Fitzgerald & Watkins (2006)	Procedural Safeguards for all states except Ohio	Flesch	Mean = Grade 12
Mandic et al. (2012)	Procedural Safeguards for all 50 states and D.C.	SMOG formula	Mean = Grade 16 Median = Grade 16

2.4.5.2 Barriers Because School Staff Are Viewed As Experts

There is often inequality in the roles of the various team members on IEP teams. Parents are often passive participants, while teachers consider themselves the specialists (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008; Valle, 2011). School personnel often prepare IEP documents before the meeting, allowing the parents very little input into the document. Thus, schools “deprive parents of empowerment” to which they are entitled under special education law (Mannan & Blackwell, 1992, p. 220).

Very often students with low incidence disabilities (those that are not as common, i.e., spina bifida or deaf-blindness) have individual needs about which parents can provide the school valuable information, but school personnel dismiss the information as having no value (Valle, 2011).

Moreover, parent training opportunities are frequently presented as a “one-way transmission of knowledge...that effectively dismisses the value of parent knowledge and any chance for collaboration” (Valle, 2011, p. 188). Turner (2001) suggests that if IEP teams are to be truly effective, parent training should target collaboration with school teams and not just parents’ lack of knowledge.

2.4.5.3 Deficit Views of People with Disabilities

Several authors address what they term the deficit view that school staff have toward students with disabilities (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008; Harry, 1992; Karge and Lasky, 2011). Oftentimes, school personnel make a judgment about a student’s lack of ability to achieve. They tend to have lower expectations for the students’ futures than their parents do (Heatherington et al., 2010). It is easy to see how believing that a child does not have the potential to achieve can lead to insufficient targeted goals and objectives, which may negatively affect the student’s future outcomes for transitioning from school.

2.4.5.4 Barriers Due to Culture

There are many barriers to parent involvement due to cultural diversity. Parents that are not native English speakers especially have a difficult time understanding not only the language, but also the entire process of special education. Lo (2008) studied Chinese families and the barriers they faced in the special education process. She noted that the cultural mores in China toward

teachers, who are esteemed, respected, and not to be confronted or questioned, places a whole new set of barriers to the collaborative process. Other ethnic groups face similar challenges.

There are many definitions for the term *culture* that extend beyond a person's nationality. A school can also have a culture of its own, which can be defined as:

The character of a school as it reflects deep patterns of values, beliefs and traditions that have been formed over the course of its history...This invisible, taken-for-granted flow of beliefs and assumptions gives meaning to what people say and do. It shapes how they interpret hundreds of daily transactions. This deeper structure of life in organizations is reflected and transmitted through symbolic language and expressive action. Culture consists of the stable, underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time. (Deal and Peterson, 1990, p. 7)

School climate can also be a form of culture. At times, the culture in the school may not be one that is conducive to parents initiating communication with staff and not perceived as being welcoming (Mannan & Blackwell, 1992). The culture of the school may be one where there is more focus on the school system rather than on a family involvement model (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). In order to facilitate family or parent involvement, Starr and Foy (2012) recommend that schools work toward creating a trusting climate, where parents feel they are part of the community.

2.4.5.5 Summary

Societally generated barriers also inhibit parent involvement in the special education transition process. These include the law, culture and systemic barriers. In order for the transition process

to be successful, school personnel must examine the cultural barriers within the school system to ensure that they are not hindering parent involvement in the process.

2.4.6 Conclusion

The research surrounding barriers to parent involvement in school processes is extensive, as reflected in this review. It is evident by the sheer number of articles reviewed that “the existence of a gap between rhetoric and reality” with regard to meaningful parent participation in the special education process continues to be a reality (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011, p. 50). While the barriers cited in this review of literature are numerous, they are not insurmountable. By careful planning, training of both parents and school staff, and careful observance of the legal mandates, true collaboration in the special education transition process is an achievable goal, with the result being a smooth and successful student transition to life after high school. By ensuring that parents are active participants in the transition process, schools can help students benefit.

2.5 BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING PARENTS IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION TRANSITION PROCESS

2.5.1 Introduction

Family involvement is important to an adolescent student with a disability making the transition from school to life as noted throughout this literature review. The main reasons cited include improved achievement and improved post-school outcomes, including longer-term employment.

In their research on focus groups of families of transition-aged students in the Commonwealth of Virginia, deFur, et al. (2001) found that “families of youth with disabilities continue to report a perception of ‘not being valued or listened to’ as they participate in the special education process and decision making” (p. 20). The next section of the literature review investigates what the research cites as best practices for getting parents to engage actively in the transition process as opposed to the passive involvement that appears to be the norm (Flexer, Simmons, Luft, & Baer, 2001). For the purposes of answering this research question, the author uses the terms *family involvement* and *parent involvement* interchangeably.

In a meta-analysis, Landmark, Ju, and Zhang (2010) reviewed 29 studies that related to post-secondary transition and identified several practices as best practices in IEP transition planning. The factors identified include providing work experience opportunities, preparation for employment, teaching self-determination skills, providing increased opportunities for student inclusion in general education, training in life skills and social skills, and ensuring family involvement in the transition process. In fact, family participation ranked third in importance among the eight practices identified. The study was a follow-up to the research on the importance of family involvement by Kohler and Field (1996), who initially identified the concept as a best practice in post-secondary IEP transitions through their earlier review of literature. Powers et al. (2005) also completed a study about transition components in which they reviewed 399 transition IEPs. Although the study largely focused on compliance with federal special education regulations, the authors additionally compiled a list of effective practices for transition, which included improved parent participation as one of the recommendations. Likewise, Lubbers, Repetto, and McGorray (2008) suggested that family involvement is one of the most important “processes to support transition” (p. 281).

In contrast to the numerous studies citing parent or family involvement as one of the most important factors to a successful transition, Test, Fowler, White, Richter, and Walker (2009) found only one study in the research literature to show that family involvement in transition is an evidence-based practice. Their research included a review of 32 articles written from 1984 to 2008 considered high or acceptable in quality based on criteria by the *What Works in Transition Research Synthesis Project* (Alwell & Cobb, 2009). The articles they examined included group and single subject experiments, literature reviews and meta-analyses. Their findings suggest that there is only a moderate level of evidence in the literature to suggest family involvement is important in post-secondary transition. In their discussion of limitations; however, the authors do state that they did not complete an exhaustive search of literature on each topic. Thus, they may have overlooked additional evidence-based research on family participation. Although there may have been a lack of experimental research into the importance of family participation in the transition process, there is ample evidence in the special education research to support the need for family involvement in students' special education planning in general. Moreover, studies by Kohler (1993) and Landmark, Ju and Zhang (2010), which reviewed numerous studies on transition practices, found that family involvement is necessary to successful transitions for students.

This section of the review of literature focuses on five prominent best practices most frequently cited in the research on engaging parents in the transition process. They include:

- Parent training
- Training of school personnel
- Communication
- Family/school collaboration

- Parent empowerment.

It is important to note that each individually addressed area is connected and none of these practices alone is sufficient to build strong partnerships with parents. Each of the components is an area where schools may need to focus attention to improve their practices in working with parent to build successful, collaborative IEP Transition teams.

2.5.2 Parent Training

The need for family training to improve participation in the special education process is a general theme that emerges in the literature. In fact, according to Boone (1992), parent training is the one practice that has been emphasized most with regard to improving parent involvement. Parent training comes in varying forms. Although there is a necessity for parents to understand the legal regulations regarding their participation in the IEP transition process, McMahan and Baer (2001) suggest that “training transition stakeholders in compliance issues, alone, will not necessarily enhance the education of the youth with disabilities” (p. 183). Nor will it increase parent participation in the transition planning process. Kellems and Morningstar (2009) suggest that school districts should offer informational sessions, such as “futures nights,” where parents are provided with resource information. Information provided could include materials on what governmental programs the transitioning student may be eligible (i.e., social security disability), what social services are available, and how to access community resources in the area. This is corroborated in a study by Hagner et al. (2012), who suggest that “families also need factual information about the complex systems of supports and funding streams” available to them (p. 43). Additional resource recommendations for parents include “transition brochures and tip sheets” (Kellems & Morningstar, 2009, p. 66), training regarding careers and post-secondary

education (Lindstrom et al., 2007), and providing parents with a state or local case manager to help parents navigate the system (Timmons, Whitney-Thomas, & McIntyre, n.d.).

Parent support groups are also proposed as a best practice in assisting parents by connecting them to others who have had similar lived experiences and can share what they have learned in their own journeys (Timmons et al., n.d.). Additionally, pre-conference training is a recommended practice whereby parents are briefed as to what to expect in the upcoming meeting. Pre-conference training not only assists parents in being better prepared for the actual meeting, but also helps them to better understand their role in the upcoming meeting (Boone, 1992).

2.5.3 School Staff Training

Several authors stress how important it is for school staff to have knowledge about the student who is transitioning (Kellems & Morningstar, 2009; Lubbers et al., 2008). A clear understanding of the student's family and home environment can also assist school staff in being better able to meet the student and family needs. Special education teachers need to understand the special education regulations involved in the transition process in order to provide services that are compliant with those regulations. Compliance knowledge, alone, is not sufficient training for teachers. School personnel also need to understand how to work with parents and families in a manner more conducive to collaboration.

According to Epstein (2001), "most teachers and administrators...are presently unprepared to work positively and productively with one of the constants of life in school: their students' families" (p. 5). She suggests improvement in university level programming for pre-service teachers as one way to develop that understanding. Christenson (2012) suggests that the

practice of providing training on parent engagement in university education programs often only includes one class period on the topic out of one semester-long course, which is not sufficient. If teachers are expected to implement best practices that include working with parents, then they most likely would benefit from additional training to increase their understanding not only about how to accomplish good parent-teacher relationships, but the research behind why it is important to build strong relationships.

In a position statement on family and school collaboration, the National Association of School Psychologists (2012) recommends that “schools must take the lead in providing opportunities for partnerships to be developed and sustained” by creating a welcoming environment, being aware of cultural differences and language barriers, and sharing educational responsibilities (p. 2). Christenson and Sheridan (as cited by Christenson, 2012) created a checklist for school personnel and parents to complete to assist in determining which areas need improved in the collaboration between home and school. The checklist can be also be used to target areas in which school staff need additional training. The checklist coincides with the components the authors feel are essential to building collaborative relationships between schools and families. The first component, *Approach*, addresses the expectations for family-school interactions. The common language used by the school to involve parents is important in this area. “We” statements (i.e., “We can accomplish this goal together”) are more effective in helping parents feel they are part of a partnership. Open, two-way communication is encouraged and valued. The second component is *Attitudes*. This area focuses on teaching staff to recognize the strengths of all families, avoiding blame, and being nonjudgmental. It helps teachers to be aware of the biases they hold in order to help them to overcome those biases to work in more of a problem-solving collaborative environment rather than an offense-defense type of environment.

The third component is *Atmosphere*. This area focuses on the school climate and culture to determine if there may be barriers to parent participation in those areas. The three components (Approach, Attitudes, and Atmosphere) combine to determine the next component, which is *Actions*. This area examines the school-family system and focuses on how schools can improve their collaboration with parents. When all four components are working efficiently and effectively, the result should be improved outcomes and achievement for the student. The components described provide school systems with one way of examining how effective their interactions are with parents in the transition planning process.

