HOW DO PARENTS EXPERIENCE THE IEP PROCESS?

BY

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Doctor of Education

Approved by

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Abstract

The Individual Education Plan (IEP) process can be critical to a student's scholastic success (Hock, & Boltax, 1995; Menlove, Hudson & Suter, 2001; Test et. al, 2004; Van Reusen & Bos, 1994). Attending an IEP meeting can present opportunities for participation in productive decision-making about educational programming or barriers that may impede the very same decision-making process (Harry, 1992). For the IEP meeting to be conducted with minimal conflict, it is critical that there be trust between parents and school districts personnel.

Because the law mandates that parents are essential participants in the IEP process, healthy relationships between school personnel and parents are critical. In too many instances, the IEP experience means parents and districts are at odds (Feinburg, Beyer, and Moses, 2002; Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Yell and Drasgow, 2000). Conflict in the IEP process not only impacts the success of the student's program, but it can also be costly for school districts.

Research into how parents experience the IEP process would help understand these relationships. I wanted to know more about how the IEP experience effects parent - school relations. I asked the following question:

How do parents experience the IEP process?

This study examines the experience of parents within the IEP process. It details how information, communication, team culture and IEP meeting process have a significant impact on the way parents experience the IEP process and whether conflicts are encouraged to bloom.

Dedication

I'd like to thank my mom and pop for encouraging me along this journey. I'd like to thank my daughter, Bella for inspiring me to be a hard-working student. I like to thank Erika for her unwavering support.

I'd like to thank Dr. Daniel Battey for his guidance and assistance, both have been invaluable.

I'd like to thank my dissertation group mates for always being there to support the effort, no matter how crazy the idea. I want to also recognize Dr. Melinda Mangin for her encouragement and Dr. Alisa Belzer for her instruction.

I'd like to thank my committee: Dr. Battey, Dr. Angela O'Donnell, and Dr. Judith Harrison, who let me be a TA in her class, twice!

Chapter 1 Introduction to the Study

Common to the educational programming for all special education students is the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is a legal document, which is supposed to be crafted by the Child Study Team (CST) with input from service providers, teachers, and the parents. The purpose of the document is to customize instruction and create an appropriate learning environment for every student with special needs. The guarantee of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for eligible students is the cornerstone of special education (Chopp, 2012). The mandated annual IEP process includes a conversation between families and school personnel concerning the design and implementation of special education services for children with special needs. The IEP process can be critical to a student's scholastic success (Hanline, Suchman & Demmerle, 1989; Hock, & Boltax, 1995; Menlove, Hudson & Suter, 2001; Test et. al, 2004; Van Reusen & Bos, 1994). Attending an IEP meeting can present opportunities for participation in productive decision-making or barriers that may impede the very same decision-making process (Harry, 1992). All parties involved – educators, administrators, parents, advocates – may have strong feelings about the services that are needed, proposed programs, and the locations and methodologies for implementing them. For the IEP meeting to be conducted with minimal conflict, it is critical that there be trust between parents and school districts.

The parent IEP experience should not be so difficult to track and monitor. Not only does the law guarantee FAPE, but it also requires that parents be an integral part of the decision-making process for their child's educational program. Because the law mandates that parents are an essential component in the IEP process, healthy relationships between school and parents are

critical. However, in too many instances, the IEP experience results in parents and district personnel being at odds (Feinburg, Beyer, &Moses, 2002; Mandlawitz, 2002, Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Yell and Drasgow, 2000). Relationships can become so strained that school districts are taken to court by families that are very dissatisfied with the IEP proceedings. The number of due process hearings between parents of children with disabilities and school districts is growing nationwide (Mandlawitz, 2002; Yell and Drasgow, 2000; Zablotsky, Boswell, and Smith, 2012). Conflict in the IEP process not only impacts the success of the student's program, but it can also be financially costly for school districts.

School districts bear a burden for each case that goes to court. “Per the 2002 Congressional record, the costs accrued per hearing can range between $50,000 and $100,000” (Mueller, 2009, p. 60). Based on the National Center for Dispute Resolution in Education’s 2008 report, school districts across the United States potentially spend more than $90 million a year in conflict resolution (Mueller, Singer, & Carranza, 2006). In addition, families of children who receive special education services under IDEA regulations, and who feel compelled to take a case beyond mediation, generally recover reasonable attorney's fees and related costs from the school districts.

If the relationship is contentious or ineffective, it can ripple beyond the IEP meeting and affect the child's success in the classroom, comfort in the school building, and relationship with the support staff (Fleming, & Monda-Amaya, 2001; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). I’ve witnessed the breakdown of communication and trust between parents and schools. These breakdowns can, and often do lead to conflict, litigation, and increased costs for school districts (Yell & Drasgow, 2000). Research into how parents experience the IEP process would help

understand these relationships. I wanted to know more about how the IEP experience affects parent - school relations. I asked the following question:

How do parents experience the IEP process?

This study examines the experience of parents within the IEP process. I define experiences as personal involvement throughout events before, during, and after the IEP meeting.

This portfolio contains three distinct components of my study, "HOW DO PARENTS EXPERIENCE THE IEP PROCESS?" These components include a scholarly research article, a practitioner article, and a conference presentation. Two of the articles will enable me to reach a broad range of change agents, including educators and administrators who have the authority to search out best practices for K-12 schools. The conference presentation allowed me to speak to Child Study Teams and other IEP team members to show how parents were describing their experiences. It is my hope that these three documents contribute to creating change in special education. Each artifact is detailed below.

The first artifact of my study is a research article that will be submitted to *Exceptional Children*. The purpose of the research article was to look at how parent experiences were tied to prior research on the subject of parents and IEPs. My research article demonstrates that we can build on our prior knowledge of parent experiences by examining the IEP as a year-long process, and not just a solitary meeting. By focusing on the entirety of the process we can examine how learning new information advises the negotiating process. We can look for opportunities for IEP teams and parents to communicate on a scheduled basis. This article is intended for those looking at research for ways to improve the parent IEP experience. The article is a good examination of how to leverage CST – parent interactions into a win-win situation.

The second artifact of my study is a practioners' article that was submitted to *Educational Administration Quarterly*. The article examines sources of conflict. The IEP process does not need to become so contentious. Making concrete changes to CST/IEP protocols will help parents and school districts avoid getting enmeshed in battles where the likelihood of a lose-lose outcome is high. For parents, the benefits include avoiding disruption of services for their child, not to mention, stress, aggravation, alienation, time, and money. School districts can avoid sacrificing productivity, time, resources, reputation, goodwill in their communities, and tens of thousands of dollars on legal fees. This article offers three types of new protocols around communication, culture, and process that can be instituted immediately to cut down on parent – IEP team conflict.

My third artifact is a presentation given at the *2018 NJ Council of Exceptional Children Conference* at Ramapo College in March 2018. The presentation was given to an audience of Child Study team members and teachers. The nearly one-hour presentation focused on how members impact and effect the experiences of parents at an IEP meeting, how parents respond to the experience, and how they view their children's service providers. It included recommendations for practical changes that can be made at the school level that would have an immediate impact on improving the parent experience.

Although each component mentioned above is distinct, each demonstrates the knowledge and skills I have developed from both my professors and independent research during my time as a doctoral student. These three artifacts are designed to reach different audiences and create change in multiple areas of the education system. As a change agent, I realize the importance of

sharing my findings with educational stakeholders who have the ability to improve the IEP process for children and their families.

Chapter 2: Research Article for Exceptional Children Submission: How Do Parents Experience the IEP Process?

Andrew A. Panico

Rutgers University

December 2018

Abstract

The IEP process can be critical to a student's scholastic success (Hock, & Boltax, 1995; Menlove, Hudson & Suter, 2001; Test et. al, 2004; Van Reusen & Bos, 1994). Attending an IEP meeting can present opportunities for participation in productive decision-making or barriers that may impede the very same decision-making process (Harry, 1992). For the IEP meeting to be conducted with minimal conflict, it is critical that there be trust between parents and school districts.

Because the law mandates that parents are an essential component in the IEP process, healthy relationships between school and parents are critical. In too many instances the IEP experience means parents and districts at odds (Feinburg, Beyer, and Moses, 2002; Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Yell and Drasgow, 2000). Conflict in the IEP process not only impacts the success of the student's program, but it can also be costly for school districts.

Research into how parents experience the IEP process would help understand these relationships. I wanted to know more about how the IEP experience effects parent - school relations. I asked the following question:

How do parents experience the IEP process?

This study examines the experience of parents within the IEP process. It details how information, communication, team culture and meeting process have significant impact on the way parents experience the IEP process and whether conflicts are encouraged to bloom.

Problem Statement

Common to the educational programming for all special education students is the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is a legal document, which is supposed to be crafted by the Child Study Team (CST) with input from service providers, teachers, and the parents. The purpose of the document is to customize instruction and create an appropriate learning environment for every student with special needs. The guarantee of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for eligible students is the cornerstone of special education (Chopp, 2012). The mandated annual IEP process includes a conversation between families and school personnel concerning the design and implementation of special education services for children with special needs. The IEP process can be critical to a student's scholastic success (Hanline, Suchman & Demmerle, 1989; Hock, & Boltax, 1995; Menlove, Hudson & Suter, 2001; Test et. al, 2004; Van Reusen & Bos, 1994). Attending an IEP meeting can present opportunities for participation in productive decision-making or barriers that may impede the very same decision-making process (Harry, 1992). All parties involved – educators, administrators, parents, advocates – may have strong feelings about the services that are needed, proposed programs, and the locations and methodologies for implementing them. For the IEP meeting to be conducted with minimal conflict, it is critical that there be trust between parents and school districts.

The parent IEP experience should not be so difficult to track and monitor. Not only does the law guarantee FAPE, but it also requires that parents be an integral part of the decision-making process for their child's educational program. Because the law mandates that parents are an essential component in the IEP process, healthy relationships between school and parents are critical. However, in too many instances the IEP experience results in parents and districts being at odds (Feinburg, Beyer, and Moses, 2002; Mandlawitz, 2002, Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Yell

and Drasgow, 2000). Relationships can become so strained that school districts are taken to court by families that are very dissatisfied with the IEP proceedings. The number of due process hearings between parents of children with disabilities and school districts is growing nationwide (Mandlawitz, 2002; Yell and Drasgow, 2000; Zablotsky, Boswell, and Smith, 2012). Conflict in the IEP process not only impacts the success of the student's program, but it can also be financially costly for school districts.

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If the relationship is contentious or ineffective, it can ripple beyond the IEP meeting and affect the child's success in the classroom, comfort in the school building, and relationship with the support staff (Fleming, & Monda-Amaya, 2001; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). I’ve witnessed the breakdown of communication and trust between parents and schools. These breakdowns can, and often do lead to conflict, litigation, and increased costs for school districts (Yell & Drasgow, 2000). Research into how parents experience the IEP process would help understand these relationships. I wanted to know more about how the IEP experience effects parent - school relations. I asked the following question:

How do parents experience the IEP process

This study examines the experience of parents within the IEP process. I define experiences as personal involvement throughout events before, during, and after the IEP meeting. There is a small body of recent research on parent involvement with the IEP process. Some of these studies combine elements and themes relating to IEP development or IEP implementation.

Literature Review

A great deal of thought has gone into the outcomes of IEP conflict. Several studies have looked at the crisis of families in conflict with the school over the IEP process (Feinberg, Beyer & Moses, 2002; Mueller, 2009; Mueller, Singer & Draper, 2008; Scheffel, Rude & Bole, 2005). However, very few studies have looked at the experiences that lead to families clashing with schools over communication and culture around the IEP process. A study that examines how parents' experience different elements of the IEP process would contribute to what we know about creating a more productive and less contentious IEP process. A more productive IEP process could increase the level of parent satisfaction, thus reducing conflict between them and school districts.

In some instances, the literature on parent's IEP meeting involvement exposes some dark results. Many studies looked at specific IEP meeting outcomes. Parent's sense of powerlessness and ignorance at IEP meetings can ignite suspicion, or in some cases, struggles with educators (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). In general, encountering conflict is an ongoing problem in the field of special education that can have damaging effects on administrators, teachers, parents, and most significantly, the child (Hess et al., 2006; Mueller et al., 2008; Pudelski, 2013; Scheffel, Rude, & Bole, 2005). Some studies looked at disputes between parents and special education teachers that occur when parents experience a lack of

trust, poor communication, strained relationships, and misunderstanding of the special education law (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller et al., 2008). Missing, is a look into parent perceptions of their experience for the entire IEP, that goes beyond the meetings and looks at the entire IEP process. To prevent conflicts and increase two-way parent-teacher collaborations, building on the limited research about parent experiences with the IEP team process can inform this field about effective or ineffective partnering strategies.

Early research into the encounters of parents in the IEP meeting process involved the relationship between parent satisfaction and levels of participation and examined participation from the educator's perspective**.** More recently, there has been a shift away from looking at parent feedback levels to looking at the entirety of the parent IEP meeting involvement. Fish (2008) conducted a survey of 51 families of students with an IEP. Most of the parents were middle-to-upper-middle class, and more than 75% were Caucasian. In his study, most parents reported a positive overall IEP meeting experience. They believed that IEP team members treated them with respect. Fish pointed out that despite an unequal relationship between parents and IEP team members, things did improve after educational awareness developed for parents. In another study that looked at parent participation, Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003) surveyed 45 families of children with autism about their participation and perceptions of IEP meetings. They found that most parents expressed overall satisfaction with the process, although some parents mentioned that they were unable to contribute to the development of the IEP because it was prepared before the meeting. Here we have the developing need to look beyond parent participation during meetings. This work examines positive experiences during meetings but does not explore the need to look beyond the meeting dynamic.

In an article by Wagner, published on youth participation and transition planning at IEP meetings, he referenced two longitudinal studies of nationally representative samples of students with disabilities (Wagner et al., 2012). The Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study–2 (NLTS2) were both funded by the U.S. Department of Education (Wagner et al., 2012). They measured the experiences of over 11,400 families who attended their child's IEP meetings. Over seventy percent of these parents reported their level of participation in decision- making during meetings was satisfactory (Wagner et al., 2012). The findings of parent satisfaction with the IEP process from these studies show that a full 30% of parents were dissatisfied with the IEP process, but it does not seem to describe what parts of the process impact the entire parent experience. It is interesting that longitudinal studies show that levels of dissatisfaction appear during meetings, but the studies stop short of looking at the entirety of the parent - IEP team relationship.

