What Does Trust Have to Do with It? The Lived Experiences Of
Parents Within the IEP Process: A Phenomenological Study

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DEDICATION

This labor of love is dedicated to:

~ To Oliver and Eric. You are the light and love of my life. Thank you for all of your love and support.

~ To all of my teachers who taught me that I have what it takes to go anywhere in life, and that anything is possible.

~ To all of the parents who have inspired me to do this work.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of parents involved in the IEP process. More specifically, the study explored how parents in the IEP process experience trust in their relationship with educational professionals. The two research questions addressed in this study were: What is the lived experience of parents involved in the IEP process? and How do parents in the IEP process experience trust? Data were collected through 90-minute semi-structured individual interviews with ten parents engaged in the IEP process. Participants in the study were parents of one or more children with an IEP, from school districts within a mid-sized city in the northern Midwest. For the purposes of this study "parent" refers to the adult who assumes parental roles and responsibilities for the child and has legal guardianship. In choosing the participants, convenience sampling was applied to identify the participants (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2012). Due to the convenience sampling, the homogeneity of the participants was a limitation of this study. The phenomenon focused on was *trust* as parents described their experiences in the IEP process. The analysis of the parents' stories, reveals and verifies the significance of trust within the IEP process. In addition, the data analysis included a demographic questionnaire. Three overarching themes emerged in the analysis of the parent interviews that were integral to participants' experiencing trust within the IEP process. The three themes consistent among the parents were communication, parent-teacher partnerships, and meeting the needs of their child.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The road to achieving special education for children with disabilities is often arduous for parents. In many cases parents must demand services in order to have their child's needs met. Without their tireless efforts, there would be no "special education" as it is known today (Yell, Rogers, & Lodge-Rodgers, 1998; Curtiss, 2005; National Council on Disabilities, 2005). One result of parents' efforts was the passing of PL 94-142 in 1972, initially titled the Education for the Handicapped Act, now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2004. It has been over 40 years since the original Act was first enacted, and it has been amended several times in order to improve the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process. The purpose of the IEP is to develop and implement an individualized plan to meet a child's academic and behavioral strengths and needs related to the disability, providing supports and services to fully access the general education curriculum (Center for Education and Employment Law, 2013). The implementation of IEPs supports inclusion and increases parent involvement in their children's education (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The IDEA amendments of the 1990's was significant to parental input in the special education process. White (2014) explains that the 1990's amendments provided parents with several alternatives for legal recourse when they alleged that educators were noncompliant with the terms of the IEP or mandates of IDEA. Increasing the opportunity for legal recourse provides parents voice in the special educational system. Their ability to speak from a legal standpoint ultimately reinforces the importance of the parent/teacher partnership in serving children with disabilities.

Parent involvement. As mandated by IDEA, parents are expected to be involved in the decision-making process regarding their child's IEP (Wellner, 2012). In fact, IDEA specifically requires parental involvement as a part of the IEP process along with school professionals. (Shepherd & Kervick, 2015; Yell, Katsiyannis, Collins, & Losinski, 2012). Lo (2012) explains that when parents are actively involved in the decision-making process regarding special education services and placement, their children show greater educational success. "Unfortunately, studies of parent and professional relationships suggest that school and agency professionals often fail to understand family systems and/or parent's expertise regarding their children's strengths and needs" (Shepherd and Kervick, 2015, p. 2). When professionals disregard parental involvement, it can be detrimental to the success of an IEP.

There is extensive literature about the importance of family partnerships and parental involvement in children's education (Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011, Sauer & Kasa, 2012; Wellner, 2012). Yet, parents and teachers still struggle to work together during the IEP process (Ciracy & McGinnis, 2007; Gershwin-Mueller, 2015; Minnesota Department of Education, 2013). There appears to be a disconnect between parents and professionals involved in the IEP that inhibits strong partnerships. This disconnect is evident by the level of dissatisfaction reported by parents, sometimes resulting in litigation. In Curtis's (2005) analysis of special education litigation cases, results indicate many parents feel their input is not valued, and others feel as though they need to fight to get services for their child. His findings emphasize the importance of parents feeling they are an integral part of the IEP

process. When there is a strong partnership between parents and professionals, it is less likely parents will be dissatisfied with the outcome of the IEP (Curtis, 2005; Fish, 2008).

Gershwin-Mueller, Singer and Draper (2008) explain, "conflict between families of children with disabilities and school districts has become a nationwide topic of concern for policymakers, educators and researchers" (p.191). The law states that parents and schools must work together in order to develop a plan for each child; however, the law does not say that the two parties must respect each other, embrace each other's ideas, or strive for a trusted and positive working relationship. The Office of Special Education Programs reveals, "approximately one third of parents of children receiving special education services continue to report that schools are not facilitating their involvement in such a way as to improve services and results for their children" (Elbaum, Blatz, Rodriguez, 2015, p. 2). Parent involvement continues to be a major area of concern with special education. Further exploration of the parent-teacher partnership is needed if IEPs are going to be the determinate of success.

The parent-teacher relationship and trust. The parent-teacher relationship is the crux of positive parental involvement. The literature describes trust as a proponent of successful parent-teacher partnerships (Adams & Christensen, 2000; Angell, Stoner, & Shelden, 2009; Wellner, 2012; White, 2014). Parents may not trust educators or the IEP for a variety of reasons involving service delivery issues, communication or lack thereof, or opposing views of the child's needs. Lack of trust is consistently reported in nearly every request for mediation or Due Process Hearings (Ciracy & McGinnis, 2007; Gershwin-Mueller, 2015; Minnesota Department of Education, 2013). Trust is shown to be a key element to ensuring positive parent involvement. Hence, it is central to the

development and implementation of an IEP that will appropriately address the child's learning needs.

Statement of the Problem

The IEP process continues to fail at establishing positive parent involvement. Contentious issues between parents and educational professionals remain a consistent determinant of poor student outcomes in special education. The lack of trust in the parent-teacher relationship often gets in the way of effective decision making about the educational needs of the child. Research provides many reasons why parents do not trust school professionals and the IEP process, including lack of communication, authentic caring, warmth and respect. Researchers consistently point to several factors that influence lack of trust. Some of these include follow through and shifting blame. Other factors include lack of competence of the professionals and program options, as well as poor problem solving among professionals that influence parents' lack of trust (Adams, & Christensen, 2000; Angell, et al, 2009; Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). The time that could be spent supporting the child is often spent in conflict. Conflict has its purpose and allows for new ideas and change. However, in order for conflict to be effective, both parties involved must trust one another (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Mistrust between parents and education professionals has the potential to impede the development and implementation of effective IEPs.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of the present phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of parents involved in the IEP process. Specifically, the study sought to

identify how parents in the IEP process experience trust in their relationships with educational professionals and describe the nature of trust within those relationships. Listening to the stories of parents, learning about their perspectives and their experiences with trust may serve to further inform special educators about parent involvement to support the desired outcomes of the IEP process.

Understanding more about the significant role of trust for parents engaged in the IEP process may inform educators on ways parental involvement can be strengthened with the IEP process. Ultimately, the refinement of parental involvement can provide educational professionals, teacher preparation programs, researchers and policymakers with further knowledge on how to improve the special education process and enhance educational outcomes. The research questions that guided the present study were:

- What is the experience of parents involved in the IEP process?
- How do parents in the IEP process experience trust?

Theoretical Framework

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004), situates the child within the social environment. Together the educational and family systems are representative of the child's social environment.

Bronfenbrenner (1977), most known for his ecological systems theory, explains:

The understanding of human development demands going beyond the direct observation of behavior on the part of one or two persons in the same place: it requires examination of multi-person systems of interaction not limited to a single setting and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing subject (p. 514).

The IEP process is a multi-person system, which requires collaboration of multiple members, including the family and school professionals, in order to understand the child in a variety of social contexts (school and home environment). Systems theory is foundational to understanding parent involvement as a crucial component of special education.

The underlying principles of IDEA, the IEP and parental involvement, are rooted in Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1966). Bowen is considered to be the forefather of the Family Systems Theory (Lambie, 2008). Satir, another well-known family systems theorist, emphasizes that in order to achieve change, the personal relationship between the family and the professional is primary to technique (as cited in Lambie, 2008). When parents and professionals perceive each other as equal partners, they can work together in the decision-making process of the IEP, which is ultimately in the best interest of the child.

Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) offer an Integrative Model of Organizational Trust. This model is useful in understanding parental involvement in educational systems. In their viewpoint, trust is a fundamental component of social interactions. Trust is relational, rather than a psychological state. Trust is something that is created when two people enter a relationship as opposed to something an individual has prior to developing a relationship with another person. In addition, Mayer, et al., 1995, point out that trust is necessary when one person depends on the other to produce an outcome. For example, in the IEP process the parent is reliant upon the education professional to meet the needs of the child by implementing the IEP.

Mayer, et al. (1995) also theorize that ability, benevolence and integrity are interdependent of one another when defining trust. Within the IEP process, ability might refer to the education professional's ability to meet the child's needs, or their ability to communicate frequently about the child's progress. Mayer, et al., describe benevolence as wanting to help another person. An education professional who actively supports a child in order to help them achieve success in the classroom, is an example of benevolence. In this study, an example of integrity might include an education professional who actively carries out what they said they would do.

Drawing upon the Integrative Model of Organizational Trust, an education professional who demonstrates ability, benevolence and integrity would be considered to be trustworthy by the parent. Whether or not parents and professionals perceive these three factors as a means to trust with the IEP process is unclear. What is clear is that lack of organizational trust does have an impact on parental involvement and the effectiveness of special education for children with disabilities.

From an ecological and family systems approach we can see that the child is at the center of the IEP process, but the family and the education professionals play a significant role when it comes to designing an appropriate IEP. The organizational trust model can provide a framework for understanding what families need from education professionals in order to effectively work together in the best interest of the child.

Although the Integrative Model of Organizational Trust (Mayer, et al., 1995) may be applicable to the way parents experience trust in the IEP process, it is vital for education professionals to consider that diversity may impact a parent's ability to trust (Rosetti, Story-Sauer, Bui, Ou, 2017). Based on the information provided in Rosetti, et

al. 2017 ability, benevolence and integrity may be perceived differently depending on the parent's socioeconomic status, familial, education, or cultural background. Howard (2007), reminds us that racial, cultural and socioeconomic differences are very real. In his article, he explains that ninety percent of the teachers in the U.S. public schools are white. Education professionals need to acknowledge that racism and classism have created a sense of exclusivity. "Certain demographic groups are served well, while others languish in failure of mediocrity. As diversity grows in rapidly transitioning school districts, demographic gaps become increasingly apparent" (Howard, 2007, p.19). In schools, education professionals need to enhance their cultural competence and awareness that based on previous experiences, not all parents are going trust education professionals.

Definition of Terms

Education Professionals. The education professionals include the special and general educator, administrator (principal, vice principal, and special education director), school psychologist, school social worker, and related services provider (e.g. speech and language pathologist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, school counselor, school nurse, etc.).

Lived Experiences. Events that have happened during the IEP process, this may also include emotions that may have been triggered during these events.

Parent Involvement. Parent involvement occurs when parents participate in their child's education. This includes but is not limited to supporting the child academically, socially and emotionally both at school and at home. Examples include attending parent-teacher conferences, attending IEP meetings, seeking out additional information and

resources to support the child's education, communicating with education professionals regarding the students' needs and accomplishments, assisting with homework.

Parent-Teacher Partnership. A parent-teacher partnership is created when parents and education professionals working together to support one another in search of the best possible outcome for the child. This includes communicating with one another. A partnership also has an aspect of trust.

Trust. When one party believes that the other party involved is benevolent and has their best interest at heart. Trust can also occur when party believes other party is competent and able to carry out the task at hand. Other factors include that the other party has integrity and will honor their word (Mayer, et al., 1995).

Assumptions

There are bodies of research discussing the significance of parental involvement in education and the subsequent consequences. Not all parents are capable of being a partner with their children's teachers. However, for the present study, an assumption is that parents do want to be involved in the IEP process and act as advocates for their children's education. Participants in the present study are engaged parents in their children's education. Studying their experiences as engaged parents allowed for rich description of the complexity of trust in the IEP process as it is fostered and sustained, as well as challenged and broken.

The present study acknowledges the federal law that states parents are equal partners in the IEP process. This study assumes that all parties in the IEP are interested in creating and sustaining a partnership with one another. Parents are equal partners along with education professionals as a part of the IEP decision-making process. Another

assumption would be that education professionals' welcome parents' voices in the

development and implementation of this process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss the experiences of parents of children with disabilities and the IEP process. Five main concepts guide this discussion. The first section of the chapter provides an historical overview of the education system and the inaccessibility and legal issues in which families of children with disabilities experienced. Today, children with disabilities have access to education through the IDEA law and the IEP process. IDEA mandates that the IEP process include parent involvement by way of parents and school professionals working together as equal partners. The second section addresses the importance of parent involvement in the IEP process and in the child's education as a whole. Parent involvement leads to the third section which discusses the significant amount of research that explains how educators can successfully increase parent involvement through the IEP process and in general. Conversely parents of children with disabilities still face many barriers when it comes to the IEP process. The fourth section explains that many parents still feel left out of the IEP process and is illustrated in the fourth section, the IEP process and current barriers for parent involvement. Finally, the fifth section explicates trust and how trust is conceptualized in the present study. A vast majority of the literature supporting the first four concepts emphasizes that trust is an important component to the IEP process and parent involvement. Trust is a necessary component of any positive working relationship. Without trust, there is no relationship.

The literature review includes five topic areas for exploration, each with subtopics to help guide the reader. The five topic areas include: (a) history of barriers for parents with special education, (b) importance of parent involvement, (c) factors that support

parent involvement (d) the Individualized Education Plan process and current barriers for parent involvement, (d) the issue of trust and parent-school relationships. Each topic will address the various aspects of the subject as it relates to the lived experiences of parents through the Individualized Education Plan process.

History of Barriers for Parents with Special Education

Throughout the history of educational legislation in the United States, parents of children with disabilities have faced many barriers. They fought not only to protect their children, but also to ensure their child's access to education. The 1960's marked the beginning of a new time for the people of the United States, especially individuals with disabilities. Education evolved and became accessible for many individuals who had not been given access to public education in the past (National Council on Disabilities (NCD), 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The Civil Rights Act (1964) was put into place, and schools were required to provide an equal education to all people of the United States (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman 2008; Sorrells, Rieth, Sindelar, 2003). Despite the Civil Rights Movement and Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965), a significant number of children with disabilities continued to be marginalized. If their families could not afford private education, then children with disabilities often were ignored. Parents were left to the challenge of understanding and advocating for ESEA in a large complex system.

The Civil Rights Act served as a catalyst for the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the public-school system (NCD, 2005). The ESEA created momentum for inclusion (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The Act also provided schools with funding through Title I intended to decrease the achievement gap (Hess & Petrelli, 2007;

Marshall, 2007; Pinar, 2008). Through the ESEA, additional funds were set aside to assist in the improvement of education for students, including those with disabilities (Yell, et al., 1998). Although there were funds in place to improve education for students with disabilities, many states did not hold their public schools accountable in terms of providing an equal education, or any education for students with disabilities (NCD, 2005).

The education system is out of compliance. Although the ESEA supported inclusive practices, by the year 1970, U.S. public schools only educated one in five children with special needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; Yell, et al., 1998). Children with disabilities had yet to be provided equal access to education and 1.75 million students with disabilities did not receive a public education, unless their parent paid for private schooling (Sorrells, et al., 2003).

In 1970, it was through parent advocacy that a new law, the Education for the Handicapped Act (EHA), was instituted (Shepherd, Kervick, 2015; Yell, 1998; NCD, 2005). The purpose of the EHA was to enforce the ESEA law so states had to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Specific to FAPE, the word "appropriate" is a legal term in special education that refers to the accessibility of the curriculum. For example, even though a student with a disability may be able to sit within a classroom with non-disabled peers, he or she may not be able to be an active learning participant depending on the type of disability present and the degree to which it impedes the child's learning (Carson, 2015; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011). FAPE clarified that a student having equal access to the classroom does

not equate to free and appropriate public education. One must be able to access the curriculum being taught (Carson, 2015; Yell, 1998; Curtis, 2005; Sorrells, et al., 2004). FAPE was an influential piece of legislation that enforced IDEA. Despite progress with FAPE, many states remained out of compliance with federal law.

After the enactment of EHA, there were still many states out of compliance with ESEA (NCD, 2005). For example, in 1970, only 20% of children with disabilities in the United States had access to a free and appropriate public education (Sorrells, et al., 2003; Yell, et al., 1998). Children with disabilities receiving special education were often lumped together with other children who had varying disabilities, resulting in their being segregated from mainstream classrooms. They were isolated from peers and their classrooms were commonly housed in trailers and school basements (NCD, 2005). Many others still did not have access to education at all. Not only was the law ignored by many, when it was enforced, students with disabilities were generalized and further marginalized in the education system.

Once again, parents of children with disabilities were at the forefront of reform, insisting on educational rights against the states who were still out of compliance with the EHA, and were not providing a free and appropriate public education to students with disabilities (NCD, 2005). Two landmark cases of parents taking a stance were Pennsylvania Association for the Retarded Child vs. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972) and Mills vs. The Board of Education of the District of Columbia (1972). With both cases, school districts were held accountable for discriminatory exclusion practices. As a result of these cases, public schools were required to provide education to all students with disabilities (NCD, 2005). Parents and advocates were the

voice and advocates who brought these cases to trial and won. Not only was the Mills vs. the Board of Education paramount to ensuring EHA was enforced, it was also the impetus of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975, Public Law 94-142, which marked the mandate and emergence of IEP's for students with disabilities who qualified for special education services (NCD, 2005; Sorrells, et al., 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The IEP. An IEP highlights the student's academic and behavioral strengths as well as needs resulting from the disability. The IEP aides in providing appropriate supports and services in order to allow the individual to fully access the general education curriculum (Center for Education and Employment Law, 2013). The IEP also includes explanations to the extent to which the student requires services, modifications and accommodations in order to access the general education curriculum. It also clarifies how often the student receives services and specifies who provides the services (Sutton, 2013). Finally, the IEP explains the extent to which the student participates with non-disabled students in general education classes. For students 14 years and older, the IEP includes a statement of any transition services necessary for the student (Center for Education and Employment Law, 2013). In 1986, an amendment to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was made awarding parents reimbursement of attorney fees, if a case was proven to be in violation of the EHA (Center for Education and Employment Law, 2013). Parents no longer bore the burden of legal fees to ensure their child had equal access to education.

Reauthorizations and amendments. In 1990 the EAHCA (PL 94-142) was reauthorized and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), a significant

amendment was added for parents and all children with disabilities. This time IDEA had

been amended in order to make parents equal partners with school personnel, which

provided them access to their child's school records, to participate in decision making in

regards to the evaluation and design their child's IEP (Spann, Kohler & Soenksen, 2003).

