

**Families and IEP Meetings in a Lower Socioeconomic Urban School Setting:
Identifying Barriers to Participation and Strategies to Increase Engagement**

by

Jennifer M. Geibel

Bachelor of Science: Music Therapy, Slippery Rock University, 2001

Master of Science: Communication Disorders, State University of New York at New Paltz, 2008

Professional Certification: Supervisor of Special Education, Edinboro University, 2014

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
School of Education in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

University of Pittsburgh

2019

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

This dissertation was presented

by

Jennifer M. Geibel

It was defended on

July 23, 2019

and approved by

Dr. Lori Delale-O'Connor Ph.D., Assistant Professor, School of Education

Dr. Joyce Epstein Ph.D., Professor, Johns Hopkins University School of Education

Dr. Kathryn Poggi, Ed.D., PA Training and Technical Assistance Network, Educational

Consultant

Dissertation Director: Dr. Louise Kaczmarek Ph.D., Adjunct Associate

Professor, School of Education

Copyright © by Jennifer M. Geibel

2019

**Families and IEP Meetings in a Lower Socioeconomic Urban School Setting:
Identifying Barriers to Participation and Strategies to Increase Engagement**

Jennifer M. Geibel, Ed.D.

University of Pittsburgh, 2019

This study examined family engagement in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings from the point of view of various stakeholders, including family members of students receiving special education services, and educators, such as classroom teachers, special educators and paraprofessionals. Six educators and three parents were interviewed to glean information regarding family involvement in the special education process. Documents were also analyzed to supplement the information gained from the interview process. This analysis examined both school-wide documents, such as mission statements and family engagement policies, and student-specific documents, including IEPs and other special education documentation.

Common practices in special education and family engagement were analyzed in relation to identified policies and procedures, and explored processes surrounding such topics as communication and building collaborative partnerships. Family engagement in IEP meetings was specifically reviewed according to the viewpoints of multiple stakeholder participants. Several barriers to family participation in the special education process were identified within this study. Minor concerns included logistical challenges, such as scheduling and transportation, which were generally easily overcome, and more serious issues, such as ineffective communication, lack of special education knowledge, and inadequate family-school partnerships, which proved more inelible. A number of strategies were described as means to overcoming these described barriers, including frequent, ongoing communications in a variety of forms (texting, communication books,

etc.), building of relationships of mutual respect and trust, and the provision of trainings to teach parental rights in the special education process. Recommendations were identified for administrators, special educators, classroom teachers, and family members, to increase authentic family school partnerships within the IEP process.

Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Purpose of the Study	2
1.2 Research Questions	3
1.3 Significance of the Problem	3
1.4 Social Validity	5
1.5 Methodology.....	7
1.6 Limitations and Delimitations.....	7
1.7 Organization of the Study.....	8
1.8 Summary	9
2.0 Review of the Literature.....	10
2.1 Methods of Literature Review.....	12
2.1.1 Search Procedures.....	12
2.1.2 Inclusionary and Exclusionary Criteria.....	13
2.1.3 Additional Search Methods.....	14
2.1.4 Coding Procedures	14
2.2 Results.....	15
2.2.1 Research Designs.....	15
2.2.2 Quality of Studies	16
2.2.3 Participants.....	16
2.2.4 Settings	17
2.2.5 Modes of Participation.....	18

2.2.6 Identified Barriers.....	20
2.2.6.1 Knowledge-Based Barriers	21
2.2.6.2 Communication Barriers	22
2.2.6.3 Logistical Barriers	23
2.3 Discussion	26
2.3.1 Modes of Engagement.....	26
2.3.2 Barriers to Engagement.....	27
2.3.3 Implications for Research and Practice	30
2.3.4 Limitations.....	34
2.4 Conclusion	35
3.0 Research Methodology	36
3.1 Purpose of the Study	36
3.2 Research Questions	37
3.3 Research Design.....	38
3.3.1 Rationale	38
3.3.2 Participants.....	39
3.3.3 Setting.....	42
3.3.4 Instrumentation.....	43
3.3.5 Role of the Researcher	45
3.3.6 Procedures	45
3.3.7 Trustworthiness.....	48
3.4 Conclusion	50
4.0 Results	51

4.1 Documents Used within Artifact Review.....	51
4.2 Description of Interview Participants.....	57
4.3 Analysis of Policies, Procedures, and Practices	58
4.3.1 Policies and Procedures Surrounding Family Engagement in General Education	59
4.3.1.1 Developing Home-School Partnerships	61
4.3.1.2 Use of Understandable Language.....	63
4.3.1.3 Rates of Home-School Communication	65
4.3.1.4 Knowledge of Curriculum	67
4.3.1.5 Communication Regarding Student Achievement	68
4.3.2 Family Engagement in Special Education	69
4.3.2.1 IEP Meeting Attendance	70
4.3.2.2 Developing the IEP	74
4.3.2.3 Accountability	77
4.4 Barriers to Engagement of Families in IEPs.....	79
4.4.1 Barriers of Knowledge.....	79
4.4.2 Logistical Barriers.....	83
4.4.3 Barriers of Communication	85
4.4.4 Barriers of Culture and Relationships	87
4.5 Strategies for Engagement of Families in IEPs	90
4.5.1 Strategies for Increasing Attendance at Team Meetings	91
4.5.2 Strategies for Enhancing Family Member Contributions to IEP Meetings	95
4.5.3 Strategies for Impacting Parental Participation in Academics	100

4.6 Conclusion	102
5.0 Discussion	104
5.1 Discussion	110
5.1.1 Communication	110
5.1.2 Building Partnerships	113
5.2 Recommendations	116
5.2.1 Recommendations for Administrators	117
5.2.2 Recommendations for Special Educators	119
5.2.3 Recommendations for Classroom Teachers	120
5.2.4 Recommendations for Family Members	121
5.3 Limitations	122
5.4 Implications for Further Study	126
5.5 Demonstration of Scholarly Practice	128
5.6 Conclusion	130
Appendix A Educator Recruitment Letter	131
Appendix B Family Member Recruitment Letter	132
Appendix C Family Member Phone Screening Protocol	133
Appendix D Educator Phone Screening Protocol	135
Appendix E Informational Packet and Consent Form	137
Appendix F Document Review Consent Form	141
Appendix G Family Member Demographics Survey	142
Appendix H Educator Demographics Survey	143
Appendix I Interview Protocol for Family Members	144

Appendix J Interview Protocol for Educators 148
Bibliography 151

Preface

This project would not have been possible without the support of a number of individuals. First of all, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Louise Kaczmarek, who always instilled within me the belief that completion of this research study was not only important, but also surmountable. I would also like to thank my doctoral dissertation committee who provided me with time, assistance, and advice. Your participation on my committee reflected your selfless devotion to increasing the body of literature examining family engagement in special education. Words of thanks or accolades cannot adequately express how grateful I am for your assistance, or how much I respect your professional contributions to the subject of family engagement in education. I also thank the individuals who were interviewed for this study, as well as the representatives from the participating school district who allowed me to conduct my research within their site. All of your contributions are deeply appreciated.

Lastly, I must bestow the lion's share of my gratitude to my children, Aiden, Thomas, and Mikey. These past three years have been challenging, not only for me, but for you, as the four of us have tried to navigate the world of doctoral studies, in addition to work, school, sports, music lessons... and everything else we've had to do. The three of you always believed, unwaveringly, in my ability to finish this project. You showed an interest in what I was doing and asked me how things were going, though I don't know whether my answers were always interesting for three children under the age of twelve. I will never forget that every time I said, "Please go to bed – I have to write a paper" or "Please go out and play, so I can finish my review of lit", you listened to me and gave me the time I needed to complete my requirements. Your support allowed me to finish my study, which will help other families be more involved in their children's education, just as we

are involved in each other's ups and down. The three of you are everything to me and I look forward to helping you learn and grow over time, as you have helped me learn and grow during this process. Thank you for being you. I love you all more than anything in this world!

1.0 Introduction

The compilation of forty years of research into the area of family engagement has identified that collaboration between schools and families is a vital component of successful schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Numerous studies have described family engagement as a vital contributor to student success, regardless of demographic elements such as socioeconomic status (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Benefits of family engagement for students include significant academic gains (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005), increased positive attitudes towards school (Huerta, 2009; Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004), improved school attendance (Sheldon & Epstein, 2007), and higher graduation rates (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). This engagement may be divided into the separate domains of parental involvement at home and parental involvement in school, with school involvement being a particularly difficult avenue in which to stimulate engagement (Kim, 2009).

For students with disabilities, familial involvement in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings is a common mode of parental engagement within the school environment and is considered to be an important aspect of the home-school partnership (Moody, 2010). Districts are mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to make sincere efforts to include parents in IEP meetings (IDEA, 2004), and should, ultimately, provide opportunities for meaningful, active engagement within the education process (Fish, 2008). However, research shows that parental attendance at IEP meetings is inconsistent and related to numerous variables, including cultural and linguistic diversity (Jung, 2007), school location (Williams-Diehm, Brandes, Chesnut, & Haring, 2014), school procedures and communication (Moody, 2010), and

type of student disability (Ritchey, 2006). According to verbal reports by teachers within lower socioeconomic urban school districts in Western Pennsylvania, familial attendance at annual IEP meetings is lower than preferable, in spite of efforts made to include families in the IEP process. This study will seek to recognize barriers to attendance and authentic engagement in special education planning meetings, as well as identify policies and procedures that can be used within Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to increase familial attendance and meaningful participation within the planning process.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to analyze school and school district policies for parent participation in IEP meetings, identify barriers to participation, and explore strategies to increase IEP attendance. The target populations within this study were educators and parents of students enrolled in special education at a lower socio-economic urban school. These individuals represented multiple stakeholders within the special education process. Educators hailed from various educational backgrounds, and included special educators, classroom teachers, and paraprofessionals, who worked with students in a variety of grades and with diverse diagnoses. Family members represented students of varying ages and different categories of identified disabilities. This study specifically intended to glean insight into family engagement and the special education planning process within a lower socio-economic urban school and used artifact review, as well as qualitative interview data to confirm this experience. This study sought to describe not only barriers to family engagement in special education, but also to glean insight into how to improve the process to increase familial involvement in the IEP process.

1.2 Research Questions

The following research questions were asked within this study:

1. What are the current school, district, and state policies and procedures regarding family engagement in general education and IEP Meetings?
2. What are the barriers to family participation in IEP meetings, as identified by educators and family members in a lower socioeconomic urban school district?
3. What are supportive strategies identified by educators and family members that may be used to increase family participation in IEP meetings within a lower socioeconomic urban school district?

1.3 Significance of the Problem

Family engagement in education may be impacted by a number of factors. Many of the variables related to familial attendance are related to partnership-building and the creation of a welcoming school environment (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 2008). Creating this environment may be one of the most difficult challenges behind any family engagement activity, including the inclusion of families within the special education process. Family engagement researcher Karen Mapp identifies several principles behind building a welcoming environment. According to Mapp's research, establishing a welcoming culture requires a "paradigm shift." Schools must effectively move from seeing families and community members as a part of the problem within schools to seeing them as a part of the solution. In addition, educational agencies must alter their focus from program-based to relationship-based, built on a foundation of

collaborative and shared responsibility. The commitment to family engagement must occur as part of a program-wide, systemic change that is engrained in all staff members (Mapp, 2012). However, changing a school culture is not necessarily easy, as it may be more difficult to alter underlying attitudes than general policies.

Creating an environment of welcoming within the special education process, specifically attendance at IEP meetings, may involve even more in-depth diagnostics, because the special education process is fraught with additional barriers (Smith, 2001). Family members of students with disabilities may experience more intense levels of stress than their counterparts whose children are without diagnoses, a factor that is potentially detrimental to the IEP process (Cheatham, Hart, Malian, & McDonald, 2012). Logistical concerns, such as scheduling difficulties, work obligations, lack of transportation or lack of child-care for younger siblings, may prohibit even the most basic participation within meetings, while barriers of knowledge – confusing jargon, high readability levels, lack of understanding of school system or disability, and feelings of inadequacy – may also contribute to a lack of engagement (Smith, 2001). Communication among stakeholders also influences the success of student in special education, as ineffective communication has been noted to lead to conflict within the IEP process (Tamzarian, Menzies, & Ricci, 2012). Additional frustration on the part of family members may be linked to a lack of opportunity to provide input and a lack of a strengths-based approach by the school in educational planning (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

Families whose children attend lower socioeconomic urban school districts may experience unique difficulties in becoming involved in their children's IEP meetings or the school environment in general. Larger populations of students identified as minorities often correlates to higher percentages of students identified as receiving special education (Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Educational staff members do not always exhibit acceptance of the contributions of family members of minority and low-income families, instead perceiving them as unconcerned or uncaring (Ritter, Mont-Retnaud, & Dornbush, 1993), while parents themselves may feel that their contributions to the IEP process are not welcome (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). It is not unusual for family members in lower socio-economic school districts to be non-participants in IEP meeting, contributing to a lack of understanding of special education requirements and expectations between home and school environments (Trotman, 2001). This lack of participation has serious repercussions for students, however, as positive parental experiences within the IEP process are an essential component of special education success (Mucci, 2014; Shogren, 2012).

1.4 Social Validity

Numerous stakeholders are involved in student IEPs. According to IDEA, these stakeholders include parents, regular education teachers, special education teachers, LEA representatives, transition services personnel, individuals who can interpret test results, and others with special expertise about the child, as well as the students themselves (2004). Effective and collaborative IEP meetings are beneficial to all of these involved parties, as partnerships increase the efficacy of special education programming (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011). Involving families in education, particularly in the development of student IEPs, can result in positive outcomes for school personnel, including smoothing transitions between home and school, positively impacting student achievement, and building communication between schools and families (Xu & Gulosino, 2006). Other positive gains from engaging families include improved test scores, improved grades, more positive student attitudes, fewer special education

referrals, lower dropout rates, less high risk behavior, higher staff morale, enhanced relationships between school and community, increased family support for school initiatives and programs, increased donations of materials and services, and improved parental opinion of and regard for the school (Callendar & Hansen, 2005). Ideally, these potential changes result in a more pleasant and successful working environment for school professionals in general.

As vital stakeholders in their students' education, family members also reap benefits when successfully engaging in their children's education. According to Epstein and colleagues, families who are engaged in their schools feel more comfortable with their children's education and perceive their academic programs as being of higher quality (2008). They also exhibit an increased ability to support their children academically (Epstein et al, 2008). Interactions between school staff and families are ultimately gratifying to students, who demonstrate an increased awareness of their own progress in subjects and skills, greater knowledge of actions needed to maintain or improve grades, and improvements in self-concept as they serve as valuable communicators within the school-family partnership (Epstein et al, 2008).

Students themselves may benefit the most from parental involvement in IEPs. The development of self-determination and self-advocacy of students with disabilities have been linked with parental support and family involvement (Martin & Marshall, 1996). As home-school relationships develop, students gain an increased awareness of academic goals and expectations, as well as their own skills and progress (Cox, 2005). As a result, students with disabilities whose parents demonstrate involvement within the IEP process are able to attain increased levels of student engagement, academic achievement, and social adjustment (Newman, 2005). Such increases relate invariably to higher levels of graduation, lower drop-out rates, and more positive post-school outcomes (Papay and Bambara, 2014).

1.5 Methodology

The method employed a qualitative research approach involving the systematic collection and analysis of data; participants' narratives and experiences were explored through the use of open-ended interview questions and supplemented through analysis of pertinent school documents. Six educator participants and three family member participants were chosen to participate in the study. It was the intent of the researcher to use purposive sampling to select these participants in order to represent a wide variety of viewpoints and experiences, though the small number of volunteers limited the ability of the researcher to mindfully select participants. This will be further discussed in subsequent sections of the document. Questions within the interview process focused not only on what barriers to family engagement are present within the IEP process, but also examined possible strategies to improve the IEP process in order to increase authentic family participation. School-wide and student specific documents were analyzed in order to explore existing policies and procedures pertinent to family engagement within special education, and to determine the presence of parent voice within the special education planning process.

1.6 Limitations and Delimitations

This study was limited in scope, as participants were chosen from a single elementary school within one lower socioeconomic urban school district. Therefore, caution must be applied when determining whether patterns gleaned from this study may be held to be generalizable within multiple school settings, as a variety of factors may potentially impact the ability for this information to prove transferable into other environments and with other student populations.

Moreover, while steps were taken to ensure the use of effective interview instrumentation, including the use of field testing, it must also be noted that information gained from interviews could possibly be skewed by the individual participants' own understanding of the questions presented. In this case, the use of multiple perspectives and artifact review served to support or identify elements of disconnect within interview data. It should be noted, too, that given the potentially small number of interview participants, the researcher should be cautious before ascertaining relationships between demographic characteristics and data trends. For example, the researcher should not assume that because a family member of a child receiving speech-language services demonstrates a particular viewpoint, that this viewpoints is representative of all family members of children receiving such services within the school environment.

1.7 Organization of the Study

This study is organized into the following five chapters:

- Chapter 1: Introduction – Chapter 1 will provide a general information pertaining to the significance of the problem, as well as the research questions being explored, and a brief description of the methodology that will be used to study this problem.
- Chapter 2: Review of Literature – Chapter 2 will describe a review of the research exploring barriers to participation of family members within special education planning meetings in urban school districts.
- Chapter 3: Methods – Chapter 3 will describe the research design and methodology used within this study. Procedures and instrumentation will be described in detail, and aspects such as validity and trustworthiness will be explored.

- Chapter 4: Results – Chapter 4 will present the data collected from the study and discuss the results and findings associated with this data.
- Chapter 5: Discussion – Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of the study and their relationship to the current body of research. It will also discuss possible suggestions for future research.

1.8 Summary

Family involvement in education has long been held as a vital factor in student achievement. However, a multitude of barriers exist that are potentially detrimental to this engagement. Barriers to participation for family members of students with disabilities may be particularly complex, given the intricate nature of the special education system. However, the law itself (IDEA) recognizes the importance of family-school partnerships and seeks to build IEP teams with representatives from multiple spheres of influence. The purpose of this study was to not only identify barriers to familial participation in IEP meetings within a lower socioeconomic urban school district, but also to discuss solutions from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders in order to provide insight as to how to better engage families within the special education planning process and recognize and exalt families as valued team partners.

2.0 Review of the Literature

The compilation of forty years of research into the area of family engagement has identified that collaboration between schools and families is a vital component of successful schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Family-school partnerships have been known to increase children's academic success, as evidenced through higher standardized test scores, as well as overall awareness of academic progress (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Additional studies have identified parent and community involvement as one of five essential supports necessary for maximizing academic growth and success (Bryk et al. 2009). Further benefits of family-school partnerships include smoother transitions between grades and schools (Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001), reduced drop-out rates and higher graduation rates (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006), increased attendance rates (Sheldon & Epstein, 2007), and better attitudes towards learning (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004).

Family engagement may be separated into distinct domains of parental involvement at home and parent involvement in school, with in-school involvement being a particularly difficult avenue in which to stimulate engagement (Kim, 2009). Parent involvement within the school environment takes many forms, whether it be family attendance at school concerts, participation in volunteer PTA activities, or parental attendance in individual student proceedings, such as parent-teacher conferences (Kim, 2009). For students with disabilities, familial attendance at individualized education program (IEP) meetings is considered an important aspect of the home-school partnership (Moody, 2010).

Policies within IDEA indicate that family members, specifically parents, are to be considered equal partners within the IEP process (Landmark, Roberts, & Zhang, 2013). However,

research shows that parental attendance at IEP meetings is inconsistent and related to numerous variables including cultural and linguistic diversity (Jung, 2007), school procedures and communication (Moody, 2010), and type of student disability (Ritchey, 2006). Additionally, families have reported barriers to perceptions of inequality and an apparent lack of opportunity to provide input (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2013). In worst case scenarios, the IEP process has resulted in family members feeling alienated and coerced to participate within a process that they do not feel is representational of their child and family (Valle & Aponte, 2002). A combination of these factors may contribute to a lack of familial participation within IEP meetings.

Urban education settings may possess a variety of attributes that have the potential to impact students and families. However, how do we define “urban?” According to the research, “urban education” is a term that is inadequately described and inconsistency utilized (Milner, 2012). Milner (2012) describes three conceptual frames to describe urban educational environments: urban intensive, urban emergent, or urban characteristic. “Urban intensive” schools are located in densely-populated, large metropolitan areas, while “urban emergent” schools are within smaller cities and encounter problems, such as scarcity of resources, on a smaller scale (Milner 2012). “Urban characteristic” schools are not located in big or mid-sized cities, but experience some of the challengers that may be associated with urban school contexts (Milner 2012). Examples of such characteristics may be increasing populations of English Language Learners. Such schools may serve large and highly-diverse populations (Weiner, 2000). High levels of at-risk students and high poverty levels may also be evident (Kindall-Smith, 2004). Additionally, elevated transient student populations (Nevárez-La Torre, 2012) and increased levels of teacher attrition (Calloway, 2009) serve as further complicating factors. A high frequency of

behavioral challenges (McMahon et al., 2014) and below basic achievement levels in mathematics, reading and science may also occur, relative to high levels of students enrolled in special education (IES National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

This literature review will seek to answer these questions: 1) In what ways do families participate in special education planning meetings, including annual IEP meetings, in urban school districts, according to the current body of research? 2) What does the literature identify as primary barriers to engagement in special education planning meetings for families living within urban school districts? Because investigations addressing questions of perceptual barriers are typically qualitative in nature, due to the fact that qualitative research is an appropriate venue for providing insight into attitudes, perceptions, and interactions (Babbie & Mouton, 2001), this review will consist of an examination of qualitative research studies only.

2.1 Methods of Literature Review

2.1.1 Search Procedures

The PsycINFO and EBSCO databases were utilized to locate scholarly articles and dissertations pertaining to family participation in IEP meetings and special education planning. PsycINFO was selected as an exceedingly popular database utilized within the psychological and behavioral sciences (American Psychological Association, 2016), while ERIC (within the EBSCO family of databases) was utilized due to its strong reputation for educationally-based academic articles. Search results were limited to include dissertations and articles published in academic journals from 2004 forward, as 2004 marked the reauthorization of the Individuals with

Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), which re-emphasized the necessity of family engagement in the special education planning process. The following search terms were utilized: IEP OR individualized education program OR special education AND family OR parent* OR mother OR father OR caregiver, AND urban. This initial search yielded 190 possibilities identified using EBSCO and 412 potential publications utilizing PsycInfo.

2.1.2 Inclusionary and Exclusionary Criteria

Both scholarly journal articles and dissertations were identified as appropriate publications for inclusion in this review. The purpose of including dissertations was to provide a more complete picture regarding the available data pertaining to barriers to family participation within the IEP process. The author reviewed the abstracts of all articles and dissertations in order to determine whether these articles directly referred to barriers to family IEP participation and special education planning within urban settings, according to the following inclusionary and exclusionary criteria. The following criteria were used to determine possible studies (scholarly articles and dissertations) for inclusion in this review:

- The study utilized qualitative research (in some case “mixed methods” articles were identified, with a focus on the qualitative modes of exploration)
- The study referred to families of school-age children
- The study referred to the IEP or special education planning process
- The study included participants from urban environments

Exclusionary criteria was also utilized to eliminate inappropriate articles and dissertations from the review. Publications demonstrating the following were not included in the review:

- The study used solely quantitative methods of investigation

- The study explored barriers to family participation in only early childhood or non-school settings
- The urban data within the study could not be delineated from data from other settings
- The study did not specifically examine barriers within special education (i.e., only general education involvement was explored)

Review of the abstracts of these documents according to the inclusionary and exclusionary criteria resulted in the identification of twenty-three articles to scrutinize further.

2.1.3 Additional Search Methods

All twenty-three potential articles identified through the application of inclusionary and exclusionary criteria to the article abstracts were then read in their entirety. Following this review, a total of six articles and dissertations were deemed appropriate according to the inclusionary and exclusionary criteria. An ancestral search of each reference list was then performed to ascertain other potential publications. Additionally, a descendent search of cited research was completed to further identify relevant publications. Hand searches of *Urban Education* and *Journal of Special Education* were also performed. These methods – ancestry, descendent, and hand searches – resulted in the identification of five more publications for review.

2.1.4 Coding Procedures

Upon the identification of all relevant research reports, each document was coded for a numbers of variables. These included research methods, research participants (number of

participants, demographics of students (disability criteria, cultural and socioeconomic characteristics, ages/grades), modes of participation in special education planning, and barriers identified within the studies. The documents were coded by hand, without the aid of software or a computer. The researcher read all articles and dissertations and identified pervading threads within the studies. Thorough study of all included articles and dissertations resulted in the determination of four categories of barriers: knowledge-based, communication, logistical, and cultural and relational. Cultural and relational concerns were included together as these often overlapped.

2.2 Results

2.2.1 Research Designs

All of the articles reviewed in this literature review, as per the identified inclusionary and exclusionary inclusion criteria, described research studies identified as being qualitative in nature or employing mixed methods. Of these research studies, one was phenomenological (Griffin, 2016), while two employed focus groups (Rueda, Monzo, Shapiro, Gomez, & Blacher, 2005; Geenan, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2005). Six of the studies examined data gleaned through interviews (Geenan et al., Gonzales, 2012; Harris, 2017; Hotchkiss, 2012; Mayes & Moore, 2016, Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Sweet-Lazos, 2012). Sweet-Lazos (2012) also utilized survey data as did two others (Burke, 2017; Williams-Diehm, Brandes, Chesnut, & Haring, 2014). Harris (2017) also applied discourse analysis, while Gonzales (2012) utilized observation and file review in addition to interview.

2.2.2 Quality of Studies

While the focus of this qualitative research review is more oriented towards the identification of themes within the body of research than on the examination of quality of each article, it is, nonetheless, important to apply some measure of quality to the publications included within the literature review. All of the studies included were found to be acceptable by some form of peer review, whether an editorial board or dissertation committee. Additionally, each study met at least the minimum standards indicated in Brantlinger et al. (2005), describing factors to be considered regarding appropriate collection and representation of data. Within all reviewed articles, the included participants were appropriate and the questions within the research were reasonable. Additionally, data collection methods were adequately described and conclusions were thoughtfully and reasonably drawn. All articles also included disconfirming evidence and discussed study limitations.

2.2.3 Participants

The majority of the eleven studies that met criteria for review included family members as research participants, though one article examined barriers from the point of view of educators (Williams-Diehm et al., 2014), one study included both teachers and families (Sweet-Lazos, 2012), and one research utilized both student and parent data (Mayes & Moore, 2016). Of the ten studies utilizing family members, 152 family members served as research participants. While all of these articles referred to family members of students participating in special education, many of the studies were also delineated by reference to specific racial, cultural, or disability groups. Five studies focused specifically on the families of African-American students (Griffin, 2016; Harris,

2010, Hotchkiss, 2012, Mayes & Moore, 2016, Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008), while two others examined barriers to special education planning participation for families of Latino students (Burke, 2017; Rueda et al., 2005) and Gonzales (2012) specifically interviewed caregiver participants of Mexican-American students. Geenan et al. (2005) and Sweet-Lazos (2012) included participants of mixed cultural identities: Hispanic, Native American, and African-American families, and African-American, Latino, Asian-American families, respectively.

Disability categories were discussed more minimally than were cultural descriptors. Many of the identified research articles focused on barriers of participation in the special education process for students with varied or non-specified disabilities (Burke, 2017; Geenan et al., 2005; Griffin, 2016; Harris, 2010; Hotchkiss, 2012; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Rueda et al., 2005; Sweet-Lazos, 2012; Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). However, two of these articles – Gonzales (2012) and Mayes & Moore (2016) – examined the experiences of families of students diagnosed with emotional disturbances and twice-exceptional students, respectively. Twice-exceptional students are defined as those who qualify for both special education, as well as gifted education services.

