# PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACHER SUPPORT RELATED TO THEIR CHILD'S INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLAN: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Linda Hester Henderson

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

Barbara Jordan-White, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Meredith Park, Ed. D., Committee Member

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine parents' experiences of the support they receive from their children's teachers when those children have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and attend public-school preschools. For this study, described support is defined as emotional, instrumental, or informational assistance, along with appraisal received from others during times of need. The theoretical framework for this study is Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of parental involvement and Epstein's parent involvement model, which identifies six types of family involvement. These theories fall under Bronfenbrenner's overarching ecological systems theory. The study includes 10 participants chosen through purposeful sampling. Participants are parents living in the Southeast United States whose children have an IEP and attend a public-school preschool. The study answers the central research question: How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-school preschool describe the support provided by their children's teachers? The study utilizes interviews, focus groups, and a review of documents to collect data. Interviews were transcribed and examined for emerging themes. Data analysis was conducted using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology and analysis procedures. Results of the study provide information on the lack of support, communication, trust, and advocacy that parents of public-school preschoolers whose children have an IEP receive from their child's teachers during the IEP process.

Keywords: collaboration, individual educational plan, preschoolers, support

## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Thedortis. Thedortis has been my calm amid my storms. His prayers, patience, encouragement, and continued prioritizing of my well-being have indeed been a gift from God. The completion of this dissertation is my testimony of God's ability to turn tragedy into triumph.

**Acknowledgments**

I want to acknowledge Dr. Barbara Jordan-White, my committee chair, and Dr. Meredith Park, my methodologist. The guidance and professionalism you have shown me throughout this dissertation process is nothing less than the love of God shining through you. I will forever be grateful.

I would also like to acknowledge my church family, The New Red Mountain Missionary Baptist Church. Your prayers have continually been felt through this journey. YOU HAVE PETITIONED GOD ON MY BEHALF when I have felt tired, discouraged, and spiritually drained. For that, I appreciate you.

Lastly, I acknowledge my parents, children, siblings, and extended family members. You all have had a significant influence on the person I have become. I could not have made it this far without you in my life. Know that where I succeed, you succeed. The Bible reminds me in Proverbs 3:27, “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (*ESV*).

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## List of Abbreviations

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Ecological Systems Theory (EST)

Epstein's Parent Involvement Model (EPIM)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's Model of Parent Involvement (HSMPI)

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDA)

Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Overview

In the fall of 2005, over 700,000 children attending public-school preschools received special education services (National Center for Learning Disabilities [NCLD], 2018). If a student enters public-school preschool with an Individualized Educational Plans (IEP), they receive special services to address their delays in linguistic, social, emotional, physical, and occupational needs. A student with an IEP can enter a public-school preschool program as early as three years of age (Zirkel, 2020). Because young students can have inexperienced parents developing an IEP, parents can become overwhelmed with what a student needs educationally and find that they need support from teachers. For example, a parent may not know how to help a child with speech difficulties or how to encourage the child's interactions with peers (Conger et al., 2019; Zirkel, 2020). Parents can experience great stress when young children with developmental delays are newly attending a school environment (Shaw, 2018). In addition, there has been little research involving the parental experience of teacher support during the IEP process when preschool children have IEPs and attend public-school preschools. This study examines how parents of preschoolers perceive teacher support related to their children's IEPs. This chapter consists of relevant background information on the research problem, the researcher's role, and the purpose of the study. In addition, this chapter includes the significance of the study, situation to self, the research questions, the definitions of essential terms, and concludes with a summary.

## Background

Students entering public-school preschool with IEPs have unique needs. Students' needs cause a great deal of stress for parents creating a need for support from teachers. Parents raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) reported greater levels of stress than parents with

typically developing children (Pepperell et al., 2018). Despite elevated stress levels, only limited information about parental experiences of teacher support when children have IEPs and attend preschool. The current study looks closely at how parents of public-school preschool children perceive the support they receive from teachers related to their children's IEPs and the IEP process.

**Historical Context**

The inclusion of students with disabilities has become a typical scene in general education classrooms across the United States. During the 2018-2019 school year, 7.1 million students between the ages of three and 21 received special education services, of which 33% had a specific learning disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act mandated that all states provide public education for students with disabilities (NCLD, 2018). The Regular Education Initiative of the 1980s set the stage for the political rally of parents seeking social justice for their children with disabilities (NCLD, 2018).

In 1975, the United States passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which mandated that public schools provide free and appropriate education to students with disabilities between the ages of six and 21 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The law is currently named Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The ESSA now includes preschool students ages three to five. The disabilities for which a student can receive special services can include but are not limited to physical, social, emotional, cognitive, language, or a combination of disabilities. Once identified, a student is given an IEP, which documents specific goals and sub-goals designed to develop the skills needed for the child to be successful (Musyoka & Clark, 2017).

When planning and implementing an IEP, parents, teachers, and support services must understand the process and purpose of an IEP (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

**Social Context**

The social context specific to preschooler students with IEPs includes students, their family environments, teachers, and service providers. Preschoolers attending public-school preschool settings and requiring IEPs are made eligible for special education services under one of 14 disability categories, which include ASD, deaf-blindness, deafness, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech-language impairment, traumatic brain energy, and visual impairment (ESSA, 2015). Research shows that individuals with ASD have trouble with social communication which can contribute to additional developmental delays (Ferguson et al., 2020). Further research has shown that preschoolers with disabilities struggle with adult and peer imitation, often resulting in an inability to imitate appropriate behaviors during play with their typically developing peers (Francis et al., 2020). In addition, Yu (2019) found that preschoolers with disabilities were often overlooked as play partners by their typically developing peers. Hence, preschoolers with disabilities have different social experiences than their typically developing peers. Therefore, developmental discrepancy requires the input and understanding of all stakeholders when developing an IEP to ensure that a child's IEP goals reflect the child's educational and social needs.

Likewise, there are social implications for parents who have preschoolers with IEPs. Yet, research has found that parents are often excluded, ignored, and challenged during IEP meetings (Mueller & Vick, 2019). For example, parents reported feeling belittled, unheard, and forced into decisions they did not agree on during IEP meetings (Kurth et al., 2020; Mueller & Vick, 2019).

Additionally, parents reported feeling socially awkward and overwhelmed during IEP meetings, leading them to shut down and not have their concerns heard (Kurth et al., 2020). Yet, parents are the primary stakeholder in their children's lives, and parental contributions to IEP decision-making are associated with positive outcomes for students and better interventions implemented for a child (Kurth et al., 2019; Mueller, 2017; Rispoli et al., 2018). Furthermore, parents' involvement in the social contexts of their preschoolers allows them to provide much-needed information about their children's strengths and needs (Kurth et al., 2019).

Participation in a public-school preschool special education program provides children and their families access to interventions that can address the special needs of children and prepare them for kindergarten (Conger et al., 2019). School personnel who instruct preschoolers with IEPs face many challenges (Yu, 2019). Often, teachers are more knowledgeable concerning the IEP process than parents (Kurth et al., 2019; Kurth et al., 2020). Therefore, teachers should strive to provide parents with support, collaboration, and involvement opportunities during the IEP process (Mueller & Vick, 2019). Studies demonstrate a positive educational impact when parents and teachers collaborate (Sucuoglu & Bakkalouglu, 2018; West et al., 2017). In addition, a solid and respectful relationship between parents and schools has a beneficial effect on the inclusion of those students with special educational needs (Stephenson et al., 2020). However, there is little data on parents' experiences about teacher support for them and their children with IEPs. Investigating how parents with preschoolers perceive teacher support related to their children's IEPs could provide the tools necessary for conducting more inclusive and effective IEP meetings, leading to better student outcomes.

