

FATHERS' PERSPECTIVES: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE
EXPERIENCES OF FATHERS OF CHILDREN IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

There has been a growing interest in understanding and increasing father involvement in their child's education. Ongoing research has documented the positive effects of father involvement; however, fathers continue to feel disconnected from their child's school and educational program. Not surprisingly, research has indicated that fathers of children in special education are also underutilized by school practitioners. Rather than reaching out to both parents, school personnel continue to disregard fathers and rely predominately on the child's mother. Because federal policy mandates parent collaboration on special education teams, there is a need for special education personnel to begin reaching out to fathers in order to increase their involvement in the process. In this study, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with fathers of children in special education to better understand their involvement in the process. This study examines their experiences engaging with school personnel and their perspectives on their roles in their child's special education program. Their emotional reactions to the process are examined within the in-depth data providing a rich description of their experiences. Findings indicate that the fathers in this study are strong advocates for their children and are very concerned for their children's education. In addition, the fathers want to be included more often and to be seen as equal partners in their child's special education program. Furthermore, these fathers offered recommendations for special education personnel to better facilitate the involvement of fathers. Suggestions for school psychology practice and topics for future research are discussed.

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CHAPTER I

Literature Review

Current research has focused much attention on the importance of parent involvement in their child's education. Increased parent involvement is associated with higher grades and test scores, regular attendance in school and a greater likelihood that the child will graduate high school and go on to college (Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Hango, 2007; McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Ho, 2004). There is also evidence for increased motivation and self-concept at school, a positive sense of independence and fewer discipline problems (League & Ford, 1996). When parents are involved in their children's schooling, it sends a positive message that they are interested in their children's well-being and care about their academic performance.

Because of the increased interest in parent involvement, there has been a greater responsibility placed on schools to enhance family-school collaboration. For instance, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2001) details explicit family involvement requirements that schools must follow in order to obtain Title 1 funds (NCLB, 2001). NCLB advocates for mutual accountability between parents and schools to improve student achievement and emphasizes a shared responsibility among parents, school staff and the students themselves. The school is also responsible for creating capacity for effective parent-school communication and partnership.

Unfortunately, fathers are frequently left out of both family research and intervention (Rimm-Kaufman & Zhang, 2005; Turbiville & Marquis, 2001). Typically, when service providers and school personnel talk about *family* or *family involvement*, most often they are only referring to the child's mother. It is the child's mother who is most commonly consulted with over educational decisions or invited to participate in meetings that impact the child (Polmanteer & Turbiville, 2000). In Dudley-Marling (2001), it was found that most of the burden of schooling, especially for children struggling in school, fell on the mothers. This not only included homework help, meeting with teachers and collaborating with the school on alternative programming, but the emotional burden as well. According to Dudley-Marling, "Fathers were not immune to the effects of school problems, but mothers, not fathers, talked about losing sleep worrying about their child's schooling. Mothers, not fathers, reported that worry over school troubles frequently intruded on their lives at work. It was also a mother, not a father, who told me that she worried so much about her son's struggles in school that she was not eating" (pp. 195). This trend occurs across disciplines and human service organizations. In medical, wellness and mental health care clinics, mothers are still more likely to be instructed and educated, and asked questions pertinent to the child's developmental, social and medical history (Ahmann, 2006).

Much of the literature on father involvement comes from Head Start research. Historically, Early Head Start and Head Start programs have dedicated much time and effort attempting to engage fathers (Raikes & Bellotti, 2006; Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005). Early education programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start recognize the important contributions fathers make to their child's early development

(Roggman et al., 2002). For instance, fathers, as well as mothers, contribute to attachment security (Grossman et al., 2002), emotional regulation (Roggman et al., 2002), social competence and cognitive development (Shannon, Tamis-LeMonda, London, & Cabrera, 2002). Research also indicates that when fathers are actively involved in raising and educating older children, they can play an integral part in enhancing their social, emotional and academic development (Mehta & Richards, 2002; Quinn, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Zhang, 2005). As children grow older, greater father-school involvement is associated with improved social and adaptive behavior, greater psychological well-being, fewer behavior problems and improved language skills (Mehta & Richards, 2002; Moore & Kotelchuck, 2004). When fathers are involved, children demonstrate greater cognitive competence, increased empathy and a stronger internal locus of control (Quinn, 1999). In a longitudinal study of over 7,000 children, Flouri and Buchanan (2004) found that early father involvement strongly predicted educational attainment in late adolescents. In a study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; U.S. Department of Education, 1997), it was found that, on the whole, children do better in school when their fathers are involved. The NCES results indicate that children whose fathers are involved in their education do better regardless of whether the father resided in the same home as the child. Some of the findings include:

- Children are less likely to repeat a grade if their fathers are involved in their schools.
- The relationship between success in school and father involvement is important regardless of variables such as income, race or ethnicity, or parent education.
- Children are more likely to get A's if fathers are involved.

While these findings are encouraging, the report also indicates that father involvement remains low. Similarly, data from another large national survey showed only moderate involvement. The fathers in this study had little knowledge of their child's learning environment and less than half knew the name of their child's teacher (McBride, Rane, & Bae, 2001). Of great concern is that children deprived of father involvement are at risk for adjustment problems in school, lower academic achievement and delinquent behavior.

Part of the difficulty in conducting research on father involvement is that definitions tend to vary. For instance, defining *father* is challenging because fatherhood is a multifaceted concept that has shifted and changed over time (Lamb, 2000). In Weiner, Vasquez, and Battles (2001, as cited in: Ahmann, 2006, pp. 88), fathers are defined as "biological, foster, and stepfathers, and other male caregivers living in the household and caring for the child at least 10 hours a week for a period of at least 1 year." However, many would agree that fathers need not live in the household and as families continue to change, a degree of flexibility in definition is warranted. As such, Ahmann (2006) defines a father as "the person or persons who see themselves in the paternal role, whether or not they are biologically related to the child, are the persons most likely to be interested and involved participants in the child's care" (pp. 88).

A commonly cited definition of *father involvement* was developed by Pleck (1997) and expanded by Lamb (2000) in which father involvement includes three components: *engagement* (actual one-on-one interaction with the child, e.g., feeding, helping with homework, etc.); *accessibility* (less intense degree of direct interaction, e.g., cooking in the kitchen with the child in the next room.); and *responsibility* (the most difficult to define, but reflects the extent to which the father takes ultimate responsibility

for the child, e.g., making child-care arrangements, knowing when the child needs to go to the pediatrician, ensuring the child has clothes to wear, etc.). It is important to recognize, however, that fathers fill many roles and the relative importance of each role and time spent with his children varies from one cultural context to another (Lamb, 2000).

There are several factors that may serve as barriers to father involvement. Quinn (1999) acknowledges that the role of the involved parent, as viewed by society, is mandated to the mother and remains an option for the father. Socially constructed views dictate a care-giving role for mother and a provider and protector role for father. While these gender roles are at times challenged, it is often mothers and not fathers who have been held to domestic responsibilities, which include the children's schooling (Dudley-Marling, 2001).

Assuming a provider role often impacts the amount of time fathers spend at work (Freiman & Berkeley, 2002). Although the later half of the 20th century saw an increase in men embracing a stay-at-home role or a more flexible work schedule, the man's role as breadwinner has been well established since the turn of the 20th century (Berger, 1998). As a result, many children grow up with fathers who are determined to fulfill their work obligations, often at the expense of parenting obligations. A father's employment schedule is frequently identified as a barrier to accompanying a child to pediatricians' offices for checkups (Ahmann, 2006) and one of the most commonly cited reasons why fathers cannot come to school meetings or teacher conferences (Freiman & Berkeley, 2002).

Another factor impacting involvement is the lack of social support. Research indicates that during the newborn period, there are no clear differences in competence between mothers and fathers (Lamb, 2000). Both parents usually acquire “on the job training.” However, it is common for mothers, not fathers, to receive social support from friends and family when a baby arrives. Mothers tend to have more sources of assistance to help them adapt to their role as parent and mother. Furthermore, since mothers tend to be “on the job” more often than fathers, they become more sensitive and in tune to their children’s needs. Because of their lack of support and experience, fathers can become correspondingly less sensitive and less confident in their parenting skills. This can lead some fathers to defer child-rearing (and subsequently educational involvement) responsibilities to mothers (Lamb, 2000). For fathers who reject or avoid social support, traits related to masculinity (autonomy, emotional control and competence) may create obstacles for father involvement. Accepting or seeking help may be seen as a weakness (Roggman et al., 2002). Furthermore, encouraging fathers to become more involved with their children and their educational programs may decrease their level of involvement if the father associates his involvement with criticism of his competence (Roggman et al., 2002).

School systems, among other human service organizations, tend to perpetuate these roles and experiences. Although the positive impact of father involvement has been documented, fathers tend to be neglected by school professionals (Frieman & Berkeley, 2001; League & Ford, 1996; McBride, Rane, & Bae, 2001; McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Ho, 2005; Turbiville & Marquis, 2001; Viadero, 1997). Furthermore, there has been a lack of initiatives by schools encouraging fathers to be involved in their children’s

education (McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Ho, 2005). Although schools are advocating for *parent* involvement, it often refers to the work of mothers (Dudley-Marling, 2001). Fathers are often looked to for help with discipline, if the child is misbehaving in school or if the child's mother needs "tough" support from home to gain additional services for the child at school (Harrison, Henderson, & Leonard, 2007). Often teachers feel uncomfortable initiating contact with fathers. If educators are not trained to work with families, they may be even less prepared to work with fathers. Female teachers share the same gender experience with mothers and they may find it difficult to relate to fathers (Frieman & Berkeley, 2002). This could explain why preschool and kindergarten teachers, of which 98% in this country are female, tend to reach out to mothers at a far greater rate than fathers. This was evident in Rimm-Kaufman and Zhang's (2004) study on father involvement during the preschool and kindergarten years. It was found that father-school involvement occurred at about 10% of the frequency of teacher-family communication involving other caregivers. Frieman and Berkeley (2002) argue that female teachers can maximize father involvement by embracing the uniqueness of being a father, encouraging positive parenting skills and by supporting active collaboration.

As mentioned above, if parent-teacher conferences are held at times that conflict with the father's work schedule, this will make it difficult for fathers to engage with the school. Also, the way information is transmitted from school to parent may perpetuate the notion that fathers need not be involved. For instance, often teachers reach out to the child's mother about educational needs rather than the father. This sends a message that the father does not need to be involved in matters concerning his child's education, which reinforces the role boundary fathers have been socialized to follow.

Similar to the way fathers are perceived in the general education system, fathers of children in special education have been characterized as “hard to reach,” “the invisible parent,” “the peripheral parent,” and “just a shadow.” On the other hand, fathers have described the support systems in place as available to their partner, but not to them (Carpenter & Towers, 2008). Additionally, Carpenter and Herbert (1997) noted that fathers find it difficult to assert their involvement because of their work schedules and because education professionals seemingly do not recognize the need to include them.