The amendment of 1997 was the beginning of parents being viewed as equal partners in

the IEP process (Shepherd & Kervick, 2015; Yell, et al, 2012). Prior to 1997, parents

were not viewed as equal partners in the development of the IEP (NCD, 2005). Those in

the education system (teachers, administrators, specialists), were viewed as the experts

and the sole decision makers in regard to the educational needs and IEP for students. The

voices of parents were often left unheard or altogether disregarded. This is the reason the

1997 amendment of IDEA (National Association for Special Education Teachers, 2015)

was one of the most important historical progressions of parents' inclusion with special

education. The change in the law fortified the inclusion of parents as equal partners with

education professionals in the IEP process. By law, parents are equal partners in the

decision-making process that determines the educational practices for their child.

Importance of Parental Involvement

Not only is family involvement a mandate of IDEA, it is also considered best

practice among educators and researchers (Keen 2007; Shepherd, et al., 2015). There is a

significant amount of research emphasizing the importance, as well as the many benefits,

of parent involvement in children's education. Coots (2007), a leading researcher,

explains, "beyond these legal mandates, best practice standards would suggest that

services will be most effective when parents and professionals work in collaboration" (p.

33). For decades, other human service related disciplines have recognized the importance

of parent involvement in the child's life. For example, the human service discipline of social work approaches to understand the individual as a member of the family system (Lambie, 2008). To view the child as a part of a larger system would be the only understand part of the whole child. The child cannot be viewed as independent from the family system. Parents know their children in ways educators do not and their insights shed light on the child's strengths and needs that can inform the education planning process (Shepherd, et al., 2015). Parents as partners must be a part of the IEP process for effective collaboration to occur.

Benefits of collaboration. Parental involvement serves as a means to ensure system accountability. "Parents are experts about their children and serve as accountability mechanisms, parental input in the special education process is crucial", (Burke & Sandman, 2015, p. 72). Family members can bring a passion and energy to the educational process that surpasses any outside member. Shepherd, et al, (2015) argue that "family members bring wisdom, experience and passion for improvement that is critical to improving the systems of care designed to support them" (p. 2). In order to support the student, parent involvement is essential in order for schools to work cooperatively and alongside of the parents (Turnbull, et al, 2011).

Collaboration with schools can also provide the family support in the home environment. Edwards and Da Fonte (2012), explain that "Addressing student and family needs can also help reduce stressors related to rearing children with disabilities and support higher levels of family health and adjustment," (p. 7). Collaborating with families has many benefits to the entire system; when parents feel supported, they are better able to meet the needs of their children. Viewing the child within the context of their family

and school system fosters comprehensive and accountable care throughout their childhood. Edwards and Da Fonte (2012) argue that collaboration with parents is a priority for educators, and should not just occur in the early years, but throughout the student's school experience.

Parent involvement benefits student academic performance. In 2003, Barnard completed a longitudinal investigation of the influence of early intervention (parent involvement their child's education), conducted at the Chicago Child Parent Center Program. The study began in 1986; the participants were children ($N = 1,539$) six years of age. In 2000, the participants were 20 years old. Of the original participants, only 1165 were included in the study sample. The researchers obtained information on whether the participants dropped out or attained high school completion. The data included parent ratings of home involvement, school involvement, and teacher ratings of parent involvement in the school. In this study, logistic regression was used to measure rates of high school dropout and high school completion, and hierarchical linear regression were used to examine the highest grades completed. The findings suggested that the parents in the experimental group who participated in their child's education indicated the child obtained an average or better status based upon teacher ratings. Further results are significantly correlated with lower dropout rates and more years of school completed (Barnard, 2003).

Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack (2007) found that when parents are informed about their child's educational progress (especially if the child is struggling) they are better equipped to provide opportunities for their child to practice academic and behavioral skills that the child may be having difficulty with in school. Parent

involvement can also help educators make informed decisions regarding appropriate interventions (Cook, Shepherd, Cook, & Cook, 2012). The implementation of interventions for students who are struggling is common practice for many educators. In order to determine the intervention that will best fit the child, an educator must identify the strengths, needs, interests, and characteristics of the child, and typically the parent is the best suited individual to provide this information (Cook, et al., 2012).

Positive family-school partnerships. Bronfenbrenner, an ecological systems theorist, (1978) describes the importance of fluidity between a child's home and school environment as an essential part to the child's development. It is imperative that parents participate in their child's intervention program so the goals of the child's school environment reflect the home environment and vice-versa. Parent involvement reinforces positive behavior and increases the chance of meeting the goal set (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004). Higher levels of student achievement are associated with higher levels of parent involvement (Auerbach, 2010). It is not just any involvement either. Research in parent involvement suggests that positive relationships between the family and the school-community have been associated with student success (Collier, Keefe, & Hirrel, 2015, pg.1). Dunst & Dempsey (2007) explain that the relationship between parents and educators has the ability to increase favorable outcomes not just for the parents but the child as well.

Enhances child's social emotional wellbeing. Research focused on parent involvement reveals significant correlations between parent involvement and children's positive social, emotional, and academic growth (Boethel, 2003; Collier, et al, 2015; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Fan & Chen, 2001; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, &

Sandler, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson 2009, Jeynes, 2003; Kourkoutas, Eleftherakis, Vitalaki, 2015). The positive impact of parent involvement is further supported by Beveridge (2005), and Dyson (2010) who suggests that family involvement has a significant effect on students' development. Dyches, Carter, and Prater's (2012) research further support the critical role of building positive working relationships with parents, concluding that parent involvement has a positive impact on student learning. Student learning supported at home is related to student achievement. Families of all backgrounds can have a positive impact on their child's learning, and, "building trusting and respectful relationships among school personnel, families, and community members are effective in sustaining support for student learning" (pg. iii).

Increased understanding of the child. Kratochwill, McDonald, Levin, Scalia, and Coover (2009) explain the benefits that occurred after an elementary school implemented a family support group (FAST: Families and Schools Together). The support group promoted interactions between parents and children (n = 67) in eight inclusive classrooms in a midsize city. Each of the schools received an eight-week multi-family support group intervention. The instrumentation used included nationally normed standard rating scales; the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991), Parent Report and Teacher Report Form (TRF; Achenbach, 1991) and the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliot, 1990). These are used to measure social, emotional and behavioral outcomes. The results of this study included higher teacher ratings and an increase on student academic and social skills and a decrease in aggression. Additionally, results indicated a decrease in family stress and an increase in social support. Finally, the

researchers found a correlation between lower levels of family stress and symptoms (e.g. academic and behavioral needs) reported by families (Kratochwill, et al, 2009).

A recent action research program was designed by Kourkoutas, Eleftherakis, Vikalai and Hart, (2015), to support parents and primary school teachers. The program included mediation of school professionals in order to help them facilitate the school inclusion of at-risk students, as well as those with special educational needs. The program focused on expanding across home and school environments and sought to positively impact the children's academic and social inclusion. Central to the program was the utilization of a mediation of partnership model and the support of school professionals. This program was implemented in grades first, second and third grade classrooms of four urban public primary schools and was completed over the course of four years, each year with a new group of parents. The participants included 71 parents overall, on average fifteen each year. The participants resided in Crete, Greece. During this research project, parents and educators came together to discuss their experiences with the children and were encouraged to discuss their knowledge and feelings and think about the strengths as well as the factors that may have worked against the children's academic and social development. These meetings were held every 20 days and lasted 2.5-3.5 hours. Parents were encouraged to share the difficulties they were experiencing at home and the educators shared difficulties they faced in the classroom.

Evaluation of the program was conducted through the use of a 15-point questionnaire administered to the parents. There were a series of interviews conducted with the teachers and principals who participated in the program in order to gain their perspective on the program process and outcomes. The interviews were audio-recorded

and transcribed using Tesch's (1990) systematic open coding process. In this study, several issues emerged regarding student success in relation to the home-school partnership. These included:

> (a.) The nature and sources of specific students' learning difficulties and how to help them; (b.) the nature, function, sources/causes of the students' disruptive behavior; (c.) how to assist the students with their difficulties (home and school); (d.) how punitive or harsh methods of handling the child can be punitive; (e.) how to avoid victimization (f.) the father's role in cases of problematic school and social pathways; (g.) parents-teacher collaboration in order to apply a meaningful plan of intervention for many of the discussed cases of children (p.116).

The results revealed that parents felt more involved in their child's' education when they had a collaborative partnership with educators. Both parents and teachers felt more understanding toward each other and the students and worked together to discover alternative ways to support the students. One hundred percent of the parents reported they felt this program was useful, 90% of parents found they had a more positive view of their child. When parents felt they had a better idea of how the school supported their child, they also felt less critical of the educators.

Parent empowerment. Research about parents suggests that when there are policies in place for parent involvement, and schools invite participation in various ways other than parent teacher conferences, parents view themselves as stakeholders and participants in decision making, such as school governance (Auerbach, 2010; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). Barnard (2003) suggests that based on the significance between parent involvement and successful student outcomes, it is imperative educators and other school

confidence and enjoyment in regard to their parent-professional partnerships. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis by sets were used to determine the correlation between partnership and empowerment. The results determined that parent-teacher professional partnerships were correlated with parent empowerment. Dunst and Dempsey (2007) suggest that parent-professional partnerships promote family and child outcomes.

Factors that Support Parent Involvement

There is an expansive literature on factors that support parents' involvement in their child's education, more specifically parents of children with disabilities (Hepworth-Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012, Blue-Banning, et al., 2004; Collier, et al., 2015; Dyches, et al., 2012; Friend & Cook, 2010; Latunde, & Loque, 2012; Morris & Taylor, 1998; Murawski & Spencer, 2011; Olsen & Fuller, 2012; Sauer & Kasa, 2012). Findings overall confirm, to increase parent involvement educators must foster successful partnerships with families of students with disabilities (Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012; Keen, 2007; Sauer & Kasa, 2012). There are many parent strategies recommended for use by education professionals (Coots, 2007). For example, teacher preparation programs have been aware for quite some time that building parent-teacher partnerships helps to facilitate parent involvement and have taken proactive steps in preparing novice teachers for their role in these relationships (Morris & Taylor, 1998; Sauer & Kasa, 2012; Latunde & Loque, 2012). Teachers play a significant role in building successful parent-teacher partnerships. Positive partnerships are essential component for parental involvement to occur.

Supporting preservice teachers. Morris and Taylor (1998) employed a mixed methods approach to examine the extent to which teacher education course experiences

influence preservice teachers' perceptions regarding their levels of competence in

creating parent teacher partnerships. Participants included students (*N*= 105) who were

enrolled in a School/Community Relations course. The study took place over the course

of four semesters. The students were either in an elementary (80%) or early childhood

program (20%). Each student was assessed before and after the course. The pre and post

assessments consisted of 11 items associated with student's knowledge and comfort level

in (a) conducting parent conferences or interviews, (b) accessing resources needed to

develop parent programs, (c) planning and implementing parent workshops (d)

identifying successful strategies for involving parents in school activities, and (e)

developing positive relations with parents. These responses were rated on a five-point

Likert-type scale (Morris & Taylor, 1998, p 223-224). The pre and posttests were

compared using a t test for dependent samples to determine if the participants'

perceptions changed after taking the course. The results of the study indicated that 75%

of the pre-service teachers reported that the knowledge gained in class increased their

level of confidence in their ability to work with parents (Morris & Taylor, 1998).

In a similar study, Sauer and Kasa (2012) conducted a qualitative study using

archived work of undergraduate and graduate students who were enrolled in a face-to-

face Introduction to Special Education course. The data was collected over the course of

four semesters between spring 2009, and fall 2011, at a mid-sized western university. The

archived student work consisted of interviews the students conducted with parents of

children with disabilities, as well as observations, and students' papers based on those

interactions (Danforth & Navarro, 1998; Novak, Murrary, Scheuermann & Curran,

2009). Prior to the interviews, the students were encouraged to actively listen to the

parents, use paraphrasing and follow up questions to clarify understanding. Ninety-eight families participated in the project and the students conducted 125 interviews, each interview approximately lasting two hours. The findings suggest that preservice teachers came to appreciate the willingness of families in sharing their personal stories and valued their knowledge (Sauer & Kasa, 2012). The preservice teachers reported that the families were an asset and had a wealth of information when it came to information regarding how to best work with their child. Overall, Sauer and Kasa reported that "students' perceptions of parents shifted from viewing families as less than or not welcome in the school to a more understanding approach that families of children with disabilities are no different than any other parent." In further support of this, additional findings suggest that "teacher candidates gain from listening to parent narratives and can have a lasting impact on their classroom practices over time this underscores the importance of authentic interactions in preparation of teachers" (2015, p. 239). When teacher candidates are provided opportunities to acquire and nurture practices, family-school partnerships can be strengthened (Coots, 2007).

Successful partnerships through collaboration, trust, and respect. In a qualitative study, Blue-Banning et al., (2004) identified the main components of collaborative partnerships between families and school professionals. The study had several locations in Kansas, North Carolina, and Louisiana. The participants in this study consisted of adult family members of children with disabilities ($n =137$), and professionals ($n = 53$) including administrators and direct service providers. The research consisted of 33 focus groups. In addition, there were 32 interviews conducted with non-English speaking parents (18) and their service providers (14). Focus groups were the

primary method of the data collection, as participants were encouraged to share their personal ideas and perceptions to generate a broad range of possibilities in regard to positive partnerships. During the interviews, participants were asked to think of successful partnerships between professionals and parents and describe what made them successful. The findings suggest that communication was seen as a vehicle for establishing trust, expressing respect, and ensuring equality for their families. Six broad interrelated categories were identified as contributing to positive partnerships with families: (a) communication; (b) commitment; (c) equality; (d) skills; (e) trust; and (f) respect.

In 2000, Adams and Christenson conducted a survey of parents and teachers in a large school district parents ($n = 1,234$) and teachers ($n = 209$) from a first ring suburban school district in a large mid-western metropolitan area. The district is made up of six schools, comprised of 303 teachers, 2,483 families, and 4,061 students. The parents and teachers were surveyed about issues of trust in the family-school relationship. For the purpose of their study, the researchers defined trust as; "the family-school relationship as confidence that another person will act in a way to benefit or sustain the relationship, or the implicit or explicit goals of the relationship, to achieve positive outcomes for students" (p. 480). The parents and teachers completed the Family-School Relationship Survey (Adams & Christenson, 2000) consisting of the following scales: Trust, Frequency, and Nature of Parent-Teacher Interaction, Recommendations for Improving Trust, and Demographic Variables based on the measurement of trust in close personal relationships, (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). The purpose was to identify any correlation between parent-teacher interaction and the level of trust, as well as the level of parent

trust and student's school performance. Teachers and parents rated 17-19 items beginning with the stem "I am confident that teachers" or "I am confident that parents/guardians" which preceded statements reflecting a variety of behaviors often performed by teachers and/or parents in support of student's school performance. Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale. Data was collected from grades K-12. Separate multiple regression analyses were conducted to ascertain the impact of a series of process and status variables in predicting total trust for parents and teachers. The results indicated that parents were most satisfied with their relationships with teachers at the elementary level. The satisfaction decreased at the junior high level and again at the high school level. The level of satisfaction with the relationship rated by teachers was about the same across all three levels. Both parents and teachers strongly voiced the importance of communication as a primary way to increase trust. The nature of parent-teacher interactions was a better predictor of trust than the frequency. The findings also indicated that higher levels of parent trust were strongly correlated with three indicators of school performance at the high school level: credits earned, GPA, and attendance.

Supporting parent involvement. The literature offers various avenues to increase parent involvement and build positive parent-professional partnerships. Edwards and Da Fonte (2012) provide five suggestions that encapsulate the main themes supporting parent involvement found throughout the literature. Their five suggestions are highlighted and supported by other sources that document the role of parent involvement in parent-professional relationships.

The first suggestion is for education professionals to be positive, proactive, and solution oriented when working with parents (Hepworth-Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012;

Fish, 2008; Lake & Billingsly, 2000). For example, in order to be proactive and solution-oriented education professionals need to provide parents with classroom expectations at the beginning of the school-year, including potential student consequences, as well as reinforcers. When parents know and understand the classroom expectations, they are better able to help their child understand those expectations and foster a more successful classroom experience. In addition, it is important for the educators to use positive comments about the child. This strengths-based approach gives the parents a sense of optimism. It is also important to note that mutually agreed upon goals, planning and decision making are more likely to be achieved when both school professionals and parents focus on the child's strengths and needs in order to develop an IEP (Sheehey and Sheehey, 2007). Keen (2007) suggests that the essential aspects of positive working partnerships include "mutual respect, trust and honesty; mutually agreed upon goals; and shared planning and decision-making," (p.340).

Edwards and Da Fonte's (2012) second suggestion is for educators to respect families' roles in their children's lives. For example, education professionals want to ask (rather than demand) families how they want to be involved in the decision-making process regarding goals and services (Coots, 2007; Latunde & Loque, 2012). To encourage parent involvement, educators can listen to parents' questions and concerns. When parents feel their voices are heard they may feel more comfortable in their role in the IEP decision-making process (Blue-Banning, et al, 2004; Coots, 2007). It is important for educators to respect the different cultural backgrounds of families, (Friend & Cook, 2010) and honor the wishes of parents who would rather not be involved in the drafting process of their child's goals and services.

In addition to listening to the families' concerns, Keen (2007) suggests that education professionals also need to communicate consistently, and work together, and keep families informed about their child's progress on evaluations. The evaluation process can take a long time. The length of time parents wait for evaluation results can be worrisome and frustrating (Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010). Keeping families informed of the progress is critical, so that they know the evaluation process is moving forward. Education professionals should refrain from referring to the child's disability or label, unless necessary; it is only a small part of the child and he or she should not be defined by the label (Lake & Billingsly, 2000).

Educators should also let families know when they will be available, and how quickly phone calls will be returned, providing an availability schedule. Dyches, et al (2012) supports asking the family if they would like to set up a home-to-school communication schedule. For example, the teacher can make a phone call home to the parent every Thursday or send an email home every Friday to update the parent on the student's progress. Communication can also be set-up through a home-to-school folder. With the any communication schedule, consistency and follow through can help build a trusting relationship (Blue-Banning, et al., 2004). In addition, Reiman, et al, (2010) suggests to let the family know when there are concerns as soon as they arise, make a list of important points ahead of time, and remember to be solution rather than problem focused. (Reiman, et al, 2010).

It is not only a matter of when or what educational professionals communicate but how they communicate to parents is equally important (Blue-Banning, et al, 2004). When communicating with parents, researchers suggest educators should be mindful of

using educational jargon as it can leave parents confused (Dyches, et al, 2012, Lambie, 2008, Olsen & Fuller, 2012; Reiman, et al, 2010). Educators must be aware that nonverbal messages can complicate communication (e.g. arms or legs tightly crossed can communicate defensiveness) (Ciracy & McGinnis, 2007). Awareness of nonverbal communication also provides educators an avenue of understanding parents as they exhibit body language that communicates nervousness, frustration, defensiveness, or suspicion.

Research suggests that educators should consider simple and natural supports for the child, and when considering accommodations and modifications, be sure to discuss these with the family and consider any concerns they may have. Be flexible in approaches to behavior management, and in changing accommodations and modifications; ask families for strategies and communicate changes and reasons for changes (Blue-Banning, et al, 2004; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007). When asking if the family is in need of any supports at home, educators should give suggestions only when requested, and ask for feedback on the suggestions. Consider the feedback before providing further suggestions to the family.