2.2.4 Settings

While the majority (eight in all) of these research articles included only families living in or teachers working in urban school environments, participants within three studies were also comprised of suburban and rural families in addition to urban families (Burke, 2017; Harris, 2010; Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). All of the settings were school-age educational agencies, with four focusing on the families of elementary age students (Gonzales, 2012; Harris, 2010; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Sweet-Lazos, 2012) and four others focusing on the families of high-school

age students (Geenan, 2005; Harry, 2008; Hotchkiss, 2012; Rueda et al., 2005). Three studies included mixed grades of elementary, middle, and high school students (Burke, 2017; Griffin, 2016; Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). All of the articles examined public school facilities, with the exception of Griffin (2016), which examined barriers to participation for the parents of private school students.

2.2.5 Modes of Participation

According to the research articles reviewed, participation and engagement of family members within the special education process were highly variable and dependent on numerous factors. Family members within all eleven studies indicated that they were dedicated to their children's education and that they desired to participate within special education planning. However, only nine studies described family members who felt that they had participated highly in special education planning and that they had the special education knowledge to support their children throughout the process (Geenan et al., 2005; Gonzales, 2012; Griffin, 2016; Harris, 2010; Hotchkiss, 2012; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Rueda et al., 2005; Sweet-Lazos, 2012; Williams-Diehm et al., 2014).

Those families who did feel knowledgeable about the special education process sometimes felt that they had to become so on their own. One father stated: "Over the years, my wife and I became experts in the field of special education and continued to be aggressive advocates for our son, each and every year, ensuring that his teachers clearly understood his delay and that he was successful in covering the materials presented" (Hotchkiss, 2012, p. 74). Another parent mentioned: "I prepared for my IEP meeting as though I was studying for a final exam. I made sure all my paperwork was filled in correctly and I researched all my answers to my questions.

Information was not easily handed to me and I had to go the extra mile to ask others for information that should have been a natural part of the process” (Griffin, 2012, p. 88). Teacher stakeholders also identified knowledge as an important facilitator of family engagement. According to one teacher, “Parents’ knowledge is the greatest indicator of involvement” (Sweet-Lazos, 2012, p. 105).

Family members engaged in different ways within special education meetings. Five studies cited that parents contributed to planning by providing information to the IEP or transition team concerning their children’s abilities and needs (Rueda et al., 2005; Hotchkiss, 2012; Gonzales, 2012; Griffin, 2016; Harris, 2010). Three studies described family engagement in which family members closely reviewed their children’s paperwork in order to facilitate their own understanding (Griffin, 2016; Harris, 2010; Hotchkiss, 2012). Three others mentioned parents asking questions or engaging in discussions to enhance clarity (Harris, 2010; Hotchkiss, 2012; Griffin, 2016).

Several studies described situations in which families utilized resources to assist them in engaging in the special education process. In five studies, parents utilized resources they had located within the school itself, including interpreters, tutors, and counselors (Burke, 2017; Gonzales, 2012; Hotchkiss, 2012; Mayes & Moore, 2016; Sweet-Lazos, 2012). In Griffin (2012), a mother explored legal counsel when dissatisfied with the IEP process: “I sought support from a special education lawyer because things were so egregious. The school failed to update me regarding [my child’s] process and none of my phone calls were returned” (p. 72). Three studies described caregivers who relied on family members for support (Rueda et al., 2005; Munn-Joseph, 2008; Mayes & Moore, 2016) and six studies outlined families who sought assistance from outside agencies (Burke, 2017; Geenan et al., 2005; Hotchkiss, 2012; Rueda et al., 2005; Mayes & Moore, 2016; Munn-Joseph, 2008). One parent mentioned talking through her son’s learning disability

with a cousin: “My cousin in Florida, she has a software from grade K to up to 5th grade for reading and grammar, and she said that once we’re ready to state the software she said let us know and she would sent it to us” (Munn-Joseph, 2008, p. 389). Another spoke about seeking out an advocate to assist her with transition planning: “I didn’t know anything about [what the school has to do]... I didn’t know any of that, so I had an advocate for two years... and after that, I was doing great!” (Geenan et al., 2005, p. 12).

2.2.6 Identified Barriers

All of the articles and dissertations within this review examined barriers to participation in the IEP or, in general, the special education planning process, as related by educational stakeholders within the qualitative research process. Several themes relating to special education barriers emerged during the analysis of these research studies. Stakeholders described a series of perceived obstacles to meaningful participation and attendance within the special education planning process that generally fell into four categories: knowledge-based barriers, communication barriers, logistical barriers, and cultural/relational barriers. These categories were determined by the researcher upon thorough study of the reviewed articles and dissertations, noting that pervasive barriers could be described through four basic categories. The researcher initially coded barriers as either “knowledge-based” or “relational,” according to the work of Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), which determined that parental involvement in education was influenced by parents’ beliefs about their roles in their child’s education, whether parents believed they had the ability to help their child, and whether parents felt that their contributions were welcomed and valued by the school. Applying this research, the reviewer hypothesized that home-school relationships would impact family involvement in IEP meetings, as would parental knowledge and

abilities to understand their child's disabilities and navigate the special education system. However, as the review continued, the researcher identified additional pervasive categorical barriers. Knowledge-based barriers included a lack of understanding of disability, the special education system, or parental rights within the system. Issues such as infrequent or ineffective communication were described by stakeholders as obstacles to special education engagement and identified as communication barriers. Logistical barriers included hindrances to participation primarily involved concerns such as lack of transportation or difficulties with timing. Cultural/relational barriers were more complex but were described as obstacles related to biases and ineffective relationships, as well as a lack of understanding of varied cultural values.

2.2.6.1 Knowledge-Based Barriers

Ten of the eleven studies indicated that “knowledge-based” barriers posed difficulties to active family participation. Family members, as well as teacher participants, identified a lack of knowledge of the special education process (Burke, 2017; Geenan et al., 2005; Griffin, 2016; Hotchkiss, 2012; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008) or ineffective understanding of disabilities (Harris, 2010; Mayes & Moore, 2016; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Sweet-Lazos, 2012) as barriers to effective family involvement. Other “knowledge-based” barriers include difficulties understanding parental rights (Geenan et al., 2005; Griffin, 2016; Hotchkiss, 2012). Burke (2017) and Sweet-Lazos (2012) also indicated a lack of parent trainings as a barrier, while Rueda et al. (2005) specifically indicated a lack of knowledge of transition planning as a detriment to family participation in the special education planning process. One particular family indicated that at least some communication difficulties related to the use of profuse and complex documentation: “On paper we are sure there are many, many reams of documents that lay out the process but unfortunately much of that planning is lost in the translation...” (Hotchkiss, 2012, p. 75). Another

stated: “The whole process is very intimidating... I don’t understand half of what is discussed” (Hotchkiss, 2012, p.76).

2.2.6.2 Communication Barriers

In addition to barriers of knowledge, communication barriers to family IEP participation were a common theme within the articles reviewed, as all eleven of the research articles reviewed indicated that inadequate communication was related to decreased family participation in the IEP process. According to the research, these communication barriers may take on a variety of forms. Eight of the studies specifically cited a failure to seek or include parental input in the IEP document as a primary barrier to active participation (Burke, 2017; Geenan et al., 2005; Gonzales, 2012; Griffin, 2016; Harris, 2010; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Rueda et al., 2005; Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). For example, one parent stated that all decision-making was done prior to the meeting and that he did not have a chance to contribute: “It was done before I got there. I guess I would prefer it done with me there” (Harris, 2010, p. 85). Another family member stated, similarly, “I think a lotta times... teachers write up the whole thing and then just read it off you know... which is not the best way” (Geenan et al., 2005, p. 8). When parents did try to contribute, they did not always feel validated: “I felt there was no value in my input. For example, when input was offered, the team seemed disengaged and disinterested in what I had to say” (Griffin, 2016, p. 80)

Limited reading abilities of family members represented another communication barrier within two studies (Harris, 2010; Sweet-Lazos, 2012), while eight studies described a lack of home-school communication as discouraging to collaborative partnerships (Burke, 2017; Geenan et al., 2005; Harris, 2010; Hotchkiss, 2012; Mayes & Moore, 2016; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Rueda et al., 2005; Sweet-Lazos, 2012). For example, a parent shared an incident in which her daughter’s teacher did not contact her about behavioral difficulties in the classroom, resulting

in what she felt was a detrimental IEP team decision: “I said next time y’all having a problems with my daughter you send a note, or you come and talk to me, or either you send a note home for me to come talk to you...” (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008, p. 387).

The use of confusing special education jargon also represented a communicative barrier in two of the research studies (Griffin, 2016; Harris, 2010). As one parent in Griffin (2016) noted, “They did not empathize with the fact I was not familiar with special education jargon. I had limited comprehension of the language used” (p. 77). An example of this phenomenon is noted in Harris, 2010. In this analysis of verbal discourse, the teacher was noted as saying: “To address these concerns, he will recognize the difference between the meaning of connotation and denotation, answer literal, inferential, and evaluative questions to demonstrate comprehension of grade-appropriate print texts and visual media” to which the parent simply replied, “That it!” (p. 110). The teacher did not respond to the parent’s changes in body posture indicating discomfort, and continued to read from the IEP without explaining it in laymen’s terms. Families indicated that even when schools did provide information related to the special education process, it was done in an ineffective, and almost sterile way: “I read it and now I’ve kind of forgotten most of it. But, uh, they did give it to me. They didn’t really explain it, you know, but they gave it to me, they gave me the package” (Gonzales, 2012, p. 116).

2.2.6.3 Logistical Barriers

Logistical concerns, primarily those involving timing, were also identified as barriers to active IEP participation. Family participants within five studies indicated that the scheduling of IEP meetings was asynchronous with their work schedules (Burke, 2017; Geenan et al., 2005; Gonzales, 2012; Griffin, 2016; Sweet-Lazos, 2012), while teachers in one study indicated timing as a major detriment to engaging families in the special education process: “In essence, special

education teachers felt a ‘lack of time’ was a major barrier to collaboration” (Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). One parent related the timing issues to a lack of empathy: “The school has no idea of the concept ‘take a walk in my shoes.’ I arrived late to one meeting. They did not show compassion for having to work two jobs. The meetings times were always not optimal...” (Griffin, 2012, p. 78). Sometimes these scheduling difficulties prohibited family members from attending meetings in any way. For example, one parent stated that he had not attended a recent IEP meeting because it was a busy time of year for his business (Gonzales, 2012), and another stated that her schedule is unpredictable, making it difficult for her to schedule a meeting in advance (Gonzales, 2012). In one case, transportation difficulties also excluded families from attending IEP meetings (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008). Four studies also indicated that financial burdens served as barriers to participation (Geenan et al., 2005; Griffin, 2012; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Mays & Moore, 2016). As one parent stated: “My husband can’t take time from work until May... and they’re like (school staff) ‘You don’t understand, your son needs you right now’... and I’m like, ‘I’m sorry, you don’t understand, I’ll loose [sic] my kid, I’ll loose [sic] my house, I’ll loose [sic] everything... I can’t right now” (Geenan et al., 2005, p. 10).

Cultural and relational barriers to IEP participation were widely varied. In some cases these barriers were associated with communication difficulties, such as linguistic and non-verbal communication challenges (Geenan et al., 2005; Gonzales, 2012; Hotchkiss, 2012; Mayes & Moore, 2016; Sweet-Lazos, 2012), while others were more concerned with relationships. Feelings of mistrust, alienation, helplessness, burnout, and lack of respect all contributed to the inefficacy of family-school partnerships (Geenan et al., 2005; Griffin, 2016; Harris, 2010; Mayes & Moore, 2016; Hotchkiss, 2012; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Rueda et al., 2005). Sometimes these feelings of disconnect occurred between families and teachers, such as in Munn-Joseph and Gavin-

Evans (2008), in which a parent stated: “It doesn’t feel like the teacher wants to help out” (p. 387). Similarly, in Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans, 2008, a parent noted: “He [the teacher] came off like he really wasn’t concerned with his learning problem or disability and that didn’t seem right coming from a teacher” (p. 388). A family member in Griffin (2016) described these feelings of disconnect as extending to the entire IEP team: “The environment was very cold and unwelcoming. They were very rude and dismissive. The school personnel alienated and controlled most of the decisions during the meeting” (p. 73) Lack of empathy was noted by several participants: “This experience seems far too normalized and school personnel does not understand what I’m feeling” (Griffin, 2012, p.77).

At times, feelings of alienation appeared to be directly related to issues of race and culture. One student participant stated that he had strained relationships with his teachers because they considered him to be “another black, lazy kid” (Mayes & Moore, 2016, p.181), while another student noted: “So for a Black student, it’s really a lot harder because we already have that reputation, we already have that symbol of lower privileged” (Mayes & Moore, 2016, p. 182). Families also sometimes felt that their own cultural values were at odds with those of the school entity. For example, one Latina parent did not understand why “leaving home” was emphasized in the school’s transition plan. The idea of having to tell her child to go off on her own upon leaving school was not culturally accepted: “Never. I have never said that to my daughter. I told her, when your own daughters are grown, never tell them to leave, because that it very Anglicized. And among Latino families, no, on the contrary, my father used to tell me, ‘Why do you want to be going out all the time? You have your house here’” (Rueda et al., 2005, p. 405).

2.3 Discussion

In summary, this literature review identified 11 qualitative studies exploring family engagement in special education planning, including IEP meetings. The analysis posed two questions 1) In what ways do families participate in special education planning meetings, including annual IEP meetings, in urban school districts, according to the current body of research? 2) What does the literature identify as primary barriers to engagement in special education planning meetings for families living within urban school districts?

2.3.1 Modes of Engagement

The results of this literature review described varied ways that families attend and participate in special education planning meetings. Some families physically attend meetings, while others review paperwork. Some parents engage in self-directed learning to expand their knowledge about the special education process. When engaging in meetings, parents may provide information about their child or may ask questions for clarification. They might reach out to in-school, community, or family supports to assist them with the process.

There are numerous ways in which families may be involved in their children's educational process. Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, and Simon (2008) have identified six unique types of parental involvement in what is typically referred to as Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision-Making, and Collaborating with the Community. in what is typically referred to as "Epstein's Framework of

Six Types of Involvement”. Individual family members may participate in these different types of parenting activities at varied frequencies and with diverse rates of success. However, all activities are important to the educational achievement of the student, as well as the overall success of the school, and have been associated with increased student achievement (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Additional benefits of the multiple types of involvement include improved school attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) and decreased behavioral difficulties (Vakalahi, 2001).

According to Epstein et al. (2008) schools may assist families in their development of different modes of family engagement by deliberately instituting policies and procedures that build families’ abilities to engage in the various types of involvement. Sample practices are included within Epstein’s framework to assist local educational agencies in addressing each distinct mode of engagement. It may be useful for local educational agencies to research the means by which their families engage within the special education process in order to mindfully select policies and procedures that support additional means of engagement. The National Parent-Teacher Association created a tool based on Epstein’s six types of involvement entitled PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships: An Implementation Guide (2009), which may allow schools to identify possible areas of growth according to the six types of involvement.

2.3.2 Barriers to Engagement

The eleven identified articles within this literature review indicated that a variety of barriers exist that limit families’ participation within the special education planning process, including attendance and active involvement at IEP meetings. Knowledge-based barriers such as a lack of knowledge of disability or the special education process contribute to difficulties engaging. Limited efficacy of familiarity with the system may prohibit family members from attaining

authentic engagement within the special education planning process. According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995), parental efficacy comes from four sources: “the direct experience of success in involvement or involvement related activities, vicarious experience of others’ success in involvement or involvement related activities, verbal persuasion by others that involvement activities are worthwhile and can be accomplished by the parents and the emotional arousal induced when issues of importance to the parent are... on the line” (1995, p. 313-314). Parental efficacy within special education may be particularly difficult to achieve, as compared to other facets of education, given the depth of knowledge required to navigate the system. Schools are encouraged to consider not only what knowledge is being shared with family members, but also how they share that knowledge. For example, schools who share Procedural Safeguards only through documentation might benefit from knowing that just 4% to 8% of state level Procedural Safeguards materials are written at recommended reading levels (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006).

Communication is closely related to the sharing of knowledge. However, sharing of information is not the only component of communication emphasized as being impactful to the special education planning process. According to the literature reviewed, communication, either lack thereof or ineffective communication, is identified as a contributing factor to ineffective family-school partnerships, whether it occurs within or separate from the IEP meeting, and may consist of written communication, as well as oral communication. Families desire not only communication regarding the special education process, but also seek to communicate about their children on a regular basis. They seek to “establish relationships” and develop “strong-frequent communication with the school staff...” (Gonzales, 2012, p. 159). This is not necessarily surprising as research indicates that family members may benefit from a more informal approach to communication than is usually presented at IEP meetings (Dabkowski, 2004), as formal register

typically consists of more specific vocabulary that does not repeat ideas, even though such repetition may facilitate understanding (Payne, 2001). Teachers also indicated that informal, but consistent communication between home and school was more beneficial to the educational process than face-to-face meetings (Sweet-Lazos, 2012)

According to the results of this study, logistical barriers including transportation, and particularly, time, may prove to be detrimental to engagement within the special education process. On the surface, these issues may be the easiest to rectify, as changes in locations and times of meetings could be consistently integrated into school policy. According to Parette and Petch-Hogan (2000), such adjustments as meeting after school, providing transportation to meetings, and providing childcare to families who need it may impact whether family members engage in IEP meetings. However, additional logistical issues such as teachers' contracts and available meeting space may contribute to a lack of flexibility in IEP scheduling. Issues of cultural and relationship differences may also serve as obstacles to the building of family-school partnerships.

Cultural and relational barriers are also identified as potential barriers to engagement within the body of research examined in this review. This is not necessarily surprising, given that students from minority populations continue to be overrepresented within special education (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, & Chung, 2005) and that minority parents often feel disenfranchised and disempowered within the special education process (Leiter & Krauss, 2004). For English learners in special education, lack of preparation and availability of bilingual special education teachers continues to contribute to inefficacy in special education planning (Wang & Woolf, 2015). Lack of partnerships and difficulties forming relationships influence the experiences of stakeholders within the process (Dillon, 2013), with parents sometimes even considered to be "adversaries" within special education (Tam & Heng, 2005).

Existing literature indicates the importance of ensuring that students, parents, and school professionals, feel respected and valued within special education (Gallagher, Malone, & Ladner, 2009). The research within this study emphasizes this point, as all of the studies examined within this review described cultural or relational barriers.

2.3.3 Implications for Research and Practice

This literature review has identified several implications for future research, as well as practical implementation of family engagement programming within special education planning. First of all, further delineation of factors such as socioeconomic status, student age, disability category, and parental educational levels, among others, may be useful in determining how these contribute to various types of barriers to participation. For example, Hicks (2010) analyzed the transition process of special education students and their families and found that assumption of parental involvement decreased as students aged, resulting in different levels of engagement at different grade levels. Additional studies may explore how variables such as age influence participation in different settings and cultures. Additionally, though many of the studies within this review of literature focused on particular cultural groups, more research is required to determine whether this information is indicative of long-standing behaviors, or is relegated to individual locations or school settings. Replication studies may be helpful in increasing our understandings of patterns of involvement.

More research is also required to determine the efficacy of strategies established to combat existing barriers to familial IEP participation. There is a dearth of data at this time indicating what strategies have been established within districts struggling to increase family participation within the special education process. Most particularly, there is a paucity of existing research analyzing

the effectiveness of such programming. Research studies quantitatively examining the efficacy of school-initiated family engagement strategies within the special education realm are quite rare within the literature, with only eight studies identified throughout a thirty year period (Goldman & Burke, 2017). These studies typically describe instances in which trainings have been used to increase parental awareness of content such as special education law, parents' rights at IEP meetings, IEP team member roles, and how to participate in IEP meetings (Goldman & Burke, 2017).

Studies such as those explored in Goldman and Burke (2017) explore training types as parent involvement strategies, such as verbal explanation, video trainings, training meetings, handouts, modeling, and guided practice. The types of strategies utilized are primarily related to the reduction of Knowledge-Based barriers. Knowledge is, indeed, an important component of educational programming. Hill and Tyson (2009) reported that informed parents are better able to communicate to their children the purpose of learning, the need to set and attain goals in school, and why school is important. However, while Knowledge-Based interventions may be valid family engagement strategies in many local educational agencies, this review of literature has also identified barriers to involvement beyond Knowledge. Further research is required to examine the efficacy of strategies to reduce Communication, Logistical, and Cultural/Relational Barriers as well.

These variations in types of barriers to participation have implications for practice within the field. In regard to communication, research indicates that regular and frequent opportunities for home-school communication and reciprocal feedback, tailored to individual family situations, is among the most important factors when establishing family-school partnerships (Epstein, 2005). Parents seek good communication skills in their children's teachers, citing it as one of the most

desirable characteristics a new teacher could have (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2001). Strong communication can also encourage higher and more realistic parental expectations (James, Jurich, & Estes, 2001).

We also cannot discount the school-wide benefits of effective communication. According to a study by Callendar and Hansen (2005), effective communication is associated with improved test scores and grades, more positive student attitudes, fewer special education referrals, decreased drop-out rates and high risk behaviors, increased staff morale, enhanced relationships between school and community, increased parental support for school initiatives, donations of materials and services, and improved parental regard for the school. Therefore, it may be valid to look beyond parent trainings when reducing barriers to planning participation; instead, a focus on training educators and other school staff to more effectively communicate with families may be more valuable. Policies and procedures may also be put into place to encourage positive frequent, positive, informal communications between school and home. Studies have indicated that open, ongoing, informal communication improves parental satisfaction with communicative interchanges and increases feelings of trust and comfort (Soodak & Erwin, 2000; Erwin, Soodak, Winton, & Turnull, 2001). Therefore, the establishment of policies and procedures encouraging frequent, informal two-way communication may encourage more positive communicative interactions between parents and staff, both in and out of IEP meetings. Additionally, schools may want to review their own communication practices in terms of analysis of readability levels and special education jargon. According to Lo (2014), the majority of IEP documents are written at non-preferred levels, with either advanced high-school or college readability. Such communication may be ineffective for communicating with families, particularly when special education jargon is also used. Research by Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006) and Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, and Acevedo-

Garcia (2012) indicate that jargon is a barrier for parents with children in special education; therefore, mindful analysis of written and spoken communication should be performed to determine the proclivity to use acronyms and professional verbiage.

Cultural/Relational Barriers may also be addressed through practices within the field. According to Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), families decide whether to actively engage in their children's education based on a number of factors including their beliefs regarding their roles in their children's education, whether they believe they have the ability to help their children, or effect change, and whether they feel that the school and their staff members welcome parental involvement. Creating this welcoming atmosphere is a first step for maximizing family participation within educational activities (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Lack of congruity between home and school cultures are known to impact perceptions of parent involvement and student achievement (Hunt & Empson, 2014; Williams, 2007), indicating that cultural awareness training may be helpful to professionals. Additional interventions focusing on assisting educational professionals in urban schools in viewing parental involvement from multiple perspectives may increase the rate at which teachers and administrators welcome and solicit parental involvement (McDonnall, Cavanaugh, & Giesen, 2010). Research by Harry (2002) also indicated the necessity for educational professionals to understand and respect the differences in the cultures in order to maximize family involvement and student success. This cultural reciprocity may be built through four steps: identification of cultural values associated with professional interpretation of student difficulties; noting how the student's family values differ from their own view of the student's abilities; acknowledgement and respect of identified differences; and discussion and collaboration to determine the best means of harmonizing professional interpretations with the value system of the family (Harry & Kalyanpur, 2012).

2.3.4 Limitations

This analysis has some limitations, both at the primary study level and the analytical level, that may have impacted results gleaned from the research. First of all, because of the experiential focus of this study, only qualitative research was reviewed. Qualitative studies provide excellent measures of human experience. However, further research utilizing mixed methods or quantitative analysis may result in a more comprehensive body of data, determining not only possible barriers to IEP participation, but also the degrees to which these barriers influence family engagement. Such research could provide broader understanding of family engagement concepts and also assist in the pragmatic application of results. Additionally, while the inherent value in qualitative research is profound personal examination into the experiences of those involved in the study, this in-depth investigation also often results in a limited number of research participants. Several of the identified studies included ten or less participants (Gonzales, 2012; Griffin, 2016; Hotchkiss, 2012; Mayes & Moore, 2016, Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Harris, 2010) which reduces our ability to discern broad patterns from the results obtained. Additionally, some of the research studies examined very specific subgroups which may, again, diminish the ability to generalize the aggregate data. The results indicated should be utilized cautiously when determining directions of further research or establishing protocols for educational practice.

An additional limitation of this study may be inherent to the body of family engagement research itself and how family engagement concepts are defined within this research. Local education entities and families may differ on what they consider appropriate and effective participation in the special education planning process. IDEA itself is unclear on the expectations of this process. The assertion that family members must be included as team members is present within the legal jargon and the recognition of family members as valuable team members is

implied, but the law itself does not offer any cut-and-dry description as to what should be demonstrated within this involvement. This lack of definitive definition might impact how all stakeholders understand the concept of parental participation in the special education planning process.

2.4 Conclusion

Family engagement in education has been researched widely for decades. Studies have consistently shown that increased family engagement is associated with higher student achievement, improved school attendance, and a variety of other positive developments for students, families, and schools. However, how this involvement manifests itself in special education planning, including IEP meetings, is a less researched area. This review of literature identified a number of barriers that may exist in regard to family engagement, specifically within the special education planning process. Knowledge-Based, Communication-Based, Logistical, and Cultural/Relational Barriers were identified by stakeholders within the educational process as detrimentally impacting family engagement within special education planning. It may be useful for local educational agencies to use this information to not only identify barriers, but also to explore functional strategies to increase parental participation and, as a consequence, overall academic success for students with disabilities.

3.0 Research Methodology

The intent of this study was to explore and describe barriers to participation of family members in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings within a lower socioeconomic elementary school and to posit strategies to overcome these barriers. The purpose of this section on methodology is to introduce the research methods used within the study and the rationale behind them, the setting of the study, participants included in the study, data collection processes, and data analysis and interpretation.

3.1 Purpose of the Study

Family involvement in education has been identified as an important component of academic achievement (Henderson and Mapp, 2010; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Bryk et al. 2010; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). For students with disabilities, family participation within IEP meetings is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act. In fact, family members are designated as the first members of the IEP team (IDEA, 2004). However, actual attendance of family members at IEP meetings is inconsistent and related to an assortment of variables (Williams-Diehm, Brandes, Chesnut, & Haring, 2014; Moody, 2010; Ritchey, 2006; Fish, 2006). Furthermore, attendance at IEP meetings does not necessarily indicate meaningful participation and engagement of family members within the meetings themselves.

The review of literature in the previous chapter indicated that although research exists identifying barriers to family participation in IEP meetings, few of these studies examined lower

socioeconomic school districts specifically. Additionally, studies within the current body of research seldom simultaneously delve into possible strategies that may be used to combat those barriers. Moreover, these studies are often limited to application to one group of stakeholders, such as either parents or teachers, but generally do not seek to reveal multiple stakeholder opinions within one school district. This study seeks the opinions of both family members and educators within one lower socioeconomic urban school district regarding both IEP barriers and possible strategies to overcome those barriers. Although general family engagement barriers have been widely studied, the topic of genuine participation of families in IEP meetings is less predominant in the research, and information specifically detailing family IEP experiences within lower socioeconomic urban school district has been examined even less. Additionally, while various studies have researched the barriers behind a lack of family participation in IEP meetings, far fewer have examined possible ways of improving home-school collaboration within the IEP process.

3.2 Research Questions

With a general goal of increasing family participation in IEP meetings, this study sought to identify barriers to family engagement in IEP meetings, as well as possible strategies to overcome these barriers. The specific questions guiding this study were posited as follows:

1. What are the current school, school district, and state policies and procedures on family engagement and participation in IEP meetings?
2. What are the barriers to family participation in IEP meetings, as identified by educators and family members, in a lower socioeconomic urban school district?