As scholars began to look at elements of the IEP, different parts of the IEP process began telling us different things. In a study that is closer to representing parent experience, Stoner et al. (2005) interviewed four couples of parents of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). All four sets of parents described the initial IEP meeting— their first formal in-person meeting with the special education personnel—as confusing. Parents reported feeling "completely lost" and stated that the meetings were difficult to process. The authors said that this confusion heightened parental concern and supported attitudes of dissatisfaction with the IEP process. Like Stoner and colleagues, Fish's qualitative study (2006) used semi-structured interviews to examine the perceptions of seven families of children with ASD about the early parts of the IEP progression. All seven sets of parents stated that their initial IEP meeting involvement had been negative. Most indicated that they had been treated poorly by school personnel during IEP meetings. For

example, parents were accused of being unreasonable and blamed for their children's academic and behavioral problems. The study concluded that although relations between parents and schools were complicated, they grew stronger through increased education of student needs amongst educators, and when families were becoming more knowledgeable about the IEP process. Hess, Molina, and Kozleski (2006) conducted a similar study with 27 parents and caregivers in Britain. Mothers and fathers reported feeling helpless at IEP meetings until they learned more about their part as team members and started to act as an advocate for their child. The next step in research would look at what parts of the parent experience lead to most complications and how did parents scale the learning continuum to become better informed participants. Looking beyond the initial meetings could help give a rounder picture of parent experience.

One qualitative study that does look at a broader perspective involved interviews with twenty fathers of students with IEPs to gain insight into their experiences with the IEP process (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Many of the fathers spoke of collaboration and valued the benefit to their children in building partnerships with IEP team members. For these fathers, productive partnering required three key mechanisms: (a) building partnerships by way of trust and collaboration; (b) open, honest, and frequent communication; and (c) listening to parent voice. The fathers recalled specific anecdotes and instances where the three mechanisms existed, and thus, IEP meetings went smoother. The fathers were also able to recognize areas where partnership did not exist and how it affected their participation and the child’s IEP services. The partnership was also described as helpful during times of struggle, where problem-solving required coming together with IEP team members for a resolution. The next step would be to look at what part of the parent experience impacted collaboration and what elements of the IEP

progression affected the parent-CST partnerships. While this study looked across these father's experiences, it was not clear what parts of the process were most impacted by parent - IEP team collaboration.

Summary

The research relating to parent's experience in IEP meetings has come full circle, starting and ending with parent satisfaction. Yet, there are still many gaps in what we know about parents' IEP experience. Although research indicates that most parents walk away satisfied with the IEP process, a full 30% have reason to believe that conflict exists. Parent IEP involvement research looked for a connection between involvement in meetings and parent satisfaction. Rather than examine the entire continuum of parent experience, early IEP researchers focused on parent satisfaction with IEP team meetings, and connections to parent involvement. Some of this early research focused exclusively on measuring parent involvement in the IEP process. Research concerning the parent experience in team meetings needs to consider the entire IEP process, to better understand the interaction between IEP practices and parent's experiences across time.

Methods

Design

I utilized a descriptive research design format using a set of individual and couples' interviews to answer my research question. Parents of children with special needs, representing a diverse ethnic array, were selected for interview using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Secondary or follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify information and to pursue

connections. This qualitative data collection process relied on semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. I conducted these interviews as part of a grounded theory analysis. The interviews comprised eleven open-ended questions intended to elicit evocative descriptions of the IEP process, looking for elements of parent experience. In this case, I relied on interviews for rich descriptions of the experiences of families participating in IEP meetings to create these theoretical relationships.

Participants

To develop rich descriptions of the parent experience, I recruited families through the assistance of a multi-cultural parent support group, **Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN)** that serves thousands of families of children with special needs. **SPAN** is an independent 501(c)3 organization committed to empowering families as advocates and partners in improving education, health, and mental health outcomes for infants, toddlers, children and youth in New Jersey. Parents were chosen based on the following criteria: (a) one or more children aged 8 - 16 currently in public school, (b) one or more children served by an IEP (c) experience in three or more IEP meetings. (d) a willingness to reflect and share their personal experiences. I also attempted to find a culturally rich sample of participants. Parents were informed about the study by a leader who coordinates support activities for the group. The above criteria were selected to find parents who were willing participants, with ample IEP experiences to draw from, whose children represent a cross-section of the special education population.

Data Sources

The initial interview protocols were constructed using questions tested from a pilot study of a similar design. In the pilot study, four sets of parents responded to questions about their experiences in the IEP process. This process helped inform the creation of the questions for this study and possible coding categories.

In the pilot study, there were two groups of parents, those with children in-district, and those with children out-of-district. Several major themes emerged from the data analysis. One overarching finding within these parents' experiences was that they felt frustrated with an overwhelming amount of information. They were particularly frustrated by the vast amounts of content specific terminology, particularly the use of acronyms. Initially, no parents felt knowledgeable enough about the IEP process. However, parents became more satisfied when they had passed a certain point on the learning curve, generally around the one-year mark, or when their child had been sent out-of-district. The pilot study impacted the development of the interview protocol. This research focused on the parents' range and development of experiences with the special education system experienced by the parents as they grew into and learned about the stages of the IEP process. The interviews asked the parents to recall back to their earliest experiences of the IEP process. Additionally, I took notes focused on IEP participants, environment, documentation, leadership, culture, and participation.

Each initial semi-structured interview protocol included eleven questions and took approximately 35 minutes to complete. The interviews were recorded to ensure reliability, and transcripts were from the verbatim recording. Once the initial transcripts were complete, each subject was interviewed a second time as part of a constant comparative analysis for establishing concepts and categories. The participants were asked to comment on categories and themes that

developed from the other initial interviews. Additionally, participants were asked to verify their contribution for accuracy and to determine if it is necessary to add or change any information. The interviews were carried out with a sole parent, who had the choice to be accompanied by a spouse for recollection support. I did the interviews at a time that was convenient for the participants. I did not conduct interviews when the subject's children are present.

Follow-up interviews were conducted once the initial round of interviews had been complete. Rather than rely on preset interview protocols, follow-up interviews asked participants questions about themes that develop from the initial interviews. Therefore, these interviews were responsive to the preliminary analysis from the initial interviews and thus, serve to improve the validity of the study. Follow-up interviews were recorded, transcribed, and member-checked for accuracy. They will last for approximately 20 minutes.

Data Analysis

The bulk of data analysis was accomplished through coding. The process of coding aided in conceptualizing the qualitative data. Data analysis utilized a three-step coding system. First, I read through each of the transcripts as they were completed. I memoed about significant parent experiences. This memoing informed subsequent interviews to check for similarities and differences across the parents

Throughout the interview and coding process, I was creating running notes of each of the concepts that are being identified. This served as an intermediate step between the interviewing and coding. By using these field notes from the interviews, I was able to document the development of categories and concepts throughout the analysis. The constant comparative

method comes into play, generating a model about how the parent comments connect right from the first interview and determine if the model holds up as I analyzed subsequent interviews to document the process of building a theory.

After all the interviews were complete, I will read through each transcript in its entirety. Once I had a sense for the entire dataset I began coding small chunks of text by labeling the actions or features described by the parents with an "open code." Many of the parents' words were lifted directly from the transcripts and infused into the open codes. After coding the first transcript, I reviewed the initially established codes and set code definitions for analyzing the remaining interviews. Then the remaining transcripts were coded using the same process with subsequent modifying and adding to the coding scheme. This supported a cross-interview analysis by noting the number of interviewees that made the same or similar comments within each category and by relying on my field notes. Next, I reviewed the open codes and classified them according to the conceptual categories found in all interviews. Each of the broad codes were checked and considered for child or sub-codes to further delineate the parents' experiences. As parents willingly shared their experiences as participants in the IEP process, codes developed that mirror those found in the pilot study. Analysis done during the pilot study revealed illustrative data within the following five broad areas: culture, communication, environment, information, and procedures. Codes such as confusion, frustration, anger, and resignation were used to capture dissatisfied responses and agreement, and inclusion, confidence, and good works for satisfied responses.

Axial coding was used to look across the two sets of codes, looking for cross-cutting themes. For example, I examined data looking at satisfaction/dissatisfaction in rows and factors

like culture, communication, environment, information, and procedures in columns. I looked at regions of certain codes to see if they were aligned or not aligned. This helped elicit themes that cut across codes beyond simply reporting the codes themselves.

As part of my grounded theory analysis, I attempted to systematically gather data, while being sensitive to the words and actions of the interviewees. I analyzed experiences to develop a theory presented from "the reality" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). I conducted a cross-interview analysis by noting the number of interviewees that made the same or similar comments within each category. These categories were developed into overarching themes with the major related concepts under those themes. I then examined if those themes coalesce into a theory.

Validity

Because questions for this study were originally used in a pilot study of the same nature, I was able to use the pilot study as a check for validity of the parent interviews. In addition, I used member checks, to help improve the accuracy and validity of the study. Both re-stating information during each initial interview and determining accuracy through a follow-up interview were used. The follow-up interviews used emerging themes from initial interviews to affirm content and thematic coding possibilities. After the responses were coded and summarized, I did member checks with participants to evaluate the analysis for accuracy and completeness. During this process, I constantly checked my understanding of the phenomenon by utilizing techniques such as paraphrasing and summarization for clarification. This gave participants opportunity to correct errors and challenge what they perceived as wrong interpretations

Findings

Parent recollection of the IEP process runs a full gamut of positive to negative experiences. Parents typically have one face-to-face meeting per year but need to deal with the IEP team year-round. Early in the progression, parents often flounder. After a dizzying introduction to the process, parents undergo an ascending knowledge curve that helps answer questions and better prepares expectations. When questioned about their own IEP memories, parents were able to recollect those experiences that formed their opinions of the IEP team and colored their feelings about their child's opportunities for success. Both novice and seasoned parent participants were able to describe parts of the process they felt worked well, and parts that left them frustrated. It is important to note, that without sharing information, open communication, and positive team culture, it is not possible to hold productive IEP meetings. The study of parent experiences with the IEP process can be used to help improve the process for parents and children and gives rise to practical improvements and future research. This will be discussed after first presenting the four themes that had the greatest impact on parent's IEP experiences.

Parent Knowledge and Understanding

When they were well informed, parents could be more successful, productive members of the IEP team. The first opportunity for parents to learn about the complexities of the IEP was when they were being introduced to the IEP process. Eleven of the fifteen families interviewed mentioned that information was key to their IEP experience. The process is replete with technical terms, timelines, medical jargon, professional roles, and educational law. None of this knowledge was intuitive for parents, even for those with backgrounds in education or law. Jeff &

Amina W. remembered their first IEP team interaction, “in the beginning when we first had our very first IEP, which was called I believe, like less than a week after ... It was quick after we just had the diagnosis. I didn't understand why everybody was there, what their motivation was. I understood they were professionals.” This type of meeting can have a Learning Consultant, School Psychologist, Social Worker, therapists, teachers, and administrators, most of whom would be unfamiliar to the parents. Not only are they personally unfamiliar, but often their roles, beyond their titles, remain mysterious. Without knowledge about the IEP process, parents shared being scared and feeling vulnerable. Along with the unfamiliar personnel, the terminology of the IEP process is a truncated language of acronyms and therapeutic terminology. A. Lath summed up the experience of many families, “So we actually were not really told how the process works.” Wendy C. remarked, “They're using all these codes and letters. I was completely lost.” Information and formalities controlled by the IEP team that could help parents understand the process was often never shared directly.

Early in the meeting process many parents were forced to search on their own for answers. Their primary resource should be the IEP team, but too often they were rebuffed. Parents began to realize that a genial team wasn’t always an informative team. Grace B. remembered her experience, “At that time, it was cordial and fairly collaborative. I don't know if you want to know how I think about it now, or how I was thinking about it then, but thinking about it now, I realize they withheld a lot of information from me.” Sharma L. recalled, “when we of course went to ask questions, no one would tell us anything”. Early on, parents don’t even know what parts of this new experience they don’t know. There is no formal component of the process that is supposed to educate parents. Amit L. remembered, “no one was prepared to discuss anything with us”. Without some idea of the process, parents are often not aware of the

right questions they need to ask. At this stage of frustration, parents often cross paths with outside advocacy groups that help them prepare for battle with the school district.

Over years of experience and exposure, parents gain knowledge of the parts of the IEP process that are relevant to their child. When it's not provided, information can become a source of conflict. Without explicit educating, there is no way a family can become proficient in the ways and the means of the process. Some who haven't felt as though they were working with a team that informed them, and shared information, had negative feelings about the CST. By that time, too often, they felt like they were in an adversarial situation. Parents were often compelled to prove to the IEP team that they knew their child's rights. Dayana B. defiantly confronted the CST with the law, "They don't want me to know the process or the law. You have to bring it to them and show them that you know it for them to do the right thing." It's not only knowing the law, but also learning what the laws implications are for a child, that parents experience. Suzin T. who gained that knowledge through outside advocacy remembered, "So, it's me having to have the knowledge and press forward that gets her the services that she actually deserves, but I had to be knowledgeable myself going in there. Or else, she would have far less than she does." Parents who aren't educated by their own CST will often become hostile when they must go find this information on their own. At this stage, many parents describe the exchange of information in highly negative terms.