Although fathers continue to feel left out, there is legislative support for the involvement of both parents in the special education system. Parent involvement is a mandated component under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). IDEA requires schools to include parents in all aspects of their child’s special education and for school personnel to confirm an understanding of all procedural rights and proceedings (Fish, 2008). Schools are charged with including parents on any school-based team that makes decisions regarding the child’s education or special education services, and to provide enough time to parents so they understand the process (Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008). Parents must be seen as equal partners throughout any decision-making process and school personnel are responsible for reaching out to parents to ensure a positive collaboration.

Research indicates that many parents feel dissatisfied with their level of involvement in the special education process and discontent over the school’s lack of effort to develop effective relationships (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Parents have historically been viewed by school professionals as peripheral to their child’s special education, and in some circumstances, they have been seen as obstacles and adversaries

(Stoner et al., 2005). While some studies examining child-focused team meetings suggest general satisfaction (Goldstein et al., 1980), parents are still reporting negative experiences even after IDEA. For example, in Esquivel, Ryan, and Bonner (2008), 16 parents of special education students were surveyed about their experiences in school-based teams. Several parents reported feeling left out on important information and “anger and hurt” over the circumstances of the meeting. In other post-IDEA studies, many parents reported feeling confused with their role during the pre-referral phase (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008). Unfortunately, this initial confusion can lead to detachment and limited involvement in later special education programming (Harry et al., 1995). Despite the legal mandates, many parents feel alienated because school personnel are dominating the decision-making process (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997) and often have to fight for necessary provisions (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004). In cases of culturally diverse families or families of low socioeconomic status, collaboration has seemingly failed to exist (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000). For instance, in Salas (2004), 10 Mexican-American mothers were interviewed about their experiences with the special education system. Many of the mothers felt disrespected and not listened to while at meetings. Several mothers described feeling embarrassed, angry and confused because school personnel used technical language that was difficult to understand. Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans (2008) interviewed sixteen Black and low-income families of children going to an urban elementary school. Many of the families were concerned over the lack of engagement and interest on behalf of their child’s teacher. Furthermore, many had an overwhelming belief that school officials focused primarily on misbehavior rather than academic goals.

Although most childhood family research focuses on mothers and their perspectives (Turbiville & Marquis, 2001), themes that have emerged in studies focusing on fathers of children in special education include a lack of communication from the school or child's teacher, and dissatisfaction in fathers' perceived roles during meetings (League & Ford, 1996). Research indicates that fathers feel labeled as the disciplinarian because the school tends to only initiate communication because of behavior problems (Davis, 2007). Many qualitative accounts of fathers dealing with the special education system have shown that they continue to be neglected by school professionals even though they desire to be more involved (Davis, 2007). In one study examining fathers' experiences parenting a child with a disability, one father made this comment in regard to the education system:

"I've noticed that professionals always talk to the mothers, so you feel a bit left out, and you have to ask your wife questions at a later time. The questions weren't addressed to you, even if they were about you, and it feels very daunting." (Harrison, Henderson, & Leanord, 2007, pp. 86)

In Carpenter and Towers (2008), twenty-one fathers were interviewed about their experiences. The authors found that fathers wanted to have a high level of involvement in their children's lives (day-to-day experiences as well as decision making), are committed to the learning and development of their child, want to be seen as equal partners and be shown respect for what they contribute to their family's lives.

School professionals, notably school psychologists, have a responsibility to reach out to both parents and include them in the decision-making process regarding their child's special education. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory is a useful model for understanding the factors relevant for facilitating active father (and mother)

involvement in the special education process. According to systems theory, the family is considered an open system that constantly interacts with other systems like the school and community. From a systems perspective, school psychologists are charged with recognizing the various influences on a child's life (family, school and community) and attempt to intervene at these multiple levels to ensure positive outcomes for their students. Throughout the National Association of School Psychologist's (NASP) *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice III* (Ysseldyke et al., 2006), several components are highlighted as necessary to engage students and families using a systems perspective. For example, the authors stress the importance of viewing effective learning as occurring within multiple systems, rather than strictly at the individual student level. In order to help students with disabilities, school psychologists should understand how the multiple systems in a child's life interact to influence their learning. The Blueprint III states: "While schools and educational settings are the most logical targets, school psychologists also need to understand how to impact family [and community] systems. Children and youth are part of a larger system, and it is only when the individual components of that system work together that optimal outcomes can be achieved." (p. 13). In an effort to delineate such a perspective, Ysseldyke et al. (2006) propose school psychologists conceptualize their roles as *systems consultants*, a role that would enhance coordination and communication between schools and the family. It is through the lens of a systems consultant that school psychologists can adopt an ecological perspective to facilitate positive interactions with both parents.

Aligned with a systems perspective is the "negotiating model" of parent-professional collaboration. Drawing on systems theory and pragmatism, Dale (1996)

proposes a model where the cognitive and emotional viewpoints of parents are considered. The negotiating model defines partnership as ‘a working relationship where the partners use negotiation and joint decision-making...to reach some kind of shared perspective or jointly agreed decision on issues of mutual concern.’ This model assumes that school psychologists would learn about both parents’ perspectives through listening, inquiry and openness. This model embraces a pragmatic approach by attempting to bring all potential voices to the table in an effort to have a dialogue about issues pertinent to the child’s social, emotional and educational development. In matters concerning father involvement in their child’s special education program, school psychologists and other school professionals should recognize fathers as a resource for their child’s learning, attempt to understand their experiences and perspective, and engage them in a pragmatic dialogue so they feel valued by their child’s educational system.

Because researchers and practitioners tend to agree that father involvement is associated with achievement gains and greater well-being in children in special education (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Mehta & Richards, 2002), implementing research-based interventions to increase their involvement is of paramount importance. Unfortunately, there is presently a lack of evidence-based father involvement practices in the literature. As Fishel and Ramirez (2005) indicate, the failure to include populations other than mothers (i.e., fathers or grandfathers) is a tremendous shortcoming in evidence-based parent involvement studies. Additionally, and not surprisingly, there are very little, if any, evidence-based practices aimed at facilitating greater school involvement for fathers of children in special education. Given the government policy and funding provisions regarding family involvement in the special education system, establishing and utilizing

evidence-based programs to encourage father involvement would not only be supportive to the families, but would also be in the best interest of the school.

Since school psychologists are now encouraged to assume a systems perspective, one way for researchers to begin thinking about evidence-based programs for fathers of children in special education is to draw on past research using systems theory and pragmatic practice. For instance, there is a common theme in the Head Start research that indicates how the program applies systems theory to successfully engage fathers. Rather than target fathers specifically, researchers highlight the importance of considering the whole family, specifically the child's mother. Several Head Start and Early Head Start studies have shown a strong relationship between mother engagement and father involvement in the program (Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005; Roggman et al., 2002). Mothers have been recognized by many father researchers as "gatekeepers" who can limit and/or control the program's access to fathers. McBride and Rane (2001) suggest that we begin seeing mothers not as "gatekeepers" but as "gateways" that provide an avenue for promoting father involvement. This way of thinking is aligned with what systems theorists define as interdependence. In Kelly (1966), one of four ecological principles governing interactions among systems includes *interdependence*, where all elements making up a system interact and have influence on one another. In the case of Head Start, one way to engage fathers is by reaching out to, communicating with and supporting the child's mothers. Pruett et al. (2009) also found that engaging mothers at the same time as fathers in activities that bring together the whole family, or at least offer separate but concurrent programs for mothers and fathers, help keep men involved. In Turbiville and Marquis' (2001) study looking at the involvement of fathers with typically

developing and disabled children in early childhood programs, it was found that fathers were more likely to be involved in activities that included all family members (i.e., holiday parties and picnics), learning with men and women about their child's future, and learning with men and women about being a better father or parent. On the contrary, going to men-only support groups had the lowest participation rate. Adding additional support to the whole-family model are qualitative accounts that have shown fathers benefiting more from programs if they felt their partners benefited as well (Summers et al., 2004). Lastly, Pruett et al. (2009) suggests that programs will be more successful at involving fathers by adopting a supportive, relationship approach emphasizing strength-based perspectives that view fathers as positive contributors and by making the efforts to build relationships with them.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how fathers experience their involvement with their child's special education program. By learning more about fathers' perspectives, their experiences with their children and with the school, we can begin examining how to create and utilize evidence-based programs to engage fathers and maintain their involvement. To further focus the study, the following questions were proposed in order to garner recommendations for future evidence-based research involving fathers of elementary and middle school children in special education:

- 1) What are the concerns and challenges of fathers who have children in special education?

- 2) How do fathers of children in special education describe their relationships with education professionals?
- 3) How can school professionals improve the relationship between fathers and the special education process so that they become positive resources and partners in the process?
- 4) How can school systems respond and make sure this is happening?

CHAPTER II

Methodology

A qualitative approach to gathering data was used. According to McCracken (1988), the goal of the qualitative method is to isolate and define categories in order to determine the relationships between them. A key difference between the qualitative method and the quantitative method is that qualitative methods can provide a much richer description of human experiences (McCracken, 1988). The method chosen for this study was the collective case study which examines more than one case to understand the similarities and differences of the population, phenomenon or general condition in question (Stake, 2000). Although a single case study design could produce rich data, studying several cases allows the researcher to see processes and outcomes across cases, and to gather more powerful accounts and depictions (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four fathers who had children in special education programs. Stoner et al. (2005) describe interviews as the most effective ways to understand another person's perspective and experience. Two fathers had children in elementary school and two had children in middle school. The sample of four was chosen to provide a stepping stone for more systematic studies on father involvement in special education. While interviews with four participants may not have generated results that are overly generalizable, the data gathered can provide enough information to

create preliminary hypothesis to be tested in larger, evidence-based studies and be used to inform professional practice.

The purpose of the interviews was to gain insight into fathers' experiences. A semi-structured interview (drafted by the researcher) was used because it provided a framework to question fathers while allowing flexibility for discussion. The interview was created after a thorough review of the literature and consultation with advisors. Participating fathers took part in one face-to-face interview that lasted an average of 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded and labeled as "Interview 1," "Interview 2," "Interview 3" and "Interview 4." During each interview, hand-written notes were taken by the researcher. The notes were used to document observations and personal reactions. Recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriber who provided the researcher with electronic copies of the transcripts.

Fathers were recruited through special education programs and a family support group network. The facilitator of the network was asked to distribute an initial request via email to families of elementary and middle school students receiving special education services. These grades were chosen to capture the experiences in early education, and before and after the transition to middle school. The facilitator explained the purpose of the study and that it was voluntary. Fathers who were interested in receiving more information about participating replied to the facilitator via email. The facilitator then forwarded the fathers' contact information to the researcher via email. The researcher contacted those expressing interest by phone. After agreeing to participate, fathers met the researcher and received an informed consent letter which gave additional information about the study, confidentiality and their rights as participants. Prior to beginning the

interviews, the fathers were asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire that included questions about themselves, their spouse and their family. Information about their child's age, gender, grade and the nature of their child's disability and special education classification was also provided. Interviews were conducted in settings convenient for the fathers, in environments that were private and where they felt safe to disclose personal information about themselves, their children and families. Two fathers were interviewed in their offices at their places of employment, and two were interviewed in their homes.