3. What are supportive strategies identified by educators and family members that may be used to increase family participation in IEP meetings within a lower socioeconomic urban school district?

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Rationale

Determination of the type of methodology used within this research study was based on the inquiry questions themselves. Since the purpose of the study was to identify obstacles to family participation in the IEP process, as well as possible strategies to increase participation, a qualitative approach was identified as the best method to provide deeper insight into stakeholders' perceptions and experiences. It is the aim of qualitative research to increase our understanding of social phenomena from the viewpoints of those who have been involved in that phenomena (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

The inquiry design used within this research study was, in nature, a needs assessment, in which information was gleaned through artifact review and participant interviews. The needs assessment inquiry design is one that is grounded in the transformative paradigm. The purpose of utilization of a transformative paradigm is to involve the stakeholder community impacted by the research to participate within the methodological decision-making process to invoke change within that community. Through the use of individual interviews, stakeholders – in this case family members and educators – were given the opportunity to speak about their previous experiences with IEP meetings and give insight into changes that might ultimately improve family participation

within these meetings. According to Crandall, interviews may be used as a value needs assessment tool that provides insight that can elicit transformational change (2005). The research study also utilized document analysis as a means of understanding current school practices and procedures that may potentially impact stakeholder experience. This allowed for the collection of data in an unobtrusive and nonreactive way. Documentary evidence can be combined with interview data in order to minimize bias and increase credibility (Bowen, 2009).

Several other methods of inquiry were considered in order to answer the posed research questions. Survey was considered and ultimately rejected, because of the lack of direct personal contact and limited free-thinking inherent in conducting research using this method. It was determined that the more direct relationship between participant and researcher allowed by interviews, would more adequately address the needs of the participants and allow them to more effectively present their viewpoints. Observation of IEP meetings was also considered but this method would not allow the researcher to gain extensive insight into the reasons why family members do not attend meetings and would also have increased complications in regard to confidentiality. Interviews were, therefore, with the support of document analysis, seen as the most effective tool in answering the state inquiry questions.

3.3.2 Participants

Research participants in this study consisted of adult family members of students with disabilities currently attending a lower socioeconomic urban-characteristic school district in western Pennsylvania and educators who have actively participated in the special education process at the same school. Participants were selected on a voluntary basis following a letter of recruitment (See Appendix A & B) being released through staff e-mail (for the educators) and via

paper invitation for family members of students with disabilities. Volunteering for the project was self-initiated, as staff and family members contacted the researcher to state their interest in the project

Following self-initiated contact with the researcher, participants were selected for the study via a phone screening process (See Appendix C and Appendix D). The researcher responded to all potential interviewees within 48 hours from initial contact and completed phone screenings within a week of first contact. This phone screening process provided information in a scripted manner in order to inform participants of their rights and of the purpose of the study. This phone screening also asked questions which were meant to ensure that a variety of subjects were selected for purposive interviewing. However, because so few volunteers stepped forward, nearly all individuals were accepted, as long as they met the criteria for participation in the study. One family member was informed that she could not participate because she did not have a child enrolled in special education at the participating school at the time of the study. Volunteers were informed of their qualification for participation within a week of the study and often within the phone screening itself. Exclusion criteria for participants included any known receptive or expressive language delays that might limit their ability to participate in the interview process, but this did not occur.

It was the intent of this study to interview both family member and educator stakeholders involved within special education. Upon the commencement of the study, the researcher intended to recruit at least seven educational professionals representing more than 15% of the total educator population for interviewing purposes. Purposive sampling of the educators was to be used to select participants who signified the perspectives of diverse educator stakeholders, with multiple grade levels represented, as well as varied educational roles. However, only seven educators came forward to engage in the study, with only six actually participating in the interview process – the

seventh individual ultimately could not be scheduled for an interview. The six educators were all selected to be interviewed because they met the study's inclusion criteria, and also represented different disciplines, grade levels, and types of experience. However, their selection cannot be described as "purposive sampling" because they were not selected from a wider group. They just happened to represent various educator stakeholder perspectives.

Of the individuals participating, two were classroom teachers, three were special educators, and one was a paraprofessional. These individuals represented all grades in some capacity, as the paraprofessional and one special educator worked with K-2 and the remaining educators worked with students in grades 3-5. The participants had varying degrees of experience but had typically been employed at the research site for a number of years (10+). Inclusion criteria for educators required that they were school staff members (general education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, etc.) who had had active involvement in IEPs as 1) case managers; 2) attendees; and/or 3) providers of information for the IEP.

The original intent of the study was to recruit at least seven family members to be mindfully selected for participation in the research study. As there are 100 students enrolled in special education at the research site, these family members would have represented approximately seven percent of the total population of families with students enrolled in special education. To be included in the study, family members were required to be adults with some level of guardianship (foster parent, parent, other family members with educational rights, etc.) over a student or students receiving special education services at the research site, whom could ultimately provide permission for the researcher to examine the student's special education documentation. Family members may have attended IEP meetings in the past or not.

While obtaining seven interviews was the intent of the study, only three parents were ultimately interviewed due to the limited number of volunteers who contacted the researcher to indicate a desire for involvement. A total of four parents contacted the researcher to indicate interest in involvement. However, one of these individuals was actually a parent at another school within the district and was, therefore, ineligible for participation. This resulted in a total of three parents who ultimately participated in the study. A sample group of this size, though small, can still provide relevant information in such a qualitative study. According to Patton (2002), it is the richness of information and the capabilities of the researcher that determine the meaningful and insight of a qualitative study, as opposed to the sample size.

Participants were able to choose locations in which they felt comfortable when completing the interviews. Many were interviewed in their homes, though interviews also took place at the school and at the local community library. Family member participants provided permission for the researcher to review their children's special education documents, such as IEPs and Notices of Recommended Educational Placement (NOREPs), so that data gleaned from interviews could be further supported through document analysis. Participants also provided the research with the permission to audio record their interviews and, additionally, utilize the Dragon Dictation app to transcribe their interview. Participants were provided with a \$25 gift card of their choice upon commencement of the study interview.

3.3.3 Setting

The research site utilized was an elementary school located within a large intermediate unit in western Pennsylvania. The district itself was an "urban characteristic" district consisting of fifteen schools serving more than 11,000 students. The district was classified as "urban

characteristic” because of its location within a small city (a population of about 100,000) and the exhibition of some features often associated with urban school districts, including scarcity of resources and increased levels of diversity. The school where the research took place was a neighborhood school within that district, where students from Pre-K through Grade 5 receive a public education. The school serves about 500 students, approximately 100 of whom qualify for special education services. The school is highly diverse, with racial and ethnic groups including, Hispanic, Asian, Black, and Multi-racial. The majority (99%) of students at the school are eligible for free lunches (below 130% of the poverty line) or reduced lunches (below 185% of the poverty line). The school population includes children from 24 different countries, who speak 15 different languages. This particular school agreed to serve as the inquiry setting for this project examining barriers and strategies surrounding family participation in IEP meetings in lower socioeconomic urban school districts, because the staff there hoped to increase their levels of authentic family engagement in the special education process.

3.3.4 Instrumentation

Prior to commencing the research study, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Pittsburgh was obtained. The IRB application included, among other pieces of information, the instrumentation used within the study. The instrumentation used within the study was developed by the researcher. Prior to initiation of the interview process, family member and educator recruitment letters were prepared in order to inform participants of the study and to lobby for participation (see Appendix A and Appendix B). The process was further explained during a short phone screening (see Appendices C and D). In addition, a packet including a study description and informed consent form was created to share with all participants (see Appendix

E). This packet informed participants of their rights prior to beginning the interview process. The family members' packet also contained a consent form allowing the researcher to access the students' special education file (see Appendix F). Granting of this permission was required for participation of family members in the study. This separate form was a request of the research setting, which is why it was not included on the overall consent document.

Separate interview protocols were developed for use with educators and family members (See Appendices I & J). However, the interview protocols were similar in nature, in that they consisted of open-ended questions with the use of probes, if necessary, to glean further information. Numerous researchers (Hatch, 2002; Turner, 2010; Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2009) have cited the importance of using open-ended questions that allow participants to share their thoughts and concerns without bias. This type of questioning also allows the researcher to search for common threads and themes, ultimately resulting in an ability to evaluate areas of need and provide strategies to increase family participation in IEP meetings. Field testing of the family member interview protocol was performed, prior to interviewing of family member study participants, in order to ensure that the listed questions were understood by family members of students in special education. Adjustments were made to the questions according to comments of the field tester. The family member field tester recommended minor changes in the order of some of the questions and probe questions, which were subsequently implemented by the researcher. She also recommended when items required further explanation to increase participant understanding; these changes were made as well. Field testing of the educator interview protocol was also performed and resulted in minimal changes to the educator interview protocol.

3.3.5 Role of the Researcher

I, the researcher, was employed as an educational consultant with the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), the training arm of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Special Education throughout the course of this research. However, the research was not directly associated with PaTTAN or any of the initiatives of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Special Education. I had been an educational consultant at PaTTAN for approximately 3.5 years prior to the commencement of this research. My work at PaTTAN most intently focused on work in speech and language, family engagement, assistive technology, and inclusive practices, as well as tertiary projects associated with secondary transition and behavior. I had previously worked with the research site on projects surrounding Inclusive Practices and had previously worked with two of the educator participants briefly within the course of this project. However, I had no prior contact with any of the other participants in the study, either educators or family members. Previous to working at PaTTAN, I served as a speech-language pathologist within a number of urban schools. Additionally, during the time of this study, I was actively involved in the special education programming of my own three children, all of whom attend a lower socioeconomic urban/suburban school district. However, during this study, my prime ethical obligation was to ensure that my own biases did not cloud the representations of data provided by the participants themselves.

3.3.6 Procedures

Data collection consisted of two separate activities: document analysis and interviews. Document analysis involves the interpretation of written artifacts to glean meaning and determine

themes (Bowen, 2009). As Coffey states, “It is entirely possible and appropriate to take a thematic analysis of documentary data (2014, p. 368).” The following school-wide documents were used to inform the study: the school learning compact, right-to-know document, school “welcome” letter, school mission statement, and the district strategic plan. Student-specific documents were gathered, including special education documents: Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Invitations to Participate in Student Planning Meetings, including IEP meetings, Notices of Recommended Education Placements/Prior Written Notice (NOREPs/PWN), Special Education Evaluation and Re-Evaluation Reports (ERs and RRs), and Special Education Progress Monitoring Reports. In this case, the document review specifically examined the use of family voice within special education documentation, and policies and procedures related to the engagement of families. School-wide documents were gathered from school administration, as well as from public sources, including the school district website. Student-specific documents were supplied by district level administrative staff, following parental signing of the consent form. Pertinent documents were copied and/or transcribed into Dedoose, a web-based qualitative analysis system. Analysis was primarily qualitative in nature, as documents were analyzed according to content; however, some quantitative analysis took place, as frequency of themes was noted. Themes were identified as individual units of analysis and coding schemes were developed both inductively from the available data and deductively, as informed by the current body of research. These coding schemes were then analyzed using Dedoose.

Participants who were identified as being included in the study, following the initial phone screening, participated in guided interviews. These interviews took anywhere from 30 to 65 minutes, and were performed in a location of the participants’ choosing, including homes, the school itself, and a local library. Prior to interviewing, the researcher assured that these locations

were quiet and capable of ensuring confidentiality. Interviewees were presented with a packet containing study information and an informed consent form for participation in the interview, including permission to audiorecord the interview. Family members were also presented with a consent form allowing the researcher to access the participants' children's special education records. All interviewees participated in a demographics survey prior to the interview protocol itself. These surveys differed slightly depending on whether they were intended for educators or family members (Appendix G and Appendix H). Participants were provided with a \$25 gift card of their choice prior to beginning the interview, and were informed of their rights, including their right to halt the interview at any time without repercussions. Interviews were audiotaped. Interviews were digitally transcribed using Dragon Dictation, an automated dictation program that turns spoken communication into editable written text, and notes were taken throughout the interview by the researcher. The transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy by Transcription Star, a professional transcription service experienced in producing accurate transcriptions based on audio recordings. Only verbalizations were included within the interview transcriptions. Behaviors, including pauses, movements, facial expressions, etc., were not included within the transcripts.

Upon completion and editing of transcriptions, all interviews were entered into the Dedoose platform. Coding schema were established in a similar fashion to those utilized for document analysis. Units of analysis consisted of individual statements by interviewees. Statements consisted of one complete idea surrounding a specific coding theme. Themes were identified initially on a deductive basis, as informed by previously determined barriers categories from the literature review: Knowledge-Based, Communication-Based, Logistical, and Cultural/Relational. However, as the transcripts were reviewed, coding was also determined

inductively based on the provided interviewee data. Inductive logic was applied, as the researcher reviewed the transcripts and identified common, related themes, and defined coding labels based on the available data. Coding schema were again identified as individual thematic units. All interviews were coded within the Dedoose system and the data then analyzed to make sense of the themes and categories previously identified within the coding system. This analysis took place by entering all interviews into Dedoose, reviewing them, identifying individual text segments to be coded, and assigning code labels to text segments. The database was then searched for items with the same coding labels and a list of the text items was established. Categories were explored and themes analyzed to determine relationships and discrepancies.

All physical data collected from the interviews, including recordings and notes, was kept under lock and key within the researcher's office. Digital data was stored on Box, the University of Pittsburgh's cloud-based platform. Data will continue to be stored for seven years, according to IRB guidelines. Data was made anonymous by providing participants with numbers for identification purposes. Information was made confidential by intentionally masking details that would lead to easy identification of participants.

3.3.7 Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is critical in assessing the value of qualitative research and it may be measured through four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is indicative of confidence in the truth of the research findings, transferability refers to the applicability of the findings into other contexts, dependability describes the consistency of the research, and confirmability, refers to the limiting and addressing of possible research bias. Several steps were performed to achieve credibility. First of all,

participants were ensured that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that there would be no negative repercussions for providing information for the study. Additionally, the researcher attempted to build a positive rapport with all participants, from the initial contact and throughout the interview process. For example, participants were assured that the researcher was always available to answer questions and address concerns. In order to capture genuine participant voice, questions were phrased in ways that were open-ended and encouraged participant contribution. To further ensure credibility, the researcher conducted field testing of the interview questions by administering family member interview protocol questions to one family member of a student enrolled in special education in a lower socioeconomic urban school district and educator interview protocol questions to one educator employed at a lower socioeconomic urban school district. The family member field testing participant provided feedback and recommendation that resulted in changes to the order of probe questions, insertion of definition/explanation into the questions for clarity, and slight vocabulary and wording changes, resulting in further refinement of the interview questions into the two final family member and educator interview protocols. The educator interview field tester recommended very limited wording changes, which were included in the final educator interview protocol.

In regard to transferability, the researcher very densely described the context of the inquiry in order for readers of the research to understand how data was collected and the context in which that data was received. The purpose of this was to allow readers to determine whether the resulting data might carry applicability into other settings and circumstances. Because of the small sample size utilized within the study, particularly with the family member subgroup, the researcher practiced caution in ascertaining correlations between participants with similar demographics. These responses will be reviewed in the discussion section of this document, according to

similarities and differences, but with a note that these elements may or may not be related to similarities between participants. To attain dependability, great care was taken to ensure confidentiality and accuracy of data, by closely recording the organizational process and steps used for data collection and analysis within the study. Multiple transcriptions of the data were produced and notes were taken during interview to create the most accurate transcription possible. Dependability, and also confirmability, were established through joint examination of the research data by another professional unrelated to the study, who assessed the data for accuracy and fairness. This researcher examined pertinent documents, such as the interview protocols. She also reviewed coding procedures and schema in order to ascertain their accuracy within the Dedoose platform.

3.4 Conclusion

Qualitative research can be a powerful tool for the unveiling and illumination of human experience. Because the intent of this student was to examine perceived barriers to family participation in IEP meetings and determine possible solutions to those barriers, through the eyes of multiple stakeholders, qualitative research was identified as the most effective tool to describe and determine common themes. Throughout the collection and analysis of data within this study, the researcher sought to remain ethically neutral and take steps to establish trustworthiness of data. The next chapter of this dissertation will describe the results discovered through implementation of the described data collection plan and analysis.

4.0 Results

This study was designed to use artifact analysis and interviewing as qualitative research methods to identify barriers to authentic family engagement in IEP meetings, as well as determine possible strategies to increase engagement. This chapter presents a summary of the results obtained throughout the course of this study. The first section of this chapter will describe the artifacts used within the study and provide details regarding the participants. Subsequently, the findings gathered from these sources will be reported in accordance with the three posited research questions: 1. What are the current school, school district, and state policies and procedures regarding family engagement in general education and in IEP meetings? 2. What are the barriers to family participation in IEP meetings as identified by educators and family members in a lower socioeconomic urban school district? 3. What are supportive strategies identified by educators and family members that may be used to increase family participation in IEP meetings within a lower socioeconomic urban school district?

4.1 Documents Used within Artifact Review

Both school-wide and student specific documentation was collected for analysis within this research study. Several documents were collected for analysis of school-wide documentation. Documents were used if they applied to 1) family engagement; and/or 2) special education. As these documents were reviewed, it was noted that they widely differed in regard to document length, purpose, audience, and accessibility. Several of these documents examined family

engagement policies and procedures from a general education perspective. These documents included a Welcome Letter, mission statement, Family Engagement policy, “Right to Know” statement, Learning Compact, and the district-wide Strategic Plan. Documents that were specifically oriented towards special education included the Special Education Plan, the Special Programs webpage, procedural safeguards, and Pennsylvania Chapter 14, i.e., the special education code.

The first five of these documents, which describe general education principles, were available to all students in the school and their families. Most of these documents (with the exception of the mission statement) were distributed to all students at the beginning of the school year and all new families upon enrollment. They were also available on the school website throughout the school year and into the summer, when they were updated in preparation for the fall semester. These documents were all fairly short, two pages or less in length. All of these documents were specifically oriented to the individual school, as opposed to the district at large.

The Welcome Letter was a general education document sent home with children at the beginning of the school and used to orient families to the school’s curriculum. The letter also explained the staff members currently employed at the school as well as the school’s dedication towards acceptance: “[Our school] embraces diversity. The children and families in our school community are a diverse cross section of many different cultures, ethnic groups and languages.” The mission statement is posted inside the school and also available on the school website. This was brief two-sentence declaration stating the school’s commitment to “excellence” as a “community of learners.” The “Right to Know” statement, Family Engagement policy, and Learning Compact are all requirements of the Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) Section 1112. “Right to Know” recounted parents’ rights to be informed of such aspects of education as teacher

and paraprofessional credentials and qualification, student participation in assessments, and assessment purpose and content. The Family Engagement policy explained the importance of home-school partnerships and how the school seeks to communicate with families and establish these relationships. The “Learning Compact” is based on the “School-Parent Compact” requirement within Section 1116 of ESSA. The purpose of this document is to explain that multiple stakeholders share responsibility for attaining high levels of student academic achievement.

Other documents analyzed were representative of the entire school district and not directly associated with this particular school. The first of these, the Strategic Plan, is a required element for each school entity, as described in section 4.13 of The Pennsylvania Code. Also required within The Pennsylvania Code is a student services plan, a Special Education Plan, and a gifted education plan. The Special Education Plan was also analyzed as part of this research study. While it is unknown whether the strategic and Special Education Plans were widely disseminated to students and families, both documents were available on that district website under the “About Us” tab. Finding them was somewhat difficult, as neither of the documents were labeled on the tab. Rather, they appeared as hyperlinks under related pages. The Strategic Plan document consisted of seven sections describing development of the document, the structure of the plan, and associated recommendations. It was displayed as a full-color document containing photographs and quotes from varied stakeholders. The Special Education Plan, on the other hand, appeared more clinical, containing only written information and tables, as opposed to photographs and charts. However, the available document was in review by the public and had not yet been finalized.

Of the documents collected, only the PA Chapter 14 of the State Code, Special Education Plan Report, the Special Programs page of the Pupil Personnel Services tab, and the Procedural Safeguards applied directly to special education. Chapter 14 of the 22 Pennsylvania State Code

provides regulatory guidance for assuring compliance with the federal law of IDEA. The primary goal of IDEA is to ensure that students with identified disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. There are six pillars of IDEA: Individualized Education Program (IEP), Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), appropriate evaluation, parent and teacher participation, and procedural safeguards. It is divided into four parts: Part A, which describes general provisions of the law; Part B, which covers the educational guidelines for preschool and school age children with disabilities, 3-21 years of age; Part C, which defines requirements for infants and toddlers with disabilities; and Part D, which consists of the national support programs administered at the federal level. IDEA provides the basis on which individual states build their own special education regulations. Chapter 14 is based on general principles of IDEA and is divided into the following sections: General Provisions; Child Find, Screening, and Evaluation; IEP; Educational Placement; Early Intervention; and Procedural Safeguards. The primary purpose of these regulations is to “adopt Federal regulations by incorporation by reference to satisfy the statutory requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (§ 14.102).” However, document also establishes requirements specific to Pennsylvania and describes court decisions that were used to inform these requirements. It is a long document most easily accessed online, typically available in sections, under separate numbered headings. All publicly funded schools within the state of Pennsylvania are subject to the requirements listed under Chapter 14, as per their provision of special education services to identified students.

The Special Education Plan is another document required by Pennsylvania law, under the auspices of section 4.13, relating to strategic plans. This Plan is also described by Chapter 14.104 of PA regulations. This document is meant to describe ongoing special education programming

and services provided within the district as well as anticipated changes in programming, in conjunction with the school district's Strategic Plan structure (Special Education Plan Information, 2019). This district's Special Education Plan is currently being displayed for public review on the district website with the intention of enacting it in July of 2019. The Special Education Plan is a 94-page document, which is not distributed to the public, but is available for review on the district website. The Plan contains information on special education within the district, including assurances, least restrictive environment, behavior support services, types of support, and availability of professional development opportunities, among other topics.

The Special Programs page was located on the school district website under the Pupil Personnel Services tab, which is housed under the "Departments" page. The Special Programs notice is required under Pennsylvania State Code 22 Pa.Code 14.121 as an affirmation that the school conducts ongoing identification activities as part of its school program for the purpose of identifying students for special education. The Procedural Safeguards, which is required by IDEA, are designed to protect the rights of families and children with disabilities, and, at the same time, give families and school systems several mechanisms by which to resolve their disputes. This document was quite long, consisting of twelve pages of text, in booklet form. The Procedural Safeguards document is required under IDEA and Chapter 14 but can differ in length and format across LEAs dependent upon the school district issuing the document, provided that the basic content explaining student and family rights is maintained.

Student specific documents were also reviewed for the three students whose parents were interviewed. These documents included Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Invitations to Participate in Student Planning Meetings, Notices of Recommended Education Placements/Prior Written Notice (NOREPs/PWN), Special Education Evaluation and Re-Evaluation Reports (ERs

and RRs) and Special Education Progress Monitoring Reports. The IEPs reviewed consisted of anywhere from 24 to 56 pages in length, with the longer documents containing a substantial amount of data regarding behavior. They contained standard information such as demographics, team signatures, procedural safeguards notice, special considerations, present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, goals and objectives, program modifications and specially designed instruction, educational placement, and PennData reporting. The transition and English Learner sections on these IEPs were not completed, as none of students whose documents were reviewed were either of transition age (14 or above) or English learners.

All three students whose documents were examined also had IEP Invitations in their files, as well as NOREPS/PWNs. These were short documents (2-4 pages in length) that parents had signed to indicate 1) intent to attend the IEP meeting, and 2) to demonstrate acceptance of the students' current placements in special education. It is also possible for families to sign these forms to decline these elements, but all of these documents with the files indicated acceptance. All students also had an evaluation report, but only one had a re-evaluation. An evaluation is a required part of the special education process that is used to determine whether or not students qualify for special education. This document is written prior to the student IEP meeting. It is a long document, with the evaluations reviewed consisting of anywhere from twelve to 26 pages in length. Reevaluations subsequently occur every three years, unless they are waived, except in the case of students with intellectual disabilities, who are required to be reevaluated every two years, with no waivers accepted. The reevaluation reviewed was 25 pages in length. One student's file contained a reevaluation waiver, which is acceptable in certain circumstances if it is signed by the parent, which this one was. The other student had not participated in the system long enough to warrant a reevaluation.

According to special education law, progress monitoring reports must be written and provided to the parents at least quarterly. All of the students' files contained progress monitoring reports for all but the final semester of the school year. These notes consisted of percentages and/or narratives describing student skill development throughout the course of the IEP.

4.2 Description of Interview Participants

The researcher conducted nine interviews consisting predominantly of open-ended questions to discern the participants' perceptions of their experiences engaging in the special education planning process. To attain anonymity among research participants, all interviewee participants were assigned a false name. Specific information such as age, length of employment, or family details will not be shared. Other attempts to cloak the identities of the subjects, such as the removal of names and identifying characteristics from interviewee statements, also served to offer privacy for participants.

Six educator research subjects participated in the interview process. These individuals consisted of two classroom teachers (Classroom Teacher 1 and 2), three special educators (Special Educator 1, 2, and 3), and a paraprofessional (Paraprofessional 1). Of the three special educators, two performed both pull-out and push-in learning support and one engaged primarily in a co-teaching relationship. One classroom teacher worked with a second grade classroom, while the other taught in a fifth-grade co-teaching classroom. The paraprofessional assisted students in a variety of grades, most often primary. Among them, the educator research participants were responsible for educating students in grades K-5, all representative grades within the research setting. They represented various durations of employment at the school, ranging from four to over

twenty years. All educator participants were Caucasian, ranging in age from 37 to 56 years of age. The educators identified various student sub-groups with whom they work most regularly. Four indicated that most of their caseload is comprised of students with learning disabilities, but several other diagnoses were also identified: students with emotional disturbance, autism, speech-language impairment, other health impairment, and intellectual disabilities were all represented within the student population of these educators' classrooms.

The researcher conducted three interviews of family members of students enrolled in special education services at the research site. All of these participants were in their late thirties to early forties and all were Caucasian. One participant, Parent 1, was the father of a third-grade student identified under IDEA as having a speech-language impairment. Two other participants, Parent 2 and Parent 3, were mothers of students enrolled in special education, one diagnosed with autism and the other as displaying a specific learning disability. These students were attending fifth and second grades, respectively. All of these parents also had children at other levels of education (either high school or preschool) with at least one other child also receiving special education services at these other levels.

4.3 Analysis of Policies, Procedures, and Practices

Prior to determining barriers to engagement and potential strategies, it was necessary to gain insight into the underlying practices and procedures surrounding general family engagement within the school and as related to special education planning processes. Of the official policies and procedures described, a number of them involved compliance with various aspects of ESSA,

IDEA, and PA Chapter 14. Other practices were specific to the school or district. These will be explored below.

4.3.1 Policies and Procedures Surrounding Family Engagement in General Education

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) serves as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was first signed into law in 1965. The purpose of this law is to put into place measures that promote equity in education for all students, even those who have been historically underserved, such as students in poverty. Schools may be designated a “Title 1” school in association with ESSA. Title 1 involves the provision of supplemental funds to schools with the highest concentrations of poverty, including the research site. ESSA and Title 1 emphasize, among other topics, “Parent and Family Engagement” under Section 1116. ESSA, which was signed in 2015, requires each state to create and submit a State Plan detailing how ESSA requirements will be implemented. The PA ESSA Consolidated State Plan, like ESSA itself, expresses “the importance of promoting engagement of students and their families throughout their education to build positive, meaningful relationships, and promote improved attendance and academic outcomes (p.116).” The Plan expounds upon this idea by describing the commitment of the PA Department of Education in providing support and technical assistance to LEAs to assist them in meaningfully engaging families. Various levels of engagement are outlined: Data Reporting and Transparency (District and State Levels); Capacity Building and Technical Assistance (District and State Levels); Communication and Outreach (School and District Levels), and Engagement and Collaboration (School Level).