Empowering families with knowledge and opportunities to work together with education professionals to meet their child's needs can help strengthen the parent-teacher partnership and increase parent involvement (Dunst & Dempsy, 2007). It is suggested that education professionals inform parents how they can be involved in the IEP decision-making process, as well as their rights (Friend & Cook, 2010). Parents need to know that their input is valued and educators should provide frequent opportunities for parents to weigh in and make choices regarding their child's education (Berger, Riojas-Cortez,

2012; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007). In addition to other information, educators can create a packet that includes information regarding local, state, or Federally funded services for families of children with disabilities (e.g., support groups, services, activities) (Lambie, 2008; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015). Too much information can be overwhelming for some families. Ask parents what they are in need of and then ask again if they would like resources they can contact and provide them only if interested. Be an advocate for the child and the family (Blue-Banning, et al, 2004).

Helping parents understand the IEP process. Parents who understand their rights and the special education law (IDEA) tend to have more trust in the special education process than parents who do not (Fish, 2008; Gershwin-Mueller, et.al, 2008; Lo, 2012). Education professionals provide all parents of children who receive special education services with a document called *Procedural Safeguards*. Procedural Safeguards describes the parents and students' legal rights, the IEP process, and the protocol to follow when there is disagreement about a child's services (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

The Procedural Safeguards uses educational jargon and is often difficult for parents to understand (Fitzgerald and Watkins, 2006). In addition, their findings suggest that it is not uncommon for parents of a child with a disability to have a disability themselves, and this needs to be taken into consideration when it comes to the readability level of the Procedural Safeguards. Just because a document is written in a person's native language, does not mean he or she will be able to comprehend the information being presented (Fitzgerald, et al., 2006). Educators need to know that parents may need assistance in understanding their rights as well as the IEP process.

The IEP Process and Current Barriers for Parent Involvement

Even with the mandates for parent involvement and a growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of parent involvement, there is still overwhelming evidence that parents of children with disabilities still face many barriers when it comes to parent involvement in the IEP process (Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008; Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2008; Elbaum, et al., 2015; Hoppe, 2005; Latunde & Louque, 2012; Lo, 2012; 2008; Keen, 2007; Reiman, et al., 2010; Sheehey & Sheehey, 2007; Starr & Foy, 2012; Stoner, et al., 2006, White, 2014). Despite the research supporting the need for improvement in creating and sustaining positive relationships between parents of children with disabilities and education professionals, there is very little evidence that any real improvements have been made (Elbaum, et al., 2015). The lack of evidence is documented in recent reports released from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013). Recent results (FY 2008-2009 and FY 2011-2012) from the national survey on Schools' Facilitation of Parent Involvement report that approximately one-third of parents who have children with disabilities receiving special education services feel that schools are not facilitating parental involvement as a means for providing services and supports for children with disabilities (Elbaum, et al., 2015). Parents have the ability to help education professionals make better informed decisions about the services and supports provided in the IEP.

Deficiencies in building collaborative relationships. Elbaum, et al. (2015) studied parents' perceptions of their experiences of the IEP process. The study used a quantitative measure provided by the state in order to determine the level to which the school facilitated methods of parent involvement. In addition, parents described their

experiences of collaborating with their child's school. Participants consisted of parents (n = 92) of students with disabilities from 18 schools in eight school districts in a large southeastern state. The qualitative analysis determined the top five negative variables parents reported were:

- The school did not solicit or was not receptive to parent input

- The school was rigid in terms of choices provided.

- Teachers were not accessible.

- The school does not involve parent in placement decisions.

- The school does not provide parent training

The results suggest schools must prioritize their efforts in responsive communication with parents and carefully monitor students' progress in order to improve collaborative relationships with parents of students with disabilities (Elbaum, et al., 2015). "Favorable perceptions of the IEP process are the exception rather than the norm," (Cheatham, et al., 2012, p. 50). In the IEP process, the research suggests collaboration between education professionals and parents is absolutely essential in order for trust to occur.

Parents do not feel valued. A report from the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (Reiman, et al., 2010), highlights several barriers that parents continue to face, including that parents do not feel valued within the IEP process (White, 2014). For example, Reiman et al. (2010) shared one family's experience where professionals had already prewritten the student's goals and because of this the parents felt their presence was merely a legal obligation, and their input was unwanted. If parents

are equal partners in the IEP decision-making process, education professionals need to cannot make decisions without parental input.

Rogers, Weiner, Marton, & Tannock (2009) reported that other parents were blamed (by education professionals) for their child's academic and behavioral problems, and one mother was accused of taking drugs during pregnancy. This type of accusation is disrespectful and paints the parent in a negative light, blaming the parent for the child's disability. Some of the parents shared that they needed to take time off of work to be at IEP meetings. Many of the parents worked hourly jobs and expressed frustration due to school professionals not showing up to the IEP meeting, showing up late or leaving the meeting early. Other instances include special education professionals repeatedly checking the clock during the meeting. In addition, parents who were in need of an interpreter due to limited or no English language, explained their frustration regarding the interpreter's inability to translate common special education terms, and in one situation an interpreter left the IEP meeting early. When professionals are not invested in the IEP meeting, it can give parents the sense that education professionals feel that their child's education is less than important. From these experiences, parents reported feeling disenfranchised, disrespected, and their participation was not valued (Rogers, et al., 2009; Reiman, et al., 2010).

Another factor that may attribute to parents of children with disabilities not feeling valued is their personal sense of feeling uninvited. Some parents experience the feeling of inadequacy when it comes to supporting their child as these parents often feel as though they do not have the skills necessary and feel incapable of dealing with the challenges associated with their child's disability (Lake & Billingsly, 2000; Rogers, et al.,

2009). When education professionals remind parents that they are equal partners and their input is of value, they are more likely to be involved in the IEP process (Edwards & DaFonte, 2012).

Poor communication leads to conflict. White (2014) studied parents of children with autism and found they often struggle with misunderstanding the IEP and the services. Whites' findings suggested there are multiple issues preventing the parents from full involvement, for example, misunderstanding the information provided by the school regarding their child. Inconsistent and unclear communication is confusing and often the catalyst of parent-school conflict (Angell, et al., 2009; Reiman, et al., 2010; Starr & Foy, 2012; White, 2014.) These struggles leave parents feeling excluded and vulnerable and discourage their active participation in their child's education (Finders and Lewis, 1994).

Further literature explains that many issues cause contention and create barriers for parent involvement in the IEP process. In a study using a grounded theory approach, Lake and Billingsly (2000) attempted to identify factors that escalate and deescalate parent-school conflict from the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities *Valuation* emerged as a key factor in parent-school conflict and was defined as being valued as a partner. Lake and Billingsly (2000) explain that valuation was of equal importance to both parents and school professionals. Participants reported a decreased sense of feeling valued when they believed they were lied to and when information was withheld by parents or school professionals. *Reciprocal power* merged as critical factor that leads to a conflict spiral (Pruit & Kim, 2004) in which one party tries to intimidate the other with threats or inaction, as the other party retaliates with an increased action or inaction until one of the parties gives in. *Constraints,* mainly had to do with time and

fiscal restraints. Parents and advocates in the study both reported that meetings would end abruptly, with no explanation for why the services they requested were not being considered. The abrupt termination of services led to parents' suspicion regarding fiscal restraints. Additionally, parents reported being invited to the IEP meeting and being dismissed before all issues were addressed. Advocates and parents reported that the school has "short-sightedness" when it comes to planning and meeting the needs of their child. School professionals gave parents the runaround when asked how services were actually implemented, this caused the parents to be suspicious whether the services were implemented or not.

Discrepant *views* of the child or child's needs; Lake and Billingsly (2000) also revealed another factor that initiated conflict was parents' perception that school professionals only viewed their child from a deficit perspective. The parents reported feelings of sadness and frustration when being told in detail what their child could not do. Parents want to hear positive attributes about their children, not only the negative aspects. *Knowledge* of the IEP process was a deficit the school professionals took responsibility for, explaining that they fell short when it came to providing knowledge to parents. Often times schools will present families with less than helpful information regarding IDEA that is difficult to understand, which can be very frustrating (Cheatham, et al., 2012). *Communication* was important to both parties, however the data showed there was a lack of communication and the frequency was inconsistent. Parents reported not being listened to or heard.

Finally, when parents felt trust, they reported a sense of predictability and security. A predictor of trust was the school personnel's' consideration and capability to

meet the needs of child. Parents who had broken trust did not have the ability to accept good faith efforts. Often times these parents requested out of district placement, mediation or due process hearings (Lake & Billingsly, 2000). Although conflict may not be correlated with every single one of the barriers parents face when it comes to IEP involvement each are considered to be a potential impetus to conflict (Lake & Billingsly, 2000). "Conflict develops when people interact and perceive incompatible differences or threats to their resources, needs or values," (Deutsch, 1973 as cited in Lake & Billingsly, 2003, p. 241). Lake and Billingsly, explain that conflict is not necessarily the source of the problem, it is how it is handled (2000).

Unresolved disputes or conflict between parents and school officials can result in the need for mediation or litigation. There are several cases where disputes between parents of students in special education and school officials have led to requests for mediation in order to seek resolution for their student's educational needs (Center for Education and Employment Law, 2013). Recent reports show that in the state of Minnesota, the number of cases going to mediation in 2013 were 33. In addition, 21 cases requested IEP meetings to be facilitated by a mediator as a neutral third party (Minnesota Department of Education, 2013). It is not just in the state of Minnesota; parental dissatisfaction with special education is a national problem (Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008).

The Issue of Trust

Studies have shown that when trust exists in the parent-teacher relationship, disputes and requests for mediation with IEPs are less likely to occur. In Ciracy and McGinnis, (2007) IEP Managers Training Manual: Managing Relationships and

Meetings, reports that during the FY '06-'07, mediators and parties in mediation (e.g. parents and education professionals) cited that disagreement on the child's needs and lack of trust were the two main factors leading to disputes. Similar findings were reported for fiscal years 2009-2013 by the Minnesota Department of Education (Minnesota Department of Education 2013). Ciracy and McGinnis (2007) also note that the perceived lack of communication and trust between school officials and parents is problematic in the IEP process.

Given the significance trust has on the parent-teacher relationship, further studies have been completed to determine what can prevent trust from being fostered (Spann, et al., 2003; Angell, et al., 2009). The primary factors identified are communication, follow-through, and the emotional environment of the parent-teacher relationship. Communication and lack of follow through are the most widely noted. After conducting phone interviews with parents of children who have autism, Spann, et al. (2003) reported that 60% of the parents cited communication with educators as one of the most significant problems they faced during the special education process. When teachers fail to communicate and follow through with the special education process, the development and sustaining of trust in the parent-teacher relationship is impeded.

Factors in support of trust. Angell, et al. (2009) examined perspectives of mothers with children who have disabilities about their levels of trust with education professionals. The purpose of their study was to find out how mothers of children with disabilities describe their trust in education personnel and what factors do mothers of children with disabilities identify as contributing to or detracting from their trust. The study utilized Hoy and Tschannen-Moran's (1999) definition of trust - "an individual's or

group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest and open" (p. 189). The participants consisted of sixteen mothers of children with disabilities. A collective case study approach was used.

Angell, et al. (2009) findings revealed many characteristics affecting trust, including personal and historical information. When asked to what extent they trust others, participants responded as follows: four said they trust too much, four said they were trusting and six said they were cautious to trust. Eight of those who said they either trust too much or they are trusting also indicated that they trust until they are given a reason not to trust. A major determinant was whether or not the participants had a positive or negative experience of trusting other education professionals in the past. Parents also gave examples of how education professionals either gained or lost their trust based upon the experiences they had with them. Trusting experiences consisted of education professionals reaching out to parents and consistently communicating regarding their child, follow up and demonstrating authentic caring.

Lack of trust. Angell, et al. (2009) also found distrust was correlated with education professionals based on their inability to meet the needs of the student, failure to implement accommodations, lack of follow through regarding parent recommendations, failing to meet the needs of the student and lack of confidentiality. Each of the participants reported that communication was paramount to trust, and lack of communication was an equally strong inhibitor of trust. It is clear from research that communication is an important factor when it comes to trust and parent-educator relationships (Adams & Christensen, 2000; Angell, et al., 2009; Blue-Banning, et al.,

2004; Ciracy & McGinnis, 2007; Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012; Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008; Keen, 2007; Lake & Billingsly, 2000; Reiman, et al., 2010; White, 2014).

While communication and follow through have been noted as significant to the trust building process, the emotional environment of the teacher-parent relationship is also important. Adams and Christensen (2000) explain that, "the first most basic stage of foundational trust is that of predictability, which refers to reliability of behavior and stability of the emotional environment" (p. 480). Hepworth-Berger and Riojas-Cortez (2012), authors of *Parents as Partners in Education: Families and Schools Working Together,* frankly address the subject of trust between parents and special educators. "Very often families face negative perceptions from teachers and administrators…Parents do not trust educators" (p. 283). If parents do not perceive the relationship as a safe place, they are going to be less likely to be involved.

Trust and parent involvement. Trust is a determinant of the degree to which parents are willing to engage in the IEP process. A study by Stoner and Angell (2006) revealed that the amount to which parents trusted the education professional had a significant impact on the degree of the parent's involvement. Their exploratory study employed qualitative methodology, analyzing interview data of eight parents of four children with autism spectrum disorder. When parents did not trust the education professionals, their level of engagement increased in the way of monitoring and negotiating because they felt as though they could not trust the educator to do their job (Stoner & Angell, 2006). White (2014), elaborates on this issue by explaining when parents need to continually advocate for their child (due to lack of support or services) it can place them in an adversarial role with educators. The need for frequent contact with

education professionals to ensure their child's needs are met can cause parents to approach educators from a distrustful standpoint (Stoner & Angell, 2006).

Summary

As suggested by the literature, the history of experiences of parents in the IEP process is inundated with disputes and litigation (Curtiss, 2005; Minnesota Department of Education, 2013; Shepherd & Kervick, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Wellner, 2012; White, 2014). When it comes to the IEP process, there is major concern regarding the lack of parent involvement and ineffective parent-teacher partnerships (Ciracy & McGinnis, 2007; Gershwin-Mueller, 2015). It is clear there are several known factors that support parent involvement and successful parent-teacher partnerships. However, effective partnerships between parents and education professionals seems to be the exception rather than the norm (Elbaum, et al., 2015). Trust appears to be the main theme found throughout the literature on the subject of effective parent-teacher partnerships, and the IEP process.

Building trust within the parent-teacher relationship is essential to parental involvement (Adams & Christensen, 2000; Angell, et al., 2009). Education professionals must be cautious not to set a negative tone when interacting with parents. It is in their best interest to be mindful to use strategies promoting positive communication, including both verbal and non-verbal communication. Tcshannen-Moran and Hoy, (2000) as well as, Tyack and Cuban, (1995) suggest interpersonal relationships are the ultimate ingredient comes to building trust. Keen (2007) further explains that trust is not something expected or automatic. Rather, trust is built through personal interactions, encounters, and exchanges (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camen, 1998). It is critical that

more is understood about how parents experience trust. Current research has provided an understanding of factors that impact trust (Adams & Christensen, 2000; Blue-Banning, et al., 2004; Burke & Sandman, 2015; Ciracy & McGinnis, 2007; Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012; Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008; Keen, 2007; Lake & Billingsly, 2000; Reiman, et al., 2010; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Wellner, 2012; White, 2014), but how parents perceive trust in the IEP process needs further exploration. Parental perceptions can inform micro, mezzo and macro level systems in special education including policies such as IDEA (2004). Parents have first-hand experiences with the strengths and deficits regarding IDEA. Given their roles, and experiential knowledge, it is imperative to consider parent feedback as part of a comprehensive approach toward improving the IEP process and special education as a whole (Burke & Sandman, 2015).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Act mandates parent participation in the IEP process. There is a significant amount of literature that highlights the importance of parental involvement in the IEP process and suggests there are many benefits. The literature regarding special education law and due process also suggests there is a significant issue when it comes to parent involvement in the IEP process due to the level of conflict between parents of children with disabilities and school personnel (Elbaum, et al., 2015; Gershwin, et al., 2008). Conflict has its purpose and allows for new ideas and change. In order for conflict to be effective, both parties involved must trust one another (Mayer, et al., 1995).

The literature describes trust as an element of successful parent-teacher partnerships (Adams & Christensen, 2000; Angell, et al., 2009; Wellner, 2012; White, 2014). There are multiple reasons reported why parents do not trust educators, such as communication issues, disagreement between parents and educators about the needs of the child, and less than effective parent-teacher partnerships. Lack of trust is consistently reported in nearly every request for mediation or Due Process Hearings (Ciracy & McGinnis, 2007; Gershwin-Mueller, 2015; Minnesota Department of Education, 2013). Trust is a key element to ensuring positive parent involvement. Hence, it is central to the development and implementation of an IEP that will appropriately address the child's learning needs.

Research Questions

The overarching questions that guided this study are:

- What is the lived experience of parents involved in the IEP process?

- How do parents in the IEP process experience trust?

Research Methodology & Analytical Framework

The purpose of the present phenomenological study was to explore experiences and conceptions of trust among parents involved in the IEP process. Phenomenological studies systematically approach inquiry that illustrates how individuals make meaning of their experiences (Brantlinger, Jiminez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). In general terms, qualitative approaches to research are holistic and person-centered in an effort to understand human experience (Cresswell, 2013). The phenomenological approach is a means to give voice to those who have historically been disregarded and/or marginalized. In addition, this type of study describes the common meaning among multiple individuals of their lived experience of a certain phenomenon.

The researcher's intent in a phenomenological study is to distill rich descriptions of those experiences to understand the nature of the phenomena. The use of phenomenological analysis involves identifying themes to elucidate participants' experiences of the phenomena as well as describe the context that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomena (Streubert & Carpenter, 2012). In this study, analysis directly pertained to parents with children with disabilities and their experiences with schools. Specifically, this study examined parents' experiences of and conceptions of trust within the IEP process.

Trust is an intricate part of the IEP process. For parents there is an obvious risk involved when they come to the table, their child's welfare. A parent is responsible for their child's overall health and wellbeing. The decisions made during the IEP process

have life-long effects, both positive and negative, not only for the child but for the parents as well. Within the IEP process, a parent is most often their child's biggest advocate. In reality, most education professionals are only a part of the child's life for a small window of time. General educators typically work with students for one year. Many special educators only work with the child for one to three years depending on the size of the school and the population. On the other hand, for the parents the relationship with and the sense of responsibility toward their child is a lifetime investment.

There is much to consider when it comes to the sociological and psychological dynamic of trust. For the purpose of this study the conceptualization of trust was drawn from psychological and sociological theory. From psychological definitions, individuals may approach a situation with a willingness to trust until there is evidence proving whey should do otherwise. Yet with others, trust is something that is to be earned overtime. From a sociological definition, trust is created in the interaction. It is influenced by social factors such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, and so on.

