CREATING AND MAINTAINING COLLABORATIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS: UNDERSTANDING PARENT PERSPECTIVES OF COLLABORATION DURING INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP) MEETINGS

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SIGNATURE PAGE

DISSERTATION: CREATING AND MAINTAINING COLLABORATIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS: UNDERSTANDING PARENT PERSPECTIVES OF COLLABORATION DURING INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP) MEETINGS

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DEDICATION

My educational journey has been long and at times turbulent; however, I have had the best travel companions with me who helped me arrive at this wonderful destination.

To my husband, Todd, your unwavering support and sacrifice was selfless and inspiring. Thank you for your love and being the best father for our son.

To my son, Matthew, who without you, I would not know the meaning of unconditional love, patience, and advocacy. I will make it my life’s work to help create a world that accepts and embraces your beauty.

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ABSTRACT

The rights of students with disabilities and their parents have evolved over the past 40 years. Students with disabilities have gained equal access to the educational opportunities of their general education classmates. With the evolution of the laws, the formation of a relationship between parents and school districts was formed and together the Individualized Education Program (IEP) was developed and the need for collaboration. The purpose of this sequential mixed-method study was to identify strategies that parents of students with disabilities feel contribute to a collaborative IEP team relationship, even in times of disagreements or conflict. Utilizing Feinberg, Beyer, and Moses’ continuum of conflict, this study focused on preventative strategies, including: collaboration, communication, trust, respect, and equity. The study was conducted in a single district Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) in southern California. In phase one, 578 questionnaires were sent to parents of students with disabilities in grades preschool through third grade, and 75 (13%) completed the survey. In phase two, six mothers completed follow-up interviews. Results indicated the majority of parents agreed preventative strategies were important to collaborative relationships between parents and school districts. Four themes emerged: (a) the need for a better baseline understanding of special education and the IEP process, (b) access to support for parents, (c) being heard and the importance of the parent voice, (d) problem-solving supports when in disagreement, and (e) trust is earned. Conclusions, implications and recommendations for further research were discussed.
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Chapter 1: Overview

With the evolution of P.L. 94-142, federal laws regarding educating students with disabilities increased the importance of parental participation, parental rights, and procedural safeguards (Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, [EAHCA], 1975; Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, [IDEA], 1997; IDEA, 2004). Parents, in collaboration with educational professionals, can bring together a variety of background knowledge and experiences to develop a powerful Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a student with a disability. The IEP team is charged with making decisions on behalf of the student with disabilities and in turn can have “lifelong consequences for the children and their families” (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011 p. 11). This collaboration between parents and educational professionals is dynamic and requires hard work to ensure the relationship has communication, trust, respect, and equity. Many factors can drive the decision-making process and influence how decisions are made during the IEP meeting (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011).

In any relationship, disagreements and conflict occur; the relationship between parents and educational professionals is no exception. School districts and/or parents have the right to file for due process, which is a way set forward by the government to settle conflict through an appointed mediator and/or judge. Due process is a way to ensure the rights of students’ Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) are not violated. Disagreements and conflict are inevitable in all relationships, yet ways to work through them during the IEP process are not addressed in the law. The lack of strategies can damage relationships between school districts and families and result in costly legal fees for both parties. Research by Mueller, Singer, and Draper (2008) indicated that the due
process mechanisms, set forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004), have resulted in hindering relations between families and school. School districts lack collaborative strategies to promote equitable involvement of parents during the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process beyond the minimal required by law. This can lead to a breakdown in the collaborative relationship and prevent resolution of disagreements as they occur.

**Background of the Problem**

Advocacy for the rights of students with disabilities has evolved over the past 40 years. Federal and state educational mandates to support the education of students with disabilities arose as a result of advocacy. It is important to understand the history of how students with disabilities transitioned from isolation and hospitalization to education alongside their nondisabled peers. It is essential to understand the legal parameters that govern the relationship between students with disabilities, parents of students with disabilities, and educational professionals. The following review of federal, state, and case law highlights the importance of these relationships and demonstrates where collaboration can “break down” resulting in disagreement and conflict among parties.

**Federal Law**

Public Law 94-142, the EAHCA of 1975, established the requirement that students with disabilities have protection under the law. Prior to 1975, the rights of students with disabilities varied, as did their educational opportunities.

Before the date of enactment of the EAHCA of 1975 (Public Law 94-142), the educational needs of millions of children with disabilities were not being fully met because:
(A) the children did not receive appropriate educational services;
(B) the children were excluded entirely from the public school system and from being educated with their peers;
(C) undiagnosed disabilities prevented the children from having a successful educational experience; and/or
(D) a lack of adequate resources within the public school system forced families to find services outside the public school system. (IDEA 20 U.S.C. 1401 (2)

(A-D)

Since the passage of this landmark law, educational access for students with disabilities has become a requirement.

When P.L. 94-142 was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, educational access was defined as a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for all students ages three through 22 years (IDEA, 1997). The federal government defined “free appropriate public education” as special education and related services that:

(A) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge;
(B) meet the standards of the State educational agency;
(C) include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the State involved; and
(D) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required under section 614(d). (IDEA, 20 U.S.C.§ 1401(a)(18))

In order for each state to receive federal funding, states must align their laws with federal education code requirements. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) must be
written to meet the unique needs of each individual student with a disability in the least restrictive environment (LRE), and the plan must include:

(I) a statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance;

(II) a statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals;

(III) a description of the child's progress toward meeting the annual goals;

(IV) a statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services;

(V) an explanation of the extent, if any, to which the child will not participate with nondisabled children;

(VI) a statement of any individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the child on State and districtwide assessments consistent with section 612(a)(16)(A);

(VII) the projected date for the beginning of the services and modifications described in subclause (IV), and the anticipated frequency, location, and duration of those services and modifications; and

(VIII) beginning not later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child is 16, and updated annually thereafter--

(aa) appropriate measurable postsecondary goals

(bb) the transition services

(cc) a statement that the child has been informed of the child's rights
P.L. 94-142 includes procedural safeguards to ensure the above requirements are being met. 20 USC1415 section 615 (b) (1) calls for parents or guardian to (A) have the opportunity to examine relevant records of the child; (B) receive prior written notice if a change of placement is recommended or denied by the district; (C) receive notification in the parents’ native language; and (D) have the opportunity to file a complaint with any matter related to FAPE. P.L. 94-142 also brought forward the mandate of inclusion: inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities and the voice of their parents. Overall, inclusion of students with disabilities meant that, unlike in the past, these students would not be segregated but rather placed in the least restrictive environment.

The 1975 P.L. 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1987. The act has been amended multiple times during the past 40 years to meet federal goals and program requirements. For example, an amendment in 1987 extended the call for services for students three years through 21 years to include children birth through three years of age (IDEA, 1987). In 1997, the reauthorization of IDEA established the essential members of an “individualized education program (IEP) team” as:

(i) the parents of a child with a disability;

(ii) not less than one regular education teacher of such child (if the child is, or may be, participating in the regular education environment);

(iii) not less than one special education teacher, or where appropriate, not less than one special education provider of such child;

(iv) a representative of the local educational agency who--
(I) is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities;

(II) is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum; and

(III) is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the local educational agency;

(v) an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results, who may be a member of the team described in clauses (ii) through (vi);

(vi) at the discretion of the parent or the agency, other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child, including related services personnel as appropriate; and

(vii) whenever appropriate, the child with a disability (IDEA, 1997).

Parents and guardians must:

(a) be included in the scheduling of the IEP meeting at an agreeable meeting time and place;

(b) receive prior notification of the meeting to ensure enough time for the parent to participate;

(c) receive a meeting notice that includes meeting information such as time and place;

(d) be provided the opportunity for other forms of communication to ensure IEP participation, such as teleconferencing; and

(e) be provided an interpreter, if requested. (IDEA 34 C.F.R. 300.321, 300.322)
These provisions established both school district personnel and parents as equal members of the IEP team while the student remains eligible as a student with a disability.

Collectively, the overall goal of the IEP team is to come to an agreement on the FAPE that will meet the unique needs of the student with a disability in the least restrictive environment, including in times of disagreements or conflict. Over the years, IDEA has redefined ways that school districts and parents can resolve conflicts if they should arise as a result of trying to develop and implement an IEP. IDEA currently offers four avenues for dispute resolutions for families of students with disabilities. A family can file a state complaint (IDEA 34 C.F.R 300, 151-153), participate in the resolution process (IDEA 34 C.F.R 300510), participate in mediation (IDEA 34 C.F.R. 300.506), or file for due process (IDEA 34 C.F.R. 300.511). Although these avenues provide an opportunity of resolution of the dispute, they do not allow for the team to collaborate on a resolution at the local level.

Over the years, there has been a rise in the number of requests for formal dispute resolution or due process hearings; however, there is a discrepancy between the number of due process filings and those that actually go to hearing (GAO-03-897, A Report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, U.S. Senate, 2003). Congress determined, “Parents and schools should be given expanded opportunities to resolve their disagreements in positive and constructive ways” (IDEA 20 U.S.C. 1400 (8). Despite Congress’ determination to provide schools and parents with opportunities to resolve disputes in positive and constructive ways, current research indicates a need to develop resolution practices that foster home-school partnerships
(Mueller et al., 2008). This is especially important since students with disabilities and their parents can be partnered with school districts for up to 22 years.

State Law

Each state is responsible for aligning their education code with federal mandates. In the state of California, the Department of General Services Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) is the state agency that provides resolution services for individuals and government agencies (Office of Administrative Hearings, 2016). The mission of OAH is to provide a neutral forum to resolve matters between parents and school districts. OAH processes mediation and due process hearings requests for both parents and school districts by providing mediators and judges that help to resolve the conflict while following both state and federal law.

Parents’ and Educational Professionals’ Relationships

The legitimization of parents or guardians as equal members of the IEP team requires school districts to provide opportunities for shared knowledge and decision making regarding the student. Creating a partnership involves knowing and understanding the whole child (Epstein, 2011). According to Epstein (2011), these partnerships are important so that educators do not segment students into the school child and the home child, ignoring the whole child.

Collaboration and conflict are a part of any relationship. Collaborative relationships between parents and educational professionals have many benefits. Soodak and Erwin (2000) explained, “Educators must be receptive to what parents as interested and informed consumers have to say about the education of their children if they are to
achieve effective collaboration” (p. 260). Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, and Soodak (2006) identified four benefits of collaboration:

1. a mutual commitment to the student as they have already agreed that the child would benefit from an IEP/IFSP,
2. effective partnerships encourage families to contribute to their child’s learning,
3. partnerships respect families’ preferences for participation in their child’s education, and
4. children perform better and achieve more when parents engage in their child’s learning.

Relationships between parents and school districts are dynamic and ongoing, so it is in the best interest of the student that both parties have strategies to resolve disagreements should they arise so they can maintain collaborative relationships. Deutsch (1993a) explained that conflict is evitable in all types of relationships. “In the process of designing and implementing an appropriate program for a student with a disability, differences of opinion inevitably arise between parents, school officials, and other professionals involved with the student” (Lake & Billingsley, 2000, p. 240).

Learning and implementing collaborative techniques keeps the decision-making power within the IEP team and not relying on an outside person(s), such as a mediator or judge, to make decisions on their behalf.

This study explored the experiences of parents of students in preschool through third grade with disabilities during the IEP process in a single district Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) in southern California. The researcher chose preschool-through third-grade parents based on the data retrieved from the Office of Administrative
Hearings (OAH) indicating in 2014-2015 students’ ages 5 years to 12 years represented 1,989 of the due process filings equaling 51% of the total filings for that year.

At the time of the study, the SELPA did not have a formal training process about collaborative techniques for its staff or a system of alternative dispute resolution should a disagreement or conflict arise within the IEP team. The SELPA does, however, train its staff on legal compliance for the IEP. For example, annually the SELPA offers Administrative Designee training, which is a one-day training that essentially teaches administrators (or their designees) how to chair IEP meetings. The focus of this training is on procedural requirements of the IEP. The same is true for past training for newly hired teaching staff. Although longer (two days), the focus of the former training was on compliance of the IEP forms and legal mandated timelines.

As in most districts, each student identified as a student with a disability is assigned a case manager. Typically, the case manager is the special education teacher. The case manager is responsible for ensuring the student has an IEP at least once each year and a triennial review at least every three years. Also, the case manager is to report on progress of goals and benchmarks at least every time a general education student receives a report of progress. IEPs are scheduled after consulting the calendars of all required team members (i.e. site administrators, service providers, general education teacher, and parent or guardian). This can be a difficult task since many service providers service more than one school site and can have up to 55 students on their caseloads. IEP meetings are typically held after the school day. The amount of time designated for an IEP meeting varies greatly, based on the items to be reviewed during the meeting. SELPA-made agendas are handed out at each IEP to keep the team on track.
so they meet all compliance requirements of the IEP. Triennial IEPs can last longer as they have assessments to review. In Urban SELPA, contract language stipulates teachers must be released from meetings 45 minutes after their school day. In the event an IEP meeting is unable to finish, it is expected the team reconvene to complete the meeting. Once IEPs are completed, case managers are required to affirm and attest their IEP, which is a process that ensures all of the required state compliance data are entered.

IEP teams can collaborate around their data prior to the IEP meeting. It is important that all members of the team remember that only the IEP team as a whole can finalize the required components of the IEP. This prevents school district from unilaterally making decisions on behalf of the child without the input of the parent.

The school district in this study did not employ techniques to ensure collaborative practices were embedded during the IEP process. The lack of collaborative practices has resulted in unresolved disagreements between parents and the school district. At times, parents sought legal counsel to lobby on their behalf during times of disagreements. In turn, the school district was left with remediating outside of the context of the IEP meeting, which takes away the power of the IEP team and can result in the district having to pay a monetary price for legal counsel. Legal fees for the district have increased. The parent perspectives have helped to identify areas of strength and weakness in the IEP development process, in an attempt to strengthen parent-district relationships and guide future practices.

The study aimed to understand systems to ensure parental involvement and conflict resolution strategies to avoid parents seeking state intervention. With this in
mind, we need to questionnaire parents’ experiences to expose what factors they believe promote collaborative relationships within the context of the IEP.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to identify strategies that parents of children with identified disabilities feel contribute to a collaborative IEP team relationship. This study focused on parents in a single school district with a preschool-through third-grade child with an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

**Research Questions**

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What preventative strategies do parents report as being part of the IEP process?
2. What factors do parents identify as promoting working collaborative relationships during the IEP process and during points of disagreement, if applicable?

**Significance of the Study**

This study can assist school districts with developing a system of support to improve collaborative relationships between parents of students with disabilities and school district professionals during IEP meetings. Parental perspectives on collaboration, disagreements, and conflict can provide school districts with invaluable input to create systems that improve collaboration and, in turn, provide better educational programming for students with disabilities. The results of the study can also help policy makers promote collaboration between parents and school districts to help prevent parents from seeking support from outside sources to mediate their disagreements.
Definition of Terms

In order to facilitate a greater understanding of the terms within the study, the following definitions have been provided.

- **Alternative Dispute Resolution** – those processes used to resolve conflict not specifically required under IDEA.

- **Collaboration** – Working together in a supportive relationship.

- **Conflict** – A social interaction between two parties who have mutually exclusive or incompatible values (Putnam & Jones, 1982).


- **Dispute Resolution** – A term used by in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Parts B and C that includes State Complaints, Due Process, Mediation, and Resolution.

- **Due Process Hearing** – The term is identified as an actual court hearing whereby the district and the child’s family present information to an impartial due process hearing officer acting like a judge (Mueller, 2009).

- **Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)** – The term FAPE means special education and related services that are provided at public expense, meet state standards, including appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary education, and conform to the IEP (Conroy, Yell, Katsiyannis, & Collins 2010; IDEA 20 U.S.C. 1400).

- **Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team** – A group of people as defined by IDEA who have a shared responsibility to make decisions regarding the
development of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for a student with a disability.

- *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* – IDEA is defined as a federal law that mandates FAPE, ensures rights of children with disabilities, and assists states in providing appropriate services (LaMorte, 2002).