2.5.4 Communication

Effective communication remains one of the keys to a successful relationship between families and schools (National Association of School Psychologists, 2012). Two-way communication not only assists in building trusting relationships between school staff and parents, but also helps to develop an environment that supports parent involvement in the IEP transition process (Blalock et al., 2003). Effectively communicating involves sharing of information, common goal planning, and shared decision-making (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008, Christenson, 2012). Frequent home-school communication is one way of ensuring family engagement with school staff. In addition to ongoing communication, Blue-Banning et al. (2004) stress the “importance of the quality of communication” (p. 173). In other words, providing information to parents about significant topics is equally as important as communicating frequently with them.

Other communication factors to consider include the awareness of any social or cultural barriers that may exist (Lo, 2008). This includes not only a family’s understanding of the language used in meetings with the school, but also factors such as the jargon frequently used in

special education meetings. In addition, parents involved in the transition process often report that they would like an increase in information regarding the various systems involved in transition (Timmons et al., n.d.). Special educators can be the key in the dissemination of that information.

2.5.5 Family-School Collaboration

The term collaboration suggests a cooperative effort to reach a desired goal. In the case of IEP transition planning, the desired goal is a successful post-school outcome for the student who is transitioning. Michaels and Ferrara (2005) postulate that “successful collaboration and problem solving are the foundational process on which meaningful transition plans are constructed” (p. 287). In order for the family-school collaborative experience to be successful, Blue-Banning et al. (2004) depict family-school collaboration as a partnership in which both parties not only participate equally, but also bear equal responsibility. They identify several important factors that are involved in collaboration, including “a) communication, b) commitment, c) equality, d) skills, e) trust, and f) respect” (p. 167), all of which they describe as interconnected. In their research, Blue-Banning et al. (2004) interviewed parents regarding the behaviors of the school personnel in the collaborative process. They also interviewed school personnel about the collaboration. Since a previous section discussed communication, only the other five areas are addressed next.

The second factor is *commitment*, which suggests a devotion to something. Commitment in a transition planning team implies “thinking of clients as people rather than cases” (p. 176). Many of the interviewees discussed the importance of being friendly with the teachers on their child’s transition team. This leads to a feeling of trust of the other team members by the parent.

Next, the authors discuss the factor of *equality*. As discussed previously, parents in the study noted that teachers helped them feel empowered. Parents indicated that equality signifies that school staff value their views and provide them with the opportunity to share ownership of the decision-making process.

The fourth factor discussed is *skills*. This domain addresses the skills of the teachers and school personnel in building collaborative relationships. Of the professionals interviewed for the study, most reported that they were more skilled at building partnerships with outside agencies than they were at building them with families. In the next domain, *trust*, the authors found that parents identified three definitions: reliability, safety, and discretion.

The final factor discussed is *respect*, which the authors noted, “emerged as an essential component of partnerships” (p. 179). To the parents interviewed, respect signifies feeling valued for who a person is and what contributions he is able to make. Mutual, two-way, respect between the professionals and the parents is necessary for successful partnerships.

Each of the six factors discussed is important, in and of itself. However, it is almost impossible to separate one from the other. A combination of all of the factors is the goal to building a strong collaborative team (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

2.5.6 Parent/Family Empowerment

Perhaps the most effective way to foster the school and family collaborative process is empowering parents to be involved. Family empowerment is a term discussed by Bakken and Obiakor (2008), Blue-Banning et al. (2004), and deFur et al. (2001). This involves such practices as parents and professionals sharing the decision making for students who are transitioning, valuing and respecting parent contributions, and developing a trusting bond

between school staff and families. A study by Michaels and Ferrara (2005) suggests that school teams may inadvertently be acting in a way that discourages parent involvement in the transition planning process. Empowering families to be more involved in the special education transition planning process is one of the keys to a successful transition for a student with disabilities.

2.5.7 Summary

The development of truly collaborative family school partnerships is a complex undertaking. It involves strong and open lines of communication, mutual trust and team decision-making. Although parents and school staff should be partners in the IEP transition planning process, most families report this is not the case (Lindstrom et al., 2007). In fact, the “disparity of power and authority in the relationship between parents and professionals...[is a] major challenge to successful partnerships” (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, p. 168).

Merely increasing the amount of parent involvement is not the answer. Improving the form and substance of the involvement is the key. Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) discuss the importance of the quality of parent involvement rather than the quantity. They suggest that “attention needs to be given to fostering involvement that is autonomy supportive rather than controlling, process rather than person focused, characterized by positive rather than negative affect, and accompanied by positive rather than negative beliefs about children’s potential” (p. 399).

Both school personnel and parents would benefit from additional training in building collaborative partnerships. Further training would better enable everyone to understand their roles, help them to work together instead of against each other and ultimately it would allow them to remain focused on the critical objective, that of a successful transition for the student.

3.0 METHODS

The following chapter addresses the research methodology used to conduct the study. The theoretical perspective explains why I believe that the constructivist approach was appropriate to the study. Then, I explain in detail the conceptual framework, the lens through which the research will be analyzed. The third section poses the research questions, which I developed from the conceptual framework, followed by the selection process for participants. Next, is a discussion of the data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, I examine limitations and ethical considerations of the study.

3.1 EPISTEMOLOGY AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Although I used descriptive data to report gender, age ranges, and disability categories of the students, the majority of the research data is qualitative in nature, examining parent perceptions and knowledge regarding the special education transition process based on semi-structured interview data. The researcher's role is to "seek to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it" (Hatch, 2002, p. 7). Thus, this researcher utilized the constructivist paradigm to conduct the study. In the constructivist paradigm, "the researcher's goal is to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge" (Mertens, 2010, p. 18). By allowing

the parents of adolescents with significant disabilities to speak about their lived experiences in the special education transition process, the study gives the parents and their experiences a voice.

3.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

DeFur et al.(2001) found that “parents of adolescents with disabilities consistently identified the quality of the relationship they had with service providers as the key factor that affected the family’s involvement in transition planning” (p. 19). Through their research on focus groups in Virginia, they developed the *Cycle of Family Empowerment*, which I used as this study’s theoretical framework. This study examined parent perspectives concerning their involvement in the special education transition process using the five areas of the model as a starting point to guide the research questions.

The five areas that deFur et al. (2001) developed became recommended areas that school teams should examine in order to assist them in determining how successful or unsuccessful they are in empowering families to be more active participants in the IEP transition process. Those include Awareness, Professional Reaction, Family Reaction, and Family System Interaction. Each of the five domains interacts with the others and leads to more empowered parents. A discussion of each domain follows.

The *Awareness* domain is the beginning of the cycle. At this level, school teams examine how well the family understands the special education process, in this case the IEP transition process, and the school system in general. It also examines how well school personnel understand the individual family dynamics and culture. The knowledge base of either the school or family can range from low to high. In the case of a low understanding by either party, the

more difficult it will be to collaborate as equal partners. A high understanding by both family and school members allows for more equality in collaboration. DeFur et al (2001) suggest that a high understanding should be the goal for which both school staff and families should aim.

The second level is the *Professional Reaction* domain, which assists schools in determining if their approach with parents is one that demonstrates the value of relationships or one that focuses only on the necessary, regulatory interaction. If the approach is more bureaucratic, the less likely it is that families will feel empowered to be active participants. If professionals approach families in a more personal manner, building trust and a higher level of communication, they are more likely to develop a collaborative atmosphere.

The way in which professionals approach the relationship with parents triggers the next domain, the *Family Reaction*. In other words, if school professionals react to parents merely in a non-personal, coldly professional manner, the likelihood is that there will not be a high level of trust by the parents. Trust is important in a relationship because trust allows the parent to feel safe enough to provide suggestions and more fully participate in the process. Mistrust breeds contempt and the higher likelihood of developing an antagonistic relationship, the opposite of what is necessary for collaborating.

The fourth domain, the *Family Involvement* domain, examines whether parents are active or passive in their participation. Special education regulations expect parents to be actively engaged in the transition process. Passive participation means that families may not be prepared to assist their children in their future endeavors. By helping parents to be active participants, schools are empowering parents as partners in the process.

The final domain is the *Family and System Interaction*, which is described as either being collaborative or hierarchical. This area addresses whether the family and school work together

to formulate goals and future directions rather than the school district personnel controlling the entire process. The goal is to build a more trusting relationship through the collaborative process.

DeFur et al. (2001) proposed that all five domains are important to parent empowerment. Parents feel empowered to be more active, equal participants when school district professionals have a high understanding of the family dynamics, culture and values. Relationship building is a critical component of empowering families. A good relationship between parents and the school will usually lead to a high level of trust between the two parties. When there is a higher level of trust, parents are more likely to participate more and school staff value their participation. The result is a collaborative effort in developing goals and plans for the student's transition. Disempowerment results when none, or only some, of the conditions described exist.

When discussing the potential use of the Cycle of Family Empowerment Model, deFur et al. (2001) state:

For families of students in the transition phase of education, the cycle of empowerment or dis-empowerment may be well established based on a long history of participation in the system. Changing the cycle to improve parental involvement in these instances will take perseverance and dynamic relational interactions with individual families to regain lost trust. The power and responsibility to initiate a change in this cycle lies with the professional more so than with the family (p. 34).

Empowering families to be more involved in the special education transition planning process is one of the keys to a successful transition for a student with disabilities. Research on

parent involvement reveals that students whose parents are more involved in their education, demonstrate higher levels of achievement (Carter, 2000; McDonnall, Cavanaugh, & Giesen, 2010). Bakken and Obiakor (2008) advocate for parent involvement in the special education transition process because students whose parents are more involved in the process are more likely to meet with higher levels of success after they graduate, including holding jobs for longer periods. The reality is, that parents are not always as actively involved in the process as they could be. Often, parents are more passively involved, as school district personnel take a bureaucratic role rather than building relationships which can empower the parents to become more involved (Dabkowski, 2004, Flexer et al., 2001). This study examines the relationships between schools and parents from the parent perspective. In the next section, I discuss the questions which guide my research based on the deFur et al. (2001) model.

3.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study sought to answer the following questions:

What do parents of students with significant disabilities know about the special education transition process in general? In order to gain an understanding of parents' actual knowledge of the special education transition process, it was important to establish what parents know or do not know about the process. In addition to ascertaining what they know, I was also interested in examining how parents' understanding relates to the special education regulations and what they mandate concerning parents and their involvement in the transition process.

How do the parents of students with significant disabilities understand their role in the transition process? For this question, I was interested in finding out how parents describe their role in the

transition process compared to what it is supposed to be. Because the literature (Flexer et al. (2001), Dabkowski (2004)) suggests that parents are often passive participants, I examined how involved in the transition process parents perceived they were. I also examined parents' level of trust or mistrust of school personnel involved in the transition process, which Adams and Christenson (2000) have suggested is significant to parent involvement, and their level of interaction with other members of the IEP transition team.

How do school districts try to engage parents of students with significant disabilities to be actively involved in the transition process? This question examined what processes school districts have in place to assist parents to be active participants. It also examined parents' perceptions about school staff attitudes and professional reactions toward the parents and how well they interact with each other. Spann, S.J., Kohler, F.W., and Soenksen, D. (2003) suggest when parents perceive that teachers and other school staff have negative attitudes toward them or their children, their perceived level of engagement is lower. In addition, research by Starr and Foy (2012) suggested that the "quality of collaboration and communication differentially affected the parents' perceptions of their children's educational experience" (p.213).