Whether they are slow to deliver information, or never deliver time sensitive information, IEP teams' methods can anger parents. Amina W. recalled being provided an IEP the directed her child to be placed in an out-of-district school, as she recollected, "Deceptive is the best way to put it. Then once I became aware of that I said, 'No I'll sign these after the meeting when I can read them.' This can't happen again. You can't not give us the basic information about how a

school search works, and then tell us, sorry, we're still pushing you." Sometimes the negative feelings result from the lack of sharing. One parent was incredulous, "but thinking about it now, I realize they withheld a lot of information from me. They told me what they thought I wanted to hear". Once the parent identifies the IEP team as an unreliable source of information, it is difficult to get that genie back in the bottle. Though some parents lamented the change of team members due to natural attrition, or school level change over the years, some parents were grateful to let the new team press a reset button. Unfortunately, in some districts, when district leaders like Directors of Special Education or even building level principals had gotten involved in the process, parents were often left with the feeling that non-communication was endemic to the district. Amit L. recalled, "but no one was prepared to discuss anything with us, and we had an interim superintendent, interim everybody. Horrible interim Director of Special Services." Parents like Amit L. felt pressured by the presence of district administrators and there often hidden motives for being at meetings.

Communication

Communication between the IEP team and the parents is the key to a successful relationship. Communication entailed more than just sharing routine information about regularly scheduled events like annual IEP meetings. Most IEP teams handled this primary function satisfactorily. Communication also encompassed all the ways parents could (or could not) be informed about developments that lead to, or away from meeting the IEP goals. Most teams struggled to share this secondary communication with parents. Good communication can help parents develop as true partners to the IEP team; poor communication, or lack of communication can lead to conflict. Initial communication empowers parents during a very long, complex and

technical process of classifying their child. Back and forth communication kept parents abreast of IEP developments and helped the CST keep abreast about changes or developments at home. Wendy C. recalled, “they send a monthly report, whether it may be the OT or the speech therapist. It's usually just like two or three paragraphs, like what they're doing, whether they're seeing any progress in certain areas.” Interim reports, whether casual or formal, not standard practice in all districts, helped parents keep abreast of progress. Despite this, too often these relationships were devoid of any secondary communication at all. Most parents recalled being sent form letters in the mail, or via email, sometimes receiving short perfunctory phone calls that stated the logistics of the initial and subsequent meetings.

When parents were asked about routine primary communication, it was not uncommon to hear comments similar to Melissa G., “Not very much usually. Usually you get the date, the formal date (of the annual IEP meeting), those things that they must send you, you get that…but that's pretty much it.” Sometimes, if they were fortunate, parents would get some back and forth communication on choosing a time and date. Julie K. remembered, “All that's really there is just the day that we have available and if there's ... They send you a form, "This is the day we're looking at," and if we needed to change the date or the time, we would do that. There wasn't anything other than that”. This is a common occurrence and described the most frequent type of communication between the CST and the parents. This primary communication routinely covered all the logistical arrangements of the annual meetings, but after the delivery of initial classification reports, never included any information on the educational status of the child.

Parents frequently voiced frustration that the communication outside of the actual meetings was through form letters. Parents lamented the lack of regularly scheduled exchanges of information. Many parents were clearly frustrated that they were not told about non-milestone

events, such as behavior incidents, they felt were important, until the annual IEP meeting. In these meetings, IEP team members, one after another, would try to cram a full calendar year worth of information into one conference. Teachers, service providers, counselors, even administrators with behavioral reports would go around the table, taking turns encapsulating the child's year. The parent was forced to listen to this, process it, and ask relevant questions. Wendy C. summed up the feeling of many when she stated, "Well, it was a pattern. It was many years of telling us things after the fact". Learning about situations their children handled poorly, or about an inability to meet an IEP goal, after the fact, left parents with bad feelings. Often the parents were given a vague synopsis of the child's growth and development. Monica F. stated, "I feel it's too general, so I would like some more specific." Specific information shared through communication could not be accomplished unless a member of the IEP team regularly reached out to the parent and shared information on incremental growth and development. Most parents did not enjoy that type of relationship with a member of their child's team.

Culture of the IEP team

The culture of the IEP team, the sum of its attitudes, customs and beliefs is not just the sense of working towards a communal goal during the annual IEP meeting. IEP team culture refers to the sense of its attitudes, customs and beliefs shared with the parents the other 364 days a year as well. Being made to feel included by the culture of the IEP team makes parents feel that they are part of their child's IEP process, and helped parents believe that the team was there for the child. Since the IEP is a year-round progression, there are many opportunities for parents to bond with the IEP team, unfortunately some teams are disabused of that notion over time. Parents get a sense right away when they are not being included in the process. Amit L.

remembered being included from the start in a new district after being excluded by his previous district, “Mostly they had questions for us. But everybody was very much more communicative, and had a lot more to offer, as far as what they thought they could work on with him. And they did express that the IEP from the district, his previous IEP, was very lacking in academic goals, and so they had to do a lot of resetting of goals.” Jeff W. angrily recalled not being included, “As soon as the meeting starts and there's 14 professionals or however many were there talking about my child, I was given papers. said, "Sign this. "” Large groups of unfamiliar professionals, with an agenda and a schedule talking about your child was intimidating. UNPACK HERE Prior connection to a member of the IEP team was important. Parents without relationships with their IEP team shrank from their roles as active IEP participants.

Most parents did not feel part of the culture when they were being told what was best for their child’s education and well-being. Wendy C. shared these same sentiments, “they feel they know what's best for the children, rather than what the parents know.” The sense of working together did much more to embellish the feeling of culture. Lisa B. reflected, “I don't feel intimidated going there because there's so many of them and just me. I feel like I can speak to them and that's what they're there for. Not only for him but for me as well and to work together.” CSTs that were able to make parents feel included received many more positive comments about team culture and IEP outcomes.

The relationship dynamic changed as parents become more familiar with the IEP process. Susan C-G. recalled, “they want you to be compliant and they want the meetings to go quickly. They have too many meetings and too many people with needs to deal with and not enough resources and they want you to go away.” CST are at the mercy of their caseloads, parent demands, resource availability and district norms. In addition, each IEP represents countless man

hours and dozens of pages of paperwork. Resources and the burden of bureaucracy were often mentioned by parents as elements that affect team culture. Anne W. remarked, “The experience that I've had, actually in both school districts is that the interest isn't really to help the child, but because we're limited resources over here, it's more to protect their resources.” The perception of teams cutting corners or protecting resources was a common belief among many parents who did not describe themselves as part of the culture of the IEP team.

There is a sense that being there for the child, is being there for the right reason. Teams that made the parent feel included received positive comments about their team culture. Too often parents do not feel included. There is persistent worry that they are being railroaded into ‘just going along’ with the process. Some parents go along with this, but many do not. As Suzin T. noted, “I think that in the town that I live in they write IEPs and everybody just kind of goes with the flow, and it is what is, and I'm sure the teachers are doing what they're supposed to do, and all is great. And, I'm not one of those people.” Being separated from the team culture led parents to experience powerlessness and helplessness. It became easy to believe that everyone was in on the same narrative, but the parent. Anne C-G. shared, “I don't like feeling powerless and because there's such a bureaucracy with the IEP process and there's laws and there's rules, I felt very powerless. … I felt bamboozled by everybody, from the school secretary, all the way up this whole food chain. Where I felt like everybody was taking advantage of the situation and just saying, "Well, that's just the way it is, or that's the way we've always done it here."”

Bucking the norm or going above and beyond to make something out of the ordinary happen were effective ways to make the give the parents positive feelings about their experience with the culture of the IEP team. Acting perfunctorily, or railroading parents into signing documents was connected to IEP teams that had unhealthy or unwelcoming cultures. Parents

recognized the culture of their IEP teams. Culture was one of the leverage points that instigated positive or negative feelings about the IEP team and the IEP process.

(Un)Productive IEP meetings

The actual IEP meeting process worked best when it was an open-ended, productive format and really included the parents. Without the previous components of parent experience; sharing information, open communication, and positive team culture, it was not possible to hold productive IEP meetings. All those elements, cultivated over a year of relationship building, made a successful IEP meeting possible. Harried, or unorganized meetings set up in inconvenient spaces could impact the successful sharing of information and have a negative impact on the parents' experience. How the meeting is managed by the case manager determines whether it will be a productive inclusive meeting. Parents also reflected on how updates about their child were presented to them during meetings. It could be a back-and-forth exchange of evidence and questioning, or it could be a perfunctory meeting with a short time window. The format of the meeting figured prominently in the parent experience. Often the meeting format called for one service provider after another to verbally share a year's worth of observations of the child. It could be hard for parents to process multiple recitations of their child's progress, even when punctuated by case manager summations. Some IEP teams knew that samples of work and other examples of the child's progress would be helpful to break-up the delivery of information. In one out-of district setting, Amina W. recalled a particularly helpful, thoughtful technique to help demonstrate growth, "Yeah they showed videos at the conference. They shoot a lot of video of her in school and they all show us videos in the classroom which is actually very interesting." Work samples and video clips are rarely used but were effective ways to communicate present

levels of performance. IEP meetings in dedicated spaces, with technology that allowed a computer projection of the working document left parents the impression of a purposeful meeting.

Parents noticed that the IEP meeting was often not dictated by the child's needs, but rather by the length of the IEP document, the legal obligations of the IEP team, and the availability of staff. The flow of the meetings was often hostage to the availability of service providers who had been temporarily relieved of the customary school duties. Some parents often described meetings that were pressed for time by staff rotating in and out of the meeting or by the artificial time limits of the school's bell schedule. Amit L. recalled a service provider cutting them off with, """Oh, well I have to get going. Oh, sorry, you know, I have kids, whatever." And it's like, "Okay, but we do this once a year," you know?" It was not uncommon to hear this about members of the IEP team who would come and go during meetings. Anne C-G. recalled, "So, often related service providers will say that they need to leave in the middle of a meeting to go do a therapy session for another child." A perfunctory meeting also usually suffered from an artificially imposed time clock. Meetings could be subjected to the deadline of the school's period bells, or from the pressure of other families waiting a turn for their meeting to start. Perfunctory meetings were choreographed to minimize the input of the parents. Anne C-G also recalled, "I also feel like people try to run out the clock. So, they know if they have one hour, that if people start reading reports they know that they can run out the clock on that meeting and kind of reduce the amount of time that I will be providing input."

Some parents gratefully noted the back and forth sharing opportunities they were given, such as Sharma L. recalled, "We were asking questions about how's our child doing? And we were getting answers, okay, they're doing this, this, and this". Lisa B. recalled pressing back,

asking for more service that she thought was needed, “in future we would like to come down to one. But for now, we want to keep it at two sessions and they were okay with it. So, when our input is taken and when they propose new strategies, that really helps my son”. The meeting agenda would dictate who spoke, how much they could share and how much discussion could be had. It helped shape the parents’ participation and ultimately how they experienced the IEP process.

The experience of the parent during the IEP process could also largely be impacted by how prepared they were going into the meeting. IEP teams are not required to provide a copy of the draft IEP until the meeting, but in some cases make a copy available to parents beforehand. Anne W. recalled how she arrived at this outcome, “When I first started asking for it, they first started writing draft across the top and now they already have it basically all printed out and ready for me. They've never really given me a problem about that.” The earlier the parents received a copy of the IEP, the better they could prepare for the meeting. Parents who had a draft copy of the IEP could pre-prepare questions and share observations on progress towards goals. Parents who previously hadn’t seen the draft were forced to process all new information during the meetings. Amina W. stated, “I would sign these things and I wouldn't always read them because I believed what I was told from the Case Manager… I was given these papers to sign specifically at a time when I could not read them. That was the not a positive.” Swetha S. had some experience with the process and realized that without the draft, she was missing important information, “I feel that maybe they should have given me a copy, because the problem here is I do not understand the law of IEP, how it should go. If I'm supposed to get a document that would really help like me going over the document beforehand can help me really and learn all the skills and like whatever that we are going to discuss next day. But since I did not get a copy,

maybe that would be helpful if we get a copy of the IEP just before the meeting." Parents felt that the IEP, a dense fact-filled document over 30 pages, could simply not be read while participating in an important meeting.

Anne W., a more experienced parent, knew that she should have a draft copy, and that the draft copy would impact her experience, "When I first started asking for it, they first started writing draft across the top and now they already have it basically all printed out and ready for me. They've never really given me a problem about that." Being prepared helped this parent feel empowered, like she had some input into how the IEP process was being handled.

The IEP process can be dictated by the agenda, availability of personnel, and the pre-preparation of the CST. It can also be impacted by the how the school values the meeting and the parents. Schools that dedicate space and time to staff enhance the parent experience. Schools and teams that have overriding priorities, including budget, time-management and space often have negative impacts on the parent IEP experience.

Discussion

Because the law mandates that parents are an essential component in the IEP process, healthy relationships between school and parents are critical. Much has been written about the IEP experience when parents and districts are at odds (Feinburg, Beyer, and Moses, 2002; Mandlawitz, 2002, Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Yell and Drasgow, 2000). In response to these known IEP challenges, educators have spent time studying levels of parent participation in the IEP meeting and parent satisfaction. Studying parents complete experience during the IEP process is a promising way to get a more complete picture of what parts of the IEP process hamper the child's education progress and lead to grinding conflict. The study's subjects

repeated mention of four aspects of the IEP progression, information, culture, communication, and process, allow us to examine how and why these three areas so greatly impact parent's overall experience.

Limitations and scope of study

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the findings cannot be generalized to the larger population within the field of special education. Instead, the intent of this study was to simply begin investigating a new approach to examining the parent – district relationship through the lens of parent experience. There are several limitations worth noting. First, this was a small sample interview study that was based upon the recollection of the participants' past experiences with IEP meetings and interactions with the CST, neglecting to include any direct observations of the actual meetings or actual conversations. This study is limited to participant perceptions and experiences only. Second, the participants included only parents and families from suburban New Jersey. It would have created a richer study to have a more equal demographic and geographic distribution of parent voices in the study. Third, all participants in this study were members of SPAN, a parent advocacy group, and had experience with conflict during the IEP meeting process. Consequently, the findings are specific to this population only and cannot be generalized to all parent's experiences. Future research ought to include parents of children who attend schools in low socio-economic districts and districts located outside of the state of New Jersey. Despite these limitations, this study offers a starting point to further investigate the parts of the parent experience that can be directly responded to by changes in the IEP process.