Participants

Four fathers were interviewed for the study. The ages of the fathers ranged from 45 to 51. All four fathers lived in the Northeast and lived in suburban, middle to upper class communities. All four had their bachelor's degrees and two had advanced degrees (MBA, J.D.) All four fathers were married, and their wives were all college educated, three having advanced degrees. The ethnicity of the fathers varied. Two identified themselves as Caucasian, one identified himself as Irish-Italian-Swedish-French-Canadian and one identified himself as Dutch-American. All four fathers had two children in their households. Three fathers were from the same town and, therefore, all of their children attended the same school district. One father lived in a different town and sent his child to that town's public school.

At the time of the interviews, the children of the participants who were in special education programs all attended their town's public schools. The children were all boys, ages ranging from 8 to 13. Two of the boys (8 years old and 10 years old) attended elementary school and two (both 13 year olds) attended middle school. Two of the

children were classified with Specific Learning Disabilities (both diagnosed with Dyslexia), one was classified Other Health Impaired (diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder) and one was classified Autism (diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disability – NOS). It should also be noted that one of the children diagnosed with Dyslexia and the child diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder were also intellectually gifted, making them twice exceptional (i.e. they have a disability and an IQ of 130 or above). For a more detailed breakdown of participant demographics, please see Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Information

Age

45	46	47	51
N=1	N=1	N=1	N=1

Educational Background

Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree or higher
N=4	N=2

Marital Status

Married
N=4

Spouse's Educational Background

Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree or higher
N=4	N=3

Ethnic/Cultural Self-Description

Caucasian	Dutch-American	Irish-Italian-Swedish-French-Canadian
N=2	N=1	N=1

Individuals in Family

Four
N=4

Age of Child under Study

Eight	Ten	Thirteen
N=1	N=1	N=2

Gender

Male
N=4

Grade of Child under Study

1 st	5 th	8 th
N=1	N=1	N=2

Special Education Classification

Autism	Specific Learning Disability	Other Health Impaired
N=1	N=2	N=1

Data Analysis

After each interview was transcribed, the researcher analyzed the transcripts for emerging, common themes that related to these fathers' perspectives and experiences (McCracken, 1988). The objective of analysis, as advocated by McCracken (1988), was to "determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that inform the respondent's view of the world in general and the topic in particular" (42). This involved a careful and thorough analysis of the data. It was up to the researcher to approach the analysis with an understanding of what the literature says ought to be there and a sense of what took place in the interviews themselves (McCracken, 1988).

Data from each interview were reduced to smaller units and compared and contrasted with each other to determine themes. The process involved five stages of analysis, each representing a higher level of generality (McCracken, 1988). According to McCracken (1988), the five-stage process inscribes a movement from the particular to the general. The initial stage involved securely investigating the fine details and statements, or "observations" of the interview. During the second stage, the observations were expanded and related back to the transcript. In the third stage of analysis, the observations were refined and developed. The intention here was to identify the interconnecting, "higher level" observations and begin shifting away from transcripts towards observations themselves. The final stages involved a process of "collective scrutinization." This means that observations generated at previous stages were analyzed to determine patterns and "intertheme consistency and contradiction" (McCracken, 1988, p. 42). The point of the final stages was to advance the researcher to general scholarly conclusions.

CHAPTER III

The Participants

Study Participants' Backgrounds

In this section, brief narrative accounts of the four fathers who participated in this study are presented. The narratives include information about their employment history, family composition and the members of their household, and experiences raising their children. This section also includes information about their children who were in a special education program and the nature of their disability. The purpose of this section is for the reader to have some relevant background information about the participants before the themes from the interviews are examined. Furthermore, this section includes a commentary by the researcher about his experience with each father during the interview. All fathers' and family members' names have been changed.

Matthew and Charles

Matthew was a product manager working in the marketing department of a large organization. He lived with his wife, his two sons, and an au pair. The au pair had been living with Matthew and his family for about two years. Prior to the au pair, the family had a live-in nanny for seven years. He described his wife and himself as having "power careers" but not being a "power couple" because, as Matthew described it, "...if two people become a power couple, people pursue their careers and their kids suffer."

Matthew's older son, 8-year-old Charles, was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). PDD-NOS is a "sub-threshold" condition in which some features of autism are identified. PDD-NOS is diagnosed in early childhood and is a continuous and lifelong disorder. Individuals with PDD-NOS can have severe and pervasive impairments in the development of reciprocal social interactions, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, and may present with stereotyped behaviors, interests and activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Charles is not particularly verbal and although he does speak in one-sentences, he doesn't usually respond verbally to people or look people in the face. Charles is a good reader; he is quite funny, a good traveler and is fairly flexible. Charles does suffer from anxiety, attention problems and has a history of vomiting when he gets too anxious or when eating something he doesn't like. When Charles was originally diagnosed on the autism spectrum, Matthew was angry, frustrated and above all else, scared. Matthew had an extensive history working with children with developmental, cognitive and physical disabilities at a day camp but working with children with autism was always the scariest for him.

"The lack of connection, because of all those children – often they were very warm, loving children, but the autistic children just did not connect. And I just was very frustrated because it was very difficult to reach them. It was very difficult for me. And then the fact that I didn't know if they were aware of what was going on. And so it was very scary."

When Charles was first given the diagnosis of PDD-NOS at 2 years old, Matthew was not quite sure what the diagnosis meant (i.e., "NOS"). However, he felt happy because he thought the diagnosis would allow him to get Charles services. Subsequent to receiving the diagnosis, Matthew and his wife began a "race for the cure."

“It’s a rush to do as much as you can as fast as you can. My son was – even to this day had about seven activities a week. Every day. My wife’s thing is sort of like a race for the cure. That’s how I felt it was after the diagnosis. Race for the cure. We were like, what can I do? What can I do?... We would research it and test it out and everything else. We were just so desperate.”

Charles had been on several medications (allergy, ADHD, anti-depressants) and had been involved in a variety of different therapeutic interventions – Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), Relationship Development Therapy (RDT), behavior therapy, Floortime, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech lessons, integrated drama, and hippotherapy (horseback riding). Along the way, Matthew had educated himself on autism and even created an internet blog for fathers of children with special needs. By educating himself and networking with others, Matthew became a strong advocate for Charles and is very involved in his special education programming.

During the interview, it was apparent that Matthew was very involved in Charles’ educational needs. He was versed on the processes and regulations of special education and spoke passionately about his advocacy work. Matthew was a smart man with a sense of humor. He had many stories to share. To the researcher, these experiences must have been difficult at the time, but Matthew was able to reflect on these stories with humor. He and his wife had gone through challenges with Charles and one could tell by talking with Matthew that his life had changed dramatically because of Charles’ disability. However, one could also tell that Matthew had a very special connection to both of his sons and could identify with Charles’ difficulties. Matthew disclosed a history of learning difficulties that he had experienced, and a history of social and emotional disabilities in his family. Even though Matthew felt his wife still carried much guilt, it appeared he had

been able to make sense of Charles' disability. He took pride in Charles' development and had adjusted his expectations. When Matthew told the researcher that Charles had recently spontaneously asked him a question, I asked Matthew what that was like for him.

He responded:

“I don't think he's ever asked me a question...I was taken aback, He said something like, 'What's your favorite movie?' I'm like, oh my God – he's trying to have a conversation. Now most people have those sorts of things when the kid is 2. Mine's just a little bit delayed; six or seven years...So my journey's just a little different than other people. It's a little bit more delayed. My issue is if I get there, if he becomes independent at 30, 40 – I think I'll be very happy. It's sort of -- the timeframes are a little bit different.”

Martin and Daniel

Martin was an engineer for a company in a city about an hour and a half from his home. He lived with his wife and two children. His wife had an advanced degree in psychology, with a specialization in child and school psychology. They have a 16-year-old daughter and a 13-year-old son. Their son, Daniel, was classified for special education under the category of Specific Learning Disability when he was 7 years old and in the third grade. Because Martin's wife was a psychologist, she was able to help explain the special education process to Martin, but even with her expertise, navigating the system and obtaining services for Daniel had been “stressful and emotional.”

Dyslexia is one of the most commonly diagnosed learning disabilities in school-aged children. Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability which results in difficulties with language skills, namely reading. Otherwise known as a “reading disorder” in the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), individuals with dyslexia have difficulties in reading fluency, speed and comprehension relative to others

their age and as measured on standardized tests. Many young children who are later diagnosed with dyslexia present with speech difficulties. This was the case with Daniel. Martin and his wife first started noticing Daniel's speech problems at a young age and they brought him to a speech therapist. This intervention helped; however, when he was in second grade, they became concerned because of Daniel's reading difficulties. Daniel was tested through his district between the end of second grade and third grade and was given the classification of Specific Learning Disability at that time.

Daniel is considered twice exceptional because he was learning disabled and had a high intelligence quotient (IQ). Daniel's IQ fell in the gifted range of intelligence, which meant he had an IQ of 130 or above (100 is average). According to Martin, they started noticing Daniel's giftedness when he was about 2 years-old.

"He articulated concepts and had questions, for instance, surrounding politics at a very young age. It was evident to us, but also to others, like my brother-in-law. We don't see them too often, but this was when he was a little older. They went for a walk and when they came back, I said, 'How was the walk?' He said, 'Oh, it was good, but I just had an adult conversation with a 4-year-old.'"

Martin described an adversarial, at times contentious relationship with the district. Many of their disputes involved the dual exceptionality and creating a program that met Daniel's needs. Martin was able to cite several instances, meetings and correspondence between home and the school that were emotional and exhausting for Martin and his wife. Because of her expertise within the field, Martin's wife was able to take on much of the advocacy early on, but after some time, Martin was able to learn more about the system and Daniel's rights as a student in special education.

When interviewing Martin, the researcher got the sense that this was a very grounded, insightful and caring individual. He spoke highly of his children and seemed proud of their academic, social and emotional development. Martin was an involved father who, although he had a long commute and work day, tried to find time to spend with his family. He credited his wife for much of the “burden” of dealing with the special education department. While she had taken on the lead role, he felt they worked as a team and communicated effectively about decisions regarding Daniel’s program. Martin and his wife’s history with the school were filled with frustrations, but through it all, the two of them had remained a team. When asked about his relationship with his wife, he described it as strong.

“This year we’ll be married twenty years. I’m looking forward to many more. We have our moments. We don’t have a lot of differences in our outlook on life or childrearing...we’re kind of kindred spirits in that sense.”

Jake and Christopher

Jake was the director of a non-academic department at a large university that was located about ten minutes from his family’s home. Jake lived with his wife and two children. His wife was an adjunct professor and his children, both boys, were 13 years old and 10 years old. Jake’s younger son, Christopher, was diagnosed with dyslexia and classified with Specific Learning Disability. Jake explained that Christopher had experienced a series of challenges when he was a young child. As a youngster, Christopher had much difficulty with communication skills and articulation, so Jake and his wife brought him to a speech therapist. By the time he was 3 years old, Jake and his wife were only able to understand about 10 percent of what he said.