What do parents of students with significant disabilities identify as important issues in the transition process? Several researchers (Blalok et al., 2003; Lo, 2008; and Timmons et al., n.d.) have suggested the importance of communication between school staff and parents in the transition process. This question examined what parents define as key issues in the collaborative process of transition planning.

The overall implication of this research study is to help answer the following question: *In what ways can school districts increase the engagement of parents of students with significant disabilities in the special education transition process?* In order to speak to this concern, I

examined what parents identify as best practices for transition. This information was compared to what the literature identifies as best practices as outlined in the literature review section. It also provided recommendations for future practices in the transition process.

The overarching purpose behind these research questions was to identify how school districts attempt to try to engage parents of students with significant disabilities to be actively involved in the special education transition process. In addition, this research can provide information about how parents feel school districts can improve their efforts for gaining and increasing the involvement for parents of students with significant disabilities.

Figure 2 below provides a visual representation of the actual interview questions related to each of the specific research questions.

Research Question	Parent Interview Questions Addressing Research Question
<i>What do parents of students with significant disabilities know about the special education transition process in general?</i>	<p>Who is usually invited to attend the transition IEP meetings each year?</p> <p>What parent information meetings or trainings has your school had?</p> <p>How do you get information you might need for transition?</p> <p>Describe in your own words what you think the purpose of transition planning is.</p>
<i>How do the parents of students with significant disabilities understand their role in the transition process?</i>	<p>How would you describe your role at IEP meetings?</p> <p>How do you provide information for your child's IEP?</p> <p>How is the information you provide included in the IEP?</p> <p>What is your level of involvement in IEP meetings?</p> <p>What is your level of satisfaction with the transition process?</p>
<i>How do school districts try to engage parents of students with significant disabilities to</i>	<p>Who usually comes to your child's yearly IEP meetings?</p> <p>Do you ever bring anyone with you? <i>If so</i>, who do you</p>

<i>be actively involved in the transition process?</i>	bring? How would you describe your relationship with your child’s special education case manager?
<i>What do parents of students with significant disabilities identify as important issues in the transition process?</i>	What types of things have been talked about at the IEP meetings since your child has been transition age? Have there ever been any concerns about your child’s transition planning? If so, how was it resolved? Is there any way your school district could improve the transition process for you and your child?

Figure 2 Research questions in relation to interview questions

3.4 PARTICIPANTS

This study used a purposeful sampling method, which “involves studying information-rich cases in depth and detail” (Patton, 1999, p. 1197). The study focused on parents of students with significant disabilities who are involved in the IEP Transition process because their children are between the ages of 14 and 21. Two parents, who are organizers of a community sports league for students with disabilities located in southwestern Pennsylvania, volunteered to be interviewed and to provide additional names of parents who were also willing to participate. This type of sampling is snowball sampling, which “starts with key informants who are viewed as knowledgeable about the program or the community...[and are able to] recommend other people to whom [the researcher] should talk” (Mertens, 2010, p.322). Because the number of participants increases as the informants recommend further participants, the sample increases; thus, the term snowball sampling. The sample size was determined as the study progressed by

the number of people suggested by the interviewees. The initial participants were provided with a recruitment script, which they delivered to those parents they recommended to be interviewed.

Following each of the interviews, the researcher asked the participants to provide contact information of other parents who also met the criteria of having a child with a significant disability and having a child who is age 14 to 21. The participants were provided with recruitment scripts to give to the people whom they recommended for future interviews. The researcher then called or emailed those parents who were recommended to ask to schedule an interview. This process was continued until the researcher determined that a sufficient number of participants are interviewed (n=10). This was reached when many of the parents provided similar names and when similar answers began to be obtained.

The full recruitment script is found in Appendix A. It contains basic information about the research study, its purpose and how parents were chosen to participate. It is presented in an easily readable, question and answer format to ensure that parents of all backgrounds would be able to understand the reading level.

This study examined the perceptions of parents of adolescent students with significant disabilities with regard to the special education transition process. I chose to interview parents solely because as a school district employee, I was interested in studying their perspectives in order to identify potential areas that may need improved. It is important to note that I was acquainted with the two initial parents who were approached, and was also familiar with two of the parents who chose to subsequently participate. Although I asked for recommendations for the generic term “parents”, all of the respondents were mothers. A total of ten (n = 10) parents volunteered to participate in the telephone interviews.

The parents lived in five different school districts in Southwestern Pennsylvania, which ranged from a small, rural school district to mid-size and large suburban districts. In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, I did not ask which school districts the children attended. The districts were described by the parents to be small, mid-size or large. The term “large” is relative to this region of Pennsylvania, in which the largest school district has approximately 6,000 students. It is unknown whether the parent descriptions about school district are accurate because of the 4 parents I knew, one described her district as large and one as mid-size and both lived in the same school district. Thus, the reliability of their descriptions is in question. There were no parents from urban schools represented in this study.

The parents had adolescent children ranging from 14 to 21 with varying types of significant disabilities. Although the study parameters included four types of disability (intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, autism and physical disabilities), the respondents were only representative of three of the categories, as no parents of students with physical disabilities responded. Seven of the students were students with intellectual disabilities, all of whom are diagnosed with Down Syndrome. Four of these students attend school within their regular high schools in a life skills support program, while three attend specialized schools for students with disabilities outside of their school districts. Two of the students fell within the multiple disabilities category and both attend a specialized program outside of the district. Only one student was in the autism category and she is the only student included in general education with supports. Lack of diverse disabilities in the sample was not intentional. Due to the nature of the sampling technique I used, the lack of diversity is not a surprise, especially since the original parents were involved in a sports program for students with disabilities. In Table 4, the sample of parents is described.

Table 4. Parent Information

Respondent	Gender of Child	Age of Child	Disability of Child	Type of Educational Program	Size/Type of District
Emily	Female	15	Autism	Inclusion	Mid-Size Suburban
Evelyn	Male	15	Intellectual Disability	Specialized School	Mid-Size Suburban
Kayla	Male	17	Intellectual Disability	Specialized School	Large Suburban
Michelle	Female	17	Intellectual Disability	Specialized School	Large Suburban
Renee	Female	15	Intellectual Disability	District Life Skills	Large Suburban
Rose	Female	17	Intellectual Disability	District Life Skills	Mid-Size Rural
Samantha	Female	20	Intellectual Disability	Specialized School	Mid-Size Suburban
Shelley	Male	15	Multiple Disabilities	Specialized School	Large Suburban
Tina	Male	18	Intellectual Disability	District Life Skills	Mid-Size Suburban
Violet	Male	17	Multiple Disabilities	Specialized School	Large Suburban

Out of the ten parents interviewed, seven have worked with an advocate at one time during their child’s school career. Of that group, more than half had occurred when their child was much younger. Two parents had formal training in special education; Evelyn has a bachelor’s degree in special education and Tina is a certified speech pathologist. The remainder of the parents had no formal training. Table 5 outlines specific demographics concerning the students of the parents interviewed.

Table 5. Student Demographic Information

N=10	Male	Female	Autism	ID	MD
Age					
15	2	2	1	2	1
17	2	2		3	1
18	1	0		1	
20	0	1		1	
Disability					
Autism	0	1	--	--	--
Intellectual Disability	3	4	--	--	--
Multiple Disabilities	2	0	--	--	--
Type of school program					
Inclusion	0	1	1		
Life Skills in regular building	1	2		3	
Specialized Placement outside of district	4	2		4	2

3.5 DATA COLLECTION

3.5.1 Procedures

This research involved conducting semi-structured telephone interviews with the two initial participants. Prior to beginning the actual interview, I read an introductory script reiterating the purpose of the research and why parents were invited to participate. Because there were no face-to-face meetings, no written consent was obtained. However, parents were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and they could opt to not participate or if they did participate, could opt not to answer specific questions. In addition, I obtained verbal permission from the participants to digitally record the interview also informed the participants that the interviews would be transcribed, but no identifying information would be included on the tapes so their interview transcripts would be anonymous. No links or codes were stored and there

were no follow-up interviews. See Appendix B for the complete introductory script and interview protocol.

After conducting the interviews, the interview audiotapes were transcribed individually and each interview was coded utilizing a codebook. I employed both a computer-based coding tool (Dedoose) and a paper and pencil method of coding. The Data Analysis section provides further details about how I went about analyzing and coding the data.

3.5.2 Measures

I conducted this research project using a semi-structured interview format. The interviews were formal in nature; that is, they were scheduled for a specific time and followed a specific list of open-ended questions, asked of every participant. The semi-structured interview format was chosen because it allowed the researcher to use the list of questions, but also provided the opportunity for more in-depth follow-up questions based on the participants' answers (Hatch, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For this research, an interview protocol was used as a guide, with additional questions asked depending on the nature of the responses. Because the research was done through the constructivist paradigm, the researcher chose responsive interviewing as the method of choice. This method of interviewing "assumes that people interpret events and construct their own understanding of what happened, and that the researcher's job is to listen, balance and analyze these constructions in order to understand how people see their world" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 10). Responsive interviewing involves a flexible approach to interviewing, in which the researcher asks questions in response to how the respondent answers previous questions in order to dig deeper into the experiences of the respondent. Responsive interviewing was akin to the training I have had in conducting clinical interviews as a school

psychologist because it requires the reflexive, or active, listening, in which the examiner listens closely to what the respondent says and digs deeper in order to gain a better understanding of their statements.

Although no field-testing was done on the interview protocol, the protocol was reviewed by a group of school professionals and one non-school associate who provided suggestions to the researcher, which were implemented to make the questions more understandable and meaningful. The interview included questions concerning demographics, such as the age and gender of the student, the type of disability the student has and in what size school district he/she resides. Additional questions focused on the parents' level of understanding of the IEP transition process, what their level of participation is in the process, and what improvements could be made to the process. The questions were designed to "encourage informants to explain their unique perspectives on the issues" (Hatch, 2002, p. 23). The majority of the questions were structured as open-ended to allow for respondents to provide additional information as they felt appropriate. However, there were also a few Likert scale questions asked to garner additional information regarding the parents' level of involvement in the transition process as well as their levels of satisfaction. I felt this was important to examine whether parents were happy with the transition process and what they perceived to be their level of involvement in order to be able to compare those answers with their answers about their actual experiences.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

A professional typist transcribed all of the anonymous parent interviews after signing a confidentiality agreement (See Appendix C). After the tapes were transcribed, they were thoroughly read by the researcher. I calculated percentages for the demographic data, as well as for the Likert scale questions, to provide descriptive statistics of the population sample. The data from the open-ended questions was analyzed through descriptive coding. A codebook was developed for use throughout the entire process to allow for recording of initial and subsequent data.

The initial coding involved examining the interview data in categories based upon the five domains in the Cycle of Family Empowerment (deFur, et al, 2001). Hatch (2002) describes this as *typological analysis* because the data was initially divided into the five domains of the deFur et al. (2001) model and the five domains were already determined before the coding began. Next, I identified similar response patterns or themes that I discovered in the data. Looking for common themes is considered “second cycle coding,” according to Saldaña (2009). The themes were again examined to assist in making statements about similarities and dissimilarities among the experiences of the parents interviewed. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), the researcher should “start the coding with concepts and themes that you explicitly asked about. Then you can look for concepts and explanations that your interviewees recognize” (p. 195). In this research, initial coding was based on the interview questions and the conceptual framework, letting further codes emerge as the data was analyzed in more depth. The final themes I developed emerged from arranging and rearranging the codes into similar groupings.