Implications for future research

More research is needed to consider the experience of parents during the entire IEP process. Past research has looked more specifically at the IEP meeting and the document it produced, and work has been done looking at parent participation in different components of the IEP meeting and how they produced crisis (Feinberg, Beyer & Moses, 2002; Mueller, 2009; Mueller, Singer & Draper, 2008). By focusing on the situation already in crisis, existing research has looked at important parameters of the crisis and its effect on relationships. For example, Mueller, Singer & Draper (2008) found that exclusion of parents was one of three categories of system problems. While enlightening, what this work does not clarify is how IEP teams leverage information and communication to build more successful relationships. Studying conflict illustrates the areas that produce tension, but it does not necessarily make clear how successful CSTs navigate these tensions in developing successful IEP meetings for parents.

In particular, this study raises the need to investigate how CST's communication outside the meeting space to better understand if communication is at the heart of building better parent - CST relationships.

In addition, some studies have looked at specific IEP meeting outcomes, such as whether meetings ended in a dispute. Specifically, studies have found that meetings that ended in disputes between parents and special education professionals occurred when parents experience a lack of trust, poor communication, strained relationships, and misunderstanding of the special education law (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller et al., 2008). Relatedly, we know that parent's sense of powerlessness and ignorance at IEP meetings can ignite suspicion, or in some cases, struggles with educators (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). While this can occur within the IEP meeting itself, this parents' voices in the present study raise the need to examine how the IEP, as a 365 day a year system, impacts those same parents' sense of inclusion

or exclusion from the process. Would treating parents like year-round partners change the impact of their child's always evolving set of circumstances? The next step is a look into parent perceptions of their experience for the entire IEP, a look that goes beyond the meetings and examines the individual components of the years-long IEP process. Can we start to conceptualize this contrast between positive and negative experiences described in this study to demonstrate the need for more in-depth research about the yearly process, paying close attention to what procedures and practices will best reduce conflict?

Typically, researchers investigate how trust deteriorates, rather than examining the building blocks of successful relationships. In understanding the IEP as a longitudinal process, it would provide benefits to understanding ways that CSTs can better support parents. Studies have pointed out that despite an unequal relationship between parents and IEP team members, things did improve after educational awareness developed for parents (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). This suggest that as parents participate in the IEP, they gain important awareness and knowledge that allow them to participate more effectively, in turn, allowing them to be more satisfied with the process. In this study parents describe much more positive experiences in the later stages of their learning curve and clearly articulate what they needed to do to become central participants in the process. The study of parent experiences gaining educational awareness can potentially lead to greater IEP process outcomes. If this finding holds across other studies, it would raise the important of the CST to support parents, in learning terminology, interventions, and generally how the IEP is developed. In what ways can CSTs help improve that learning curve process?

The fact that every school district (and out-of-district school) handles the IEP process differently, and every family presents to the school with different backgrounds, highlights the need for more research beyond this study. Future parent experience research could focus on

standardizing elements of the CST presentation, much the same way the IEP document format has been standardized. Inquiry into IEP process standardization could focus on the experiences of parents, educators, and other stakeholders after using more standardized practices. One important item that can be utilized across all IEPs is a year-long calendar that could be created to contain relevant dates and times of contact, as well as important meeting events. Meanwhile, the potential effects of using standardized practices on a statewide level could also include improving student outcomes, parent satisfaction, and reducing the rate of IEP interactions that rise to the conflict level. Investigation and research might provide opportunities to analyze how standardized practices and procedures could be created to rise to the level of best practices. Other research could investigate the use of an experimental design aimed to examine the effects of technology benefits on outcomes of planning and executing IEP meetings, for example, investigating the difference between CST that use technology to prepare and execute IEP meetings with those that don't. While standardization won't be a cure all, it could lead to be access for parents who are new to the IEP process.

Conclusion

The experience of parents during the year-long IEP process varies from district-to-district, school-to-school, and child-to-child. This experience of the parents will be impacted by what background parents bring to the process, but it will largely be determined by what processes and methods IEP teams employ. Specifically, the exchange of information, the culture of the IEP team, the style of communication and the practices employed by the team determine how the school personnel shape the parent experience. Bringing best practices to IEP teams methods and procedures will serve to reduce conflict between parents and schools, not just

during meetings, but during the entire IEP process, ultimately to improve outcomes for students with IEPs.

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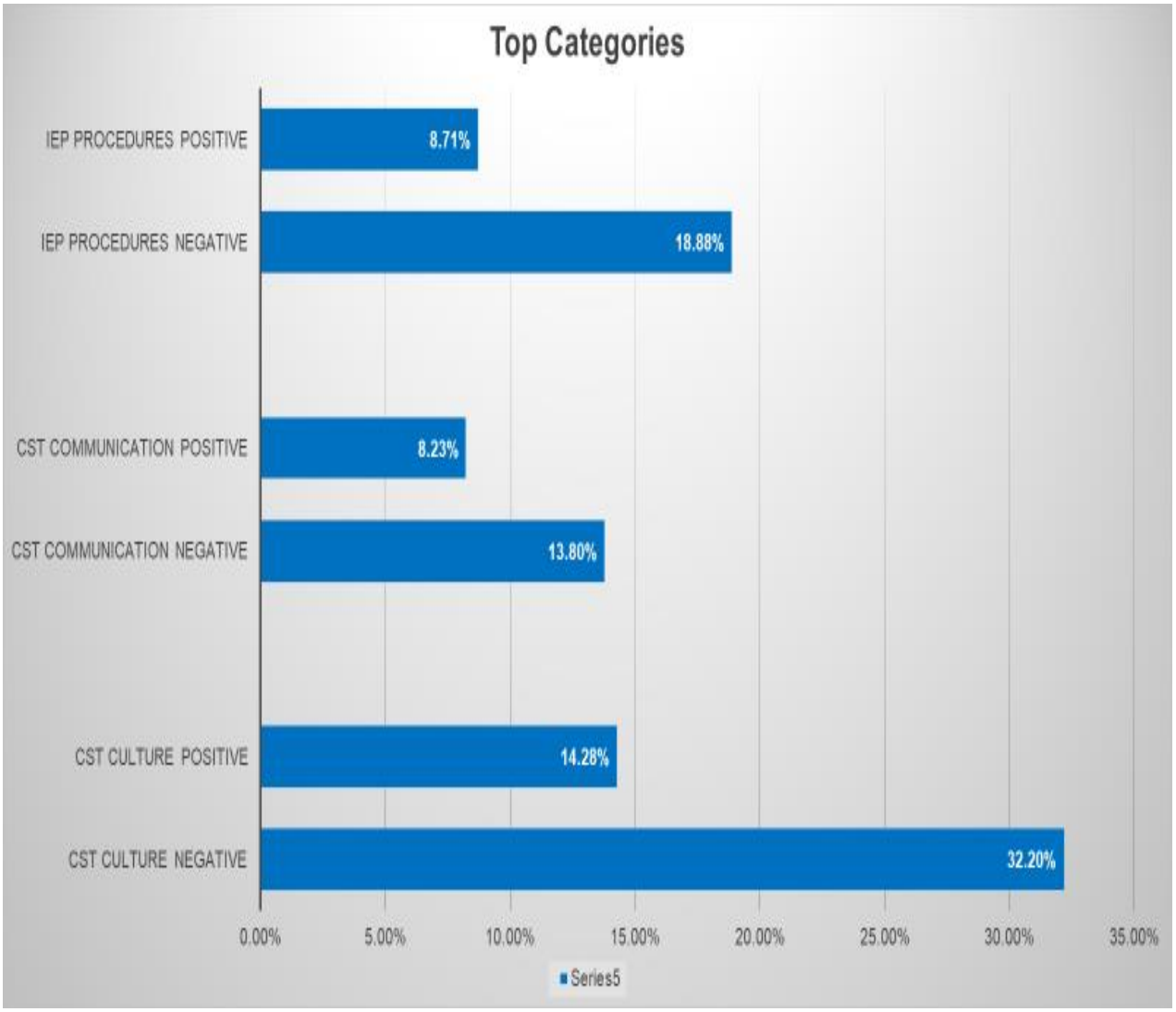
Appendix 1: Parent Involvement – Child Classification

Parents	Child Classification	Grade	In-District/OOD
Swetha S.	Autism	4	Out-of-District
Melissa G.	Multiply Disabled	10	In-District
Julie K.	Multiply Disabled	9	In-District
Suzin T.	Other Health Impaired Autism	6 6	In-District In-District
Anne W.	Specific Learning Disability	3	In-District
Susan C-G.	Multiply Disabled Autism	10 4	Out-of-District In-District
Yosenia Z.	Autism	2	In-District
Grace B.	Specific Learning Disability Multiply Disabled	9 11	In-District Out-of-District
Nancy M.	Autism Specific Learning Disability	5 7	Out-of-District In District
Monica F.	Autism	3	In-District
Kimberly F.	Autism Autism Specific Learning Disability	3 5 10	In-District Out-of-District In-District
Dayana B.	Multiply Disabled Multiply Disabled	4 9	In-District In-District
Jeff W. Amina W.	Autism	8	Out-of-District
Lisa B.	Specific Learning Disability	5	In-District
Wendy C.	Multiply Disabled	8	In-District
Amit L. Sharma L.	Autism	5	Out-of District

Appendix 2: The relationship of common parent comment categories



Appendix 3**:** Interview Protocol: Parent Satisfaction Interviews

To facilitate our note-taking, I would like to audio tape our conversations today. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. Please sign the release form. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your agreeing to participate.

I have planned this interview to last approximately .5 - 1 hours. During this time, I have several questions that would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.

Introduction:

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a special needs child currently in public school being served by an IEP. My research project as a whole focus on parent satisfaction with the IEP process, the CST culture, IEP design, and the relationship of physical space to the creation of the IEP. My study does not aim to evaluate your school district or your child's case manager. Rather, I am trying to learn more about CST culture and the IEP process, and hopefully learn more about reducing conflict and improving student outcome opportunities.

1. How many times have you been involved in an IEP meeting?

2. If I defined culture as the sum of attitudes, customs, and beliefs, how would you describe the culture of your CST?

3. Describe your most recent experience during an IEP meeting.

4. Describe your most memorable experience during an IEP meeting.

5. Describe your most successful IEP meeting?

6. How would you describe the room design of the location of the most recent IEP meeting?

7. How would you describe the communication with the CST during the lead up to the IEP meeting process?

8. What are your expectations for the CST during the IEP process?

9. How has your relationship with the CST changed over time?

10. Did the CST understand your cultural sensibilities?

11. Describe your wishes for your next IEP meeting.

Follow-up questions:

1. Describe your early relationship with your CST.
2. When did that relationship change?

Chapter 3: Practitioner Article for Educational Administration Submission: How Parents Experience the IEP

By Andrew Panico

Rutgers University

December 2018

John’s parents arrive for a pre-arranged Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting, scheduled by John's case manager, an individual they speak to on average two times per year. Having not heard concerns from John's classroom teacher, the parents expect a continuation of his "entitled" services. At the meeting, sitting around a crowded table, the parents are surprised to be confronted by recommendations to modify services, from educators they have never met in person. The conviviality disappears quickly as John's parents struggle to process the new information and become frustrated by the technical jargon used by the district’s special education service providers to justify the change in service provisions. At the end of the meeting, the parents refuse to sign the new IEP. Follow-up attempts at communication by members of the Child Study Team further frustrate the parents, who feel compelled to contact the local Special Education advocate, who will advise them on how best to handle their conflict with the school district. The unresolved conflict could go to a due process hearing, or if the parents do not get satisfaction, the conflict could end up in court.

School districts bear a burden for each case that goes to court; “Per the 2002 Congressional record, the costs accrued per hearing can range between $50,000 and $100,000” (Mueller, 2009). Based on the National Center for Dispute Resolution in Education’s 2008 report, school districts across the United States potentially spend more than $90 million a year in conflict resolution (Mueller, Singer, and Carranza, 2006). In addition, families of children who receive special education services under IDEA regulations, and who feel compelled to take a case beyond mediation, like other successful civil rights plaintiffs, generally recover their reasonable attorney's fees and related costs from school districts.

HOW DO PARENTS EXPERIENCE THE IEP PROCESS?

Why does the IEP process become so contentious? How do parents and school districts get enmeshed in battle when the likelihood of a lose-lose outcome is so high? For parents, the consequences include disruption of services for their child, not to mention, stress, aggravation, alienation, time, and money. At the same time, school districts risk sacrificing productivity, time, resources, reputation, goodwill in their communities, and tens of thousands of dollars on legal fees. To better understand what feeds these conflicts, I thought it was important to look at how parents experience the IEP process to see if there were any obvious sources of friction and to determine if school districts could make changes to their practices that would reduce the likelihood of ill will and conflict, and by doing so, improve educational outcomes for children served by IEPs.

As a teacher, Learning Disabilities Teacher-Consultant (LDT-C), member of several Child Study Teams, and Special Education administrator, I have participated in several hundred IEP meetings over the last twenty-five years. In that time, I have watched how small fissures, and significant flaws in the IEP process, have an impact on the parent – school relationship. If the relationship is contentious or ineffective, it can ripple beyond the IEP meeting and affect the child's success in the classroom, comfort in the school building, and relationship with support staff (Fleming, & Monda-Amaya, 2001; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). I've witnessed the breakdown of communication and trust between parents and schools. These breakdowns can, and often do lead to conflict, litigation, and increased costs for school districts (Yell & Drasgow, 2000). Research into how parents experience the IEP process can facilitate better understanding of these relationships. In order to explore how the IEP experience effects parent - school relations, I asked the following question:

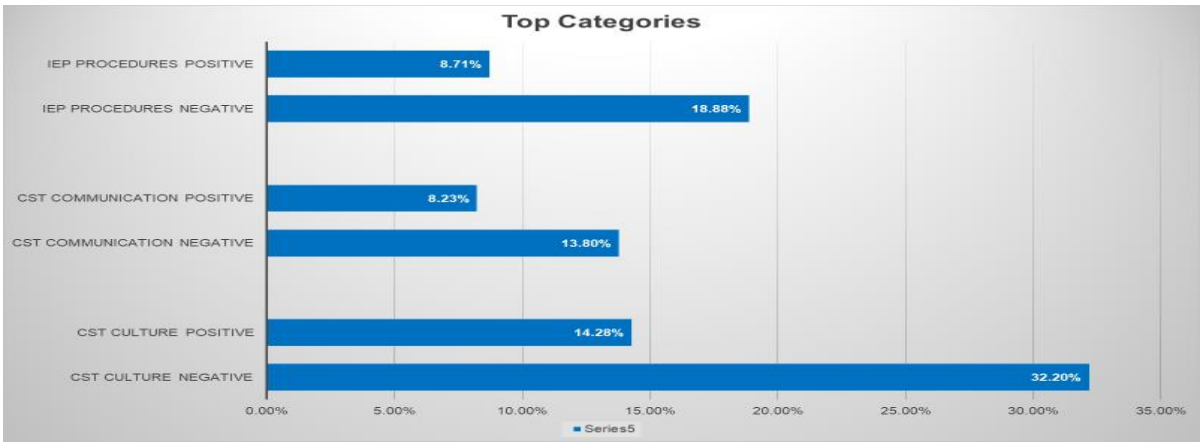
How do parents experience the IEP process?