When Christopher was to begin preschool, Jake described the first of many “frustrating” meetings with special education personnel. At that time, they would not provide Christopher with any additional help and did not find him eligible for special education services. Because the school would not provide services and their older son was also having learning difficulties and was not found eligible for services, Jake and his wife decided to enroll their children in a private school. When he was in first grade, Christopher began having difficulty with writing, reading and spelling and was taken for a learning evaluation at a community clinic. After the assessment, the clinician diagnosed Christopher with a learning disability (dyslexia).

By the time Christopher was in fifth grade, Jake and his wife decided to bring both children back to the public school. Having gone through the process with their older child, Jake and his wife were better prepared to advocate for special education services for Christopher. Furthermore, they compiled reports from Christopher’s teachers from his private school and researched their rights as parents.

“We’re -- our eyes were wide open. We had basically went through the handbook, looked at what our rights were as parents and said, ‘Okay, we want this, and we want it done before school starts. And we want a child study team convened, and we want to pull together all the material that we need.’”

Christopher was found eligible for special education services and had been rather successful in his academics, socially with friends, and on sports teams and afterschool activities. Jake and his wife had had many challenges advocating for Christopher and remained very active in his special education program.

Jake was a very energetic, personable man who spoke highly of his children. He seemed to enjoy being a father and had a special relationship with his children. Jake had

coached his children in sports and told many stories about the quality time they spent together. He spoke passionately about his role as father and how important he felt the school's role was in educating children. He was also able to relate to Christopher's difficulties in reading. As a child he, too, had trouble reading. While he had mixed feelings about Christopher's special education classification, he found it to be accurate and validated his wife and his concerns. Jake told the researcher many stories about his times with his children. It was a theme of the interview and something Jake seemed to enjoy. Many of his stories were humorous and painted a picture of a man enjoying his time with his children and family. When explaining the joys and challenges of fatherhood, Jake launched into a story about his children seeing old movies he grew up watching and how he enjoyed taking his children on family vacations. First, though, he described his greatest joy:

“Well, the greatest joy of being a parent – mother, father – is watching the world through your child's eyes as they become aware of what goes on around them. You kind of – you're reenergized in terms of what life is like, in terms of all the experiences that kids have growing up. That's a wonderful aspect of it. If I had to pick one thing that is the greatest aspect of being a dad, it's seeing that.”

Russell and Michael

Russell had a law degree and worked as a real estate consultant. He lived with his wife, also an attorney, and their two teenaged sons. Russell's younger son, 13-year-old Michael, was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and was classified under Other Health Impaired for special education services. Michael was also considered twice exceptional because his IQ was 130 or higher. As a parent advocate, Russell's wife was considered an expert on special education policy and spent much time

working with parents, public school administrators and child study team personnel. Still, it was very frustrating advocating for Michael. As a matter of fact, Russell described the process as a battle.

“There’s the annual IEP issue, and there are the battles that are continuing during the course of the year where you try to get something changed or something adapted or fine-tuned. Every year, the IEP meeting would be a battle, and we’d go into it knowing it’s going to be a battle.”

Diagnosed with ADHD, Michael had difficulties with concentration and attention, as well as trouble with handwriting. The essential features of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder are inattention and/or hyperactivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). There are subtypes of ADHD as well. For some individuals, they can be characterized as having both inattention and hyperactivity; for others, they are predominantly inattentive. In the third subtype, individuals are predominantly hyperactive-impulsive. For Michael, he was diagnosed as predominantly inattentive. In addition to his ADHD, Michael fell in the gifted range of intelligence. This dual exceptionality was often the center of many disputes with the district. Because Michael was able to produce work at a higher level, Russell and his wife wanted the school to individualize his program so the IEP goals were at a higher standard.

Russell had many opinions about the special education process, particularly the IEP process and how and when meetings were held. Although he tried to make most of the meetings, it was his wife who was the point person for Michael’s program. Russell and his wife communicated about the decisions, but because Russell had his own business, it was often difficult for him to make every meeting. Russell was able to remain involved in his children’s activities. He coached their sports teams for several years and claimed being a father was “the best job in the world.”

When interviewing Russell, it was apparent that he was involved and did his best to be available to his sons. He was a passionate man who spoke openly about his family and children, as well as his experiences growing up in his family. Russell was a hard worker and seemed to have a tough persona; however, when the interview shifted towards his experiences being a father, his expression and tone of voice took on a different, affectionate quality. Russell expressed a very strong relationship with his children and had enjoyed watching them transition through the different stages of childhood and adolescence. He called being a father the “best job in the world” and claimed he had “two little friends.” Russell cared very much about their education. While he acknowledged that school is for education, he saw it as a very important experience, for both social and emotional development, and he wanted the school to take it as seriously as he did.

“You’re dealing with my child’s future here. My kid’s only going to be 13 years old once, and what happens to him when he’s 13 and how he develops into a 14-year-old, you have a big impact on and I want it to be done right.”

CHAPTER IV

Results Section

The interviewer explored how fathers experience their involvement in their children's special education program and the issues and challenges they face. During the interviews, the participants shared many stories about their children, experiences with the special education system, their communication with school personnel and the obstacles they encountered when advocating for their children. The participants discussed what they wanted schools to know about fathers with children in special education and what they wanted most from teachers. Furthermore, they offered recommendations to fathers of newly classified children, and to school practitioners looking to increase and strengthen the involvement of fathers so they can be more active and a positive resource in the process.

Five primary categories emerged from the data and have been organized into the following sections: (1) Emotional impact on fathers of having a child with a disability, (2) Obtaining services and support at school, (3) Interactions with school personnel, (4) Recommendations to schools and special education personnel, and (5) Words of advice to fathers of children entering the special education system.

Emotional Impact of Having a Child with a Disability

The participants in this study spoke about the emotional impact of being a father of a child with a disability. While the researcher did not ask about the “emotional impact” outright, the theme emerged throughout the interview. This section discusses the emotional impact by focusing on the following themes: (a) relationships with their children, (b) life changes, (c) feelings about classification and/or diagnosis, and (d) support.

Relationship with their Children

All of the fathers spoke about having good relationships with their children. They were involved in activities with their children (i.e., homework help) and tried to stay active in going to events such as chorus concerts, sports and class trips. Two of the fathers, Jake and Russell, coached their sons in sports. Martin enjoyed going to basketball games and playing basketball with Daniel. When Matthew spoke about going to Charles’ chorus concert, he said his feelings were mixed. He was happy because Charles was participating with typically developing children, but felt bad because his child was still segregated.

“So they put him there and they put all the handicapped kids on the bottom. And I don’t know, I felt bad because he was on the side and buried. You couldn’t see him or anything. I felt like they sort of buried the handicapped kids at the end. I understand why, because the kids were acting up, they needed to pull the kids – they had to pull Charles out at one point. So I felt bad. I felt good that he was doing something and he enjoyed it, but I felt bad that they had to put him at the bottom and they had to make special arrangements and everything else. But I felt good that they pushed a little bit and he was doing it. So it’s sort of mixed.”

Many of the fathers were able to relate to their sons' disabilities. For instance, Russell admitted to suffering from ADHD, Jake mentioned having grown up with a less severe case of dyslexia, and Matthew spoke about being multiply learning disabled. Furthermore, Jake and Matthew had family members with similar disabilities as their children. In Russell's case, he spoke about his own ADHD as well as his poor handwriting, which he also had in common with Michael.

“Michael has horrific handwriting. I mean it's indecipherable. I don't have good handwriting, either, so I don't doubt where he gets it from.”

All in all, these fathers generally spoke highly about their relationships with their children and the joys of parenthood. The fathers in the study had children with varied disabilities (i.e. PDD-NOS is very different from dyslexia), but all spoke about their father-son relationship as typical. Although Matthew described moments that were very stressful, he acknowledged the joys of seeing Charles accomplish things and treated him the same as his non-disabled brother. Martin described his joy of parenting coming from “seeing Daniel grow and develop and spending time together.” All of the fathers described a feeling of wanting to spend more time with their children, but because of work and life responsibilities, it was difficult. For instance, Martin worked about 90 minutes away and is usually very tired when he comes home. While his family does make an effort to eat dinner together, spending quality time is his biggest challenge as a father.

“I come home from work at 7:00 at night, and they're home at that point, but everyone's had a long day, and they have homework, and I'm tired and have to grab a bite...so I'm wiped...so that's the big challenge for me personally is finding the time and, I guess, energy, to have real quality time with them.”

Life Changes

Many of the fathers in the study described having to make decisions that impacted their employment, work schedules and financial situations. Three of the fathers enrolled their children in private speech therapy. In Matthew's case, it took many years for the insurance company to begin paying back some of the costs. Because Charles is diagnosed on the autism spectrum, he has been involved in a number of therapies and interventions, most of them at a great financial cost to Matthew and his family.

"... We were spending \$30,000 a year out of pocket. Not covered by insurance. That was after – if you fought with the insurance, I mean, speech therapy was one of the hardest services to get. I was fired by two speech therapists because the insurance companies wouldn't pay them."

For Martin, Matthew and Jake, they decided to enroll their sons in private schools because their public schools were not meeting their children's needs. In Jake's case, his town's school did not find Christopher eligible for special education and Jake feared he wouldn't get a quality education in the public school. The private school he enrolled Christopher in had a specialized program and had taken the time to do an evaluation of Christopher's learning strengths and weaknesses.

"That's really where Christopher got his more formal evaluation. Now, it wasn't the formal state one. It was the way the private school would do it. I don't think they've given him IEP or anything like that. But they looked at him. They evaluated his needs. It is a school that has a very individualized curriculum."

Martin also sent Daniel to private school because he and his wife were concerned the school was not implementing the IEP correctly. They were also disturbed by some of the behavior displayed by school personnel so they made the decision to send him to a private school for several years that had a smaller environment and a smaller class size. Martin described this as a "big change" and suggested that he and his wife were debating

whether they will send him to a private high school when he transitions out of middle school.

Many of the fathers have had to make concessions when it came to work responsibilities. For instance, all of the fathers described having to attend a lot of meetings. Russell had his own business so finding time in his schedule to leave for meetings was difficult at times. When Martin's children were young, he designed his work schedule so he could work from home one day a week. He keeps that schedule now, even with his children in their teenage years, to be available for all of the special education meetings he and his wife must attend. For the most part, he and the other fathers were able to go to the "important" meetings, but for the other "run-of-the-mill" meetings, they were unable to go.

Matthew has had a different experience with work responsibilities and employment history. According to Matthew, he and his wife had "power careers," but he was unable to pursue an executive position because of Charles' needs. Matthew and his wife work very hard, but since Charles was born, Matthew had changed jobs five times. At the time of the interview, Charles was 8 years old. Matthew alluded to a sense of frustration and regret about not being able to pursue a powerful career because he had to attend to Charles' school and various programs.