Trust is a significant and complex dynamic among those invested in the IEP process, particularly the parents of the children/youth. In this study, trust was conceptualized as a relational dynamic created and sustained within the array of psychological and sociological influences situated in the complex web of relationships parents experience with educators, with the institution, and with the IEP process itself. This study investigated parent's experiences and conceptions of trust through a phenomenological design.

Adopting a phenomenological approach, the researcher utilized the interview process as a means for data collection. With an interview protocol of unstructured and

semi-structured questions, the researcher interviewed ten parents of children on Individualized Education Plans. Unstructured and semi-structured questions within an interview protocol allow for flexibility so that questions may be modified or added as preliminary evidence surfaces (Brantlinger, et al., 2005).

Participants

Participants in the study were parents of one or more children with an IEP, from school districts within a mid-sized city in the northern Midwest. For the purposes of this study "parent" refers to the adult who assumes parental roles and responsibilities for the child and has legal guardianship. In choosing the participants, convenience sampling was applied to identify the participants (Saunders, et al., 2012). The participants will be identified as persons who "have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched," (Kruger, 1988, p.150), in this study specifically, experiences of trust in the IEP process. Parents of children currently in grades 2 through 12 and on an IEP within the public-school system were interviewed. These interviewees' experiences were the focal unit of analysis (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000). Selection of the participants was based on my judgment as the researcher and the purpose of this research (Babbie, 1995; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Schwandt, 1997).

Table 1

Individual Parent Characteristics

Characteristic	Parent (n = 10)	
Gender		
Male	2	(20)
Female	8	(80)
Relationship to Child		
Father	2	(20)
Mother	8	(80)
Race/Ethnicity		
White	10	(100)
Language Spoken		
English	10	(100)
# in Household		
2	1	(10)
3	3	(30)
4	3	(30)
5	1	(10)
6	2	(20)
Age Range		
35-39	2	(20)
40-44	3	(30)
45-49	2	(20)
50-55	1	(10)
56-60	2	(20)
Education Level Completed		
High school	1	(10)
Trade school/Certification	1	(10)
Some college	1	(10)
Associates degree	2	(20)
Bachelor's degree	4	(40)
No response	1	(10)

The children of the parents in this study included ages eight to 19 years old at the time of the parent interviews. The children's disabilities included Autism Spectrum Disorder, Specific Learning Disability, Emotional Behavioral Disorder, Developmental Cognitive Disability and Speech and Language. Three of the families had multiple children, totaling 12 children in the study. Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics

of the children in the study.

Table 2

Characteristics of Children

Characteristic	Children (n = 12)	
Gender		
Male	10	(83.3)
Female	2	(16.7)
Race/Ethnicity		
White	12	(100)
Language Spoken		
English	12	(100)
Age		
7	1	(8.3)
8	2	(16.7)
9	2	(16.7)
11	1	(8.3)
15	1	(8.3)
16	2	(16.7)
17	1	(8.3)
19	2	(16.7)
Disability Category		
Autism Spectrum Disorder	3	(25)
Developmental Cognitive Disability	4	(33.3)
Emotional Behavioral Disorder	2	(16.7)
Specific Learning Disability	2	(16.7)
Speech and Language	1	(8.3)

Role of the Researcher

As a special educator of 14 years, I have worked in various school settings with various disability areas. As a school special educator, I worked with parents through the IEP process. I am experienced with the IEP process and well versed in federal and state special education laws and policy. Throughout my experience as a special educator I learned trust is a crucial component to the success of the IEP process. Trust is essential in the success of the IEP process and to the welfare of the child, and in order for success to

occur both parents and teachers must trust in the process. When trust is not present, it is common for parents to take a threatening stance, communication is strained, and conflict is often the result. As an educator, I experienced this first hand. For example, some of the parents I worked with presented themselves as non-trusting upon our initial meeting, before I even had an opportunity to establish a relationship them.

As an educator of preservice teachers, I work directly with individuals who are in teacher preparation programs for whom understanding the IEP process is crucial. In short, my experience as a special educator includes an array of settings that are central to the IEP process. As a preservice teacher, I had no idea how crucial trust is among parents and teachers. Had I understood the importance of trust within the IEP process, I would have taken an entirely different approach working with parents. Now as an educator of preservice teachers, I teach how important it is for them to not only understand the role of trust, but that they develop the skills and dispositions to foster and sustain trust among those invested in the IEP of the child.

As a researcher, I acknowledge my experiences and current understanding related to my research. Understanding how my experiences impact my assumptions allowed me to bracket my opinions and experience in special education from the analysis of the parents' experiences. Munhall (1994) refers to bracketing as a process of unknowing the known in order to avoid imposing our own assumptions on the lived experiences of the interviewee. As the researcher of the present study, it is necessary to set aside my own preconceived ideas and knowledge of parents' engagement in the IEP process in order to allow their voices to speak through the data. As the researcher, I am purposeful to identify my understanding and experiences of the IEP process and specifically the role of

trust in that process as a way to bracket them. Bracketing as a technique in phenomenological research that allows for the data to speak for itself, rather than filtering the experiences of the participants through my own.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The research methods in this study follow a qualitative approach. Data were collected through 90-minute semi-structured individual interviews with ten parents engaged in the IEP process. In the phenomenological interview the phenomena are the focus, with intention to illuminate the nature of the phenomenon. The phenomenon focused on in was the dynamic of trust as parents described their experiences in the IEP process (Englander, 2012).

The interview questions asked of the participants elicited stories of situations and moments of their experiences of trust in the IEP process. More specifically, participants were asked to describe their concerns regarding the IEP and their child's welfare. In addition, they were asked to describe their relationships with school educators they engage with in the IEP process. Subsequent questions asked the participants to describe their experiences with the school and schooling in general. In order to gain a more holistic view, participants were asked about their conceptions of the IEP process itself. The individual interviews were conducted by me as the researcher and arranged at a place and time convenient to the participant. The interview consisted of one parent or potentially both parents if both parents attend the IEP meetings and both wanted to participate in the interview. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis and reporting purposes. Analysis of interview transcripts employed constant comparison method of analysis (Merriam, 1998).

Chapter 4 discusses the three themes revealed in the analysis of the interview data. These themes explain how parents experience trust in the IEP process.

Chapter 4: Influences on Parents' Sense of Trust

Introduction

Three overarching themes that emerged in the analysis of the parent interviews that were integral to the participants' experiences with trust are discussed in what follows. To reiterate, the purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of parents involved in the IEP process. More specifically, the study explored how parents in the IEP process experience trust in their relationship with educational professionals. The two research questions addressed in this study were: What is the lived experience of parents involved in the IEP process? and How do parents in the IEP process experience trust? To answer these questions, the researcher interviewed ten different parents, each parent having one or more children on an IEP. The analysis of the parents' stories, reveals and verifies the significance of trust within the IEP process. In addition, the data analysis included a demographic questionnaire. The participants in this study were parents of children who are receiving services through the IEP process. The IEP process was defined as a process that aides in providing appropriate supports and services in order to allow the individual to fully access the general education curriculum (Center for Education and Employment Law, 2013). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), mandates that parents and educators are equal partners in support of making informed decisions regarding the child's needs.

Mayer, Davis and Schoorman's 1995 definition of trust used for this study is clearly in alignment with what the parents described as some of the essential components needed for trust to occur within the IEP process. The parents believed that they were better able to trust the IEP process when the professionals involved in the IEP process

had their child's best interest at heart. Another essential component the parent needed for

trust to occur within the IEP included the professional's level of competence; in this case

it was their professional knowledge about the child's disability, their ability to meet the

child's needs, and most important how well the professional knew the child. Finally,

Mayer, et al. (1995) state that integrity is a key component for trust to occur. The parents

in this study reported that they tend to trust the professional more when he or she honored

their word, and communicated when they said they would, for example the professional

returned phone calls, emails, and comply with what was written in the IEP.

Three overarching themes emerged in the analysis of the parent interviews that

were integral to participants' experiencing trust within the IEP process. The three themes

consistent among the parents were *communication, parent-teacher partnerships*, and

meeting the needs of their child. In what follows, I first describe the key attributes of the

themes and then explicate each by drawing upon the interviews and literature.

Communication

Communication emerged as a critical dynamic in the parents' experiences of the

IEP process and weighed heavily on their feelings of trust, their abilities to trust, and who

they trusted (Adams & Christensen, 2000; Angell, et al, 2009; Blue-Banning, et al, 2004;

Ciracy, McGinnis, 2007; Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012; Gershwin-Mueller, et al, 2008;

Keen, 2007; Lake & Billingsly, 2000; Reiman, et al, 2010; White, 2014). To a large

extent, communication for the parents meant receiving information about their child's

academic, behavioral, and or social-emotional progress. Academic progress included the

child's grades, and their ability to perform in the areas of reading, writing, math, social

studies, science, physical education, music and art. Behavioral progress referred to the

child's ability to follow the classroom and school rules and avoid frequent disciplinary action. Social-emotional progress focused on the child's ability to regulate his or her emotions, as well as their ability to interact and form healthy relationships with peers and adults. Other information that the parents wanted to be notified about were regarding the child's needs. Needs were anything from immediate needs like the child missing the bus and needing transportation home after school, to an increase or decrease in academic, behavioral, or social-emotional needs. If there was an increase in the child's needs, the parents wanted to know specifically the area of need and how the professional was going to provide support. The parents also wanted to know when there was a decrease in the child's needs and no longer a need for support in that area.

Information exchanged between professionals, or lack thereof was another topic the parents felt was important for trust to occur. When more than one professional was working with the child, the parents expected the professionals to communicate with one another regarding the child's needs and or progress. The parents felt when the professionals shared information with one another regarding the child's needs and progress, the professional was better able to meet the needs of the child. Other points the parents brought up in reference to receiving information was the complexity of the language used in the document explaining their rights. Many of the parents did not know their rights, or their child's rights because they were not communicated to them in a clear manner.

While information flow was the predominant sense of communication, it was also multi-faceted and complex because it was not merely the exchange of information, but also the way it was communicated. The parents explained that the professionals' affect

and tone mattered and impacted their trust. A professional who was warm and welcoming, and communicated with kindness and empathy, was viewed as trustworthy.

Another topic that frequently came up in the analysis was how well the professionals listened to the parents. For example, when the parent had concerns, did the professionals listen, did they validate the parents and address their concerns. The parents also talked about whether the professionals listen and take parent input into consideration when deciding how to best meet the child's needs. When professionals listen to parents, the parents tend to have more trust in the IEP process.

Give me the 411. Each of the ten participants emphasized the importance of frequent communication with education professionals regarding their child's progress. Nine of the ten participants stated when it comes to trust, communication was essential. One facet of communication that was highlighted throughout the interviews was the significance of the educator providing information to the parent within the IEP process.

Throughout the interviews, parents described communication in a variety of different formats, including both verbal and written, face-to-face, over the phone, email, and other correspondence. One-way communication of information occurred is through a conversation that happened face-to-face. Face-to-face communication could be an informal conversation between the parent and teacher either after or before school when the parent is picked up their child, or more formally in a parent-teacher conference or an IEP meeting. Information through written communication can come in the form of a letter, a document, an email, or even a handwritten note. IDEA mandates that an educator must communicate with the parent to keep them informed of their child's progress. For example, it was crucial that the parent stayed informed about their child's progress in

order to make decisions on how to advocate and support their child. Many parents felt it was their job to ensure their child's needs are met: social, emotional, behavioral, and academic. The parents in this study felt that when they were not informed about their child's needs, they were unable to make decisions.

Throughout the interviews, the participants explained that the lack of information from the education professionals was a detriment to trust within the IEP process. One parent said that communication regarding her daughter's progress was lacking "had they communicated more about my daughter's progress, it would have helped ease my mind." Keen (2007) also found that keeping families informed through frequent communication about student progress can help to increase the parent's trust. Within the IEP process, it is the teacher's duty to provide necessary information to the parent about the student, which includes the student's progress (gains or concerns), and whether the student's academic or behavioral needs are being met. School age children spend up to seven hours a day with their teachers. Due to the amount of time teachers have with students in special education, they have information about the students in regard to their social, emotional, behavioral, and academic wellbeing. When a teacher did not communicate this information to the parent, the parent emphasized they were not able to make informed decisions - nor were they able to ensure their child's needs were being met. In the interviews, when parents reported a lack of communication with teachers or other professionals, they associated that lack with a lack of with the teacher and the IEP process.

One parent described his experience regarding the teachers providing information:

Although it was negative, initially the teacher communicated well. Then, all of a sudden, the communication stopped. At that point, we felt as though the school gave up on us. For months we had no communication, we were extremely ticked off. My wife asked the school, what the hell was going on?! Then the teacher communicated, but only because she had to.

After several unanswered attempts, one parent had to rely on outside resources for her son's high school credit recovery, in order to graduate. She said, "The school said they'd get back to me. I sent five emails to the principal and the special education cooperative and no one got back to me. I had to turn to Mayo Clinic." For the parents in this study, when it comes to experiencing the IEP process, communication is not just important it is fundamental to trust.

In contrast, when the professionals communicated frequently about the child's progress, concerns about the child, the child's strengths or needs, solutions, interventions or supports, the parents felt more confident that their child's need were being met, and thereby had more trust in the IEP process. Many participants said that "it is important for the teachers to keep us informed, for example when the professionals let you know that things are alright." Frequent communication about the child's progress was viewed as positively, as one parent noted. One parent said "the communication piece has really helped me understand and accept the diagnosis of my daughter's disability." Two parents specifically noted they communicated with the teachers weekly in order to stay informed about their child's progress, needs or concerns through either email or a notebook.

Two other parents spoke specifically about their reliance on phone calls from the teacher. Still, others preferred checking-in with the teacher upon dropping their child off

at school in the morning, or when picking the child up at the end of the school day. One

of the teachers used a phone application where parents receive classroom updates

throughout the day, which included short videos of what the kids are doing, photos,

positive and negative behavior updates, as well as private individual updates on their

child. Regardless of different types of communication, the majority of the parents

expressed they really wanted to know whether their child was doing okay in school. One

parent expressed appreciation for the teacher keeping her informed, "she [the special

education teacher] calls when my daughter misses the bus." Another parent explained she

felt supported by her son's teachers, and one in particular because he was available when

she had questions or concerns. She shared that she felt comforted by the fact that the

teacher was available for questions "I could always call the middle school teacher on the

phone. If he wasn't available he would always get back to me right away." When

education professionals provided information and responded in a timely manner, parents

felt as though they could trust the IEP process (Ciracy & McGinnis, 2007; Spann, et al.,

2003).

Figure 1 lists the responses participants provided in regard to their primary needs in order to have trust in the IEP process and with educators. Figure 1 shows a synthesis of the parents' thinking in terms of what they need from the professionals regarding communication, the format, the type of information, and the frequency.

Figure 1

Participants primary needs from education professionals for trust to occur
_____

- Have good communication and be open.

- Be up front with everything.

- Frequent communication.

- Communication and listening are important.

- When professionals let you know things are alright.

- Verbal affirmations to parents are important.

- In the morning, I'll poke my nose in, to see how things are going. At the end of the day she (the teacher) will come and find me to give me updates.

- Every day we have a communication notebook that goes back and forth.

- As a parent, you need to keep the communication open.

- Sending your child to high school is daunting, there is no communication.

- Had they (the teachers) communicated more about her progress, it would have helped ease my mind.

- The communication piece was really helpful for me.
_____

Communication Between Professionals. In order for a child's needs to be met, it was vital that education professionals communicate with one another in order to best

serve the child. Several of the parents said that they had difficulty when it came to the professionals communicating with other professionals. In one case, a parent needed the physical therapist to send a document of justification to the insurance company so that she could order a necessary piece of equipment. The piece of equipment gives her daughter the ability to walk.

She said:

I am currently having issues with the physical therapist. We tried to order it last spring and we still don't have it. She [the physical therapist] is not responding to my emails. I actually talked to her and said I've been emailing you and I haven't received a response. The physical therapist said she didn't receive the emails, and that they must have went to junk mail. I said, well now that you know, can you respond to the emails? She still hasn't responded. We just need to get the justification over to the insurance company, and she just won't do it. So, the fact that I have to constantly ask for that, really frustrates me. That is added stress on me, that I just don't need.

When describing one of the IEP meetings she attended, one parent explained:

The school psychologist just sat there and said, I did the best I could, I couldn't really understand him. Then we get to the school speech therapist who sheepishly said actually he doesn't qualify for speech services because he's passed his speech. Yet we've got the school psychologist saying that he can't understand him. When the school psych and the speech language pathologist contradicted one another, that's when I started to get my guard up.

For this parent, lack of communication coordinating her child's services was frustrating. She felt as though she could not rely on the professionals to communicate with one another in relation to her son's special education services.

As the participants spoke about their experiences with a lack of communication between the teacher and the other professionals who work with the child, one parent specifically talked about the outside medical professionals who prescribed medication for their son. The medication is to help manage the student's hyperactivity and ability to focus in the classroom. The medication needed adjusting from time-to-time, which requires regular doctor visits. During these visits, the doctor asked a lot of questions about what was happening in the classroom. Although the parent felt as though the doctor has understood what goes on in the classroom, he felt the communication between the two professionals (i.e. teacher and doctor) helped to inform progress and proper treatment for the student.

Several of the participants said that the communication was lacking during periods of transition. For example, when the child completed first grade and moved on to another teacher for second grade, information was not shared with the second-grade teacher regarding approaches and strategies for working with the child. Parents noted every year when school begins, the teacher spends a month trying to figure out how to best work with their child.

For example, one parent said:

One shortcoming of school is that every year they have to reset-up his system and it takes a month from the start of the school year to get everyone on board. Eating

breakfast and lunch outside of the cafeteria is not in his IEP, and it needs to be set

up again every year.

The parent gave advice and asked if the teacher had communicated on what worked with the previous teacher. One parent explained that they had an IEP meeting before the start of Kindergarten year, during which they discussed the child's needs. The team members agreed that it was important for this child to be placed in a classroom environment that met his needs. The parents felt that the meeting was very positive and productive. On the first day of kindergarten, the parents walked into the classroom and wondered what happened. The classroom environment was not at all what they had discussed at the IEP meeting. The mother immediately wanted her child placed in another kindergarten classroom. The father said that they should give it a couple of weeks and see how the child does. After consulting with a special education specialist outside of the school, the father came home and told the mother that it was time to pull him from that classroom. The school waited until the end of the quarter, but eventually complied with the parents' request. The education professionals failed to communicate with one another about the child's needs and did not follow through with a placement discussed.

The same parents had a better experience in first grade, although their child had behavioral issues at the beginning of the school year. At the end of the first-grade year, the parents went to the school to have a conversation with the teacher about their child's needs. The father talked with the administrator to make sure that the following year his son would be placed in a second-grade classroom where the teacher and the classroom environment met the needs of his son. The father said that someone was definitely listening because the classroom was the perfect fit, and his son was thriving. However,

another parent had a far less positive experience due to lack of communication between teachers. "The transition from teacher to teacher every year sucks. We lose two months every year as the new teacher has to figure my son out." When education professionals do not communicate with one another during times of transition (from the end of one school year to the beginning of another) about the child's needs, the child often misses out on learning opportunities When the receiving teacher communicated with the previous year's teacher, children did not have a difficult time in school during the first two months of the school year.