- *Mediation* – A dispute resolution process and viewed as a potential alternate to due process procedures (Mueller, 2009).

- *Partnerships* – Partnerships are the collective efforts of a team such as educators, families, and community members, with the intent of supporting the child’s learning and development (Epstein, 2011).

- *Trust* – “An expectancy held by an individual or a group that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon” (Rotter, 1967, p. 651).

**Assumptions**

This study was conducted within an urban single district Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) in Southern California between May 1, 2016 and June 15, 2016. The following assumptions were made:

- All responses provided by parents were honest and candid.

- Participants had all experienced a similar phenomenon (an IEP meeting) in the study.

**Limitations**

The research conducted was meant to better understand the dynamics of collaboration during the IEP process by interviewing parents of students with disabilities.
who had participated in an IEP meeting. The following factors may have influenced the results of this study:

- The researcher was the special education director of the district.
- Not all IEP teams that parents referenced had the same team members.
- Parents may have had difficulty recalling events or situations due to time lapse since their last IEP meeting.
- Only cases that did not move forward to due process were included in the study.
- The number of IEPs parents attended varied since students’ grades levels varied from preschool to third grade.

**Summary and Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. Chapter 1 provided background information regarding the evolution of legal mandates for students with disabilities during the past 40 years. During these years, a relationship was mandated between parents and school districts that required shared decision-making to develop and implement an appropriate IEP for students with disabilities. Chapter 1 concluded with a statement of the problem and proposed research. Chapter 2 includes a review of relevant literature related to the topic area. The methodology used to conduct the phenomenological study is presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 contains the results of the study for each of the research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 includes conclusions and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The educational benefits of strong home school connections have been well documented. The U.S. Department of Education’s *Strong Families, Strong Schools* report (1994) explained, “Thirty years of research shows that greater family involvement in children’s learning is a critical link to achieving high quality education and a safe disciplined learning environment for every student” (p. 1). Federal legislation, as outlined in IDEA (1997; 2004), emphasized the importance of parents as equal partners in the participation in the development of special education services for students with disabilities. In turn, parent participation has led to many positive outcomes for students with disabilities (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003).

The relationships between parents and school districts are dynamic and evolving. For success, relationships require both collaboration and trust. Trust is a critical factor in the building and maintenance of positive relationships between parents and educators (Angell, Stoner, & Sheldon, 2009; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Turnbull et al., 2006). These relationships can be hard and filled with conflict or supportive and rewarding (Stoner & Angell, 2006). Regardless, the relationships are necessary and interdependent and will continue in special education until the students either exit special education or reach the age of 22 years (Stoner & Angell, 2006). As equal members of the IEP team, parents are afforded equal protection to make decisions regarding services and placement on behalf of their student with disabilities (Wakelin, 2008). Thus, it is critical to understand the relationships between parents and educational professionals to better evaluate how school districts can create collaborative working relationships with parents of students with disabilities during the IEP, including working through conflict if and when it arises.
Theoretical Framework

In 1977, Urie Bronfenbrenner introduced the ecological system framework, which “describes the social and cultural aspects of the human environment” (Gauvain & Cole, 1997, p. 3). Bronfenbrenner (1977) explained, “The ecological environment is conceived topologically as a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next” (p. 514). His framework suggests there are systems that interact and influence one another to affect a child’s development. These ecological systems, displayed in Figure 1, include the following:

1. Microsystem – the relations between the developing person’s immediate setting containing that person (e.g., home, school, workplace).

2. Mesosystem – the interrelations among major settings containing the developing person at a particular point in his or her life. A system of microsystems.

3. Exosystem – an extension of the mesosystem embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings in which that person is found, and thereby influence, delimit, or even determine what goes on there.

4. Macrosystem – the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exo-systems are the concrete manifestations (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, pp. 514-515).
Figure 1. Conceptual framework of systems theory

The framework is predicated on an interactive relationship between several systems all centering around a phenomenon, which is the individual child. There is a critical need to understand and apply the knowledge of these relationships in order to maintain the needs of the child as the center of focus.

Parent-School District Relationships

Relationships are elements of experiences that one individual has with another (Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000). Relationships form for a variety of reasons and develop over time as a result of shared experiences. Relationships are typically strengthened as
individuals share experiences and gain knowledge about each other (Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000). If the opportunities to interact with one another are limited, so are the amount and kinds of knowledge we learn about each other. Conversely, if our experiences include extended time and multiple contexts, then there is an increased opportunity to learn more about the other person. The relationship between a parent of a child with a disability and school district personnel is one example. The relationship likely starts with limited knowledge, but this knowledge increases as more interactions take over time.

In order to provide effective early identification and intervention services and to strengthen educational opportunity for students with disabilities, family participation and collaboration are needed (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). Family participation can and should extend beyond the child’s parents to include key people who will help strengthen the child’s opportunities to obtain quality of life (Turnbull, Blue-Banning, Turbiville, & Park, 1999). Including other key people helps families prepare, not only for the immediate decision-making, but also to be “effective partners” as their child ages. It also helps families build their repertoire of resources (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Turnbull et al., 1999).

The partnership between parents and educators is a continuum of involvement, not just a singular event (Adment, 2008). Figure 2 describes this continuum of involvement as informing, involving, engaging, and leading. As the partnership moves from informing to engaging, so does parent and educator involvement and trust in the partnership (Adment, 2008).
According to the model, informing occurs when schools make decisions and inform parents, students, or the community. Eventually, schools move to involving parents, mostly to meet the needs of the school, but not for the sake of collaboration. As relationships are developed, schools move from involving parents to engaging parents through more shared decision making and actions with a higher degree of trust (Adment, 2008). Eventually, leading occurs when both parents and educators assume leadership roles by working together to achieve a shared vision. Understanding that collaboration between parents and educators is an evolving and not a singular event is important; it can begin at any age when a child is identified with a disability and last up to 22 years.

Disagreements may arise between school districts and parents for a variety of reasons. The IEP team has many decisions to make about the program and service planning for a student with a disability. It would not be uncommon for a disagreement or dispute to ensue regarding those decisions between the members of the IEP team. Collaborative teams can work through disagreements without moving into conflict, defined as incompatibilities within the team without the possibility of resolution in the current context.

There is a need to identify more proactive strategies to support the parent-school-district relationship and foster the home-school partnership beyond the original due
process mechanisms in IDEA (Mueller et al., 2008). As Feinberg et al., (2002) explained, “Several states and districts have developed early dispute resolution strategies that, along with due process hearings and mediation under IDEA, may be placed on a conflict management continuum” (p. 15). The Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) is a technical assistance center funded by the Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to serve as the National Center on Dispute Resolution in Special Education. CADRE (n.d.) “works to increase the nation’s capacity to effectively resolve special education disputes, reducing the use of expensive adversarial processes” (para. 1). CADRE has published many reports regarding successful Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) systems used in the United States and maintains a website and database in order to promote ADR and provide technical assistance to educators and families of students with disabilities.

Feinberg et al. (2002), published a briefing paper for CADRE that summarized the continuum of conflict resolution options beyond mediation. According to Feinberg, et al., “This continuum is a conceptual model that allows placement of the various strategies according to the state of development of the conflict at which they are implemented and the degree of intervention they require” (p. 15). The continuum is divided into five stages:

- **Stage 1: Prevention.** This stage attempts to minimize conflict by incorporating collaborative practices and problem solving.
- **Stage 2: Disagreement.** This stage is where conflict is emerging following a disagreement that occurs for a variety of reasons including eligibility, placement, and/or services.
• Stage 3: Conflict. This stage presents with an identified disagreement that is not able to be resolved without third party intervention.

• Stage 4 Procedural Safeguards. This stage requires third party intervention as identified by IDEA.

• Stage 5 Legal Review. This final stage is the most formal and based on legal precedence and law.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on current literature that further explain stages one through four. These stages can assist school districts in understanding how to effectively include parents of students with disabilities during the IEP process and employ collaborative strategies to work through disagreements when they occur.

**Stage 1: Prevention**

The goal of prevention is to minimize disagreements or conflict between parents and school districts. The current conflict resolution options under IDEA (state complaint, mediation, and due process) are only available once conflict has occurred. Collaboration, communication, trust, equity, and respect are important factors in minimizing or preventing conflict in education (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Each of these factors are explained in the next section.

**Collaboration.** According to Friend and Cook (2007), interpersonal collaboration is “a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work towards a common goal” (p. 6). Friend and Cook (2007) elaborated:

• Collaboration must be voluntary in that an individual or individuals cannot be forced to collaborate.
- Collaboration requires parity among participants. This would ensure that each individual has equal power in the decision making process.

- Collaboration is based on mutual goals. By agreeing to at least one goal on which to collaborate, this will then maintain the attention of the participants.

- Collaboration depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision making.

- Individuals who collaborate share their resources. Sharing of resources is important in that it can act as a key motivator for collaboration. Conversely, lack of sharing can cause people to withdrawal or hide their resources in order to stay in control, which is counterproductive to the purpose of collaboration.

- Individuals who collaborate share accountability for outcomes. Whether the outcome is positive or negative, there is a need for accountability. The accountability can be held to an individual or to the group as a whole with the intent that collectively they will work towards change. (p. 6)

Successful collaboration can lead to increased collaboration and increased positive beliefs and attitudes (Friend & Cook, 2007). Rewards of collaboration can include: input, perhaps in areas one is not an expert in, strengthening of relationships with the emergence of trust, and the development of a sense of community (Friend & Cook, 2007). Friend and Cook (2007) emphasized, “When collaborative efforts result in higher levels of trust and respect among colleagues, and working together results in more positive outcomes for both students and professionals, the risks taken seem small in comparison to the rewards” (p. 11). The opportunity for successful collaboration and the
rewards that arise from collaboration can incentivize participants to continue collaborating in the future.

Collaboration between parents and school districts is important for students with disabilities. Blue-Banning et al., (2004) interviewed 33 focus groups including parents with and without children with disabilities, service providers, and administrators to identify indicators of collaborative family professional partnerships. The study identified the following six themes essential to these partnerships: 1) communication, 2) commitment, 3) equality, 4) skills, 5) trust, and 6) respect and found the lack of a clear understanding of what a “collaborative relationship” is between parents and educators’ hindered consensus and accountability in collaboration. Having a clear understanding of specific behaviors that result in a positive collaborative relationship is important for professional educators as they work to develop and maintain these relationships with parents of students with disabilities. Similarly, Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, and Shogren (2014) found seven essential features of collaboration between parents and professional educators, including: 1) communication, 2) professional competence, 3) respect, 4) commitment, 5) equality, 6) advocacy, and 7) trust.

Parent participation in their child’s education benefits both the student and the district. Involving parents in the decision-making process is not only compliant in the eyes of the law, but aids parents in understanding their child’s disability and understanding their rights under IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

**Communication.** Lake and Billingsley (2000) conducted 44 phone interviews with parents of children with disabilities, school administrators, and mediators to identify factors that escalate and deescalate parent-school conflict. Interviewees conveyed that
lack of communication, infrequent communication, misunderstood communication, and lack of follow up are all factors that can escalate a conflict. Among the six themes that promote collaborative family professional partnerships noted in the same study (i.e., communication, commitment, equality, skills, trust, and respect) Blue-Banning et al. (2004) found communication was the most frequently mentioned. Study participants felt communication was essential to a positive partnership. The parents noted that communication between parents and educational professionals allows for a complete understanding of the student’s ongoing development and educational progress, which supports IEP team collaboration. At times, parents reported they felt educational professionals were withholding information or not sharing complete information, which they felt limited their access to information (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, p. 175). Similarly, as the number of participants in IEP meetings increased, parents felt more intimidated and less heard (Lake & Billingsley, 2000, p. 248). Intimidation prevented more in-depth discussions and inquiry by parents regarding their child’s needs and programming, and often prevented them from expressing their concerns and feelings (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Lake & Billingsley, 2000, p. 248).

Fisher, Ury, and Patton (2011) explained that as human beings we have difficulty communicating clearly due to our different perceptions and emotions. The authors reveal “three big problems in communication” as 1) lack of communication, 2) lack of truly hearing what the other person is saying, and 3) misunderstanding (Fisher et al., 2011, p. 35). One problem occurs when each side does not communicate with the other but rather tries “to impress third parties or their own constituency” (Fisher et al., 2011, p. 21). Secondly, people do not pay attention to what people are attempting to communicate and
forget to truly listen to what is being said. It is impossible to effectively communicate if active listening is not taking place. The third problem in communication is misunderstanding, when what is being said is not correctly interpreted. According to the authors, humans “have emotions, deeply held values, and different backgrounds and viewpoints; and they are unpredictable” (Fisher et al., p. 21) and not always communicated or correctly interpreted. People work through issues with effective communication skills; however, this can be difficult due to human emotions and experiences. Failure to share issues, listen closely to what is being communicated, and navigate through these human reactions can hinder collaborative relationships (Fisher et al., 2011; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak et al., 2014). Combined, these three communication problems prevent teams from collaborating and negotiating through conflict and can create separation between parties.

In a study that explored how communicating during an IEP meeting can influence the decisions that are made during the said meeting, Ruppar and Gaffney (2011) found three conversational junctures that affected decision-making during the meetings. First, communication that took place prior to the meeting or the lack of communication prior to the meeting affected the decisions being made during the IEP meeting. Second, there was a lack of expression by team members during the IEP meeting when their opinions differed from the decisions being made. Thirdly, the IEP document was used as a guide during the meeting. Although the document guided the team through the legal requirements of IEP paperwork, it constricted the conversation, it influenced the conversation’s beginning and ending times, and provided less opportunities for
discussion, as needed (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). As a result, the conversational junctures affected the decision-making process during the IEP meeting.

**Trust.** An essential component of a collaborative relationship is trust. Blue-Banning et al.’s (2004) study found parents defined trust in terms of reliability, safety, and discretion. Reliability was defined as dependability, safety corresponded to their need to know that their child would not be harmed physically or emotionally while with educational professionals, and discretion involved the confidence of the parents to trust that there would be confidentiality and discretion when it came to information about their child or IEP (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

Without trust, parents were less likely to accept the suggestions of educational professionals and did not value the need to work towards collaboration (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). According to Lake and Billingsley (2000), “The consequences of broken trust resulted in widening discrepant views between parents and schools, and resulted in an unwillingness to take the risks necessary to continue communicating about the needs of children” (p. 249). Lack of trust can lead “parents to request out-of-district placements, changes of schools, mediation, or due process hearings” (p. 248).

Stoner and Angell (2006) interviewed eight parents of students with autism spectrum disorder to identify the roles parents’ play in monitoring their child’s educational program. The researchers found “the degree of perceived parental trust in education professionals correlated with the degree of engagement by parents in the roles of negotiator, monitor, and supporter” (Stoner & Angell, 2006, p. 185). When parents had high levels of trust, their roles became more supportive to educational professionals. However, when there was low level of trust, their roles were spent negotiating and
monitoring. Trust levels compromised the level of involvement and the motives of parents. The following is summary of critical findings for each level of engagement in the study:

**Negotiator (low trust):**

1. All parents prepared for negotiation at IEP meetings.
2. All parents saw providing rationales for their requests as an effective negotiation strategy.
3. Parents’ use of consultants as negotiators achieved positive results.

**Monitor:**

1. All parent participants used informal monitoring.
2. Parents stressed the need for honest and balanced communication between the home and school.
3. Children’s behavior was one of the most reliable monitoring tools the parents used.
4. Mothers spent time in the schools to further monitor their children’s education.

**Supporter (high trust):**

1. All parent participants engaged in the supporter role by encouraging their children’s teachers.
2. Parents provided direct assistance, such as producing classroom material, purchasing items for the classroom, and reinforcing classroom intervention strategies in the home.