**Theoretical Context**

As parents of public-school preschoolers seek to navigate the IEP process the need for support from their children's teachers is evident (Gershwin, 2020; Heiskanen et al., 2021). Understanding Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) assist in recognizing the critical connection between family and educational systems (Wood et al., 2018). EST further recognizes the importance of all systems working together because each plays a significant role in childhood development and learning (Wood et al., 2018). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) guides this research study. Additionally, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) model of parent involvement (HSMPI) and Epstein's (2018) six types of parental involvement model (EPIM) serve as supporting theories for this study. HSMPI suggests that parents can help their children's learning by involvement through encouragement, modeling, reinforcement, and instruction (Sheldon & Turner-Vorbeck, 2019). EPIM encourages collaboration among schools, homes, and communities by using six types of involvement (Epstein & Sanders, 2009).

Parental support is needed during the IEP process (Mueller & Vick, 2019). With EST as the theoretical foundation for the study, HSMPI and EPIM provide further elaboration regarding the complex social context surrounding preschool students. These theories recognize the importance and the interconnectedness of each family member to the family system and the potential educational impact. Also, the interacting theories acknowledge the need for outside agencies to recognize and respect the role of the family in a child's education and development. The theoretical significance of this study is that the implementation of support, collaboration, and parental involvement during the IEP process is needed by parents of public-school preschoolers (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Epstein, 2018; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

## Situation to Self

My career as an educator in the public school system started over 15 years ago. I have worked as a teacher in public school settings in elementary, middle, and high school classes. I have taught in an inclusive classroom as well as in self-contained settings. Working in different classroom settings allowed me to work with students who have IEPs and their families.

I am currently in my sixth year of teaching in a public-school preschool self-contained classroom. All my students receive special education services and have IEPs. I genuinely love the work I do. Serving the families of these children allows me the opportunity to participate in all aspects of the IEP process. Unfortunately, I have observed firsthand the frustrations parents have displayed during developing and implementing IEPs. Research shows that parents often lack support and collaboration from their children's teachers regarding the IEP process (Mueller & Vick, 2019).

My desire to give a voice to parents' lived experiences of support from their children's teachers regarding the IEP process has led me to conduct this transcendental phenomenological study. Each participant experienced the same phenomenon but viewed their experiences differently. Many different worldviews impacted the experiences provided in the data. The social constructivism paradigm guided the study because it is concerned with ways knowledge is constructed through social interactions. Creswell and Poth (2018) identified the four types of philosophical assumptions as ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological. The ontological assumption allows me to report how participants view their experiences differently. The epistemological assumption will enable me to combine what I know about the phenomenon studied and what I do not know. The axiological belief addresses any bias I may have brought to the study. Finally, the methodological assumption allowed me to create a research design that

logically supports the investigation. The transcendental phenomenological method provides a better understanding of the lived experiences of the parents included in the study and reports participants' insights and knowledge.

## Problem Statement

The problem is a lack of collaboration and support between parents of preschoolers who have IEPs attending public schools and their children's teachers (Burke et al., 2018; Siegel, 2017). Children who enter a public-school preschool setting with IEPs are between the ages of three and five (South Carolina Department of Education, 2020). All students with IEPs have language, physical, cognitive, social, or emotional developmental delays (South Carolina Department of Education, 2020). Head Start Programs, which provide school readiness skills to children from low-income families, had 10% of their student population identified as having some type of disability (Rispoli et al., 2018). For some parents, learning about their child's developmental delay is not only recent news; it often coincides with the first time their child has been in a school setting. Parents facing unfamiliar information and circumstances need the support of teachers. Parent-teacher relationships are one of the critical essentials for effective preschool inclusion (Sucuoglu & Bakkalouglu, 2018).

Zeitilin and Curic (2014) conducted a study to gain parents' experiences for making the IEP process more meaningful. The study interviewed 20 parents whose children were both between the ages of five and 18 and had IEPs (Zeitilin & Curic, 2014). In this study, parents described the IEP process as depersonalized, highly emotional, and hard to understand. In addition, the parents felt excluded from the process (Zeitilin & Curic, 2014). Doyle et al. (2017) completed a study on the experience of support during IEP transition meetings. Sixty-nine parents responded to a survey, and eight parents participated in interviews. Parents in the study

had children with IEPs in kindergarten, fifth grade, or sixth grade. The study found that 33% of the parents never had discussions concerning IEP meetings with any educational personnel before the meetings. As a result, they felt compelled to demand support from school personnel concerning the IEP process (Doyle et al., 2017). Overall, parents have previously reported a lack of support and feelings of frustration regarding the IEP process (Doyle et al., 2017; West et al., 2017).

Current legislation mandates parental participation in decision-making during the IEP process (ESSA, 2015). Eliminating the voice of parents during the IEP process is a violation of parental rights, and it excludes valuable information concerning interventions and the strengths and needs of a child who has an IEP (Kurth et al., 2019). Furthermore, if teachers do not understand the parents' experiences of their support, they will not be able to support parents (Doyle et al., 2017) adequately. Unfortunately, current research does not sufficiently address parental experiences of support regarding IEPs for preschoolers. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach focuses on the experiences shared by parents in the Southeastern United States who have preschool children with IEPs attending public schools. The experiences pertain to the support received from teachers related to the IEP process.

## Purpose Statement

This transcendental phenomenological study examines parents' experiences of the support they receive from their children's teachers when those children have IEPs and attend public-school preschools. Experienced support is defined as emotional, instrumental, or informational assistance and appraisal received from others during times of need (Ioannou et al., 2019). The theory guiding the study is EST, which focuses on the ideas of Bronfenbrenner. EST is built on the ecological contexts, which focus on the need for support from parents, schools,

and communities. In addition, HSMPI and EPIM help support a deeper understanding of EST (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Epstein, 2018).

## Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that it provides parents and teachers with information that could lead to better parent-teacher collaboration and support from teachers during the IEP process. This study is essential to parents, teachers, and students because it includes vital parental experiences with the current body of related literature. Describing the experiences with teacher support as reported by parents of preschoolers in public schools within the Southeastern United States provides empirical, theoretical, and practical significance to the study.

### Empirical

Empirically, investigating the described support for parents of public-school preschoolers with an IEP and interpreting those responses from parents adds to the body of research literature about the described experiences of the group. The research raises the need for better communication with families (Rios et al., 2020). Parents have felt that a lack of support and collaboration with teachers brought about significant problems (Seigel, 2017). Parents of children with IEPs often lack an understanding of the process and implementation of an IEP (West et al., 2017). Because parents need support from teachers, it is crucial to understand their experiences when seeking to strengthen that type of support (Conger et al., 2019; Doyle et al., 2017).

### Theoretical

As parents of public-school preschoolers navigate the IEP process the need for support and collaboration from their child’s teachers is evident. The need for teachers to support and collaborate with parents is stressed through Bronfenbrenner's (1994) EST which is the theoretical

framework of this study. This theory is built on the ecological contexts and focuses on the need for support from parents, schools, and communities. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original EST consisted of four interconnecting systems. First, the microsystem includes the interactions between children, families, schools, and neighborhoods. Second, the mesosystem connects the child-teacher dynamic to parents. Third, the ecosystem describes aspects where children are not directly involved but will feel the positive or negative effects from others involved in the microsystem. Fourth, the macrosystem refers to cultural values, customs, and laws (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017). A fifth system, the chronosystem, consists of environmental events and transitions experienced by the child. It later added to the other four systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The interaction between these systems promotes child development and learning, making it imperative that all systems work together (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017).

For this study, the theoretical framework also utilizes HSMPI (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) believed that parents could help their children succeed by becoming involved through encouragement, modeling, reinforcement, and instruction (Sheldon & Turner-Vorbeck, 2019). HSMPI emphasizes the need for school personnel to provide parents with the opportunity to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In addition, EPIM developed by Epstein (2018) is utilized for this study and includes the issues of parenting, communicating with schools, volunteering, facilitating learning at home, participating in decisions, and collaborating among the community. Together, these three theories address the need for support and collaboration among parents, teachers, and the school community. Therefore, investigating parents' experiences of teacher support related to their children's IEPs using EST, HSMPI, and EPIM

addresses a theoretical need in the research to help all stakeholders prepare for IEP meetings by emphasizing collaboration.