Dissemination of several documents is required by ESSA, in association with the “Communication and Outreach” component listed within the Consolidated Plan. Documents such

as the “Right to Know” statement, the Family Engagement policy, and the Learning Compact all represent documents required of Title 1 schools by ESSA. Analysis of the “Right to Know” document, the Family Engagement policy and the Learning Compact indicated that the district had complied with nearly all ESSA regulations in the publication of these documents. “Right to Know” is a communicate required by section 1112 of ESSA. The document detailed parents’ rights to enquire about the education levels of paraprofessionals and educators, and also contained information regarding student curriculum and assessment. This required document also generally describes parents’ right to know the level of their children’s achievement but this statement is absent in this school’s “Right to Know” document. The content of this school’s Learning Compact followed the letter of the law, at least mostly, in that it explained the responsibilities of stakeholders (school, families, and students) and addressed the importance of home-school communication. However, this compact also typically includes some sort of statement indicating that communication must occur “in a language that family members can understand (Section 1116).” Such a statement is not included in the school’s Learning Compact, which is a poignant exclusion for a school educating students who speak fifteen different languages. The Title 1 Family Engagement policy appeared to include all necessary elements, according to an analysis that employed the “Pennsylvania Department of Education Title I Local Education Agency and School Parent and Family Engagement policy Checklist.” This document adhered to ESSA’s perspective on home-school collaboration: “We recognize that a child’s education is a responsibility shared by the school and family and agree that to effectively educate all students, the schools and parents/guardians must work together as partners.” The document also contained information on communication, the school-parent (Learning) compact, and the development of home-school partnerships, among other topics.

While the above documents were required by the district as part of ESSA, the school's Strategic Plan was a compulsory document decreed by Pennsylvania Code 4.13. This document is described within the code as: "a comprehensive and integrated K-12 program of student services based on the needs of its students every 6 years as provided in § 12.41(a) (relating to student services)." While how this document is structured and produced is, to some extent, under the purview of the LEA, PDE does cite nine characteristics that are strongly associated with high-performing schools, one of which is "high levels of community and parent involvement (Comprehensive Planning Process, 2019)." As such, the district's Strategic Plan does include many references to families and parents – 65, in fact. Within this document one principal is quoted as saying, "I hope, through the collaboration and support of our entire community, that students and families feel empowered and hopeful for their future. The schools cannot do this alone, we must have the support of families and the community." The Plan is described through four pillars, the second of which, Pillar B is entitled, "Safe Climate & Strong Relationships with Students, Families & Community." According to the document, "Our second Pillar... recognizes that "SCHOOLS CAN'T DO IT ALONE." This Pillar emphasizes school safety and collaboration with families and community in ways that are welcoming and respectful of diverse perspectives."

4.3.1.1 Developing Home-School Partnerships

Partnerships and collaboration were common themes within the documents, as well as among interviewees. The first line of the Family Engagement policy stated "[Our schools] are committed to the belief that all children can learn and acknowledges that parents share the school's commitment to the educational success of their children." According the Strategic Plan, a "key action" of the plan was to "Build partnerships among school staff, parents/guardians/caregivers, community-based organizations and residents to facilitate service projects and civic responsibility

experiences for our students” (p. 24). Another key action of the plan is described as such, as the district intends to “Extend the Community Schools approach to all schools, by implementing the existing model district-wide and cultivating the mindset inherent in the model” (p. 24). According to the Coalition for Community Schools, “a community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources” (2019). The purpose of establishing a community school is to integrate the academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement, with the school as the central focus of the community, in order to improve student learning and the community at large. Two special educators and one classroom teacher stated that the school had been identified as a community school and that a community liaison will begin work at the site next year. According to Classroom Teacher 1, “We are becoming a community school [and] we will have a community school director. Once we have a community school director, that person will be able to help parents with community needs and resources. It will let parents be more involved.” At this time, however, prior to beginning the community school program, resources are not as readily available. As stated in the Family Engagement policy, “[The school] does not currently have a Parent Resource Area. Materials, books, and other resources are also available upon request, from your child’s teacher and/or the [School-Wide Support] teachers” (p. 2).

All educator research subjects mentioned a newly founded PTO that had come into existence during the current school year as a way to facilitate family engagement. The staff initiated this organization intending to hand control over to parents. There is no mention of the PTO in the school Welcome Letter, or any other of the analyzed documents, and no information on this organization is provided on the school’s Facebook page. However, it is currently testing the waters as a new organization. According to Special Educator 3, “Well, this year we do have a

PTO. They are just trying to get that off the ground so they haven't had as much success this year as I think other buildings do." Classroom Teacher 2 concurred that this year has been difficult for the PTO, but that the sponsoring teachers are trying their best: "This year, they started a PTO organization and they've had meetings – they've tried to stagger the meetings; some in the morning, some in the afternoon, some in the evenings so that they could try and hit different times that's convenient for parents. It's been a rocky start but I think it will get better in time."

Given the diversity of research site, it is not surprising that several documents eluded to welcoming all families. According to the Welcome Letter, "[our school] embraces diversity. The children and families in our school community are a diverse cross section of many different cultures, ethnic groups and languages." The Strategic Plan explained that a key action of the district will be to "Facilitate induction of new teachers into their profession through recognized new teacher programs (e.g., Urban Institute) and mentor-teacher support in areas such as: classroom management, diversity, student/parent engagement, assessment practices, interventions, and collaboration" (p.25). However, the educator participants did not mention such practices as actually occurring within their school. Rather, Special Educator 1, for example, found a lack of time to mentor or collaborate among staff to be a hindrance to building effective partnerships. "I think there's not a lot of time for the teachers to get together and learn from each other. We pretty much hit the floor running every day. I mean, that would be the issue I think more than anything. Our time is pretty much taken." This does not lend itself to establishing "mentor-teacher" support.

4.3.1.2 Use of Understandable Language

As mentioned previously, the Learning Compact at this research site does not contain the phrase which is typical to a school-parent compact, regarding the importance of communication "in a language that family members can understand" (ESSA, Section 1116). In spite of this

omission within the verbiage of the document, the Learning Compact is, however, available in several different languages, including Arabic, Nepali, Somali, Spanish, and Swahili, as is the Family Engagement policy and the “Right to Know” letter. School practices follow this example to some extent, as the school is a member of a consortium that is able to provide translation of important documents and interpreters for official meetings, such as IEP meetings and parent-teacher conferences. “We just have so many languages here – it’s not just about Spanish anymore, we have so many more languages, like Nepali and Swahili. We do have translators available for the meetings” (Special Educator 1).

Language, however, becomes an issue in the everyday, informal communications within the district, as there are no official policies as to how to send out frequent communications, such as homework: “It’s tough. I mean, we have a lot of English language learners, language is a huge barrier. Our families can’t help our kids with homework because they just don’t understand the language” (Classroom Teacher 1). The recently implemented PTO has had difficulties with language barriers as well, “In all the years... in probably 20 years, we haven't had a PTA or a PTO. So this year, we finally came up with a PTO (Parent-Teacher Organization). And it's kind of funny because the only people that join the PTO is the people who can't speak English. So we have a group of people, like, from Nepal and they all just sit there and it's like nobody understands us. So I wish we could get more communication. We're trying to get more parents involved in that because that's a great way to communicate with families, you know, having a PTA and a PTO. So we're trying to get – figure out how to do that. We don’t have translators available for that” (Special Educator 2). Teachers sometimes employ their own creativity to communicate with the families of English Learners, by going through other family members. “Mom doesn’t speak English, but the older daughter had to come and be the interpreter. I usual talk through her – she’s the one that

helps [the student] with homework, she's the one I talk to about progress... it's been a difficult process with that parent, even more so because of the language barrier" (Special Educator 1). There is no written school policy regarding the use of interpreters, though typical practice dictates that they must be employed for official meetings. Otherwise, teachers are left on their own to determine how best to communicate with their families on a daily basis.

All of the educators interviewed stressed that language barriers existed between school and home, even for the family members whose first language was English. Special Educator 1 was concerned that her families don't always seem to understand what she is discussing with them, particularly when speaking about official documents. "I always explain things to the parent. I always ask the parent for input. But, you know, a lot of parents aren't, you know, a lot of them – a lot of the parents aren't even a high-school level, education-wise. So the ins and outs of [the special education process], they don't totally understand all of it..." One classroom teacher and two special educators expressed the necessity of being mindful in their written communication as well. According to Classroom Teacher 2, "When I'm constructing an email, it's important to be aware of your audience. Obviously, if I'm writing an email to a parent I want it to be professional, but I'm also not aware of that parent's education background, so I'm not going to use words that might be specific to academia. I try to use vernacular or language that's just maybe more easily accessible to anyone as opposed to just someone with a master's degree or someone who is in education." Again, teachers make their own determinations as to what is most appropriate in using comprehensible language with their families on a daily basis.

4.3.1.3 Rates of Home-School Communication

Communication was a frequent topic of discussion, both in the examined documents and in the testimonies of interviewees. Pillar B of The Strategic Plan is described as promoting "trust,

open communication and healthy partnerships with families and community.” This district-level document also indicated that schools within the district were responsible for “using a variety of communication strategies (e.g., newsletters, email, social media, home-language meetings) to communicate with parents and families on an ongoing basis.” The Family Engagement policy and Learning Compact both mention communication more than once. According to the Family Engagement policy, “Communication regarding School-Wide guidelines occurs through family events, parent-teacher conferences, resources sent home, and the school and district websites.” However, though the policy described “how” communication takes place, it did not expound upon “how often.” Similarly, the Learning Compact stated that teachers must “keep parents informed of their child’s progress,” but did not describe not how to do so or how often.

According to both special educators and classroom teachers, the school currently has no pre-determined policies or detailed procedures regarding home-school communication. Educators described different rates of self-initiated communication. According to Special Educator 1, “I’m always talking to my parents, they’re in my phone.” Special Educator 2 agreed: “I have them on the phone, I’m running out to the parking lot to talk to parents when they drop them off... I’m talking to them all the time.” However, Classroom Teacher 2 indicated: “I try to make positive phone calls, but generally, at this point in the year, I’m only going to call you with bad news. I only call them when I need to.” Both special educators and classroom teachers agreed, however, that there is no formal policy regarding home-school communication. “We used to have a communication log we were supposed to fill out when we talked to parents. But that was more for documentation” (Special Educator 1). Rates of contact are not recorded. The only real requirement regarding communication within general education is that classroom teachers must provide the opportunity for all parents to attend a face-to-face parent teacher conference, which is included in

their responsibilities as part of their teaching contract, as well as within the School-Parent Compact requirements within ESSA, and, in accordance, the Learning Compact. Nonetheless all of the special educators interviewed, as well as one classroom teacher, took it upon themselves to arrange the one face-to-face conference per year to communicate with their parents on a more regular basis.

4.3.1.4 Knowledge of Curriculum

The spirit of ESSA recognizes that family involvement in education promotes the academic achievement of students and stipulates that parents be informed of the school's curriculum and their students' achievement. According to ESSA, a school must "provide parents of participating children... a description and explanation of the curriculum in use at the school." The research site provided information regarding curriculum in the "Right to Know," which is a required element of that document. However, they went further by also describing the student curriculum in the "Welcome" letter: "[The schools'] curriculum parallels the recently adopted PA Common Core Standards. These standards require a rigorous and comprehensive academic curriculum and range of subjects, including: World History, Geography, American History, the Sciences, Literature, Writing, Mathematics, Visual Arts, and Music."

According to interviewee participants, families are also informed about the school curriculum in additional ways. "They have parent nights, where the parents are invited to come in [to the school]. They have different themes, different subjects, you know? The one in January was a math night... the one coming up, I believe, is STEM" (Special Educator 1). These nights were associated with Title 1 compliance, which requires participating schools to use at least part of their funding to promote family engagement in education, and provided direct connections to the curriculum. Additionally, a PA Core Standards Parent Fact Sheet is available on the school website. Information regarding Core Standards is also reviewed at the school's annual Title 1

Family Engagement meetings. Two teachers (one special educator and one classroom teacher) indicated that they also took additional steps to teach their families how to provide curriculum support in the home. Special Educator 1 provided families with tutorials, specifically for math, which she described as “the most challenging subject, because to do it like we do now... [parents are] oblivious to how it’s done.” Classroom Teacher 1 stated that she sent home a packet containing “reading tips and math skills” to help her families understand how to help their children at home. These provisions were not requirements of ESSA or Title I but did uphold the intent of informing families not only of the curriculum but how they could assist their children in participating in it.

4.3.1.5 Communication Regarding Student Achievement

Student achievement is another topic of which parents must be informed, according to ESSA, which stresses “the importance of communication between teachers and parents on an ongoing basis through, at a minimum... frequent reports to parents on their children’s progress” (Section 1116). The school takes various approaches to inform parents of their children’s achievement, as is indicated in the Family Engagement policy: “Families are provided support to monitor their student’s progress. Student progress is monitored by report cards, assessment data, parent/guardian-teacher conferences, parent portal and home-school communication.” Everyday practices appear to support this communication regarding student progress, particularly if there are concerns: “We’re very good about if a student is failing we call and ask for a conference with the parent. If the student is struggling with behavior we call and ask for a conference with the parent, so I would say, at least twice a month I’ve met with parents throughout the year at a minimum” (Classroom Teacher 2). There are variances in this communication, however. For example, Special Educator 1, however, stated that she communicates with her families regarding student progress on a much more regular basis, rather than when there are difficulties. “I’m talking to them all the

time. I still do the formality of sending that progress report because it's the law. But they pretty much know how they're doing without looking at that. Even grade wise, I usually send emails close to report card time and give them a heads up before their report card comes.”

4.3.2 Family Engagement in Special Education

According to IDEA, an IEP is “Individualized education program or IEP means a written statement for a child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with §300.320 through §300.324” (IDEA, § 300.22). This document is required for all students receiving special education services. Chapter 14 of Pennsylvania State Code adopts this definition and additional assertions as well, such as “Parents may request an evaluation at any time, and the request must be in writing. The school entity shall make the permission to evaluate form readily available for that purpose. If a request is made orally to any professional employee or administrator of the school entity, that individual shall provide a copy of the permission to evaluate form to the parents within 10-calendar days of the oral request” (PA ch. 14, § 14.123). In regard to parental involvement in the special education process, IDEA notes that the IEP team must include the parents of the child as the first listed participant within the team. Other ways in which parents are to be involved include providing consent, developing the IEP, revising the IEP, participating in manifestation determination, examining records, receiving prior notice of changes to placement, and participating in mediation and due process. These rights are also reviewed in the Procedural Safeguards booklet that is provided to the families of students participating in special education. The Special Programs tab on the Pupil Personnel Services site also discusses student and family rights, but primarily to inform that families can seek help if they “believe that [their] school-age child may be in need of special education services and related programs...”

4.3.2.1 IEP Meeting Attendance

As noted above, parents are recognized as the first IEP team members and, as such, their participation should be facilitated through effective practices. According to IDEA (again, as adopted by PA Chapter 14), it is the responsibility of the LEA to notifying parents of meetings well in advance, schedule the meetings at mutually agreeable times, and inform the parents of the purpose of the meeting. Additionally, it is noted: “If neither parent can attend an IEP Team meeting, the public agency must use other methods to ensure parent participation, including individual or conference telephone calls, consistent with §300.328 (related to alternative means of meeting participation)” (IDEA, § 300.322).

At this time, the research school has no written policies governing special education, beyond those indicated in IDEA, Chapter 14, and the Special Education Plan. However, they do appear to be following the regulations of IDEA and Chapter 14 when it comes to scheduling meetings for the convenience of parents. Special Educator 2 stated that she tried to involve all families by flexibly scheduling meetings. “We try to change the time to get the families there. If we can’t, we do a phone call or a home visit. Or Skype – we’ve only done that once.” Special Educator 1 also noted the importance of sending meeting notices early. “Usually, I send the invite out a month ahead and then I’m sending reminders. And, like I said, I have most of mine in my phone. So I’m reminding the parent it’s coming up. I’ve had all but one show up this year and that was a work issue. They just couldn’t schedule because of their work schedule... we had to do a conference on the phone.” This is in accordance with IDEA as well, as section 300.328 states: “If neither parent can attend an IEP Team meeting, the public agency must use other methods to ensure parent participation, including individual or conference telephone calls...”

Sending home IEP meeting invitations is a common practice among LEAs, in order to show that they are taking “steps to ensure that one of both of the parents of a child with a disability are present at each IEP meeting or are afforded the opportunity to participate...” (IDEA, § 300.322). According to the student specific IEP Invitations, however, not all educators send Invitations home prior to the meeting. This was suggested by the fact that several of the available IEP Invitations had been signed on the day of the IEP meeting itself, indicating that parents had not received this documentation ahead of time. Special Educator 1 indicated that she does not prefer to distribute the IEP Invitation ahead of time for fear it will be lost. Instead, she called her parents and scheduled the meeting, presenting the Invitation at the meeting itself. Signing of the Invitation is not necessarily a requirement of special education law. However, signing the Invitation on the day of the meeting itself does not allow an LEA to prove, in writing, that they offered ample advanced notice to the parents prior to the meeting. Perhaps previous communications such as phone calls could be documented in another way – but this was not evident within student files.

All special educators mentioned that they have had particularly successful parent attendance at their meetings this year. However, in the past they have had different experiences. Special Educator 1 stated that there are some parents that just cannot be reached and, in this case, the educators default to district policy: “You send your three invites and then you send it on to downtown [the district office].” This is not a written policy but is a practice associated with the fulfillment of the following IDEA requirement: “A meeting may be conducted without a parent in attendance if the public agency is unable to convince the parents that they should attend. In this case, the public agency must keep a record of its attempts to arrange a mutually agreed on time and place, such as... Copies of correspondence sent to the parents and any responses received...”

(IDEA, §300.322)”. Special Educator 3 agreed: “You send something three times and then it goes downtown and they deal with it.”

According to PA Chapter 14 regulations (and IDEA), all IEP meetings should have, at the minimum a parent, a special educator (case manager and/or someone to interpret results), a regular education teacher (if the student spends any time within the regular education classroom), and an LEA representative (IDEA §300.321). Though multiple voices (classroom teachers related service providers, counselors) might be written within the IEP, participants stated that very few stakeholders attended their meetings; typically, just the special educator and the parents were present. Both classroom teachers stated that they might attend if they could find a substitute but typically they wrote up their information and sent it in. When they did attend, they did very little talking: “The special educator explains everything and I sit there and if I have any other input, which I usually don’t, I say something... I don’t give too much input at the meeting” (Classroom Teacher 1). According to Paraprofessional 1, “I have never, ever attended a meeting. Ever. I know a few [paraprofessionals] that have because they were one-on-one with their students and they were asked to participate, but hardly ever. But I never participated in one.” Parent 1 and Parent 3 both described meetings in which they met solely with the special educator, though the “principal might pop his head in” (Parent 1). Special Educator 3 concurred: “If I can get the classroom teacher in great, if I can get the principal great, if I can get whoever else in that’s great, but the priority is getting the parents.” Special Educator 3 noted: “I think I’ve only had one meeting where my actual supervisor was available to attend... If the counselor is involved, she’s in there. If the behavioral specialist – if my student meets with them, she might pop in... I don’t think I have a meeting where everyone is... I’ve had few because of schedules pretty much. It’s hard to get everybody there because they’re booked.”

Two of the special educators interviewed identified the discrepancy between professional IEP meeting attendance and special education law. According to Special Educator 1, “I have attended IEP meetings as an advocate for other school districts for parents... or friends that ask me to go in and sit in. And there was a whole table for people there representing different agencies and things... We don’t have that here.” Special Educator 2 also stated that she has been to other school districts where they “do it right” and have all team members attend the meetings – but that this is not a reality for her LEA. “I know ideally and legally, they need all these people in there but when it comes down to it, would you rather not have the meeting because you can’t get everyone there or would you rather me at least sit down with the parent and go through [the IEP]? They are supposed to get everybody in on those meetings, that’s the protocol, that’s the procedure, but it doesn’t always happen now” (Special Educator 2). Parent 2 stated that her special educator sent home the IEP prior to the meeting and she was able to review the information from the absent IEP members – but that it would have been more helpful to have these members at the meeting. This parent stated that she had only attended one meeting (a few years ago) where an entire IEP team was present – two paraprofessionals, the classroom teacher, behavioral specialists, the speech-language pathologist, and an administrator were all in attendance, as well as the special educator, and she and her husband. Parent 2 described this as “the most successful meeting” she ever had because of the rich conversation generated. However, this was not described as common practice within the school.

In reviewing student paperwork, it was noted that IEP invitations indicated that multiple stakeholders would be in attendance. One such invitations listed the invitees as: Parents. Special Educator, Regular Educator, LEA Representative, Speech-Language Pathologist, and Behavioral Specialist. The corresponding IEP also contained signatures for these individuals, indicating that

they had attended the meeting. However, Parent 2, the child of whom the IEP belonged, reported that they had not. This is not within the letter of the law, as IDEA states: “A member of the IEP Team described in paragraph of this section may be excused from attending an IEP Team meeting, in whole or in part, when the meeting involves a modification to or discussion of the member’s area of the curriculum or related services, if 1) The parent, in writing, and the public agency consent to the excusal; and 2) The member submits, in writing to the parent and the IEP Team, input into the development of the IEP prior to the meeting” (IDEA §300.321). However, no attendance waivers were noted in the students’ file. Parent 2 reported that the district often had IEP team members sign the IEP, even if they were not there. “I know that’s not supposed to happen. I know those people aren’t supposed to sign if they didn’t come. One time we had to do an IEP revision because things just weren’t working and I made the administrator attend and remove the signatures from the original IEP, because the people just weren’t there. I don’t like to push the envelope but I did that time.” Signing the IEP when team members were absent is not considered to be acceptable, given the wording on the IEP itself: “The Individualized Education Program team makes the decisions about the student's program and placement. The student's parent(s), the student's special education teacher, and a representative from the Local Education Agency are required members of this team. Signature on this IEP documents attendance, not agreement.” However, according to the document analysis, it appeared to be common practice for individuals to sign, even though they did not attend the meeting. Such documentation is misleading to anyone reviewing special education files at this LEA.

4.3.2.2 Developing the IEP

The regulations within IDEA and Chapter 14 encourage the use of teaming in the development of IEPs. For example, “A regular education teacher of a child with a disability, as a

member of the IEP Team, must, to the extent appropriate, participate in the development of the IEP of the child... (IDEA §300.324). All participants described this as, ideally, a team process, but stated that some team members were more active than others. As case managers for the IEPs, special educators were most active in this process and were those who were most interactive with the family members. Classroom teachers were less involved in IEP planning, aside from providing data for the IEP – “She will email me a questionnaire and I will fill that out [and] email it back to her” (Classroom Teacher 1). According to Classroom Teacher 2, “I just would gather any data I need to present to the parents, so grades, homework completion, class-work completion, any behavior referral. That would be it for my part as the classroom teacher... Oh, and interventions. What we’ve done up to this point that has worked, what hasn’t worked... I write that up and [the case manager] presents them with the written IEP to review.” Paraprofessional 1 was also likely to provide data for the IEP: “I take data, like, on behavioral plans, and I give that to the teacher to use at the meeting.” Neither the classroom teachers nor the paraprofessionals professed to communicating very often with family members within the IEP meetings themselves, but they did provide information for the write-up. This is not necessarily in keeping with the spirit of IDEA in regard to collaborative planning, as it appeared that the special educator (the case manager) was the progenitor of the IEP itself, with limited open dialogue noted between educator team members. Special Educator 1 did propose a means of having more individuals attend the IEP meeting, which she uses often. According to Special Educator 1, she “rotates in and out” of meetings, providing coverage for her regular education teachers so the teachers may attend the meeting and talk directly to parents themselves. This does allow the classroom teacher to perform a more active role during the meeting than either sending in written data or sitting silently as the special educator explains

the content of the IEP. However, it does not, again, allow for IEP development discussion among all team members, as the educators are not within the meeting at the same time.

According to IDEA, within the crafting of the IEP, “The concerns of the parents for enhancing the education of their child” must be considered (IDEA, § 300.324). All parent participants stated that IEP documents are written before they arrive at the meeting and reviewed with them. However, they also all stated that they contributed to the writing of the IEP in some way, either through communication prior to the meeting or discussion during the meeting. Sometimes they did so by providing general information within the IEP. For example, one IEP noted: “The student has a strong family with three older brothers!”. Information such as this did not necessarily related directly to educational programming, but may have helped the team get to know the child better. At other times, parents contributed directly to the writing of goals. In the present levels of one IEP it was noted: “The student’s parents would like him to be more involved in functional math activities, such as counting money” and a corresponding goal was identified: “When given manipulatives (real coins, plastic coins), [the student] will correctly count denominations in amounts of \$2 or less with 80% accuracy.” Parent 2 indicated that she and her husband requested a “money” goal and that it was subsequently added into the IEP. This demonstrated direct integration of parental aims into the IEP. In another IEP the statement: “The student’s mother is happy with his progress but would like to see him be more successful in reading comprehension” allowed the family voice to be heard. The student also had a corresponding reading comprehension goal. Parents also provided information regarding student preferences, as in “The student loves to play soccer and also enjoys playing Roblox with his friends.” Parent 1 found this dialogue helpful in regard to student motivation.

4.3.2.3 Accountability

During the IEP process, family members are presented with a series of documents and statements to sign to indicate assent or participation. Signing of these documents is not necessarily required by the federal law of IDEA, but rather as a means of demonstrating accountability for the LEA. For example, there is nothing in IDEA or Chapter 14 indicating that the IEP must be signed by attendees. However, it is common practice to do so, so that the LEA can prove via documentation that the meeting was attended by multiple team members, in accordance with federal law. According to review of student files, these documents included IEPs, NOREPs, and the Procedural Safeguards Notice. Another document specifically required by the school district is the Medical Billing Assistance form. All of the examined documents had been signed by parents on the day of the meeting. Of these documents, it is typical for the IEP to be signed at the meeting, as it indicates meeting attendance. The Procedural Safeguards Notice is also generally signed at the meeting, specifying that the family has been offered the Safeguards. However, documentation in particular, the NOREP, describes the recommended placement for the student and requires that the parent sign to either accept or deny this placement, or speak further with education staff. This is a document that is able to be signed after the meeting, as families can take time to consider whether they choose to accept the placement as indicated. It is in the spirit of IDEA to provide families with time to review these documents, as is indicated here: “Written notice... must be given to the parents of a child with a disability a reasonable time before the public agency... proposes to initiate or change the identification, evaluation, or educational placement of the child or the provision of FAPE to the child (IDEA, § 300.504). Two or the three parent participants indicated that immediate signing of this document was not required. “We don’t have to sign the papers that day but we usually do. Usually, we have a chance to read over it. She’ll give us a chance

to look over and read it ourselves. And then we usually add either an initial or sign it” (Parent 1). Parent 3, however, expressed belief that this document had to be signed immediately – but this is not required by either IDEA or Chapter 14.

The Procedural Safeguards Notice is the school district’s way of documenting compliance with IDEA and Chapter 14 law indicating that “a copy of the procedural safeguards available to the parents of a child with a disability must be given to the parents only one time a school year” (IDEA, § 300.504). All parents signed the notice indicating that they had received these Safeguards, which are intended to inform the families of students enrolled in special education of their rights within the system. According to Pennsylvania Chapter 14 Code, each school must present the families of all students with disabilities with the opportunity to receive the Procedural Safeguards, which describe the legal protections of the rights of parents and guardians as identified within IDEA. In reviewing the Procedural Safeguards booklet provided by the district to the families of their students, it was noted that the document was quite long – over ten pages in length – with text on each page. The document was in black and white, with no visual supports such as photographs or charts. Many of the words on the pages were multi-syllable (“dispute resolution,” “manifestation determination”). This booklet is provided to families participating in initial IEP meetings, and is subsequently offered to families during annual meetings, and is supported by the available documentation. While all special educator participants indicated that they always offer the Procedural Safeguards to families, they had their doubts as to whether they are read or understood. This will be discussed further in the “Barriers” section of the chapter.