"Now I'm at a big company, and one of the reasons is it's a publicly traded company and I'm making a lot less because I can't pursue the executive career in a risky profession such as marketing in technology where things change a lot, because I can't. My wife also has a power career and that's important to her, too. I think this time I took the pay cut and said I'm not gonna pursue a career, which is the last thing I thought would happen. I was thinking when I was coming here, that I'm very frustrated that I've only been here a year – that I can't, if my son was not handicapped I possibly – it would be possible probably to do it. I know that kids always are sacrifices, and with a couple that's a lot of career

stuff. But I can't. I just can't. There's just too much that I have to do. I have to go to school things. There's too much monitoring. My wife works – is not an executive, but is definitely on that path, and she works an hour-and-a-half away. And that's the other thing we decided, we said somebody has to work close.”

Feelings about Classification and/or Diagnosis

For the most part, the fathers dealt with the news of their children's classifications and diagnoses with understanding. For some, their feelings were mixed. For instance, Jake said he felt good about Christopher's classification, but admitted to having mixed feelings. He was able to make sense of the Learning Disabilities classification due partly because it confirmed what he and his wife had thought for some time, as well as his own history of learning disabilities.

“I must admit the feelings are mixed. I mean you don't want to know your child is in need of help, you know? You feel like, ‘Well, is there something wrong?’ But for three main reasons, I feel good about it. One, because I think it's accurate. Two, in many ways it is a confirmation of what Allison and I have been working with him on for many years. And three, and this is a very personal thing, looking back on my own childhood, I'm pretty sure I had a form of dyslexia growing up...”

For Russell, his feelings of anger and frustration at the school for the amount of time it took to complete the assessment process overwhelmed any feelings he may have had about Michael's classification. By then, Michael's M.D. had diagnosed him with ADHD. Russell felt satisfied with the diagnosis and understood his son's attention problems because he, too, had attention difficulties; however, when it was time for the school to classify Michael for services, Russell's reaction was more out of frustration because it took a long time. Furthermore, he was “steaming” because in the meantime, Michael was not receiving services.

“I saw myself basically running in place with this whole thing as we were fighting with them to get them to find out what’s wrong so we can get started on fixing what’s wrong. I guess it was more impatience on my part, ‘cause it only took really a few months when I think about it, two to three months to get the process done. I guess because of how much time had gone by beforehand - - I was still steaming from that...Your kid only goes through these things at one point in their life, and I don’t want to put him off track anymore than he has to be.”

Support

A prevailing theme during the interviews was how the fathers accessed support and who were supportive to them. The researcher also asked the fathers outright about where they found support. For the most part, the fathers in this study all spoke about their wives as teammates and partners in terms of raising their children and advocating for services in the school. All four of the fathers credited their wives for educating them on different aspects of special education law and policy. For instance, Russell’s and Martin’s wives were specialists in different fields related to child and school psychology. Russell’s wife was a lawyer and worked as an advocate for families with children in special education. She takes care of many of the school-related research and has explained special education law to Russell (who is also a lawyer).

Martin’s wife took the lead role as advocate for Daniel. She was a doctoral level school psychologist so she had the background and understanding of special education procedures, law and children’s educational rights. Martin and Russell described their wives as the “point person” because of their expertise. As Martin described:

“She takes a big burden on the special education front, too, because it’s one thing to – for me to change my schedule and go to meetings, but in our advocacy for Daniel, she’s very committed to that and spends a lot of time researching and comparing notes with other people in similar circumstances, emailing teachers and administrators. So that’s a very big commitment.”

Many of the fathers were also part of networks and support groups for families with children in special education. Their friends and group members provided support and access to resources and information. Matthew was part of a network and online blog for children and families of kids with special needs. He shares and receives information and educational resources.

Jake and Martin mentioned their parents and extended family, including wives' families, as part of their support network. Martin's in-laws were "very close to the kids" and "really enjoy each other's company." As a matter of fact, his wife's parents were visiting at the time of the interview. Jake talked about his immediate family as very supportive and talked to his own father often. When he needed answers or information about educational milestones and schooling, he looked to his mother and his wife's mother who were career educators.

All in all, the fathers talked about their strong relationships with their wives. They were all married for 20 years or longer and saw eye-to-eye on most of the decisions regarding family matters, children's education, finances and discipline (although Matthew claimed his wife was a little more lenient than he was). Although 20 or more years of marriage brought different challenges and hardships, all four couples were able to "work through it." After years of being an athlete, Russell had to experience a number of operations on his hips, back, shoulder and knee. As a result, he was not as available to his family as he would have liked and "felt terrible about that." When asked what his relationship with his wife was like, he explained:

"We're married 24 years now. So 24 years with somebody, you see a lot. You see a lot of good, you see some not so good, and you work your way through the tough ones and try to get back to where you were. I give her a lot of credit, because it must have been very tough on her when I was

going through that period where I was so sick. I know it was tough on her, but we seem to have come through it okay, and we're on the same page as far as the kids are concerned."

Obtaining Services and Support at School

The fathers spoke about the obstacles they encountered when trying to obtain services and support for their children at school. While many of them recognized the challenges and pressures that school systems are under (i.e. financial constraints, having to meet the needs of all the students in the school, etc), the fathers spent much time discussing their frustrations when working with the school. This section is separated according to the following themes: (a) emotional reactions and (b) advocacy.

Emotional Reactions

All of the fathers dealt with a variety of emotions when trying to obtain services for their children. They described many of their experiences as stressful, frustrating, and emotionally exhausting. When the school told Jake they would not move forward with an evaluation of Christopher the first time, he and his wife requested one. He could only describe it as frustrating:

"When it is your own kid, it's very, very frustrating because you know what he needs, and you say, "Well, I can do so much privately, but this is really what he needs." And I guess my feeling about it was, under the law, my understanding was he should have qualified for this, but the feeling at the time was we just can't make it work."

For Martin, he and his wife were very concerned about how Daniel was receiving his services. They spent much time in meetings and advocating for his rights as a special education student. Like the other fathers in the study, Martin described the experiences as frustrating and emotional:

“Generally, the meetings are somewhat stressful. We have a kind of a – to some extent, a contentious relationship with the district, and it’s very emotional for us...Some meetings, I get fired up and will be more emotional and direct with them...I think it’s so emotional because we’re putting in a tremendous amount of time and effort, almost to an exhausting level, to try to get what Daniel is entitled to from the district.”

Russell had gone through the special education process twice. His older son was also referred for services but did not get classified. Because of his history with the system, Russell went into the process for Michael already frustrated. However, his experiences obtaining services for Michael was also “very frustrating” and he found the whole process “shortsighted.”

“Incredibly frustrating...because your kids only go through first grade once and second grade hopefully once...obviously, pre-classification was just frustration...my whole recollection – my whole impression was just frustration at trying to get things that seemed to be easy accommodations incorporated.”

Russell described the process of obtaining services as a “battle” and a “war.” He used these descriptors often and for different periods of the special education process. He and his wife were often “fighting” with the school.

“There’s the annual IEP issue, and there are the battles that are continuing during the course of the year where you try to get something changed or something adapted to, fine-tuned. Every year, the IEP meetings would be a battle, and we’d go into it knowing it’s going to be a battle.”

A common reason the fathers felt so frustrated and emotional when trying to obtain services was because they didn’t think the school understood or knew their children. For Matthew, Jake, and Martin, this was a common theme throughout their interviews. Matthew described several instances when school personnel (guidance counselor, child study team members, and teachers) had misunderstood Charles’ behaviors. One of his teachers believed Charles was “mentally retarded” and had treated

him as such. Matthew felt that many of the staff had lower expectations for Charles because they thought he was “mentally retarded” and were unable (or unwilling) to pinpoint the cause of some of his behaviors. The following passage about Charles’ transition from a special services school to the local public school illustrates Matthew’s point:

“Well, they promised they’d do a transition. They never did any transition. He spent the first three months throwing up at the school. They didn’t tell me until eight weeks later that he was throwing up every other day, which was purely anxiety. The teacher had a strict ABA classroom where she was giving rewards on a lottery basis. And Charles was getting upset because he had earned all his points, but there was only a one in five chance he would get the winnings. So the teacher thought he was mentally retarded. But the real issue was Charles was so nervous, he just froze up. So he spent the first half of the year frozen and the teacher’s like ‘he’s got a low intellect.’ I’m like ‘you’re the first person in six years who thinks he has a low intellect.’”

Jake and Martin also struggled with the notion that the school did not know or understand their children. Martin spoke about this issue throughout the interview. He told of how the school had a “difficult time getting their arms around” how to meet Daniel’s needs as an intellectually gifted student with a learning disability. Although there is a very small percentage of students with dual exceptionality, it was particularly frustrating when Martin and his wife heard one of the school personnel say, “Oh, well, he’s not that unusual and solidly average.” Because his wife was a psychologist, she was able to explain to Martin the uniqueness of Daniel’s abilities. As they went through the process, Martin felt the root of the problem was that the school did not understand who Daniel was:

“They -- and the source of the problem, and I’ve alluded to it, is a lack -- apparently a lack of understanding who Daniel is, but also a lack of willingness or capability to implement his IEP.”

Advocacy

The fathers spoke about their efforts to obtain services for their children. In an effort to gain services, make sure the school was implementing their child's IEP correctly and to hold people accountable, the fathers and their wives had to become advocates for their children. Many of the fathers did not trust the school to implement the IEP and follow the services and goals as they were written. Matthew lost trust in the school after Charles went through a very difficult transition back to the district. He was never informed about Charles' difficulties and, as a result, Matthew felt he needed to be more visible for Charles.

"I said I will never trust you again. You have completely blown everything. He had a horrible transition. He's regressed. He's now labeled practically mentally retarded. And he hasn't accomplished anything...So I said, guess what? If I have to be here in your office every week – and I told this to the caseworker who was a lovely woman – guess what? I'm now the pain-in-the-ass parent...And I took a job here purposely because I'm 15 minutes away from the school so I can drop by any time."

In order to advocate for their children, the fathers and their wives often had to seek out others to assist in their efforts. All of the fathers found help in their friends or support networks. However, all of the fathers were forced to advocate for assistance from school administrators (i.e., principal, assistant superintendents and superintendents), school board members, contacts in the field and even heads of major associations. Matthew, Jake and Martin were all in contact with the school principal. Matthew would often use his discussions with the school principal to inform him of the difficulties Charles was experiencing, as well as leverage during the child study team meetings. For instance, Matthew mentioned to the caseworker and school team that he had already

discussed certain points with the principal. Matthew believed that by mentioning the principal, it would assist in his advocacy for Charles.

Jake also met with the school principal to make sure Christopher was assured a smooth transition back to the district. Jake believed that the school principal could offer more support in making sure Christopher's school experience was a good one. Jake also used "contacts in the field" to advocate for Christopher and discussed his challenges making progress with school board members.

The superintendent and assistant superintendent have also been contacted to assist these fathers in their advocacy. Russell and Martin were in contact with their superintendents because of the challenges they faced when working with the school. In Martin's case, he and his wife were involved in a contentious situation with one of the administrators in Daniel's school. In this case, the assistant superintendent had to get involved and make sure the problem was resolved. From that point forward, Martin and his wife were able to rely on her to support them.

"We basically had to go over the administrator's head to the assistant superintendent for Daniel...so we found an advocate in the assistant superintendent."