To answer that question, I conducted a qualitative study that looked at how parents experience the IEP process. I wanted to look for possible inflection points that caused IEP processes to go off the rails. I surveyed fifteen suburban, New Jersey families, including parents and caregivers, asking them to describe their experiences both positive and negative, dealing with Child Study Teams (CST) during the year-long IEP process. I asked them to describe IEP meetings and all the communication and effort that went into arranging those meetings. A wide range of questions were asked of families relating to the topics mentioned above. Families spoke passionately and earnestly about the subject of the IEP and the CST. Parents talked about CST culture, their expectations, IEP meetings, and meeting environments. They spoke about paperwork, personnel, Special Education terminology, and meeting protocols.

What was surprising was the balance of positive and negative comments. The ratio of coded responses was 11:8, in favor of the negative. Also illustrative was the fact that the same three categories were rated most frequent in both the positive and negative domains. In each domain, CST culture, CST communication, and meeting procedures were most frequently discussed by all families. CST culture was the number one topic in the positive domain, and the number two topic mentioned in the negative domain. Just under 50% of all comments related directly to CST culture. The following details some of the negative and positive aspects of the three main topics discussed: CST culture, CST communication, and meeting procedures. After discussing parent perspectives on the IEP process, I share a list of practical changes that school districts and CST teams could consider to improve the likelihood of positive outcomes and more

productive IEP meetings. The article concludes with an illustrated example of two of the practical changes I suggest.

Table 1



The Negatives

It is important to note the parents' perception of CST is not something that develops over the course of one meeting. Sometimes the perception of CST culture is fostered over several meetings and years of interaction. Although regularly designed to be a once-per year affair, some parents found themselves in IEP-related meetings up to five times or more per year. Parents who met with the CST that often were likely to have a negative view towards the IEP team. Often the team was described as bossy and dismissive, such as when parent, Suzann T. said, "I felt that I was there for them to tell me what they were going to do and that I was just there to sign to let them do it." She described becoming angry and resistant to this treatment. Rather than shortening, it served to prolong the IEP process by adding meetings to the yearly process.

Parents who are not made to feel part of the team often described a trivializing CST. Parent, Julie K complained, "They want you to be compliant and they want the meetings to go

quickly. They have too many meetings and too many people with needs to deal with and not enough resources and they want you to go away." In worst case scenarios, such as when cases ended in conflict, the family's perception of the team was that they were intent on doing as little as possible to move the case along. Parents were quick to pick up on CST members that were burdened and overwhelmed with mountains of cases. Nancy M. believed, "I think the culture now is try to do the minimum that you can get away with." Parents often didn't see the back story that explains why IEP teams sometimes seem to handle things perfunctorily. But if they did, they would likely still demand that their child receive the attention they deserve.

While it may be hard to quantify culture, it is even harder to undo the perceptions of a negative culture once those feelings have hardened in the belief of the families experiencing the IEP process. Often the culture of the team is established through the nature of a meeting dynamic, where so many professionals gather in a room to present their piece of the IEP. Parents can feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of participants in a meeting. It can take years before parents feel that the culture of the team is not an "us" versus "them" paradigm. Monica F. recognized, but was not fazed by this meeting dynamic, "Because I've done it so long I don't feel intimidated going there because there's so many of them and just me. I feel like I can speak to them and that's what they're there for. Not only for him but for me as well and to work together." She believed that over years of experience she had learned how to deal with the pressures brought on by an IEP meeting.

Parents seemed universally dismayed when teams entered the meeting with pre-conceived outcomes in mind. Parents didn't like having completed IEPs read aloud and then put in front of them for signature. They described meetings where everyone seems to have

memorized their part. Susan C., observed, “I feel it's all pre-rehearsed.” In the heat of the meeting under time pressure, parents recognized when they were not being asked for input. Yosenia Z, recalled, “I would sign these things and I wouldn't always read them because I believed what I was told from the Case Manager. I was given these papers to sign specifically at a time when I could not read them.” On the other hand, some parents recognized that there is a difference between coming to a meeting unprepared and coming with a draft IEP. Swetha S. was exasperated when it appeared the CST was not prepared to ask her for input or add their collective ideas to data discussed at the meeting. She shared, “When I say ready, I mean having the IEP ready. Don't work on the IEP while I'm there, writing on top of an old IEP. Have the draft IEP ready so that we can review and discuss, not do it on the fly when I'm there.” Parents describe lack of note-taking, poor time management, and poor preparedness as their main complaints about IEP meeting design and procedures.

Parents displeased with CST communication also mentioned three key complaints, the three Ts: timeliness, topicality and trust. Parents wanted communication that gave them ample time to construct an opinion, responded to events soon after they occurred, and represented an accurate, objective observation of their child’s performance and behavior. Parents like Suzin T. did not appreciate the lack of timely communication. “And even if we did email or call and ask questions, we often would not receive any replies from the Case Manager… The only communication that's there is when the IEP meeting is coming up.” This lack of timely communication made it difficult for parents to plan for their IEP meetings.

Another communication complaint was hearing information in IEP meetings for the first time, such as when Nancy M., reported, “Well, it was a pattern. It was many years of telling us

things after the fact." These parents wondered why they weren't being told of events just after they occurred, at times when they, as parents, could be most helpful to respond. Sometimes timely communication is not enough once trust barriers have eroded. Years of bad communication and periods of silence led Julie K. to lament, "Nobody trusted each other, nobody trusted the other party to have a conversation that wasn't documented with a witness. That's why we went through the lawyers." At this point the relationship is officially in conflict and the process of restoration can be expensive and time consuming for both parties.

The Positives

In several instances, parents saw the culture of the team as focused, responsive, and inclusive. Melissa G. remarked, "I feel like they have in their minds an idea of how much he can achieve, and they're very motivated to get there, so when they speak to us, it's with this very goal focused... they're very responsive, if we have any issues." Several parents were pleased that service providers were approachable and communicated consistently. This greatly facilitated completion of a successful IEP. Some parents felt that a responsive team would be more likely to answer questions and accept feedback. This led to more fluid mid-year corrections to a plan that needed tweaking.

Parents generally viewed case managers producing draft IEPs for the families, ahead of the meetings, as favorable. It is too difficult to try to read all the documentation during the meeting (IEPs often exceed 30 pages) and be able to carefully listen to what is being said as providers around the table shared their piece. Grace B. noted, "I always request a copy of the I.E.P. document before the meeting. And then I always go through the document, I highlight my questions and any place I have questions and I make a list of my comments and any stuff before

then." Having the draft in advance permitted the parents to read the crucial parts, look for substantive changes, and make notes about areas they felt needed more information. Having a copy in advance also allowed parents to pre-form their questions and be better prepared overall for the IEP meeting.

Parents wanted to hear what was going right with the plan, as well as what needed to be tweaked or changed. Hearing about positives let the parents know that their child was reaching goals and was making year-over-year progress. In addition, parents wanted to share positives they observed in the home. They were hopeful this new information would reflect on their child's growth and give the team additional information to work with to form new goals. It was very well received when the teachers or providers could validate the parent's comments by affirming that growth was witnessed in more than one domain.

Parents with solid relationships to the CST were encouraged to ask questions, before during, and after the actual IEP meeting. Good two-way communication included hearing from the case manager on a regular basis. This included asking questions about whether there had been any recent changes in the home. Monica F. proudly pointed out this aspect of her experience, "She texts me when there's issues coming up. John isn't getting all his homework in or John seems a little hands-on during recess this week, she'll call me and say, 'Hey, is there something going on with John?' Checking in with the home helped cement the perception of healthy communication.

An important factor in good communication was the avoidance of excessive use of technical terms and unintelligible acronyms. Parents who were new to the process took time to integrate this technical vocabulary. Many felt too embarrassed to constantly stop the proceedings

to ask for clarification. Speaking a common language, like good communication helped promote positive relationships between parents and the CST and helped ensure that IEP meetings would not be full of surprises.

Recommendations

Drawing on these positives, there are some obvious and not so obvious ways this process can be made to improve the parent experience. Improving the parent experience would likely remove friction that leads to conflict in the IEP process. Based upon my interviews with parents, I have developed a short list of changes that can have a positive impact on the parent experience during the IEP process. Table 2 shows ten recommendations for developing a positive IEP experience for parents. In the table I focus on the three areas; communication, culture and process, that most often were mentioned by parents I interviewed. I list practical changes that can be instituted by any CST or Special Education department.

Table 2 Recommendations for Improving the IEP Process

Category	***Recommended Changes to the IEP Process***	***Explanations***
Communication/Culture	Digital/print glossary & directory	Providing print and online glossary of terms and directories of service providers would help improve parent knowledge and aid parent-CST contact.
Process	IEP in advance	Providing parents a copy of the IEP in advance gives them an opportunity to be better prepared for meetings.
Process	Abandon the truncated IEP meeting	Moving to a longer form IEP meeting would allow for facilitated IEP meetings and more time for parents to absorb and contribute information.
Process	Improve meeting space technology	Using a screen where editing could be done would allow everyone in the meeting to see real time changes to the IEP.
Culture	Create personalized calendars	Creating a suggested meeting and communication calendar could help parents plan for and prepare for phone calls and meetings.
Culture	Schedule regular Meet & Greets	Meets & Greets could be used to introduce service providers to parents, outside of the IEP meeting
Culture	Arrange parent workshops	Service providers and case managers could use semi-annual workshops to make parents more knowledgeable about important IEP topics.
Communication	Use communication protocols	CST/Special Education departments can be tasked to create communication protocols to determine when CST members get informed by teachers about classroom incidents & academic events. Additional protocols can be created to determine who communicates with the families and what information should be shared.
Communication	Reduce case manager caseloads	Reducing individual caseloads by 10% - 15% should allow case managers more time to visit classrooms, talk with teachers and communicate with parents.
Process	Create CST certification process	Creating a national/state-wide CST certification process would give CST teams a standard with which to achieve universal best practice. Certificates can be used by districts to serve as a baseline for due-process and court cases when compliance comes into question.

Conclusion

The IEP process does not need to become so contentious. Making concrete changes to CST/IEP protocols will help parents and school districts avoid getting enmeshed in battles where the likelihood of a lose-lose outcome is high. For parents, the benefits include avoiding disruption of services for their child, not to mention, stress, aggravation, alienation, time, and money. School districts can avoid sacrificing productivity, time, resources, reputation, goodwill in their communities, and tens of thousands of dollars on legal fees. By making small and large changes to the IEP process, we can help improve outcomes for children, improve the parent experience, and reduce the likelihood of expensive litigation. Parents and CSTs enjoying a better relationship will likely help improve school-community relationships in meaningful and positive ways while having a great impact on the financial health of the school district.

One of the process improvements that could be made to improve the parent experience involves technology in the meeting space. Using a projection screen where live IEP editing could be shown during the meeting would allow everyone in the meeting to see real time changes to the IEP document. Rather than physically marking up a pre-prepared physical document, case mangers could show the meeting participants real-time changes, as they are being enter into the document on a screen. This would help parents see how their input was manifesting itself in the document and remove the impression that the document had already been created prior to the meeting. One of the culture improvements that could be implemented is the creation of personalized CST calendars. Creating a suggested meeting and communication calendar for each child with an IEP could help parents plan in advance and prepare for phone calls and meetings. Calendars could be useful to keep parents abreast of a years' worth of meetings and

communication opportunities. Calendars that presented week-long time ranges could still be helpful for forecasting interaction opportunities without presenting inflexible timelines.