4.4 Barriers to Engagement of Families in IEPs

Several common themes emerged within the analysis information in relation to the perception of barriers to the engagement of families within the special education planning process. These barriers lent themselves to analysis according to the four barrier categories identified within the review of literature: Knowledge-Based, Logistical, Communication, and Cultural/Relational.

4.4.1 Barriers of Knowledge

Knowledge-based barriers, including a lack of families' understanding of disability, the special education system, or parental rights within the system, have been identified as barriers to family engagement in previous studies. While this study did not find that understanding of student disability was a problem among parents within this school, inadequate knowledge of the special education system and parental rights were identified as potential barriers to family participation within the IEP process by educator stakeholders. However, there are disparate points of view between educators and parents in this regard. While most educator interviewees listed this as an area of difficulty within planning, specifically in regard to the parents' understanding of the special education process, parent participants did not necessarily agree. This will be discussed further in the following paragraphs.

According to the educator interviewees, the most serious breakdowns of knowledge that appeared to impact the IEP process at the school, were misunderstandings or lack of knowledge of the special education system itself, specifically among parents. All educators spoke of the breadth of the IEP as being prohibitive to parent understanding. "There are a lot of parts to the IEP... I sit there and go over it. But, you know, do they really comprehend it? I don't think everybody does"

(Special Educator 2). Another noted, “The parents that have an education are more on-board and they’re more knowledgeable. But most of them don’t know the system. And honestly, I believe this with all my heart, parents don’t want to ask questions because they don’t want to look dumb, they don’t want to seemCommunication like they’re not informed” (Special Educator 3). Special Educator 2 concurred, “There’s a frustration of not understanding what things mean, how the services work... Sometimes they are stuck, they don’t understand, and they give you that look.” Special Educator 3 indicated that such knowledge was highly variable: “Some are more informed than others. Others don’t have any clue. They just want help and they just send their kids to school and expect us to do everything... so we’re kind of like the parents and the teacher and specialists. And then there’s others who know everything about their child’s disability but not about the system.”

Educators also agreed that many families tend not to ask questions during these meetings, with a couple of notable exceptions. According to Classroom Teacher 1, “I’ve been in meetings where the parents say nothing, ask no questions, make no comments. They sign and leave. And I’ve been in meetings where the parents – either the parent or if they bring an advocate - the advocate has a lot of questions about what’s going on, and what we’re planning to do, and how goals are being met, etc. It just depends.” Special Educator 3 made a similar statement regarding variability: “I have one parent now. She’s very educated, very knowledgeable. She asks a lot of great questions and we have good discussion at that meeting.” This does not always happen however. “A lot of times, the parents don’t say much because it’s new to them and they kind of just go with what the teacher says. So they kind of just sit there and they’re so overwhelmed” (Special Educator 3). Special Educator 1 concurred: “I go through [the IEP] page by page, usually. I rarely even have [the parents] ask questions. I ask if they have any questions but they usually don’t.”

As mentioned previously, the rights of students and parents of students receiving special education are described within the Procedural Safeguards booklet, which is provided at the initial IEP meeting and offered at all subsequent meetings. It is unclear whether this document is effectively read or understood by parents, however. One special educator admitted that she does not review the Procedural Safeguards with the families. “When they are first identified, they get a booklet... but I don’t know if anybody takes the time to go through that with them initially. I don’t know if the school psychologist [goes] through any of that with them or if it’s kind of like ‘Here is your manual, I hope you can understand it.’” (Special Educator 2). Another special educator who works with fifth graders stated, “By the time I get them, the parents don’t want [the Procedural Safeguards.] They say, ‘I have, like, six of these.’ When I ask if they’ve ever read them, they just shake their heads” (Special Educator 1). Special Educator 2 stated something similar in regard to the Procedural Safeguards booklet: “Sometimes I say, have you ever read it? And they look at me, they’re like, no. I said ‘But this is your rights as a parent with the student with an IEP. If you ever have any questions, there’s information in here, you know, you can read.’ And they usually – they’re like, yeah, and they sign it. I don’t honestly know that anybody has ever read it.” Additionally the educators indicated that the Procedural Safeguards were not available in other languages. One stated: “We might have it in Spanish, maybe. But most of my ELs (English Learners) speak Nepali” (Special Educator 3).

Family member participants in this study took a slightly different viewpoint to knowledge barriers, as they did not specifically identify knowledge barriers as being a problem for them personally. All family members indicated that family members, friends, community groups, and the Internet were great resources for them. “I’m a nurse so I have access to a lot of medical sites that talk about autism. I try to avoid sites like “Autism Speaks,” which seem to be more about

money. In the past, I've also been involved in the Autism Society meetings" (Parent 2). Another stated, "I know this process really well now, because his brother went through it first and they've both been in it for a long time" (Parent 3). However, though the family member participants professed to feeling very comfortable with their understanding of the special education system, only one, Parent 2, was actually able to thoroughly describe her rights as the parent of a child with a disability. Parent 1 indicated that his rights as a parents included "Teachers have to talk to us and we can come to the meetings. We can ask them questions." However, he was unable to describe any further rights, such as confidentiality or dispute resolution options. He also had difficulty describing the current goals in his son's IEP, stating that his son was working on sounds, though his IEP indicated that he was also working on receptive and expressive language concerns. Parent 3 also had great difficulty describing her many rights within the special education system: "They have to ask me to the meetings. I know that. And tell me if something is wrong. I'm just not sure what else." Neither Parent 1 nor Parent 3 knew the names of elements of the special education process, such as "progress reports" and "reevaluation." Though these families themselves did not identify a lack of system knowledge as an impactful problem, it nonetheless seemed to exist.

Parent 2 was better able to describe her rights: "I know that I need to be invited to the meetings and that I can hold a meeting at any time – I just requested a meeting a couple of months ago because of some changes in my son's behavior. And I know about confidentiality and how to make a complaint, though I haven't. I know that the school has to give me the list of rights – the Procedural Safeguards – and I always take them and read them. And I ask my sister questions. She's a principal now so she knows all this." Parent 2 stated that her sister served as her primary source of information on parental rights in the special education system: "Only one teacher ever even talked about those with me. If I didn't read about them and ask my sister, I wouldn't know."

4.4.2 Logistical Barriers

Several possible logistical barriers may exist in planning IEP meetings, including transportation, lack of child care, and most particularly, difficulties in scheduling. While some logistical barriers appeared to exist for families participating in the IEP process, these appeared to be minor concerns amongst both the family members and educators. Both groups stated that they were seldom unable to schedule a meeting this year, though the educators indicated that “this year was different,” in a positive way. “Everyone seemed to be on-board this year, all my families got here. It’s not always like that.” Nonetheless, issues such as scheduling and transportation can be problematic. As Special Educator 1 stated, “I believe a lot of single moms that are really trying their best, a lot of them have two jobs. I sometimes have a very difficult time scheduling and communicating [with] them due to that work schedule.” Special Educator 2 concurred saying, “They [the parents] work multiple jobs so finding time between jobs is hard, or if they’re working shifts they have to sleep, so that’s a huge concern.” Scheduling is further complicated when families have younger siblings at home. “We have a lot of families that have younger children at home,” said Special Educator 2. Another stated: “I’ve had parents walk in with younger siblings, bringing the younger siblings to the meeting” (Special Educator 1). According to these educators, the school has come to expect this and is able to adapt, leading to this issue no longer being impactful to IEP participation.

Transportation also represents a potential hardship, as many families do not own vehicles. According to Paraprofessional 1, “We have a lot families who just don’t have cars and they can’t get here. They have to see if they can get rides with other people.” Special Educator 1 stated that this has been an issue for her parents as well. “Transportation especially in the city, many times

could be an issue. But I'm finding that most of them have a cellphone. So the minimal is do it over the phone." Again, the district has found ways to adapt to these situations.

Of the family members interviewed, none found babysitting or transportation to be a problem. All of them have vehicles, as well as family supports (spouses, parents, or siblings) who can assist them in watching the other children or helping them get to the meeting, if necessary. Scheduling has not been a problem for these families. According to the families, teachers either call or send home an invitation for a specific time, but that time can be changed as necessary. Parent 3 stated: "They send paperwork home with my kid and then I sign it and then we go in on the IEP day. There is a couple of times we couldn't make it to be there. They needed us to be there, so they did change [the meeting]." Parent 1 agreed: "They're good about the meetings. One time I forgot to come so when I showed up to pick up my son, they said, 'You forget? You want to come in now and meet?' It was no problem."

One scheduling barrier that presented itself repetitively throughout the interview process did not concern the attendance of families at IEP meetings, but rather the lack of attendance of professionals. Two of the family members interviewed did not indicate that this was a problem for them but Parent 2 stated that this practice frustrated her. "We go to the meeting and we're lucky if there are four people there. The special education teacher is there but regular education never comes and neither does an administrator." Parent 2 expressed this tendency as being highly frustrating. "I know that they should be there, I know my rights. If they cared they would be at the meeting. Instead it's all left to the special educator." The educator participants concurred that their meetings are generally sparsely attended. Special Educator 1 described a typical meeting, "I'm there, right beside the parent. The regular education teacher is there... but we're not always in there at the same time. The principal usually stops in, but they don't stay. I think I've only had one

meeting where my actual supervisor was available to attend and that's, you know, he rotates. If the behavioral specialist – if my student meets with them, she pops in. She's not always there for the whole thing.” Special Educator 2 stated: “The majority of the time, it's just me at the IEP meeting, unless it's after school, because I can't always find somebody to sub for the classroom teacher so she can come down. Or, you know, maybe the principals are both busy. The counselor though if she's in there... she gets to chime in but typically it's just me in the room with the parent.” Classroom Teacher 1 agreed: “Sometimes if I can get a coverage I will be in the meeting, and if the counselor is needed depending on what the IEP is for – that's it. Usually it's just the special educator and the parents.”

4.4.3 Barriers of Communication

Communication appeared to be highly variable amongst individual interviewees, and was identified as both a barrier and a strength. Special educators indicated that they communicated so frequently with their parents that the IEP meeting itself served as more of a formality: “I have most of my parents in my phone. So I'm usually in touch with the majority of my parents... every day. I text them, let them know what they either have for homework or if they're on a behavior chart that chart goes to them via texting. I take a picture and send it right to them” (Special Educator 1). Special Educator 3 agreed that she utilized not only frequent communication, but positive communication: “I do like to call at least once in a while and say, ‘Hey, it's a good day’ because, I mean, I can't imagine just always getting a bad phone call, so everyone once in a while, I like to try to be positive.” Classroom Teacher 1 also indicated that she spoke to her parents often, particularly this school year: “I do a lot of phone calls home, I have a lot of parents that I will text at the end of every day to let them know how their student is doing, e-mails... a lot of parents I

will see outside and connect with them outside whether their kid had a good or a bad day. We keep in contact a lot with parents. This year has been [better] than most.” On the other hand, Classroom Teacher 2 described less frequent communication: “With parents, it’s more on an as-needed basis. I try to make positive phone calls, but generally, at this point in the year, I’m only going to call you with bad news. I only call them when I need to.”

All family members indicated that they spoke to their special educators on a regular basis – even a daily basis – throughout the school year, not just during IEP meetings. However, communication with their special educators had been a barrier for these families in the past. According to Parent 1: “We didn’t have a lot of communication with our older son, with, um, whoever was supposed to talk to us.” Parent 3 agreed that her family, too, has had difficulty with this in the past: “We’d like to know what’s going on in our son’s life, in his school. We try to help, you know? But we found out too late sometimes.” Additionally, parents indicated that they did not necessarily have the same levels of success in communicating with their children’s regular education teachers, as they did with their special education teachers. According to Parent 1, “We talk to [the special education teacher] all the time. She texts us everyday and lets [our son] call home when he needs to. We don’t really talk to the other lady [the classroom teacher].” Parent 3 concurred: “This year... they seem to be making an effort with me. Well, [the special education teacher], always calls me or texts me and, you know, lets me know everything... We don’t talk to his other teacher much.”

Some difficulties with communication were directly related to language barriers. Of the families at the school, a large portion are English Learners with about fifteen different languages represented. Generally, language differences were not noted as a problem, as the school participates in an interpretation and translation consortium, in which an interpreter is available to

digitally participate in IEP meetings. However, despite the availability of this service, it does lead to difficulties in scheduling. As Special Educator 1 stated, “When you have an interpreter, you’re kind of at the mercy of them [for scheduling], so the meeting could be at any time. Usually these are at more inconvenient times because it has to work with their schedule, too.” This seems to be a minor problem, however, as she added: “Usually it works out.” Linguistic differences did represent a larger challenge between IEP meetings, when interpreters were not available for day-to-day informal interactions. In these cases, friends or family members often served as interpreters between home and school.

Though several individuals cited phone calls and texting as effective means of communication between home and school, barriers exist to this type of communication as well. For example, Special Educator 1 noted: “Calling is sometimes hit or miss. A lot of our parents don’t have landlines anymore and their cellphones... the number keeps changing so we don’t know someone’s current number.” Additionally, “Not everyone has Internet access or email.” Special Educator 2 agreed, citing that this problem particularly existed in the upper grade levels: “Here the majority of my families come – I hardly have a parent that doesn’t come to a meeting. But at the high school I hardly ever did. There was never working phone numbers... it was either non-working phone numbers or sometimes the parents didn’t even live with the kid.”

4.4.4 Barriers of Culture and Relationships

Of the participants in the study, none of them specifically cited racial or cultural differences as being possible barriers to the IEP process, though it should be noted that all participants were of the same racial description. However, that will be explored further in the discussion of this document. This section will seek to define the relationship barriers described by study participants.

Of family members participating in this study, all of them stated that their current relationships with school staff have been fairly successful. This had not always been the case, however. Parent 3 described past teachers that her children had as being “impossible to work with.” She felt that these teachers were judging her – for what, she wasn’t sure – but perhaps because of the family’s lack of money or because she didn’t go to college. Parent 1 agreed that he, too, had experienced what he called “the blame game,” or the tendency of teachers to say everything that he and his child did wrong, rather than trying to work with their strengths. “We’ve had people, they’re not going fast enough, they’re not trying hard enough, and they’re just blaming him.” These strained relationships made it difficult to establish a collaborative relationship with the teachers. Parent 3 stated: “We’ve been to some bad schools. Like, for instance, when my son was younger, his teacher wouldn’t even get [close to him], or even show him what to do if he didn’t understand something.” According to Parent 3, the teacher said that “she didn’t show him because she says ‘Your parents seem like the type of person that would sue us.’” This feeling of non-caring and judgment was echoed by Parent 1, who felt that in the past his son needed empathy that he didn’t receive. “He was seeing a therapist because of his speech problem when he was young, you know. And you get frustrated when nobody understands you but she just – she just said ‘Your son has major behavioral problems, like, she wasn’t getting the concept. It’s not behavioral problems, it’s frustration over his speech.’” Parent 3 stated a similar concern. “I think about what it’s like for him, not able to read and write like everybody else. It’s like when I was a kid, I had a hard time with reading too – I was more a math kid. I remember trying so hard and not getting nowhere. He works hard. I don’t want him to feel like it’s his fault and some therapists and teachers... they make him feel that way.”

Educators, too, also expressed barriers to relationships from another viewpoint. Though educators praised some of their parents as caring and concerned, they identified others as “part of the problem” (Special Educator 2). Special Educator 3 stated: “This year is different, but in previous years, I’ve had a parent, they just didn’t care and they won’t come in. They came right out and said, ‘I’m not coming’. There’s nothing you can do with that.” Paraprofessional 1, the paraprofessional, agreed. “Some of our parents are great but some of them... They’re not in the school, they never come in, and they don’t really care what happens to their kid.” Others feel their parents care but are not always able to help and do not necessarily reach out for assistance. Special Educator 2 stated: “Very rarely do I have parents that call and say, ‘I didn’t understand what the homework was, can you explain it to me?’” ... I think at the very most I have had parents that maybe write a note on the top of the homework and say, “I really tried,” but they didn’t get it.” Special Educator 3 agreed: “I think they’re intimidated to come in here. A lot of them were in special ed too.” Paraprofessional 1 stated something similar, “School’s not a place where these parents want to be. It can be a hard place. I don’t think they had a good time when they were here.” Classroom Teacher 2 concurred, “In my experience, many of our parents have had negative school experiences themselves and do not like coming into this building. A lot of them feel that I may not be able to relate to their child whether it’s because I’m a different gender, I’m a different race, I have different beliefs, I come from a different background, whatever their thought process may be.”

Other teachers stated that the parents they work with do not value education in the same way that they do and that the parents do not want to learn the system or help their students achieve success. Alternatively, the parents may value education, but other things get in the way – drugs, work, additional children at home. Oddly, it was also noted that even though teachers commonly

identified the importance of family engagement, they also made statements such as, “The best meetings are when everyone is on the same page, the parents accept our recommendations, and everybody leaves happy” (Special Educator 2). Another described a successful meeting as one that “runs smoothly” without disagreement (Special Educator 3). While these meetings may sound idyllic, they do call to question whether educators really want to work with families who will question them, debate with them, and possibly engage in robust discussion. Like the family members’ perspectives before them, these testimonials do not lend themselves to building true home-school partnerships.

4.5 Strategies for Engagement of Families in IEPs

Throughout the interview process, several themes emerged in the identification of impactful strategies for the engagement of families in IEPs. A number of these strategies were already taking place in the research site and were identified as techniques that might be leading to the currently successful rates of IEP attendance being reported within this school site. Other strategies were suggested by families and teachers as techniques that might more successfully engage families in authentic IEP participation. These are described according to three categories: strategies for increasing attendance at team meetings, strategies for enhancing family member contributions to IEP meetings, and strategies for impacting parental participation in academics.

4.5.1 Strategies for Increasing Attendance at Team Meetings

All of the special educators within this study described this year as “an unusually good year” in regard to parental attendance at IEP meetings. Among the special educator participants, one of them has had 100% face-to-face attendance by families for the year, with the others maintaining perfect attendance with primarily face-to-face meetings, occasional phone meetings, and one home-school visit. Several reasons were cited to explain these high levels of attendance. Two special educators (1 and 2) stated that they believed that the high levels of attendance related, at least partially, to the fact that they were working with elementary school students. “In middle school it’s a whole different ballgame. And in high school – I maybe had two parents show up all year” (Special Educator 2).

Aside from age differences, which are an uncontrollable element in family attendance at IEP meetings, a number of employable strategies were suggested as contributing to parental attendance at meetings. First of all, communication was identified by both family members and educators as a means of establishing relationships and increasing tendency of parents to attend IEP meetings. Special Educator 3 stated that frequent communication was the most important thing she did for her students, “I’d rather have open communication. It’s helpful in their learning. Most of my kids behave in class because they know I have their parents on speed dial. The parents also know they can call me too.” Whether it was phone calls home, daily texting, or visiting parents during morning drop-off, frequent communication was described as a successful way to build partnerships. Additional strategies were also described, “We have a lot of communication logs too, like books that we send home to talk about the day” (Special Educator 2). Other options for written communication included sending home written documents, such as reports and IEP invitations, but these were not described as being successful.

Additional suggestions for communication strategies were somewhat more creative. Class Dojo and Remind (i.e., digital communication apps) were identified as daily modes of maintaining communication. “There are a few teachers that communicate daily on class dojo. I haven’t used it but I do hear teachers talking about that and that seems to really work...” (Classroom Teacher 1). Paraprofessional 1 agreed: “Some classes use [Classroom Dojo] and things like that. They communicate with parents mostly through text, I’d say... Immediately, if there’s a problem in class, the teacher can immediately send a note to the parent or text to still let them know. So it’s constant communication really.” Communicating with older siblings or grandparents in lieu of parents due to difficult work hours or linguistic barriers was employed when necessary. “Mom doesn’t speak English, but the older daughter had to come and be the interpreter” (Special Educator 1).

According to Classroom Teacher 2, a local group called the “Blue Coats” served as ambassadors for communication. “The Blue Coats actually, they’re mostly men from the community, but there’s a few women too. They act as sort of like monitors; safety monitors outside the school at dismissal and when the students are arriving at arrival and dismissal. They’re men and women who live where the kids live. The kids know them. It’s like a relationship and I noticed the parents will really, really frequently interact in conversations with them because they’re people they’re comfortable with. They see them at their houses too so they know them from the neighborhood. A lot of times, when we’ve had issues with kids, we can say, ‘Hey, can we call the Blue Coats and ask them to mention to the mom, ‘We need to meet with them.’” Techniques involving texting, phone calls, or face-to-face communication seemed particularly successful in both establishing relationships and helping find times to hold meetings. “I do a lot of phone calls home, I have a lot of parents that I will text at the end of everyday to let them know how their student is doing. A lot of parents I will see outside and connect with them outside whether their

kid had a good or a bad day” (Classroom Teacher 1). Another stated: “I talk to my parents on phone or text all the time so I usually say, “Hey the IEP meeting is coming up, when are you available? I ask them about three weeks out and make a couple of reminders leading up to it” (Special Educator 2).

Other digital means of communication were also available – email, a parent portal, district-wide Facebook – but neither family members nor educators indicated that these were particularly successful. Classroom Teacher 2 was particularly skeptical about the value of the parent portal, “I guess some of the parents use their parent portal for grades, I have very few parents who I have call or email saying ‘What happened with my kid’s grade?’. While establishing open communication may not be easy, it seems to have great effects on IEP attendance, as well as meeting success: “I feel like all my positive meetings happen when I have communication that’s NOT just that meeting. When the parents are on board and they’re working with their children at home and... I’m talking to parents every single day and I’m calling them even when it’s not bad things. It feels more like a team” (Special Educator 3).

All of the participants within the study indicated that flexibility in scheduling also contributed to IEP attendance. While teachers often suggested a time frame to parents, they were willing and able to change that if necessary. Special Educator 1 stated, “I just text them and say, ‘Hey, we have this coming up, what time you think within a two-hour window?’ I tell them the times I can’t do, which is lunch. Usually I try to do them first thing in the morning because they have related arts and it won’t affect the schedule and I won’t miss anything with any of the other classes.” Of course, such suggestions do not always work, “I come in early and leave late everyday – usually to help kids with homework. But I can hold meetings then, too, if that’s better for the parents. Sometimes right at drop off works best” (Special Educator 1). Special Educator 3 also

indicated that using different modes of meetings has been successful. “I've had a few where I've had to do, like, phone conversations... they just couldn't come to the IEP meetings, and it was like the second time that I've done it. So I was like, ‘We can do a phone conversation, you know, talk about the IEP and then I'll send home the paperwork.’ And they said ‘Okay,’ because they really wanted to be here but they just couldn't make it in. Another time I've done a home visit. That doesn't happen very often but it can.” Special Educator 2 also has completed home visits: “There was one parent that I went to the home during the school year, because we had to meet. It was important because the child was having some really severe behavioral issues and... I had to meet with that parent and the parent had no way to get to us. So that was one time that I did make that arrangement for a parent.”

Family member participants attested that this flexibility of scheduling has been helpful to them. Parent 3 stated: “There is a couple of times we couldn't make it there. They needed us to be there, so they did change it. It usually works out for me but if it doesn't, they give me another time. I had to do a phone meeting once because I couldn't get in there – this was when I was sick – but I would rather come in. We can usually find a time.” Parent 1 said that he, too, was usually able to get in to the meetings and that the teachers are able to be flexible. “I work my own schedule because I have my own business. But if something happens that I can't get in there, they'll change it up so I can make it.” Interestingly, however, no specific suggestions were made as to how to include more teachers and administrators in the meetings. As previous discussed, parental attendance at meetings has been fairly successful this year. However, it is seldom that classroom teachers or administrators attend. Parent 2 would like to see more people at IEP meetings. “I don't know how we could find a time to get more teachers there – maybe after school? But we really need to get a principal there, at least.” This issue will be further addressed in Chapter 5, Discussion.

Aside from scheduling, other logistical concerns such as babysitting and transportation were mentioned as potential problems, but dismissed as barriers because the school is able to work around them. Babysitting is not considered an issue because all children are welcome in the school. The younger children are given toys or coloring books to amuse them while the meeting occurs, sometimes in another room with staff supervision, or sometimes within the meeting room itself, if it is large. Special Educator 3 described one such meeting. “Our room... is a nice size room so we just have coloring books and stuff. The kiddos sit in there with us and they usually do just fine.” Special Educator 1 experienced the same situation, “I’ve had parents bring in the younger siblings. We give them coloring sheets and get the meeting done as best we can.” This may not be an ideal situation but it one that has worked for these educators. Next year, however, the school will be established as a community school, with a point person established as a “community liaison.” This individual will be establishing a “family friendly” room that might be a good place for younger children to wait in order to ensure confidentiality at IEP meetings.

4.5.2 Strategies for Enhancing Family Member Contributions to IEP Meetings

Throughout the interview process, it was revealed that the school displayed particularly successful IEP meeting parent attendance rates this year. However, not all parties described authentic collaborative partnerships within the IEP process, aside from simple attendance at the meetings. For example, special educators indicated that family members attending IEP meetings did not always ask questions or participate in active conversation. Additionally, they expressed the concern that their parents did not seem to understand the special education system as a whole. Family members did not express concern with this but two of them demonstrated a lack of knowledge concerning their educational rights.

Educators and family members alike suggested that more active engagement may be achieved by establishing more effective rapport between school and home and also by encouraging family member involvement in decision-making. One suggested that the community liaison who begins next year may help build home-school partnerships, “I’m sure that with becoming a community school and having a community specialist... it will make parental involvement rise.” Another suggested that the district has taken steps which might further establish parents as collaborative partners. “We’ve established a PTO – that was just this year. It’s been hard going but I think it will help parents participate if we keep it going.” Another recent development was the inclusion of parents on the Strategic Planning committee. This is a required element of strategic planning but one that seemed to genuinely connect with families. The Strategic Planning document describes the experiences of several family members who served on this committee. One stated: “As a mother of 3 boys..., I can’t stress enough the profound importance this five-year Strategic Plan has on our community. The best possible way to make change in our city is to mobilize the entire community like you have, and address the academic, social, and emotional needs of our students to offer them the best future... I am now eager for my sons to experience what the district has to offer them...” (Erie Public Schools, 2018, p. 11). Classroom Teacher 2 would also like to see educators and families alike participate in trauma-informed care, which is a framework involving the “understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of trauma” (Trauma Informed Care, 2019). “I know it’s a buzzword but I think we have to do better at providing this type of service. A lot of our families experience trauma. Our kids come in with things having seen or gone through things... The parents too. Families deal with a lot of these issues and trauma-informed care could help us help them cope better” (Classroom Teacher 2).

Family members, on the other hand, suggested that relationships improve when the welcoming culture of the school and the atmosphere of the IEP improves. This has happened for Parent 1, who had negative experiences at another school but has enjoyed his time at the research site. According to Parent 1, “They're usually looking for our input... it's usually pretty straight forward. The ladies are usually in pretty good mood, you know what I mean. You know, it's not like you feel uncomfortable around them or anything. You feel you can say anything.” Parent 3 agreed that the school seemed to welcome her opinion to be included in the IEP. “We just sit down at the meeting and we go over it, and they will ask us if, um, if we wanted anything added to it. And we let them know and they're really good about adding, redoing everything and adding that to the IEP.” Parent 2 emphasized that the school has always shown deference to her opinions, even though they don't always agree. “They always seem to want to know what I have to say. Even though I am always in there and often have concerns, they are very respectful of my opinions.” Special Educator 3 agreed that comfort level is important. “I think first of all it starts with the parents feeling comfortable with the teacher, so building a relationship is key because then they'll feel more comfortable asking questions or saying, ‘Can you explain this to me?’” Other educators also said that being honest with parents has made their meetings more successful. “I guess I speak honestly with them, I mean good or bad, I just kind of am honest with them.... I really care about their kid, I really say where their kid is at. We don't blame anybody, we just kind of say ‘this is what is happening’” (Classroom Teacher 1). Similarly, Special Educator 2 said: “And you sit in those meetings and you... have open communication with parents, that's when those meetings are successful. Like the one meeting I just had with a parent. I had no problem telling her things that her child needs and she's telling me what she needs and it's just open communication.” Classroom Teacher 1 agreed: “I think a successful [meeting] is when the parents ask questions if they are

unclear, where they seem on board... it is always helpful when they are on board, they want to understand the process. One mother a couple of weeks ago, she asked the special educator a lot of questions, just like a genuine interest in the education.”