In order to assist in the analysis of the data, an impartial qualitative researcher was provided with the initial codebook and asked to review and code a sample of the interviews,

which consisted of three interviews. Those codes were then compared to the researcher's codes in order to determine if there were similarities on the assignment of codes. The advantage of having an independent researcher examine some of the interviews was that it allowed me to brainstorm ideas and further examine important issues raised by the interviewees that I may have otherwise missed. Having another person's perspective was invaluable to me not just as a debriefing method, but also providing me with an informal audit of my ideas. Saldaña (2009) suggests that "discussion provides not only opportunity to articulate your internal thinking processes, but also presents windows of opportunity for clarifying your emergent ideas and possibly making new insights about the data" (p. 28). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify this method of peer debriefing as "an effective way of shoring up credibility, providing methodological guidance" (p. 243). A peer debriefer can also assist the researcher in identifying biases he or she may have, as well as providing a sounding board for the researcher to discuss themes that may be identified, which was what I experienced by conferring with my fellow researcher.

In addition, an analytic notebook was employed in which I took detailed notes or memos on each interview. Those notes included first impressions and then codes that emerged from multiple readings. The analytic notebook and the coding were then used to complete second cycle coding, identified as "pattern coding" by Saldaña (2009). The process of pattern coding involved assembling the codes into similar groups that were then used to generate themes. Using patterns that repeated allowed me to match responses into categories, which also coincided with the research questions.

Triangulation of data "involves checking information that has been collected from different sources or methods for consistency of evidence across sources of data" (Mertens, 2010,

p. 258). Although this study did not contain data from other stakeholders in the transition process (i.e., school personnel), it can be argued that data obtained from parents from different school districts and differing backgrounds provided triangulation, which Patton (1999) terms “perspective triangulation”. The parents that I interviewed have children with different types of disabilities and children from different age ranges. Thus, the parents have varied educational and life experiences contributing to their perspectives. Hence, triangulation, or “the display of multiple, refracted realities simultaneously” was obtained through the use of heterogeneous parent interviews (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 8).

3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Because the interviews were voluntary, parents could choose not to participate, which was explained to them in the recruitment script. They also had the opportunity to decline answering any question or to discontinue the interview at any time. No direct experimentation was conducted and students were not directly interviewed. Although no identifying information was stored and any quotes cited were assigned fictitious names, there remains a possibility that someone reading a quoted personal account may be able to identify the speaker. The researcher made every effort to protect the identities of the individuals providing information.

3.8 LIMITATIONS

In constructivism, a researcher is committed to giving a voice to the participants involved in the interviews (Hatch, 2002). It was important for me to present an accurate voice of the parents from their viewpoints, so I decided to use direct quotes in many instances to allow the reader to “hear” those voices.

This study was conducted to provide valuable information to school districts about what parents perceive as the key issues in the transition process. Because the respondents were chosen through snowball sampling, the findings may not be representative of a larger population of parents. The question of a representative sample also extends to the geographic area of the families involved in the study. Parents all lived within three counties in Southwestern Pennsylvania and lived in mid-size to large rural and suburban school districts. Although their perceptions may be different from those of parents in other parts of the country, the results will still provide valuable information to school districts about areas of the transition process that may need to be examined for possible improvement.

Since the study relied on parents who volunteered to be interviewed, there is a possibility that only the more involved or more knowledgeable parents responded. Thus, the sample of parents interviewed at a specific school district may not accurately reflect the experiences of the majority of the parents from that particular school.

In addition, the snowball sampling method may not provide a representative sample of the population as a whole. Morgan (2008) notes that “snowball sampling poses a distinct risk of capturing a biased subset of the total population of potential participants because any eligible participants who are not linked to the original set of informants will not be accessible for inclusion in the study” (p. 816). The sample of parents was not as diverse by disabilities as

initially intended. Only one parent with a child with autism and two parents with children with multiple disabilities participated. The remainder of the parents had children with intellectual disabilities, and further review of those children showed that all 7 were diagnosed with Down Syndrome.

Another drawback to this study was that the interviews were anonymous and did not permit follow-up interviews. Thus, there was no way for the researcher to contact the participants if further questions emerged once coding began or if clarification was needed to one of the responses. Saldaña (2009) considers this to be “member checking as a way of validating the findings” (p. 28). Although no follow-up interviews were done, responsive interviewing allowed me to drill deeper when I felt the parent had more to say.

There is always the possibility that the parents interviewed did not provide accurate details, as may be noted in any self-report. Mertens (2010) suggests, “Validity is contingent on the honesty of the respondent” (p. 173). Although questions were pre-read by various professionals, it is possible that the wording led the respondent to give an expected answer. No parents were limited in English proficiency and most responses led me to believe that the questions were misunderstood by the parents.

Because my interviews only involved parents, school district representatives were not permitted the opportunity to present their perspectives, which may be very different. It is important to not assume that parent perspectives alone represent the complete picture about the transition process, although the information they provide can serve to assist school district to better understand them. As a school district employee, it was also important for me to remember that the interviews represented parent perceptions, which may or may not accurately reflect the reality of what is happening in the schools with regard to the transition process.

Conducting interviews that are not face-to-face may present a disadvantage. Telephone interviewing tends to make it more difficult to read nonverbal cues of the respondents, which would be able to be seen in a face-to-face interview. Such things as body language and facial expressions are not be able to be used to indicate dissatisfaction. Because the interviewer is unable to see the respondent face-to-face, it also makes relationship and rapport building more difficult to obtain (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). However, because of my experience with interviewing, I was able to pick up on nuances in the interviewees' voice and intonation and was able to follow-up with more detailed questions when I felt that the parent had more information on a topic.

Researcher biases also need to be examined. Because I am employed in a position where I work with many families during the transition process, I may have preconceived ideas about what is lacking in the process. In my job as a school psychologist, I often function as the advocate for children and their families. Thus, I may have the tendency to believe school districts need to make many improvements. At times, it was difficult to remove myself from the advocacy role and remember that there are two sides to the story. As I wrote the results, I had to make a concerted effort to remain neutral in my writing. Mears (2009) discusses how the biases that an insider possesses may have an impact on how a researcher analyzes the data. She notes the following:

Having background knowledge of issues or prior knowledge of the topic being studied brings a potential for greater perceptivity, but it also introduces a potential liability, namely a greater likelihood for bias and a failure to notice subtleties or disconfirming evidence. (p. 27)

3.9 QUALITATIVE INDICATORS OF QUALITY

In this research project, I attempted to maintain a high level of quality and credibility. In an article written by Tracy (2010), the author proposed 8 “big tent” criteria as the “universal hallmarks for high quality qualitative methods across paradigms” (p. 837). These criteria include worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence. Patton (1999), too, addresses credibility and rigor. Next, I briefly discuss the 8 criteria as they relate to my research study.

3.9.1 Worthy Topic

Parent participation regarding the special education transition process is a worthy topic. It has been studied by numerous researchers (Carter, 2002; Christenson, 2012; deFur et al., 2001). The current study also adds to the literature on this topic by examining a different viewpoint, that of parent perspectives, using parents with children with significant disabilities. The term worthy implies that the information gleaned is meaningful and can be used to improve practices. This research does provide practical and useful information on parent perspectives. Therefore, there are many reasons to believe this is a worthy topic.

3.9.2 Rich Rigor

The term rigor suggests that the researcher has taken care to complete a thorough project. Richness adds another dimension to that rigor and implies that the researcher provides abundant data from which to draw conclusion. I feel my study demonstrates rich rigor in that it involved

in-depth parent interviews, as well as detailed, rich description of the parent perspectives through their own voices. I have also attempted to provide information on negative cases (Patton, 1999) where parent viewpoints differed in order to show the reader different perspectives. The data analysis was then completed using both hand coding and a computer program in order to more thoroughly analyze and synthesize the findings.

3.9.3 Sincerity

It is very important for the qualitative researcher to honestly and accurately represent the findings as well as the biases that may be present. I have made every effort to accurately depict the perspectives of the parents in this study. In addition, I feel I have provided the reader with an accurate representation of how my current position may have influenced me as I conducted the research and analyzed the data. Tracy (2010) notes that “self-reflexivity encourages writers to be frank about their strengths and shortcomings” (p. 842). I have attempted to be transparent regarding those biases or concerns, which were delineated in the Limitations section.

3.9.4 Credibility

In her model, Tracy (2010) refers to credibility as involving “thick description and multivocality” (p. 843). In my research, I have attempted to use the participants’ voices as much as possible to provide the reader with that credible description of the parents’ multiple realities. The downside to completing anonymous interviews was that I was unable to return to the parents to “member check” my understandings by talking to them again.

3.9.5 Resonance

According to Tracy (2010), resonance is the “researcher’s ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience” (p. 844). This study should resonate with the target audience of school district administrators by providing them with a better understanding of the perspectives of parents of students with significant disabilities. It was one of my intentions that by providing these perspectives, school district staff may empathize more with their situations and the information will allow them to reflect on their practices and improve the areas that they may find to be lacking.

3.9.6 Significant Contribution

Tracy (2010) addressed how qualitative research can make a contribution to the available research by building a new knowledge base, providing a basis for further research or providing suggestions to improve systems. One of the goals of my research was to enable school practitioners to examine their current practices against what parents perceive as the areas that need improvement. Tracy (2010) discusses several types of significance that she feels research may meet. My research most closely aligns to what she calls “practically significant research [which] asks whether the knowledge is useful” (p. 846). This project provides the target audience with practical knowledge that is informative and can be beneficial in helping them analyze current practices and make suggestions for change.

3.9.7 Ethical

Ethical research should be the standard by which researchers conduct their studies. In this study, I addressed ethics in a variety of ways. By maintaining anonymity of the parents, I kept their identities hidden. I made every attempt to be respectful to each of the parents by allowing them the opportunity to not answer questions if they found them to be troublesome. It should be noted that none of the parents chose this option. As they provided me with their perspectives, I showed them the utmost respect by being empathetic and non-judgmental in my responses. In addition, I cited their responses, maintaining fidelity to their exact quotes, without changing their meaning.

3.9.8 Meaningful Coherence

In this indicator, the researcher integrates the literature and the research into meaningful findings. In the process of analysis and synthesis, the researcher is to remain focused on the research questions and the implications (Tracy, 2010). I have attempted to tie the literature back into the findings, always keeping in mind the questions I was hoping to answer.

3.10 SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have provided the reader with an overview of the methods used in conducting my research study. I presented the deFur et al. (2001) model used as the conceptual framework from where I generated the research questions, which I then discussed in detail. I provided information on the participants as well as the data collection and analysis processes. Finally, I

discussed ethics, limitations to the study, and my rationale for claiming that the research project meets the criteria for a quality qualitative study. In the next section, I discuss the results gathered from the parent interviews in detail, using parent voice to provide the reader with rich detail regarding their perspectives.