Interactions with School Personnel

Because meeting with special educators, child study team members and often administrators is part of the process when a child is in the special education system, these fathers have had many different experiences when interacting with school personnel. The process usually begins with the initial referral meeting where it is determined whether the child study team will move forward with an evaluation. Then, there is an IEP meeting where the child study team, in partnership with the parents, develops and begins

implementing a program based on the child's educational needs. There are also annual review meetings which are in place to monitor progress and give feedback to parents. Furthermore, many parents (and these fathers specifically) tended to meet and/or communicate with personnel throughout the year. In these fathers' cases, they often communicated via email and phone, as well as meeting at different times to monitor the IEP implementation and discuss their children's progress. This section describes their interactions by addressing the following themes: (a) roles during meetings, (b) team membership, and (c) communication between father and the school.

Roles during Meetings

In general, the fathers saw their involvement as important. They spoke about having to support the process, remain partners with their wives and to advocate for their children. When meeting with school personnel, these fathers felt they had to take on different roles at different times. At times, they felt they had to be forceful or stern. Other times, some fathers had gotten "excited" or "emotional" because they wanted to get the school personnel's attention and/or because they didn't think they were being taken seriously. For instance, Russell explained:

"When I get into a meeting and I get the runaround, and (wife) is already talking to them for months on end about a certain issue and they just haven't resolved it, they haven't addressed it, and I just – 'do your damn job!' – I've been known to say that. I've managed to keep my language pretty kosher, I think, but I've lost my temper a few times. And mostly, like I said, a couple of times it was on purpose, but most of the time it was not...it's to get their attention, because I thought they weren't really getting how important that issue was for us...As we were going through this thing, I just thought, 'These people are too lackadaisical. This person is punching the clock and I gotta change the mood in here.'"

Jake, Martin and Matthew also talked about the ways they needed to act in order to be taken seriously and obtain services. For instance, prior to certain meetings, Jake and his wife felt they needed to present themselves as “forceful and stern.” He made a point to remain respectful; but at the same time, he would quickly assess who he needed to connect with and focus his attention on that person.

“We were going to be forceful. Weren’t rude. We weren’t nasty. Didn’t question anything, anybody’s commitment to this. We understand this, but we want to make sure that he is evaluated the way he needs to be evaluated...We were pretty forceful. The trick I’ve learned whenever I have a meeting like this, they always have a long table. Usually the person running the meeting sits at one end of the table. I sit at the other end. So I basically say, “Okay. Distractions aside, you’re the person I need to connect with.”

For the most part, the fathers described their role with their wives as “good cop, bad cop.” They all described a dynamic where they would trade roles depending on the situation and the amount of time they were advocating for a particular issue. Most of the time, the fathers were the “bad cop.” Similar to Russell’s quote above, the fathers often played the “bad cop” to get the team members’ attention. Other times, it was the result of the emotional tone of the meetings. Martin told stories where he would get “fired up” at the meetings because of the circumstances, and immediately his wife and he would take on the “good cop, bad cop” roles. Taking on the “bad cop” role, he would become “more emotional and direct with them.”

Matthew had traded the “good cop, bad cop” role with his wife often. When Matthew changed jobs and was closer to the school, he decided to take on the “bad cop role” more permanently because he could come to the school more often.

“We’ve alternated with IEP’s, my wife and I, because we like to play the good cop/bad cop. In the past, I’ve been the good cop, my wife has been

the bad cop. And now I think I'm the bad cop because I can pester them more. So my wife's the good cop."

Team Membership

Most of the fathers felt they were part of a team with the school. While they all had stories about contention or a struggle to advocate for their children, for the most part, they still thought there was a team in place and they were part of it. The fathers recognized the constraints that schools are under, especially within the special education department where there are many kids with varied needs. However, when Russell was asked if he thought he was part of a team with the educational professionals at the school, he said he recognized the pressures that everyone was under, but he did not think he was part of the team. He thought "it is a matter of 'get what you are able to pull out.'" For Martin, he agreed he was part of the team, but it was a "dysfunctional team, but a team nonetheless."

A common theme throughout the interviews was the variability between who the "point person" was for the fathers and their wives. Since one of the goals of this study is to learn how to impact school psychologists' everyday practice and increase father involvement, the researcher asked directly who they considered the "point person" was for obtaining information, asking questions and general communication. When asked, none of the fathers identified the school psychologist. The four fathers identified their child's teacher, assistant superintendent, social worker and the guidance counselors as each person's primary contact in the school.

Communication between Father and the School

The majority of communication between the school and the fathers went through their wives first. Most of the fathers explained that their wives were the ones who were contacted by the special education department, the child's teacher and the additional personnel working with the child, and their wives would then tell the fathers what they said. Sometimes, when the school used email, both parents were sent the message. The fathers all explained that the email back to the school would always be discussed between both parents and they would both have input into the tone and content of the return email. Martin spoke about his unique email transmissions. He noticed that when emails went from home to school, both parent's email addresses would be included along with all the relevant school personnel's. However, rather than press "reply all," the members of the school would take his name off the recipient list. This happened whether there were many recipients or only a couple. He explained:

"My wife copies me on the emails to the district, but when they respond, they don't copy me...I hadn't really thought about that, but I see the emails. Believe me, (my wife) forwards them and says, 'Oh, look what they said now. We're going to have to respond. What do we say? What do we do?' But they don't tend to copy me on the response, even though she copies me on what we might send to them. So that's an interesting dynamic. I mean, when I email, I might add some people, but I wouldn't take off. So at some level, they're making a conscious effort to, say, reply – not reply to all – or reply to all or taking me off or whatever. I don't know."

The fathers all agreed about the importance of having good communication with the school. For some, the teachers had been responsive to the fathers. For Jake, he was generally pleased with how his son's teacher kept up communication with his wife and him. While acknowledging that most of his communication came from the teacher and not the child study team, Jake explained he was satisfied with this:

“I’m not aware of having any conversations with any individuals (in the child study team) in that regard. We have been dealing mostly through the teacher which has been fine.”

In general though, the fathers were disappointed with the communication between themselves and the school. Many thought it was inconsistent or not timely, while others did not trust the information they were getting. Russell and Martin described some conversations as insincere (getting “the runaround”). When asked if he thought the school was responsive, Russell explained:

“For the most part, they seem responsive – responsive in that they acknowledge what you’ve said. They may not do jack about it, but they acknowledge that you said something.”

Matthew had set up a system with his son’s teacher so they would communicate daily about Charles’ behavior in school. In general, the notebook was filled with Charles’ “bad behavior” and how he was “acting out” in school. Matthew would communicate what was happening at home and how different things might trigger different behaviors. All in all though, the communication from the teacher was “nothing but negative stuff.” It gave Matthew the impression that Charles’ teacher was overwhelmed, not receiving support from the school and didn’t like his son.

“All I did was get complaints. “Charles didn’t do this, Charles didn’t do that.” It was embarrassing. Not a single nice thing. Nothing but a teacher under water with a kid she didn’t like who wasn’t performing.”

Recommendations to Schools and Special Education Personnel

One of the goals of this study was to find ways school practitioners can improve the relationship between fathers and the special education process. Therefore, it was important to find out from the fathers what they would change or recommend to increase father involvement. Based on their experiences, the fathers had several recommendations

for the special education system and educational practitioners. This section focuses on the suggestions to improve school practices and incorporate programs that would benefit fathers.

Practice and Programs

The fathers had several answers to how they would change the process to get fathers more involved. Their responses fell into two main categories: changing practice and developing programs. All of the fathers wanted to remain involved and for the school to recognize them as a resource for their children. Many of them also acknowledged that it was up to the families to keep the fathers involved. As Martin explained, if the family values the father's participation, it is up to them to make that a priority. He considered the expectation to participate a "juggling act" between the family and the school system.

The fathers had several recommendations for getting other fathers involved without having to make drastic changes to practice. For instance, Jake wanted the school to reach out to fathers more and let fathers know they want them involved. He felt fathers would participate more if schools made more of an effort to encourage participation.

"We should be encouraged to participate as much as possible and every effort should be made for us to give whatever we can in the system...You know, I'm not saying that they have to reach out to us all the time, but there are fathers out there. If I knew of things that were going on that I could participate in, I'd do it...I'm available as a resource."

Another way to alter practice is for school personnel to make more of an effort to acknowledge fathers during meetings and to communicate with them directly through email and phone. Many of the fathers reported that the emails and phone calls home would usually go to their wives first. One father considered himself a "stopgap" if his

wife was unavailable. Earlier, Martin told his story about being included on emails (see above). He also made suggestions for including the father more during meetings. Like most of the fathers, Martin spoke about his wife taking the lead at meetings and the school personnel directing most of their comments and questions to her, rather than both of them:

“They should try to put an emphasis on getting the father more involved in the process. That takes an effort to try to draw the father in, in the meeting to draw the father out to participate and to get in the mix more as opposed to sitting there listening to the wife talk who knows the teachers and knows what’s going on and has seen the homework and what not...Instead of throwing it to the parents, direct something more towards the father, the person that’s less involved in the situation.”

The fathers made several recommendations for programs to get fathers more involved. Many of the fathers were unaware of the policy and procedures of special education. They were unaware of the process of getting their children involved in special education; and they did not understand the IEP process or how to hold individuals accountable for its implementation. Furthermore, it was difficult for them to navigate the system and to advocate for their children’s rights. All of the fathers suggested an information meeting and/or an educational session designed for father. Russell felt that a meeting would help because the child study team does not give fathers the information they need. He felt “they’re going to give you a watered-down version of what you can expect.” Therefore, Russell, as well as the other fathers, felt it would be a great help if the school offered a specialist led, educationally-based group where they could gather information, share resources and ask questions. Another idea was to invite the fathers to learn about the process from a panel of specialists. Both ideas would offer the fathers an opportunity to ask questions and gather information. As Russell explained:

“It would be nice to know ‘Okay, IEP’s should start at this time. Planning for the IEP’s should start at this point in the year...so that you’re more aware of what to expect.’”

Jake also thought that an information session would be a good way to get fathers involved. In fact, he said he would be “more than happy to attend an information session, maybe with an advocate or something.” Jake also thought that an informational session could assist fathers in understanding “how to get where you need to go.” As Jake explained:

“I would have liked to have been able to sit down, you know, in a small group setting or even one on one and say, ‘Look, walk me through how I do this in a way that is realistic.’”

In Matthew’s experience, feedback and education sessions for fathers were very helpful at Charles’ private school, but the public school district Charles went to now did not have them available. He also thought that these kinds of programs could educate “angry” fathers who were more likely to sue because they felt disconnected and “less understanding of the school district.” In a way, these kinds of sessions could be both informative to fathers and prevent litigious action against the district.

“I think having feedback sessions like special programs for fathers to talk to the school district. I think special programs to educate and give feedback. There are plenty of angry fathers who want to sue. They’re even worse than I am. They are less understanding of the school.”