One educator, Classroom Teacher 2, and one parent, Parent 2, also indicated that parents might share out or more authentically contribute to meetings if they had a working support system present. Classroom Teacher 2 expressed the belief that parents might share out more if the school was more welcoming to their advocates: “I would like to see us work with advocates. There’s a little bit of an adversarial relationship I feel like between school districts and advocates, but I think really, we both have the same goals. I would like to see maybe some common ground met there.” Parent 2 agreed that she wished the school would be more welcoming to team members that she brought in from outside agencies and that the school would seek to communicate with these individuals. “I always share information from [my son’s] TSS [Therapeutic Support Staff] and BSC [Behavioral Specialists Consultant] but it would be nice if the special education teacher talked to them more in the meetings or called them sometimes during the school year (Parent 2).

Both family members and educators agreed that inclusion of parental input into the IEP is necessary. However, modes of asking for information, such as email or sending home a questionnaire, have not been successful in the past. Educators suggested that the most successful way to glean parental information from the IEP is to speak to families frequently and include their opinions within the IEP document. They also stated that they leave the IEP open as fluid document which can be added to at the meeting. According to Special Educator 3, “I just keep asking them, ‘Do you have any questions? Is there anything you want to add? How do you feel about this? Do you think he or she will like doing that? Do you agree with this?’ You know, I try to ask questions, not just yes or no, you know, more open-ended questions.” Parent 2 stated that the teachers that

she's worked with have been welcoming and respectful of her opinions for inclusion of information in the IEP document. "When we've wanted to add goals, they've been very open to it. They seem to appreciate whatever information I can give them."

Several educators expressed their belief that increasing parental knowledge of the education system could also improve effective engagement. They recommended that parents be "taught" about the special education system prior to the IEP meeting. This training could take place in many different ways – online videos, face-to-face trainings, or maybe just having one specified person (an administrator or counselor) explain the system to them within a conversation. Classroom Teacher 2 indicated, "I think that there needs to be a better way to provide background information for parents so when they come in they don't feel overwhelmed. Providing them with some background information before they even come into the school to meet with us [could help] so that they're armed with the knowledge they need in order to be present in a conversation." According to Special Educator 3, face-to-face trainings could be provided at convenient times for parents so they could attend more easily: "Well, if we had like get-togethers at school, we could have them like some in the morning for like breakfast for parents who don't work first shift. And then then, like, maybe dinners or after-school programs. More options, you know?" Paraprofessional 1 also emphasized the importance of this knowledge. "I still don't know everything about this system. It's hard, you know? Maybe if we gave them information it would help." Parent 2 described her own journey to learning about the special education process. She has been "lucky" she stated over and over, because she has a large extended family, including a sister who worked in special education for many year and is now a principal, and was able to inform her of her rights as a parent. However, she recognizes that not all family members have access to such

individuals. Classroom Teacher 1 suggested that a parent network might be helpful as family members could help each other learn about the special education process.

The “Special Programs” tab of the Pupil Personnel page of the district website does provide information on special education, but is most specifically oriented towards reasons why you might want to have your child evaluated and what that evaluation process is. Teachers believed that parents could benefit by further information if it was presented in a manner that was less text-heavy. As Classroom Teacher 1 said, “Everyone learns differently. I learn through visual things, charts and graphs and pictures, something drawn out. Maybe we could explain information using more visuals.” Additionally, the teachers would like to see appropriate documentation – such as the Procedural Safeguards – translated into all languages of their student population. Parent 2, however, emphasized that the Procedural Safeguards document itself is not the best way to explain parental rights – in fact, she stated that this document actually “got in the way” of understanding. “The best teacher I ever had sat me down and explained them all to me, even the parts about what I could do if I wasn’t happy. She did not leave it to chance and made sure I understood” (Parent 2).

4.5.3 Strategies for Impacting Parental Participation in Academics

Engagement at IEP meetings is just one way in which families participate in their children’s education. The IEP is an important part of the special education process – but it is just one part. How that IEP manifests itself within the day-to-day education of students in special education varies widely and still benefits from a teaming component. Several of the interviewees spoke about how special education conversations can continue throughout the school year. Many mentioned the communication strategies we’ve already discussed as part of that ongoing conversation.

Paraprofessional 1 stated two-way communication could be used to shape learning opportunities for specific students. “We had [one student] who, her mom would send a notebook and the teacher would write in it, what we worked on, and the parent would read it and sign it... If they were working on a certain math problem or something [at home] and [the student] was frustrated... the parent could write in the book a note back... and then the teacher can maybe reteach that skill...” (Paraprofessional 1). Parent 2 concurred: “Speaking to our teacher every week helps us help each other. We can talk about strategies that work at home and in school. For example, when I talked about a visual schedule, the teacher was very open to the suggestion. She said, ‘Do you have a schedule that works for you at home?’ And we were able to keep that consistency.” Parent 2 also suggested another strategy, however. “It would be nice if we met more often than just the once-a-year IEP meeting. Maybe if we met quarterly – or even twice quarterly – with the whole team, just to talk things over.”

Aside from general communication, educators have found other ways to assist their families in helping their students with academics. Special Educator 1 stated, “Work can be challenging, like the math we do, [parents] are oblivious to how it’s done. So if I ever send math home, I’m sending a little tutorial page along with it, to help them. I’ve sent a page, extra pages that I printed offline.” Classroom Teacher 1 stated that she does something similar, “So... we send home like a fourth grade packet from our room where we give [the parents] reading tips, things to help them with math skills...” Special Educator 1 is available via texting for late-night homework advice: “I’ve had a couple of parents text me at home, ‘Hey, we’re doing math right now, having a little trouble.’” She also offers times in which families can come in before or after school to learn homework techniques, so they don’t have to stress about homework. Paraprofessional 1 identified school theme nights as an opportunity for parents to learn different educational techniques. “They

will have a math night. They have the parents come and maybe show them different ways they can work with their child in maths that they weren't exposed to in school... Math is so different than what some parents remembered learning.”

Academics, however, are not considered to be the only issue that IEP teams might benefit from discussing on a regular basis – behavior is another concern. Parent 2 describes her best teachers as those who will talk to her behavioral specialists or bring the classroom paraprofessionals into the discussion about behavior. “We need to share what is happening at school and home so we can find what works.” Special Educator 2 and Special Educator 1 also discuss behavior with parents frequently, even allowing students to call home to their parents to discuss the kind of day they are having – positive or not. Parent 1 indicated that parents and educators being “on the same page” provided opportunities for student motivation. “My son loves soccer and I tell his teacher ‘use that.’ He has to do well in school to get his soccer time so he wants to work hard, get his work done. But they’d never know that if we didn’t talk all the time.”

4.6 Conclusion

Examination of the qualitative data gleaned through document analysis and guided interviews revealed several emergent themes. Document analysis identified several areas of strength within the LEA in regard to family engagement policies and procedures. Required documents, such as “Right to Know” and the Family Engagement policy, were provided appropriately to parent stakeholders, including nearly all necessary content. Family engagement was cited as a priority in documents such as the school’s Strategic Plan. Challenges such as linguistic diversity and difficulties involving educator stakeholder attendance at IEP meetings.

Attendance of parents at IEP meetings, on the other hand, was described as being very successful. Additionally, despite approaching the interview and the special education process itself from differing perspectives, all participants agreed that communication – not just communication occurring before or during an IEP meeting, but regular, consistent, informal communication – was vital to family engagement and building collaborative partnerships. However, how successful communication was attained differed for each participant and each situation.

Several barriers to family engagement were noted with the special education process. Barriers of knowledge were cited as concerns by educator participants, while families exhibited mixed beliefs as to the whether this was a challenge for them. Logistical barriers posed more of an annoyance than a threat to collaboration, and were typically able to be addressed through flexibility and communication. Communication was seen as a great strength by some participants, but, nonetheless, barriers such as ineffective types of communication and linguistic diversity were cited as potential challenges. Barriers of culture and relationships included distrust among stakeholders and difficulties relating to each other.

Numerous strategies were proposed to reduce the impact of these barriers on family engagement in special education. Methods to train parents in order to increase knowledge of special education processes were proposed as strategies to increase knowledge of families. Communication, once again, was a topic introduced by many of the study participants, with many modes of communication recommended. It was also suggested that the establishment of more welcoming and mutually respectful relationships would lead to greater levels of collaboration and more effective home-school partnerships. Strategies and recommendations will be explored further in Chapter 5: Discussion.

5.0 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discover possible barriers to family engagement in IEP meetings in a lower socio-economic urban school district and determine possible strategies to reduce or eliminate these barriers. The following research questions were posited: (1) “What are the current school, school district, and state policies and procedures regarding family engagement in general education and in IEP meetings?” (2) “What are the barriers to family participation in IEP meetings as identified by educators and family members in a lower socioeconomic urban school district?” and (3) “What are supportive strategies identified by educators and family members that may be used to increase family participation in IEP meetings within a lower socioeconomic urban school district?” Qualitative methods were employed to examine these questions and to glean information concerning family engagement in the special education planning process.

A series of documents pertaining to family engagement and/or special education were analyzed. Additionally, multiple stakeholders, including school staff – special educators, classroom teachers, and a paraprofessional – and parents of students with disabilities were interviewed. Results of the analysis of general education documents revealed that, procedurally, the research site typically completed tasks required by ESSA, including the production of the “Right to Know” document, a school-parent compact (Learning Compact), and the Family Engagement Policy. The district also followed PA State Directives by producing a strategic plan and special education plan. These documents emphasized the importance of developing home-school partnerships and communicating frequently with families in a variety of ways. The school took steps to empower families as educational partners by including them within strategic planning

(a state requirements) and establishing a PTO and a community school environment. It also attempted to communicate with families in their native languages by utilizing appropriate translations of required special education documents. However, translation and interpretation services have not been made available on an everyday basis, for purposes such as homework or for events such as PTO meetings.

Overall communication is emphasized within general education and special education documents, which describe the necessity of communicating often with families in a variety of ways, specifically in regard to student achievement. Interviewees described practices in which the special educators in particular communicated frequently with families, sometimes on a daily basis. Modes of communication such as texting were particularly successful. While these teachers chose to implement such frequent communication with families, they were not required to do so, as there was no particular school policy surrounding rates or types of communication. Analysis of documents described numerous types of communication used to inform families of student achievement but, according to educators, some of these were more successful than others. They noted that frequent, informal, one-to-one communication was more successful at informing families of their students' progress than formal communication – for example, that which occurs through the parent portal. Parents, too, indicated that texting and phone were successful ways to communicate progress – and none of them mentioned the parent portal as a potential mode of communication.

Analysis of student-specific special education documents revealed that special education procedures were followed to the basic letter of the law, with all necessary documentation signed by parents to indicate either assent or participation. Family members were invited to attend IEP meetings, with information from their perspectives included within IEP present levels. Special

educators and classroom teachers alike reported that parental attendance at meetings was particularly high this year. Flexible practices, including phone calls, Skype, and home visits, were used to ensure parental participation in the meeting. However, practices such as limited attendance of classroom teachers and administrators at IEP team meetings and lack of discussion among multiple stakeholders did not uphold the spirit of the IEP team meeting as a collaborative partnership. Inconsistencies existed between the individuals who signed the IEP document indicating attendance at the meeting and those who were verbally reported to actually have attended the meeting. Also, while examination of student-specific IEPs indicated that parents did contribute information to IEPs, this information was sometimes used more generally to describe the student, rather than to actively enhance educational programming. Educators also indicated that many of their parents were passive during meetings, deferring to the opinion of the special educator, rather than actively asking questions or participating in discussion.

Various barriers were identified by respondents as negatively impacting family engagement in IEP meetings. According to educator participants, lack of knowledge of the special education system often served as a barrier to authentic engagement by families. Families did not always appear to be aware of their rights or how they could help their child. The Procedural Safeguards booklet, the intent of which was to explain parental rights and protections, was not often explained or even desired by parents. This document was long and available only in English and Spanish, though most English Learners in the district speak other languages, such as Nepali. The language of the document contained educational jargon that might be unfamiliar to family members. While educators identified this lack of knowledge as a problem, parent participants did not necessarily agree with this perception, stating that they generally were aware of their rights.

However, only one parent participant was able to effectively explain she and her child's special education rights.

Logistical barriers, such as those pertaining to scheduling, transportation, and childcare were also identified as potential challenges to home-school partnerships, though the school appeared to be able to work through many of these. Transportation and childcare needs were generally able to be addressed through flexibility of timing of meetings, as well as the type of meeting that was held. Childcare was provided in school when needed. Scheduling posed a larger barrier to collaborative planning. Though flexibility was effectively employed to ensure parental attendance at IEP meetings – all three special educators had near perfect attendance throughout the school year – attendance of multiple stakeholders, such as classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators, was described as inconsistent, at best, with most meetings consisting of the special educator and the parents only.

Barriers of communication were mentioned as being potentially detrimental to parental participation in the special education planning process. All parents expressed satisfaction with their current frequency of communication with their child's special educators, but indicated that lack of communication had negatively impacted their ability to engage in their children's education in the past. Educators identified difficulties with specific modes of communication, such as phone calls and the parent portal. They also indicated that language barriers were an obstacle, both for the arranging of meetings, as scheduling with interpreters was not always easy, and for everyday informal interactions when translations and interpreters were not generally available.

Limited cultural and racial barriers were identified as possible challenges to home-school partnerships – only one educator mentioned race at all. However, difficulties with relationships were identified as problematic in the teaming process. Parents mentioned relationships that had

been marred by distrust and blame on part of educators, while educators described families who did not exhibit care or concern for their children. It was also noted by educators that families and themselves did not always share the same attitudes and perspectives towards learning, which they felt contributed to difficulties with educational collaboration.

Several strategies were suggested by participants to increase efficacy of family engagement in IEP meetings. Educators and families alike described communication as a necessary element in both increasing IEP meeting attendance for families as well as building relationships. They cited open, frequent, on-going communication as the best way to increase partnerships, whether it occurred via texting, phone calls, or communication logs. Additional suggestions, such as digital means like Remind and Class Dojo, were also identified as possible communication modalities. Educators also suggested utilization of social capital as means of interaction, by sharing basic communications through community groups and extended family members.

Flexibility in scheduling was noted to be a particularly useful strategy in increasing IEP meeting attendance. Strategies such as holding meetings before or after school have been helpful, as well as offering alternative options for participation, including phone calls, Skype connections, and home visits. Welcoming younger siblings into the school environment was identified as a successful strategy to overcome the logistical needs of childcare. Providing entertainment for the children or allowing the younger children to play in the family room with the community school liaison were both suggestions made by educators.

Several participants spoke of the importance of building relationships between school and home and encouraging families to participate more extensively in special education meetings and the curriculum at large. Further mobilization of decision-making groups, such as the PTO, was identified as a strategy to increase parent knowledge and empowerment. Additionally,

strengthening parent knowledge of the special education system was recommended as a means to enhance authentic parental contributions to IEPs. It was suggested that necessary documents be presented in easily comprehensible language, with visual supports (such as charts and graphs) included as necessary. Several suggestions were also made as to how to teach the content of the Procedural Safeguards document to parents – face-to-face conversations prior to the initial IEP, before- or after-school trainings, or even building a network of parents of students with disabilities. Translation of the Procedural Safeguards into all languages spoken in the school was also seen as a necessity.

Recommendations were made as to how to maintain parent participation throughout the special education process, including time between IEP meetings. Again, ongoing communication, including talking about strategies and motivation, was identified as a possible tactic to increase family involvement in ongoing educational pursuits. Frequent discussions of behavior would increase consistency between home and school. Offering advice on homework was proffered as another strategy. Teachers might advise parents by providing reading tips or sample math problems. Being available to counsel parents on homework and study techniques before and after school, or increasing availability to provide support via text was also suggested. It was also suggested that IEP teams meet more than once a year – perhaps, quarterly – to keep the lines of communication open.

This final chapter will explore these results as they relate to the available literature. Additionally, this chapter will discuss study limitations and possible implications for further research. Recommendations for educational stakeholders will also be provided.

5.1 Discussion

Through qualitative research techniques, this study identified a number of barriers to effective family engagement in IEPs within a lower socioeconomic urban school district, but also described possible strategies to address these barriers. Two overriding themes will now be discussed in associations with the body of research.

5.1.1 Communication

Throughout this study the most consistent theme that emerged was one of communication: frustration over lack of communication, satisfaction with ongoing communication, the use of multiple means of communication, discontent with some modes, the feelings associated with effective communication. Both parent and educator participants described frequent, ongoing communication as a means of increasing family engagement in education. This is not necessarily surprising as home-school communication is a subject that has been researched frequently in the past, though not necessarily specifically in regard to IEP meetings. According to Epstein, home-school communication is among the most important factors in developing strong relationships between teachers and families (2005). Parents are even known to seek good communication skills in their children's teachers, citing it as one of the most desirable characteristics a new teacher could have (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2001). Strong communication is known to encourage higher and more realistic parental expectation (James, Jurich, & Estes, 2001) and ongoing two-way communication between families and educators has been found to improve students' academic success and increase school improvement efforts (Auerbach, 2009; Epstein, 2011, Henderson & Mapp, 2002, Murphy, 2008, Stuck, 2004).

Federal mandates, including IDEA and ESSA, include components requiring schools to communicate with parents, and parents and teachers are largely in agreement about the value of home-school communication (Molden, 2016). This belief was echoed in the documents examined within this study, including the Strategic Plan and the Family Engagement Policy, among others, with mentioned the importance of communication, particularly in regarding to increasing parent knowledge of academic program. The documents also suggested several ways in which communication might take place, including the parent portal and parent-teacher conferences. However, the question of “how best” to effectively communicate with families is not one that is easily answered.

Educators in this study described many means of communication, including texting, communication logs, face-to-face conversations, parent portals, phone calls, and emails. Of this, texting appeared to be a preferred method, but others were also employed. While the presence of so many different types of communication may appear to be confusing, it is not necessary negative. Previous studies have reported that families prefer that technological means of communication serve to support traditional forms of communication – not replace them (Shayne, 2008). Families may also prefer different forms of communication in different situations. Bavuso (2016) found that parents preferred to gather general information on social media sites such as Facebook, but favored face-to-face conversations or email for student-specific discussions. He also noted that use of digital sites may serve as a support to English Learners as translation engines can be utilized to communicate across languages (Bavuso, 2016). Bavuso, however, performed his research at a middle-class suburban school. Studies suggest that the efficacy of certain modes of communication may be limited in socioeconomic settings. For example, Taylor found that the email access rate for households with annual earnings of less than \$20000 displayed only about 50% access to email,

while households with high school as the highest level of education attended hovered at around 60% access (Taylor, 2007). On the other hand, households making greater than \$100000 per years or with university level education, demonstrated email access of greater than 90% (Taylor, 2007). Additionally, information from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) indicates that families living in poverty may not have access to effective Internet connections and data plans (2013). They may also be limited in their ability to participate in video conferencing and uploading videos due to diminutive bandwidth levels (NTIA, 2013). Therefore, socioeconomic status may have implications for preferred communication types.

Some differences were noted in the approaches of classroom educators and special educators in regard to communication. Through the descriptions noted by both parents and educators, it appeared that special educators were the professionals who predominantly communicated with parents within the IEP meeting, either because classroom teachers were unavailable or because special educators typically reviewed the IEP with parents. After the IEP meeting, special educators then continued communicating with the families throughout the school year, sometimes in lieu of the classroom teachers, even when students were fully included. One classroom teacher (Classroom Teacher 2) indicated that she generally only initiated contact with home when problems arose, though the other (Classroom Teacher 1) described communicating with some students on a daily basis. On the other hand, all three of the special educators indicated that they established methods for initiating ongoing, regular communication with families.

According to the literature, it is not unusual for special educators to dominate IEP meetings (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004). Classroom teachers are reported as attending these meetings less often, assisting with IEP decision-making less frequently, and understanding what happens next less than all stakeholders, other than students (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004). General educators

are also reported as communicating less often with the families of students with disabilities than their special educator counterparts (Woods, Morrison, & Palinscar, 2018). This may be related to the fact that special education and regular education continue to present as separated, dichotomous systems, with perceptions existing that students receiving special education services “belong” to special educators as opposed to their regular education teachers (White, 2004; Woods, Morrison, & Palinscar, 2018). Classroom Teacher 1, who identified communicating with some of her families on a daily basis, was part of a co-teaching relationship with a special educator and may, therefore, have felt greater ownership and accountability for the special education students within her classroom.

5.1.2 Building Partnerships

Communication and relationships are closely connected, as successful ongoing communication can build rapport between stakeholders. However, results of this study indicate that, while communication is a vital component of teaming, the development of trustful home-school partnerships is somewhat more complicated than just communication. All of the parents involved in the study had experienced situations in which they had felt that their opinions were not respected, and in which they felt they were “blamed” instead of welcomed as partners. Situations were also described in which the school was not perceived as being welcoming to outside agencies and individuals supporting the parents, such as behavioral staff and advocates. On the flip side, all of the educators had experienced situations in which they felt that families either did not care or were not as involved as they could be. In contrast to these negative examples, however, all family and educator participants had also described successful relationships characterized by mutual respect and honesty, which had ultimately manifest into a successful collaborative partnership.

According to the literature, respecting families and valuing home-school partnerships, as well as establishing a community of welcoming, increases family engagement in education (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies, 2007; Mapp, 2012). Other research identifies components of parent-school relationships that are known to contribute to parental involvement, including the family's belief that they are welcomed and valued at school, how well-informed they are of their child's academic progress, and whether their opinions are respected and valued by school staff (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Relational trust between educational stakeholders, built on a foundation of respect, personal regard, integrity and competence, is even known to significantly increase student academic achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The parents in this study had clearly experienced moments in which relational trust was lacking or absent, and this had impacted their IEP experience enough that they still spoke of it, even years later. However, they also described current, amicable relationships in which they felt welcomed as collaborative partners, indicating that educator approaches could positively impact the home-school relationship.

One notable barrier to the collaborative partnerships among IEP team members may have been logistical, rather than relational. While special educators sought to include families in meetings, they were less adamant about ensuring that classroom teachers and administrators were also in attendance. The paraprofessional stated that she had, in fact, never attended a meeting at all. Aside from a principal "poking his head" into a meeting, verbal reports indicated that administrators were seldom present, though, according to the artifact review, they had, indeed, signed the IEP as being in attendance. While one special educator reported that she and the classroom teacher might rotate in and out of the meeting in order for both to attend, the other special educators reported that classroom teachers often just handed in written documentation prior to the IEP meeting. The absence of team members at IEP meetings likely reduced the opportunity

for team members to get to know the families of their students, as also limited the amount of collaborative problem-solving and decision-making that could take place during these meetings. Research suggests that parents of students in special education perceive administrator attendance at IEP meetings as being the most important means by which an administrator supports the collaborative process (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). It has also been noted that the absence of a regular educator on the IEP team has the potential to result in denial of appropriate education opportunities, even when that member has provided written content and been appropriately excused from the IEP meeting with a waiver (Etscheidt, 2007). On the other hand, attendance of general educators at IEP meetings is positively associated with team members feeling empowered to make decisions, focusing on student progress, and feeling better about the meeting itself (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004). The lack of availability of these team members is, therefore, less than optimal. The research site is encouraged to consider why these time conflicts are occurring and further attempt to include more team members within IEP meetings.

Within the results of this study, participant perspectives of levels of family collaboration within IEP meetings were varied and, sometimes, at odds. For example, one educator expressed the desire for families to ask more questions but also described the perfect meeting as one in which everyone agreed and papers were signed, rather than a meeting in which discussion and problem-solving took place. Additionally, parent participants stated that their suggestions were typically welcomed within the process, though educators stated that parents often did not participate in discussion. Some of these results are not necessarily surprising, given the information available in the literature, which described the parental role in the IEP meeting as highly variable (Muscott, 2002; Tveit, 2009). It has been noted that families are often “talked at” at IEP meetings, with limited opportunities to provide input (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013), while studies have also

identified parents as feeling alienated and disenfranchised within IEP meetings and therefore, less likely to participate (Tucker & Schwartz, 2003; Valle 2009). Research has shown that parents, even though willing to participate in IEP meetings, often feel overwhelmed, confused, and ill-equipped to engage in planning (Jessop, 2018). Interestingly, however, the parents in this study did not indicate that they felt out of sorts at meetings or that they lacked awareness of the system. All three felt that their current IEP teams welcomed their contributions and IEP document analysis indicated that at least one of the parents contributed directly to the establishment of an IEP goal, and all three of them had their viewpoints represented in the document in some way. What makes these parents different than those in the literature who felt discomfited within meetings and unable to share? Two of these parents had older children who had participated in special education and, therefore, a great deal of experience with the system. One had extensive family member support. All three had independently researched their children's disabilities. Could it be that these family members simply felt more empowered to participate? Or could it be that these particular parents, all of whom purposefully reached out to the researcher with the intention of being involved in this project, also had a greater tendency to assert themselves into collaborative planning as well?

5.2 Recommendations

This study focused on the perceptions of multiple stakeholders regarding barriers to family engagement in IEP meetings, as well as possible strategies to overcome those barriers. Of the strategies described, some might be considered “ongoing” or already happening within the school while others have been posited by stakeholders as possible means to address possible stumbling

blocks to engagement. While care must be taken to avoid overgeneralizing the data discovered within this research study, some general recommendations might be noted.

5.2.1 Recommendations for Administrators

According to McMahon, school leaders must be held accountable not only for the increasing of school achievement but also for leading collaborative efforts between school families and the community (McMahon, 2007). The most recurrent theme stated over and over again by both educator and family member participants within this study was the importance of consistent, ongoing communication between school and home as a means of creating collaborative partnerships. Educators achieved this communication in various ways – phone calls, texting, communication logs, conversations in the parking lot – dependent on the needs of their families and their own preferences. While many of the interviewed educators initiated some sort of regular communication, not all of them did so – perhaps because it was simply not a required element of their job. It is proposed that administrators examine the level of communication between school and home and establish protocols for frequency of communication. Reinforcement for positive, frequent communications may also be beneficial.

It is recommended that administrators instruct their staff on the importance of communicating regularly with their families as well as to effectively communicate – and not just families with children in special education but all families. Like many schools within the state of Pennsylvania, the school utilizes the Danielson Framework (Danielson, 2010) as a teacher evaluation tool. Section 4C of the Framework, entitled “Communicating with Families,” states, “A teacher’s effort to communicate with families conveys an essential caring on the part of the teacher, a quality valued by families of students of all ages” (Danielson, 2010, p. 80). Elements of

component 4C include the frequent communication regarding instructional programming, students' individual progress, and the provision of successful engagement opportunities so that families might participate in learning activities. Administrators may wish to emphasize these elements as part of the evaluation framework and provide additional professional development opportunities regarding communicating with families. Professional development might also be provided to teach educators alternate ways of communicating with families, including digital means of communication such as Remind or social media modes of communication, such as Twitter. The formation of professional learning communities might also assist in this process.