**Advocate:**
1. All of the mothers in the study participated in some form of supplemental advocacy.

2. The fathers were not as active, but they supported their wives’ efforts.

   As articulated by Simpson (2007), “It [trust] may be the single most important ingredient for the development and maintenance of happy, well-functioning relationships” (p. 264). Likewise, Turnbull et al. (2014) identified trust as the “connection to and holding together the other six principals,” which are communication, professional competence, respect, commitment, equality, and advocacy (p. 183). Without trust, there is no connective force or incentive to continue collaboration. Lake and Billingsley (2000) explained that both communication and trust are important and can, if correctly implemented, be considered a prevention strategy. Lake and Billingsley (2000) emphasized, “Frequency of communication, lack of communication, lack of follow-up, misunderstood communications, and time of clarifying attempts [are] factors that escalate conflicts between parents and schools” (p. 248).

**Equality.** Turnbull, et al. (2014) defined equality as a condition where both parents and educational professionals have equal influence or power in the development of the educational program. Power can be used to influence how decisions are made and how parents are included in the educational process. Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak et al. (2004) explained two ways that power can affect the family-professional relationship: 1) power-over, and 2) power-shared. In power-over relationships, typically the professionals “exert decision-making control over families” (p. 175). This inequity or hierarchical power can inhibit collaboration and ultimately lead to conflict. Conversely,
in power-shared relationships, “partnerships are horizontal, not vertical” and the power is more evenly distributed with the perception of collaboration (p. 175).

An imbalance of knowledge between school personnel and parents is often perceived as an imbalance of power. District personnel are specifically trained in special education laws, while parents are the most informed when it comes to their child. These dynamics create an imbalance of knowledge between parents and the district (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Most parents depend on the expertise of the staff in order to ensure a fair and equitable education for their child. Trussell, Hammond, and Ingalls (2008) explained that in order for parents to be “true equal” partners, “parents must be involved at each level of their child’s educational program” (p. 20). Parents perceive educators as having more information regarding children with disabilities, and at times, information about their own child, which can cause an imbalance of perceived power before the start of the IEP meeting (Trussell et al., 2008). This imbalance of power can be compounded when the school district provides parents with notice of their parental rights and procedural safeguards. Per California Department of Education guidelines, districts are mandated to provide a copy of parental rights and procedural safeguards to all parents of children with disabilities, from ages three through twenty-one, each year. Although distribution of this document is a legal requirement under IDEA, the complexity of the content and the terminology has made it increasingly difficult for parents to fully comprehend their rights and procedural safeguards.

A study by Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006) found that parental rights documents are currently written at a level above the reading ability of most parents. Yet, the recommended reading level for school documents, determined under the Clinton
administration, is the seventh to eighth grade level. Fitzgerald and Watkins’ (2006) study found that only 4% to 8% of the 49 state parental rights documents reviewed were at or below this recommended 7th to 8th grade reading level. Over the years, the amendments under IDEA have become more complex, and in turn, so has the required terminology and content.

**Respect.** In relationships, parties display their respect by the way they treat one another. Epstein (2011) explained that a “respectful professional will honor cultural diversity, affirm strengths, and treat students and families with dignity” (p. 168). Thus, educators are more likely to be perceived as respectful and as equal partners in collaboration if they becoming aware of, and honor the family’s cultural beliefs, strengths, and dignity.

Respect can manifest itself in many forms. After interviewing parents, Lake and Billingsley (2000) found of most importance to parents was both the valuing of the child as a person and not a disability and accepting a family for where they are, free of judgment on culture or lifestyle. Parental participation and advocacy on behalf of their children is often dependent on the family’s culture and English proficiency. For instance, Hughes, Valle-Riestra, and Arguelles (2008) questioned 16 Latino families regarding their views and experiences raising a child with a disability. A critical theme that emerged was the families wanted to communicate more with the school and staff regarding their student’s education; however, in many cases their limited English skills prevented them from access to this communication. Lack of communication can create barriers, including the parents not being heard by the IEP team.
In a similar study, Salas (2004) interviewed 10 Mexican-American women regarding their experiences during IEP meetings for their children. Because Spanish was the parents’ primary language, they felt it was a barrier and caused isolation and marginalization during the IEP process (Salas, 2004). Parents reported that educational professionals did not take time to clarify parents’ input by carefully listening to their input, and then rephrasing in English in order to avoid misunderstandings (Cho & Gannotti, 2005). The researchers indicated that understanding the needs and concerns of the Latino parent is critical for educators since the number of Latino students in the United States is rising (Hughes et al., 2008). These needs rise beyond that of a language to cultural understanding regarding etiquette and respect as well. Language barriers and cultural barriers are not limited to Latino parents; they include Chinese and Korean-American mothers (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008) and others. To prevent families from feeling outside of the IEP process, a better understanding of diverse cultures, adequate translation services, and valuing parent input are necessary.

Williams (2007) conducted a case study examining how four African-American parents perceived school efficacy in North Carolina. Participants felt that African-American students were being treated unfairly and qualified for special education classes due to their race, creating a disproportionate representation of African-American students in special education. Participants attributed this inequity to the district’s lack of understanding of the African-American culture, including a cultural disconnect in the practices of the school district. The group of parents asked the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights to examine the current practice for identifying children for special education services. Hughes et al, (2008) shared, “Given that the field of
special education has indicated that the home and school relationship is an essential one, educators need to become familiar with the different cultures they work with” (p. 243).

Learning about and understanding a student’s culture can bring an understanding to the classroom that can assist with teaching and learning. Many skills taught to students with disabilities in the school environment need to be practiced and reinforced in the home environment. Understanding a student’s family dynamics can help educators build strong relationships with their parent(s) that encompasses communication, trust, equality, and respect, and promote meaningful collaboration on the behalf of the student. Turnbull and Turnbull (1986) further explained the benefits of family-professional partnerships, stating:

When family and professionals respect, trust and communicate openly with one another, a partnership is formed. Both families and professionals have unique contributes to bring to a partnership. Such partnerships can be beneficial not only to the child, but for parents and professionals as well. (p. 116)

Stage 2: Disagreement

The IEP team works collaboratively to establish an educational program that benefits the student with disabilities. The educational program, according to Part B of IDEA, involves deciding educational needs of the student with a disability, eligibility, placement, goals and objectives, evaluation criteria, present levels of performance, and accommodations and modifications. Each of these decisions must be made by the IEP team, including the parent. According to Ridge (2012), “people disagree when they have different doxastic attitudes towards a proposition” (p. 187). Feinberg et al. (2002) characterized disagreement as the emergence of a conflict. Because there are many
decisions to be made during the IEP process and the requirement of collaboration, disagreement can occur for a variety of reasons, “a breakdown of trust and communication may or may not have occurred at this stage because the conflict is only emerging” (Feinberg et al., 2002, p. 24). Trust and communication could still be intact during this stage, so IEP teams may be able to resolve disagreements when they occur.

**Stage 3: Conflict**

Conflict is an inevitable feature of all social relations (Deutsch, 1993a; Landau, Landau, & Landau, 2001). Conflict and resolution of conflict have been highly studied in the area of social science. The term “conflict” is used to describe “a broad range of behaviors associated with disagreement, hostility, competition, controversy, and incompatibility” (Putnam & Jones, 1982, p. 262). After reviewing the literature on the topic, Putnam and Jones (1982) adopted the definition of conflict as a process in social interaction between two parties who have mutually exclusive or incompatible values. From early childhood through adulthood, there exists a continuum of stages concerning social cognition and emotional development. This development, or lack thereof, contributes to how an individual approaches conflict.

Morton Deutsch’s (1993b) Theory of Cooperation and Competition suggested that almost all conflict contains elements of both cooperation and competition. When goals operate in a cooperative context, both parties may have a common goal but are in conflict as to how to reach the goal. Competition implies an opposition or difference in the final goal between the parties, so in the end, one person’s goal will decrease while the other’s goal increases.
Many variables affect the course of conflict, which ultimately lead to the outcome(s) of such conflict. A conflict has positive or productive consequences if those involved are satisfied with the outcomes and feel they have gained as a result of the conflict. Conversely, a conflict has negative or destructive consequences if those involved are dissatisfied with the outcomes, and they perceive they have lost as a result of the conflict (Deutsch, 1993a).

Deutsch (1993a) explained, five factors contribute to the results of conflict:

1. Control over resources
2. Personal preference
3. Values
4. Beliefs about what is reality or what is not
5. The nature of the relationship between the parties.

As in any relationship, disagreements between parents and educational professionals can evolve into conflict (Nowell & Salem, 2007). Although there is a theoretical understanding that the members of the IEP team are to make joint decisions regarding the educational planning of the child, personal beliefs and prior experiences can influence team members’ understandings of what is best for the child (Mulick & Butter, 2002). Parents often dream of a life of normality for their child with disabilities and their plans for their child may not match their child’s development (Mulick & Butter, 2002). At the same time, educational professionals can have lower expectations for the achievement of students with disabilities, based on prior experiences and failed outcomes of interventions (Mulick & Butter, 2002). These drastically different expectations can lead to conflicting goals, even before the collaboration process begins.
Due to a lack of a national reporting system and variations in data collected across states, it is difficult to categorize and define the multitude of causes of special education disputes (Feinberg et al., 2002). Many studies have attempted to delineate the causes of conflict in special education to better understand the nature of the conflict; however, the bulk of the research has focused around due process hearings and the pros and cons of mediation. Simply reporting on the reasons why parents of students with disabilities file for due process or seek mediation, does not account for the multiple layers of circumstances that occur before the complaint.

Lake and Billingsley (2000) identified eight factors that can escalate and deescalate parent-school conflict from the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities, school administrators, and mediators in one of the few studies to have investigated this need. The eight factors they identified are: 1. discrepant views of a child or a child’s needs, 2. knowledge, 3. service delivery, 4. constraints, 5. valuation, 6. reciprocal power, 7. communication, and 8. trust. Figure 3 displays these eight factors and shows the fluid and dynamic nature of these categories. According to Lake and Billingsley (2000), “it is important to understand that the identified categories are not mutually exclusive; in any given conflict situation, many factors from various categories may operate simultaneously to escalate, deescalate, or contain conflict” (p. 243).
**Discrepant views of a child or a child’s needs.** The study revealed 90% of the participants interviewed identified discrepant views of a child or a child’s need as a critical factor between parents and educational professionals. This factor involves one of two conclusions: the parent felt that the school did not see a child’s individual unique strengths and abilities, and/or school personnel described the child using a deficit-model.
**Knowledge.** Participants indicated they had a lack of problem-solving techniques and strategies to deescalate conflict. Parents, in particular, did not know what they did not know until a time of crisis, and by this time, parents became frustrated and felt isolated.

**Service delivery.** Parents reported that at times, schools lacked the ability to directly answer their questions about services leading them to doubt the services that their children were receiving. Likewise, parents and mediators reported that schools lacked information regarding the full continuum of support for students and open dialogue regarding service delivery.

**Constraints.** Conflict over reported constraints were heard by both school and parent participants. For example, fiscal, time, staff, and materials were reported.

**Valuation.** Conflict was said to increase when participants felt they were being devalued or perceived devaluation of their children. The perception of being devalued was reported by both school personnel and parents in times where they felt they were being lied to or when important information was being withheld.

**Reciprocal power.** Parents and schools used power as an attempt to resolve conflict. Lake & Billingsley (2000) reported, “Parents and school employees revealed bases of power and tactical maneuvers that were employed either consciously or unconsciously in an attempt to get what they wanted” (p. 247).

**Communication.** Lake & Billingsley (2000) stated, “Frequency of communication, lack of communication, lack of follow-up, misunderstood communications, and timing of clarifying attempts were identified as factors that escalate conflicts between parents and schools” (p. 248). Escalation of conflict occurred when
participants perceived they were not being heard or not given correct information. The inability to communicate due to intimidating circumstances at IEP meetings left parents feeling they were unable to communicate and share their input.

**Trust.** When trust was felt among parents and school personnel, there was more tolerance to negative events and the “benefit of the doubt” was more likely to be given. On the other hand, when trust was not evident within the relationship, parents had difficulty accepting recommendations and suggestions by school employees and “lacked the confidence to fully accept school personnel’s demonstration of good-faith efforts” (Lake & Billingsley, 2000, p. 248).

It is essential to understand the variables that affect conflict so parents and school districts can learn to work through them, or possibly more importantly, to avoid them. Feinberg et al. (2002) summarized, “Whether caused by issues related to design, delivery, or relationships, special education disputes require methods of resolution that address the unique character of the conflict early in the life of the dispute” (p. 14).

**Stage 4: Procedural Safeguards**

Legislators have built into the system a mechanism for resolution when parents and educational professionals are not able to resolve conflict through the IEP team. The IDEA–Part B Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) ensures compliance through procedural safeguards that must be adhered to by state and local education agencies (i.e., SEAs, & LEAs). IDEA also ensures parents are involved in all decisions affecting their children (IDEA 20 U.S.C. 1415). The option for dispute resolution has been identified in IDEA Parts B and C, and includes the following:

1. State Complaints (IDEA 34 C.F.R 300.151-153);
Due Process (IDEA 34 C.F.R 300.511) – For due process hearings, a resolution session is required within 15 days of the hearing request (IDEA 34 C.F.R. 300.510); and

Mediation (IDEA 34 C.F.R 300.506)

Parents have the right to file a complaint “with respect to any matter relating to the identification, evaluation, or educational placement of the child, or the provision of a free appropriate public education to such child” (IDEA 2004, Title I/B/615, 6A). Prior to the passage of P.L. 94-142, school districts made unilateral decisions regarding student placements, often denying educational opportunities without consent or input from parents (Osborne, 1995). Currently, complaints over procedural rights by parents can be resolved through mediation and due process, which includes the right to appear in court (Edwards, 2004, p. 4). IDEA 1997 “set forth procedures that emphasize administrative due process hearings and mediation as the mechanisms through which disputes between school districts and parents can be resolved” (CADRE, 2002 paragraph 6). H.R. 1350 (the Amending Act) included a provision requiring resolution as part of the due process complaint process (Edwards, 2004).

State complaints. IDEA Regulation Part 300 B 300.14 states that a complaint to the state can be filed under the following conditions: (1) Any complaint that an SEA or LEA has failed to meet the requirements in Sec. 300.132 through 300.135 and 300.137 through 300.144 must be filed in accordance with the procedures described in Sec. 300.151 through 300.153. The California Department of Education (CDE), as part of their responsibility to monitor all special education programs, investigates allegations of noncompliance pertaining to both federal and state special education laws to ensure the
educational needs of students with disabilities are being met. Complaints to the CDE must be based on a violation of special education law and the violation must be within one year prior to the complaint being filed. Outcomes of the complaint are dependent on a thorough investigation of documents, interviews, contacts, and review of the law, and a decision must be issued within 60 days (IDEA 34 C.F.R. 300 151-153). The CDE follows the Code of Federal Regulations Title 34 300.151, which outlines the adoption of state complaint procedures.

There are many advantages of filing a state complaint, which include: cost savings, full range scope of both substantive and procedural issues, lack of attorneys, and enforceability (Suchey & Huefner, 1998). State complaints are investigated by the CDE, and the investigation is not the responsibility of the parent. Complaints regarding violations of federal or state laws can include both substantive and procedural issues. When filing a state complaint, a parent must develop advocacy skills or knowledge of IDEA in order to identify when a violation has taken place, then access and maneuver the system to file a complaint (Mueller, 2009). All outcomes of CDE complaints are enforceable in court and are held accountable accordingly.

Due process hearings. Due process hearings “relating to the identification, evaluation or educational placement of a child with a disability, or the provision of FAPE to the child” can be filed by either a parent or school district (IDEA 34 C.F.R. 300.507). The violation cannot have occurred more than two years before the date of filing a due process complaint. Due process hearings are court hearings and are overseen by an impartial hearing officer (HO). The HO considers both parties’ facts of the case and ultimately renders a decision that is guided by IDEA regulations and case law (Mueller,
In matters alleging a procedural violation, a hearing officer may find that a child did not receive a FAPE only if the procedural inadequacies: 1) impeded the child’s right to a FAPE; 2) significantly impeded the parents’ opportunity to participate in the decision making process regarding the provision of FAPE to the child; or 3) caused a deprivation of educational benefits. However, nothing shall be construed to preclude a hearing officer from ordering a LEA to comply with the procedural requirements (IDEA 34 C.F.R. 300.513).