Transitioning from early childhood education (preschool) to elementary school, elementary school to middle school, and middle school to high school were also periods parents noted when communication specifically lacked between professionals. Parents spoke to the importance of teachers across grades sharing strategies that worked best with their child transitioning grades. They described about how well a new grade began for their child when teachers communicated and in contrast, how difficult it was for their child when the communication did not happen. For the parents in the study, whether their experiences were positive or negative, they all felt strongly that communication among teachers across grades about their child's needs and progress was critical to having faith in the schools supporting their child's progress. In order to build trust with parents, is important for education professionals to exchange information with one another about the student in order to provide an education and an environment that meets the child's needs.

What the what!? Understanding the IEP and parents' rights. Once a year parents of children on an IEP received a document called "Procedural Safeguards," otherwise informally known as "the Parents' Rights." The intent of this document was to

help parents understand the IEP process, the parents' role, as well as, the parents' and child's legal rights within the IEP process. This procedural document consisted of words and phrases specific to the special education profession that can be difficult for anyone outside of the profession to understand. The participants in this study found the information provided within the Parent's Rights and the IEP documents to be confusing. The IEP is the document that specifically describes the child's needs and how the education professionals are going to go about meeting those needs. Similar to the study parents' experiences, researchers Dyches, et al., 2012; Lambie, 2008; Olsen & Fuller, 2012; Reiman, et al., 2010, consistently found that when communicating with parents, educators need to be mindful of educational jargon that often-left parents feeling confused,

The information communicated in the IEP is the sole purpose for the IEP process. When parents were unable to make sense of the document, it was very difficult for them to understand whether or not the child's needs were being met. The IEP explains in detail the child's current academic, social-emotional, and behavioral strengths, needs, goals, accommodations, and the services that the professionals will provide for the child. When a parent was uncertain whether the child's needs were being met, the uncertainty decreased their capacity to trust the IEP process. For the parents in this study to understand the IEP directly impacted their trust that the IEP was meeting his or her child's needs.

Figure 2 below provides quotes from the participants of this study regarding their experience with IEP meetings, IEP documents, and the confusion the parents experienced due to the complexity of the IEP process and the Parents' Rights. The figure lists

responses of the participants regarding the complexity of the IEP process. Seven out of the ten participants had been a part of the IEP process for more than 15 years. The table illustrates that parents truly needed help to understand the IEP process. Half of the parents in this study did not know what their rights were, and one-third of the participants who did not know their rights had been a part of the process for 15 or more years. Many of the parents explained that they would have benefited had the education professionals helped them understand the IEP process, and the parents' rights.

Figure 2

Participants descriptions of the complexity of the IEP process

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I understand the system because I work in it. A lot of parents would get lost due to the complexity. I also had a lot of teacher support to hold my hand through the whole process.

After contacting PACER (a parent advocate organization, who helped her understand her rights), I felt more empowered as a mom.

The wording (of IEP) does not make sense.

The IEP process in confusing. It's not simple or straightforward, are they just trying to meet some recommended state level?

When asked if anyone ever went through the Parents' Rights with her, Parents Rights aren't in laymen's terms.

You don't want to ask questions, you just want to discuss your child.
I didn't really know my rights and I didn't want to put up a stink, I was new to this.

We weren't overwhelmed with our son's first IEP because they had already been through IEP process with his mom. (They adopted their son from their daughter.)

I still don't know the special education law. I know I can disagree and I have the right to ask questions and be involved.

My friend was my daughter's teacher and she walked me through the whole thing (IEP meeting). I still don't feel confident in what my rights are. No one ever went through it with me.

Parents can feel outnumbered and overwhelmed in IEP meetings.

You get handed your rights and you wonder if you're going to end up in court?

Tell parents about SPED laws and help them (understand their rights).

Parent's need your support and we are scared, we don't always know what is best.

If education professionals want the parent to experience trust within the IEP

process, then they must assure parents their child's needs are being met. The stress and

lack of trust the parents experienced when they believed their child's needs were not being met (regardless if the child's needs are actually being met or not) hindered the relationship between the professional and the parent. In some cases, as Dunst and Dempsey found (2007) the parent was reluctant to give input or be involved in the IEP process, due to feeling inept about their lack of understanding the IEP process. These circumstances are troublesome because without the parent's input, the child's IEP often does not meet the child's needs. Ultimately, if the parent has difficulty understanding the IEP, they are much less likely to trust the process (Fish, 2008; Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008; Lo, 2012). When it comes to communication and trust, parents in this study felt clear, straightforward and explicit information was crucial.

Affect & Tone. When it came to trust, it was not just when or what educational professionals communicate, but how the communication happened that was just as important for parents in the IEP process. (Blue-Banning, et al., 2004). Communication also included being aware of body language, and that nonverbal messages complicated communication (e.g. arms or legs tightly crossed can communicate defensiveness) (Ciracy & McGinnis, 2007). Research shows that nonverbal communication such as body language told professionals if a parent was nervous, frustrated, defensive, or suspicious. Keeping legs uncrossed, open hands, and leaning forward were behaviors that helped the educator communicate to parents the educator was cooperating with them, rather than working against them (Ciracy & McGinnis, 2007; Dyches, et al., 2012; Olsen, & Fuller, 2012). Parents noted such nonverbal communication as tone of voice that one used or contradicted the content and information that delivered. Communication between parents and educators happened in many forms. When a conversation happened in person,

nonverbal communication was transparent, as facial expressions and other body language was part of the communication.

Body language, affect, and tone were three powerful factors for the parents in this study toward building trust within the IEP process. Parents noted that voice and body language told them information regarding the professional's transparency, intent, and level of sincerity. All ten of the participants mentioned the powerful impact that compassion and warmth had when it came to trust. One parent explained that "Personality, warmth, and competence are so important for trust. When you talk to someone, you just get a gut feeling." Likewise, another parent said, "It's just a feeling that I got (more at the high school) that they really cared." Highlighting the importance of compassion and its impact on trust one parent said, "We believe it was their personalities that allowed us to trust them: welcoming, treated us as equals, gave us the upper-hand, their personalities were warm, soothing, and they were honest." Educators who were described as warm and friendly were more approachable and parents were more likely to trust them than teachers who parents described as abrasive and apathetic. Something as small as a teacher or professional saying hello was viewed as a positive experience. One parent said she really appreciated it when the professionals would greet her in the hallways at the school. Verbal affirmations of praise from the teacher to the parent about the child or the parent were also related to a positive working relationship with the teacher.

Participants in this study explained if the professional came across as irritated, rude, or short-tempered, they experienced the interaction as negative communication. If a professional consistently talked about their child in a negative manner, repeatedly

focusing on what the child was unable to do, the parent experienced a great deal of stress. When one parent addressed a negative experience regarding the way an education professional behaved during the IEP meeting, "I felt they thought my daughter was just a lost cause. If I feel someone doesn't care about my kid, that is going to impact my relationship with them terribly." Another parent said that the principal did not even show up to the first IEP meeting. During the second IEP meeting he sat at his desk over in the corner, on his computer. He never apologized. He acted as though he did not care about the mother or her son. She said that after that she no longer trusted the principal.

When communicating with a parent, the professional's tone of voice or mannerisms had a significant and lasting impact on the parents. When a parent experienced a negative tone with an education professional (cold or abrasive, condescending, views the parent as an irritation, full of pity, views the child or parent as "less than"), the parent was less likely to trust or want to work with that individual. The opposite held true for parents when the education professional communicated with a positive tone that was warm, welcoming, compassionate, empathetic and understanding. Parents felt positively and wanted to work with that individual. When discussing one of the special education teachers she had worked with, one parent said "the special education teacher wasn't my favorite, was not warm and fuzzy, a little more cold." As supported by Blue-Banning, et al., (2004), it is not just what is said, it is how it is said that matters, and this too impacted the parents' ability to trust.

Listen here. Relayed by parents throughout the interviews, listening was another essential component of communication in relation to trust within the IEP process. Three participants explicitly said "listening is so important." When educators disregarded the

parent's input and concerns, they risked missing out on pertinent information necessary to make educational decisions about the child. As supported by Shepherd, et al., (2015), parents must be heard in IEP process for effective collaboration to occur. Parents' insights shed light on the child's strengths and needs that inform the education plan in ways that the other may not have known. One parent said "Parents know their child best. If you don't listen to the parent, you are not going to truly understand who the child is." When discussing the importance of educators listening to parents, four of the participants specifically stated that "parents know their child best." Another parent added "we are the experts" when it comes to their children. As one participant elaborated and alluded to the idea that her input actually caused teachers to feel frustrated, she said "The parent has an idea and it's because they know their child. We are not trying to make the professional's life harder." Similarly, in Sauer and Kasa's research (2012) teachers reported that the families were an asset and had a wealth of information when it came to information regarding how best to work with their child.

When giving an example of not being listened to, one parent said:

Then we got into elementary school and it was like I would throw these ideas out and they would look at me like I had a third head. There wasn't any give and take. It was like nope this is how we are going to do it. Teachers will ultimately do whatever they want anyways.

Sometimes being heard meant that the educator took the parents' input into consideration. Other times, it meant the educator actually implemented the parent's suggestion. When the participants in this study felt the teachers and other IEP professionals had really listened to them and that they had truly been heard, they felt respected and valued. One

parent explained that during one of the early experiences with professionals regarding her son's disability, a neurologist interrupted her, and cut her off. She said "he was disrespectful and because of that it caused red flags to go up."

When the participants were asked, what advice they had for teachers when it comes to building trust within the IEP process, one parent said "Teachers build trust by making a good first impression - listen. Parents want to be heard." Another parent felt strongly, twice throughout her interview she stated "I just want to be heard." As previously mentioned, one parent had a difficult time when it came to his child's classroom placement. Two years in a row, his child was placed in a classroom where the environment had a negative impact on his learning. The parent alluded to being more aggressive in order for the education professionals to actually listen to him. He said, "We felt someone listened this time, but we've been more aggressive - because we know we do have some control."

When educators listen to parents, it does more than just inform the educational decision regarding the child's IEP. Listening had a positive impact on the relationship between the educator and the parent. When an educator really listened, the parent felt they were treated as an equal IEP team member. In the interviews, being treated like an equal team member was something that was viewed as imperative, and by law the parent is an equal member of the IEP team. In a qualitative inquiry study, Blue-Banning et al., (2004) identified the main components of collaborative partnerships between families and school professionals. They found communication was a vehicle for establishing trust, expressing respect, and ensuring equality for their families.

Parent-Teacher Partnerships

The second theme that emerged through the analysis of the parent interviews was the professionals' ability to develop a partnership with parents. When the parents felt supported by the education professional, they also felt they had a stronger parent-teacher partnership. The stronger the partnership, the more they trusted the professional and the IEP process. Previous research by Coon, 2007; Keen, 2007 and Shepard, et al., 2015 supported this theme in that they found a collaborative parent-teacher partnership was considered best practice. In addition, and similar to the research by Dunst and Dempsey (2007), the parents in this study viewed their partnership in a positive manner when they felt it was based on a common goal; both the parent and the professionals truly had the child's best interest at heart. The participants explained that the education professionals' benevolent demeanor or their disposition to want to help their child positively impacted their ability to trust the IEP process. Likewise, the professional's level of integrity and reliability were equally important to parents' experiencing trust within the IEP process. When the professionals followed through with what they said they were going to do, for example, when they said they would provide 20 minutes of small group reading support three times a week, and did, parents trusted them more. When the professional said that they would communicate, provide information about the child's progress by a certain date, and they did, parents trusted them more. Professionals who honored the IEP and their word were deemed trustworthy by the parents.

The parents talked about the array of interactions that they had with the education professionals. When professionals collaborated with parents and treated them as an equal member of the IEP team, the parents felt more empowered to give input, as supported by

Edwards and Da Fonte (2012). The parents felt like their input was valued. Because the parents in this study were treated as equals by the professionals when it came to making educational decisions for their child overall, they felt that participation in their child's education was welcomed by education professionals.

The parents discussed that the professional's level of transparency was a sign of trustworthiness and a respectful partnership. When a professional was open and forthcoming with information, the parent was more likely to trust the education professionals and the IEP process. When working with someone on an IEP team, parents want to be able to trust them. For example, one of the parents shared that a speech language pathologist (SLP) felt that it was appropriate to reduce the amount of time spent providing speech and language therapy to her child. Rather than talking openly with the parent about reducing the child's services at the IEP meeting, the SLP changed the time in the documents but did not discuss the changes. When professionals tried to reduce or eliminate the services without the parent's input, the parent can feel as though the professional is shady or dishonest.

Competence was the last element that came up regarding strong and trusting partnerships between parents and education professionals. Parents wanted the education professional to know their child - academic and behavioral strengths, and needs, the child's interests, personalities, challenges and triumphs. Parents wanted to be assured the professional knew how to do their job. The professionals needed to have answers to questions that the parents had and if they do not know, they needed to know where to go to find the answers. One parent said "I asked the school psych if he knew of a place where kids can get therapy. He said he didn't know. He didn't even have a list or

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anything." When this parent was asked what is needed for her to trust the IEP process, she said "Knowledge [the professional having knowledge] is important." In order for parents to experience trust in the IEP process, the education professional's competency matters.

Benevolence. A second aspect emerged that was paramount to the parent experiencing trust within the IEP process was importance of the education professional acting as a supportive partner with the parent. There are many ways education professionals provided support to parents within the IEP process. Benevolence was something parents observed. For example, when parents observed teachers who were passionate about educating and supporting their child, they felt the professional had the child's best interest at heart. Benevolence was also a catalyst for trust. The parents in this study had a variety of positive and negative experiences with professionals regarding the level of support the professionals gave the students and the time and effort they put into their role as an educator. One parent said, "When I see teachers working as hard as they can (to help my child) it gives me a feeling that they care." At a different point in the conversation she had a different take on her experience "I had a feeling at the middle school that these guys [the professionals] didn't really care. There were too many kids with disabilities, they [the education professionals] are overwhelmed." Likewise, another parent said "Some teachers only get students to do the bare minimum. They could have higher goals and believed in him more. Some [teachers] just don't give a shit." This same parent then talked about her son's middle school teacher and said "You could just tell that the middle school teacher loved his job!" She went on to explain that this teacher had his own child with special needs and seemed driven to help and support her son. Her son was

bullied and this teacher put a stop to it. He would check in with both her and her son to make sure her son was okay.

Throughout the interviews parents often talked about the of benevolence of the education professionals, in terms of the parent feeling supported in the parent-teacher relationship. In some instances, the parent felt that the education professional was working against the parent and the needs of the child. This parent described a situation where she felt the professionals were lacking benevolence.

When talking about the relationship she had with the education professionals who worked with her son, a parent said:

> The relationship was no longer personal. We showed up to meetings, we would check in with the teachers who had him in class. We would email, we would do anything. We would stand on our heads if it meant they would teach him something, and we just weren't getting any communication. It was like pulling teeth and we kept trying and trying in hopes that someone would communicate. There were just very few teachers who were willing to work with my son.

In another instance, during a very difficult transition from the elementary school to the middle school, one parent even thought about sending her son to a different school. The educator sat down with the parent as the parent talked about her concerns. The educator encouraged the parent to keep her son at the middle school. The parent listened to her suggestion, and her son adjusted well. It just took some time. This parent explained that she really felt that the teacher has her son's best interest at heart. In another interview, a parent described her experience in receiving support from professionals. He said "The initial IEP experience was very supportive, the professionals were constructive with their

feedback, they explained some of his shortcomings, but also did a lot to help." When parents in this study felt that professionals were genuinely trying to help their child, they also felt they could trust the IEP process.

Two parents explained that when education professionals only have negative things to say about your child, you get the sense that they do not really care. They said that IEP meetings can be very difficult sit through when all the professionals do is talk negatively about their child. One parent said "It's hard not to be defensive when you are hearing all of the negative things that your kid can't do." Another parent said "At one IEP, I had to stop the meeting and tell the professionals if they didn't have anything positive to say about my son, that the meeting was over." As supported by Friend and Cook (2010), parents understood that their child's needs needed to be addressed, but it was also important to talk about the child's strengths. They wanted to hear the reality, but they did not want to feel their child's future was doomed. Hepworth-Berger & Rjojas-Cortex (2012), Fish, (2008), Lake and Billingsly, (2000), suggest that professionals need to be positive, proactive and solution oriented. There is a balance when to discussing the child's needs and strengths.

When discussing the topic of benevolence, parents also talked about how they needed to feel supported by the education professionals in order to experience a feeling of trust. The IEP process is complex and parents often needed help navigating their way through the process. If the parent felt the education professional was working against them and did not have the parent or the child's best interest at heart, there was reluctance to ask the education professional for help (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Before attending her first IEP meeting, one parent had ten years of experience in the disability

field. She said "The first IEP meeting was intimidating and scary, even with all of my education and background in disabilities. Many times, I felt that I was at a disadvantage at those meetings." This was unfortunate because the education professional had an opportunity to support and guide the parent through the process. Parents who understood the process were more likely to feel confident in the IEP process and therefore trusted the process (Fish, 2008; Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008; Lo, 2012). Parents felt as though they were dependent upon the education professionals to support and guide them through the IEP process. For many of the parents in this study, the preschool teachers were often the ones who walked the parents through their first IEP. The parents who had this experience said that they felt empowered and learned how to advocate for their child. "I was empowered to be involved and to advocate when my son was in early childhood." Partnerships between parents and education professionals tend to thrive when the parent felt supported by the professional; this was also true within the IEP process.

Integrity and Reliability. Another way a professional built a strong and trusting partnership with parents was to have integrity and do what they said they were going to do. During one interview a parent flat out said "A trusting professional has integrity." One father said "Being able to trust and have follow through are considered positive." At some point in every interview, each parent described an experience where they felt that one or more of the education professionals was unreliable or lacked integrity. When parents perceived professionals were reliable and true to their word, they were more likely to build strong and trusting partnerships with parents. Another parent brought up a situation in which the education professional did not comply with the dates of the IEP. This lack of compliance caused a delay in her son's services, and his needs were not

being met due to the delay. This experience caused her to question whether or not she could trust the education professional.

One parent said:

This teacher - I don't even know how she is still in the district because she is shady. I respect that they are busy. BUT, if I am supposed to have the IEP in my hands on a certain date, I'm going to hold you to that. If you are going to make me fight you on everything. I am going to hold you to your job. I even brought the envelopes to show that they were sent to me after the fact. It's dated after the fact of when she was supposed to send it.

Prior to this experience, this same teacher eliminated the reading program that was actually helping her son learn to read. Prior to this, the teacher and the parents had tried other reading programs and nothing had helped her son learn to read. The parent believed that due to not having this reading program, her son's reading level regressed significantly. Ultimately the district told this mother that this teacher (at the elementary level) was not a good fit for her son, and the district moved her son to the middle school. The parent told me "At this point I had no trust in the school or the teachers." When parents cannot rely on teachers to support and help their children in the classroom their level of trust can diminish significantly.