In addition to communication, knowledge of the special education process was described as essential to engagement within the IEP process. Administrators may want to consider the ways in which they and their staff members introduce families to the special education process. The establishment of a protocol in which school psychologists or special educators communicate with parents in advance might help increase parental knowledge and engagement in discussion during IEP meetings. An overview of the special education process – the requirements, the timelines, team member roles, implementation process, etc. – may all be necessary topics to share with parents.

Last of all, it is recommended that administrators more intentionally attend IEP meetings, or at least arrange for a substitute LEA representative when they are unable to do so. Truly, this is not just a recommendation but a requirement under IDEA and PA Chapter 14 code. Additionally, the administrator should consider ways in which the classroom teachers' time can also be freed up to participate more substantially in meetings. According to anecdotal reports from many schools within Pennsylvania, many schools are currently experiencing a "substitute teacher crisis" in which they simply cannot find qualified substitutes to fill in for classroom teachers. Increasing the

availability of classroom teachers for meetings may require some creativity – providing administrative coverage of classes, combining class, scheduling meetings for before or after school and allowing comp time – but may reap benefits as more stakeholders are involved in collaborative planning. Taking these steps may not be easy. However, while it is true that scheduling conflicts arise in “the real world,” it is not beneficial to our students in special education when the default IEP team consists of only the special educator and the family.

5.2.2 Recommendations for Special Educators

Special educators may be the individuals who have the most contact with families within the IEP planning process. As case managers, special educators are responsible for scheduling meetings, writing a substantial portion of the IEP document, organizing paperwork, and many other related tasks. However, it is recommended that special educators look beyond issues of compliance and instead focus on opportunities for conversation within the IEP meeting. Special educators are encouraged to be open, honest, and respectful when interacting with parents. They should review parental rights in a way that is understandable, in lieu of the simple provision of the Procedural Safeguards. It is important that these rights also be reviewed through an interpreter for students who are English Learners. Special educators may benefit from meeting with families prior to initial evaluation to introduce a comprehensive picture of the special education process and then before annual meetings to review special education timelines, roles, etc. Special educators might also want to refer to their families to available parent networks and support groups so that families are able to learn about the process through their peers.

The concept of ongoing communication has been reviewed again and again within this research study. However, it is important, once again, to emphasize the importance of frequent

contact between home and school, Special educators should initiate and maintain communication with families, sharing both positive information and areas of need. Student progress, effective strategies, future plans, family perspectives... any number of topics might be discussed in order to increase communication and understanding, and also to produce a more lucrative and substantial IEP document. It is also important that special educators take steps, as they are able, to include a variety of team members within IEP meetings.

5.2.3 Recommendations for Classroom Teachers

Classroom teachers may be responsible for more of the day-in, day-out implementation of special education programming than even special educators. They may also serve as a primary point of contact between home and school. It is recommended that classroom teachers, like special educators, keep the lines of communication open between school and home. Classroom teachers may benefit from engaging in two types of communication: classroom wide and student specific. Classroom wide communication might be enhanced through technology, either through communication apps or social media. Once again, establishing relationships through mutual respect and honesty.

Classroom teachers should also build a sense of rapport with their families by being welcoming and respectful to all parents, including those with students in special education. Conversations should focus on student progress and link to student learning when possible. The presentation of positive data, as well as “problem” data, is suggested. Classroom teachers should also be prepared to present their own data at IEP meetings and to answer parents’ questions surrounding that information. In the event that the teacher cannot attend the meeting, parents may

appreciate their contributions being sent home early so that they may review them and reach out with questions. However, attendance at the meetings is optimal.

5.2.4 Recommendations for Family Members

Parents should consider themselves partners with the other members of the IEP team. Though it is preferable that teachers establish an open line of communication with their families, parents must be prepared to take on this mantle in the absence of regular communication from the school. Parents should contribute to IEP preparation in the way they are most comfortable – written correspondence, verbal conversation, etc. – and should also share their thoughts during the meeting, even if they are thoughts of disagreement. Parents are encouraged to utilize all of their resources – family, friends, community resources – to learn about their child’s disability and the special education process, but are also encouraged to ask the school for help and to ask questions during the IEP meeting. Parents may request documentation in advance of the meeting to ease understanding. Family members are encouraged to bring additional support to the meeting as needed, and like all stakeholders, seek to build collaborative partnerships thoughtfully and respectfully. Additionally, parents should remember that, legally, a regular educator and an LEA representative should be attending their IEP meetings. If they are uncomfortable with these individuals being absent, they should bring this to the attention of their case managers.

5.3 Limitations

This study faced severe limitations, primarily due to the small number of participants ultimately engaged in the research. At the commencement of the study, it was specified that the researcher intended to recruit at least seven educator participants and seven family member participants for participation in interviews. Unfortunately, only six educator participants and three family participants volunteered to be interviewees, far less than the numbers that were originally proposed. There were several factors that may have contributed to the lack of participation in the study, particularly in regard to family members. Initially, the researcher received very few contacts regarding this research and the inquiries that were received were only from staff members. Upon inquiry with the school contact, it was determined that only the staff had been contacted regarding participation in the study. The researcher asked that letters of recruitment be sent to all families of students receiving special education services, which they eventually were. Not all participants who volunteered, however, reported receiving a letter. Two had spoken to other participants who told them about the study and then provided them with the researcher's contact information.

An additional factor that may have impacted recruitment was the requirement of study participants to email the researcher to indicate interest in serving as a research participant. The researcher had hoped to recruit participants by providing them with her phone number and allowing them to call or text their interest in the study. However, this was disallowed by the IRB, as only institutional contact information was permitted to be included on recruitment documents. Therefore, the researcher was required to use her e-mail as the first contact, which was a more indirect method of contact.

Using email as a primary contact may have been particularly detrimental given the demographics of the research site. As previously stated, the research setting exhibits high levels of

poverty as the majority of students at the school are eligible for free or reduced lunches. In a study by Taylor, a direct correlation of email use to both income and educational level was identified (2007). Granted, technology has increased in recent years, with most families (up to 95%) owning smartphones, even in lower socioeconomic urban areas (Shields et al., 2018). However, Shields emphasized that families who struggle financially may not have constant access to Wi-fi and data access, as a means to access their email. Rather, it is recommended that email should be considered as just one option of reaching family member populations, with many varied options preferably provided (Shields et al, 2018). Therefore, limiting communication to email may have been detrimental to recruiting study participants. Additionally, the onus of contact was left to the potential participants in the study, rather than the researcher, which may have further limited the tendency of individuals to participate. This was another circumstance that was unavoidable, due to both the restrictions of IRB and from the school itself, both of which limited recruitment to a letter format, rather than a more direct recruitment strategy.

At the commencement of the study, the researcher intended to purposively select participants to reflect the demographics of the professionals and children with disabilities in the school. Unfortunately, due to the limited numbers of respondents, mindful selection was not necessarily possible. The researcher accepted all educator interviewees because of the small number who expressed their interest in the study, but these did happen to represent a range of professionals (various ages, roles, and grade levels) working with a variety of students, including those diagnosed with specific learning disabilities, autism, other health impairments, intellectual disabilities, and speech-language impairment. However, the educators were not culturally or racially diverse. The family members did represent students who were diagnosed within different disability categories – autism, specific learning disability, and speech-language impairment – as

well as varying ages. However, the family members were otherwise quite similar. All of these family members were within five years of age from each other. Additionally, they were all native English speakers who were of Caucasian descent. The family member participants also knew each other, as two of them had been “recruited” by the third to participate in the study. As the research setting is a diverse school representing varied racial and ethnic groups including Hispanic, Asian, Black, and Multi-racial students, the inclusion of only Caucasian subjects is highly troubling. Given that these participants represented such a small subset of the district’s family member population, their opinions must not be considered representative of the beliefs of all family members. Numerous studies note that cultural and racial differences and diversity may greatly impact how families engage in their children’s special education planning (Griffin, 2016; Harry, 2002; Lo, 2008; Mayes & Moore, 2016; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Rueda et al, 2005; Sweet-Lazos, 2012). Therefore, one must be particularly cautious when identifying patterns amongst the data in this research study, as all participants – educators and family members – were of the same racial groups, all with English as their first language.

It is unclear why the researcher was unsuccessful in recruiting a more diverse sample population. However, the delay in recruitment letters may have contributed as well as the use of email as the initial contact. As noted by Taylor, access and use of email may occur less frequently with individuals within minority populations (2007). Additionally, the researcher was unable to provide recruitment letters in multiple languages, though the school itself included students and families who speak fifteen languages. The school is part of a consortium that is used to provide interpretation services at meetings (including IEP meetings) and to translate documents but, not being an employee of the district, the researcher had no access to such services.

An additional limitation of the study may have occurred in relation to the wording of questions for the survey itself. It was noted in the results of the study that when asked for suggestions on how to improve the IEP process, most participants made suggestions pertaining to the opposite stakeholder. For example, educators expressed the wish that family members would ask more questions but did not indicate how they themselves could enhance discussion during the IEP. Conversely, family members spoke of the importance of communication between home and school but did not mention how they, themselves, could also initiate such contact. Additionally, while educators did on occasion express ways the school could improve its practices – such as through the implementation of trauma-informed care education or the provision of time for mentoring and collaboration – they did not demonstrate self-reflection by discussing ways in which they themselves could improve the system. As expressed by Mapp & Kuttner, successful family engagement in education may be achieved through a Dual Capacity-Building Framework (2016), in which the capacity of both educator stakeholders and family members is increased to maximize family engagement in student learning outcomes. However, throughout this study all participants identified desirable changes based on how their opposite stakeholders could improve, rather than themselves. Perhaps including questions of self-reflection or altering the wording of the questions posed would have encouraged participants to cast a wider net in their recommendations for improvement.

In general, readers should be circumspect when drawing conclusions from this study. The limited number of participants, within a very limited field setting, allows for intense examination of individual interview data but it does not lend itself to generalizability. The small number of family participants also resulted in limited student-specific artifacts so, again, information gleaned from the provided special education documents, must be viewed cautiously without

overgeneralizing. Additionally, the lack of diversity in the study sample represents a concern, particularly within such as highly heterogeneous study site. Other weaknesses of the study may have occurred as the result of wording of the interview questions. Therefore, though the information gleaned from this study may be helpful in enhancing the understanding of individuals regarding family engagement in IEP meetings, this data should be taken with caution.

5.4 Implications for Further Study

Qualitative research techniques, such as guided interviews, assist researchers in gathering very detailed information in order to explore the unique perspectives of study participants. The current study utilized artifact analysis and interviews to obtain information regarding current school policies and practices regarding family engagement, garner insight into barriers inhibiting family engagement in IEP meetings, and determine strategies that may be used to overcome barriers. While the small sample size used within this study limits the application of the findings, they do provide an impetus for further research.

Communication is an area highly explored within this study. However, the focus on communication was limited to the qualitative perspectives of a few interview participants. Future research might focus upon a wider group of participants, perhaps through utilization of a research method such as a survey, in order to determine preferred modes of communication for individuals involved within special education in lower socioeconomic school districts, as access to technology is influenced by economic status. Delineation of these results based on additional variables, such as race and ethnicity, may also be valuable in determining the most preferred means of reaching diverse student populations. Quantitative analysis of the efficacy of these modes of communication

and their effect upon not only frequency of communication but also academic progress, might also be noted. Other identified strategies, such as the teaching of parental rights in the special education process, might also benefit from a quantitative analysis to determine what types of training may be most efficacious.

It has been noted that this study displays limitations in that it contained a small and homogeneous group of participants. Looking further into the barriers and assessing identified strategies to promote family engagement would be valid research topics for any researcher. Asking additional questions such as *What do educators define as expected family engagement in IEP meetings?; What is the nature of authentic and meaningful conversation within an IEP meeting?; How does cultural context influence perceptions of engagement?; How do culturally and linguistically diverse demonstrate understand of their children's disabilities and the special education process?; How does cultural diversity influence the comfort level of families whose children receive special education services?; Are there strategies of cultural reciprocity that can be utilized to increase families' comfort levels within the IEP process?*

Further research within this area would also benefit from taking place in more varied school settings. Several participants noted the differences between parent participation in special education planning in the elementary school versus that which they had experienced in working with middle and high school. Secondary levels of education could also be examined, even within the same school district, to track the evolution of family engagement in IEP meetings from elementary school to middle and high school. Additionally, research could also examine barriers to engagement and strategies to promote engagement from the view point of students, particularly those who are age fourteen and over and legally required to be invited to participate within their own IEPs.

5.5 Demonstration of Scholarly Practice

The purpose of this study was to gain information surrounding barriers to IEP meeting participation on the behalf of families, as well as identify ways in which these barriers can be surmounted. While the intent of the study was to provide information on this subject to the educational world at large, the participating school district also has a vested interest in using the information from this study to learn more about the accomplishments pertaining to family engagement in special education, as well as ways in which they can improve their methods of including families in this process. The researcher will share the information identified within this study with administrators within the participating school district, including the principal at the research site, as well as the district supervisor of special education, through a brief verbal presentation with accompanying PowerPoint slides. The information shared will consist of general information surrounding challenges to engagement, as well as recommendations as to how to improve the process for varied stakeholders. Anonymity of the study's participants will be the paramount responsibility of the researcher throughout this presentation of information.

It is also the intent of the researcher to share the information gleaned from this study with other educational professionals. To this end, the researcher will seek to present the information gained from the study at the Institute for Educational Leadership Family and Community Engagement Conference (IEL/FCE), as well as the Family Involvement Conference. The IEL/FCE conference is held yearly at various locations throughout the country, typically in the months of June or July. The purpose of this conference is to convene a variety of stakeholders including "state leaders, school and district leaders, administrators, educators, community-based organizations, researchers and families" to explore high-impact strategies for family engagement in education (IEL, 2019). At this point in time, it is too late to apply to present at the 2019 conference, which

was held in July of 2019. However, the researcher will apply to present at the 2020 conference. The purpose of sharing this study at the IEL/FCE conference would be for schools to use the information collected to launch their own inquiry into family attendance and participation at IEP meetings. It is the desire of the researcher to augment educational administrators' understanding of barriers to family participation in IEP meetings and provide them with a compendium of possible strategies that may assist them in addressing these issues within their own school environments. The information from this study may also be used by parent and family organizations seeking to be proactive within the special education planning process. It is the hope that the use of a collaborative approach to the identification of barriers and strategies will increase communication between stakeholders and increase feelings of ownership within the special education process. This will ultimately build home-school partnerships and uphold a dual capacity framework between families and educators.

The Family Involvement Conference takes place yearly in October in Harrisburg, PA. Again, application for presentation at this year's conference has passed. However, it is the intent of the researcher to apply for presentation at the 2020 conference. This conference is "based upon the premise that active family involvement in the education process is the key to effective schools and student achievement (Family Involvement Conference, 2019). This conference typically includes a series of "strands," one of which is "Student Support," which emphasizes, among other topics, family engagement in special education. This would also be an opportunity to work with multiple stakeholders to maximize home-school collaboration in IEP meetings.

5.6 Conclusion

This study examined barriers to family engagement within IEP meetings in a lower socioeconomic urban school district as well as possible strategies to overcome those barriers. Barriers to engagement were identified within four categories: knowledge-based barriers, breakdowns in communication, logistical barriers, and difficulties related to culture and relational differences. Of the various types of obstacles listed, logistical barriers appeared to be most easily addressed by basic policies and procedures, while issues surrounding relationships and communication were sometimes more complicated. However, stakeholders were able to identify strategies to enhance communication and build relationships, with most of the approaches concerning simple tenets of home-school partnerships, such as mutual respect and valuing of team members, frequent interactions, honesty and caring. Lack of knowledge of the special education process was also identified as prohibiting family engagement, with the consensus among stakeholders that steps should be taken to teach this information to families, though there was some disagreement in how to do so.

This research study complements the available body of family engagement research by corroborating much of the pre-existing research concerning effective strategies to engage families in the special education process. Nevertheless, the identified strategies carry with them an important message. These strategies for effective engagement were not expensive or complicated or difficult to ascertain. However, many of them might involve changing the underlying culture of an educational entity, as well mindsets among team members, which can be difficult, to say the least. Regardless of such potential complications, the accomplishments that the research site has already achieved illustrate that change and success is possible. The fact that they are committed to further improvement bodes well for the future of students enrolled in special education.

Appendix A Educator Recruitment Letter



University of Pittsburgh

Dear Educator,

My name is Jennifer M. Geibel and I am a doctoral student in the Special Education Program at the University of Pittsburgh. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about family member participation in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. I am interested in identifying barriers to family member engagement in the special education process as well as strategies that might help families more fully participate in special education meetings.

You are eligible to be considered to participate in this study if you have actively participated in IEP activities, including attending meetings, serving as special education case manager, or providing information for IEP write-ups. In order to obtain a purposive sampling of professionals, I would like to do a short screening session, via phone, to determine your eligibility beforehand.

If you are selected to participate in this study, you will participate in a one-on-one interview with myself at the location of your choice, provided that the location allows for a quiet environment and confidentiality. This interview will be audiotaped and will take between a half-hour to an hour. All information provided in the interview will be confidential.

In appreciation for your participation in this study, you will be provided with a \$25 Family Dollar Gift Card OR a \$25 Amazon Gift Card.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to be considered for participation in this study or not. If you'd like to be considered for participation or have any questions about the study, please email me at JMG255@pitt.edu OR text me at 412-723-7075.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Jennifer M. Geibel

Appendix B Family Member Recruitment Letter



University of Pittsburgh

Dear Family Member,

My name is Jennifer M. Geibel and I am a doctoral student in the Special Education Program at the University of Pittsburgh. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about family member participation in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. I am interested in identifying barriers to family member engagement in the special education process as well as strategies that might help families more fully participate in special education meetings.

As a family member of a child enrolled at [REDACTED] who receives special education services, I am hoping that you will give me the opportunity to consider you for participation in my study. As I am trying to obtain representation from all grade levels, I would like to do a short phone interview to determine your eligibility beforehand.

If you are selected to participate in this study, you will participate in a one-on-one interview with myself at the location of your choice, provided that the location allows for a quiet environment and confidentiality. This interview will be audiotaped and will take between a half-hour to an hour. All information provided in the interview will be confidential.

In appreciation for your participation in this study, you will be provided with a \$25 Family Dollar Gift Card OR a \$25 Amazon Gift Card.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to be considered for participation in this study or not; in either case it will not affect the special education services your child receives. If you'd like to be considered for participation or have any questions about the study, please email me at JMG255@pitt.edu.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

|

Jennifer M. Geibel

Appendix C Family Member Phone Screening Protocol

Phone Screening Protocol

Family Member Participants

Interviewer: "Thank you for e-mailing me to learn more about my research study. My name is Jennifer Geibel, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh. The purpose of my research study, Families and IEP Meetings in an Urban School Setting: Identifying Barriers to Participation and Strategies to Increase Engagement, is to family participation in IEP meetings and to determine ways to increase engagement in the special education process."

"To participate in the study, you would need to participate in an interview that will last approximately 30 minutes to one hour. In addition, you will be asked to sign a consent form indicating that I, the principle investigator, may review some of your child's special education documents, including IEP invitations, IEPs, Evaluation Reports, Re-evaluation Reports, NOREPs, and communication logs."

"Do you have any questions or concerns? Now that you have a basic understanding of the study, do you think you might be interested in participating?"

Answer:

If No: Thank you very much for contacting me.

If Yes: "Thank you for your interest in my research study about family member participation in IEP meetings. Before enrolling you in the study, I need to make sure that you are eligible to participate. I would like to ask you a few questions to determine eligibility. It will take about 15 minutes. There is a possibility that some of the questions I ask may make you uncomfortable. You are free to choose *not* to answer any questions that may make you experience discomfort."

"Let me assure you that all information I receive from you by phone, including your name and any other identifying information, will be kept confidential. The purpose of these questions is to determine whether you may be eligible to participate in the study. Additional screening at a later time may be necessary beyond answering these questions. Remember, your participation is voluntary; you do not have to answer these questions. Please feel free to stop me at any time if you have any questions or concerns. Do I have your permission to ask you these questions?"

Answer:

As part of my study, I'm trying to choose people to interview who represent different student grade levels, different amounts of time involved in special education, different identified disabilities, etc., so we have a wide range of viewpoints. Do you mind if I ask you some questions to get to know you a little better?"

Answer:

"First off, this study is reviewing family participation in special education meetings. Do you currently have a child receiving special education services at ■■■ Elementary School?"

Answer:

If "no": "I'm sorry. Participation in the study is currently limited to those individuals who have a child enrolled in special education at [REDACTED] Elementary at this time. But thank you for your interest!

If "yes": "Thank you. How long has/have your child(ren) been receiving special education services?"

Answer:

"What does your current IEP list as your child's qualifying diagnosis? There are thirteen diagnoses listed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). I can share them with you if you like. They are: Intellectual disability, Hearing impairment, Speech or language impairment, Visual impairment, Emotional disturbance, Orthopedic impairment, Autism, Traumatic brain injury, Other health impairment, Specific learning disability, Deafness, Deaf-blindness, Multiple disabilities. Your child might be diagnosed with a primary disability and a secondary disability. For example, my youngest son has a primary diagnosis of "specific learning disability" but a secondary diagnoses of "speech or language impairment."

Answer:

"And what grade level(s) is/are child(ren) enrolled in at this time?"

Answer:

"That's great! I have three children myself and they are currently in 2nd, 4th, and 5th grades.

"Let me tell you a little bit about the requirements for participation in the study. First of all, you'll need to participate in an interview, which will need to be audiotaped for accuracy. Is that okay?"

Answer:

If "no": "I'm sorry. Participation in the study is currently limited to those individuals who give consent to be audiotaped in order to ensure accuracy of material. But thank you for your interest!"

If "yes": "Excellent. You will also need to provide permission for me to access your students special education documents, such as IEPs. Do you agree to give permission?"

Answer:

If "no": "I understand. In that case you cannot be a participant, but I wish you the best of luck throughout the school year!"

If "yes": "That's great. It seems like you're a good match to participate in this study. Do you have any questions for me about the study?"

Answer:

"Would you like to set up an interview time now?"

Answer:

"Would you like me to send you information to review prior to the meeting?"

Answer:

Appendix D Educator Phone Screening Protocol

Phone Screening Protocol

Educator Participants

Interviewer: "Thank you for e-mailing me to learn more about my research study. My name is Jennifer Geibel, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh. The purpose of my research study, Families and IEP Meetings in an Urban School Setting: Identifying Barriers to Participation and Strategies to Increase Engagement, is to family participation in IEP meetings and to determine ways to increase engagement in the special education process."

"To participate in the study, you would need to participate in an interview that will last approximately 30 minutes to one hour."

"Do you have any questions or concerns? Now that you have a basic understanding of the study, do you think you might be interested in participating?"

Answer:

If No: Thank you very much for contacting me.

If Yes: "Thank you for your interest in my research study about family member participation in IEP meetings. Before enrolling you in the study, I need to make sure that you are eligible to participate. I would like to ask you a few questions to determine eligibility. It will take about 15 minutes. There is a possibility that some of the questions I ask may make you uncomfortable. You are free to choose *not* to answer any questions that may make you experience discomfort."

"Let me assure you that all information I receive from you by phone, including your name and any other identifying information, will be kept confidential. The purpose of these questions is to determine whether you may be eligible to participate in the study. Additional screening at a later time may be necessary beyond answering these questions. Remember, your participation is voluntary; you do not have to answer these questions. Please feel free to stop me at any time if you have any questions or concerns. Do I have your permission to ask you these questions?"

Interviewer: "Thank you for your interest in my research study about family member participation in IEP meetings. As part of my study, I'm trying to choose educators to interview who represent different student grade levels, different amounts of experience, different types of special education support, etc., so we have a wide range of viewpoints. Do you mind if I ask you some questions to get to know you a little better?"

Answer:

"First off, this study is reviewing family participation in special education meetings at [REDACTED] Elementary School. Do you currently work at [REDACTED] Elementary School?"

Answer:

If "no": "I'm sorry. Participation in the study is currently limited to those individuals who work at [REDACTED] Elementary at this time. But thank you for your interest!"

If "yes": "Thank you. How long have you worked at [REDACTED]?"

Answer:

"How long have you worked in education in general?"

Answer:

"Tell me about your involvement in special education. How do you typically support special education programming?"

Answer:

"What student grade levels do you typically work with?"

Answer:

"With what disability categories of special education do you usually work? I can review these with you if you need me to."

Answer:

"Do you have any children of your own? Do any of them receive special education services?"

Answer:

"Let me tell you a little bit about the requirements for participation in the study. First of all, you'll need to participate in an interview, which will need to be audiotaped for accuracy. This interview will then be analyzed to discover patterns to family IEP participation. Is that okay?"

Answer:

If "no": "I'm sorry. Participation in the study is currently limited to those individuals who give consent to be audiotaped in order to ensure accuracy of material and who agree to analysis of the interview. But thank you for your interest!"

If "yes": "That's great. It seems like you're a good match to participate in this study. Do you have any questions for me about the study?"

Answer:

"Would you like to set up an interview time now?"

Answer:

"Would you like me to send you information to review prior to the meeting?"

Answer:

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me. My name is Jennifer and I can be reached at JMG255@pitt.edu.

Appendix E Informational Packet and Consent Form

STUDY TITLE: Identifying Barriers and Strategies to Increase Family Engagement in IEP Meetings in a Lower Socioeconomic Urban School District

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

- Jennifer M. Geibel, JMG255@pitt.edu

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY: |

- You can contact the study investigator if you have any questions about the study, concerns or complaints. Contact Principal Investigator, Jennifer M. Geibel, at JMG255@pitt.edu.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

- All funds required to support this study will be provided solely by the investigator, Jennifer M. Geibel, doctoral candidate. No other sources of support will be utilized.

INTRODUCTION:

- This research study seeks to identify barriers to family member participation in IEP meetings, as well as strategies to increase family engagement in the special education process.
- Potential subjects include educators and related service providers (special education teachers, classroom teachers, speech-language pathologists, etc.) at [REDACTED] as well as family members of students currently participating in special education programming at [REDACTED]
- Up to 12 educator subjects and 12 family member subjects will be interviewed within this study.
- Participation in the study requires the subject to participate in an interview which will take between 30 and 60 minutes to complete.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES:

- At least seven (or up to 12) family member participants will be interviewed to discuss family participation in IEP meetings. **These interviews will take approximately a half-hour or an hour to complete.**
- The principle investigator will review child-specific documents, such as Individualized Education Plans and Notices of Recommended Education Placements for the children of those family members who are participating in the study. Family members will be asked to sign a consent form so that the researcher may review their child's education documents. Student-specific

Page 1 of 4



University Of Pittsburgh
Institutional Review Board

Approval Date: «Approval Date»
Renewal Date: «Renewal Date»

IRB #: «IRB#»

Consent to Act as a Participant in a Research Study

documents will be reviewed only for children whose parents/guardians have signed the separate special education document consent form.

- At least seven (or up to 12) educator participants will be interviewed to discuss family participation in IEP meetings. **These interviews will take approximately a half-hour or an hour to complete.**
- All interviews will be performed in locations that are accessible and comfortable for the participants, including homes or centralized meeting places, such as libraries.
- Interviews will be audio-recorded for the purpose of accuracy. **All audio recordings will be destroyed upon completion of transcription.**

STUDY RISKS:

- There is a nominal risk of breach of confidentiality.
- There is a normal risk of discomfort due to the nature of the questions asked during the interview.