Mediation. The provision of mediation was added in 1997 during a reauthorization of IDEA. Mediation is voluntary on the part of the parties; not meant to deny or delay a parent’s right to a due process hearing; and is to be conducted by a qualified and impartial mediator who is trained in effective mediation techniques (IDEA 34 C.F.R. 300.506). Two requirements of IDEA 1997 are that mediation agreements shall be “set forth in a written mediation agreement,” and all discussions that take place during mediation are confidential and cannot be used as evidence during future civil proceedings or due process hearings. Mediation can help to solve issues, protect against further escalation, and improve working relationships between school districts and parents (Nowell & Salem, 2007). Margolis (1999) reported, “Through the mediation process, school personnel can begin to gain parent trust and begin to build a relationship that is based on mutual problem solving, cooperation, collaboration” (p. 92).

According to a briefing paper from The Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) authored by Feinberg, Beyer and Moses (2002), mediators come to mediation with different styles and techniques but generally agree that mediation:
• Affords the participants a structured opportunity to meet and discuss their concerns and to work collaboratively to create a mutually satisfactory agreement

• Empowers the participants to explore issues, make decisions, and design solutions

• Offers a voluntary process for mutual problem solving without assigning blame or determining fault

• Provides a confidential process to all participants

• Emphasizes communication and creative problem solving by providing a mediator to assist the participants in defining their problems, exploring their interests, and resolving their conflicts together

• Focuses on the future by describing what future interactions, plans, agreements, or behavior changes will occur. (p. 8)

A benefit of mediation is that the district can save money on costly due process hearings. However, several concerns have been identified with the current mediation process established in IDEA 1997. First, mediation is generally offered too late in the resolution process, leaving too much time between the conflict and resolution, which can lead to breakdowns in communication, hardening of positions, and lessen the likelihood of compromise. Second, mediation agreements can be difficult to implement because there are no specific requirements specified in IDEA 1997. Third, there are no specific qualifications or training requirements for mediators. Finally, complications can arise with the presence of attorneys during the mediation process. Attorneys can support the process by creating more balance of power and knowledge, and at the same time, they can be more adversarial with a different focus or agenda (Feinberg & Beyer, 2000).
IDEA’s complex protocols and mandates disproportionately benefit wealthy, well-educated parents who can deftly and aggressively navigate the due process system with the aid of private counsel and paid education experts (Feinberg & Beyer, 2000). The due process system can offer a strong enforcement of IDEA. However, the system can be hindered when parents lack knowledge about their rights and accessibility (Wakelin, 2008).

Of the three formal dispute resolution procedures provided by IDEA (2004), due process hearings are the most costly in terms of time, fiscal resources, and impact on relationships between school personnel and parents (Mueller, 2009). The financial costs may run as high as $50,000 per hearing, with an average cost running between $8,000 and $12,000 (Mueller, 2009). Although the law has embedded safeguards to protect the due process rights of students with disabilities; the law takes away the power of the IEP team and does not address ways to maintain collaboration and trust.

**California on Conflict Resolution**

An Interagency Agreement (IA) between the California Department of Education (CDE) and the Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) is in place and requires that OAH report the number of due process filings by both parents and school districts on a quarterly basis. During the 2014-2015 school year in the state of California, 3,894 filings were recorded by OAH (2015). Among these 3,894 filings 3,334 (86%) of the cases were filed on behalf of students and school districts filed 560 (14%) of the cases.

According to OAH (2015), the following were the top five reasons parents or districts filed for due process: designated Instruction, placement, assessment, compensatory education, and reimbursement.
The majority of cases filed for the 2014-2015 school year involved students identified under the eligibility category of Autistic-Like Behaviors (n=1,204, 31%). The majority of filings for the 2014-2015 year (n= 1,989, 51%) were for 5-12 years. As shown in Figure 4, 98 % of the due processes cases were resolved without a hearing.

As shown in Figure 5, school districts prevailed on all issues in the majority of the cases (51%) that went to hearing. Split decisions were rendered in 38% of the cases, and students prevailed in just 11% of the cases.
Relationships Post Due Process Filings

As a result of due process filings, parent-district relations often suffer. Relationships are vital in the field of special education and education as a whole. The financial burden can take a toll on the relationship between a school district and parents. The costs associated with due process filings can be a burden for both school districts and parents. Daggett (2003) reported, “Average expenditures for mediation and due process were between $8000 and $12,000 per case, while average litigation expenses were $95,000 per case (p. 25).

Summary and Conclusions from the Literature

This review of research provides a better understanding as to the importance of collaborative relationships between parents and school districts during the IEP process. The research reviewed the components essential for collaboration within a team,
including the importance of trust. When trust is evident, IEP teams, including parents and school districts, can often work together collaboratively and resolve conflict without having to rely on costly legal remedies set forward by IDEA.

Special education is a major area of litigation in education. The consequence of this litigation is costly and emotional. Data showed that 97% of state due process cases that were filed for due process were settled prior to moving to court, revealing a need to better understand the dynamics that cause conflict according to the perspective of parents with children with disabilities. Understanding the perspective of parents of students with disabilities and their experiences with school districts during IEP meetings will help to build a bridge of more collaborative practices and dispute resolution. Chapter 3 will explain the methodology for this study.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Purpose of Study

The development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) requires school districts to collaborate with parents of students with disabilities to ensure each student is afforded FAPE in the least restrictive environment. With the passage of P.L. 94-142 in 1975, the Education for all Children Act, the responsibility of school districts to educate students with disabilities became a reality. Over time, these responsibilities grew for both parents and school districts.

The goal of this study was to identify strategies that parents of children with disabilities feel contribute to a collaborative IEP team relationship in order to better promote collaborative relationships between parents of students with disabilities and educational professionals in school districts. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What preventative strategies do parents report as being part of the IEP process?

2. What factors do parents identify as promoting working collaborative relationships during the IEP process and at points of disagreement, if applicable?

Rationale for the Selection of the Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data, to provide a better understanding of the research problem. According to Creswell (2012), an explanatory sequential mixed methods design “consists of first collecting quantitative data and then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results” (p. 542).
To accomplish this depth of data investigation, the study was conducted in two phases: the first, *quantitative phase* consisted of questionnaires provided to parents of students with disabilities preschool through third grades. The second, *qualitative phase*, consisted of follow-up interviews with the same set of parents who volunteered to be interviewed to further expand on their experiences.

**Research Setting**

The research was conducted in a large, urban, special education local plan area (SELPA) in southern California to be known as Urban SELPA. This district was selected because as the SELPA director, I had access to parents of students with disabilities. During the 2015-2016 school year, Urban SELPA had 43 schools and 25,311 students enrolled. Of the total enrollment, 35.9% of the students were English Learners and 82.7% of the students received free or reduced price meals. The student ethnic make-up was predominately Hispanic at 80.0%, followed by 4.8% African American; 3.8% White; 3.7% Asian; and 1.2% Filipino (see Table 1). Urban SELPA is comprised of two cities with distinctly different demographics and three different zip codes.
Table 1

*Urban SELPA District Boundaries Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Zip Code One</th>
<th>Zip Code Two</th>
<th>Zip Code Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>47,260</td>
<td>74,541</td>
<td>48,768</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Population**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<th>Zip Code Two</th>
<th>Zip Code Three</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
<td>65.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average Individual Gross Income

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<th></th>
<th>Zip Code One</th>
<th>Zip Code Two</th>
<th>Zip Code Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>$77,601</td>
<td>$36,974</td>
<td>$37,435</td>
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Household value

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>$525,400</td>
<td>$255,600</td>
<td>$253,800</td>
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</table>

High School or higher education

<table>
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<th>Zip Code Two</th>
<th>Zip Code Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>92.0%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
<td>69.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bachelor’s degree or higher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Zip Code One</th>
<th>Zip Code Two</th>
<th>Zip Code Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unemployed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Zip Code One</th>
<th>Zip Code Two</th>
<th>Zip Code Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Selected Participants**

At the time of the study, 853 students qualified for special education and related services in grades preschool through third in Urban SELPA as reported to the California Department of Education in December 2015. For the purpose of this study, only parents of those students in grades preschool through third grade who received specialized academic instruction (SAI) as a service on their IEP were sent a questionnaire. Of the 853 students with disabilities in these grades, 578 met the above criteria.
Consent Form and Questionnaire

All parents whose child met the selection criteria were provided an envelope with a packet titled, *Information about Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study* and the questionnaire. Contact information for the researcher and chair was made available to the parents in the provided envelope, and participation was voluntary.

A questionnaire was generated and modified by the researcher around five themes: communication, collaboration, trust, respect, and equity. Nineteen questions were created by the researcher using the current IEP agenda used in Urban SELPA and a variety of resources that studied the above five themes (Adment, 2008; Angell, Stoner, & Sheldon, 2009; Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Feinberg et al., 2002; Friend & Cook, 2007; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Turnbull et al., 2006). The questionnaire was two sided: side one was written in English and side two was written in Spanish. Five demographic questions were included on the questionnaire to gather information related to the relationship of the person completing the form to the student with a disability, grade of their student, number of IEPs they have attended, their participation in the most recent IEP, and their perceived role. The questionnaire consisted of a 4 point Likert-type scale with an added “unsure or not applicable” option. After each question, the respondent was provided the option of adding additional information in a section titled “please explain.” The questionnaire ended by asking the participant if they have had any suggestions in promoting collaborative IEP relationships and if they agreed to participate in a confidential follow-up interview.
Procedures

Phase One

Once Institutional Review Board approval was granted for the study, phase one began by sending a paper-and-pencil copy of the questionnaire to all parents identified using the previously explained criteria. The questionnaires were hand delivered to the students’ school sites within Urban SELPA. Each questionnaire was enclosed in a large sealed envelope along with the Information and Informed Consent to participate in a Research Study form (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Parents were provided the option to complete the questionnaire in Spanish or English (see Appendix C) and the process was completely voluntary. The participants were asked to return the survey via U.S. mail using a self-addressed return envelope. All questionnaires completed and returned to the U.S. Post Office Box by June 15, 2016 were included in the study. The total number of questionnaires received was 75 of the 578 or 13%. Ten additional completed questionnaires were received after June 15, 2016; however, these questionnaires were not included in the research.

Once the questionnaires were received, the researcher manually entered the data into a Google Form. The form was customized to look exactly like the questionnaire the parents completed and all data handwritten by the parents were entered onto the form. Confidentiality methods included eliminating the parent and student name and assigning them a code (i.e. Parent 1, Parent 2, etc.). All paper copies of the questionnaires were placed in a secured location to preserve confidentiality, and all data entered and stored on the computer were password protected.
Phase Two

Once the questionnaires were returned, the researcher identified six parents to interview based on 1) their return date, 2) grade, 3) their agreement to participate in an interview, 4) the number of IEPs they had participated in, and 5) if the parent had a disagreement during their last IEP meeting. The researcher selected all of the participants (n=4) who indicated they had a disagreement for interviews. Two additional responders were selected – parents who marked “agreed” to all questions and left no other further explanation in the provided comments section. Initially, the plan was to interview six different parents who completed the questionnaires; however, one parent had twins so only five parents were interviewed. During her first meeting, the parent of the twins was asked if she would like to discuss the experiences of her second child, and she agreed. Table 2 summarizes the demographics for the parents that were interviewed in phase two of the study.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics of Interview Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother 5 (only one IEP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One parent was interviewed in person and the remaining parents were interviewed on conference calls to accommodate needs of the parents. All participants were informed that their responses would be confidential, and their participation was fully voluntary,
such that consent could be revoked at any time during the dissertation research. All five parents provided consent, and their interviews were audio recorded with permission.

The interviews lasted approximately 20-30 minutes and were conducted at a time, date and location most comfortable and convenient to the willing respondent. The intent of the interviews was to allow parents the opportunity to share and elaborate on their personal experiences related to the research questions. Each interview was guided rather than structured and open-ended in an attempt to provide participants the opportunity to express their own perspectives and reduce the influence of the researcher. During the interview, the researcher took notes on the content and visual emotions of the participants. Verbatim transcripts of the recorded interviews, purchased through Transcription Puppy, provided the data used for analysis (Merriam, 2009). Table 3 presents a summary of the two research phases.

Table 3

Summary of Research Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q1: What preventative strategies do parents report as being part of the IEP process?</th>
<th>Q2: What factors do parents identify as promoting working collaborative relationships during the IEP process and in times of disagreement, if applicable?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Phase 1: Questionnaire | Questionnaires * Parent questionnaire | * Parent questionnaire |
| Phase 2: Interviews | One-on-one interviews * 5 participant interviews * 30 minutes each * Follow-up interview as needed | * 5 participant interviews * 30 minutes each * Follow-up interview as needed |
Data Analyses

Analysis of data was ongoing once the data collection began. All 75 questionnaire responses were entered into the Google form and then downloaded onto an Excel spreadsheet on a personal secured computer. For each Likert-type item, the frequency and percentage of “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree,” “strongly agree,” and “unsure or not applicable” responses were computed. Next, the “strongly agree” and “agree” responses were aggregated. Likewise, the “strongly disagree” and “disagree” responses were aggregated. The researcher used the chart option in Microsoft Word to create the bar graphs presented in Chapter 4.

The “please explain” questionnaire responses and interview data were analyzed through a process of coding, filtering, and sorting data by columns (Lichtman, 2014). Codes were assigned to portions of the data and responses were filtered by these codes and also sorted based on themes that emerged from the literature review (i.e., communication, collaboration, respect, trust, and equity. The researcher identified outlier responses, such as those who marked “strongly disagree” and marked them in red. Following, the researcher looked further to see if written responses were available for interpretation. The researcher reviewed these comments, as available, and determined if any patterns or nuances in the data helped better understand the intent of the response. This process was ongoing until the researcher reached a point of saturation and was able to present narrative accounts for each selected participant.

Trustworthiness

Asking parents to share their experiences both in the form of a questionnaire and interview was very personal and a private event. It is with this in mind that the researcher
was especially astute of confidentiality during all parts of the research. The following steps were taken to ensure the study was conducted in an ethical manner and the results accurately represented the parents’ experiences and perspectives:

- Prior informed consent was obtained prior to beginning the research. The questionnaire provided to the parent had a coversheet fully explaining the research. For those parents who agreed to be interviewed, written or verbal consent was obtained.
- All documents used for this research did not include personal information (this excluded consent forms, which were not be shared with anyone other than the researcher and were locked in a safe location to prevent outside access)
- Codes instead of names were used to protect the identities of the parents that volunteered to be interviewed.
- The questionnaire was used to guide the interview format for all parents.
- If a response was not understood during an interview, the researcher sought clarity by asking the interviewee to explain further.
- The researcher cross checked the written questionnaire responses while interviewing the parent, and in the event there was a discrepancy or change of response than originally marked, the researcher sought clarity.
- All audio recordings and findings were stored electronically and password protected. All information was stored on an external hard drive with the researcher as the only person who knows the password to access the hard drive.
- The researcher maintained appropriate and ethical procedures in all relationships with the interviewees by focusing only on their personal experiences. While
being interviewed, only those topics related to the questionnaire were discussed. If a parent had a question about their child outside the scope of the interview, the researcher explained to them that at the conclusion of the interview, the appropriate person would be referred to them for support. This helped to maintain the lines between the researcher and the director.

Summary

This chapter described in detail the methodology and procedures that were used for this dissertation. The quantitative phase and qualitative phases of the study allowed the researcher to gain insight into the experiences of 75 parents and to gather further explanation, which was more in-depth and personal, from five select parents. The voices of these parents informed the results unveiled in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify strategies that parents of students with disabilities feel contribute to a collaborative IEP team relationship. Educational planning is the purpose of the IEP and requires collaborative relationships to help develop and engage parents and educators in shared decision making (Friend & Cook, 2007). Benefits of collaboration include: strengthening relationships, building trust, sharing resources and accountability, and sharing responsibility (Friend & Cook, 2007). The literature review presented in Chapter 2 explained not only the essential components of collaboration but the benefits of collaboration as well. Collaboration can lead to trust, and when trust is apparent, teams can collaboratively work together during the IEP. IEP teams that work together are more likely to work through conflict without having to rely on outside resources, including costly attorneys and litigation, to resolve their differences. Through a questionnaire and in-depth interviews with selected participants, this research sought to understand what parents attribute to collaborative practices during the IEP meeting.