4.0 RESULTS

The primary purpose of this research was to examine the perspectives of parents of students with significant disabilities regarding the IEP transition process. Parents were individually interviewed in order to answer the questions, *What do parents of students with significant disabilities know about the special education transition process in general? How do the parents of students with significant disabilities understand their role in the transition process? How do school districts try to engage parents of students with significant disabilities to be actively involved in the transition process? and What do parents of students with significant disabilities identify as important issues in the transition process?*

Before I begin my discussion on themes that emerged relative to the research questions, I first want to discuss the results of the two Likert scale questions the parents were asked regarding their satisfaction and participation levels. The first question concerned parent satisfaction with their child's transition program thus far. Renee and Samantha have children with Down Syndrome who are attending specialized schools for students with significant disabilities and rated themselves as extremely satisfied. Five parents said they were satisfied with the transition program, while three parents (Kayla, Evelyn, and Emily) ranked themselves as slightly dissatisfied.

Kayla, who has a 17 year-old son with Down Syndrome, described the transition process as a "tap dance" in which she has to initiate all the questions and research into what is available

as her son gets ready to graduate. She noted that there has been little discussion as to whether her son will graduate at 18 or 21 and no one has approached her about possible programs for which he may be eligible. Evelyn and Emily, who both have 15 year-olds (with Down Syndrome and Autism respectively) also spoke of their concerns that they do not have sufficient information about the transition process thus far.

No parents rated themselves as extremely dissatisfied. In Table 6, each parent's satisfaction level is presented according to the different characteristics of their children.

Table 6. Satisfaction Level by Characteristics

	Extremely Satisfied	Satisfied	Slightly Dissatisfied	Extremely Dissatisfied
Gender of Child:				
Male	0	3	2	0
Female	2	2	1	0
Disability of Child:				
Autism	0	0	1	0
Intellectual Disability	2	3	2	0
Multiple Disabilities	0	2	0	0
Age of Child:				
15	1	1	2	0
17	0	3	1	0
18	0	1	0	0
20	1	0	0	0
Type of Program:				
Life Skills in Regular School	1	2	0	0
Inclusion	0	0	1	0
Specialized School	1	3	2	0

When asked to rank their level of involvement, only Emily, whose daughter with Autism is the only student in the sample that is in full inclusion with supports, rated herself as involved, while the remaining nine rated themselves as very involved. Parent level of involvement is presented in Table 7 by characteristics of the students.

Table 7. Parent Level of Involvement

	Very Involved	Involved	A Little Involved	Not Involved
Gender of Child:				
Male	5	0	0	0
Female	4	1	0	0
Disability of Child:				
Autism	0	1	0	0
Intellectual Disability	7	0	0	0
Multiple Disabilities	2	0	0	0
Age of Child:				
15	3	1	0	0
17	4	0	0	0
18	1	0	0	0
20	1	0	0	0
Type of Program:				
Life Skills in Regular School	4	0	0	0
Inclusion	0	1	0	0
Specialized School	5	0	0	0

The remainder of this section highlights the major themes that emerged during the second cycle of coding from the parent interviews. Those themes and subthemes within each research question are examined in detail using the research questions to identify the themes.

4.1 THEME I: PARENTS HAVE LIMITED UNDERSTANDING ABOUT THE TRANSITION PROCESS

What do parents of students with significant disabilities know about the special education transition process in general?

Parents responded to several questions about the transition process in order to determine what they know and do not know about the process. When asked what they thought the purpose of secondary transition meetings were, only Rose, who has a 15 year-old daughter with Down Syndrome, could name all three components required in the special education regulations, which according to IDEA (2004) are post-secondary training, employment, and community living (§300.43). Michelle mentioned two of the components – employment and community living, while four mentioned only future employment. Shelley, who has a 15 year-old son with multiple disabilities, stated that her son’s IEP team “has not formally talked about transition yet,” even though transition has been a required component in her son’s last two IEP’s.

The main theme that emerged in every interview was the need for further education about the transition process as a whole. Only Samantha, who has a 20 year-old daughter with Down Syndrome, stated that the school has a liaison who is constantly reaching out to parents with information on various programs available throughout the county. The remaining nine parents indicated that they would like more training or information to be available.

Half of the parents indicated that the school district has provided them with no training about the IEP transition process. The other half stated that they received “a few papers” or “little packets,” but could not elaborate further on what the specific training information contained. All of the parents of students with Down Syndrome noted that they receive most of their information from outside sources, including parent network groups, service coordinators and agencies for people with disabilities.

4.1.1 Parent Perspectives on Trainings and Information

Parents were asked what types of trainings, if any, that their school districts provided concerning transition. Shelley was the only parent who indicated that she thought there had been one training, but that she had not been able to attend it. When probed further, she was unsure what the topic of the training had been or if it had even related to the transition process.

Kayla noted, “almost all of the trainings provided do not pertain to my son because he isn’t autistic.” When asked to elaborate, she noted that she knew there were trainings about behavior interventions and other informational meetings, all related to the topic of autism. She was unsure whether any transition-specific trainings were held.

Violet, who has a 17 year-old son with Multiple Disabilities, noted that “Once, I was invited to be on a transition panel by the school district. More information was to follow, which I never received.” She, too, was unclear on what the topic of discussion was to be or how the panel was specifically related to transition. She was also unaware if the panel she mentioned had ever been formed.

Other than those three comments, the remainder of the parents indicated that there were no informational meetings or trainings provided by their respective school districts. Most related that in order to get information they may need for transition, they refer to sources outside the school district. Emily stated that she was unsure where to go to get information she needs regarding transition. She feels that parents are uneducated and confused when it comes to the transition process. She is also a parent who describes herself as not having a relationship with her daughter’s teachers this year.

4.1.2 Parent Perspectives on Available Resources and Programs

Only Samantha noted that her school provides ongoing information on different programs available to her daughter in the community in which they live. She also indicated a high level of satisfaction with the program and a secure feeling about her daughter's future employment and future living arrangements. Her daughter is the oldest student in the sample (20 years old) and she attends a specialized school for students with significant disabilities. Tina noted that she received a transition folder from the state, but did not find it very helpful for her son. Shelley also received some folders, but noted that she has not even looked at them yet.

Although parents indicated that they do not feel knowledgeable about what programs are available, several spoke about specific programs in which their children are involved through their schools. Tina, who has an 18 year-old son with Down Syndrome, told about "great work sites" that he attends as part of his training. Rose's 17 year-old daughter with Down Syndrome also participates in work study and school community activities, such as student council and the school dance committee. Both of these students attend program of Life Skills Support in their regular schools within the school district.

Samantha's 20 year-old daughter with Down Syndrome attends a specialized, center-based school. She participates in a workshop and does job rotations in a daycare, candy shop, and other locations. When she graduates, she will continue in the adult workshop that the school runs. Evelyn spoke about a pre-vocational class in which her 15 year-old son with Down Syndrome, who attends a center-based school, participates. She noted that the purpose of the class is to teach skills he will need prior to going out to actual job sites.

4.1.3 Parent Perspectives About Networking

Seven of the parents interviewed indicated that the information that they receive about the transition process comes from their county case managers, mental health service agencies, agencies for individuals with developmental disabilities, community activities for people with disabilities, and other parents who have previously gone through the transition process. On closer examination, those parents all have children with Down Syndrome.

When asked if the school district provided linkages to outside agencies, all of the parents said they initiated contact with outside agencies on their own. In fact, one parent asked if there was any such thing as a transition coordinator, because she has never been informed if there is one in her school district.

Rose mentioned that she works in a different school district from where her daughter attends and she often uses that district's special education staff for ideas to take to her district concerning her daughter's transition. Tina additionally mentioned using the internet as a resource tool to research available programs for her son.

Parent networks are perceived as being vital for obtaining transition information. Rose, whose daughter has Down Syndrome stated,

We have a very strong group of friends with children who have Down Syndrome like my daughter. Last week at Special Olympics (my daughter plays soccer), I sat down with a mother of a 22 year old and asked her what exactly I should be asking for or looking for at this stage. I really rely on the experiences of other parents. Parent information and networking provides me with more information than the school does. The sad thing is that schools are set up to educate the masses, so they don't really attend to the students

with special needs like they should. Sometimes we need to take matters in our own hands.

Renee, also spoke about parent networks. She indicated that there is a great deal of readily-available information for parents of students with Down Syndrome. Parents are provided with linkages to agencies at birth and they only need to ask for the information and resources in order to get it.

4.2 THEME TWO: THERE ARE MULTIPLE ROLES FOR PARENTS IN THE TRANSITION PROCESS

How do the parents of students with significant disabilities understand their role in the transition process?

The parents interviewed discussed their roles at the IEP transition meetings in several different ways. Two levels of involvement were described, as they were in the deFur et al. (2001) research: active or passive. Additionally, four major categories emerged: advocate, adversary, liaison, and informant. More information about the levels and each category follows.

4.2.1 Parent as Passive Participant

Of the parents interviewed, all directly reported that they are involved in the IEP Transition process; however, half of the parent responses indicate that they may not be active participants in the IEP Transition process beyond attending the meetings and providing written input prior to the meeting itself. Michelle, whose daughter with Down Syndrome is 17, described a more passive

role for herself because “I basically provide information when it is asked for, but mostly I defer to the teacher, who is the expert.” Rose discussed why many of her friends who have children with disabilities might be more passive in meetings. She noted that those parents “have the mentality that teachers and administrators are like doctors. They are the experts and we should just defer to them without question.” As the comment that Michelle, the mother of a student with a student with Down Syndrome made, “I have no formal education experience or any background in special education or planning, so I defer to the expertise of the teacher, the counselors, therapists”. There was commonality in the comments that showed parents felt as if they did not have the expertise needed to be active participants.

Passive participation involves letting the school district take the lead in the process. Shelley, a parent of a fifteen year old student with multiple disabilities, noted that thus far, transition has not been a component on which her child’s IEP team has focused. She pronounced, “I was thinking I was going to wait until it’s closer to the time and then ask more questions. I am sure they are going to want to start discussing it more in the IEP’s soon.”

Conversely, Samantha, a parent of a 20 year-old daughter with Down Syndrome, explicitly chooses to be a passive participant because she is so happy with her child’s educational program. “I trust in the school staff where my daughter attends, so I am probably the easiest case because I am so thrilled with her education, her teachers and everything all around.”

4.2.2 Parent as Active Participant

All of the parents interviewed described themselves as either very involved or involved in the IEP Transition process. Renee, whose daughter has Down Syndrome, described herself as an important member of the IEP team. She noted that the school team depends upon her input and

feedback and called the transition meetings a “real group effort.” Renee further elaborates in her description of the IEP meetings by saying, “There is genuine regard of all of the people when we go to the meetings. It’s there and then some. You can feel it. Everyone’s behind the cause and we are working together doing what is best for my child.”

Half of the parents interviewed also indicated that they attend all the transition meetings and participate fully in them. Statements were common regarding working well with the school team. Michelle discussed the community feel to the program in which her daughter, who has Down Syndrome, is involved. Because the specialized school program where her daughter attends is so small, she noted that there is a good deal of one-on-one time with the teaching staff and she feels at ease in the meetings because it is a team atmosphere.