### Practical

This study provides evidence to teachers and public-school preschools about parents' experiences and needs during the IEP process. The ESSA requires parents to have input in the development and decision-making of their children's IEPs (ESSA, 2015). However, research shows that parents' information and decision-making were lacking (Kurth et al., 2019; Kurth et al., 2020; Mueller & Vick, 2019; Rios et al., 2020). Parents should be included in their children's IEP planning to ensure that goals are met both at school and home (Wood et al., 2018). However, research suggests that parents do not feel that they have a voice and are often not allowed to be fully involved in the IEP process (Burke et al., 2018; West et al., 2017; Woods et al., 2018). This transcendental research study explores parents' experiences about the support they receive from their children's teachers related to the IEP process. Their descriptions provide themes about parent-teacher collaboration on IEPs that could help strengthen collaborative relationships surrounding IEP development and implementation and meet legal mandates.

## Research Questions

One central question and three sub-questions guide this study. The theoretical framework of EST, HSMPI, and EPIM validates the research questions (Bronfenbrenner 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Epstein, 2018). Throughout the findings and discussion, I describe parents' experiences with children in public-school preschools regarding the support they receive from their children's teachers during the IEP process.

## Central Research Question

The central research question for this proposed study asks: *How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-school preschool describe the support provided by their children's teachers?* Through open-ended interview questions and focus group prompts, parents told their experiences of teacher support. This type of question allows the researcher to obtain data that will generate a textual and organizational account of the participants' experiences and provide an understanding of the shared experiences of the participants (Kurth et al., 2020).

## Sub-Question 1

The first sub-question seeks to give the researcher an understanding of how parents of public-school preschoolers describe their role and the teachers' role during the IEP process. The question asks: *How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-school preschool perceive their role and the teacher's role during the IEP process?* This question builds on collaboration's relevance, suggesting that parents become involved based on their described role (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) argued that parental involvement functions on a parent's belief about parental roles and responsibilities. In addition, the parents' understanding of parents' and teachers' roles during the IEP process identifies common themes.

## Sub-Question 2

The second sub-question asks: *What are parents' experiences of the ways teachers can support them during the IEP process?* This second sub-question continues to develop the ideas of EPIM by Epstein (2018). Epstein's theory promotes decision-making that includes parents' beliefs and input. This question gives me an understanding of the type of support parents require during the IEP process.

**Sub-Question 3**

The final sub-question is: *What are parents' experiences of the support and relationship challenges between parents and public-school preschool teachers during the IEP process?* Sub-question 3 allows me to understand the challenges that parents have experienced during the IEP process. This question supports valuable data collection for a phenomenological study because it helps develop themes based on parents' experiences related to the phenomenon that this study addresses. Additionally, this question supports Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) EST that suggests both educators and parents play a role in a child's success. Bronfenbrenner asserts that the interaction of his five ecological systems promotes positive learning outcomes in children.

## Definitions

1. *Collaboration* – A method of problem-solving between teachers, students, community members, and families to understand all stakeholders' influences (Zion & Sobel, 2014).
2. *Individualized Educational Plan (IEP)* – A written curriculum-based pedagogical document to support a student's learning process and growth (Räty et al., 2017).
3. *Preschoolers* – Children ages three to five (ESSA, 2015).
4. *Support* – Emotional, instrumental, or informational assistance and appraisal received from others during times of need (Hott et al., 2020).
5. *Teachers* – For this study, teachers and service providers interact on behalf of schools in the IEP process.

## Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study aims to give parents of public-school preschoolers with IEPs a platform to convey the described support that they received from their children's teachers during the IEP process. This study is essential to meet a current need within

the body of relevant research. There is little to no research on parents who have public-school preschool children with IEPs attending public schools' experience of support for teachers’.

All stakeholders must understand these experiences related to IEP development implementation and plan accordingly. There is a need for further investigation and description of parents' experiences. Additionally, my motivation for conducting the study is to continue to help parents become involved in their children’s education through participation in the IEP process. The study addresses the problem that parents of preschool children appear disconnected from the IEP process, which created relevance to the study because it gathers the voiced experiences and insights from those parents. The study adds to the literature for preschool IEP development and parental involvement as guided by EST. The study results inform other parents in similar circumstances, help teachers develop ways to improve parental experiences about the IEP process and facilitate improved cooperation regarding preschool education when children have IEPs, leading to better student outcomes after the IEP process. Along with the research questions and the definitions of essential terms in this chapter, a further investigation of the current research literature informs the scope of the study.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Overview

This literature review aims to present the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) ecological systems theory (EST) as the leading theory for this study. Additionally, Joyce Epstein's (2018) six types of parent involvement model (EPIM) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) model of parental involvement (HSMPI) will serve to support EST further. Following an explanation of the theoretical frameworks, an in-depth literature review helps to shape the background for the study's significance. The current research describes parents of public-school preschoolers' experiences regarding the support they receive from their children's teachers related to the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process. The teachers for this study are called the children's classroom instructors and any other school-related personnel involved in the IEP process. In addition, the literature discusses the evolution of special-education law, the IEP process, reported parents' experiences on support, the importance of parental involvement, and the importance of collaboration. A summary and explanation of the gap in the literature conclude Chapter Two.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework informs the problem or topic (Collins & Stockton, 2018). In addition, the theoretical framework provides a guide to develop research questions collect, analyze, and interpret data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). EST, the theoretical framework for this qualitative study, was produced by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994). Figure 1 shows that all five systems within the theory surround a child's life and sometimes overlap. Supporting approaches for the study include Epstein's (2018) EPIM, which identifies six types of family

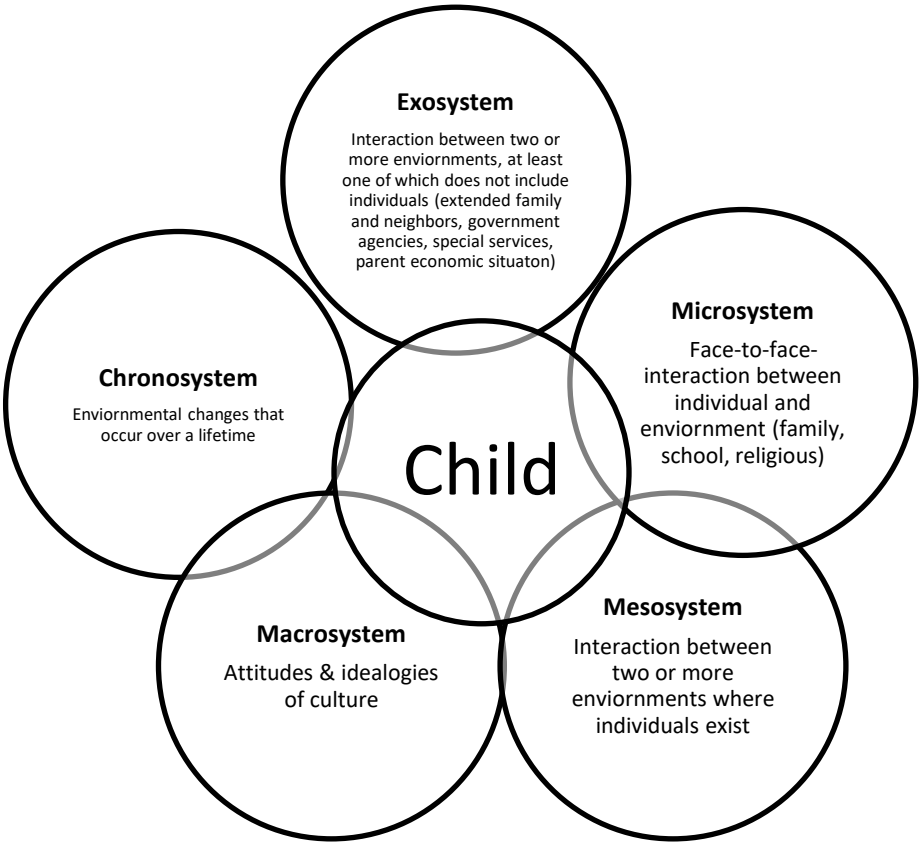
involvement, as seen in Figure 2, and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) HSMPI, as seen in Figure 3.