Another parent talked about her experience with her son and his anxiety. She said based on her experiences with the school:

I put him in outside therapy, due to his anxiety when transitioning to the middle school. I didn't trust the school to help. The school only cares about what happens within the four walls of the school. Don't rely on schools. When the special

education teacher refused to check on my son in his computer class where he was

having a hard time because it was during her lunch hour, I had to check on him

myself. This taught me that I'm the only one who is going to advocate for my son.

I could not trust the special education teacher to be there for my son. It's really

obvious that the IEP only pertains to the hours in school. Her response set the

tone.

Through such experiences, parents learned whether they could rely on the school to

support their child.

Three other parents had very similar experiences. In one instance a mother

explained that she homeschooled her son for ninth and tenth grade because the school he

attended was not a good fit for him and did not meet his needs. Before his junior year, her

son decided he wanted to go back to his high school so that he could graduate with his

friends.

She said:

The school shorted him a credit. I told them that they had shorted him a credit all

through his 11th grade year and they didn't do anything. I asked the school what

they wanted him to do over the summer to make this up? The school said they

would get back to me, but they never did. I even sent five emails to the local

special education cooperative and never got a response. I worked with the Mayo

Clinic to develop a program for him in order to make up that one credit. The

school said they wouldn't accept this. I told them you never got back to me and

you will accept this. I had to fight in order for him to graduate. I had lost all trust

again.

When parents cannot rely on schools for help or in the very least to communicate with them, their ability to trust was negatively impacted.

In another instance, a child's father felt the school professionals were unreliable because they were not available for him to communicate or consult. "The assistant principal is not available and the principal is just there for show. You are your child's advocate, and you need to be there all the time to ensure the professionals are doing their job."

Another parent felt that the school was unreliable and explained:

I'm probably not the only one who's child's IEP isn't followed. You have to trust the system, but you need to check to make sure that the teachers are following through and doing with they say they are going to do." He also said "Sometimes you have to hold the school's feet to the fire to get them to do their job, what we as tax payers are paying them to do.

Parents of children with disabilities generally have very little time for anything else. They have the same responsibilities of a parent of a child without disabilities along with the additional responsibilities that come with having a child with a disability. When parents have to constantly check in with the teacher to make sure they are doing their job is just one more thing. Parents do not trust the IEP process when working with education professionals who were unreliable and lack integrity.

Collaboration is the answer. By law, the parent is an equal part of the IEP meeting, but that does not mean they felt that their input was welcome. I have heard education professionals say that "it is the parents' job to sit and listen." I have also heard education professionals say that "the parent is an equal member of the IEP team, we need

to listen to them because they know their child best." These are two very different views. One hinders parent participation and the other encourages it. Parents who feel like valued members of the IEP team are more likely to trust the process. They feel as though they have a voice, that their concerns and or ideas have respectfully been heard, considered, and even implemented when and where appropriate. Collaboration between parents and education professionals is a process of communication in light of making decisions for the best interest of the child. Educators who are unwilling or lack the skills to collaborate can make parents skeptical about the IEP process.

Part of the collaboration process included communication where information was shared between the education professionals and the parents. Collaboration required both the parents and the education professionals to be upfront and forthcoming with information, and also to take each other's input into consideration when making decisions regarding the child's IEP. The analysis revealed, overall for the parents in this study, collaboration with education professionals impacted their ability to trust the IEP process.

Six of the participants talked about their experiences of collaboration when their child was in the early childhood setting. One parent said "she was empowered to be involved [in her child's education and the IEP process]."

Another parent said:

In early childhood, the education professionals were so involved and wonderful. I would make suggestions and the professionals would agree. When my son was in preschool and also in his senior year of high school, the sped team worked together with us, trust was built, and we bounced ideas off of each other. In elementary school they looked at me like I had a third head when I made

suggestions. There was no give and take. The professionals decided how we were going to do things.

The same parent said, *"Other teachers we worked with called us assholes [because they disagreed with their suggestion]."* It was important to the parents that the education professionals collaborate with them and are open to their suggestions. Burke and Sandman (2015) support this by explaining that parents know their children best. Parents have valuable information that can help inform education professionals in the decision-making process.

In this study the participants described a variety of ways that the education professionals collaborated with them. One parent said "Every day we have a communication notebook that goes back and forth." Her daughter, an 18-year-old who is blind, deaf and non-verbal, is also medically fragile and fed through a feeding tube. This parent was dependent upon the education professionals detailed communication and collaboration to be aware of her daughter's health. She explained that the teachers and the paraprofessionals communicated with her through a notebook providing her details about the times her daughter ate, toileting times, and activities she participated in, as well as any concerns. The notebook kept both the parent and the teacher in communication so that they collaborated on decisions regarding her daughter's education, as well as her health. In this situation, frequent collaboration between the parent and the education professionals was a matter of life and death for this child.

Two of the participants attempted email as collaborative approach with the education professionals. In both instances the education professionals were unresponsive to the emails.

One parent said:

> I am currently having issues with the physical therapist. I tried to order a stander last spring and [six months later] I still haven't gotten it. She is not responding to my emails. I talked to her later and she said she must not have got them, but she still hasn't responded.

Another parent shared her experience and said "The school said they'd get back to me. I sent five emails to the principal and then to the local special education agency and no one got back to me. I had to turn to the Mayo Clinic." Both of these parents had other experiences with education professionals who were quick to respond and collaborated regarding their child's needs. However, the parents trust in the education professionals who were unresponsive was lacking. Another parent explained that she had a very positive collaborative experience with her son's middle school teacher. She said "I could always call the middle school teacher on the phone and he would always get back to me right away." In order for collaboration to occur, both parties – in this case the education professionals and the parents - need to be willing to respond to communication. Without collaboration, it was very difficult to have a strong parent-teacher partnership.

I can see right through you. Regarding collaboration, it was also important for the education professionals to be transparent and provide the parent with upfront and up to date information regarding the child's progress, needs, and how the needs were addressed. Whether in person, on the phone, or via text, throughout the interviews the parents made it very clear that when they received information from a professional, it was critical that the information was delivered in a way that was not only transparent, but that

the professional was also forthcoming with the information. In this study, parents shared several experiences where education professionals withheld information.

Frequent communication gave the parents the opportunity to collaborate with teachers and make decisions regarding their child's education. One reason an educator might withhold information from a parent regarding the child's needs is due to lack of resources; time. One of the parents in the study explained that he and his wife had told the school that they wanted their child evaluated for special education services. Months had passed and they had yet to be notified about the results of the evaluation. When the parents asked the school about the results of the evaluation, the school said that the evaluation was never completed because the parents never submitted the paperwork. The parents were unaware that they were required to file paperwork to initiate the evaluation process. The parents felt the reason the school withheld this information is that they did not have the time to complete the evaluation due to the high number of special education referrals. The parents did complete the paperwork, and their son did qualify for special education services. When schools withhold information can make it difficult for the parents to trust the education professionals or the IEP process as a whole. For the participants in this study, transparency and frequent communication are imperative when building trusting partnerships within the IEP process.

Similar to the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (Reiman, et al., 2010) one parent was caught off guard when the school decided to wait until the IEP meeting to tell her that they wanted her son to attend a different school. She had learned that the education professionals took the liberty of deciding his school

placement ahead of time, as it was already written in the IEP before the meeting even began.

She said:

> In first grade we had our IEP meeting, and the school listed on the form wasn't even the school that he was attending. I'm like he's at [name of elementary school]. They said we feel that he would do better at this other school. In the end it worked out great. It was just the way they did it. They just sort of pulled the rug out from under me. The school he was at was his neighborhood school, with all of the neighborhood kids. It was the way it was handled, to just slide it in the IEP without telling me or forewarning me.

This lack of transparency impedes parents' ability to trust the IEP process.

Another parent said sometimes the IEP professionals tried to "sneak one past me" in the IEP meeting. For example, they quickly run through the services they will be providing for her daughter. Rather than directly communicating to her that the amount of time that her daughter receives speech services had been decreased, the education professionals skipped over the change in the meeting, hoping she would not notice. These parents wanted to collaborate as partners in the decision-making process. Regardless of the law requiring parents be equal team members, this parent's experience in the IEP process was one of disenfranchisement. When the education professionals made decisions about the IEP without the parent's input, the parent interpreted it as lying by omission. The participants in this study viewed education professionals as trustworthy when they were upfront and transparent when making decisions or providing information.

Know your stuff. In order for trust to ensue when education professionals collaborate with parents, it was vital to the participants that the teachers knew their child and were able to provide detailed examples and data to support findings to the parent. Competency matters. In one instance a parent explained that her son had very minimal reading skills. She received a phone call from his history teacher explaining that her son was refusing to do his work, and the only time he would complete his work was when the paraprofessional gave him the answers. The parent explained to the teacher that her son reads at a primer level and needs assistance from the paraprofessional in order to complete his assignments. This professional was making false accusations about the child based on her assumptions. Ultimately, this professional had failed to read the IEP. This teacher did not know the child which was supported by the detailed examples she provided explaining his "unwillingness" to do his work. This lack of competence is a deterrent when it comes to parents experiencing trust in the IEP process.

A competent education professional can give a parent reassurance that their child is in good hands and that their needs will be met. In addition, when a parent feels as though the professional truly knows and understands the child, it can give the parent a feeling of reassurance that the professional truly cares and can be trusted. One parent had a very difficult experience with a professional during an IEP meeting.

She said:

I just remember sitting in a room with all of these people. I will never forget the school psych sitting on one end. The speech therapist was on this end. Then there were all of these people in between. The school psych just sat there all pompous, saying I did the best I could do - I couldn't really understand him. I thought

you've never even spoken to him, you just had 20 minutes with him. He didn't

even know you?! How would he even feel comfortable with you.

This parent felt that this professional's competence regarding her child was

lacking, because he made a decision about her son's ability after spending very little time

with him. His lack of competence had a negative impact on her ability to trust in the IEP

process.

The Child's Needs Being Met

The third overarching theme that emerged in the analysis that the parents

addressed over and over was the importance of the child's needs being met. Whether and

how the parents perceived their child's needs were met had a significant impact of the

level of trust they had in regard to the education professionals and the IEP process. For

the parents in this study, it was clear that their child's needs being met was at the center

of their trust in the IEP process.

Each parent in this study described instances when their child's needs were not

being met and or the IEP was not being implemented. The parents typically determined

the child's progress or lack of as a sign that their child's needs were being met.

Furthermore, if their child was not making progress or was having difficulty, the parents

questioned whether the education professional were following the IEP. During these

times the parents also felt a lack of trust toward the education professionals. However,

they felt just the opposite when their child's needs were being met.

There were several topics that consistently came up in the interviews when

discussing the child's needs. The first concern parents discussed was whether the IEP was

being followed. If the education professionals do not assist the child toward meeting the

goals in the IEP, deliver the services listed in the IEP, or implement the accommodations, and modifications, they are not only out of compliance with the State, but they are also not meeting the needs of the child which can be very problematic and a deterrent to the child's success and the parent's trust.

Does the classroom environment meet the needs of the child? Some IEPs will explicitly say the type of learning environment that the student benefits from. The parents in this study explained that when the teacher does not create an environment tailored to the students' needs outlined in the IEP, it can have a negative impact on their ability to trust that their child's needs are being met.

Another topic that was relevant to the child's needs being met was whether or not the teacher was a good fit for the child. Some teachers are willing to teach to the student's individual needs and others are not. When teachers are unable to adjust their instruction to accommodate for a student on an IEP, the child is less likely to make academic progress. This too has an impact on the parent's ability to trust the IEP process. The intent of the IEP is to give the child access to the general education curriculum through increased or modified instruction, and even accommodations. If the teacher is unable to help the child access the general education curriculum, the parent is less likely to trust in that teacher's ability to teach their child, or the IEP process.

Over half of the parents sought out academic, social-emotional, or behavioral resources for their child outside of the school setting in order to help support their child in the school setting. Some of the different types of resources parents may seek outside of the school for their children are counseling for issues pertaining to mental health, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech language therapy, and academic tutoring.

Parents felt they had to seek outside resources because they could not trust the school professionals would provide resources for their child, some parents stated the school provided some resources, but not enough. Ultimately the parents sought outside resources because they could not trust schools to meet the child's needs.

There are several implications for the parent as a result of the child's needs not being met by education professionals. For starters the parent was required to be even more vigilant of their child's education than they are already expected to be. Parents of children who have disabilities are already very likely to spend more time working and communicating with educators than the parents of a child without disabilities, to ensure that their child's needs are met. When the educator does not follow through with the IEP and does ensure that the child's needs are met, the parent may have to leave work early, or take part of the day off in order to talk with the teacher. In addition, the child's needs not being met can cause unnecessary emotional stress for both the parent and the child. Two of the parents interviewed broke down crying when talking about their frustrations about their child's needs not being met. One mother and her son went to counseling to cope with the anxiety they both had during their transition from elementary to middle school.

Follow the IEP. During the interviews the parents talked a great deal about the importance of their child's needs being met. More specifically, the parents talked about the specific times when the teachers did or did not follow the IEP. When the education professionals did not follow the IEP, the parents feared that their child would fall behind or regress in their academics, behaviors, social-emotional wellbeing. When the parents talked about the teachers that did follow the IEP, they expressed a sense of relief and

gratitude that their child's need were being met. On the other hand, when the teachers did not follow the IEP, they expressed great frustration. One parent was direct, saying, "When my child doesn't make progress, I don't feel confident in the IEP process."

Another parent spoke at length about her son's years in school and explained that he did not have many needs at this point in his education. Due to his minimal needs, she has much less contact with the teachers to ensure her son is successful. He is now in high school, and knows how to advocate for himself, he is quite independent for which the parent felt less dependent on her relationship with educators or the IEP process itself. She said there is very little the teachers need to do at this point. She said, "Teachers accommodate him, for example they will place him in the first or second row" which helped to minimize her son's distractions so that he could focus on what is being taught. This was the first time in her child's educational career that she has not had to consistently advocate for him. In previous years, she had to be very involved in order to ensure her son's needs were being met. Based on previous experiences she said "I'm the only one who is going to advocate for my son," explaining that for much of his education, she did not count on the education professionals to advocate for him or ensure his needs were being met.

Another parent shared their experience of two children on IEP's, one for which the IEP is always followed, and the teachers have nothing but positive things to say about the one child. The experience this parent had with their other child's IEP was a different story. Initially, when the parent said that they wanted their second child evaluated for special education services, the school agreed, but then failed to tell the parents that they actually needed to sign a paper giving the school permission to evaluate. The parents

waited many months and finally they found out that their child had not been evaluated due to the incomplete paper work. The situation was very upsetting. When their first son went through the IEP process in early childhood, the education professionals walked the parents through every step of the IEP.

Once their second child qualified for special education, his IEP was not consistently followed. Initially, their son worked with the school psychologist and was able to turn around his behaviors in six weeks. The parent exclaimed, "SHE WAS GREAT!! He received therapy in school and he did extremely well. He had a very positive relationship with her." However, that school psychologist was sent to the high school and no longer worked at the elementary school, his child's behaviors regressed. The IEP team decided to move the child from the general education to the special education classroom. At one point the parent said "they just stopped following his IEP." "His needs are not being met at school." For this parent, his trust was dependent on whether or not his son's needs were being met. When the IEP was being followed, his son's needs were being met, which allowed the parent to trust the IEP process.

Another parent who also had two children on an IEP, explained in a matter of fact way, as though this is what is to be expected when it comes to schools:

> The shortcoming of the school is every year they start over and reset up a system
> for my son. It takes about a month to get everyone on board. Eating breakfast and
> lunch in the special education room is not in the IEP so it is not done
> automatically every year. We have also run into instances when the school was
> not following the IEP. I asked the school if he was getting his half-hour behavior
> intervention each week (which is in his IEP) and they said no, they weren't giving

him that. He was also supposed to be receiving reading services which he also

was not getting for about two months into the school year. Last year he missed out

on 1,200 minutes of service in the beginning of the year due to teachers not

following the IEP. I'm not entirely certain their following the IEP this year either.

This parent repeatedly said, "As a parent you need to be diligent. You have to be diligent

if you want the teachers to be. You can have all the trust in the world, but you need to be

diligent as a parent." A third parent with two children on an IEP explained her experience

with the IEP process. Prior to the IEP, her son needed a great deal of academic support.

His teacher tried multiple interventions to help meet his needs; she was determined to

help him succeed whether he was on an IEP or not. She said "You know you can trust a

teacher when they have the determination not to let your child fall through the cracks.

Teachers [who are trustworthy] are willing to figure out how to help your child and do

whatever it takes." This school year she and her son had a different experience. His IEP

was not followed. The teacher has not even read his IEP.

   The parent explained:

   She hasn't even read his IEP. I told her about his interventions and

   accommodations and she said that those are good ideas. They aren't just good

   ideas, she is required to be implementing them as part of his IEP. Two weeks ago,

   I got an email saying that he needs to do this assignment at home. But he

   shouldn't have to because he has reduced homework as part of his IEP. She didn't

   even give him a legible spelling list to take home. He has dysgraphia and she

   expected him to use his illegible spelling list to study from. I had to request an

   IEP meeting because she is not following his IEP. Now she hasn't sent ANY

homework, and she hasn't communicated, so this should be an interesting

meeting. It's frustrating as a parent - it's like DUDE!! READ THE IEP!

Cheatham, et al. (2012), remind us that education professionals need to know and

understand the federal requirements for IEP meetings, ensure compliance, and understand

the consequences of potential violations. Some of these consequences are relational and

include parents losing trust in the educators, and the IEP process as a whole (Angell, et

al., 2009; Lake & Billingsly, 2000).

School Environment - It Matters. Several of the parents interviewed explained

that the environment of the school had potential to increase their child's ability to be

successful or cause their child to have significant difficulty learning and focusing. When

the environment was overstimulating with ultraviolet lighting, noise (i.e. too many

students talking at one time), music, or even the humming of the ultraviolet lights – the

environment was overstimulating for their child. The environment was something that

was important to the parents in regard to their child's needs and accommodations

provided through the IEP.

One parent explained that his son's hearing is so sensitive that when he is in the

lower level of the house playing video games with the volume turned on, he has the

ability to hear someone whispering on the floor above him. In one instance he was

downstairs playing a video game and asked what that loud noise was upstairs. It was the

quiet hum of the refrigerator, but for him it was overpowering his ability to concentrate

on what he was doing. Too much stimulation has also caused him to have behavioral

outbursts and lose his ability to focus in the classroom. In order to accommodate this

student's needs, the school allowed him to eat breakfast in the special education

classroom for a time. Two weeks into the school year, however, the special education teacher said he could not be in the room any longer. The parent had to alter his own schedule to accommodate his son and bring him to school later because eating breakfast in the lunchroom with the rest of the students overstimulated him so much that he was not able to handle the demands of focusing in the classroom. Luckily this parent was retired and had the ability to be flexible. The dad said "the school has worked on getting him placed in environments where he can focus." The child's mom explained that his current classroom "is a fuzzy soft, happy room." The teacher did not use the ultraviolet lighting, instead used soft lighting and lamps throughout the room. She described the classroom as a calm environment, with fuzzy pillows, and beanbags. Her son loved his classroom.