Another recommendation for schools would be more flexibility when scheduling meetings. As Jake explained, usually the biggest challenge was being told a meeting was a certain time and not being able to attend. Sometimes they were able to find times that worked, but often it was not so easy. For the most part, the fathers understood that teachers and personnel have their own limitations, but they did have suggestions to be more accommodating for fathers. As Russell, Matthew and Martin explained, many

fathers commute over an hour to work every day and have a difficult time making meetings in the morning or by 3:00 p.m. Therefore, evening meetings or even having the option to a weekend meeting may get fathers more involved.

“I would think about trying to have the IEP meetings on a Saturday for those families that requested it, so if the father is working a regular (long hours), you’re leaving the house at 6:30, and you’re getting back home at 7:45 at night. You haven’t seen your kids; you haven’t had a bite to eat...If you make it on a Saturday, at least you’re giving people – fathers or working parents – the chance to get to a meeting without having to take time off from work. I know that would cause all kind of issues with the teachers union and those kinds of things, but that’s one step I think they should consider.”

Many of the fathers suggested using technology more to include them when making decisions about their child’s special education program. For example, email, teleconferences and web-based conferences were a few ways to engage fathers during meetings and in day-to-day communication. Furthermore, this would enable fathers to participate from work or business trips. Many of the fathers agreed that advances in technology make it possible for them to participate more from a distance. Technology, as Matthew explained, could really help with the scheduling problems.

“I think e-mail and technology is very important. Fathers can be involved. You can have Web conference. Let them do it over the phone. I don’t think anyone’s ever proposed an IEP over the phone. Let the father participate by phone! They can’t always do it in person...So I think technology and e-mail and teleconferences – a conference line. You do it on a conference line. That’s the way we do business anyway.”

Martin also felt that email and technology were the right steps to getting fathers involved. Using email and the internet to keep families connected to their child’s educational program were becoming more common in Daniel’s school. Many of the fathers mentioned that tests and homework grades were posted regularly and fathers (and

mothers) had easy access to this information. To Martin, the school's use of email and other forms of technology was "something positive that existed to allow fathers to be more involved." This was a way Martin felt "father can be a little closer to the action."

Words of Advice

The fathers in this study were asked to provide advice to fathers of newly diagnosed or classified children. The purpose was to get a sense of what these fathers thought others should know before entering the special education system. In general, the advice centered around how to gain access to the system, becoming more involved, and being a positive resource in the process. The following section is a brief list of some of these fathers' recommendations:

- 1) Be prepared, do research and know your rights
- 2) Join support groups or online blogs
- 3) Network with other families of children with special needs in the special education system
- 4) Support wife or partner in the process
- 5) Advocate, don't give up, and fight for your child
- 6) Hold the school and teachers accountable for implementing the IEP

The results section ends with this quote from Russell. It summarizes how the fathers felt about their roles as parents, the school's job to educate and the need for

fathers to remain involved in the process. It also encapsulates what they wanted the school system to know about involved fathers who have children in special education:

“It’s our kids’ futures we’re talking about here, and that’s the most important thing in any parent’s life – I mean any parent who’s got their head on straight – the most important thing is your kids. That’s the future, and that’s why you have kids, is to help them grow and become good people. You work hard to provide the financial stuff, and you get them into a good school district, and you hope that the school’s going to provide the education. And when they’re not and they’re not cooperating with you, people can get excited.”

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of how fathers experience their involvement in their children's special education program. By examining the perspectives of fathers, school practitioners and researchers can better formulate best practices to increase their involvement and develop evidence-based research to further foster their engagement in the process. Four fathers were interviewed about their families, their relationship with their children, their feelings about the special education process, their roles within the special education process, where they find support and what they would change about the special education system to increase father involvement. All of the fathers recognized the importance of fathers when it comes to children's education. Furthermore, they agreed there is much the school can do to utilize them as a resource and strengthen the partnership between school and home.

Many themes emerged from the data and this chapter will focus on the main points of discussion. The main points will be presented within the context of three of the original four questions posed by the researcher. This chapter will also highlight the limitations of the study. Future implications for researchers and school psychologists looking to strengthen the relationship between special education practitioners and fathers will also be discussed.

What are the concerns and challenges of fathers who have children in special education?

The study revealed that fathers have several concerns regarding their children's special education program and face many challenges as they try to navigate the system and advocate for their children. These fathers were concerned about the school not understanding their children and their needs, being unable or unwilling to implement their IEP and not communicating effectively about their children's progress and challenges. The concerns voiced by these fathers are consistent with some of the findings in research on parent satisfaction with special education teams (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Specifically, communication between the fathers and the child study team and/or related school personnel was a big concern for these fathers and one that has been well documented in the literature. For instance, League and Ford (1996) found that fathers felt, in general, that they did not receive the communication from the school or the child's teacher that they needed. While League and Ford (1996) was done prior to the establishment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), the present study shows fathers (and mothers) are still finding it difficult and frustrating to have consistent communication between home and school.

Another concern that was voiced throughout many of the interviews involved the school having an inaccurate view of the children's strengths, weaknesses, and learning potential. Three fathers clearly thought the school had faulty perspectives about their children and it greatly impacted the way in which services were delivered and how their children were treated. Additionally, this also impacted how IEPs were constructed and the goals and objectives the children were expected to meet by the end of the year. Often, child study teams arrange for related services to be delivered to the student, and they are

added to the IEP. Behavior plans, counseling, physical therapy and occupational therapy are all examples of related services. As per the IEP, these services are designed to meet the individual needs of the child; therefore, if a child is diagnosed with PDD-NOS and the prevailing belief among staff is that the child is “mentally retarded,” staff expectations could be impacted and the delivery of such services could be compromised.

The fathers all had to deal with many challenges as they assumed an advocacy role on behalf of their children. First, having emotional reactions from hearing their child’s classifications and participating in the special education process were common among the fathers. While the classifications and diagnoses varied, all of the fathers dealt with a range of emotions throughout the process. For some, anger and frustration were the dominant emotions. Unfortunately, these reactions have been documented among parents involved in the special education process (Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008, Salas, 2004). These fathers advocated strongly for their children’s rights and often felt “emotionally exhausted” at meetings.

During the interviews, the fathers spoke about making life changes that impacted them financially (seeking out private services, enrolling their children in private schools, etc.), interrupted employment goals and schedules (changing jobs, working from home, etc.), interrupted their children’s school experience (being shifted from public school to private school and then back to public school) and even changing their expectations of their child. They also reported having to make scheduling changes in order to attend meetings.

It is common for mothers, not fathers, to receive social support when it comes to parenting (Lamb, 2000). However, in this study, all four of the fathers were able to

identify individuals, groups, networks, friends and family members as their support. This seems to run contrary to much of the literature on fathers' social support. These men also identified their wives as their primary support, and all expressed strong relationships. It was also common for most of these fathers to be involved in networks or have friends that had children in special education. This seems to have created camaraderie, as well as the ability to obtain and share resources with others.

How do fathers of children in special education describe their relationships with educational professionals?

Although some parents (fathers and mothers) have found working with educational professionals generally satisfying (Goldstein et al., 1980), there are many reports of dissatisfaction among parents (Fish, 2008). The same can be said about the experiences of the fathers in this study. One father described a positive relationship with his child's teacher; however, all four fathers described relationships with personnel that were contentious, frustrating, emotionally exhausting, insincere and dysfunctional. The primary themes that emerged in the analysis detailed the fathers' perceptions of team membership, communication and experiences during meetings.

In Stoner et al. (2005), it was found that meetings between parents and special education personnel were traumatic, confusing and complicated. Similarly, fathers in the present study felt angry and frustrated when meeting with child study teams and when interacting with them through email and phone. There was a general sense of mistrust among the fathers and this tended to manifest itself during meetings when they often had to take on specific roles with their wives (i.e., good cop, bad cop) in order to advocate for changes in services or the implementation of certain programs. Most of the fathers

described a dynamic where they would take on these roles depending on the situation and would have to get “emotional” or “forceful” to make progress or get the school personnel’s attention.

There was a general sense that the fathers felt a part of the team with the school, although Martin described it as a “dysfunctional team.” However, they still did not feel as though their opinions or perspectives mattered as much as their wives. Additionally, the school personnel do not look towards the fathers for input during meetings and tend to communicate directly with mothers, rather than fathers, outside of meetings. This supports the research that fathers generally feel left out and schools lack the initiative to include them (Carpenter & Towers, 2008; Carpenter & Herbert, 1997). There was no better example of this than Martin’s experience with email transmissions from the school (see: Research Finding, *Communication between Fathers and the School*). While Martin’s email address was on the email sent to the school, it was seemingly purposefully taken off when it was returned to his wife.

How can school professionals improve the relationship between fathers and the special education process so they become positive resources and partners in the process?

All of the fathers were eager to share recommendations that could improve the relationship between fathers and the special education process. The fathers all recognized themselves as positive resources willing to support the process and their child’s education. Consistent with Carpenter and Towers (2008), these fathers are committed to the learning and development of their children and want to be involved in the decisions that impact their children’s lives.

One way schools can begin to improve the relationship is to recognize the impact fathers have on their children's lives. As Rimm-Kaufman and Zhang (2005) argue, teachers and school personnel should begin by recognizing the uniqueness of being a father. This involves understanding their life changes, emotional commitment, employment demands and desire to be involved. Although busy, the fathers in the present study were active in helping their children with homework, attended their children's extracurricular events, coached them in sports and had unique, very strong relationships with their children. They worked full time jobs, some traveling distances up to 90 minutes, and all remained passionate advocates for their children's special education program. Even though they were busy, they still wanted the school to reach out to them more to let them know they wanted fathers involved. As a matter of fact, Jake felt fathers would participate more if schools made more of an effort to encourage participation (see: Recommendations, *Practices and Programs*). Furthermore, the fathers in the present study wanted school personnel to understand just how important their children's education program was to them. As Russell reported, he wanted school professionals to understand his frustration and that his "blown fuses" during meetings are not personal attacks, but occur because his child's education "means so much to him."

Many of the recommendations fell into two main categories: practice and programs. One of the most commonly cited reasons why fathers are unable to attend school meetings or teacher conferences is a father's employment schedule (Freiman & Berkeley, 2002). Accordingly, the fathers recommended more flexibility with scheduling meetings. They gave suggestions for evening meetings, weekend meetings or even using technology to facilitate communication during meetings. Email, web-based conferences,

and teleconferences were a few ways fathers recommended using technology to increase involvement. The use of technology can also increase involvement and help fathers feel more connected to their children's school. This was another example of how to keep fathers engaged in the process. Not only could these methods assist fathers when they cannot attend a meeting, it can also keep them involved by communicating with their teacher and CST members about their child's progress, needs and to get updates on their schoolwork.

Some fathers also spoke about ways school personnel could increase involvement by simply acknowledging fathers more. For instance, several fathers reported feeling like a "stop gap" between the school and their wives. Others mentioned not being spoken to during meetings. By asking fathers for their input at meetings or simply being looked at more when discussing their child, school personnel can increase their engagement with the process.

The fathers also recommended programs to increase father involvement. These programs should be educationally based so fathers have a chance to ask questions about special education matters (i.e., practices, procedures and special education law), their child's classification and to share resources and experiences with other fathers in similar circumstances. Some fathers felt that the school should hold a meeting with a panel of experts. Since many of the fathers did not have experience and background in child development or the special education process, experts could answer questions and help alleviate stress related to their role in the process.