**Bronfenbrenner's EST**

EST describes how a child's development is shaped and influenced by different environments, including parental influences and involvement (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1994). Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994) compared the ecological environment to "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994). EST also organizes the different systems from the most intimate to the broadest. It asserts that both educators and parents play a role in a child's success. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994).

**Figure 1**

*Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems*



The first level of the EST hierarchy of systems is the microsystem. The microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by developing persons in different settings where they directly interact with an environment, such as in the home, school, community environment, sports activities, academic clubs, group projects, and church-based activities (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017; Woods et al., 2018). The immediate family has the most significant influence on this system (Panopoulos & Drossinou-Korea, 2020; Woods et al., 2018).

Level 2 in the hierarchy of EST is the mesosystem. The mesosystem involves the connections of homes to schools, peer groups to families, and families to communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994; Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017; Ruppar et al., 2017). The mesosystem shows the need for loving adults, outside of parents, to interact in caring ways towards students because of the multiple types of interactions (Erickson et al., 2018; Pham & Lin, 2019).

The exosystem is the third level of EST. The exosystem indirectly affects a child because a child experiences the impact of different environments but does not directly engage with those environments. (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017; Newman & Newman, 2020; Ruppar et al., 2017). The macrosystem, level 4 of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) EST hierarchy, involves society and includes culture's attitudes, such as worldviews, customs, and morals (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017; Hong et al., 2021; Phelps & Sperry, 2021).

The fifth level of EST is the chronosystem. The chronosystem reflects the changes or consistency that occur over a person's lifetime (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017; Ruppar et al., 2017). For example, a change could involve family structure, physical living address, or place of employment for the parent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994; Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017; Ruppar et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2018). The chronosystem can also include societal changes such as pandemics, wars, or economic crises (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994; Cheng et al., 2020).

EST is built upon ecological contexts, which focus on the need for support from parents, schools, and communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erickson et al., 2018; Hirano et al., 2018). As these ecological systems intertwine, experiences in one system can determine how someone will react in another system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994; Newman & Newman, 2018). The components of this framework inform the findings and discussion throughout the study by helping to understand the interconnectedness of parents' experiences and teacher support for the IEP process.

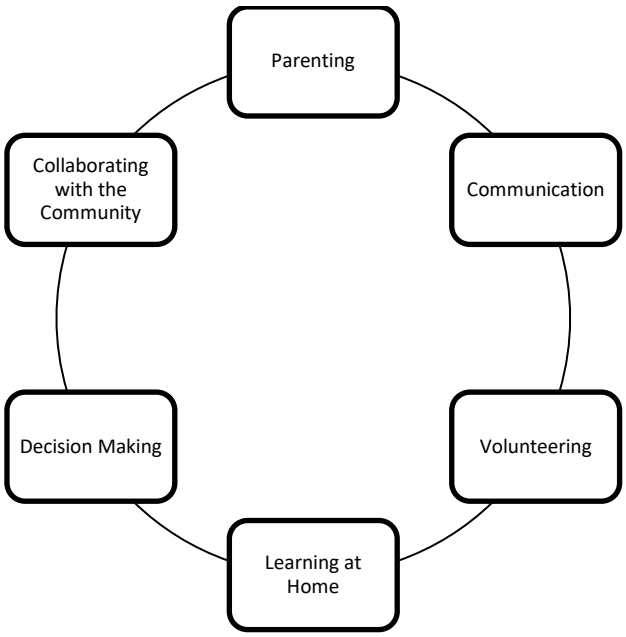
**Epstein's Parent Involvement Model**

Dr. Joyce Epstein (2018) developed a framework for defining six types of parent involvement that help educators develop school and family partnerships. EPIM is more like a manual for educators, making it hard for a researcher to get a clear parent experience (Epstein, 2018). The six types of involvement addressed in EPIM are essential because of the cooperation between a home experience and what guides educators who partner with parents. The six areas within EPIM include parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community, as seen in Figure 2.

The area of parenting is the help provided so that all families establish a home environment to support children as students (Epstein, 2018). EPIM communication includes providing two-way communication from school to home and from home to school about school programs and student progress (Epstein, 2018; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Volunteering includes recruiting and organizing parents' help and support school activities (Epstein, 2018; Epstein et al., 2002).

**Figure 2**

*Epstein's Six Types of Parent Involvement*

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The decision-making part of EPIM involves families as participants in school decisions and develops parents as leaders and representatives for their children (Epstein,2018). Educators can accomplish this by participating in parent-teacher organizations, district-level advisory boards, and committees (Epstein,2018). The final type of involvement in the EPIM is collaborating with the community. This suggests that educators provide information for students and families on community health, cultural, recreational, social supports, and other service programs.

EPIM encourages the continuation of family support (Epstein, 2018). The model promotes support for families through effective communication, including volunteering, recruitment, and organizing parent help and support. This model informs the literature by helping to understand parents' experiences of teacher support through partnerships related to their children's IEPs (Epstein, 2018; Epstein et al., 2002).

## Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Parent Involvement Model

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) proposed a model for parental involvement that addresses a psychological experience to explain why parents become involved in a child's education and how their involvement makes a difference in student outcomes (Ogg et al., 2020). In addition, this model helps to discover and analyze the experiences and beliefs of parents as it relates to their decisions concerning parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Figure 3 reflects the levels and flow for the inner workings of the HSMPI model.

HSMPI consists of five areas. The first area, Level 1, identifies how a parent's decision for involvement is implemented (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The revisions by Walker et al. (2005) for the HSMPI include a sub-level for Level 1, which defines several forms of involvement. These include personal and family values, goals, expectations, and aspirations.

Level 2 of HSMPI is *the* Parent Involvement Form and focuses on parent skills and knowledge, other demands on parents' time and energy, and specific invitations from children and schools (Anthony & Ogg, 2019; Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019). Parent skills and expertise focus on what parents perceive as the knowledge and skills they possess that are important to their children's education (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019). Level 3 addresses the mechanisms of parental involvement for the influence on the outcome of a child's schooling, such as modeling, reinforcement, and instruction (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019; Ogg et al., 2020).

**Figure 3**

*Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's Model of Parent Involvement (1995, 1997)*

**Level 5**

| Student Achievement |
|---|

**Level 4**

| Student Attributes Conducive to Achievement | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Academic Self-Efficacy | Intrinsic Motivation to learn | Self-Regulatory Strategy Use | Social Self–Efficacy Teachers |

**Level 3**

| Mediated by Child Experience of Parent Mechanisms | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Encouragement | Modeling | Reinforcement | Instruction |

**Level 2**

| Parent Mechanisms of Involvement | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Encouragement | Modeling | Reinforcement | Instruction |

| Parent Involvement Forms | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Values, goals, etc. | Home Involvement | School Communication | School Involvement |

**Level 1**

| Personal Motivation | | Invitations | | | Life Context | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parental Role | Parental Efficacy | General School Invitation | Specific School Invitation | Specific Child Invitation | Knowledge and Skills | Time and Energy | Family Culture |

The aspects of tempering and mediating variables fall into Level 4 of HSMPI. This level highlights the influence of parental roles in the form of appropriate strategies for their children's development (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Student outcomes are Level 5 of HSMPI, the final level in the model. This level includes skills, knowledge, and self-efficacy in school success.

Regardless of the level within the HSMPI, the role of a parent towards a child's education yields profound results (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). HSMPI informs the literature in this study by helping to understand the parents' experiences of teacher support related to their children's IEPs and the partnerships that are beneficial to the process. In addition, HSMPI provides documented support for the study's research questions.