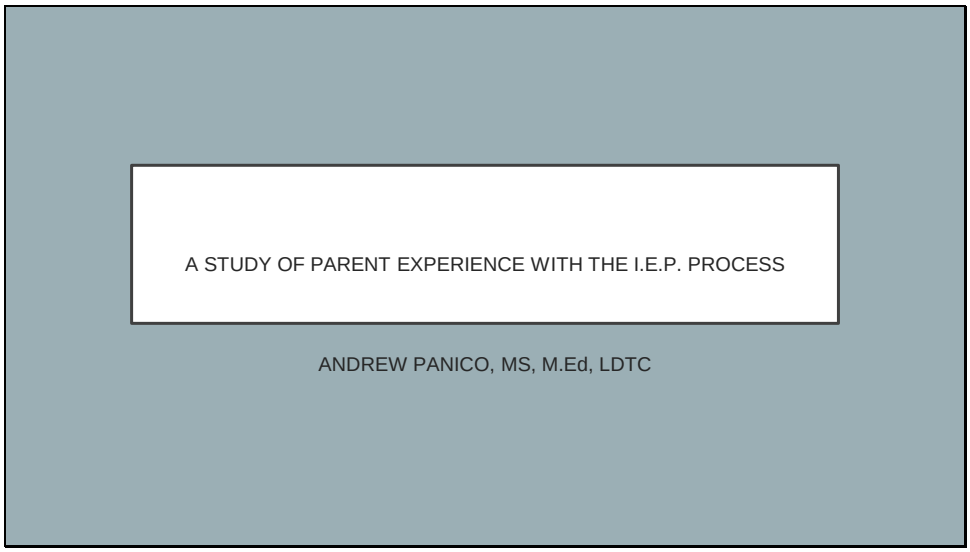
Chapter 4: Conference Presentation: A Study of Parent Experience with the IEP Process: Council of Exceptional Children Conference, March 2018

Andrew A. Panico

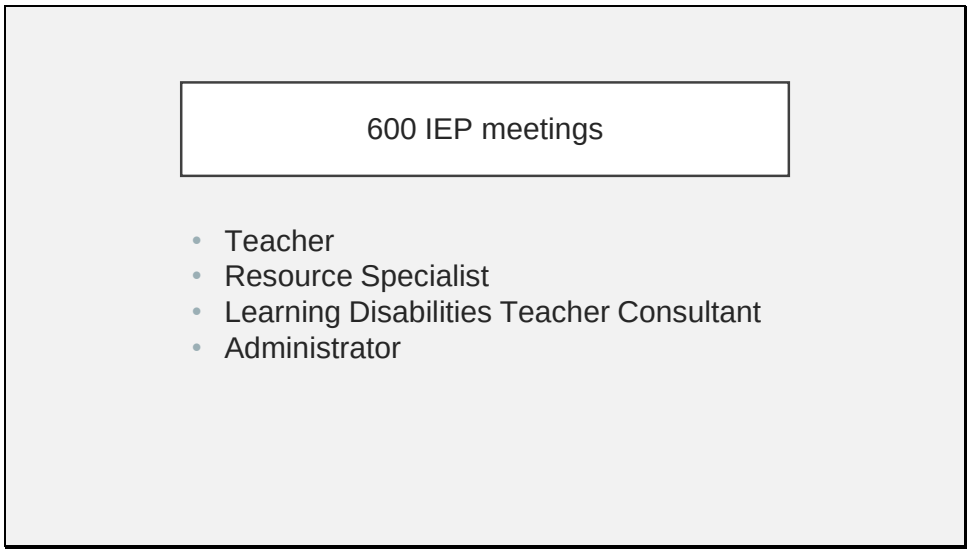
Rutgers University

December 2018

Slide 1


A STUDY OF PARENT EXPERIENCE WITH THE I.E.P. PROCESS
ANDREW PANICO, MS, M.Ed, LDTC

Slide 2


600 IEP meetings
Teacher
Resource Specialist
Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant
Administrator

Slide 3

MUTUAL TRUST = MINIMAL CONFLICT

STRONG FEELINGS ABOUT THE SERVICES, PROPOSED PROGRAMS, LOCATIONS AND METHODOLOGIES

- The annual IEP process includes a conversation between families and school personnel
- The IEP process can be critical to a student's scholastic success

Attending an IEP meeting can

- present opportunities for participation in productive decision-making
- barriers that may impede the very same decision-making process (Harry, 1992).

Slide 4

THE IEP EXPERIENCE
The law requires that parents are an integral part of the decision-making process.
Parents and districts at odds (Feinburg, Beyer, and Moses, 2002; Mandlawitz, 2002, Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Yell and Drasgow, 2000).

Slide 5

COSTLY FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS.

- “Costs accrued per hearing can range between $50,000 and $100,000” (Mueller, 2009).
- School districts across the United States potentially spend more than $90 million a year in conflict resolution (Mueller, Singer, and Carranza, 2006).
- Like other successful civil rights plaintiffs, generally recover their reasonable attorney's fees and related costs from the school districts.

Slide 6

-FIND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

-IDENTIFY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICAL APPLICATION

-FURTHER RESEARCH

Slide 7

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early IEP researchers focused on parent satisfaction with team meetings and increasing levels of parent involvement (Lusthaus, Lusthaus & Gibbs, 1981; Lynch & Stein, 1982).

- Parent's sense of powerlessness and ignorance at IEP meetings can ignite suspicion, or in some cases, struggles with educators (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Lake & Billingsley, 2000).
- Encountering conflict is an ongoing problem in the field of special education that can have damaging effects on administrators, teachers, parents, and most significantly, the child (Harry, 1992).

Slide 8

Fish's qualitative study (2006) examined the perceptions of seven families of children with ASD about the IEP meeting process:

- All parents stated that their initial IEP meeting involvement had been negative.
- Most indicated that they had been treated poorly by school personnel during IEP meetings.
- Parents were accused of being unreasonable and blamed for their children's academic and behavioral problems.

Hess, Molina, and Kozleski (2006) conducted a similar study:

- Mothers and fathers reported feeling helpless at IEP meetings until they learned more about their part as team members and started to act as an advocate for their child.

HOW DO PARENTS EXPERIENCE THE IEP PROCESS?

Slide 9

I ASK THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

HOW DO PARENTS EXPERIENCE THE IEP PROCESS?

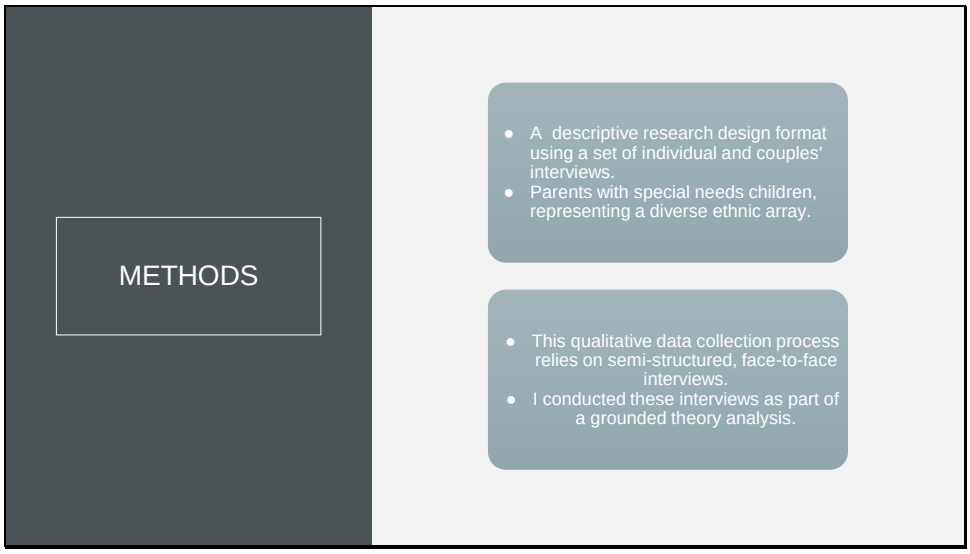
Slide 10

THE PARENT EXPERIENCE

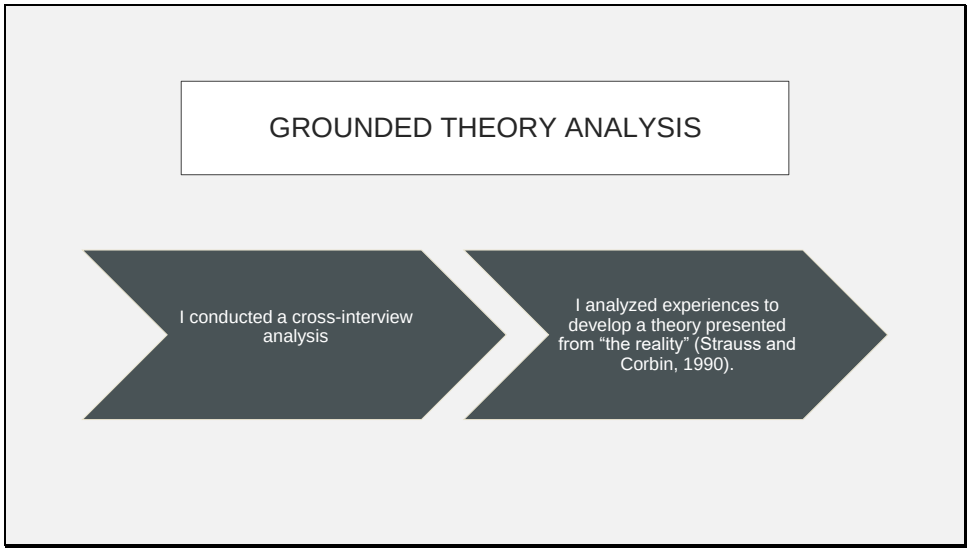
My study examines the experience of parents within the IEP process.

I define experiences as:
descriptions of personal involvements throughout events before, during, after the IEP meeting.

Slide 11


METHODS
A descriptive research design format using a set of individual and couples' interviews.
Parents with special needs children, representing a diverse ethnic array.
This qualitative data collection process relies on semi-structured, face-to-face interviews.
I conducted these interviews as part of a grounded theory analysis.

Slide 12


GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS
I conducted a cross-interview analysis
I analyzed experiences to develop a theory presented from “the reality” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Slide 13

PARTICIPANTS

- **Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN)** members

15 sets of parents were chosen based on the following criteria:

- one or more children aged 8 - 16 currently in public school,
- one or more children served by an IEP
- experience in three or more IEP meetings.
- a willingness to reflect and share their personal experiences.
- I also attempted to find a culturally rich sample of participants.

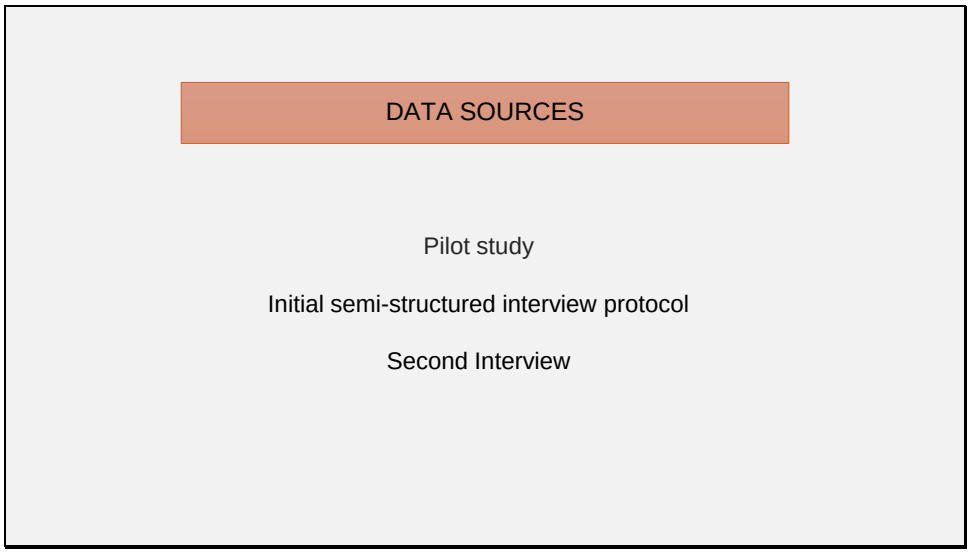
Slide 14

INTERVIEWS

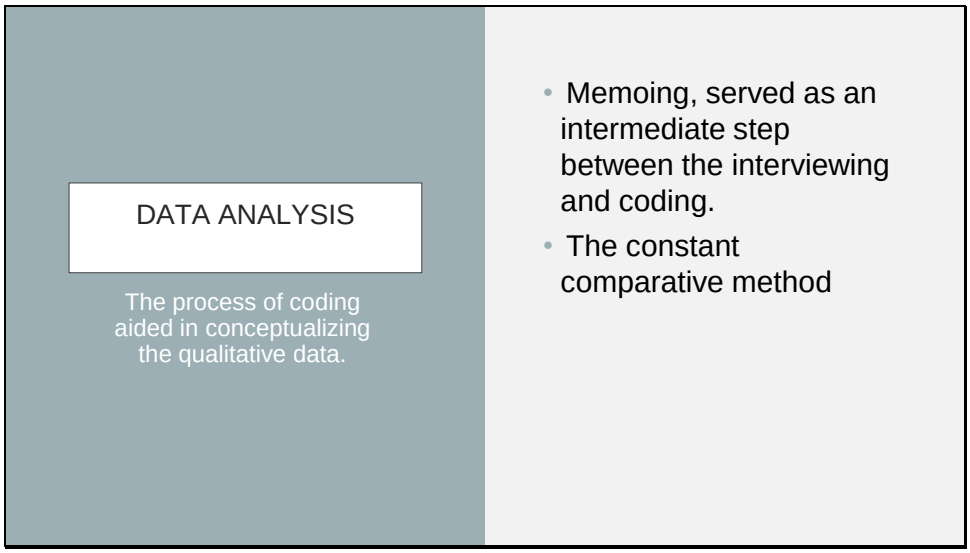
Eleven open-ended questions intended to elicit evocative descriptions of the IEP process, looking for elements of parent experience (Seidman, 2013).