Limitations

The primary goal of this study was to gain insight into fathers' experiences with their children and the special education system. By using an open-ended interview protocol, the researcher was able to learn more about their perspectives and experiences while having the flexibility for discussion. However, taking this approach resulted in several limitations including recruiting method, sample size, participant demographics and uncertain reliability of results.

The first limitation was the recruiting method. The researcher relied on special education programs and a family support group facilitator. The families were contacted by the facilitator; they did not openly volunteer to be part of the study. Therefore, the facilitator may have "hand-picked" participants she felt had interesting or more extensive stories to tell. Furthermore, because the participants were already members of a support network, they were probably more involved in their child's special education than the average father and more likely to agree to take part in this study.

The second limitation involved sample size. There were only four fathers involved in this study; therefore, it makes it very difficult to generalize the results. However, this research was considered a "stepping stone" to more systematic, evidence-based studies on father involvement, which justifies the use of a small sample. With that said, it is important to note that this group of fathers is fairly homogenous. They all lived in suburban homes, had four members in their family, the children discussed were all boys, and they fell in middle to upper income brackets. Conversely, this leads to the third limitation of the study, the participant demographics. The results may have been different had the participants had children in urban schools, if the child's genders were different, if

the fathers were diverse in race, ethnicity or income, or were divorced, separated or living out of the home. Then again, considering the participants' socio-economic status and related demographics, this might indicate an underestimate of the burden parents face when advocating for special education services.

The fourth limitation was the uncertain reliability. The interviews were read, analyzed, coded and interpreted by one researcher. This study did not rely on inter-rater reliability methods, inter-observer reliability methods or other reliability checks commonly used when analyzing qualitative research. As a result, caution should be used in generalizing the findings.

Implications for School Psychologists

Despite the legal mandates stipulating *parent* involvement and research indicating a positive relationship between father involvement and the academic, social and emotional well-being in children (Mehta & Richards, 2002; Quinn, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Zhang, 2005), fathers continuously feel left out and neglected by school professionals. This study highlights the importance of understanding and utilizing fathers in the special education process. Many fathers want to be involved in the process, but find it difficult because of employment demands, scheduling conflicts and the schools' seeming lack of initiatives to engage fathers and build positive relationships.

It is important for school psychologists to consider the father's role in their children's education and recognize them as an underutilized resource. Consistent with Dale (1996), school psychologists should start by taking the perspective of fathers and consider them a partner in the process. School psychologists are in a unique position to

challenge existing beliefs that fathers of special education students are “the peripheral parent” and “just a shadow” in terms of school involvement. As the fathers in the present study have shown, they want to be involved; they consider themselves a team with their wives and want desperately for the school to work collaboratively with them for the benefit of their children. Fathers in the present study considered themselves advocates; rather than advocating against the school, school psychologists need to form a partnership with fathers where collaboration is the theme, not contention.

Fathers entering the special education system have often experienced emotional, social and financial changes as a result of their child’s disability. Many will have had experiences with other human service organizations and personnel. School psychologists should seize the opportunity to take on the role of *systems consultant* and provide assistance to these fathers. The assistance can come in the form of linking them with outside mental health or wellness services, providing recommendations for community supports, and above all else, providing these fathers with information. Fathers (and mothers) should not be left alone to understand the processes and procedures of special education. It is a daunting task even for specialists in the field. By ensuring fathers have an understanding of the process and being available to answer their questions, school psychologists are sending the message that they are a valued part of a team and support can come from the school. It should also be noted that, like their children, fathers (and mothers) may, too, have a disability. This was a theme in the present study. School psychologists should remain sensitive to this during their interactions and when delivering information.

New strategies should be used to engage fathers. For instance, timing events and meetings appropriately, and using technology to ensure participation when fathers cannot attend. School psychologists should also advocate for programs in the school that are appealing to fathers. Examples from the present study include networking with other parents, educational support groups and panel presentations. School psychologists should also consider the father when communicating between home and school. Because technology has made it easier to communicate, school personnel should include both parents on email transmissions and when contacting them by phone. Furthermore, as experts in child psychology and schools, school psychologists should disseminate information to school staff about the importance of parent involvement and model behavior conducive to enriching the school's relationship with fathers.

Implications for Future Research

The present study was designed to serve as a catalyst for future research on father involvement in the special education process. The goal was to gain an understanding of fathers and to use qualitative data to formulate the next step in creating evidence-based programs to engage fathers and maintain their involvement. This study reveals several areas of future research.

First, it would be valuable to conduct an exploratory study examining the challenges faced by fathers of minority descent. The fathers in the present study were all Caucasian; therefore, future research looking at the challenges of ethnic and racial minority fathers would help establish an understanding of whether significant differences exist. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to examine the challenges faced by fathers with

lower income. Comparing variables such as available resources, support, advocacy and access between fathers of higher income and fathers with lower income can help school professionals understand the needs, experiences and level of support necessary to form a partnership. The same approach should be taken with fathers with varied levels of education. The fathers in the present study were all college educated and many had advanced degrees. It would be interesting to research how fathers without a high school diploma experience their roles within the special education process. In the same vein, research into the experiences of fathers who are English-language learners or recent immigrants can provide information about culturally competent practices and the kinds of supports schools should provide to this population.

Lastly, a study investigating the experiences of fathers living outside of the home, divorced or widowed would shed light on how they remain engaged in their child's program while living out of the home or without the support of their wives. It could shed light on how schools reach out to these fathers to involve them in the planning and implementation of their child's special education program. As the present study showed, the father's strong partnership with the child's mother was a common theme; therefore, an in-depth study of how fathers engage and advocate while living out of the home or without the support of the child's mother would provide valuable information for practitioners working with these families.

Conclusion

It is important for school psychologists and related special education professionals to understand the perspectives of fathers of children within the special education system.

The popular belief is that when service providers or school personnel talk about *family involvement*, they are referring only to the child's mother. School psychologists are in a position to stop the perpetuation of this belief by reaching out to fathers in a way that fosters their involvement. By valuing their participation, listening to their concerns and points of view, remaining flexible and understanding and regarding them as a resource in the process, a true school-family partnership can occur and parent collaboration will be successful. School professionals and parents have a common goal – the best possible educational experience for their children. Although there will always be challenges to reaching this goal, by understanding the perspectives of all parties and by valuing each person's place in the process, the potential for reaching this goal is greatly enhanced.

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APPENDIX A

Participant's Letter of Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Jeffrey Selman, Psy.M., who is a doctoral student at the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University. The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of the experiences of fathers who have a child with a disability, and to learn more about father involvement in their child's special education program.

Approximately four fathers will participate in the study, and each individual's participation will last approximately 90 minutes. You will take part in one interview that will last about 90 minutes. The interview will include questions about how you experience being a father of a child with a disability, and the issues and challenges associated with your involvement in his/her schooling.

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be assigned a random code number that will be used on the interview. Your name will appear only on a list of subjects, and will not be linked to the code number that is assigned to you.

There are no foreseeable risks to participation in this study. For completing the interviews, you will receive information on resources and services available in the community, as well as an opportunity to ask questions related to your child's disability and your role as a parent within the school system. Furthermore, you will be contributing to the research on father involvement which can impact the way special educators and schools relate to fathers. The knowledge that we obtain from your participation, and the participation of other volunteers, may help us to better understand the experiences of fathers and how to best work with them.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

This research is confidential. Mr. Selman will keep this information confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location. The researcher and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated, unless you have agreed otherwise.

If you have any questions about the study procedures, you may contact Jeffrey Selman at:
126 Harper St.

Apt. 2A

Highland Park, NJ 08904

Tel: 917-771-9334

Email: jselman33@yahoo.com

Or, you may contact Dr. Lew Gantwerk, faculty advisor at:
Center for Applied Psychology
Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology
41A Gordon Road
Livingston Campus
Piscataway, NJ 08854
Tel: 732-445-7795
Email: gantwerk@rci.rutgers.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Sponsored Programs Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
3 Rutgers Plaza
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559
Tel: 732-932-0150 ext. 2104
Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

Subject _____ Date _____

Principal Investigator _____ Date _____

APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Interview

Hello, I'm Jeffrey Selman, a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University. First, I want to thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this dissertation project. The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the experiences of fathers who have a child in special education and the issues and challenges associated with being involved in their child's special education program.

Over the next 90 minutes or so, I will be asking you a number of open-ended questions about *your* experiences. Some questions will be about your family, some will be about you, and others will be about your child's school. If at any time you are uncomfortable responding to a question, feel free to not answer the question, or you may generalize your response instead of stating something specific about your personal experience.

Before I turn on the recorder, do you have any questions?

Part I

1. *Let's begin by talking about your family. Tell me about your family and who lives in your home.*

2. *Tell me about (NAME of Child).*

(Probing Questions: What's his personality like? What are his interests/hobbies? What are some of his strengths? What are some of his challenges? How does he get along with his siblings? With you? With his mom?)

3. *When did you first start noticing (NAME) was having difficulty in school? Were there difficulties in other areas as well (i.e., at home, with friends, with family)?*

4. *Walk me through how (NAME) became involved in the special education process.*

(Probing Questions: Tell me about how he was first identified. What was it like for you when he went through the assessments and during the classification meetings? How did you feel when he was given his classification? Did he ever get a formal diagnosis?)

5. *What kinds of life changes have you had to make since (NAME) entered the special education system (at work, home, scheduling, etc.)?*

(Probing Questions: How has your schedule changed? Is it difficult to make meetings?)

Part II

6. *What have been the joys and challenges of being a father?*

7. *Where do you find support?*

8. *How would you describe your relationship with your wife/partner?*

(Probing Questions: Are there roles you each have with your child/children?)

9. *Tell me about your relationship with your father or father figure.*

(Probing Question: How involved was he in your schooling?)

10. *How have these two people (father and wife/partner) impacted your parenting skills?*

Part III

11. *Tell me about (NAME)'s school.*

12. *Describe the services (NAME) receives in school.*

13. *Can you describe the different meetings you have been apart of at school. What was it like for you to be there...not be there?*

14. *Tell me about the communication between you and the school.*

(Probing Questions: Who calls who? Why? How do you usually get information, does the teacher or school psychologist ever contact you directly?)

15. *Do you feel like you are part of a team with the educational professionals?*

(Probing Questions: Why or why not? Is there a "go to" person you feel you can count on?)

16. *What are your educational concerns for your child?*

(Probing Questions: How about outside of education: Social concerns, etc.?)

Part III

17. *If you were in charge of special education, what would you do to increase father involvement? What changes would you make?*

(Probing Questions: Are there programs schools can offer? What kinds of programs would you go to? Would you go to father/male only groups? How about programs offered to the whole family? Do you feel the school offers enough information to fathers?)

18. *If I were a father of a newly diagnosed or classified child with ____, what advice would you give me? What are some things you think I should know?*

19. *As a father, tell me what you want most from teacher.*
20. *What do you want special educators and schools to know about fathers? About being a father of a child with a disability/in special education?*