Participants’ Demographic Information

Questionnaires were provided to parents in both English and Spanish (i.e. one side of the questionnaire was in English, and the other was in Spanish). Respondents had the opportunity to add comments in addition to answering the questions on the questionnaire utilizing a Likert scale format. The researcher assigned either English or Spanish based on the side the respondent completed. Figure 6 shows 68% of the participants responded in English, and 32% responded in Spanish.
Participants were asked to identify themselves by marking mother, father, or other. If the participant did not mark one of the three provided options, the researcher assigned “no response.” An overwhelming 86.3% of participants marked “Mother.” Figure 7 provides a summary of responses displaying the specific quantity of responses by options.
The option to complete the questionnaire was provided to parents of students in grades preschool through third grade. As Figure 8 reveals, the majority of parents who returned the questionnaire had a student in second grade or higher (n=39, 52%). The greatest number of participants had a child in the third grade (n=26, 34.7%). First grade children had the least representation (n=6, 8%) of respondents.
The number of opportunities parents had to collaborate with an IEP team are displayed in Figure 9. The majority of participants had four or more IEPs (n=29, 38.7%), which correlates to the majority of participants having a child in the third grade (n=26, 34.7%). As the number of IEPs increase, parents’ knowledge of special education educational code and awareness of program and services also increased.

Because the intent of the research was to identify collaborative practices through the lens of the parent, it was important to decipher if, in fact, the respondent participated in the most recent IEP. Based on the responses, 90.7% of the parents attended the most recent IEP. Only five participants (6.7%) stated that they did not attend, and two did not respond to the question (2.7%).

Figure 8. Grade of student

The grade of student is displayed in the bar chart. The majority of students were in the third grade (n=26).
Finally, when asked if the parent identified his/her role in the IEP meeting as a participant or observer, the majority identified themselves as a “participant’ (n=48, 64.9%), 16.2% saw themselves as an observer, and 35.1 % did not respond. Table 4 shows that only parents with less than four or more IEPs identified themselves as an observer. More specifically, of the 12 who identified themselves as an observer, 50% of them were mothers who have held only one IEP.

Stoner and Angell (2006) suggested that the level of trust contributes to the role the parent’s play during the IEP process. For example, parents with higher levels of trust tend to be more supportive and less engaged.
Table 4

*IEP Meeting Opportunities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have been to the following numbers of IEPs for my child:</th>
<th>Person completing this form:</th>
<th>No response Count</th>
<th>Observer Count</th>
<th>Participant Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 IEPS or more</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guardian-grandmother</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother, Father</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>Person completing this form:</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only 1 IEP</td>
<td>Person completing this form:</td>
<td>Guardian/Abuela</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 IEPs</td>
<td>Person completing this form:</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 IEPs</td>
<td>Person completing this form:</td>
<td>Father</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to support the development and sustainability of the relationships between parents of students with disabilities and district personnel. This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, and the following research questions guided the study:

1. What preventative strategies do parents report as being part of the IEP process?
2. What factors do parents identify as promoting working collaborative relationships during the IEP process, and in times of disagreements, if applicable?
Data Analysis

The questionnaires and interviews provided the data for the study results, which are presented next based on the research questions and emergent themes.

Research Question 1

*What preventative strategies do parents report as being part of the IEP process?*

According to the first stage of CADRE’s continuum of conflict resolution options, preventative strategies are those practices and problem solving strategies that attempt to minimize conflict (Feinberg et al., 2002). Emergent themes in prior research revealed these preventative strategies included collaboration, communication, trust, equity, and respect (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Fisher et al., 2011; Friend & Cook, 2007; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). The questionnaire data were organized according to these five themes (see Table 5).

Communication

Communication is an essential component of effective family-professional relationships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). It promotes dialogue and understanding during the IEP process, which is ongoing and involves many important decisions to be made about the growth and development of the child with disability’s educational experience. As evident in the figures above, the majority of parents who participated in the questionnaire strongly agreed or agreed to the questions involving communication. That being said, although some parents marked “agree” on their questionnaire, they, in fact, did not agree as revealed during the interview portion of the study. Specifically, communication at the onset of the IEP process was expressed as missing with regards to the details of the process or the rights of parents.
Table 5

*Questionnaire Organization*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Q1. Prior to the IEP meeting, the IEP process was explained to me.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Q3. During the IEP meeting, I feel the IEP team collaborated.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td>Q10. I trust that what was agreed to at the IEP meeting will be implemented.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Trust</strong></td>
<td>Q9. I felt what I had to contribute was taken into account prior to decisions being made about my child’s IEP.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Equity</strong></td>
<td>Q12. Language barriers were addressed during the IEP.</td>
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<td><strong>Respect</strong></td>
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Table 6 lists the questions presented to parents regarding communication.
Table 6

Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #</th>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 1:</td>
<td>Prior to the IEP meeting, the IEP process was explained to me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question 2:</td>
<td>I understand my parental rights and procedural safeguards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 6:</td>
<td>I found it easy to communicate during the IEP meeting with the IEP team members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 7:</td>
<td>I felt heard in what I was trying to communicate during the IEP meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 8:</td>
<td>I feel there was open communication by all members of the IEP team.</td>
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</table>

**Question 1.** Prior to the IEP meeting, the IEP process was explained to me.

Results of the questionnaire indicated that an overwhelming majority of respondents either agreed (n=35, 46%) or strongly agreed (n=33, 44%) that the IEP process was explained to them prior to the IEP (see Figure 10). Specifically, those in agreement wrote comments such as the “Teacher informed me what we would be going over in the IEP” (Participant 50); “I know who was participating and what topics were going to be discussed” (Participant 25); and “Before the meeting start they go over roles and info” (Participant 5). All but two parents, who did not respond to the question, and had only attended one IEP, either agreed or strongly agreed to this question. These are parents who would have held an IEP within the past twelve months for the first time.

Conversely, two mothers who have held four or more IEPs were in disagreement (n=2, 3%), and one mother who has also held four or more IEPs disagreed (n=1, 1%) stating, “The process has never been explained even when my children entered this district. I had to learn on my own” (Participant 36).
Figure 10. Question 1: Prior to the IEP meeting, the IEP process was explained to me

Question 2: I understand my parental rights and procedural safeguards. Similar to the first question, the majority of the respondents (93%) were in agreement with this comment (strongly agree n=32, 43% and agree n=38, 50%) (see Figure 11). Unlike question one, there were positive comments except for one mother of a preschool student who marked “strongly disagree” but wrote “Everything was explained very well” (Participant 74). In fact, three respondents referenced a “packet” was provided to them to read and how they had to research these “packets” at home. Participant 25 expressed, “You are given a packet to read. You really have to research to truly understand rights and procedures” (Participant 24); and “Around my 2nd IEP meeting, I was able to read through my parental rights. It was also explained a little more during the IEP meeting” (Participant 1). One parent commented, “I read my rights at home and reread as much as possible” (Participant 3).
Question 6: I found it easy to communicate during the IEP meeting with the IEP team members. Similar to questions 1 and 2, 92% of the participants for this question agreed or strongly disagreed (see Figure 12). When reading through the comments, seven parents left a comment when asked to “please explain” further to this question. Comments ranged from very specific to minimal. For example, a mother of a third grade student who had held more than four IEPs wrote, “Even when there were words that were said that I didn’t understand (terms), the team took the time to help me understand what was being said” (Participant 1). A parent of a preschool student who has participated in three IEPs explained, “I feel comfortable asking questions and communicating” (Participant 25). Finally, one parent who has only been to one IEP simply stated, “They listened” (Participant 24).
Question 6: I found it easy to communicate during the IEP meeting with the IEP team members.

Question 7: I felt heard in what I was trying to communicate during the IEP meeting. Similar to question 6, parents agreed they felt heard in their communication (90.7%) and their comments were specific (see Figure 13). For example, a mother who has held four or more IEPs reflected, “They listened to me and my husband for almost two hours go on about our son and still had a smile on their face” (Participant 44). Another mother with the same IEP background expressed that she felt she was heard because there was compromise, “For things I disagreed on, we came to a compromise” (Participant 1).

Question 8: I feel there was open communication by all members of the IEP team. With regards to open communication by all team members, parents overall agreed that there was open communication (93.3%) with the exception of two parents (4%) who disagreed (see Figure 14). Elaborating further on her disagreement, one mother of a preschool student who had only IEP stated, “The person who needed to be in the IEP
meeting (the principal and speech therapist) weren’t there to communicate and provide the support” (Participant 4). A second mother of student in the second grade wrote, “His teacher didn’t seem interested” (Participant 75).

Collaboration. Friend and Cook (2007) defined interpersonal collaboration as “a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work towards a common goal” (p. 6). Rewards of collaboration can include: input, perhaps in areas one is not an expert in, strengthening of relationships with the emergence of trust, and the development of a sense of community (Friend & Cook, 2007). Successful collaboration can incentivize participates to continue to collaborate, and this continuation is especially important for school district personnel and parents since their relationships can last up to 22 years.
Results indicated parents agreed over 90% of the time that collaborative practices are important during an IEP meeting. Likewise, parents described collaboration as working together, making decisions together, being heard and not just listened to, and having open forum to express themselves. When parents indicated collaborative practices were not taking place, they explained they did not feel heard, they felt certain team members did not care, and they did not feel that their contribution had value.

The questionnaire items presented in Table 7 focused on team collaboration and shared decision making.
Table 7

Collaboration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 3:</td>
<td>During the IEP meeting, I feel the team collaborated.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question 4:</td>
<td>I felt I had equal decision-making power during the IEP meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5:</td>
<td>There was a mutual understanding between myself and district employees about the goals for my child.</td>
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</table>

Question 3: During the IEP meeting, I feel the team collaborated. Specifically, question 3 asked the parent if they felt the team collaborated during the last IEP meeting. Encouragingly, 69 parents (48%) strongly agreed there was collaboration during the last IEP meeting they attended (see Figure 15). Parents who wrote explanations appeared to associate collaboration with working hard, being on the same page, and talking about what will work or not work as a team. A parent of a second grade student disagreed with the question and stated that “the PT wasn’t there” (Participant 50) and another second grade parent agreed to the question but wrote “except his teacher” (Participant 75) in the comments section. Finally, a parent felt excluded as part of the greater IEP team explaining, “It always seems that the ‘team’ excluding the parents has a pre-meeting as everyone is already seated with our seats already designated when we walk in” (Participant 36).

Question 4: I felt I had equal decision-making power during the IEP meeting. In referring to equal decision-making power during the IEP, 90.7% of the participants either agreed (n=33, 44%) or strongly agreed (n=36, 48%) they had equal decision making ability (see Figure 16). Those parents who agreed explained that they were able to add to
what was said, they were asked if they had questions, they were asked if decisions that
were made were ok, and that what they said was taken into consideration. That being
said 6.7% marked that they either disagreed (n=2, 2.7%) or strongly disagreed (n=3, 4%).
For example, one parent of a second grade student who has held four or more IEPs stated,
“I did not agree with the amount of hours my son was going to receive for speech
therapy” (Participant 47).

Figure 15. Question 3: During the IEP meeting, I feel the team collaborated
Figure 16. Question 4: I felt I had equal decision making power during the IEP meeting

Question 5: There was a mutual understanding between myself and district employees about the goals for my child. Figure 17 shows the high number of responses (n=69, 92%) from parents who either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” to this question. Comments supporting this agreement included, “We all worked together and came up with goals that would benefit my son” (Participant 1), and “We are all on the same page with her goals” (Participant 25).

Trust. Reliability, safety, and discretion were used to define trust (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Without trust, parents may be less likely to accept the suggestions of educational professionals and may not value the need to work towards collaboration (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). When parents and school district personnel trust one another, they are more likely to accept suggestion and input from the other (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Conversely, lack of trust can lead to lack of collaboration leaving
Figure 17. Question 5: There was a mutual understanding between myself and district employees about the goals for my child

little incentive to work through differences and lead to conflict. Identifying the factors of trust important to parents through the lens of the parents is important in order to create and maintain trust. The research in this study revealed that trust to these parents is predicated on caring for their students, getting reports of progress, collaboration, and reassurance that what they agree or say they will do will be done.

Since trust is an essential component of any relationship parents were asked questions on Table 8.
Table 8

Trust

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #</th>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 10:</td>
<td>I trust that what was agreed to at the IEP meeting will be implemented.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question 11:</td>
<td>I trust the IEP team members.</td>
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</table>

Question 10: I trust that what was agreed to at the IEP meeting will be implemented. All fathers and all but two mothers agreed (n=39, 52%) and strongly agreed (n=32, 42.7) that they trusted that what was agreed to at the IEP meeting was being implemented (see Figure 18). The total in agreement was 94.7% participants. Parents who commented on this question stated their trust was confirmed through reports of progress, calls to the teacher, and checking in at the school.

Figure 18. Question 10: I trust that what was agreed to at the IEP meeting will be implemented
**Question 11: I trust the IEP team members.** Parents marked that they trusted the IEP team members 92% of the time (see Figure 19). One mother of a student in the third grade who has attended four or more IEPs strongly agreed with the question and explained, “I had to build that trust” (Participant 3). Other comments revealed that parents’ trust of the IEP team members was dependent on levels of help and care for their child, communication, contact by the school site, and their child’s progress.

![Figure 19: Question 11: I trust the IEP team members](image)

**Equity.** Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak et al. (2014) defined equality as a condition where both parents and educational professionals have equal influence or power in the development of the educational program. Parents perceive educators as having more information regarding children with disabilities and, at times, information about their own child, which can cause negative interactions and an imbalance of perceived power before the start of the IEP meeting (Trussell et al., 2008). In order for parents to be equal partners in the IEP process, parents need to be involved in each level
of the process and the development of the IEP (Trussell et al., 2008). This research study asked participants the following question regarding equity (see Table 9):

Table 9

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Equity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question #</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question 9:</td>
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**Question 9: I felt what I had to contribute was taken into account prior to decisions being made about my child’s IEP.** More than half of the respondents (92%) either agreed (n=38, 50.7%) or strongly agreed (n=31, 41.3%) that what they had to contribute was taken into consideration by the IEP members prior to decisions being made (see Figure 20). A parent of a third grade student who had attended four or more IEPs stated, “There were concerns before the IEP, but we made sure to bring them up during the meeting” (Participant 1). Another third grade parent with the same IEP experience, explained a similar circumstance, “We came to agreement after hearing my concern” (Participant 3). A parent of a preschool student who had only attended one IEP previously noted, “They added to what they had recommended” (Participant 24).