## Related Literature

This section aims to provide a tight synthesis of the existing knowledge regarding parental experiences with the IEP process for preschoolers attending public- school and the support that parents receive from the teachers of those children. This section will communicate what may and may not exist about the phenomenon of this study. Furthermore, the section seeks

to explain the gap in the research for this critical area in the field of public-school education. The literature also supports the significance of a study that addresses parents' experiences during the IEP process.

**History of Special Education**

By the 1920s, the United States attendance laws in most districts attempted to accommodate a wide variety of students. Yet, numerous students with disabilities had no access to many educational systems (Kurth et al., 2019; Yell & Bateman, 2017). Around that time, educators organized the Council for Exceptional Children, which is considered the primary professional association for special education (Yell & Bateman, 2017). Following World War II, special education became more visible (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). It was pronounced in smaller school districts due to pressure from parents, leading to federal legislation passed in the 1960s to address the necessity of special education services (Cioè-Peña, 2020; Yell & Bateman, 2017). As a result, Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 to address the inequality of educational opportunity for underprivileged children (Bateman et al., 2015; Yell & Bateman, 2017). Additionally, the intention of this seminal legislation promoted an increase in expectations for achievement at elementary and secondary school levels through collaborative efforts between families and schools (Cioè-Peña, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD, 2018), Congress amended the ESEA to establish a grant program to assist states in effectively implementing programs for children with disabilities (Rãmã et al., 2018; Young, 2018). In 1970, the Education of the Handicapped Act replaced the ESEA. The Education of the Handicap Act helps states develop educational programs and resources for individuals with disabilities (Kauffman et al.,

2018). Unfortunately, neither program included any specific mandates on the use of funds, and neither program produced sufficient improvements in the education of children with disabilities (Kauffman et al., 2018).

Two cases, *Mills v. Board of Education of Columbia* (1972) and *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971, 1972), had a significant impact in helping to lay the foundation for the 1975 enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Act, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDA) (Sholas et al., 2021). Before the enactment of IDA in 1975, millions of students with disabilities were either excluded from public schools or attended public schools without receiving legal services (Yell & Bateman, 2017). IDA was amended in 1997 and renamed the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). One of the two primary purposes of the IDEA revision in 1997 was to provide education that meets diverse needs and prepares children for further education, employment, and independent living. The second primary purpose is to protect the rights of both children and their parents (Kauffman et al., 2018; Sholas et al., 2021). IDEA is currently named the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015).

Section 619 of Part B of the ESSA requires that preschool programs for children with disabilities ages three through five guarantees free and appropriate public education (NCLD, 2018). Young children with any conditions named in Part B of the ESSA, including developmental delays, can receive services under section 619 (Imray & Colley, 2017; NCLD, 2018). There are fourteen categories for which children can become eligible to receive special education services from public-school preschool programs for exceptional children (ESSA, 2015). The fourteen categories are autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities,

orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech-language impairment, traumatic brain energy, and visual impairment, including blindness (ESSA, 2015). The ESSA further suggests that parents are critical members of the special education system. Research has found that a lack of support from educators concerning the IEP process caused parents to advocate for their children (Grandpierre et al., 2018; Siegel, 2017; Singh & Keese, 2020). Parent and teacher collaboration is essential for all stakeholders (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Epstein, 2018; ESSA, 2015; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Slade et al., 2018).

**IEP Process**

Each public-school student who receives special education and related services must have an IEP designed for only one student and must be a truly individualized document (Bateman et al., 2015; Buran et al., 2020; Rãmã et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). IEP meetings occur annually for each student eligible for special education services (Burke et al., 2018). An IEP can be reviewed and revised in a meeting (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). In 2005, the United States Department of Education made it clear that each school must make every effort to support parents and show evidence of making meeting times and places as convenient as possible for them, assuring that procedural safeguards are present and understood (Burke et al., 2018; Yell et al., 2020). Additionally, parents must be given a notice of procedural safeguards at least once a year and upon request (Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018). Teachers must take the time to explain important aspects of the IEP process and illicit information from parents concerning a child's needs (Lesh, 2020; Cioè-Peña, 2020).

Dinnesen and Kroeger (2018) conducted a study involving fourteen parents with students who had disabilities and received special education services. The study sought to discover if there was a need for improved informational documentation on IEP procedural safeguards

(Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018). The study found that parents felt unprepared and unqualified to give informed consent for special education services. The participants felt there was a need to revise procedural safeguard documents to support a parental engagement related to their children receiving special education services (Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018). The study concluded that service providers needed to improve their efforts to ensure parents understand IEP documents before asking them to sign (Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018). Although schools must provide parents with the needed documentation concerning procedures, the documents are often ineffective and challenging for parents to read and understand (Rossetti et al., 2020).

Another study conducted by Mueller et al. (2019) revealed a lack of teacher experience in organizing and understanding IEP procedures resulted in a lack of parental participation during IEP meetings. Also, the study reported families receiving minimal guidance, support, and wrong information concerning their rights when participating in IEP team decisions (Mueller et al., 2019). In addition, Mueller et al. (2019) recommended having mock IEP meetings for pre-service teachers to prepare them for conducting real IEP meetings.

Research has also shown that parents can experience positive meeting outcomes when teachers take the time to support them in understanding the IEP process before IEP meetings (MacLeod et al., 2017; Rossetti et al., 2020). Lo (2012) conducted a study involving two parents. One parent in the study reported that she met with teachers and special service providers before an IEP meeting to discuss the process. She felt welcomed, invited to give input throughout the meeting, and had a well-prepared interpreter (Lo, 2012). The parent further reported that she felt less nervous going into the IEP meeting and more knowledgeable about the process. Parents must be sent a formal "Invitation to Meeting" form with the specific date and time of the expected IEP meeting (Hutchins, 2018). Existing research suggests parents receive essential

information before meeting times (Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018; Hutchins, 2018; Rossetti et al., 2020). The benefits of clarity and addressing the needs and concerns of parents before IEP meetings corroborate Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) emphasis on the importance of positive parental experiences. Specifically, the invitation that parents receive from others helps maintain a sense of being welcomed and valued.

### *IEP Team*

The IEP team is responsible for developing an IEP for those students who require special educational services (Musyoka & Diane-Clark, 2017; Singh & Keese, 2020). The IEP team considers the academic, developmental, and functional needs, reviews and revises the initial IEP as needed, and considers the least restrictive placement for the child (Brandel, 2020 Greene, 2018; Harmon et al., 2020). All team members must be listed on the IEP and sign their acknowledgment of decisions made during the IEP meeting (Brandel, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Certain members of an IEP team are required to attend an IEP meeting for a preschool child (Brandel, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). First, required members include the child's parents (Brandel, 2020; Moore, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The ESSA (2015) mandates active parental participation in all areas of the child's education while receiving special educational services (Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018; Brandel, 2020; Moore, 2019). Parents have valuable knowledge about a child's strengths, weaknesses, behaviors, and insights on things that work and do not (Doronkin et al., 2020; Goldman et al., 2020). Parents must permit special educational services (ESSA, 2015; Harmon et al., 2020; Yell, 2019).

Second, the child's regular or general education teacher and one special education teacher are also required members of the IEP team (Harmon et al., 2020; Hutchins, 2018; Moore, 2019).