4.2.3 Parent as Advocate

When asked about their roles in IEP meetings, three parents specifically called themselves advocates. All three have children with Down Syndrome, two of whom attend specialized schools and one of whom is in a Life skills program in a regular school. As Rose stated,

I am a very strong advocate for my daughter. Maybe I don’t think sometimes the school was on the same page as I am, so I look at it as my role. I have to be prepared to advocate for what I want for her and what I know is out there, so I go as an advocate to get as much as I can for her because now that she is 17, I am feeling a sense of urgency. Sometimes I don’t feel like the school has that same sense of urgency.

Kayla noted, “I review the IEP, question goals and measurement tools and provide feedback for anything I feel that needs changed,” indicating that she often has to challenge the

teachers to change goals to make them more individualized and appropriate to her son with an intellectual disability. The third mother, Michelle, stated, “I think our needs are heard and I think that we’re able to sort of direct the IEP based on what we feel we really need for our daughter.” Her statement reflects the need for some parents to advocate and “direct” the IEP in order to get what their children need.

4.2.4 Parent as Adversary

Only three parents referred to themselves as having an adversarial relationship with the school. A mother of a 17 year-old student with Down Syndrome, Kayla, noted that her role is that of an adversary in some of her child’s IEP meetings. “I didn’t like the way some of the things were being taught. It wasn’t an effective method for my son, so I insisted that the method be changed, as well as how the progress was measured.” Evelyn stated, “I have argued with the teacher in the meeting and have actually written goals that I want incorporated when I have not been satisfied with the goals she has written”.

Several parents made statements about having to go above the teacher to the principal or another administrator in order to force the teacher to make changes to the student’s IEP or the program. No parents indicated that they initiated due process; however, that question was not directly asked. Seven of the parents interviewed have worked with an advocate at one time since their children began school.

4.2.5 Parent as Liaison

Four of the parents indicated that they serve as liaison between their home service providers and the school by bringing the school information about what they are working on at home. Those included Shelley and Violet, both mothers of students having Multiple Disabilities including autism who receive wrap around services in school and home. It also includes Emily, whose daughter with autism also receives support from outside agencies. Tina's son with Down Syndrome also receives services outside of the school setting. The four parents stressed the importance of providing the school with information from the outside agencies and vice versa. In addition, Shelley spoke about bringing outside agency staff with her to IEP meetings in order to provide suggestions of what needs to be worked on at both home and school.

The parents mentioned in this category did not describe their experiences in a negative light. Rather, they stressed the importance of the home-school continuum of services in order to better prepare the students for life after graduation.

4.2.6 Parent as Informant

Nine of the parents indicated that the input they provide is always included in the IEP. Information given by parents, such as strengths and weaknesses, goals identified by the parents, and self-help ideas, has been incorporated throughout their children's IEPs. Only one parent, Emily, whose daughter has autism, noted that the information she provides "ends up being a talking point, but does not end up in the IEP".

Many of the parents defined their role similar to that of Rose, a mother of a student with Down Syndrome, who said that the purpose of the transition process "is to probably get the

student with Down Syndrome, stated that her child was never invited to, nor has she ever attended, the annual meetings.

In addition to being invited to the meetings, nine parents reported that they are sent transition questionnaires prior to the annual IEP meetings. Renee noted that “it is quite extensive and covers what our concerns are, where her weak areas are, and what needs we think need more work.” Shelley, a parent of a student with multiple disabilities, believes that the school district is seeking her participation. She expressed, “It helps to make me involved by sending those questionnaires to ask questions about things I wouldn’t think of. Because it’s very overwhelming, so when they send the questionnaires to me, that shows me they want me involved.”

4.3.2 Parent-Teacher Relationships

As was described earlier, the majority of the parents indicated that they are very involved in the IEP transition process. Their descriptions of the relationships they have had with school staff, on the other hand, varied. DeFur et al (2001) discussed trust as one of the determining factors of parent engagement in the transition process. Most parents in this study described their relationships with their child’s teacher in a positive tone. Those parents portrayed trusting and caring relationships. Two of the ten parents; however, do not perceive that they have positive relationships with school staff. One parent of a student with Down Syndrome, Kayla, noted that her “relationship with the teacher the last two years was not the best. I had to actually tell her I was going to file a formal complaint against her to get her to follow my son’s IEP.”

The other parent, Emily, who has a daughter with autism, said that her relationship with the teacher is “non-existent.” When asked to further elaborate, she noted that her daughter

recently transitioned to high school. While she was in middle school, regular meetings were held to discuss any issues or concerns. There was also regular communication with several teachers. Her daughter's transition to high school has been more difficult because of no interactions with the school team despite numerous attempts Kayla has made at communicating via email. She attributes this to the high school teachers stressing that her daughter needs to be her own advocate, which makes her feel uncomfortable because of her daughter's disability.

4.3.3 Parent-Teacher Communication

Directly related to relationships is the perception of the level of communication between parents and school staff. Communication occurs in numerous ways, most notably through email and phone calls. Seven of the parents discussed two-way communication as being a regular occurrence.

Two of the seven parents have students with Down Syndrome (Michelle and Renee). They indicated that they email with the teacher daily, while another parent, Evelyn, reported that she gets a daily log of everything her son has done each day. The remaining five parents related that regular communication occurred with the teacher or someone from the school.

Shelley, Kayla and Emily were the only parents who expressed dissatisfaction over the communication with school staff. Shelley noted, "I only communicate when there are issues, especially if it's a new teacher." She also negatively described her level of communication as decreasing since her son has gotten older, despite numerous medical and physical concerns. Kayla talked about the challenge of dealing with a new teacher this year and the hope that her interactions would be better than the negative interactions and lack of communication with his previous year's teacher. She noted that thus far, the level of communication has not increased.

This is similar to Emily's comments about her daughter's change to a new building. Both parents' comments demonstrated that they feel communication is important to their children's educational program and both were hopeful that the communication would eventually improve.

4.4 THEME FOUR: THERE ARE BARRIERS TO PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN TRANSITION

What do parents of students with significant disabilities identify as important issues in the transition process?

Parents were asked specifically about what concerns they have with the IEP Transition process, as well as how the process could be improved. Several subthemes emerged and are discussed below.

4.4.1 Inadequate Information about Transition

When asked about how the transition process could be improved for families, only two of the ten parents did not make a suggestion (Shelley, who noted that they have not yet begun discussing transition and Samantha who already has everything planned). Of the eight parents that responded, most parents answered that more information should be provided by the school district. Kayla offered the following suggestion:

The school district could provide a list of vocational training programs throughout the county that the district 'approves' so that those options are open for a parent to explore. I haven't been provided any of that information. I often feel that parents are left to fend for

themselves and that it is the easiest thing for the district to do because if the parent isn't aware of an option then the district doesn't have to consider funding it.

Parents also indicated that they would like the conversations about transition to start earlier. They suggested such things as information packets, a document that walks parents through transition step-by step, or informational meetings as a way of helping parents navigate the Transition process. Michelle proposed that school district staff, including administrators, should be trained about how to work with students with disabilities. Her suggestions stemmed from her experience when her daughter started kindergarten. She was told by a principal that, although they had never had a student with Down Syndrome before, they were "willing to try" to keep her at her regular school. She strongly recommended that school districts should not be just trying, but should have an in-depth understanding of the students they work with and how to best meet their needs.

An additional suggestion was to bring parents of students with disabilities together on a regular basis to allow for more networking and information sharing. Mostly all of the parents of the students with Down Syndrome spoke of the importance of parent networks as the method for gaining more information.

4.4.2 Lack of Understanding of Available Programs

Parents were also asked to relate any concerns that they may have encountered in the IEP transition process. Half of the respondents indicated that they have no concerns with the process. The other half discussed concerns regarding lack of program availability as compared to other areas of the state or country. They discussed that the schools are doing a fair job providing job training, but not in assisting the students to be able to function in their communities, such as

providing training in accessing public transportation, housing, medical access, and other community living skills. They also spoke about the lack of information provided to parents about transition in general. Michelle worries that she has fallen short in advocating for more information:

I would say that I think if I would have been more vocal about needing more information I think they would've provided it to me. I think at the meetings a year ago or two years ago I wasn't necessarily thinking about those transitions, so I think maybe they assumed that I had information or maybe I knew it already. So last year when I said I really don't know what's available or what we were going to do, that was when I became verbal about it that they sort of pointed me in the right direction. So perhaps it's my own fault for not being more vocal about needing this information.

Overall, parents are saying that they may not have a strong grasp of what programs are available to their children to better prepare them for the future.

4.4.3 Uncertainty about Their Children's Futures

Seven of the parents interviewed indicated significant concern about their children's ability to have a job in the future. They discussed pre-vocational preparation and job readiness as their main concerns. Two of the parents also discussed apprehension concerning where their children would live in the future and how they would be taken care of if they lived away from their families.

Michelle discussed her concerns about what types of employment would be available to her daughter who has Down Syndrome. She noted that she was given a "list of types of

employment [available to her], but I don't really understand the terms, so I couldn't really ask or answer questions without someone telling me what the terms might be." Without a clear understanding, she explained, it is difficult for parents to make good decisions for their children. Kayla also discussed vocational training that she knows is available, but has never been offered to her 17 year-old son with Down Syndrome. She, like other parents, blames herself for not knowing the questions to ask.

Out of the ten parents, only Samantha, whose daughter is closest to graduating at 20 years of age, indicated that she had no concerns, because a job and living space were already arranged for her daughter. She was also the only parent who expressed a clear plan for any of the three elements of transition.

4.5 SUMMARY

Throughout the interview process, several major patterns emerged from the parent perspectives. Those included the need for further knowledge about transition as a process, the need to understand their role in the process, and specific concerns related to their children's futures. Moreover, parents discussed concerns related to communication and collaboration. In the next chapter, I discuss what the findings mean in relation to the themes, as well as implications for school districts as to how they might consider making improvements to the transition process for families and students.

5.0 DISCUSSION

Parent interviews on the IEP transition process and their roles in the process provided rich perspectival data. Many similarities emerged from the parent interview responses, but some differences emerged as well. In the previous chapter, I discussed the data obtained in the interviews. In this chapter, the data are interpreted and analyzed by examining the themes once again. I then reflect upon the research process, including biases, surprises and the experiences I gained. Next, I examine the implications that the parent perceptions on transition provide for school administrators for improving the process of transitioning students with significant disabilities. Finally, suggestions are given for future research.

5.1 FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1.1 Parents Have Limited Understanding of the Transition Process

When reviewing what parents actually know about the IEP transition process, it became obvious that parents' knowledge about both the process and available programming is limited. Although most parents felt satisfied with the transition process, when questioned about specifics related to the transition process, parents actually lacked knowledge of many aspects. First, their awareness

of regulatory requirements was limited. IDEA (2004) clearly outlines who the required IEP team members should be (34 CFR§300.321). In all cases, parent responses did not reflect that they are aware of the team members that must attend. Although school districts are required under 34 CFR§300.320(b) to invite students who are of transition age to their IEP meetings, most parents did not seem aware that the child's attendance is required. Only two stated that their child was actually invited to attend. This is in clear violation of the special education regulations.

Second, the regulations in 34 CFR §300.43 outline what areas must be discussed in transition planning. Parents were not able to identify the three main areas included in transition planning (competitive employment, community living, post-secondary training). Third, parents are required to be trained by school districts with regard to special education processes, which includes transition planning (34 CFR§650). However, very rarely did parents describe receiving any training and/or any meaningful training materials. Without knowledge about the transition process, parents cannot identify what questions to ask or what services are possible.