**Respect.** Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak et al. (2014) explained that a “respectful professional will honor cultural diversity, affirm strengths, and treat students and families with dignity” (p. 168). It is important to become aware and honor the family’s cultural beliefs, strengths, and dignity so that you are respecting them as equal partners in collaboration.
Figure 20. Question 9: *I felt what I had to contribute was taken into account prior to decisions being made about my child’s IEP*

Hearing parent concerns, respecting their culture and honoring spoken language all contribute to respect of the parent and contribute to a collaborative relationship. When there is a barrier caused by language and culture isolation, marginalization can occur (Salas, 2004). Taking the time to ensure these potential barriers are addressed can lead to a more inclusive IEP meeting. The following questions (see Table 10) were included on the questionnaire to measure the importance of respect according to parents:
Table 10

Respect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 12:</td>
<td>Language barriers were addressed during the IEP.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question 13:</td>
<td>My culture was respected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 14:</td>
<td>I was able to share my concerns.</td>
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</table>

Question 12: Language barriers were addressed during the IEP. The majority of respondents (70.7%) agreed (n=29, 38.7%) or strongly agreed (n=24, 32%), while 22.7% of the respondents marked unsure or not applicable as their response (see Figure 21). In an attempt to explain the 17 “unsure or not applicable” responses, the researcher read through the comments, which revealed that if everyone on the team spoke the same language, which in these cases was English, then the respondent marked “unsure or not applicable.” One parent marked “agreed,” however, commented that she did not speak at the IEP. There were no parents who completed the questionnaires in Spanish who marked disagreed or strongly disagreed to this question.
Question 13: My culture was respected. The data for Question 13 presented a similar profile as question 12. Specifically, the majority of respondents marked that they agreed (n=31, 41.3%) or strongly agreed (n=29, 38.7%) with the statement and 16% marked unsure or not applicable (see Figure 22). Only five parents wrote comments, and all were positive. Three of the comments were from parents who completed the questionnaire in Spanish. Parents who responded in Spanish wrote, “There was equality” (Participant 48); “There was no discrimination” (Participant 13); and “There was much respect” (Participant 31). English respondents mirrored the comments above, “We respect each other” (Participant 3), and “I didn’t have any problems” (Participant 25). All of the interviewees agreed that their culture was respected.
Question 13: My culture was respected

Overwhelmingly, respondents strongly agreed (n= 41, 55.4%) and agreed (n= 30, 40.5%) that they were able to share their concerns at the last IEP meeting (see Figure 23). Parents explained on the questionnaire, “Yes my concerns were heard and shared” (Participant 3), “There was positive feedback about my concerns and goals” (Participant 60), and “Even before the IEP meeting, all of my concerns were addressed” (Participant 31).

Figure 22. Question 13: My culture was respected

Question 14: I was able to share my concerns.  Overwhelmingly, respondents strongly agreed (n= 41, 55.4%) and agreed (n= 30, 40.5%) that they were able to share their concerns at the last IEP meeting (see Figure 23). Parents explained on the questionnaire, “Yes my concerns were heard and shared” (Participant 3), “There was positive feedback about my concerns and goals” (Participant 60), and “Even before the IEP meeting, all of my concerns were addressed” (Participant 31).
Research Question 2

What factors do parents identify as promoting working collaborative relationships during the IEP process and at points of disagreement, if applicable?

Developing and maintaining collaborative relationships between school district professionals and parents of students with disabilities is vital as the team makes important decisions regarding the student’s future. Understanding what collaboration specifically includes is critical to truly understand the needs of all parties involved in the relationship. With this in mind, this research sought to discover the perspective of parents. Educational code and case law govern the relationship between parents of students with IEPs and school district professionals, so it is even more important that components of effective collaboration are known and utilized.

Question 15 on the questionnaire asked parents to rate if “There was a disagreement or disagreements during the IEP meeting regarding contents of the IEP.”
The responses to this question presented differently than those responses before it (see Figure 24). Specifically, all response options were represented, which led the researcher to utilize both the comments and interviews to better understand what disagreements, from the parent perspectives, had occurred this past year in Urban SELPA. Of the total number of respondents (n=75), 40% of them disagreed (22.7%) or strongly disagreed (17.3%), which was consistent with the comments written by the respondents. For example, one mother whose student was in third grade and has held four or more IEPs wrote, “There weren’t any disagreements in the IEP” (Participant 10). Three additional parents who have held four or more IEPs as well wrote, “Haven’t had any issue” (Participant 25), “There was no disagreement(s)” (Participant 31), and “We were all on the same page” (Participant 50).

The comments for the parents who agreed (20%) and strongly agreed (9.3%) were inconsistent, which leads the researcher to believe the question may have confused the respondents (see Figure 24). For example, five of the seven comments for those who marked “agreed” were positive stating there were no disagreements. Similarly, only one of the seven parents who marked “strongly agree” left a comment stating, “Everything was understood” (Participant 13).
Figure 24. *Question 15: There was a disagreement or disagreements during the IEP meeting regarding contents of the IEP*

To gain a more in-depth understanding of parent responses to question 15, and to capture what factors parents felt promoted collaborative relationships during the IEP process, the researcher conducted six interviews with five parents. Each of the interviews are presented next to better understand each parent’s experiences and mindset as they completed the questionnaire.

**Parent 1 Student 1**

Parent 1 is a mother of two third grade students for whom she has attended four or more IEPs. Parent 1 was interviewed twice as she has twin boy students, both of whom are students with disabilities. Her experiences participating in IEPs for both of her sons were very different. She stated that, like many parents, her learning about special education and her parental rights and procedural safeguards involved a steep learning curve. When asked if she understood her parental rights and procedural safeguards, she explained, “Initially no. But, I guess because I felt pressure to continue with the IEP
meeting, I didn’t take the time to read them” (Interviewee 1, Student 1). She went on to say that she felt very overwhelmed in her first IEP and uncomfortable as there was much language and terminology that she didn’t understand. She interpreted the question to mean during her first IEP and not the most current IEP, so she marked “disagree” to the question. She explained that after her first experience of being overwhelmed and uncomfortable at the IEP, she vowed to not feel that way again so she “educated herself” in order to understand the process and the individual roles of the team.

Parent 1 was asked if she felt there was collaboration during the IEP that she last attended for Student 1. She replied, “Yes. Yes.” The researcher asked her to define collaboration to which she commented,

I feel that respect is the key. I feel like I am able to respect the position of the service providers and understand that maybe I may not always agree with what they’re saying, but I see where they’re coming from now, and they are very respectful. They take into consideration my ideas and my goals for my child, and it’s not just one sided. So we’re back and forth. And if something needs to be tweaked or changed or added to a goal, they’re very open. So, I think that’s good collaboration.

Parent 1 went on to explain that she had trust during the most recent IEP, and collaboration was present as evident by the fact that all opinions shared by the IEP team members, including herself, were heard and communication was clear. This trust and collaboration eliminated any disagreements during the IEP meeting. Parent 1 explained that she felt comfortable enough that if a problem were to occur, the members of the team would be “open” so she felt she could go “back to the table” to discuss her concerns.
On her questionnaire, parent 1 wrote, “It always seemed that the team, excluding parent, has a pre-meeting and everyone’s ready and a seat, and your seat as a parent is already designated when you walk in.” During her interview, she explained that for many years, she felt as an outsider coming in, not a part of the team, and as if it had been determined how the meeting was going to end. When asked what has changed, she explained that she is more comfortable and has trust in the team so she is less inclined to feel as she once did. When reflecting back, she stated, “I think my experience with Student 1 in this district has been a positive one because he’s not so involved. He’s a good boy. He adapts well to his situation.” Parent 1’s second interview conveys how drastically different her experiences were with Student 2 and a different IEP team.

**Parent 1 Student 2**

Unlike the experiences with Student 1, Parent 1 explained that the collaboration during Student 2’s IEP meetings were very different. Parent 1 mentioned her different experience may be due to her past, “because I’ve had issues in the past,” referring to her past experiences using an attorney to navigate the IEP process for her sons. She expressed her feeling of a sense of “uncomfortableness” at the most recent IEP meeting. When asked if she trusted the IEP team, Parent 1 stated, “No, not in this situation.” When asked to explain further, she shared that she knows in the past services for her son were not being implemented. Not only were the services not being implemented, the service provider hid that from her, and the other service providers did not tell their supervisor or her. She explained that for the best interest of her son, “They need to be honest even if it means calling a colleague out.”
Parent 1 mentioned that she does not dread attending IEPs anymore but wishes there was more communication and collaboration within the team for her second son. She repeated that she felt it was due to the fact Student 2’s disability was more involved and, therefore, there was a need for team members to take a “more active role in communicating with the parent.” She feels this communication is especially important since Student 2 cannot tell her what happened at school and if he needs help. She believes that if there was more active communication between her and the teacher or service providers, problems could be dealt with as they arose.

With regard to question 15, Parent 1 agreed that there was a disagreement at the last IEP, and it had yet to be resolved. When probed further about the disagreement, Parent 1 responded:

Interviewee: No, we didn’t resolve it yet. We’re going to meet again in August.

Interviewer: Have you had this experience in the past?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: So you’re saying that you had this experience in an IEP before, and you were not able to resolve it. So how did you end up resolving it?

Interviewee: I’ve sat down and spoke to the director and program administrator

Interviewer: Were you able to resolve it that way?

Interviewee: Yes
Interviewer: Have you used any other means to resolve any kind of disagreement or dispute or conflict that were not able to meet in the IEP?

Interviewee: Do you mean like an attorney?

Interviewer: Yeah

Interviewer: What led you to an attorney or even to call the director?

What led you to that?

Interviewee: In the case where I go to the special education director I felt that the IEP team is restricted as far as what they are able to accomplish within the context of the IEP. They’re not able to add services or provide me with compensatory Ed or they’re not able to address those issues that undermine what I feel that my son may need, so I go to the director. What led me to seek an attorney is when I didn’t have that open line of communication with the director very early on and my sons’ . . . both sons education [were not being addressed]. I was scared; I sought an attorney. So, I feel that because I was scared of what could happen not knowing all my options very early on, I did seek an attorney. But, I feel now I’m able to sit down with the special education director and, at least, be heard at another level.

Parent 1 ended the interview by emphasizing the need for collaboration among the IEP team. She explained that it is not just a parent-district deficit but feels the district members of the IEP team lack collaboration. More specifically, she shared that she
wishes there was more open communication between the team, not just during the IEP meeting.

**Parent 2**

Parent 2 is the mother of a third grade student as well, and she, too, has attended four or more IEPs in the past. By law, an IEP must take place at least annually; however, Parent 2 explained that she has had five IEPs for her son during the past school year, and the IEP meeting was not finished. When asked if she felt the IEP team collaborated, she stated the collaboration grew over the five IEPs. During the first two IEPs, she felt that she was not being heard because she had to keep saying things that she felt her son needed since others on the team were not paying attention. She said she defines collaboration as, “talking as a team, going around the table and sharing ideas, and being safe.”

Similar to Parent 1, Parent 2 has had an ongoing disagreement within the IEP team that has yet to be resolved. The issue is around placement and services for her son. She explained further that the team’s understanding of her child’s disability was not in alignment with her own. Therefore, issues regarding services, disability eligibility, and goals were not aligned. She explained that it was not until her son’s behaviors escalated that district personnel “began to see” what she already knew and started to look into other resources for her child.

Parent 2 chose to keep her son home until the disagreement could be cleared up, in fear of how the district might treat her son. When asked why she chose to not send her son to school, she stated, “Well, because we had a disagreement, how they are going to
treat my child in school, so I said, “No, I’m not going to send him.” When probed further, Parent 2 responded as follows:

   Interviewer: Did you ever not send him to school?

   Interviewee: Yeah.

   Interviewer: You’re at a disagreement and until the disagreement was solved, you chose to not send him to school, and how did you get past that?

   Interviewee: What do you mean?

   Interviewer: How did you move past the disagreement with the team? Is he going to school?

   Interviewee: At the beginning of the school year, they wanted to do a placement, but they didn’t have this all lined up for me and it took some time putting it into place. I’m not interested in the placement they wanted. Basically, what I asked for really wasn’t happening and it got escalated, and I kept bringing the same concerns back. It’s because it got escalated, and I didn’t want to move him totally out of the school. If we were focused in the beginning, maybe it could have changed.

   Towards the end of the interview, she stated that she felt the “process” was a “major concern” for her because she felt there was too much “red tape” and too many people who had to approve or address her concerns. She attributed her concerns to inconsistent communication:
We have to stick to our word, and the child has to be there. You cannot tell me one thing and then change it in the IEP because you don’t have that or you don’t have this or that or whatever. So, we have to deal with our trust and follow through with those things.

Throughout the interview, Parent 2 mentioned not being heard and the district not valuing her perspective and input. Parent 2 expressed, “I strongly know my child and you cannot tell me no more about my child than I can tell you” As a result, they needed many more IEP meetings, which she believes could have been avoided.

Parent 3

Parent 3 has a son in the second grade and has also attended four or more IEPs like the previous parents. Although she has attended four or more IEPs for her son, Parent 3 explained that she is not knowledgeable when it comes to her parental rights and procedural safeguards. She stated, they “give me a paper at every meeting” but she has not read them. When asked if she had questions about her or her son’s rights who would she ask, she stated that she “does not ask.” In fact, Parent 3 stated that she does not feel that she has equal decision-making power or input at the meetings due to the district’s lack of consideration when she requests additional services or input on IEP goals. She stated, “I have never been happy with the time they have him for speech, and I like mentioned it to them, and they don’t do anything about it.” She explained that she was told, “Oh no, this is all we can give.”

Parent 3 spoke about her disagreements being left unresolved. Unlike Parent 2 who tried to work things out with the IEP team, Parent 3 has chosen to
not seek resolution. When probed about her unresolved disagreements, Parent 3 responded as follows:

“Interviewer: You put that you disagree that any disagreements that you have had with the IEP have been resolved. So, anytime you disagree, they are just left unresolved?

Interviewee: Correct.

Interviewer: Okay. What would you have liked to have seen happen?

Interviewee: I would have liked for them to, I mean I am his mother and I felt like I know my son better than they do and I understand that I am not professional, but I would have liked them to take into consideration what I bring to their attention and what I feel my son needs.

Interviewer: Right. Do you feel that they gave a good enough explanation as to why they didn’t increase the service or change the goal, or did they just say ‘no’?

Interviewee: No, they just told me that they are pretty qualified for it, so I felt that I can’t fight that.

Similar to Parent 2, Parent 3 explained that she does not feel that as a parent her input was valued and considered:

I would have liked for them to, I mean I am his mother and I felt like I know my son better than they do and I understand that I am not professional, but I would have liked them to take into consideration what I bring to their attention and what I feel my son needs.
She added that she finds it easy to communicate with them outside of the IEP meeting. For example, if she tries to get in touch of the special education teacher, the teacher takes her call. That being said, she expressed doubt with regards to her son’s services, if he was receiving them or not. She stated, “I should write a log. I should have them log in everything to make sure he is getting his services.” When asked why she felt she did not trust that they were providing the services, she explained, “I don’t have a reason now, but I don’t know if they are doing it. You know what I mean?”

**Parent 4**

Parent 4 is the mother of a kindergarten student who has participated in two IEPs. She repeatedly stated that the first IEP meeting she participated in was “night and day compared to the most recent IEP.” Parent 4 stated that during the first IEP for her son, the District did not take into account what she had to say or her concerns. She felt alone. When asked if she had any disagreements during the first meeting, Parent 4 explained:

Yeah, I disagreed because they didn’t mention anything that was relevant to helping him. It’s like they were just rubbing me off and telling me he was okay, and he only needed occupational therapy. He wasn’t just fine. He doesn’t just need occupational therapy; he needed a lot more.

She explained that fortunately her husband was childhood friends with another teacher on campus who helped them to learn their rights and what they should ask for at the IEP meeting.

Parent 4’s most recent IEP was “like night and day” compared to the first one. She says the new IEP team listened to her more and tried more interventions with her son. Parent 4 was impressed with the new teacher because her child’s
needs have now been met because there has been a lot of communication and 
trust. She feels comfortable with her new IEP team and says her son has made a 
lot of progress.

**Parent 5**

Parent 5, the last parent interviewed, is a mother of a preschool student who has 
only attended one IEP. Parent 5 disclosed that her daughter has down syndrome, present 
since birth. Although her understanding of how to navigate resources for her daughter 
was not new, attending an IEP was a new experience. She explained that prior to going 
to her first IEP, she did receive a quick overview of the process, but no explanation was 
provided from the school district. She explained, “You’re given a packet to read. You 
really have to research to truly understand your rights.” Although she had an overall 
“great” experience, she feels that the district does not tell parents enough about what the 
District has to offer with regards to services and placement, so parents have to “wait and 
see what is offered or find out from other parents.”

Parent 5 shared that prior to going to the IEP, she was nervous. When asked why, 
she explained that she had only heard horror stories about IEPs from other parents and 
stories she had read on the internet. She explained:

>You don’t know what to expect really. You don’t know how the whole process 
works. You don’t know. You don’t know how much you get to talk or how 
much input you get to give until you’re actually there.