The child's regular or general education teacher can give important input about how the child performs in the classroom (Beck & DeSutter, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). A special education teacher can contribute information, suggest modifications, or offer accommodations that a child may need to be successful in the general education classroom or a separate setting classroom (Beck & DeSutter, 2020; Doronkin et al., 2020; Moore, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Some additional members must be a part of an IEP team, including a school district representative. The district representative should be qualified to provide or supervise specially designed instruction that meets the unique needs of children with disabilities. Administrators should be knowledgeable about the availability of resources and be able to approve any resources deemed necessary by the team to ensure effective implementation of the specific child's IEP (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

The team must also consist of an individual who can evaluate the results of an IEP (Hutchins, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). An existing team member can perform the evaluation (Hutchins, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Additionally, the team must consist of individuals with knowledge or particular expertise regarding the child, including appropriate related services personnel (Beck & DeSutter, 2020; Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2020). For example, administrators provide an interpreter who speaks the parent's native language to assist a parent who does not speak or understand English (Compton, 2020; Tran et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Finally, all required team members must be present in IEP meetings so that the team has the most significant opportunity to develop an effective educational plan for a child (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Other optional team members may be a part of an IEP meeting. For example, parents may invite a parent advocate or a friend (Hutchins, 2018). Although schools are not required to

provide parent advocates, they can assist in helping parents locate advocates (Hutchins, 2018). Once a child with an IEP reaches the age of sixteen, they can attend the IEP meeting (Beck & DeSutter, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). A child's attendance during an IEP meeting allows them to self-advocate and be a part of the development of the IEP (Biegun et al., 2020; Heiskanen et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2020). The inclusion of multiple required and optional team members helps to provide transparency, accountability, and cooperation throughout the IEP process.

Meeting times and places must be convenient for all IEP team members, including the parents (Rosser, 2021). It benefits parents when teachers take time and explain expectations and the format of an IEP meeting (Dunn et al., 2016; Mueller & Vick, 2019). Parents attending an IEP meeting for the first time can become easily overwhelmed with the number of individuals present at the meeting (Burke et al., 2018; Compton, 2020; Rosser, 2021). However, how teachers communicate with parents about how IEP meetings work, including each team member's role, can ease anxiety intimidation.

### *IEP Document*

The purpose of the IEP document is to create a written educational plan for students with disabilities to address their special needs within the educational setting (ESSA, 2015). According to the ESSA (2015), the IEP document must contain specific information mandated by the IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Data in the IEP document includes, but is not limited to, a child's present level of academic and functional performance along with descriptions of the child's academic and behavioral strengths and weaknesses (Harmon et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2019; Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020). The document should describe how the child is currently doing in school and how their disability affects their involvement in

the general curriculum (Harmon et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The child's present level must address how their disability affects their growth within the general curriculum (Harmon et al., 2020; Yell et al., 2020). The IEP includes the child's annual goals, which parents and the school team think the child can reasonably accomplish in a year and are (Cioè-Peña, 2020; Hutchins, 2018; West, 2017).

Additionally, details include special education and related services provided to the child, including supplementary aids and services. Improvements also include time spent separated from nondisabled peers (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2020; West, 2017; Yell et al., 2020). Supplementary aids may include but are not limited to specialized equipment such as wheelchairs, computers, and computer software. Instructional modifications include breaks, more time for specific tasks, and unique materials from home; assignment modifications such as recorded instructions and shortened assignments; and testing adoptions such as having a test read aloud and allowing extended time to take tests (Hedin & DeSpain, 2018; Hott et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2018). Also included in the IEP document are required supports, modifications, or accommodations for a child's education.

Furthermore, the document must address district testing, which generally does not begin until children are in kindergarten (The Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2020). The document should also include the date that services will begin along with modifications, frequency, location, and duration of those services. All revisions are agreed upon by the IEP team (Hedin & DeSpain, 2018; Hott et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2018; The Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2020). The IEP document is a legal document that ensures goals address the individual child's needs. The document also ensures that data is collected daily to reflect a child's progress, to describe strengths and areas for which skills are lacking, and to hold

the IEP team accountable for the implementation of services as laid out in the IEP (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2020; West, 2017; Yell et al., 2020;).

**Parents' Experiences of Support**

The Center for Health and Behavioral Research (2020) defines support as emotional, instrumental, or informational assistance and appraisal received from others. Research has documented professional help as playing a significant role in predicting outcomes for families with children who have disabilities Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Fantuzzi et al., 2002; Griffin & Steen, 2010). Studies reported that many parents of children with IEPs depend on professionals for advocacy, training, and support (Gershwin, 2020; Heiskanen et al., 2021; Hirano et al., 2018; Slade et al., 2018). In addition, research recommends teacher training on the facilitating of parent involvement, knowledge, and advocacy as it pertains to supporting parents during the IEP process (Boshoff

et al., 2017; Strassfeld, 2018).

Buren et al. (2021) conducted a study on advocacy experiences of rural parents with children who have disabilities. They interviewed twelve parents of children with disabilities. Participants from the study reported their dependency on teachers and service providers to advocate for their child's needs due to their limited knowledge (Buren et al., 2021). Additionally, the research found that many parents of children with disabilities and an IEP did not receive the support they needed from teachers during the IEP process (Jones et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2019; Rossetti et al., 2020; Slade et al., 2018; Stephenson et al., 2020).

Likewise, Rossetti et al. (2021) conducted a study that included 127 English-speaking or Spanish-speaking parents across four states (Rossetti et al., 2021). The study indicated parents had a higher level of advocacy participation when teachers were welcoming, respectful, and

supportive (Rossetti et al., 2021). Unfortunately, the study found parents reported negative experiences when trying to advocate for their children when team members were unwilling to support them with resources (Rossetti et al., 2021). Also, the study suggests that parents' lack of participation in advocacy related to their child's IEP is due to a lack of knowledge concerning IEP terminology, policy, and the feeling of being overwhelmed with the IEP process (Rossetti et al., 2021). Parents who are unfamiliar with the IEP process need the support of teachers when trying to advocate or obtain resources needed to advocate for their child's IEP needs (Buren et al., 2021; Burke et al., 2018; Rossetti et al., 2020; Rossetti et al., 2021).

Many parents have felt that teachers and administrators showed no preparation during IEP meetings (Buren et al., 2020; Burke et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2020; Slade et al., 2018; Stephenson et al., 2020). In a study done by Trahan et al. (2018), parents reported a lack of support from teachers when preparing for an IEP. The study interviewed seven parents whose children attended high school and received special education services (Trahan et al., 2018). The study found that parents described teacher support as lacking during IEP meetings when explaining the process and eliciting parental input. The study also found that when parents reported positive IEP outcomes, it was due to respect that they respected and having support services build rapport with them during an IEP meeting. Parents said that having a positive connection with team members gave them more confidence during the process (Trahan et al., 2018). Further research also found that parents had positive experiences with the process when expectations were discussed beforehand (Gershwin, 2020; Singh & Keese, 2020). Preparedness ahead seems to enhance the experience of positive outcomes for IEP meetings.

The research found a lack of parental support from teachers and support services regarding language barriers during IEP meetings (Burke et al., 2018; Gershwin, 2020). Support

services provided for students receiving special education services can include but are not limited to occupational, physical, speech, and language therapy, often provided by specialists (Heiskanen et al., 2021; Kurth et al., 2018). Cho and Gannotti (2005) interviewed 20 Korean American mothers of children with disabilities who received special education services. The study found that parents reported a need for support in securing translators and interpreters fluent in both Korean and English (Cho & Gannotti, 2005). In general, the research found a lack of support from teachers during the IEP process towards parents of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children (Heiskanen et al., 2021; Hoover et al., 2018; Kurth et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2018).

Low-income parents whose children receive special education services reported a lack of teacher support and communication during the IEP process (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019; Rispoli et al., 2018). For example, Hirano et al. (2018) did a study with 20 low-income parents whose children received special education services. The study found that low-income and culturally and linguistically diverse parents of secondary school students with special needs felt that they received adequate information and support to make informed decisions during IEP transition meetings (Hirano et al., 2018). Additional research studies reported that participants were often unaware of the available special education services, and they did not understand commonly used terms in the IEP process (Stephenson et al., 2020; Woods et al., 2018). The needs of CLD families appeared to be generally limited in the IEP process based on described needs and the expectations of those families.

**Parent Involvement**

Parent involvement is “parental attitudes to support a child’s academic and behavioral development” (McDowall et al., 2017; Ogg et al., 2020; Sucuoglu & Bakkalouglu, 2018).