- Rich descriptions of the experiences of families

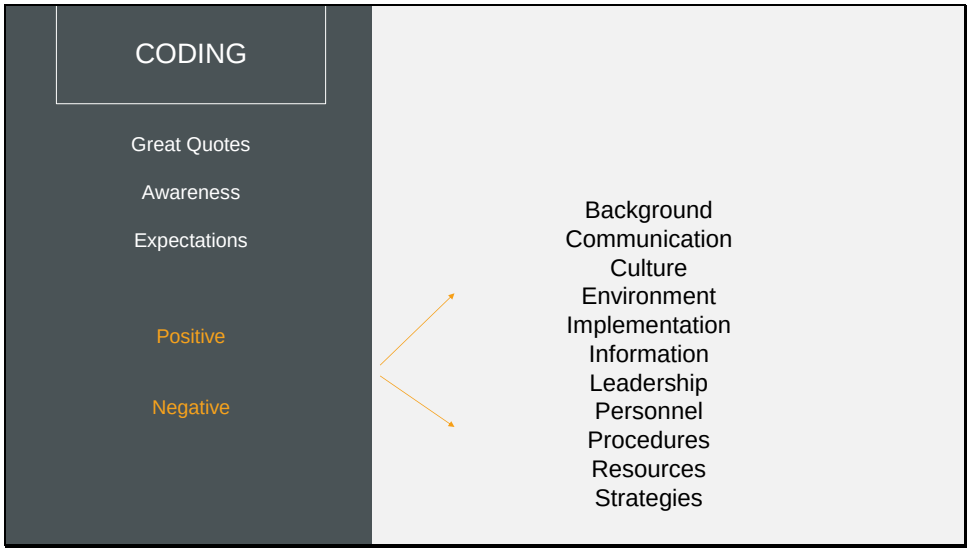
Slide 15


DATA SOURCES
Pilot study
Initial semi-structured interview protocol
Second Interview

Slide 16


DATA ANALYSIS
The process of coding aided in conceptualizing the qualitative data.
• Memoing, served as an intermediate step between the interviewing and coding.
• The constant comparative method

Slide 17


CODING
Great Quotes
Awareness
Expectations
Positive
Negative
Background
Communication
Culture
Environment
Implementation
Information
Leadership
Personnel
Procedures
Resources
Strategies

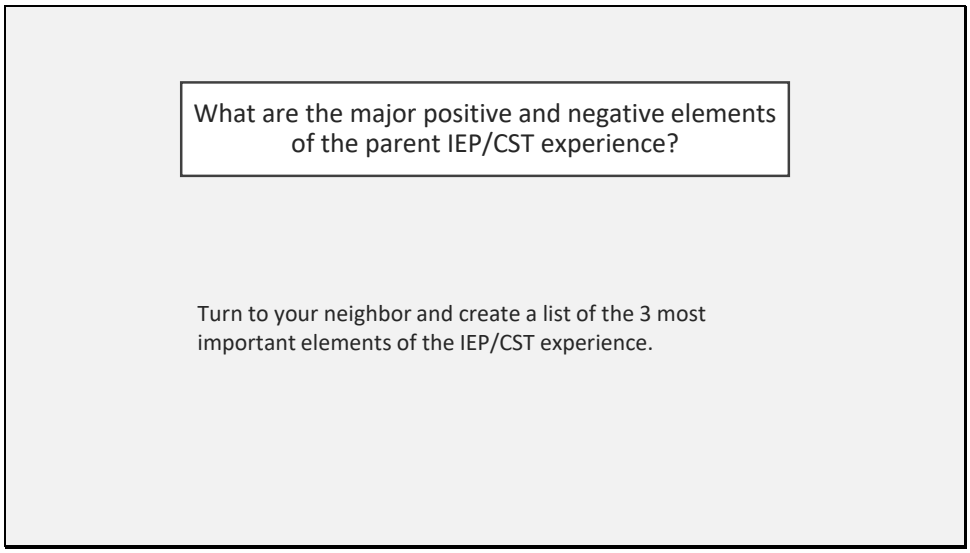
Slide 18

Outside Advocates & Experts
satisfaction: other
leadership
communication
leadership
Expectations
personnel
implementation
resources
procedures
information
Great Quotes
Awareness
resources
environment
culture
procedures
information
CST Roles
dissatisfaction
personnel
culture
satisfaction
strategies
strategies
background
environment
communication
dissatisfaction: other

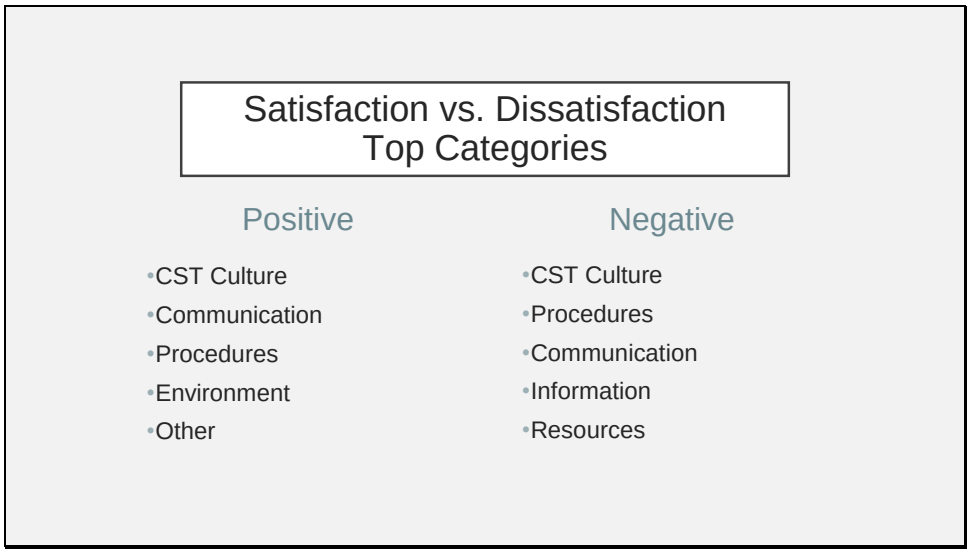
Slide 19

A ratio of 11:8; negative comments to positive comments

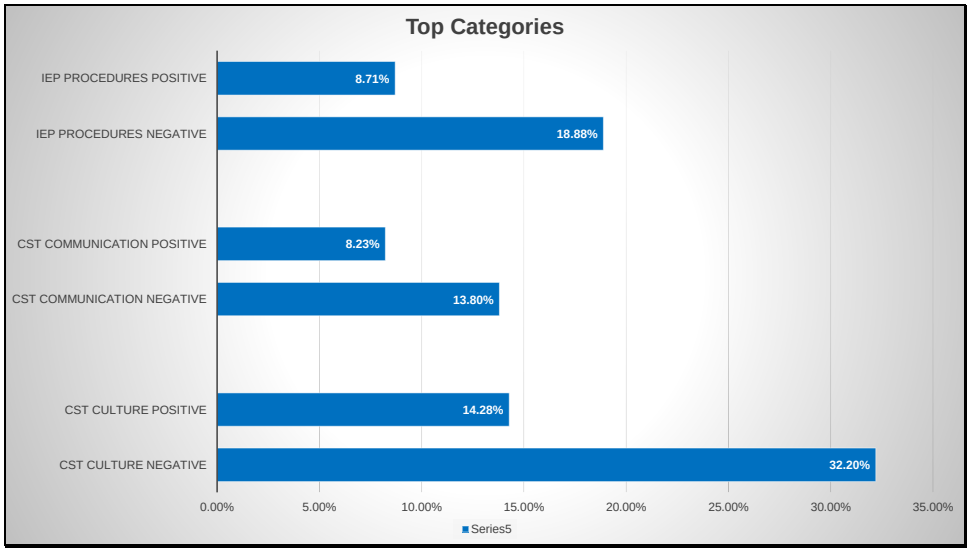
Slide 20


What are the major positive and negative elements of the parent IEP/CST experience?
Turn to your neighbor and create a list of the 3 most important elements of the IEP/CST experience.

Slide 21


Satisfaction vs. Dissatisfaction
Top Categories
Positive
•CST Culture
•Communication
•Procedures
•Environment
•Other
Negative
•CST Culture
•Procedures
•Communication
•Information
•Resources

Slide 22


Top Categories
IEP PROCEDURES POSITIVE
8.71%
IEP PROCEDURES NEGATIVE
18.88%
CST COMMUNICATION POSITIVE
8.23%
CST COMMUNICATION NEGATIVE
13.80%
CST CULTURE POSITIVE
14.28%
CST CULTURE NEGATIVE
32.20%
0.00%
5.00%
10.00%
15.00%
20.00%
25.00%
30.00%
35.00%
Series5

Slide 23

CST Culture

Positive

“ you can see that these are all people that cared about their jobs and are professionals. They're there because they have to be, but they're also there because they want to do well for your child. ”

“ I feel like they have in their minds an idea of how much he can achieve, and they're very motivated to get there. So when they speak to us, it's with this very goal focused... they're very responsive, if we have any issues ”

“The case manager goes in and visits him. That's her job to go in and pretty much visit him and see if they're following through on their IEP goals.”

Slide 24

CST Culture

Negative

"I felt that I was there for them to tell me what they were going to do and that I was just there to sign to let them do it."

"they want you to be compliant and they want the meetings to go quickly. They have too many meetings and too many people with needs to deal with and not enough resources and they want you to go away. "

"I think the culture now is try to do the minimum that you can get away with and if I put a bigger fight, they usually cave."

Slide 25

CST Culture

“Because I've done it so long I don't feel intimidated going there because there's so many of them and just me. I feel like I can speak to them and that's what they're there for. Not only for him but for me as well and to work together.”

Slide 26

IEP Procedures

Positive

- "It was me telling them what he needs for the areas he's really strong in, and his teacher agreeing with me, and us together coming to what was the best arrangement for him."
- "I always request a copy of the I.E.P. document before the meeting. And then I always go through the document, I highlight my questions and any place I have questions and I make a list of my comments and any stuff before then."
- "I knew to ask for a copy of all documents in advance. If ever they wanted to talk to me, they had to give me the papers in advance."

Slide 27

IEP Procedures

Negative

"I would sign these things and I wouldn't always read them because I believed what I was told from the Case Manager. I was given these papers to sign specifically at a time when I could not read them."

"I feel it's all pre-rehearsed."

When I say ready, I mean having the IEP ready. Don't work on the IEP while I'm there, writing on top of an old IEP. Have the draft IEP ready so that we can review and discuss, not do it on the fly when I'm there.

Slide 28

IEP Procedures

"They have this huge screen now, it almost looks like a TV and it has the IEP actually up on this gigantic screen so you can see exactly what is being typed. The IEP is up and the fields that they're typing into are completely visible as they're typing. That seems to really fit into a plan of sharing the ideas as the meeting goes along."

Slide 29

CST Communication

Positive

- “She texts me when there's issues coming up. John isn't getting all his homework in or John seems a little hands-on during recess this week, she'll call me and say, "Hey, is there something going on with John?”
- “They said that if I ever had any questions, I can always reach out to them, call them, or make an appointment, and they were available to me to discuss”
- “ They said, "If you communicate to us, we can work with you to make things better." And once we all sat down and really talked through the best way for them to learn and how we can do stuff at home that will help them. And, they can do stuff that helps us. It seemed successful.”

Slide 30

CST Communication

Negative

"And even if we did email or call and ask questions, we often would not receive any replies from the Case Manager."

"Nobody trusted each other, nobody trusted the other party to have a conversation that wasn't documented with a witness. That's why we went through the lawyers."

"The only communication that's there is when the IEP meeting is coming up."

"Well, it was a pattern. It was many years of telling us things after the fact."

Slide 31

CST Communication

“When they speak to parents, they need to use more layman terms. They're using all these codes and letters. I was completely lost.”

Slide 32

What are the elements of the CST/IEP process that are not critical to the parent experience?

Turn to your neighbor and discuss one issue that does not factor prominently in the experience of the parent experience.

Slide 33

Non-Issues

Factors that do not seem to impact the parent's IEP experience

- Negative feelings about the meeting room environment/location
- IEP instructional strategies
- Classification choices
- CST leadership
- Length of the IEP & amount of Evaluation Plan documentation
- Frequency or length of the IEP meetings
- Case manager's role on the CST
- Age/experience of CST personnel
- Make-up of the CST roster

Slide 34

Practical Recommendations

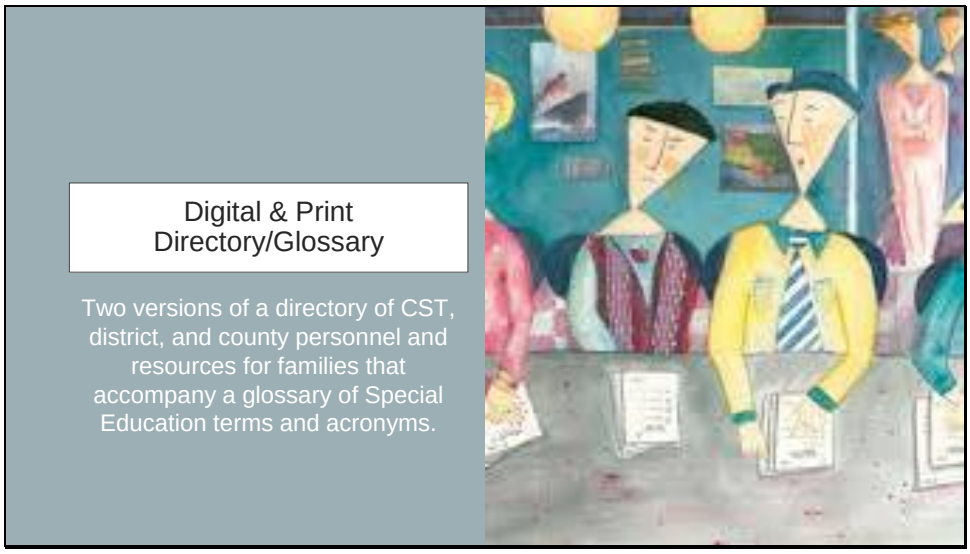
What are some practical recommendations that will improve the IEP/CST experience of the parents thereby reducing the potential for conflicts and improving outcomes for children, families, and schools?

Slide 35

Practical Recommendations

- Digital/print glossary & directory
- Abandon the time constrained IEP meeting
- Improve meeting space technology
- Create personalized calendars
- Schedule regular Meet & Greets
- Arrange parent workshops
- Use communication protocols
- Reduce case manager caseloads
- Create CST certification process

Slide 36


Digital & Print
Directory/Glossary
Two versions of a directory of CST, district, and county personnel and resources for families that accompany a glossary of Special Education terms and acronyms.

Slide 37

Abandon the time constrained IEP Meeting Format

Assume and plan for IEP meetings that exceed one school period. Plan accordingly for case managers, teachers and support providers to spend an adequate amount of time explaining present levels of performance, listening to parents input, and creating realistic, appropriate goals.