All in all, she was impressed by the IEP team and all that they had done to assess 
her daughter. However, she felt there could have been more collaboration throughout the 
process. For example, when asked if she felt she had equal decision-making during the
IEP, she stated that she gave some input, but the district staff had already filled out her
daughter’s present levels of performance and written her goals. Although they asked her
if she agreed with the goals, which she said were “nice,” she did not feel as if she
provided equal input. The only disagreement Parent 5 shared that she experienced during
the IEP meeting was about which form of communication to teach her daughter. The
team was able to work together to resolve the conflict within the context of the IEP
meeting.

When asked if she had any final comments or input, Parent 5 suggested that
assessment results and proposed goals be available to parents prior to the IEP meeting.
She mentioned if these were provided even three days before the meeting, she could have
contributed more to the already developed IEP goals that the teacher brought to the
meeting. She explained, “They want the parent’s input at the meeting, to give your input
about your child to help them, but if you don’t know what her assessments are, it’s pretty
much hard.” She went on to explain that the teacher comes to the meeting and says “this
is the goal I have for her, and you are barely hearing about what the assessment said.”
Finally, although new to the IEP process, she felt trust towards the IEP team members.
She based her trust on the fact that members of the team heard what she was saying and
were not just trying to appease her.
Summary

This chapter provided a detailed analysis of the responses provided through the 75 questionnaires completed and returned by parents of students with disabilities in grades preschool through third grade. The six follow-up interviews with mothers who have students with disabilities provided additional insight into the factors the parents felt facilitated and hindered the IEP process. Chapter 5 provides a summary and discussion of the research findings, and concludes with implications and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 5: Recommendations

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed method study was to provide a better understanding of parents’ perspectives of students with disabilities in preschool through third grade. Specifically, the research sought to better understand what parents of students with disabilities feel contribute to collaboration during an IEP meeting and in times of disagreement. Parents and school district professionals, including parents, teachers, administrators, and service providers are required to work together for the development of the IEP, which includes goals, provision of services, and placement in the least restrictive environment for those students who qualify as a student with a disability. The relationship has evolved over time and so have the rights of parents and students with disabilities. As in any relationship, disagreements are inevitable. Disagreements can arise and, if left unresolved, can become adversarial. If these disagreements are not able to be resolved at the local level, state complaints, mediation, and/or due process are options for resolution. Once either a parent and/or school district seeks resolution outside of the IEP team, power is removed from the team and can be financially and emotionally costly.

Summary of Study

This chapter provides a summary of key findings from parent questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires were provided to parents through the student’s case manager and mailed back to the researcher with a provided self-addressed envelope. A total of six interviews were conducted with parents who conveyed that they were willing to participate in the interview portion of the study. Four of the six parents chosen for the interview expressed they had a disagreement within the last held IEP. Two additional
interviews were completed with parents who did not indicate a disagreement took place at their last IEP meeting. The first research question addressed preventative strategies the parent felt contributed to the IEP process. The second question identified factors the parents felt promoted collaboration during the IEP process and during points of disagreement. Interviews provided more in-depth perspectives of select parents, all of which indicated a desire to find the best possible educational opportunities for their students. Key themes that emerged from the data included:

- Theme 1: Baseline understanding of special education and the IEP process
- Theme 2: Access to support
- Theme 3: Being heard and the importance of the parent’s voice
- Theme 5: Need for a continuum of support to work through disagreements
- Theme 6: Trust is earned

**Theme 1: Baseline Understanding of Special Education and the IEP Process**

Prior to a child being identified as a student with a disability, intakes are held, assessments are completed, and parents are asked to provide consent. During this process, parents are to be provided a copy of their parental rights and procedural safeguards per the Code of Federal Regulations Section E Procedural Safeguards. These parental rights and procedural safeguards provide information regarding the educational rights of students with disabilities and their parents.

Although data from the research revealed that parents were notified of who was attending the IEP meetings, and they were provided a “packet” of their rights, there was no evidence from those interviewed that they truly understood their parental rights and procedural safeguards as their child entered into special education. In fact, multiple
parents stated that it took years for them to learn about their rights, and they had to seek the knowledge on their own. This finding contradicts what Friend and Cook (2007) suggested as a defining characteristic of collaboration, parity among the participants so there is equal power in the decision-making process. More specifically, individuals need to share their resources so that there is not an imbalance of knowledge and, in turn, control. Similar to the research study by Blue-Banning et al. (2004), the results of this research revealed that parents felt they have limited access to information. In order for parents to have a complete understanding of the student’s ongoing development and educational progress, communication is essential through the entire process (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

In Urban SELPA, parents are typically provided a copy of the assessment reports and draft IEP goals at the IEP meeting. This has been the practice for many years, in large part due to the amount of time it takes to complete assessment reports and the impacted number of students on special educators’ caseloads. That being said, a baseline of understanding is essential so that parents can make fully informed decisions and understand their role in the IEP development and process. Parent 5 stated that if she had received the assessment results or proposed IEP goals, even three days prior, she would have had the opportunity to more meaningfully participate. Without this knowledge, there was an imbalance of power, diminished communication, and lack of equity in the process. Sharing of resources, whether it is via a draft or summary of assessment scores, can lead to increased collaboration and more positive beliefs and attitudes (Friend & Cook, 2007). Results of this study suggested that parents would benefit from a baseline understanding of their parental rights prior to their first IEP meeting so there is not a
perception that information is being concealed or that their input is not valued. Parent 4 mentioned during her first IEP meetings that she did not know how to navigate the system; she had to seek out support from staff outside of the IEP team in order to be heard and have her concerns about her child considered. She felt, “alone.”

**Theme 2: Access to Support**

Collaboration implies individuals directly interact and work together to engage in shared decision-making. Friend and Cook (2007) explained that as successful collaboration takes place, trust and respect increase. Conversely, when there is little to no opportunity for interaction and sharing of resources, there is limited opportunity to learn to build trust.

The parents interviewed revealed that they did not seek support in times of confusion or when overwhelmed. Many sought their own knowledge and did not rely on school district professionals to support them. Parent 1 explained that she felt “pressured” to continue with the IEP meeting even though she was overwhelmed. Parent 3 explained that she does not know who to ask when she has questions about her son’s IEP, and she has never reached out to ask for support even in time of disagreement. She shared, “she just doesn’t” ask for help. Parent 4 found an old family friend of her husbands in the field of education to assist them in their time of need. Although the family friend was not in the field of special education, she was able to coach them through the process. Educators and school leaders can use the insights these parents have provided to create avenues to increase this dialogue and trust.
Theme 3: Being Heard and the Importance of a Parent’s Voice

Fisher et al. (2011) explained that as human beings, we have difficulty communicating clearly due to our different perceptions and emotions. The authors revealed “three big problems in communication” as 1) lack of communication, 2) lack of truly hearing what the other person is saying and 3) misunderstanding” (p. 35). Ruppar and Gaffney’s (2011) research revealed that school districts often focus on the legal requirements of the IEP and miss important conversation taking place by IEP team members. Parents repeatedly explained through comments and interviews that they did not feel what they were trying to communicate was truly heard. Fisher et al. (2011) explained that it is impossible to effectively communicate if active listening is not taking place. Parent 2 explicitly stated that if the IEP truly heard what she was trying to communicate during the first IEP meeting, she feels it would not have taken four additional meetings to move through the process. Parent 2 was not the only parent to express concern about being truly heard; all parents interviewed expressed the same concerns.

Adment (2008) spoke about a continuum of involvement of parents ranging from simply being informed by the school district about information concerning their child to fully participating in setting goals for their child and shared decision-making. The educational system cannot operate in isolation and must take into consideration the whole child, not just the child while at school. As Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems theory conveys, there is an interactive relationship between several systems in the life of a child. With this in mind, the parent’s voice, regardless of the amount of formal educational experience or IEP attendance, needs to be valued. Specifically, parents’
bring a voice to the IEP team of that outside of the educational environment, but equally as valuable when constructing goals and program planning. As Parent 3 explained:

I would have liked for them to, I mean, I am his mother and I felt like I know my son better than they do and I understand that I am not professional, but I would have liked them to take into consideration what I bring to their attention and what I feel my son needs.

School district professionals must convey a level of interest and provide opportunities for parents’ voices to be heard during IEP meetings. This is predicated on the comfortability and level of trust of the parent with the school district. According to Lake and Billingsley (2000), without trust, parents are less likely to speak during the IEP meeting, take risks, and agree to what is being said by the school district professionals.

**Theme 4: Need for a Continuum of Support to Work through Disagreements**

Parents in this study expressed that they did not rely on school district professionals to support them when they had concerns or disagreements. According to Lake and Billingsley (2000), one of the eight categories that can escalate and deescalate parent-school conflict is knowledge. The researchers defined knowledge as problem-solving techniques and strategies to deescalate conflict. Although disagreements and conflict may be inevitable in any relationship, the ability to problem-solve disagreements around IEP-related issues is not knowledge the parents who participated in this questionnaire said they had. Parents who were interviewed sought outside support (i.e. friend, attorney, or another teacher) to help them problem solve.

School district leaders should consider putting systems into place that teach preventative strategies and problem-solving strategies so the IEP team can work through
their disagreements within the context of the IEP team. These strategies can include effective communication and active listening.

**Theme 5: Trust is Earned**

As parents learned to navigate the system, tensions eased and trust was built. Stoner and Angell (2006) found that as parents’ trust evolved, so did their role in their child’s education. Specifically, when parents had high levels of trust, their roles became more supportive to educational professionals, but when there were low levels of trust, their roles were spent negotiating and monitoring what was going on both within the educational environment and with educational professionals. This study revealed that the trust of parents was predicated on how educational professionals cared for their students and communicated with parents regarding their child’s progress. Ongoing communication played a key role, as noted by one parent’s recommendation, “Keep communication with all IEP team members throughout the school year. You'll get comfortable with everyone your child will be in contact with at school and its’ one less thing to worry about” (Participant 1). Another parent felt there was too much “red tape” and too many procedures to go through that hindered communication and trust. Parent 5 felt that the district was not forthright in what they have to offer parents and students with regards to services and placements. She indicated parents must “wait and see what is offered or find out from other parents.”

When trust was broken, either due to lack of student progress or lack of staff follow through, collaboration was reduced and in some instances, parents turned to legal support to navigate the process. Educators need to understand the importance of
communication and follow through in a timely manner to build and maintain trust and collaborative relationships with parents.

**Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The results of this study give rise to the voice of parents and the need for professional learning opportunities to be provided to both parents and educational professionals around collaboration. Since collaboration is predicated on trust, it is important for all members of the IEP team, parents, and educators alike, to learn how to build and maintain that trust through effective communication.

Parents as equal members of the IEP team need time to develop their knowledge and baseline understanding of their role in the IEP process, including knowledge about their parental rights and procedural safeguards. School leaders can set-up opportunities to connect parents to this very specialized knowledge through trainings and community outreach. By creating a better understanding of the IEP, parents will likely feel less intimidated and overwhelmed and will be better equipped to contribute valuable input to the development of the IEP.

Educational leaders can help dismantle barriers to communication and improve access to support by creating policies and practices that encourage parent outreach. Parents should not hesitate to ask for support when either in need of increasing their knowledge or when they have concerns about their student’s IEP. As access increases, opportunities for collaboration and, in turn, trust should also increase. In the event parents continue to feel uncomfortable accessing these practices, parent advocates or parent centers could be utilized to ensure parents are being heard.
The IEP meeting allows educational professionals and parents the opportunity to put together an educational plan in the best interest of the student with the necessary supports and services. Each member brings added value to the table in his or her unique individual experiences with the student and their collective expertise. District staff needs to not only listen to the expertise of the parents, but truly hear what they are saying. In order for this to occur, staff needs training on actively hearing what is being said by parents and responding in ways that communicate respect and equity.

Relationships, regardless of their origin, take continuous hard work and dedication. The relationships among parents and district professionals are no different. Both parents and staff would benefit from training in collaboration. As Friend and Cook (2007) explained:

- Collaboration requires parity among participants.
- Collaboration is based on mutual goals.
- Collaboration depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision making.
- Individuals who collaborate share their resources.
- Individuals who collaborate share accountability for outcomes (p. 6).

Knowledge about collaboration is not necessarily innate and all parties involved in the IEP would benefit from the opportunity to learn more about strategies to promote effective communication.

**Recommendations**

Based on the data collected in this research study, it is recommended that districts, including Urban SELPA, work to create more collaborative relationships among parents...
students with disabilities and school districts. Feinberg et al. (2002) presented a
continuum of conflict and suggested specific strategies that can be used in each stage of
the continuum as follows: Stage 1: prevention, Stage 2: disagreement, Stage 3: conflict,
and Stage 4: procedural safeguards. The recommendations from this research address
Stage 1: preventative strategies based on the outcome of the data.

Students are identified at various ages so a child can be born with a disability and
qualify for special education and related services before entering school, at a very early
age, or at an older age, when the identified disability begins to impede the student’s
ability to learn. The law states that parents are to receive a copy of procedural safeguards
upon initial referral or parent request for evaluation. This is “the packet” often referred to
in the research.

The parents from Urban SELPA reported that they agreed that communication
(91%), collaboration (92%), trust (93%), equity (92%), and respect (82.2) are important
during the IEP process. Parents need an avenue by which to learn about their rights, the
rights of their student with a disability, and the IEP process. All parents interviewed
stated that they had to learn their rights on their own or from the help of a friend. It
would help to provide this information to parents prior to the student’s first IEP meeting
and continue to help parents learn their rights to ensure their needs are continuously being
met. The next section provides preventative strategies to support parents before, during,
and after IEP meetings.

**Prior to the IEP Meeting**

- The school district should offer parent support groups for students entering the
district birth through five years. This is a critical time for parents as they learn
about their infants and toddlers and the role of the school district in the early years of intervention. The school district can provide a parent support group to help parents learn how to articulate the strengths and weakness of their child. The group should be more therapeutic than process orientated.

- The school district should offer a series of parent trainings for newly identified students with disabilities. Parents can benefit from learning with one another and from each other. The training series could be co-taught with a parent and educator. The trainings should be offered in levels: beginning, intermediate, and advanced.

- The special education department should train certificated personnel on how to support parents as their child is identified as a student with a disability. Training topics should include 1) how to convey data about the student to the parent’s prior to the IEP meeting even if not in the form of a completed assessment, 2) how to use active listening and hear the concerns and input of the parent, and 3) ways to include the parent throughout the IEP process.

During the IEP Meeting

It is critical for the IEP team to ensure collaborative practices that include communication, trust, equity, and respect.

Communication. Fisher et al. (2011) explained that communication can often create a problem in one of three ways: 1) lack of communication, 2) lack of truly hearing what the other person is saying, and 3) misunderstanding what was said. To avoid the above three potential problems with communications, IEP teams should be trained in utilizing active listening techniques so members can truly understand what is being said.
by others at IEP meetings. It is only when one understands the communicative intent of what is being said that s/he can effectively respond to that (Fisher et al., 2011). If a message lacks clarity about the communicative intent of a member of an IEP team, this can affect not only the relationship within the team but the planning and decision-making as well. Ruppar and Gaffney (2011) cautioned that too much emphasis on procedural compliance during an IEP can hinder communication and can greatly affect decision-making. School district personnel should be trained to focus more on the development of the IEP, which includes capturing parental input and collaboration by the IEP team, while still meeting the legal requirements of the IEP.

**Trust.** Blue-Banning et al. (2004) found parents defined trust as reliability, safety, and discretion. Comments from parents in this study revealed that parents trusted the district when they felt their child was cared for, communication was evident, their child was making progress, and staff did what they said they were going to do. Trust builds over time and holds the principals of collaboration together (Turnbull et al., 2006). Understanding how what we say and do affects how we can build or destroy trust is important when training district staff.

**Equity.** Equity can influence participation and decision making during the IEP team meeting. The perception that because district staff are more knowledgeable about the field of special education often lends parents to assume their contribution is of less value. Equity in the IEP team should not be misused to mean equal. Each member of the IEP team should bring forward their contributions based on their area of expertise. Training should begin to change the cultural perception that appears to exist in Urban SELPA that parents’ expertise is not of equal importance thus creating an inequity within
the IEP team. Training should include ways to best capture the contributions of parents and document how their contributions affected the decision-making process.