Parental involvement also entails developing a home-school relationship (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Lang et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2018). Researchers described parent involvement as the efforts demonstrated by parents that help support childhood development and meet children's academic needs (Al-Shammari & Hornby, 2020; Bray & Russell, 2018; Doyle et al., 2017; Mueller & Vick, 2019). Jeynes (2017) described parental involvement as parents' participation in two-way communication that involves student learning and school activities. Parents' attitudes and efforts to remain involved in a child's education can provide significant benefits.

Parent involvement also includes committing to providing resources such as time, energy, and money for the academic context of children's lives (Barger et al., 2019). U.S. educational law defines parental involvement as "the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication, involving student learning and other school activities" (Montes & Montes, 2020, p.1). These definitions all suggest that parental involvement can occur in several forms ranging from a generally low level of involvement to a high level of interaction (Barger et al., 2019; Jeynes, 2017; Mueller & Vick, 2019; Rios et al., 2020). Additionally, researchers have shown that changes over time and student grade levels can influence parent involvement (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; McDowall et al., 2017; Montes & Montes, 2020). Parental support is dynamic and has many influencing factors (Jeynes, 2017; Mueller & Vick, 2019).

Parental involvement is a mandate by the 2015 amended ESSA and is considered a best practice among educators and researchers (Cavendish et al., 2017; Bray & Russell, 2018; Greene, 2018; Yell et al., 2020). The change in the law supported the inclusion of parents as equal partners in the decision-making process (Brandel, 2020; Bray & Russell, 2018; Cavendish et al., 2017; Compton, 2020). By law, parents are equal partners in the decision-making process

who determine the educational methods for their children (Cavendish et al., 2017; Compton, 2020; ESSA, 2015; Harmon et al., 2020). Additionally, research revealed that a parent has a unique insight into a child's life and serves as a qualified individual who can provide crucial input in special education (Compton, 2020; Harmon et al., 2020; Goldman et al., 2020).

Due to the essential nature of parental involvement and collaboration with teachers during the IEP process, the Federal Government mandated the inclusion of parents during the IEP process (ESSA, 2015; Harmon et al., 2020; Mueller, 2017). Parents and professionals agree that there is a greater need for parental involvement, yet parents report that schools do not provide adequate support for meaningful pathways and beneficial parental involvement (Goldman et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, research has consistently reported a lack of parental decision-making during the IEP process (Goldman et al., 2020; Hirano et al., 2018; Kurth et al., 2019; Love et al., 2017; Yell et al., 2020). During the early childhood years, much of the decision-making for educational services comes from professionals (Shaw, 2018). However, parents have often reported that professionals do not solicit or consider their input during IEP meetings (Love et al., 2017; Slade et al., 2018). Research has uncovered school professionals make decisions about special services, placements, goals, accommodations, and implementations without getting input from parents (Goran et al., 2020; Mueller et al., 2019). However, it is vital during the IEP process that both parents and professionals make decisions (Hirano et al., 2018; Love, 2017). Burke and Hodapp (2014) reported that parents of children with disabilities who experienced positive partnerships with professionals also experienced lower stress levels about educational decisions and progress. Research also found that parental participation in decision-making during IEPs helps develop better alignment with the needs of a child (Heiskanen et al., 2021; Hott et al.,

2021; Hott et al., 2020). This type of alignment is associated with positive student outcomes and produces necessary information about children's strengths and weaknesses (Heiskanen et al., 2021; Hott et al., 2021; Hott et al., 2020).

Rossetti et al. (2020) shared findings that revealed how a family's limited access to information and an educator's lack of providing practical support hampered parental involvement. Parents have reported not receiving a status equal to that of other IEP team members (Buren et al., 2020; Rossetti et al., 2020; Slade et al., 2018). Chinese and Vietnamese parents of transitioning high schoolers reported experiencing a lack of support and information from teachers concerning their child's IEP, which prevented them from effectively participating in decision-making (Lo & Bui, 2020). Involvement, clear communication, and equitable treatment as an IEP team member are potential growth areas for improving IEP development and the implementation necessary to improve parental experiences.

Many theorists support the need for parental involvement in a child's educational environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Epstein, 2018; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Jeynes, 2017). Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) EST conveys that a child's development is shaped and influenced by their environment, including parental influences and involvement. Epstein's (2018) six types of parent involvement aim to help educators develop school and family partnerships. The HSMPI of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) takes on a psychological experience to explain why parents become involved in a child's education and how their involvement makes a difference in the educational outcome for that student. Finally, having teacher support when navigating the IEP process will prompt parents to be more involved (MacLeod et al., 2017; Pepperell et al., 2018). These interrelated components of cooperation indicate that it is vital to understand and utilize effective means for engaging parents and their

experiences about the IEP process (Lo & Bui, 2020; MacLeod et al., 2017; Pepperell et al., 2018; Rossetti et al., 2020).

Other theories that support parental involvement have influenced research for how parental involvement enhances student achievement (Jeynes, 2018; Lechuga-Pens & Brisson, 2018). Studies have found positive correlations between improved school-based parent involvement and improved student achievement, especially in early childhood education (Hirano et al., 2018; Phelps & Sperry, 2021). Studies have shown a positive impact on the educational outcomes for African American children when their parents become involved in the educational process (Phelps & Sperry, 2021; Rispoli, 2018). A study done by Ross et al. (2018) found that parental involvement from African American parents of 13-year-old girls led to positive educational outcomes. Jeynes (2017) shared the results of examining 28 studies on the relationship between parental development, academic achievement, and school behaviors for Latino pre-kindergarten to college-age children. The study concluded that improved parental involvement resulted in better school outcomes (Jeynes, 2017). The evidence within the collective body of research indicates a strong connection between increased parental support, participation in the educational process, and more desirable outcomes for the children involved. However, the positive relationship does not explicitly address the experience shared by parents for the impact of parental involvement.

It is important to note research that found that parents involved in their child's educational experiences often developed positive relationships with their child's teachers and school staff (Kurth et al., 2019; Singh & Keese, 2020). Likewise, studies found that parental involvement improved the climate of schools at all levels for students' experiences (Jeynes, 2017; Love et al., 2017; Rosetti et al., 2020). For example, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005)

reported that teacher effectiveness was strongly related to parental involvement in schools and classrooms. Further research found that children's behavior in school improves considerably when strong partnerships exist between parents, school staff, and teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Jones et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2019; Cioè-Peña, 2020). EST further asserts that people and places children may not directly interact with can impact their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017). Therefore, solid parental relationships with teachers and school staff have aided in productive educational experiences.

**Collaboration**

One of the intentions of the ESSA (2015) was to create an opportunity for collaboration between parents, teachers, special service providers, and school administrators in the hopes of creating a solid educational plan for children with disabilities (NCLD, 2018; Singh & Keese, 2020). The ESSA (2015) encourages schools to recognize parents as important collaborators during the IEP process. Additionally, the United States Department of Education (2019) developed a guide to help educators incorporate collaboration when planning an IEP meeting. Collaboration is a method of problem-solving between teachers, students, community members, and families to understand all stakeholders' influences (Buren et al., 2020; Burke et al., 2021; Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018; Crockett et al., 2018). Jansen et al. (2016) explained that collaboration is a collaborative decision-making process based on equality in which there is consensus regarding support. Collaboration is also a process of two or more parties working closely together to achieve common goals and objectives (Murray et al., 2018). In addition, collaboration is a partnership to set and achieve goals for the benefit of a child. All the understandings presented help emphasize the importance of collaboration as a vital component of a child’s education. Experiences regarding collaborative efforts could further inform how to

develop it in the future as parents and school personnel work together for a shared purpose (Rossetti et al., 2020; Slade et al., 2018).