Slide 38

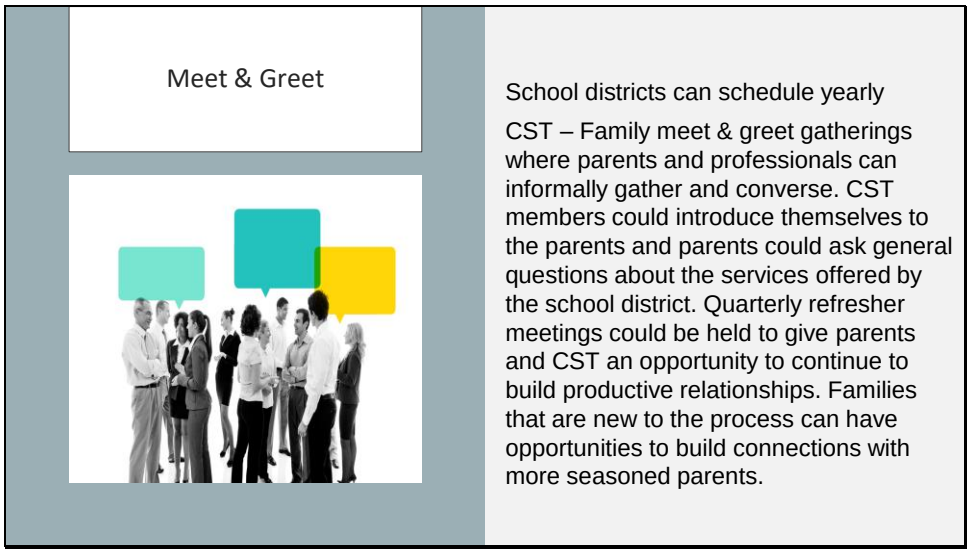
Meeting Space Technology

School districts can commit a dedicated space for meetings that contain a Smart board or equivalent technologies for projecting IEPs onto a screen or a monitor during meetings.

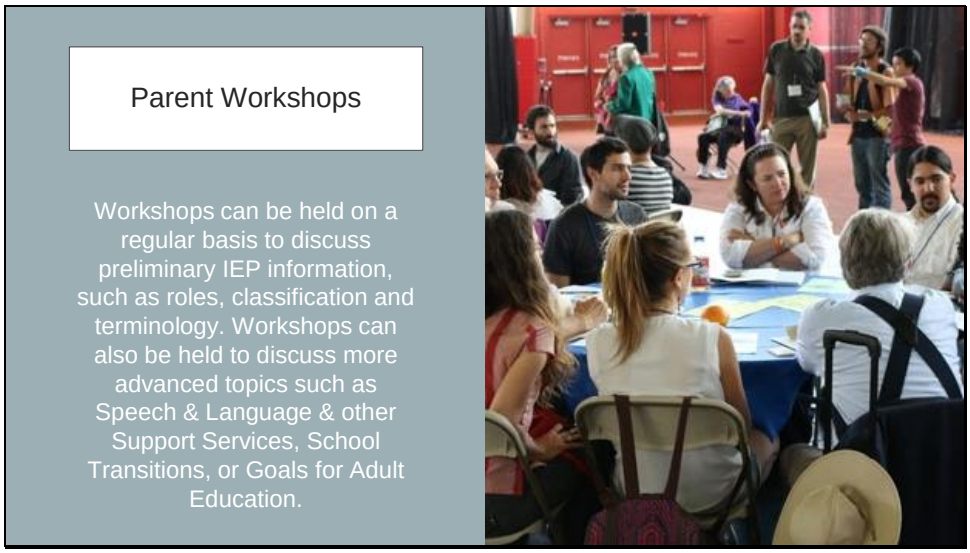
Slide 39

Personalized Calendars
Yearly personalized calendars can be created by case managers and families that record regular agreed upon communication, meetings and milestones based upon the needs of the child. Parents and CST members can share their preferred modes of communication.

Slide 40


Meet & Greet
School districts can schedule yearly
CST – Family meet & greet gatherings where parents and professionals can informally gather and converse. CST members could introduce themselves to the parents and parents could ask general questions about the services offered by the school district. Quarterly refresher meetings could be held to give parents and CST an opportunity to continue to build productive relationships. Families that are new to the process can have opportunities to build connections with more seasoned parents.

Slide 41

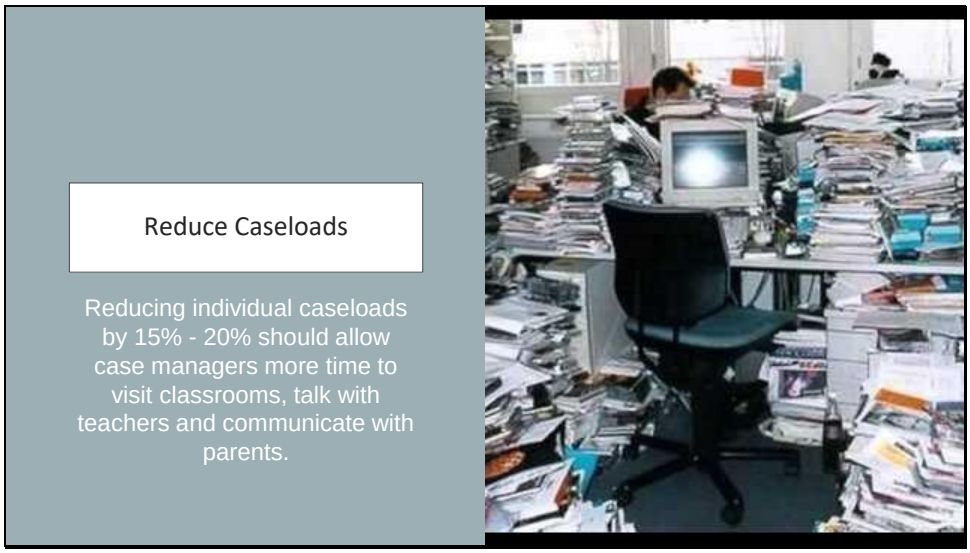

Parent Workshops
Workshops can be held on a regular basis to discuss preliminary IEP information, such as roles, classification and terminology. Workshops can also be held to discuss more advanced topics such as Speech & Language & other Support Services, School Transitions, or Goals for Adult Education.

Slide 42

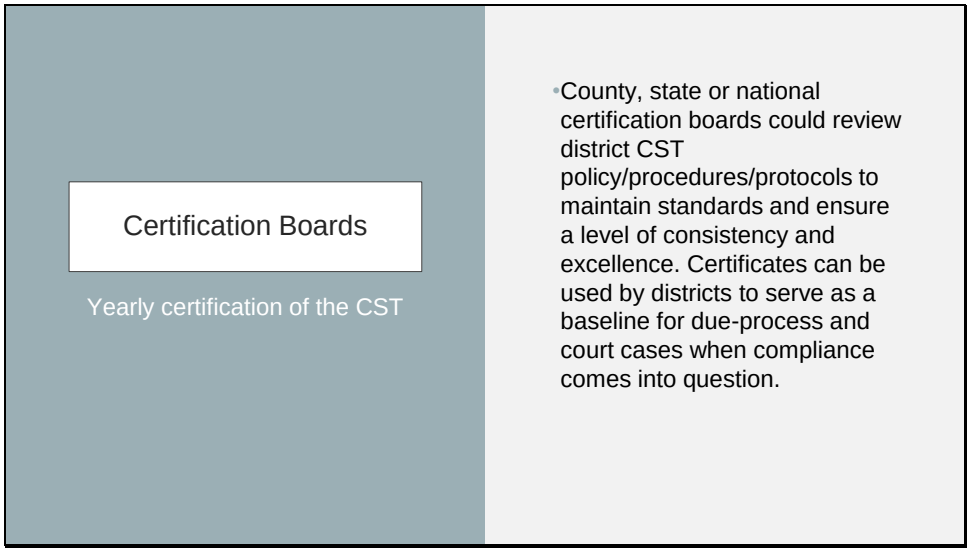
If-Then Communication Protocols

CST/Special Education departments can be tasked to create communication protocols to determine when CST members get informed by teachers about class room incidents & academic events. Additional protocols can be created to determine who communicates with the families and what information should be shared.

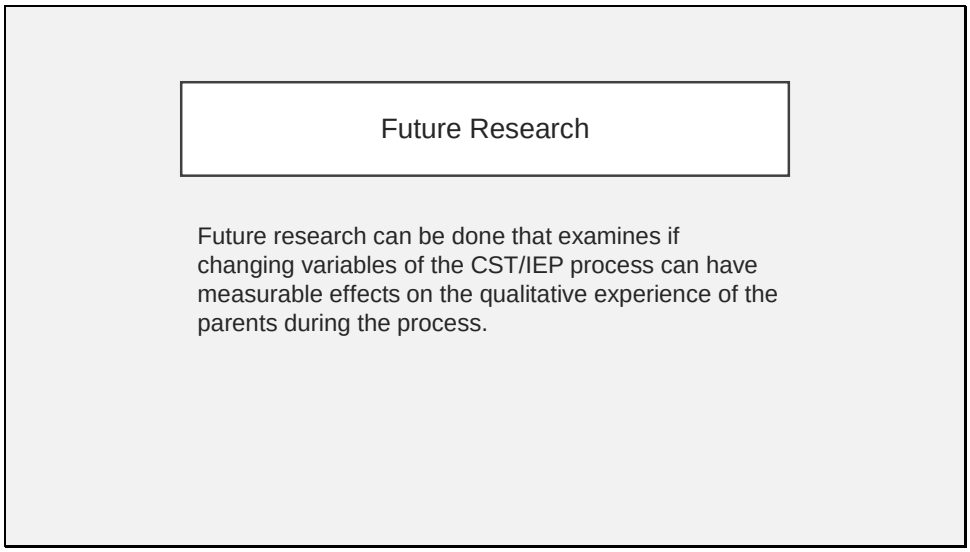
Slide 43


Reduce Caseloads
Reducing individual caseloads by 15% - 20% should allow case managers more time to visit classrooms, talk with teachers and communicate with parents.

Slide 44


Certification Boards
Yearly certification of the CST
County, state or national certification boards could review district CST policy/procedures/protocols to maintain standards and ensure a level of consistency and excellence. Certificates can be used by districts to serve as a baseline for due-process and court cases when compliance comes into question.

Slide 45


Future Research
Future research can be done that examines if changing variables of the CST/IEP process can have measurable effects on the qualitative experience of the parents during the process.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

An Individualized Education Program is a written statement of the educational program designed to meet a child's individual needs. Every child who receives special education services must have an IEP. That's why the process of developing this vital document is of great interest and importance to educators, administrators, and families alike. The IEP has two general purposes; to set reasonable learning goals for a child, and to state the services that the school district will provide for the child. The IEP is developed by a team of individuals that includes key school staff and the child's parents. The team meets, reviews the assessment information available about the child, and designs an educational program to address the child's educational needs that result from his or her disability. Once completed at an annual meeting, this IEP should be the capstone for a relationship between parents – IEP teams that will flourish over time. Too often these meetings become negative experiences for those involved because of differing expectations and poor relationships.

My research indicates that the good relationships between parents and IEP teams have four major components that can best be examined by studying how parents experience the IEP process. By interviewing parents of students with IEPs I was able to gather insights about how relationships were bolstered by information, communication, process and positive culture. I was also able to see how parents ascend a learning curve that starts out steep, but eventually flattens as parents get up to speed. My combined efforts are intended to expose these relationships and suggest ways to reduce friction by improving parent experiences.

HOW DO PARENTS EXPERIENCE THE IEP PROCESS?

The experience of parents during the year-long IEP process varies from district-to-district, school-to-school, and child-to-child. This experience of the parents will be impacted by where they are on the learning curve, but it will largely be determined by what processes and methods IEP teams employ. Specifically, the exchange of information, the culture of the IEP team, the style of communication and the practices employed by the team determine how the school personnel shape the parent experience. Bringing best practices to IEP teams methods and procedures will serve to reduce conflict between parents and schools, not just during meetings, but during the entire IEP process, ultimately to improve outcomes for students with IEPs.

What do best practices look like for an IEP process?

Best practices for the IEP process begin with looking at it as a year-round engagement, not a once yearly meeting. When parents are regularly engaged on their child's progress over the course of the school year trust begins to develop between stakeholders. Parents can be better prepared to discuss their children's goals if they are aware of progress over the course of the year. Regular progress reports not only afford opportunities for sharing specific goal achievement they also give providers additional opportunities for relationship building. Yearly calendars that schedule in time for conversations and updates can also be part of improving the communications between parents and schools. The creation of glossaries can also help to establish the year-round relationship by better preparing parents for the mounds of new information they are expected to be prepared for in a conversation with an IEP provider. It would also include meet-greet type meetings where IEP service providers would be encouraged to come together with parents to answer questions about their particular service and how they are being utilized in a building or program.

Best practices would also include protocols for meetings that would attempt to optimize parent participation. If parents are properly prepared by CST for the meetings the meetings would be dictated by the needs of the student and not the school bell. Agendas can be made available so that everyone gets time to speak and ask appropriate questions. Meetings would be held in comfortable spaces, outside of instructional areas, where noise and din can be an issue. Parents would have pre-printed drafts of their child's IEP and Smart board technology would allow everyone in the meeting to see changes that were being made in real time to a live document. Service providers could use video to show examples of goal completion from the classroom or therapy room. This could help substantiate claims made about child progress. The meeting would conclude with self-evaluation questions – "How did we do today? Did we represent and develop a program in the best interest of the child?"

How do we get to best practices? How can we best take disparate ideas from an environment that's always different depending on the student, the families, the school? Just like the document itself is uniform, based on what the law states needs to be included in an IEP, so too can best practices can be crafted into a series of uniform protocols that can be used in any IEP meeting. Since the document already exists as a driver of the meeting, significant meeting planning is consistent from individual to individual. The more complex and variable elements of the protocol planning would involve the remainder of the year, or how to plan out a formal annual communication and event schedule.

For the purpose of establishing and monitoring protocols, state-wide or county-wide committees could be convened that would seek to normalize the protocols and share the information with stakeholders. In bi-annual meetings, municipal areas could bring up concerns or

feedback around the implementation of the protocols and whether they were having the desired effect of reducing conflict and improving the experience of parents in their communities. These committees could use teams of inspectors that pay regular visits to CST and special education communities to see if they are able to institute the necessary protocols. Teams of inspectors could review best practices and share valuable insights into what works in other communities. If this type of monitoring were permitted, audits would give us insight into how best to engage parents and work together for outcomes that benefit children with special needs.

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