Another parent had a similar situation. It took a couple of years to figure out why her son was not eating at school. He was barely putting on a weight. This parent altered her son's lunch, trying different foods, and nothing was encouraging him to eat. On one occasion her son's class was excused from the lunch table, but he sat there not realizing everyone left. The teachers and the parents wondered if he was having absentee seizures. Finally, one day her son came home and told her that he could not focus in the lunch room. There was so much going on that he could not eat. This mother said "he can't focus in the lunch room so they put him in the sped room for lunch and he can eat… I am much more likely to trust when the teacher is willing to meet my child's needs." For both families discussed above the school was able to meet the children's needs and provide an environment that allowed the children to function to their highest potential. For the parents, having their child's needs met had a positive impact on their ability to trust.

Is the Teacher a Good Fit for the Student? A significant aspect of parents'
concerns about their children's needs was whether they perceived the teacher as a good
fit for their child. In the teacher-student relationship there were various components that
determined whether the parent saw the teacher as a good fit for the child, including the
teacher's demeanor, their ability to engage the child and even more importantly, their
willingness to follow the IEP. When the teacher was a good fit for their child, parents
were more likely to trust that their child's needs will be met.

The relationship a teacher had with the student had a direct impact on the parents'
level of trust with education professionals. One parent specifically said "As a parent you
trust the professionals more when they have a relationship with your child." When
describing the kind of relationship their child had with the teacher that increased the
parents' ability to trust they noted, "It's positive when your child feels welcome and
loved in the classroom." As stated previously in this chapter, when the education
professionals have benevolence, or the child's best interest at heart, the parents were
much more likely to trust the IEP process. One parent said, "If I feel someone doesn't
care about my kid, that is going to impact my relationship with them terribly." In general,
the parents interviewed directly related their trust of the education professional with
having their child's best interest at heart.

The demeanor of the education professional was another indication to parents of
the education professionals care of their child. Throughout the interviews, five of the
parents specifically talked about the demeanor of the education professionals in relation
to their ability to trust. One the parent noted that the teacher his son had was a great fit for
him, and his son had a very positive experience. When describing this education

professional, he said "She had a very bubbly personality, my son loves that. It makes him feel special, it motivates his happy sense." When their child had a positive response with the teacher, the parent felt a sense of trust toward that professional.

It was not only the way the parent observed the education professional with their own child that impacted their trust. The parents also described the demeanor of the education professionals in regard to the way they treated other students, as well as the parents' personal interactions with the professionals. One parent who felt the school psychologist was not trustworthy said, "The school psychologist wouldn't even acknowledge me in the hall. He also doesn't have a relationship with the kids and I never see kids talk to him, or vice-versa." She then went on to describe her experiences with the school counselor as positive and said "She sees me and says hi. I see the students saying hi to her and they want to be around her." Another parent described professionals saying "The special education teacher wasn't my favorite. She was not warm or fuzzy, she was a little more cold." When asked what the characteristics of a trustworthy professional were, the same parent also said "when professionals say 'hi' in the hallway." During another interview a parent described a past experience she had with her son's first grade teacher.

She said:

> The teacher didn't judge me. Even though the teacher's husband was a police officer who had been called to their home and witnessed her personal challenges, she still treated me just like everyone else. She still says hi to me when we run into her out in the community.

This particular teacher showed kindness and compassion to the parent and her son which influenced the parent's ability to trust her. Another parent explicitly stated that the

genuine and caring demeanor of the education professionals made a significant and positive impact on their ability to trust. "We believe it was their personalities that allowed us to trust them: they were welcoming, treated us as equals, gave us the upper hand, had personalities that were warm and soothing, and they were honest." When education professionals demonstrated a kind-regard or warm demeanor toward the child and the parents, the parents were more likely to trust the professionals.

When the parents talked about whether the teacher was a good fit for their child, they had much to say regarding the teacher's ability and willingness to meet their child's needs. One parent said, "My trust would come and go. Sometimes her needs would be met and other times they would do the bare minimum." When her daughter's needs were met, she trusted the IEP process, yet there were times the parent felt the education professionals failed to meet her daughter's needs. Another parent explained that she knew her son's fourth grade teacher was not a good fit for him and was prepared for it.

She said:

I knew we were going to have this road block in fourth grade [that the teacher would have an inability to meet his needs]. I know she has a large group of kids with high needs, but I still don't trust her. She hasn't even read his IEP. I feel like my son is just a number in his class.

This parent felt that her son's teacher not only lacked the ability to meet his needs as a result of the large group of students with high needs, she also wasn't willing to meet his needs due to the fact that she had not read his IEP. The teacher's inability to implement her son's accommodations and modifications had a negative influence on her trust in the teacher and the IEP process.

One parent shared a story about a time a teacher refused to continue to implement the reading curriculum that had not only taught her son to read but helped him make significant gains in reading. Her son had cognitive disability and was only able to retain information when it was taught in a frequent and consistent manner. After the teacher stopped implementing the reading curriculum, she said "My son lost a lot of information during that time because the teacher took him out of a reading program that was working for him." Not only did the teacher pull him out of the reading curriculum, but the teacher kept telling her son that he could read, he was just not trying. Because of this her son came home from school exhausted and did even eat dinner. He went straight to bed. The school agreed that the sixth-grade teacher was not a good fit for him and moved her son to the high school classroom for cognitive disabilities. She was upset about the way her son was being treated because her son was only in sixth grade. The school's only option was to place her sixth grader in the high school; they were unwilling to hold the sixth-grade teacher responsible for removing the reading curriculum or consider other options that kept him with his same aged peers. She said "I lost complete trust in the school and the teachers."

In contrast to the above experience, another parent spoke about the willingness of the education professionals to meet her child's needs and how that influenced her to trust of the IEP process.

She noted:

When I see a spark in someone [an education professional] and they are really looking at my daughter's capabilities, and they say let's try this or let's revisit this. When I see someone genuinely trying to work with her and help her out.

The education professional's level of willingness to try new approaches to help her daughter led her believe the education professional was a good fit for her daughter. Similarly, another parent talked about her son's third grade teacher's ability and willingness to meet his needs. She was the one who paid attention and figured out that he was on the Autism spectrum. She said "everything just came together, his third-grade teacher individualized learning and used physical activity to help the kids learn. This worked very well." This parent truly felt that his third-grade teacher was a great fit for him which greatly influenced her trust in positive ways.

Implications of the Child's Needs Not Being Met. When education professionals are unable or unwilling to meet the child's needs, there are multiple implications. First, the parent must find time to advocate for their child. This might include making phone calls to their child's education professionals and sometimes set up meetings to discuss why their child's needs are not being met. The child's needs not being met, required parent to take additional time off of work. A few of the parents were unable to work a full-time job due to the educational, medical and, social demands of their child's disability. In addition, some of the participants had to seek outside resources when they could not trust the school to meet the child's needs. For the participants in this study, the impact of the child's needs not being met was a source of stress for both the parent and the child. The stress also had a negative impact on the parents' ability to trust the IEP process.

Advocate or Fight? Every single participant said they had to advocate for their child and over half also said they had fight for the child as well. In interviews, parents made a distinction between advocating for their child and fighting for their child, for

them, advocating was more collaborative conversation with the education professionals.

Fighting, however, was having to be aggressive with the school to have their voices heard

and their child's needs met. Seven out of the ten parents said that they had to either fight

for threaten, or demand that the school provide services for their child, to ensure their

child's needs were met. One parent said: "Sometimes you have to hold the school's feet

to the fire to get them to do their job, what we as tax payers are paying them to do."

Another parent said, "You are your child's advocate, you need to be there all the time to

ensure professionals are doing their job."

Likewise, a third parent said:

The strategy I used was to bother everyone I had to until I got what he needed. I

am constantly advocating. I am very involved, constantly check in and asking

questions. I was persistent and got my son help. I pushed it (the IEP) forward. I

was adamant that he was getting services. My child will not be lost, I advocate,

I'm persistent, and I'm determined. Getting my son identified and needs met was a

two-year process. I had to fight and advocate to get just to him tested. My sister is

a teacher and she told me that I have to fight - otherwise he is just a number.

There was a clear difference between advocating and fighting. The parents

expected that they to advocate for their child, naturally as a parent it is their job. One

parent said "It's the parent's job to advocate and be a voice for their child. It's the way

parenting should be." Many of the parents explained that advocating for their child was

part of ensuring your child's needs are met. When the participants discussed advocating

for their child, they did not mention feeling frustrated or having a lack of trust toward the

education professionals. However, having to fight was something that was viewed as

frustrating and exhausting. Fighting meant that the professionals did not listen, respond or they refused to listen to the parents when they communicated their child's needs. The professionals lack of response resulted in the parents demanding services from the education professionals until their child's needs were met. One parent said, "that's the frustrating part about being a parent, you have to fight." When discussing the impact that the need to fight had on a parent, she said "I have no trust with the education professionals I have to fight with."

   Seeking Outside Resources. When the school did not have the resources to meet their child's needs, the parents looked outside the school for help.

   One parent said:

   "I walk in initially trusting the education professionals (to meet my child's needs), but I have reservations. If they won't help him, we will. When our son was having a difficult time transitioning to the middle school, we put him in therapy, we just didn't trust the school to help."

In similar instance, another parent explained that she and her husband were the only ones teaching her son life skills. She said "they [the teacher] only worked on adding and subtracting all throughout elementary. We also had to teach him to read at home, and we did." During another interview, one parent simply said "I felt the school wasn't equipped to help my daughter. The school lacks resources." The lack of resources the parents addressed included the limited amount of time the teacher has to work with their child, or the limited amount of support personnel [teaching assistants, paraprofessionals] available to work with the students in the classroom. When one of the schools was unresponsive toward one of the parents, she had to reach out to the Mayo Clinic to help her set up an

educational program for her son. Other parents talked about the physical therapists and speech therapists overloaded with too many students on their caseload, and as a result, their child did receive the amount of time needed to make adequate progress with their speech and language or gross motor skills. Not one parent complained about seeking outside resources or paying additional money for outside therapies in order to help their child. In fact, every single participant acknowledged that the school lacked the amount of resources necessary to fully meet their child's needs at all times. The parents were very understanding when it came to the teacher's limitations. However, at the end of the day the teacher's willingness and ability to meet the child's needs was a key factor in the parent's ability to trust.

Stress. Finally, the last implication of the child's needs not being met have a direct and negative impact on not just the parent, but the child. Four of the participants told stories illustrating the heartbreaking stress that their child experienced when the education professionals did not meet their needs, and the impact it had on the child. As previously mentioned, one parent had an experience where her son's sixth grade teacher told him he could read if he tried. Her son is illiterate due to having a moderate cognitive disability. He would come home so exhausted, not eat dinner and go straight to bed. She said, "One night he came home from school and cried and cried, he told me, I just want a new brain." She said, "at this point I was desperate and angry. I was frustrated, I was angry, I was done." By the time her son was in ninth grade, his anxiety was so bad, he hid in the school. She said "My son looks normal and he didn't want his friends to know he was in special education. He had to do the football team's laundry and go into the classroom and pick up recycling. It was humiliating." The school required the students

with cognitive disabilities to do the laundry and pick up recycling. She said "my son had actually been hiding in the school for a while before the school let me know what was going on." One parent explained that was not only stressful for the child when their needs were being met, it was also very stressful for the parent. He said, "As a parent it is really stressful when your child's needs aren't being met."

Another parent told her story and she explained that when her son was in tenth grade, he hated school and he hated being in special education. Her son did not want to be in special education classes any longer. She requested an IEP meeting so that he could exit from special education. At this meeting, the general education teacher looked at her and said that her son will never make it in the general education classroom. With her support, her son exited out of special education.

She said:

The general education setting was very difficult for him because he didn't have the same support. During this time, it seemed like he wanted to give up. My son feels really bad about himself and thinks that he is a failure. This was a really scary time for me because I dropped out of school when I was his age. He did go back into special education.

The tenth-grade year was a stressful time for both her and her son. Although his academic needs were being met in the special education classroom, it had a significantly negative impact on his self-esteem.

One parent's story was about his son was in daycare. Although it did not take place in the K-12 setting, his son was forever changed by a childcare professional. At the age of two, his son was molested in daycare. His older son told him that his brother was

screaming and crying upstairs, and he wanted to go help his brother, but the daycare provider's son would not let him go upstairs.

The parent explained that:

Before this incident he was a happy-go-lucky kid, and the next day he was touching his private parts, he was angry and manipulative. Once he got to preschool at age three, his behaviors were so severe that the preschool teachers said that you may want to get him tested. The Kindergarten teacher wasn't really helpful, and in first grade things only got worse.

Due to his severe behaviors, the education professionals who currently work with him have a very difficult time meeting his needs. Much of the time school is a very stressful place for him to be. The trauma caused their son by a care provider had a lasting, damaging impact on the child and the parent's ability to trust.

The final story told by a mother illustrates the stress her daughter experienced when the school was unable to meet her needs.

The parent explained:

This all happened before we got a concrete medical diagnosis. My daughter was in kindergarten. At the time she was in the general education classroom. We needed a concrete diagnosis before she could receive any (special education) services. I remember I would have to drag my daughter to school, and she would be crying I hate it here, I hate it here, please don't make me go!

Although her daughter was not yet receiving special education services, this story highlights the impact that a child's needs not being met directly has on the child. This little girl was only in Kindergarten, and yet she hated school because she could not

handle the daily routine in the general education classroom. This parent knew that the education professionals in the general education setting were unable to meet her daughter's needs. At this time, she contemplated homeschooling her daughter, because she unsure if she could trust that the school system would be able to meet her daughter's needs, whether it was in the general or special education setting. Once her daughter received a diagnosis, she was able to receive special education services. The general education teacher was unable to provide the supports listed in her IEP, so her daughter ended up in a fully self-contained special education classroom. As a parent, it was not what she wanted for her daughter, but it was the only place her daughter's needs were met.

Discussion

From the analysis presented in above, it is very clear that trust is deeply situated within a nexus of relationships the parent has with educators, the school, the IEP process and their child. To reiterate the purpose of the study was to describe parents' experience in the IEP process, the ways in which they experience trust within the IEP process? First and foremost, parents' trust is constructed within the relationships they have with education professionals who serve their children, with the school as an institution, and with the IEP process in which they are engaged. This multidirectional set of intricate relationships also includes the relationship between the education professionals and the child. The analysis revealed three overarching themes that characterized the relationships that impacted trust: communication, parent-teacher partnerships, and the child's needs being met. The present chapter discussed parents' experiences of trust in the IEP process. Again, and again, their experiences revealed that trust is not only relational, but intricate.

Trust was contingent on the parents' perception in the experience that the wellbeing of their child is at the center.

Communication between the parents and the professionals, and among professionals, was essential in order for the parents to have trust in the IEP process. The analysis revealed that parents expected and needed educators to update them with information about their child's progress. The frequency of the updates was dependent upon the needs of the parent. It was common for parents to prefer that educators provide updates when there are any changes in their child's needs or when the child has met a benchmark. In the IEP process, communication is also provided to the parents through documentation. The Parent's Rights and the IEP documents were very confusing for parents to understand. Due to the language specific to special education professionals. This confusion created a barrier between parents and their ability to know whether their child's needs were being met and the IEP process as whole. When the parent has difficulty understanding the IEP, they are much less likely to trust the process.

The way the communication is delivered has a significant impact on trust. Affect and tone were important to parents. Parents preferred it when education professionals had a warm and welcoming demeanor. They felt the education professionals were not only more approachable, but that they cared. Listening was also essential when it comes to the parents' ability to trust the IEP process. When educators listen to parents, it not only informs the educational decisions regarding the child's IEP, it lets the parent know that they are an equal team member in the IEP process.

Parent-teacher partnerships was the second theme that emerged in the analysis. When the participants talked about their partnerships with the education professionals

they said that the personality and demeanor the education professional had the ability to make the parent feel supported and that they had their child's best interest at heart. Parents felt as though they could trust the education professionals and had a stronger partnership with them when they had integrity. Being able to rely on the education professionals was essential for trust to occur. The parents talked about how important it was for the education professionals to collaborate with them, share information and work together to create an IEP best suites the child. Transparency was also something that was addressed as important when it comes to having a strong parent-teacher partnership. Professionals need to be forthcoming with information and concerns regarding the child. Finally, when it comes to parent-teacher partnerships competence matters. If the education professional does not know the child, their learning and behavioral interests, strengths, needs, or who their friends are, the parent may question the professional's ability to meet the child's needs. Lack of competence can also give the impression that the education professionals are not invested in the child and diminish the strength of the parent-teacher partnership.

The final and most essential theme in relation to the parents experiencing trust in the IEP process was the child's needs being met, meaning that child is successful academically, behaviorally, social-emotionally. The parents viewed this success as evidence of their child's needs being met. When the parents were certain their child's needs are being met, there was no reason for them not to trust the IEP process. If the child was not making progress, the first question the parent asked was whether or not the IEP was being followed. Consistent across interviews, when the child's needs were not met, it was evident to that parent that the IEP was not being followed. The child's needs not

being met was cause for concern for the parent and a deterrent to their trust in the IEP process.

Other factors that were considered when addressing the child's needs were whether the school environment supported the child's needs and if the teacher was a good fit for the child. An overstimulating environment hindered a child's ability to learn and therefore, made it difficult, if not impossible, for the child's needs to be met. Likewise, a teacher who was not a good fit for the child, someone who was not able and or willing to meet the needs of the child was cause for concern for the parent. When the school environment or teacher inhibited the child's ability to learn it negatively impacted the parent's ability trust in the system's ability to meet their child's needs.

Parents were likely to seek outside resources when their child's needs were not met within the four walls of the school. Seeking outside resources was one way that parents advocated for their children. The analysis revealed that parents expected to advocate for their child. But most of the parents felt that they had to fight in order for their child's needs to be met. Fighting meant that the school did not listen or respond when the parent communicated the child's needs - and this was a cause for contention and a barrier to trust.

This study also revealed when education professionals are unable to meet the needs of the child, it can cause a great deal of stress for the child and the parent. The stress that four of the children in this study experienced impacted them so severely that they no longer wanted to go to school. For one parent, homeschooling her son was the result of this stress. One parent explained how painful it was to watch her son give up on himself. She said he stopped believing in himself. Throughout the analysis it is clear that

the number one reason parents did not trust the IEP process was due to their child's needs not being met. The intent of the IEP process is to help the child access the general education curriculum through an individualized education program that is tailored to the child's needs. The needs of the child must be met in order for parents to experience trust within the IEP process.