In general, the parents believe their school districts do a good job with providing services to their children. Their answers concerning their satisfaction levels are proof of those feelings. In spite of this, it is evident that they may not know the questions to ask if they do not know requirements or if they do not have an understanding of what the process is. Leiter and Krauss (2004) suggest "parents may be unaware of their rights or of the services for which their children are eligible, suggesting that parents' expectations of special education may be compromised by what they do (and do not) know" (p. 143).

Parents' responses indicated that they mistakenly believe that they must request services for their children in order to obtain them. In fact, some of them stated that they felt they should have asked for certain services earlier. Under IDEA (2004), it is the school district's

responsibility to provide information about services and to provide what services are needed for each student (34 CFR§300.43). School districts are responsible for informing parents about what services are available, beginning with the IEP the year the student turns 14. For a parent to indicate that the IEP team has not really spoken about transition plans indicates that school districts are clearly not fulfilling some of their obligatory duties.

Some of the more profound findings in my study come from what parents did not say, despite consistent prompts in the interview protocol. Not one parent could identify specific topics of trainings related to transition that had been provided by their respective school districts. None mentioned the availability of training centers where they could go for more information. It should be noted that some of the parents noted that they had received state transition pamphlets at their meetings. Included in those pamphlets is information regarding training centers and information on the transition process in general. Although the parents feel school districts have not directly provided them with transition information, the information may be readily available to them. Another concern is that very few parents even realized that their school district had a transition coordinator. They stated that they would call their child's teacher if they had a concern. From the information provided, it sounds like the teachers are the resource persons for the parents and may not be sharing about additional resources available to them in the school districts. Thus, the breakdown may actually be at the teacher level. In other words, teachers may lack the necessary training in order to provide parents with more information they might need for transitioning their children.

The data obtained through the parent interviews suggests that parents do not have sufficient knowledge about transition in general from a basic background on transition to the components that should be discussed in the IEP meetings. Without an overall knowledge base, it

is impossible for parents to be fully engaged in the IEP transition process, as intended by the Federal Regulations.

One point should be noted here. Students with significant disabilities are eligible to remain in school until the age of 21. I make the assumption that all of the students whose parents were interviewed (with perhaps the exception of Emily's daughter, who is in inclusion classes and is expected to go to college) will remain in school until 21. The parent with the student closest to leaving school (20 years old) *did* feel that all areas of the transition process were covered in her daughter's IEP. She also felt that she had been provided with information, although she could not name specific training that she had been provided. This is in keeping with research by Cameto (2005), who implied that more information is given to parents about post-secondary options as the student gets older, especially those who stay in K-12 education until the age of 21. Thus, it is expected that the parents of the students who are 14 and 15 should expect to get more information as their children get nearer the age of exit from school.

Most parents felt that they learned about the transition process on their own rather than being educated by the school district. They expressed the need to reach out to outside sources, including professional organizations and other parents, in order to find out what they need to know about transition. In this study, the majority of the parents had children with Down Syndrome and are involved in networks through outside activities (for example, Special Olympics or the ARC, a community based organization for people with developmental or intellectual disabilities). The outside agencies through which they have participated have been providing them with information and resources since their children were infants. Thus, they may not actually feel the need to have more information from the school. This could explain why

most of them report that they are satisfied with the school process and why some of them do not report a sense of urgency about the future.

5.1.2 There are Multiple Roles for Parents in the Transition Process

Parents described themselves in a variety of ways: advocate, adversary, informant, and active or passive participant. These descriptors align with research by deFur et al. (2001) which speaks to family involvement, professional reaction and family and system interaction.

Those parents who described themselves as their child's advocate spoke more of a parent-driven IEP process than those who indicated that they were only providing information. Most spoke of being the one constant in their child's team, with changing schools or changing personnel. Thus, they described their feelings of urgency with impending graduations as being only belonging to themselves and not to school staff.

More than half of the parents interviewed have employed an outside advocate at one point in their child's educational career. Some of those parents continue to bring advocates and describe their roles as being an adversary. Those parents who described their roles in this way noted that they have had to dispute the school's plans for their child and pressure the school into getting what they feel their child needs.

Most parents provided information into their children's IEPs, thus they could all be described as informants. However, some parents talked about themselves as only providing information, which was then written into the IEP, rather than playing an equal role in the process. Although most parents tended to call themselves active participants in the process, their descriptions contradicted that characterization. Providing information alone does not constitute active involvement. Again, it underscores the fact that parents do not have a general

understanding of what their role can and should be. In their research, Flexer et al. (2001) declared,

Educators must learn to comply with the legislative mandates in the spirit with which they were intended. This means that parents must be afforded the opportunities to participate in their child's educational process, not simply because they have a legal right to participate but, rather, because successful outcomes for youth with disabilities cannot be achieved without them (p 413).

The findings herein also support the findings by Katsiyannis and Ward (1992) which show how important it is to nurture relationships with parents to build their roles as more active participants in their children's transition process. The difficulty for school districts is how to convince the parents to be more active when they report that they are satisfied with the process.

5.1.3 Collaboration is an Essential Component in Transition

Based upon the parent interview data, almost all of the school districts solicited information from parents for their children's IEPs. All of the parents were also invited to the annual IEP meetings where transition was discussed. This is in direct contradiction of research by Valle (2012) that found that IEP's were being written with no parent input or participation. Thus, all of the school districts where the participants resided were at least in compliance with the regulations with regard to parent participation.

Parents indicated that they communicate with their children's teachers and many of them communicate regularly. As research suggests, communication is critical to building strong parent and school relationships (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008, Christenson, 2012). The majority of

parents in this study feel that they have strong, regular communication with the school district. The three parents who ranked themselves as somewhat dissatisfied with the IEP Transition process thus far were also the ones that indicated that there was little to no communication with school staff. This finding suggests there may be a correlation between communication and parent satisfaction with the IEP transition process.

The perspectives gleaned from the parents shows that there may actually be more parent to parent collaboration than parent to school collaboration. Again, this is evident with most of the parents in this sample because of the well-established networks of parents of children with Down Syndrome. Parent collaboration was not noted by the three parents of students who did not have Down Syndrome. Of those three, only the parent of the child with autism spoke of lack of communication and collaboration with her school district. Her daughter was the only student in the sample that is in inclusion. It is unclear whether the lack of communication and collaboration is based upon the daughter's educational setting and expectations because of her placement. The student is also the only one from the sample who is expected to be able to attend college upon graduation, so she may well be higher functioning than the sample of other students and the school team may expect more independence from her than the other students. This may account for the difference in parent-teacher communication and collaboration.

5.1.4 There are Barriers to Parent Engagement in Transition

Parent concerns regarding their children's future plans were a primary issue identified. Only one parent, out of the ten interviewed, declared that she had a clear plan for her child's future education, job and future home living situation. This may be because the student was the oldest in the sample (20 years-old) and the rest of the students are still in the planning stages of

transition. Those remaining students were uncertain about future goals, which is contradictory to their statements of satisfaction with the process. It is once again indicative of parents' lack of knowledge about the process and about which programs are available for their children. In addition to knowledge about programs, the lack of programs in the school districts was discussed by many parents. One parent compared her school district to that of another county with a superior vocational program. She described her school district as lacking in providing options for transition and lacking vision for coming up with new programs. Perhaps the reason for not having more, and different, programs available could be due to underfunding for those programs. Further perspectives from many of the parents did show that their children are involved in various work experiences within and outside of the school districts, as well as in pre-vocational experiences in their schools. It seems that there is a contradiction between parent report and what is happening in the schools. It may well be that parents have higher expectations for programs than what their children are receiving, but many are receiving vocational training experiences.

Communication was again identified as an important issue for parents. These findings are in agreement with those of Adams and Christenson (2000), "parents have sent a very clear message: communicate with us, share information with us, keep us informed" (p. 493). Parent report showed that many parents and teachers communicate regularly. Their expression of need for further communication shows that most parents want to be actively involved in decision making and in all aspects of their children's educational programming and planning.

5.1.5 Topics That Cut Across Themes

There are several topics for further consideration that arose from the parent interview data that should also be discussed. Those topics cut across the themes. First, the overall findings suggest that parents have a high level of satisfaction with the transition process. This finding may have arisen because parents do not fully comprehend the components of the transition process and are unaware of what they do not know. If they had a higher level of understanding, they may have been less satisfied with the process, although it is not possible to know within the confines of my current data set.

Second, because my sample of students with intellectual disabilities were all students diagnosed with Down Syndrome, the answers may have been different for parents of students who just had cognitive deficits, but not Down Syndrome. I make the assumption that there would be fewer networking opportunities for those students than are available to families with children with Down Syndrome. Thus, parents may report a lower level of satisfaction with the process. It is also possible that out of necessity, they may take a more advocacy role for their children because they do not have the resources from the outside agencies that parents of students with Down Syndrome have.

Third, the level of understanding about the transition process may be related to the students' ages. As mentioned earlier, the parent with the oldest student (20 years-old) was the only one in the sample who reported a clear plan for her daughter's future with regard to the components of transition required in IDEA (2004). It may be that as children become more prepared to leave the school system that the parents also develop a higher understanding of what is available for their children and develop a higher understanding of the transition process in general.

Finally, many of the students in the sample are already involved in job training activities. Despite having those opportunities, parents reported not having knowledge about available programs. This seems somewhat contradictory. It may be possible that parents are not making the connection that these activities are the very programs that will prepare their children for the future. It is also possible that school districts are preparing the students for the future much more than parents are recognizing.

These are topics that arose from the data analysis. They provide the reader with the opportunity to further speculate what the findings mean across the themes. They also provide additional areas where further research could be conducted. Recommendations for future research are discussed in more detail in the next section.

5.2 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several recommendations are made for future research on the topic of parent engagement in the transition process. The current study contained only a small sample of parents of students with significant disabilities. Future research should be completed using a larger sample of parents from a more diverse population. This would allow for more generalization to the population as a whole by providing a comparison between disability types or between school district size or setting (city vs. suburban).

While the purpose of this research project was not to present a complete picture of all participants' views on the special education transition process, but to present parent perceptions about transition, future research could include more comprehensive consideration perceptions by all parties in the transition process. A study of this structure would allow for a more balanced

picture of the transition process. Including a record review of the transition IEPs could also provide triangulation of information and strengthen the research project.

Another suggestion is to complete a longitudinal study following parents from the time of the first transition meeting when their child turns 14 through their 21st year. Because my research findings suggest that parents lack a full understanding about transition and available resources, a study of this type would allow the researcher to examine how parent perspectives evolve as the student gets older, as well as their knowledge about transition at various stages. Of course, a longitudinal study could also include information from parents a few years beyond their child's departure from school to examine parent perspectives after graduation and how they reflect upon the process after they have been through it. Especially since parents don't seem to have a strong understanding at the beginning of transition, I am interested to examine how that knowledge evolves as they progress through the transition process and beyond. It would also be interesting to examine their perspectives surrounding what they would have done differently with what they learn after their children are beyond school age.

Moreover, an analysis of school district training programs regarding transition could be completed. Surveys could be completed by school district transition coordinators to determine what the school perspectives are concerning how they engage parents in the transition process.