STUDY BENEFITS:

- It is anticipated that [REDACTED] and similar schools will benefit from the information gleaned in this study and will be better able to address the needs of family members to increase family participation in IEP meetings.
- Information gained from this study may be used to provide general guidelines to schools who wish to self-reflect upon their families participation in IEP meetings and may be used as a framework to determine strategies to increase meeting attendance.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY:

- All research data will be coded to protect the privacy of those participating in the study. Storage of linkage code information will be kept in separate files and digitally protected by firewalls.
- Any report on the results of this research will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing names of participants and their children within write-ups of the research and disguising any details of the interviewee which may reveal identities.
- Please note: We will do our best to keep your personal information private but confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. You will not be identified by name or other identifiable information in any publication or presentation at a scientific meeting unless you sign a separate form giving your permission.
- Please note: We will do everything possible to protect your privacy and confidentiality but information transmitted over the internet is insecure and no method of electronic storage is perfectly secure therefore absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.
- Authorized representatives of the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office may review your identifiable research information for the purpose of monitoring the appropriate conduct of this research study. In unusual cases, the investigators may be required



Consent to Act as a Participant in a Research Study

to release identifiable information related to your participation in this research study in response to an order from a court of law. If the investigators learn that you or someone with whom you are involved is in serious danger or potential harm, they will need to inform, as required by Pennsylvania law, the appropriate agencies.

WITHDRAWAL FROM STUDY PARTICIPATION:

- Subjects may withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- To formally withdraw from this research study, participants should provide a written and dated notice of this decision to the principal investigator of this research study at the address listed on the first page of this form. Your decision to withdraw from this study will have no effect on your current or future relationship with the University of Pittsburgh.
- Withdrawal from this study will not affect your relationship with [REDACTED]

COSTS:

- There are no costs to participate in this study.

PAYMENTS:

- Participants in this study will receive a \$25 gift card to Family Dollar or Amazon. This is the choice of the participant.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

- Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. You may want to discuss this study with your family and friends and your personal physician before agreeing to participate. If there are any words you do not understand, feel free to ask. The principle investigator will be available to answer your current and future questions.
- Whether or not you provide your consent for participation in this research study will have no effect on your current or future relationship with the University of Pittsburgh.
- Participation in this study will not impact the relationships of adult or child participants with [REDACTED]



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE:

The above information has been explained to me and all of my current questions have been answered. I understand that I am encouraged to ask questions, voice concerns or complaints about any aspect of this research study during the course of this study, and that such future questions, concerns or complaints will be answered by a qualified individual or by the investigator listed on the first page of this consent document at the telephone number given. I understand that I may always request that my questions, concerns or complaints be addressed by a listed investigator. I understand that I may contact the Human Subjects Protection Advocate of the IRB Office, University of Pittsburgh (1-866-212-2668) to discuss problems, concerns, and questions; obtain information; offer input; or discuss situations that occurred during my participation. By signing this form I agree to participate in this research study and agree, as a family member participant, to allow the collection of my child's educational records and information that we discuss for research purposes. A copy of this consent form will be given to me.

Participant's Signature Date

INVESTIGATOR CERTIFICATION:

I certify that I have explained the nature and purpose of this research study to the above-named individual(s), and I have discussed the potential benefits and possible risks of study participation. Any questions the individual(s) have about this study have been answered, and we will always be available to address future questions, concerns or complaints as they arise. I further certify that no research component of this protocol was begun until after this consent form was signed.

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent Role in Research Study

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date (Time if placed in medical record)

Appendix F Document Review Consent Form

Consent for Release of Student Records and Information

Student's Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____

As a participant in the study entitled, "Identifying Barriers and Strategies to Increase Family Engagement in IEP Meetings in a Lower Socioeconomic Urban School District" you have been asked to provide the principle investigator with access to your child's special education documents including, but not limited to:

- Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)
- Invitations to Participate in Student Planning Meetings, including IEP meetings
- Notices of Recommended Education Placements/Prior Written Notice (NOREPs/PWN)
- Special Education Evaluation and Re-Evaluation Reports (ERs and RRs)
- Special Education Progress Monitoring Reports
- Other (write in name): _____

If you are willing to share special education information, please check the boxes of ALL documentation you wish to share with the investigator and sign the below statement. If you do NOT wish to share information, leave all boxes blank and sign the statement at the bottom of the page.

I, _____, agree to share the above documentation with Jennifer M. Geibel, principle investigator, with the knowledge that this documentation will be used ONLY to inform the study "Identifying Barriers and Strategies to Increase Family Engagement in IEP Meetings in a Lower Socioeconomic Urban School District". The purpose of this study is to assist schools in better engaging families in special education planning. I understand that my child's educational rights are protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and that agreeing to share special educational documentation is optional; participation in the study is NOT dependent on willingness to share special education documentation. I also understand that the investigator will take all possible steps to ensure confidentiality of the information contained within the special education documents and that all copies of the information will be kept under lock and key, and will be destroyed following study completion.

Family Member Signature

|

Appendix G Family Member Demographics Survey

Demographics Survey Family Member

Before we begin our interview, I need you to take a short demographics survey. This will just help me get to know you a little better. It will also help me identify you when I'm analyzing your data, though confidentiality will be maintained when writing up the research.

1. How old are you? [Click here to enter text.](#)
2. With which racial or cultural group do you most identify? [Click here to enter text.](#)
3. What do you do for work? [Click here to enter text.](#)
4. What is your educational level (Some high school, high school, tech school, college, masters, etc)? [Click here to enter text.](#)
5. Who else lives in your home? [Click here to enter text.](#)
6. How long have your kids attended XXXXX Elementary? [Click here to enter text.](#)
7. What are the ages and grade levels of your children? [Click here to enter text.](#)
8. How many of your children receive special education services at XXXXX Elementary? [Click here to enter text.](#)
9. Under which IDEA diagnoses do your children receive special education services? (Share diagnoses if necessary.) [Click here to enter text.](#)
10. If there any other information I should know in order to understand you better?

Researcher use only:

Participant Identification Number: _____

Appendix H Educator Demographics Survey

Demographics Survey

Educator

Before we begin our interview, I need you to take a short demographics survey. This will just help me get to know you a little better. It will also help me identify you when I'm analyzing your data, though confidentiality will be maintained when writing up the research.

1. How old are you? [Click here to enter text.](#)
 2. With which racial or cultural group do you most identify? [Click here to enter text.](#)
 3. What is your educational role (related service provider, classroom teacher, special educator, etc.)? [Click here to enter text.](#)
 4. How long have you worked at XXXXX Elementary? [Click here to enter text.](#)
 5. How long have you worked in education throughout your entire career? [Click here to enter text.](#)
 6. With what grade levels do you typically work? [Click here to enter text.](#)
 7. How do you typically support students in special education? [Click here to enter text.](#)
 8. About how many special education students do you work with (caseload, classroom enrollment, etc.)? [Click here to enter text.](#)
 9. Which IDEA categories of disability are your students typically diagnosed with? (Review categories if necessary.) [Click here to enter text.](#)
 10. Do you have any children of your own? How many? [Click here to enter text.](#)
 11. Do any of your children receive special education services? [Click here to enter text.](#)
 12. What additional information might be useful to help me understand you better?
-

Researcher use only:

Participant Identification Number: _____

Appendix I Interview Protocol for Family Members

Interview Protocol for Family Members

Interview Questions

"Thank you for meeting with me today. I really appreciate your help. I am completing a research project about family participation in student IEP meetings at [REDACTED]. IEP stands for "Individual Education Plan" and an IEP meeting is a team meeting in which we complete special education planning. You may or may not have attended an IEP meeting and it is okay either way. The purpose of this interview is to get an idea about how you feel about the special education process, ways in which you participate, and reasons that might make it difficult to attend meetings. This is a completely safe environment and your answers are totally private. Your name will not be used at all within this study. However, your answers will help us understand how parents can participate in the special education process, o thank you for your honesty!"

Demographics/Background Information

"We are going to start with a few questions that will help me get to know you better. You are a family member of a student who currently receives special education services at [REDACTED]. Can you tell me a little about your family and the children attending [REDACTED]?"

Probe: Tell me a little about your kids. How old are they?

Probe: How long have your students been receiving special education services?

"I'm also interested in hearing about how your child is participating in special education. What kind of special education services is your child currently receiving?"

Probe: Does your child have diagnoses that qualify them for special education? An example of a diagnosis is "specific learning disability." That is the diagnosis that my son has which qualifies him for special education.

Probe: Tell me about the goals or skills that your children are working on.

Preparing for an IEP meeting

"As I stated earlier, an IEP meeting is a team meeting in which special education planning takes place. However, there are some preliminary steps that might take place before a meeting. Let's talk first about how you're invited to an IEP meeting."

Probe: How do you typically find out about an upcoming IEP meeting?

Probe: Were you given options on how or when the meeting should be held? Was the school flexible in finding a time that you could attend a meeting?

"Let's talk about how you participate in this process *before* the actual meeting date. How do you and your children's teachers communicate? How do you provide input into Present Levels of Performance? "Present Levels of Performance" is a section of the IEP that provides information on your child's strengths and needs."

Probe: How often do you communicate with your child's teachers and what do you talk about?

Probe: In what ways do your child's teachers ask for information to use in the IEP?

Probe: What kinds of information do you usually share with the IEP team prior to the meeting? How is this information then included in the IEP document?

Attending an IEP meeting

"We are now going to talk about the IEP meeting itself. An IEP meeting takes place before a child begins special education services and then occurs at least once a year. How many IEP meetings has your child had and how have you attended them?"

Probe: Tell me about the experiences you've had when physically attending IEP meetings.

Probe: Tell me about participating in IEP meetings in alternate ways, such as via phone or on Skype. What was that like?

"Now I'd like to hear about your experience at the IEP meetings you attended. Think of a really successful IEP meeting. Describe it to me."

Probe: What made this meeting work?

Probe: How did this successful meeting make you feel as a parent? As a team partner?

"I'd like to talk about meetings in a little more detail now. Where were your meetings held? Who attended them?"

Probe: What was the room set-up of the IEP?

Probe: Let's talk about the people at the meeting. Who were they and what roles do they play in your child's education? Talk about school personnel, outside agency personnel, and people you brought with you.

"We've already talked about how you might have provided information *prior* to the IEP meeting. Now let's talk about the ways you contributed *AT* the meeting. What kind of information did you discuss and how did you talk about it?"

Probe: How did it make you feel to contribute information to the IEP meeting?

Probe: What sections of the IEP did you contribute to THE MOST? I can review the IEP sections with you if you like.

Probe: What kind of information did you contribute to the IEP team and in what way what it included in the final documents?

"I'd also like to know how information was shared *with* you at the meeting. Who talked to you and what did they say? How did they explain the IEP document to you?"

Probe: What kind of information were you given at the IEP meeting?

Probe: Describe the types of wording used in the IEP and your level of understanding of the document?

Probe: How did you feel when asking questions during the IEP meeting and how were your questions responded to?

*Probe: How were documents such as Procedural Safeguards and NOREPs reviewed at the meeting?
(Follow-up: Did you sign documents at the meeting or wait to sign?)*

Barriers to Attendance and Participation

"We talked about successful IEP meetings but now I'd like to talk about a less successful meeting. What was that like?"

Probe: What was different about this meeting, as opposed to a successful meeting? What specifically happened to make you feel that it was unsuccessful?

Probe: How did this meeting make you feel as a parent? As a team partner?

"Now we are going to talk about meetings that you might not have been able to attend. This could happen for a lot of reasons. What are some reasons that you might have missed an IEP meeting?"

Probe: What supports might have helped you attend the meeting?

Probe: What other factors, like time or type of meeting (phone, skype, etc.) could have influenced whether or not you could have attended the meeting?

"When you are able to attend special education meetings, sometimes the special education process can be hard to understand. How would you describe your personal understanding of the special education system?"

Probe: What can you tell me about your rights as a parent of a student receiving special education? How did you learn this information?

"The special education process consists of a lot of timelines. Steps have to be performed in a certain order and at a certain time.

Probe: What is your understanding of special education timelines? How did school personnel explain special education timelines to you?

"There are a lot of special education documents out there. These documents can include IEPs, Evaluation Reports, Notices of Recommended Educational Placement (NOREPs), and many others."

Probe: How do school personnel help you better understand special education documentation?

Probe: In what ways do you research special education on your own?

In addition to understanding the special education, it can also be hard to understand the ins and outs of your child's disability. My son has Sensory Integration Disorder and it took me some time to research that and understand it better. How well do you understand your child's disability and the possible academic concerns that might occur as a result of your child's disability?

Probe: What steps do school personnel take to help you understand your child's disability?

Probe: Where do you go to find information on your child's disability?

Probe: What community agencies have you worked with to learn more about your child and what you can do for him?

"Describe how you feel when you attend IEP meetings at your child's school. If you haven't attended any meetings, consider school events in general."

Probe: Describe the process for getting into the school to attend meetings/events.

Probe: Describe the feelings that you have when you attend school events/meetings.

"How welcome do you feel at your school when attending events or IEP meetings?"

Probe: To what extent do you feel that your cultural values are reflected in the school?

Probe: To what extent do you feel comfortable asking questions of school personnel?

Probe: To what extent do you feel your opinions are respected and valued?

Strategies for Participation

"Now I'd like to talk about ways that the IEP meeting experience might be enhanced. First of all, I want to think about what's happening already that works and should NOT be changed. What do you like about your special education planning? What would you like to stay the same?"

Probe: Describe your favorite part of your child's special education experience. What do you love about their school and their overall education?

Probe: Choose one individual who has been really helpful having on your IEP team. What made that person such an important part of the team?

"Now I'd like to consider some possible changes that might make your IEP experience better."

Probe: How could your IEP experience be changed through altering the time or location of a meeting?

Probe: Consider whether the people present at the meeting could influence how you feel at the meeting. What are some things they could do or ask to make your time at the meeting more valuable?

Probe: Are there ways in which the special education planning process could be changed to build stronger relationships between home and schools?

Appendix J Interview Protocol for Educators

Interview Protocol for Educators

Interview Questions:

The purpose of this interview is to get an idea about how you feel about the special education process and the ways in which families are engaged in the process. This is a completely safe environment and your answers are totally private. Your name will not be used at all within this study. However, your answers will help us understand ways in which families are engaged in education. So thank you for your honesty!"

Demographics/Background

"We are going to start with a few questions that will help me get to know you better. You are an educator at [REDACTED]. Tell me a little about your experience there.

Probe: Describe a typical work day to me. What do you do? In what ways do you interact with students and families?

Probe: What do you love most about your job?

Probe: What could you change to enhance your work experience?

Engaging with Families

"Now we're going to talk about ways in which families are engaged in their children's education. Opportunities may exist both in and out of school. What opportunities are available for parents/families to participate in activities on school grounds?"

Probe: Think about large group nights such as PTA Events, Back-to-School Nights, Literacy Nights, concerts, art fairs, etc.

Probe: Consider student-specific events such as IEP meetings, GIEP meetings, Parent-Teacher Conferences, etc. How do those meetings work at [REDACTED]?

"According to the research of Joyce Epstein (2005), Director of the National Network of Partnership Schools, families are involved in their children's education in a variety of ways including: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision-Making, and Collaborating with Community. In what ways do the families at [REDACTED] engage in their children's education?"

Probe: How might families communicate with you and how might you communicate with families? What is your protocol, if any, regarding type and amount of communications?

Probe: How do your families assist in learning at home? What kind of guidance do you provide to assist in this process?

Probe: What is the process for referring families to community resources to obtain support that they need?

Probe: What opportunities exist that help involve families in school wide decision-making processes? Think about committees, participation in projects, etc., as well as single-student events, such as parent-teacher conferences and IEP meetings.

The IEP Process – Prior to the Meeting

“Our next step in this study is to understand our IEP process and the role of families in IEP meetings within our district. First we will think about our IEP process in general. I’m going to ask you to describe your IEP preparation process in detail. What steps do you take BEFORE the meeting date to help the meeting be successful?”

Probe: Consider chronological requirements: “After the ER is completed, my next step is to _____. Prior to schedule the IEP meeting I need to _____.”

Probe: What is the process for selecting times and locations of meetings?

Probe: Consider how your experience with IEP preparation in this district compares with other districts in which you have worked.

The IEP Process – During the Meeting

“Next, I am going to ask you to consider how you conduct IEP meetings. Explain the IEP meeting process on the day itself. Consider both the setting and participants within the IEP meeting.

Probe: Describe the space in which the meeting is held.

Probe: Who are the participants typically present within an IEP meeting? Where does everyone sit?

“There is a great deal of information shared at an IEP meeting. Let’s consider how we share this information with families.”

Probe: How are families informed of the necessary procedural safeguards?

Probe: How is the IEP explained and who explains which section?

Probe: What steps are taken to ensure parental understanding?

Probe: What forms are typically presented during the meeting (NOREPs, Medical Access Billing, etc.) and how are these explained?

Family Engagement During the IEP Process

“Now let’s specifically consider the role of the family in IEP meetings. Think about the ways in which families are included in the meetings.

Probe: What is your understanding of the requirements for family participation in IEP meetings and the special education process in general?

Probe: Describe ways in which your district seeks to put family members at ease throughout the IEP process.

Probe: Describe your use of written and spoken language during family-school interactions.

Probe: How do you solicit information from family members as contributions to the IEP? How do you ensure authentic family voice in the IEP process?

Probe: How do you encourage families to participate in active discussion throughout the meeting?

Barriers to Family Involvement in IEPs

"Thank you providing a detailed explanation of how families are involved in IEP meetings. Now consider why families might not attend meetings or why they may not noticeably participate in meetings.

Probe: Consider logistical concerns, such as timing and location of meetings, as well as needs such as babysitting.

Probe: Think about possible knowledge barriers. How well-informed are your families regarding the special education process, their children's disabilities, options for special education placement, etc.?

Probe: Describe any barriers of culture or any relationship difficulties between home and school that might negatively impact the IEP process.

"I'd like you to think back to a less than ideal IEP meeting. What made this meeting unsuccessful?"

Probe: What was different in this unsuccessful meeting, as opposed to a successful one? What specifically made this meeting feel unsuccessful?

Probe: What could have been changed to make this meeting more successful?

Strategies for Engaging Families in IEPs

"Now that we described an unsuccessful meeting, let's talk about a more positive one. What was this like?"

Probe: What made this meeting a success? Consider the who, what, when, where, and how of the meeting.

Probe: Describe your feelings as a team member participant within this meeting.

"Considering what you know about your school and your families, what strategies would you recommend to increase familial participation in IEP meetings?"

Probe: If you had a child receiving special education services, what would help you more actively participate in the special education process?

Probe: Describe an individual who is particularly adept at engaging families. What makes this individual so successful?

Probe: Think creatively about your families' needs. What out-of-the-box thinking could be employed to meet these needs?

Bibliography

- Babbie, E.R., & Mouton, J. (2001). *The Practice of Social Research*. Oxford University Press.
- Bowen, G.A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27-40.
- Brantlinger, E., Jimenez, R., Klingner, J., Pugach, M., & Richardson, V . (2005). Qualitative studies in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 71, 195-207
- Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., & Morison K. B. (2006). *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Retrieved 7/17/2017 from <http://www.civicerprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf>
- Bryk, A., Sebring, P., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.
- Burke, M. M. (2012). Examining family involvement in regular and special education: Lessons to be learned for both sides. *International Review of Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 43, 187-218.
- Burke, M.M. (2017). Examining empowerment, family–school partnerships, and advocacy among rural and urban Latino families of children with disabilities. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 36(2), 56-63.
- Callendar, S. & Hansen, A. (2005). Family-school partnerships: Information and approaches for education. *National Association of School Psychologists Communique*, 34(4), 25-28.
- Coffey, A. (2014). Analysing documents. In Flick, U. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis* (pp. 367-379). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2008). 14 PA Code, § 14, Special Education Services and Programs State Regulations.
- Cox, D.D. (2005). Evidence-based interventions using home-school collaboration. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 20(4), 473-497.
- Crandall, S. J. (1998). Using interviews as a needs assessment tool. *Journal of Continuing Education in Health Professions*, 18, 155-162.
- Dabkowski, D.B. (2004). Encouraging active parent participation in IEP team meetings. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 36(3), 34-39.

- Epstein, J.L., Coates, L., Salinas, K.C., Sanders, M.G., & Simon, B.S. (2008). *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*. (3rd ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Erwin, E. J., Soodak, L. C., Winton, P. J., & Trunbull, A. (2001). "I wish it wouldn't all depend on me": Research on families and early childhood inclusion. In M. J. Guralnich (ed.), *Early childhood inclusion: Focus on change* (pp. 127-158). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
- Etscheidt, S. (2007) The excusal provisio of the IDEA 2004: Streamlining procedural compliance or prejudicing rights of students with disabilities? *Preventing School Failure*, 51(4), 3-18.
- Every Student Succeeds Act. (2015). Pub. L. No. 114-95 § 114 Stat. 1177 (2015-2016).
- Fantuzzo, J., McWayne, C., Perry, M. A., & Childs, S. (2004). Multiple dimensions of family involvement and their relations to behavioral and learning competencies for urban, low-income children. *School Psychology Review*, 33(4), 467-480.
- Fish, W. (2006). Perceptions of parents of students with autism towards the IEP meeting: A case study of one family support group chapter. *Education-Indianapolis Then Chula Vista*, 127(1), 56.
- Fitzgerald, J. L., & Watkins, M. W. (2006). Parents' rights in special education: The readability of procedural safeguards. *Exceptional Children*, 72(4), 497-510.
- Geenan, S., Power, L.E., & Lopez-Vasquez, A. (2005). Barriers against and strategies for promoting the involvement of culturally diverse parents in school-based transition planning. *The Journal for Vocational Special Needs Education*, 27(3), 4-14.
- Gonzales, Z.L. (2012). Mexican American parents of elementary students classified as emotionally disturbed: Perception of rights, roles, and actions (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (Accession Order No. UMI: 3577691)
- Griffin, C.L. (2016). Urban African-American parents' lived experiences of the individualized education plan process: A phenomenology study (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (Accession Order No. 10172971)
- Harris, A.R. (2010). Parental and professional participation in the IEP process: A comparison of discourses. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (Accession Order No. UMI: 3419873)
- Hatch, A. (2002). *Doing Qualitative Research in Education Settings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

- Henderson, A., Mapp, K., Johnson, V., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York: New Press.
- Hill, N.E., Tyson, D.F. (2009). Parental involvement in middle school: A meta-analytic assessment of strategies that promote achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, 45(3), 740–763.
- Hodges, T. L. (2013). *Survey of the effectiveness of Epstein's model of family engagement with special needs parents (Dcotoral Dissertation)*. Retrieved from Pro-Quest Dissertations & Theses. (Accession Order No. UMI: 1399993762)
- Hoover-Dempsey, K., Walker, J., Sandler, H., Whetsel, D., Green, C., Wilkins, A., & Closson, K. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(2), 105–130.
- IES National Center for Educational Statistics. (2007). *Urban Education in America*. Retrieved November 17, 2017 from <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/urbaned>
- Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act. (2004). 20 U.S.C. §§ 1414 Evaluations, eligibility determinations, individualized evaluation programs, and educational placements.
- Jessop, K. L. (2018). *Parental perceptions of preparation and readiness for meaningful engagement in the initial IEP meeting: The case of mid-town school district. (Doctoral Dissertation)* Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 10817642).
- Jung, A.W. (2011) *Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and barriers for parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Multicultural Education*, 18(3), 21-28.
- Landmark, L. J., Roberts, E. L., & Zhang, D. (2013). Educators' Beliefs and Practices About Parent Involvement in Transition Planning. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 36(2), 114–123.
- Lo, L. (2014). Readability of Individualized Education Programs, preventing school failure. *Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 58(2), 96-102.
- Kim, Y. (2009). Minority parental involvement and school barriers: Move the focus away from deficiencies of parents. *Educational Research Review*, 4, 80-102.
- Mandic C. G., Rudd R., Hehir T., & Acevedo-Garcia D. (2012). Readability of special education procedural safeguards. *The Journal of Special Education*, 45, 195–201.
- Mapp, K. (2012, June 21). *The Role of Family-School Partnerships in Children's Learning and Development [PowerPoint]*. In EdWeek Webinar Series: Engaging Parents and Schools in Student Learning. Retrieved July 7, 2016 from <http://www.edweek.org/media/2012-06-21parentengagementfinal.pdf>
- Mapp, K., & Kuttner, P. (2013). *Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework*. Retrieved June 16, 2016, from U.S. Department of Education: www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf

- Martin, J., Marshall, L. H., & Sale, P. (2004) A 3-year study of middle, junior high, and high school IEP meetings. *Exceptional Children*, 70(3), 285-297.
- Mayes, R.D., & Moore, J.L. (2016). Adversity and pitfalls of twice-exceptional learners. *Journal of Advanced Academics* 27(3), 167-189.
- McDonnall, M. C., Cavanaugh, B. S., & Giesen, J. M., (2010). The relationship between parental involvement and mathematics achievement for students with visual impairments. *The Journal of Special Education*, 45(4), 204-215.
- Milner, H. R. (2012). But what is urban education? *Urban Education*, 47(3), 556–561.
- Moody, A.K. (2010). Empowering families to be collaborative participants in IEP meetings. *Childhood Education*, 87(2), 129-133.
- Munn-Joseph, M.S., & Gavin-Evans, K. (2008). Urban parents of children with special needs: Advocating for their children through social networks. *Urban Education*, 43(3), 378-393.
- Newman L. (2005). *Family involvement in the educational development of youth with disabilities*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Papay, C., & Bambara, L. M. (2014). Best practices in transition to adult life for youth with intellectual disabilities. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 37, 136–148.
- Parette, H.P, & Petch-Hogan, B. (2000) Approaching families: Facilitating culturally/linguistically diverse family involvement. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 33(2), 4-10.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective. *Qualitative Social Work*, 1(3), 261-283.
- Ritchey, K.F. (2006) *Initiating and engaging partnerships using the individualized education program (IEP) process* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Wilmington College, Wilmington, OH.
- Rueda, R., Monzo, L., Shapiro, J., Gomez, J., & Blacher, J. (2005). Cultural models of transition: Latina mothers of young adults with developmental disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 71, 401-414.
- Shields, W.C., Omaki, E., McDonald, E., Rosenberg, R., Aitken, M., Stevens, M.W., & Cielen, A.C. (2018). Cell phone and computer use among parents visiting an urban pediatric emergency department. *Pediatric Emergency Care*, 34(12), 878-882.
- Sheldon, S. B., & Epstein, J. L. (2005). Involvement counts: Family and community partnerships and mathematics achievement. *The Journal of Longitudinal Research*. 98(4), 196-206.
- Smith, S.W. (2001) "Involving Parents in the IEP Process: ERIC Digest E611." Retrieved on March 9, 2016 from <http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-2/iep.htm>

- Soodak, E. C., & Erwin, E. J. (2000). Valued member or tolerated participant: Parents' experiences in inclusive early childhood settings. *The Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 25, 29-44.
- Sweet-Lazos, H.A. (2012). Exploring parental involvement in culturally diverse low socioeconomic special education elementary school settings (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (Accession Order No. UMI: 3532361)
- Tucker, V., & Schwartz, I. (2013) Parents' perspectives of collaboration with school professionals: Barriers and facilitators to successful partnerships in planning for students with ASD. *School Mental Health*, 5, 3-14.
- Turnbull A., Turnbull R., Erwin E.J., Soodak L.C., & Shogren K.A. (2011). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: Positive outcomes through partnership and trust*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Turner, D. (2010). Qualitative interview design: A practical guide for novice investigators. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(3), 754-760.
- Tveit, A.D. (2009). A parental voice: Parents as equal and dependent – Rhetoric about parents, teachers, and their conversations. *Educational Review*, 61, 289-300
- Vakalahi, H.F. (2001). Adolescent substance use and family-based risk and protective factors: A literature review. *Journal of Drug Education*, 31, 29–46.
- White, N. (2004) When special education and general education untied, everyone benefits. *WestEd R&D Alert*, 6(1), 1-9.
- Williams-Diehm, K.L., Brandes, J.A., Chesnut, P.W., & Haring, K.A. (2014). Student and parent IEP collaboration: A comparison across school settings. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 33(1), 3-11.
- Woods, A.D., Morrison, F.J., & Palinscar, A.S. (2018). Perceptions of communication practices among stakeholders in special education. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 26(4), 209-224.