Chapter 5

Introduction

Imagine that you are a parent walking hand-in-hand with your child through a doorway and there is a sign that reads "welcome to the IEP world, we are here to help." As you and your child walk through the doorway, an education professional hands you a pamphlet which explains your rights as a parent in the IEP process. Within this pamphlet it clearly states "as the parent, you are an equal partner in the IEP decision making process." The Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2004 states that parents are an equal partner in the IEP process and this makes sense to you because for you, you have known your child from birth. You know that education professionals only see a snapshot of your child. Their time with your child is temporary and typically short-lived. In most cases, the education professionals might only work with your child for one to three years. You have been with the child since birth and she will always be a part of your life. Although you may not be an expert in the area of education, you are an expert in the area of your child. This is why research repeatedly reminds educators that *parents know their child best*. You know just about everything there is to know about your child and you would do absolutely anything for her.

As you walk into the IEP world, you do not really have any questions about the IEP process, because it seems so complex and you don't even know what kind of questions to ask? You do however have a lot of questions for the education professionals (educators, service providers, administrators, paraprofessionals) who will be working with your daughter. The questions you really want to ask are: How do you plan to help my child? Can you help me understand the IEP process? How knowledgeable are you

when about my child's specific needs? Will you really be able to meet my child's needs? Will you listen to me if I have concerns about your child, or when I have ideas that could help her in school? Will you let me know right away if she is falling behind in school? Do you genuinely have her best interest at heart? Ultimately, can I trust you?

You and your child have now been a part of the IEP world for two years. Your daughter's teachers have been so wonderful. You have a positive working relationship with the teachers. The principal greets you and your child by name when she sees you and always has something positive to say about your daughter. In fact, the principal even asks you how things are going, and to let her know if there is anything that you need. The education professionals have treated you as an equal partner. The education professionals thank you for your participation and tell you that they value you. They really listened to your input and even implemented some of your ideas. When they do not implement your ideas, it is not that they were not open to them – they explained why another strategy will work better, and that if your daughter does not make the necessary progress they will revisit your idea.

Every week you receive an email from your daughter's teacher with updates about her progress. Whenever any of her teachers have concerns they contact you to set up a meeting so that you are fully informed. The education professionals rarely have any concerns about your daughter, which is great because you have not been able to leave work to meet with them. When there are concerns, the education professionals are able to accommodate your schedule by doing a video conference during your lunch hour. The education professionals follow the IEP with such integrity. They honor their word. Your experience has been positive, and you feel that you and your daughter are fully supported

by the education professionals. They genuinely have your best interest at heart. The relationships you and your daughter have with the education professionals ensure her needs are being met and allow you to trust the IEP process.

Discussion of the Study Results

Even though the IEP process mandates parent involvement in the IEP process, there remains overwhelming evidence the process continues to fail at establishing an equal and positive parent-teacher partnership (Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008; Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2008; Elbaum, et al., 2015; Hoppe, 2005; Latunde & Louque, 2012; Lo, 2012; 2008; Keen, 2007; Reiman, et al., 2010; Sheehey & Sheehey, 2007; Starr & Foy, 2012; Stoner, et al, 2006, White, 2014; Zirkel & Hetrick, 2017). Inequality in the parent-teacher partnership has had a negative impact on the parents' ability to trust the IEP process. Research has also provided many other reasons why parents do not trust the IEP process. A few of these reasons include communication, authentic caring, warmth and respect, follow through, shifting blame, competence of the professionals, lack of program options and problem-solving knowledge of the professionals (Adams, & Christensen, 2000; Angell, et al., 2009; Blue-Banning, et al., 2004; Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). The findings in the present study builds upon prior research, offering further understanding and consideration of the significance of parents' trust and the success of the IEP process. Being that parents have a wealth of knowledge about their child, it is pertinent that parents and teachers work together as partners in order to best meet the individual needs of the child with disabilities.

This study examined the experiences of parents in the IEP process, and more specifically, how parents experience trust. The three themes that emerged in the analysis

were communication, parent-teacher partnerships, and the education professional's ability to meet the needs of the child. These overarching, interwoven themes support that within the IEP process, trust is relational. Through their experience with IEP process, parents create relationships with the educational professionals which are based upon a common interest, the child. A large part of whether the parents in this study experienced trust within the IEP process was dependent on the way they experienced their relationships with the education professionals in relation to the services and supports received by the child. Trust is not necessarily something that parents in the IEP process show up with. In the IEP process, trust develops and is maintained through the relationships that are built between the parents and the education professionals (Rossetti, Story-Sauer, Bui, Ou, 2017). Positive parent-teacher partnerships are parallel to trust.

The results of the present study indicate that trust is not a single dynamic; it is a multidimensional experience situated within the IEP process. One of the more specific ways the parents experienced trust within the parent-teacher partnership was through the way they were supported by the education professionals within the IEP process. The IEP process is complex and overwhelming for many parents. It is quite common for parents to feel lost when trying to navigate this system. The complexity of this process also serves as a barrier that can keep parents from feeling they truly are an equal partner in the IEP process and marginalizes parents. Education professionals have the upper-hand because they are the experts, which may leave parents feeling like an outsider in the IEP process. The complexities and anxieties parents experience during this process may cause them to question whether or not the IEP process can actually help their child (Fish, 2008; Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008; Lo, 2012). Often times parents are perplexed by all of the

educational terminology used in the IEP process that they do not know what questions to ask.

Part of the complexity of the IEP process is that it is ever changing. The IEP is based upon the child's needs in order to access the general education curriculum. As the curriculum changes, the IEP also changes in order to meet the child's needs. Within the IEP process there are different types of IEP meetings depending on the what about the child's needs are being discussed. For example, every year the parent can count on their child's annual IEP meeting to discuss the child's present level of performance, strengths, needs and services. In addition to this meeting, a parent is able to call a Review/Revise meeting at any time to review or revise the IEP. One parent in this study who had over 10 years of experience in the IEP process was unaware of the Review/Revise meeting. Although she was offered the Procedural Safeguards each year at the annual IEP meeting she was unaware of her right to call a Review/Revise meeting at any time. Education professionals cannot assume that just because a parent has been a part of the IEP process for several years that they know and understand their rights in the IEP process. When parents understand the IEP process, their role, and their rights then they are able to participate as an equal partner and trust the IEP process (Fish, 2008; Gershwin-Mueller, et al, 2008; Lo, 2012). In addition, for parents to be fully enfranchised as partners, education professionals need to provide ongoing support and guidance in the IEP process.

Communicating information to the parent is one way for education professionals to provide support and guidance to help them understand the IEP process. The parents need the education professionals to communicate, but in order to be an equal partner in the IEP process, parents also need to be heard. The IEP is intended to be a place for

parents and education professionals work together in a collaborative partnership through dialogue, to create an individualized education plan for the child. Through the process of collaboration, parents and education professionals are able to exchange information with one another in order to better understand the child's needs. For parents the in this study, the interactions which took place in the parent-teacher partnerships also provided a communication system in which the parent was able to see whether or not their child's needs were being met. Parents emphasized importance of communication in relation to their ability to trust the IEP process.

Another significant way parents experience trust in the IEP process was dependent upon the interactions that they had with the professionals. Parents are not typically with the child during the school day so they rely on the communication they receive through the parent-teacher partnership in order to stay informed on their child's progress. Through communication, the parent can see whether the child is making adequate gains in school or whether their needs are being met. Parents wanted to be informed about their child's needs as well as the progress their child made. When decisions needed to made regarding the child's educational placement, parents wanted to be acknowledged as equal partners in the decision-making process (Cavendish & Conner, 2018).

When the collaboration is lacking, parents are not as likely to be informed on whether their child's needs are being met. Parents are less likely to trust the partnership and in turn the IEP process when the communication or collaboration is lacking (Rossetti, et al., 2017). Trust is a key element to ensuring positive parent involvement. Hence, it is central to the development and implementation of the IEP that will appropriately address

the child's learning needs. For the parent, understanding the IEP, being treated as an

equal partner in the IEP process, and having a collaborative partnership with the

education professionals are all factors that determine whether they will experience trust

within the IEP process. However, in the end what truly matters is that their child's needs

are being met.

Considerations for Practice

As stated in the discussion, the IEP is a complex process. In order for parents to

understand the IEP process, they need ongoing guidance and support. Although parents

receive the Procedural Safeguards every year explaining their rights, many parents still

are unsure of what their rights are. A parent can read through their rights, but not

understand what they mean. For each parent, the IEP process is constantly changing and

evolving in accordance with their child's needs. The research says when parents

understand the IEP process, they are more likely to trust the process (Fish, 2008;

Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008; Lo, 2012).

When parents understand their role, they are enfranchised to participate as an

equal partner in the IEP process, alongside education professionals. One recommendation

to the field of special education is to provide ongoing support and guidance for parents as

they go through the IEP process. There is a missing link in the IEP process, meaning that

there is not someone who is poised to present the parent with the necessary information

to understand the ongoing changes in their child's IEP. Education professionals are not

necessarily the best person to provide this support to parents. First of all, education

professionals often do not have the time to provide the support and guidance that parents

need through the IEP process. Building a trusting relationship takes time and care. Some

school districts offer a parent liaison, or a parent advocate to help parents navigate the IEP process. The parent advocate is specifically designated to work collaboratively with parents throughout the IEP process, listening to the parents, answering their questions and helping them address their concerns. Offering a parent advocate to sit beside the parent and help the parent through the process, helps to enfranchise the parent as an equal team member in the IEP process (Edwards & DaFonte, 2012). Parents who understand the IEP process feel more confident in their ability to advocate for their child, and more likely to trust the IEP process (Fish, 2008; Gershwin-Mueller, et al., 2008; Lo, 2012).

Another consideration for practice is for education professionals to reflect on their current strategies for building collaborative parent-teacher partnerships. If schools are in the habit of talking at the parents, rather than having dialogue, they might consider a more collaborative approach. Parents do want information, but sometimes the information can be overwhelming. Education professionals can help minimize confusion or miscommunication by checking in with the parent to ensure understanding. As previously stated, a dialogue provides an opportunity for each person in the conversation to have an opportunity to speak and be heard. When education professionals use a collaborative approach, parents are more likely to trust the IEP process.

To create a positive parent-teacher partnership, education professionals might also consider reflecting upon the way they are perceived by parents. Asking questions such as do the parents I work with feel confident that I have the ability to meet their child's needs? And how do I present myself in such a way to parents that they feel that I have their child's best interest at heart, in addition do I do what I say I am going to do – do I act with integrity? Although an education professional may have the ability to meet the

child's needs, benevolence toward the child, and act with integrity – it is possible that the education professional behaves in a contradicting demeanor. For example, if the education professional does not follow through with what they say they are going to do; following the IEP, returning a phone call or email to the parent, or communicates that they have the ability to meet the child's needs but their affect or tone of voice communicates uncertainty – the parent may question whether or not they can trust the education professional. In addition, if the education professional does not behave in a way that is caring or supportive toward the parent or child, the parent may determine that the education professional does not have their child's best interest at heart. In order for the parent to experience trust within the IEP process, the education professionals' demeanor and affect matter when building a positive parent-teacher partnership.

Considerations for Future Research

Due to the convenience sampling, the homogeneity of the participants was a limitation of this study. A recommendation for future research would be to conduct similar studies in the K-12 setting and include variety of participants from other diverse backgrounds. Increasing the diversity of the participant pool will provide a better representation of the population of parents served in the IEP process and how they experience trust.

Another recommendation for research would include interviewing education professionals in order to better understand their experiences with parents in the IEP process. The results from this study could be used to help better inform field about the relationships created between parents and education professionals in the IEP process, and what supports are needed to create and sustain positive parent-teacher partnerships.

Expanding on the demographics and drawing upon education the experiences education professionals have with parents in the IEP process would provide the necessary information to create a curriculum for teacher prep and teacher development providing support for educators. The goal being that the curriculum might help educators understand how they show up in the relationship with parents in the IEP process, and in addition provide support and information for educators so that they can build more positive parent-teacher partnerships.

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Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

Name_____

Please provide a way for me, the researcher to contact you to set up the interview (a phone number or email address):

Phone number:_____ **OR**
email:_____

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study of parent's experiences of trust in the Individualized Education Plan process. The purpose of the questionnaire is for me, the researcher, to learn some basic information about you and your child in preparation for the interview. There are 15 items, each with a set of responses. Please choose the response that most represents you and your child. Once you have completed the questionnaire, please return it to me, the researcher, via the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope.

1. With which gender to you identify?

- Male

- Female

- Both

- Neither

- I do not wish to answer this question

2. With which gender does your child identify?

- Male

- Female

- Both

- Neither

• I do not wish to answer this question

3. How old are you?

• 18-25

• 25-29

• 30-34

• 35-39

• 40-44

• 45-49

• 50-55

• 56-60

• 61-65

• 66-75

4. How old is your child? _____

5. Which grade level is your child currently in? _____

6. With which race/ethnicity do you identify?

• American Indian or Alaskan Native

• Asian/Pacific Islander

• Black or African American

• Latino or Latino American

• White/Caucasian

• Multiple ethnicity/Other. If other, please briefly describe in the space
    below.

7. With which race/ethnicity does your child identify?

- American Indian or Alaskan Native

- Asian/Pacific Islander

- Black or African American

- Latino or Latino American

- White/Caucasian

- Multiple ethnicity/Other. If other, please briefly describe in the space
  below.

**9. What is your child's diagnosis or area of disability eligibility listed on the IEP?
(Please select all that are appropriate)**

- Learning Disability

- Developmental Cognitive Disability

- Emotional Behavioral Disability

- Other Health Disability

- Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Other, if other please list the diagnosis or area of disability eligibility in
  the space below.

**10. Please describe one significant impact of your child's disability on your
family and or your child's education.**

11. What is your relationship to your child?

- Mother

- Father

- Step-mother

- Step-father

- Grandmother

- Grandfather

- Aunt

- Uncle

- Guardian

- Foster parent

- Other, if other please briefly describe.

12. What was the primary language spoken in your childhood home?

- Chinese

- English

- French

- German

- Italian

- Korean

- Russian

- Spanish

- Tagalog

- Vietnamese

- Other/Multiple languages

13. What is the primary language you speak with your child currently?

- Chinese

- English

- French

• German

• Italian

• Korean

• Russian

• Spanish

• Tagalog

• Vietnamese

• Other/Multiple languages

14. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

• High School

• Some College

• Trade School/Certification

• Associate Degree

• Bachelor's Degree

• Master's Degree

• Doctorate

15. Please list the persons living in your household, and provide the age for each child.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

(P) = Probing question

1. How old is your child?

2. In which grade is your child?

3. How many years has your child been attending his or her current school?

4. How would you describe your experiences as a child in the school system? (positive or negative)

5. How well do you like the school that your child attends?

>   (P) Have you ever considered any other schools other than the school your child attends?

6. In what ways does your child's school encourage parent participation?
   (P) Are you able to participate as a parent in the school?

7. How did you first learn that your child had a disability?

>   Can you describe what that experience was like for you?

8. Once you learned your child had a disability, how did you know what to do next?
   (P) When you first got involved with the IEP process, how did you approach it? For instance, did you trust in the process and the people right away or did you have some hesitance or reservations?

>   Do you trust the process, why or why not?

9. For a lot of people the center of the IEP process is the IEP meeting. Describe your experience with your first IEP meeting like?

(P) How did that influence your relationships with the teachers and school professionals involved?

10. What experiences have you had with teachers and other school professionals that have influenced your beliefs and attitudes about the IEP process?

10.1 What do you expect or need from the teachers and the professionals that you are engaged with in the IEP process?

10.2 When you think about your relationship with the teachers and specialists that work with you in the IEP process, what aspects are most important to you? (Benevolence, integrity, communication, respect, etc. – fill in more)

(P) How does that help you build trust?

10.3 Is there a person that you feel that you have a stronger or closer relationship with, and what is it about that relationship that makes you feel that way?

(P) What kind of things build these relationships for you?

11. Aside from the people and the professionals that you are involved with in the IEP process, how do you feel about the way the education system or the school system responds to children with disabilities?

(P) What experiences have really shaped your attitude or your feelings about the system? (i.e. benevolence, integrity, competence, high level of trust)

(P) Do you believe that the school system has the ability to meet your child's needs? Thinking about the school system what ways does it and in what ways does it not responds to your child's needs.

12. When it comes to working with parents, what advice would you have for educators involved in the IEP process?

13. How would you describe your current experiences with your child and the school system?

14. Are other members of your family involved in the IEP process and what have their experiences been with the IEP?
    (P) Are all family members supportive of the IEP process?

15. Given your experience, what advice would you give other parents about the IEP process?

Wrap-Up

16. Is there something that I did not ask about that you think I should know in terms of how parents experience the IEP process?

    (P) I am really interested in the topic of trust in the IEP process, would you like to tell me more about that?

Appendix C

Consent Form

What Does Trust Have to Do with It? The Lived Experiences of Parents and The IEP Process: A Phenomenological Study

You are invited to be in a research study of parent experiences with and views of the IEP process. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a parent (have legal custody of a child) who is currently enrolled in school between grades second and twelfth, and on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), or has been on an IEP in the past 12 months. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by:

Adrea Grocke

Teaching and Learning Doctoral Student

Department of Education

University of Minnesota, Duluth

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to learn about and understand the experiences of parents involved in the IEP process. The study will explore how parents in the IEP process experience trust in their relationship with educational professionals. Listening to the stories of parents, learning about their perspective and their experiences will inform ways that parent involvement can be improved with the outcomes of the IEP process.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

To participate in at-least one interview with the possibility of a follow-up interview, lasting approximately 90 minutes in length. The interviews will be audio-recorded with permission. Prior to the interview you would complete a demographic survey. Once the interview has been transcribed you will be asked to verify the information in the interview transcription is an accurate portrayal of your responses. During this time if you feel uncomfortable about any of the information you will have provided, you will have the opportunity to eliminate or discard any information previously given.

Interview questions, and demographic survey have been attached to this document.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The study has several risks: First, the use of private information; Second, probing for personal or sensitive information in the demographic questionnaire and the interview(s).

While this study includes minimal risks, the researcher has considered that there are potential risks. There will be an invasion of privacy by responding to the demographic questionnaire and in the interview, (through the interview questions). Consent will be obtained from parents to complete the interview and the demographic questionnaire. Parents will be given the option to opt out of any questions in the interview or questionnaire that they feel are too personal or sensitive.

The benefits to participation are: There are no benefits other than that a parent may feel some appreciation to have the opportunity to have their opinions heard and share their experiences with a professional in the field. The study does have the potential to inform special educators, administrators and parents and others that are invested in the Individualized Education Process regarding the importance of building and maintaining relationships and trust. The study will potentially contribute to the literature in the field regarding the IEP process and the variable of trust.

Compensation:

There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of confidentiality. I will be the only one who will have access to the audio recordings. The interview transcripts, recordings and any other data will be stored in a password protected encrypted file on the researcher's password protected computer. Any hard copy data obtained such as field notes during interviews will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's campus office, which will also be locked. All data will be destroyed by the researcher five years after completion of the study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is: Adrea Grocke. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, 218-393-9726, agrocke@d.umn.edu. Or you may contact her advisor, Lynn Brice, Ph.D., at 218-726-6815, lbrice@d.umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature:_____ Date: _____

Signature of parent or guardian:_____ Date: _____

(If minors are involved)

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____