5.3 RESEARCHER REFLECTIONS

Before beginning the parent interviews, I had several biases based upon my position as a school psychologist and experiences in IEP meetings where transition was discussed. A conscious effort was made to keep those biases out of my questioning techniques with the parents I

interviewed. One correct assumption was that parents would not have a strong grasp on what programs are available to their children. One major misassumption, however, was that parents would have a good overall understanding of the transition process. They did not. Other basic assumptions were that parents would express their dissatisfaction with the transition process and that they would indicate that they are not very involved in the process, which was also not the case.

There were several surprises in the research, including the lack of knowledge on the part of parents, especially concerning basic IEP requirements. All of the parents' children have been receiving special education services since preschool, which means that the parents have participated in at least a dozen IEP meetings. It was surprising to discover that parents did not by this time have an understanding of who is required to participate in IEP meetings each. It was also surprising that some parents did not seem concerned that many of the transition details have yet to be resolved or even discussed.

I was able to gain valuable information through the parent interviews. That information can be used to improve the transition process for parents within school districts. In the next section, I discuss how the information from this study can be useful for school districts in examining their own transition practices to determine if there may be areas upon which they can improve.

5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

The main implication of this research was to determine how school districts could improve the transition process for parents of students with significant disabilities. At first, this research

appears to suggest that parents are actually satisfied with the process. Nonetheless, a review of the specific responses showed areas that could be improved by school districts. Based upon parent information, as well as the analysis of the literature about best practices and my professional experience, this section recommends some ways school districts can improve the transition process for parents and their children.

Training appears to be the one issue most often mentioned by parents and mentioned in the best practice literature. School districts need to provide parents information about IEPs, about IDEA requirements, and about the components of transition. By doing so, parents may have a more clear understanding of the special education process in general. Training should then move to providing parents with more information about what opportunities are available in their children's programs. As also recommended by Ankeny, Wilkins, & Spain, (2009), the parents in this study recommended that families need assistance in finding resources. Parents should be provided with information materials they can read about pre-vocational and vocational training, possible jobs, housing, medical information, transportation and community programs. The information should be comprehensive and distributed to all parents. Several parents suggested that brochures should be made available with step-by-step information parents need in order to make informed decisions about their children's futures. School districts in the state of Pennsylvania have access to Intermediate Units and the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), which can both be useful resources in providing support for school districts in their training endeavors. Consultation with those agencies can also be beneficial to a school district with limited resources from which to acquire materials.

School districts also need to furnish information regarding their transition program in general. Only one parent could identify a transition coordinator in their district. All parents of

students who are transition age should be aware of who the transition coordinator is and what his/her role is. Parents should be given contact information for additional resources that they can access.

In a similar vein, school districts should compile information regarding agencies in their area. Information alone is not sufficient. Even though many of the parents in my study are already connected to outside agencies, school districts should also furnish them with linkages to outside agencies and community resources in order to assist them in obtaining available funding and materials for which their child may be eligible. They should consider hosting an information meeting to which they invite parents and outside agencies that may be relevant to the parents and their children. If doing so, school districts need to keep in mind that they should provide information regarding all types of disabilities, and not just for a specific group, as noted by one of the parents who was interviewed.

Because this study shows that parents and teachers communicate regularly with each other and that teachers are the main source of information for the parents, consideration should be given to further professional development for teachers and school staff involved in transition planning.

Finally, school districts need to consider the information provided by the parents in this study that shows that parents learn most when networking with each other. Districts should assist parents in forming networks in which they can interact with each other and can discuss topics of concern. Forming a transition council within the school district would also be beneficial. The council could be comprised of parents, school staff, as well as community or agency representatives. The council could then report information to the parent groups. By forming these networking experiences, school districts would build lasting collaborative

practices with the parents who badly need information for their children with significant disabilities.

5.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The current research project provided valuable information about parent perspectives on the transition process. The overarching reason for doing the research project was to inform ways that school districts can increase the engagement of parents of students with significant disabilities in the special education transition process. This research was not meant to blame school districts or imply they have not done what is legally required of them, but merely to provide areas where they may improve the transition process for parents. However, as a school district employee myself, I recognize that there is always room for growth. It is clear from the parent perspectives that school districts would benefit from examining their practices regarding the special education transition process in order to determine if there are areas in which they could improve.

The findings in this study produced four main themes:

- Parents' limited understanding about transition was by far the major theme identified in all parents' responses. Much of the research reviewed showed that parents are in need of increased information (Ankeny, Wilkins, & Spain, 2009; Harry, 1992; Trussell, Hammond, & Ingalls, 2008). This research project supports that reported need by the parents.
- The role that parents play in transition was also a major theme that emerged. Parents described themselves in a variety of ways, which ranged from passive to

active. They mostly all characterized themselves as informants. The other roles that emerged were advocate, adversary and liaison.

- The third major theme centered on collaborative practices. Parents described the need for communication with school staff and the importance of relationship building which was also identified by Adams and Christenson (2000) and Knopf and Swick (2008). They also discussed their perspectives on how school districts try to engage them in the transition process.
- Finally, the fourth major theme emerged as parents discussed concerns about the IEP transition process. Again, they discussed knowledge, information, and communication as being of the utmost importance.

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), approximately only 17.8% of people with disabilities were employed in 2012, compared to 63.9% without disabilities. In addition, 33% of people with disabilities only held part-time jobs. These statistics serve as a reminder of the importance of careful transition planning for students with disabilities so that they are able to live productive lives in our society. It is the hope that parent and school collaboration in the transition process will ensure that students are able to gain the skills they need for future employment to be able to reach their full potential in the future. Improving practices by engaging parents more in the transition process is a step in the right direction.

The findings herein indicate that parents are satisfied with what school districts are doing for their children, but that they also need to do more. School districts are faced with the difficulty of more fully engaging parents who say they are satisfied within the process. Increased collaboration and communication with parents is central to improving the transition process. By

working together as a team, which is the intent of the regulatory requirements, schools and parents will be better able to design meaningful transition programs for students with significant disabilities. Helen Keller once said, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” This simple statement coincides with the findings of the current research project and expresses the importance of engaging parents in school processes in which important decisions are being made about their children’s futures.

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

CONSENT TO ACT AS A SUBJECT IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to find out what parents of students with significant disabilities think about the IEP transition process (the time when their children ages 14-21 are being prepared for life after school).

Who is being asked to take part in this study?

Approximately 20-30 parents of students with significant disabilities who are between the ages of 14 and 21 will be invited to take part in this research study.

What is the definition of significant disability?

For this study, the research includes the following: intellectual disability, autism, physical disability, or multiple disabilities.

What do I have to do?

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to be interviewed by telephone. The interview will last around 30 minutes. You will be asked questions about the IEP process and how well you think your school is meeting your child's transition needs.

What are the possible risks of this study?

There is very little risk involved in this study. The interviews will be anonymous and your name will not be recorded. You will not be asked any personal information.

Will I benefit from taking part in this study?

Your information may help to improve the transition process for other parents in the future.

How much will I be paid if I complete this study?

No pay will be given to people who participate in this study

Will anyone know that I am taking part in this study?

The information you provide will be anonymous. You will not be identified as a participant.

Do I have to participate in this study?

No. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in it, or you may stop participating at any time. You will not be asked to sign permission, but will be asked at the beginning of the interview if you agree to participate and if you agree to be recorded.

How can I get more information about this study?

If you have any further questions about this research study, you may contact the investigator listed at the beginning of this consent form. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Protection Advocate at the University of Pittsburgh IRB Office, 1.866.212.2668.

APPENDIX B

INTRODUCTORY SCRIPT AND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introductory Script

Hi! My name is Stacey Snyder and I am a student at the University of Pittsburgh. You were recommended to me by _____ as someone who is willing to be interviewed for a study I am working on. My research is about parents' experiences during special education meetings after their children turn 14. We call this the transition time. Transition is where you and the school team plan for your child's future after graduation. As part of my research, I am interested in finding ways to make the process better for parents.

Before we begin the interview, I need your agreement to participate. I would also like to record our conversation so that I don't have to take lots of notes while we're talking. The tape will be typed after our interview, but you will only be identified by a number. You can choose not to answer a question if you don't want to. The interview should last no longer than 30 minutes. You are welcome to stop it at any time. I am going to start recording now. **Turn on recorder.**

Are you willing to participate in this recorded telephone interview? _____ Thank you.

General Questions

First, I have a few general questions about you and your child.

A. How old is your child?

B. What is your child's gender?

C. What is your child's disability category(on his/her official school paperwork)?

D. What size is the school district where your family lives?

E. Which best describes the area where you live - would you say it is rural, suburban, or urban?

F. Have you ever had any classes or formal training about special education? *If yes, what topics were covered?*

G. Have you ever worked with a special education advocate?

Interview Questions:

1) First, I want to ask you about the meetings you have with the school each year. Those are usually called IEP meetings. Who is invited to attend the meetings

2) Do you ever bring anyone with you to the meetings? If so, who?

3) Can you describe to me what you think is the purpose of a transition meeting?

4) Now I want to know about how you give information and ideas. How do you provide information for your child's IEP?

a) *Do you send something in writing?*

b) *Do you talk to the teacher?*

c) *Do you ever fill out checklists or questionnaires?*

Feel free to provide more detail.

5) What is your role at IEP meetings? (What do you do at the meetings?)

6) Is the information you provide always included in the IEP? If so, can you give me an example?

7) Now think about the meeting itself. What types of things are talked about at the IEP meetings since your child reached transition age?

8) At the IEP meetings, how would you describe your level of involvement? Would you say you are very involved, a little involved, or not involved at all?

9) Thank you. This is very helpful information to me. Now I want to find out how you learned about the transition process. What training materials has the school given to you

10) What parent information meetings or trainings has your school provided you, if any?

11) How do you get information you might need for transition?

12) Has the school district linked you with any outside agencies?

13) How would you describe your relationship with your child's special education teacher?

14) Have you ever had any concerns about your child's transition planning? If so, can you explain in more detail? *If so, how were the problems resolved?*

15) Thinking about the overall IEP transition process, would you say you are extremely satisfied, satisfied, slightly dissatisfied or extremely dissatisfied with the process? Why?

16) If there is any way the school could improve the transition planning process for you or your child, what would that be?

I want to thank you for sharing your experiences with me. Is there anything else you would like to add that I haven't asked about?

Thank you so much for talking with me today. Since my study is being done with parents of students who are 14 to 21, I am asking that the people I talk to recommend other parents that they know who they feel might be willing to be interviewed. Is there another parent of a child with a disability older than 14 that you would recommend I talk to? *Provide phone number and email for them to contact me. Indicate that I may make a follow-up call to check to see if the parent agreed to talk to me. Also indicate that they may also contact me if they think of other parents to recommend.*

APPENDIX C

CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT FOR TRANSCRIPTIONIST

Confidentiality Statement

I, _____, understand and agree that the interviews that I am transcribing may contain confidential information. Any information identifying the participant will be removed when typing the transcripts. I agree not to disclose or reveal any information on the interview audiotapes. Those audiotapes will be erased after the interviews are transcribed. Tapes, USB drives, or any other data storage device containing the interview transcripts, will be returned to Stacey Snyder upon completion of the transcription.

Name _____

Title _____

Date _____

Witness _____

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