**Respect.** Culture or lifestyle was positive throughout the research study. Parent respondents mostly attributed respect to the way the district handled potential language barriers. However, two parents explained that they felt respected when their input was considered. IEP teams should be taught ways that inclusiveness can be fostered during the IEP process, as evident by recognizing and respecting individual differences and qualities. This training should include how to interpret verbal and body language, listening techniques, and how our own actions and words can impact others. When respect is apparent, its influence can lead the way for difficult conversations and solution driven outcomes, when needed.

Having preventative strategies intact during the IEP process can assist IEP teams in getting through times of disagreements, which are inevitable in any relationship. Feinberg et al. (2002) explained that the onset of disagreement does not mean that trust or communication are broken, but rather that conflict is only emerging; IEP teams can work through these disagreements if taught the appropriate strategies including: separating the people from the problem, focusing on interests and not positions, listening to all possible solutions prior to making a decision, and agreeing to results that are based on objective standards (Fisher et al., 2011).

**After the IEP Meeting**

Immediately following all IEP meetings, responsibilities should be adhered to and followed through. District staff need to learn techniques to organize their next steps
following each IEP meeting. As Parent 1, Student 2 explained, “Do what you say and say what you do.” This follow through helps to maintain trust and collaboration.

In the event resolution of disagreements are not possible within the context of the IEP team, Urban SELPA should create a process that allows parents to navigate through disagreements/conflict without having to seek the expense of legal counsel. This could include parent-to-parent connections, support from a neutral facilitator to attend the IEP meeting, and alternative meeting options to work through conflict that is not able to be resolved with the current IEP team.

The overall purpose of the above recommendations is to prevent the dismantling of the parent-district relationships so parents and educators can focus on the needs of the student.

**Generalizability**

This study took place in a single district SELPA, and only those parents with students in preschool through third grade who have held one or more IEPs were included. Because the knowledge regarding special education and access to resources increases for parents with the number of IEPs held, the results of this research may be different for those parents have held more than the IEPs held by the parents in this study.

All participants were from a single district SELPA from Southern California. Urban SELPA consists of a vast difference in the average household value and gross income depending on where a student lives. It is not known to the researcher if experiences of the parent varied depending on where in the SELPA the parent’s lived or if these experiences could translate to another SELPA with differing socio-economic status. Thus, the results of this study may not generalize to all SELPAs in California.
The study captures the perspectives of 75 parent participants whose students qualified for special education services and attended a public school setting. The data concerning the specific disabilities of the students were not collected. The five interviewees selected to participate in the qualitative phase of the study were taken from within the 75 initial participants. The majority of respondents were months (86.7%) and all interviewees were mothers as well. Finally, research was conducted in a single district SELPA. Not every SELPA is considered a single district SELPA and can have more than one district within its jurisdiction unlike Urban SELPA.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The following limitations and recommendations for further research are noted:

- The results of this study represent parents’ perspectives and did not take into account the perspectives of district staff. Further research should explore the perspective of district staff and their experiences with effective collaboration during the IEP meeting.

- All questionnaires were given to the parents of students in grades preschool through third grade who met the study parameters. There was no follow-up by the researcher to ensure the case manager remembered to send home the envelopes that included a description of the research, contact information, and questionnaire; thus, participants could contact the researcher if additional explanation was needed. More participants may have participated had the researcher followed up with the case managers. In fact, 12 additional completed questionnaires were received after July 15, 2016 and not included in the study.
• It is also important to note that the researcher is the director of the special education department in this single district SELPA and acts as both the SELPA and special education director. Parents were made aware of the role of the researcher and, in turn, this could have affected the outcomes. For instance, parents may have been more likely to return the questionnaire if the researcher was in a supervisory role in the district.

• Some parents were of a different ethnicity than the researcher and spoke a language other than English. This may have limited the conversation and the input provided.

**Conclusion**

Parents as equal partners in the IEP process created a relationship between parents of students with disabilities and educational professionals with a common charge of developing and implementing an education program in the least restrictive environment. Collaborative practices help to encourage and sustain the working IEP relationships. If the IEP team, parents, and school districts encounter disagreements, and they are unable to work through them, decision making power can be taken away from the IEP team and placed in the hands of mediator or judges. As was evident in the parent responses on the questionnaires and interviews, disagreements start at the very basic level within the IEP team around a variety of reasons. These minor disagreements, if not addressed appropriately, can turn into conflict. Conflict is inevitable; however, by training and employing preventative strategies, parents of students with disabilities and school district professionals can learn to collaborate and maintain working relationships. The parents in this research have provided data to convey the need for more preventative strategies so
that educational professionals can remove barriers to collaboration and encourage equity among IEP team members.
References


Retrieved from


Appendix A:

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
Information about Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study about the contributing factors that promote collaborative relationships about Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) between school districts and parents of students with disabilities. This form provides you with information about the study. The study has been approved for conduct by the California State Polytechnic University, to comply with federal guidelines for ethical research practices. The study has also been approved for conduct in the by the Superintendent, .

Jennifer Yales is conducting the study for a dissertation supervised by Dr. Amy Gimino, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. Jennifer Yales will describe the study and answer any questions about the study and your rights as a research participant. If you have additional questions, you can contact the researchers using the information below.

If you have any questions about research participants’ rights, complaints about the informed consent process of this research study, or experience an adverse event (something goes wrong), please contact the Compliance Office within California State Polytechnic University, Information is . If you have any questions about the district’s approval of the study, you can contact .

Jennifer Yales          Dr. Amy Gimino
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Your participation is entirely voluntary and will contribute greatly to this research. Thank you for your willingness to participate.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to identify strategies that parents feel contribute to a collaborative IEP team relationship, in order to better promote collaborative relationships between parents of students with disabilities and educational professionals in school districts.

Study Methods: The study uses questionnaires provided to parents who have a student with disabilities who is in grades preschool through third grade and are currently eligible for special education and related services and enrolled in the . In addition, six parents will be asked to be interviewed based on their responses to the questionnaire completed.

Topics Discussed in the Questionnaire
1. What preventative strategies to parents report as being part of the IEP process?
2. What factors do parents identify as promoting working collaborative relationships during the IEP process?
   1. during points of disagreement?
   2. during points of conflict (if applicable)

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in an interview is completely voluntary. At any point you can choose not to answer the questions or to stop the interview. Consent forms and transcripts will be destroyed in three years.

Confidentiality: Your answers will be confidential. All information about individual respondents and responses obtained in connection with this study will be separated from the data. Pseudonyms will be used for respondent names and other identifiers such as schools or positions.

Commitment and Compensation: Your total participation in the study will take 1 response to a questionnaire (15 minutes) and potentially 1 interview (45 minutes). You will not receive financial or other compensation for participation in the study.

Possible Benefits and Risks: You will not receive any direct benefits or monetary rewards from participating in this study. Your participation is intended to contribute to the research and improve practice of improving collaborative relationships between parents and school personnel. You can ask the researcher for a summary of the study findings.

We expect that there are minimal risks of participating in this study. The results of the study will potentially be published in an academic journal, at a conference, or in a district presentation. Confidentiality means that you will not be revealed as a participant in the study or in any responses that can be attributed to you in a publication or report.
The risk of accidentally disclosing your identity is minimized by careful procedures of data collection, de-identification, and storage. The risk to you of having your identity associated with the study is minimal given that the topic of collaboration is a standard educational practice. No specific answers will be identified with you as a participant. Any information that you want deleted from the interview data will be removed during the study.

Jennifer Yales, Special Education Director, is an employee responsible for the Special Education program. She has no supervisory or reporting responsibilities about information you provide except as required by law. She has designed confidential interviews to get in-depth data according to professional standards for ethical research conduct. The interviews are voluntary and confidential, meaning that the data will be used only to support the collaborative practices between parents and school personnel during IEP meetings.

If you feel coerced or threatened by the request to participate in the study or respond to questions, you may contact Dr. Amy Gimino, dissertation chair, or the Compliance Office of Cal Poly Pomona’s Office of Research at (909) 869-4215.
Appendix B

Agreement to Participate in Research Study (Informed Consent)

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona IRB Protocol # IRB-16-97

Consent: I consent to participate in an interview for the study Creating and Maintaining Collaborative Working Relationships: Understanding Parent Perspectives of Collaboration During Individualized Education Program (IEP) Meetings.

I also consent to audio recording the interview for data analysis purposes. Should you agree to participate in an interview and should the researcher ask you to participate in an interview, you will be asked for permission to record the interview with a digital recorder to supplement written notes. You indicate agreement by initialing the statement on the consent form below. Recordings will be transcribed for data analysis and will not be used for any other purpose. They will be erased within 3 months of the interview. You have the right to request that specific responses are removed from recordings and transcripts during the study.

_____ (participant initial here)

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may decline to answer or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I can ask that specific responses be removed from recordings and transcripts during the study.

I have received a copy of the study information and this form for my records.
Print Participant Name _______________________________

Participant Signature _________________________________ Date _______________

I hereby certify that I have given an explanation to the above individual of the study and its risks and protections.

Researcher Signature _________________________________ Date _______________

If you have any questions, contact: Jennifer Yales (909) 559-1828 yalesjen@gmail.com or Dr. Amy Gimino, (909) 489-3511, agimino@cpp.edu
Appendix C: Questionnaires

**PARENT PERSPECTIVE OF COLLABORATION DURING THE INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP) MEETING**

Once completed, please complete this questionnaire and return it to Jennifer Yales utilizing the self-addressed stamped envelope provided by **May 15, 2016**. In order to maintain confidentiality, please do not return the questionnaire back to your child’s case manager. Only those questionnaires returned via mail will be used as a part of this study.

*Person completing this form:*  ____ Mother  ____ Father  ____ Other: ___________________

*My child is in:*  ____ preschool  ____ kindergarten  ____ 1st grade  ____ 2nd grade  ____ 3rd grade

*I have been to the following number of IEPs for my child:*  ____ Only 1 IEP  ____ two IEPs  ____ three IEPs  ____ four IEPs or more

*I attended the most recent IEP for my child:*  ____ Yes  ____ No

*If so, my role was as an*  ____ observer  ____ participant.

Please mark (with a “x”) the statement that most closely matches your opinion for the most recent IEP meeting you attended for your child.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Unsure or Not Applicable</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Prior to the IEP meeting, the IEP process was explained to me.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>2. I understand my parental rights and procedural safeguards.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>3. During the IEP meeting, I feel the IEP team collaborated.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>4. I felt I had equal decision making power during the IEP</td>
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127
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Unsure or Not Applicable</th>
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<td>meeting.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>5. There was a mutual understanding between myself and district employees about the goals for my child.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>6. I found it easy to communicate during the IEP meeting with the IEP team members.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>7. I felt heard in what I was trying to communicate during the IEP meeting.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>8. I feel there was open communication by all members of the IEP team.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>9. I felt what I had to contribute was taken into account prior to decisions being made about my child’s IEP.</td>
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<td>10. I trust that what was agreed to at the IEP meeting will be implemented.</td>
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<td>Statement</td>
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<td>11. I trust the IEP team members.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>12. Language barriers were addressed during the IEP.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>13. My culture was respected.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>14. I was able to share my concerns.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>15. There was a disagreement or disagreements during the IEP meeting regarding contents of the IEP.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>16. Collectively, the IEP team members were able to work through the disagreement and come to an agreement.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>17. Any disagreement(s) I had with the IEP have been resolved.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>18. My child’s IEP meeting experience was as I expected.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>Statement</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td>19. My relationship with the school improved as a result of the IEP meeting.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>20. Overall, my child’s IEP meeting was a positive experience.</td>
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<td>Please explain:</td>
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<td>21. What suggestions do you have for promoting working, collaborative IEP relationships?</td>
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<td>Answer:</td>
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<td>22. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview (the information you provide will remain confidential)?</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<td>If yes, please provide your name and contact information:</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAME:</td>
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<td>Email:</td>
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<td>Additional comments I would like to share:</td>
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You have finished completing this questionnaire. Please make sure you have answered all questions. Thank you for participating in this questionnaire.
Crear y Mantener Relaciones de Trabajo en Colaboración: Comprendiendo Perspectivas de los Padres de la Colaboración Durante las Reuniones del Programa de Educación Individualizado (IEP)

Una vez completado, por favor de regresar a Jennifer Yales utilizando el sobre proporcionado con estampilla y dirección para el 15 de mayo de 2016. Para poder mantener la confidencialidad, por favor no devuelva la encuesta al administrador del caso de su hijo. Solo aquellos cuestionarios devueltos por correo serán utilizados como parte de este estudio.

**Persona completando esta forma:**  ____ Madre  ____ Padre  ____ Otro:

**Mi hijo esta en:**  ___ preescolar  ___ kinder  ___ 1er grado  ___ 2do grado  ___ 3er grado

**He estado en el siguiente número de IEPs para mi hijo:**

___ Solo 1 IEP  ___ dos IEPs  ___ tres IEPs  ____ cuatro IEPs o más

**Asistí al IEP más reciente para mi hijo:**  ____ Si  ____ No

**Si es así, mi papel era como un:**  ____ observador  ____ participante.

Por favor marcar (con una “x”) la declaración que más se acerque a su opinión de la reunión más reciente del IEP que usted asistió de su hijo.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Declaración</th>
<th>Total Desacuerdo</th>
<th>De Acuerdo</th>
<th>Muy de Acuerdo</th>
<th>Inseguro o No Aplica</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Antes de la reunión del IEP, se me explicó el proceso del IEP.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>2. Entiendo mis derechos de padres y garantías procesales.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>3. Durante la reunión del IEP, siento que el equipo del IEP colaboró.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>4. Senti que tenia igual poder de decisión durante la reunión del IEP.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>5. Hubo un entendimiento mutual entre yo y los empleados del distrito sobre las metas de mi hijo.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>6. Encontre facil de comunicarme durante la reunión del IEP con los miembros del equipo del IEP.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>7. Me senti escuchado en lo que estaba tratando de comunicar durante la reunión del IEP.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>8. Siento que hubo comunicación abierta por todos los miembros del equipo del IEP.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>9. Siento lo que tenía que contribuir fue tomado en cuenta antes de tomar la decisión sobre el IEP de mi hijo.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>10. Confio en que lo acordado en la reunión del IEP sera implementado.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>11. Confio en los miembros del equipo del IEP.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Las barreras del idioma se abordaron durante el IEP.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>13. Mi cultura fue respetada.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>14. Fui capaz de compartir mis preocupaciones.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>15. Hubo un desacuerdo o desacuerdos durante la reunión del IEP sobre el contenido del IEP.</td>
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<td>Declaración</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>16. En conjunto, los miembros del equipo del IEP fueron capaces de trabajar a través del desacuerdo y llegar a un acuerdo.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>17. Cualquier desacuerdo que tuve con el IEP se han resuelto.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>18. La experiencia de la reunión del IEP de mi hijo era como lo esperaba.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>19. Mi relación con la escuela ha mejorado como resultado de la reunión del IEP.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>20. En general, la reunión del IEP de mi hijo fue una experiencia positiva.</td>
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<td>Por favor explique:</td>
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<td>21. Que sugerencias tiene usted para promover el trabajo, las relaciones de colaboración del IEP?</td>
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## Respuesta:

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<th>Muy de Acuerdo</th>
<th>Inseguro o No Aplica</th>
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22. ¿Estaría dispuesto a participar en una entrevista de seguimiento (la información que proporcione será confidencial)?

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En caso afirmativo, por favor proporcione su nombre e información de contacto:

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<tr>
<th>NOMBRE:</th>
<th>TELÉFONO:</th>
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Email:

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Comentarios adicionales que me gustaría compartir:

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*Ha terminado de completar esta encuesta.*  
*Por favor asegúrese de que ha contestado todas las preguntas.*  
*Gracias por participar en esta encuesta.*