Collaboration between parents and educators has become essential for providing quality special education services to students with special needs (Rossetti et al., 2020; Rowe & Francis, 2020; Slade et al., 2018). In addition, collaboration encompasses identifying and integrating the community's resources and services that support families, students, and schools (Epstein, 2018). When beginning the IEP process, parents and educators find themselves in a situation where collaboration is essential for achieving positive outcomes (Rossetti et al., 2020; Rowe & Francis, 2020; Slade et al., 2018). All involved contributors must understand that the need for collaboration and what it entails within the special education arena is critically important to create and sustain beneficial partnerships (MacLeod et al., 2017; Rowe & Francis, 2020). Early intervention professionals must work to ensure active participation from parents during the IEP process (Kurth et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2018). Unfortunately, research has described the collaboration between parents and teachers during the IEP process as inconsistent and in need of improvement (Burke et al., 2018; Hirano et al., 2018; Stephenson et al., 2020; West et al., 2017). Further investigation to gather the experiences of parents could help address this need.

Research concerning collaboration also suggests that, though it is essential, beneficial, and best practice in special education, it is a challenging task to accomplish (Beck & DeSutter, 2020; Shaw, 2018). Researchers have reported that a lack of understanding of the components of partnerships has led to the unsuccessful development of collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals (Murray et al., 2018; Sucuoglu & Bakkalouglu, 2018). Studies have shown that special education and regular education teachers found it extremely difficult to find time for collaboration during normal school hours (Fowler, 2019; Fowler et al., 2019). Siegel

(2017) found that families reported feeling a lack of collaboration during their IEP meetings and feeling dismissed when trying to give input on services for their child. Woods et al. (2018) conducted a study on the experience of communication practices from valuable stakeholders during IEP meetings. The researchers found that during IEP meetings, parents felt like they had little input and had to become argumentative when trying to get needed services for a child. Interpersonal communication and comradery could help improve parents' experiences about their collaboration with other IEP team members (Sears et al., 2021).

Teacher and school staff preparedness can also impact the experiences shared by parents. Some research has described how parents found it challenging to collaborate with teachers who did not understand a child's needs, supports, or accommodations (Fogle et al., 2020; Woods et al., 2018). Parents reported being in meetings where teachers had the wrong file and were addressing the needs of a child other than theirs (Bettini et al., 2017). Parents of CLD children reported feeling left out of the IEP process and reported running into many obstacles such as lack of collaboration on input, disagreement with professionals' experiences of the child, lack of respect, lack of trust, and a general insensitivity (Cavendish & Conner, 2017; Hoover et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2018). Research has also shown that some CLD parents attended IEP meetings but were not allowed to contribute to the process (Hoover et al., 2018; Rossetti et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2018). In addition, Burke et al. (2021) compared special education experiences among Spanish-speaking and English-speaking parents. Twelve Spanish-speaking parents and forty-four English-speaking parents participated. The study found that Spanish-speaking participants reported more instances of unprofessional behaviors and an unwillingness to collaborate among their child's teachers. The study also reported that all twelve Spanish -speaking parents acknowledged concerns about the lack of training among their child's special education teachers.

In contrast, the study reported only five English-speaking parents had concerns about their child's teachers' level of knowledge. Therefore, Rossetti et al. (2020) suggested strategies to help improve collaboration between teachers and CLD parents. These strategies include teachers self-reflecting on their own cultural beliefs and experiences, obtaining information on a family's language and culture, and examining the current relationship and quality of IEP meetings with CLD families (Rossetti et al., 2020).

Likewise, Cheatham & Lim-Mullins (2018) researched how teachers could better support immigrant and bilingual parents who have children receiving special education services. For example, the research suggests teachers should set high expectations for parent participation, earn parents' trust, refrain from using jargon during meetings and recognize the strengths and expertise of the family (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018). Also, Cheatham & Lim-Mullins (2018) communicate the importance of teachers incorporating true partnerships with parents by first having a positive experience of immigrant and bilingual families. In addition, Cheatham & Lim-Mullins (2018) assert that teachers are responsible for supporting immigrant and bilingual families' right to be a part of the decision-making concerning their child's special education services.

Equally, Korean American parents of children who received special education services reported a lack of collaboration from teachers, feelings of mistrust, and a lack of concern for their thoughts (Lee et al., 2020). Likewise, low-income, minority, and less educated parents were more likely to experience disrespectfulness and rudeness during IEP meetings (Rispoli et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2020). Research revealed teachers' respect and inclusion of CLD families influence how parents perceive the overall IEP process (Azad et al., 2018; Burke et al., 2021;

Lee et al., 2020; Lo & Bui, 2020). Continued research is necessary to describe experiences in this vital area of educational partnerships.

Additional research has suggested that disrespectful and inconsiderate attitudes conveyed by professionals often resulted in less parental participation in IEP meetings (Al-Shammari & Hornby, 2020; Burke et al., 2018; Hirano et al., 2018). In addition, unreliable professionals can harm collaborative partnerships with parents (Kurth et al., 2019; Love et al., 2017). In some cases, school personnel have been known to cancel meetings inconveniently, arrive late, be unprepared, and rush parents through the IEP process (Al-Shammari & Hornby, 2020; Love et al., 2017). For example, in a study done by Park and Holloway (2016), a parent-reported how a case manager's failure to keep scheduled and rescheduled appointments caused the parent to consider the case manager untrustworthy and unprofessional. Likewise, in a study done by Houri et al. (2019), Black and Latinx American parents of children with disabilities felt that positive collaborative relationships with teachers could only occur when teachers showed mutual respect and trust towards the parents. The quality and effectiveness of collaboration impact parents' experiences and require further investigation (Al-Shammari & Hornby, 2020; Buren et al., 2020; Love et al., 2017).

During the initial enrollment into a special education preschool program, parents often receive a document and a handbook without explanations or assistance understanding what is in the materials (Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018; Dunn et al., 2016). Dunn et al. (2016) reported that parents needed better communication from teachers when explaining acronyms, getting teachers' insight into strategies that work at home, and if the results accurately affected their children's ability. However, the total number of experiences like these from parents is somewhat limited and could benefit from further research efforts.

Theorists support the need for parent and teacher communication (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Epstein, 2018). The EPIM model of parental involvement addresses the importance of two-way communication channels between school and home (Epstein, 2018). The model asserts that educators can implement two-way communication by conferencing with every parent at least once a year, recruiting language translators to assist families as needed, and providing a regular schedule of valuable notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Epstein et al., 2002). According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) EST, the systems all intertwine, making both parents and teachers responsible for the success or lack thereof of communication during the IEP process. Bronfenbrenner's (1979.1994) EST level 2 mesosystem the importance of loving adults, outside of parents, to interact in caring ways towards students because of the multiple types of interactions (Erickson et al., 2018; Pham & Lin, 2019).

Research has asserted that when family-centered practices are put in place by teachers and therapists, effective collaboration can occur concerning a child's IEP (Mandak & Light, 2018; Popa, 2017). Public Law 99-457 requires that early intervention be family-centered (Francisco et al., 2020). In addition, public Law 98-457 is specific to infants and toddlers up to 36 months who receive special education services (Bricker et al., 2018; Francisco et al., 2020).

The family-centered approach emphasizes that teachers and professionals are the primary decision-makers for identifying the needs of young children with special needs (Francisco et al., 2020). Family-centered practices improve children and their families physical, psychological, and developmental (Francisco et al., 2020; McWilliam et al., 2019). Existing research found programs using more family-centered practices reported more parental support from teachers (Francisco et al., 2020; McWilliam et al., 2019; Movahedazarhouligh, 2021).

Hughes-Scholes and Gavidia-Payne (2019) conducted a study examining family-centered practices in early-childhood intervention programs. The study included sixty-six families whose children had developmental delays and attended an early-childhood program (Hughes-Scholes and Gavidia-Payne, 2019). The study revealed that parents experienced more positive encounters from teachers when requesting support with advocacy, knowledge, and decision-making relating to their child's needs (Hughes-Scholes and Gavidia-Payne, 2019).

Although family-centered practices are a positive collaboration tool for IEP teams, research has found that families of children with disabilities received minor family-centered services from schools (Hughes-Scholes & Gavidia-Payne, 2019; McWilliam et al., 2019). Family-centered programs promote positive teacher and parent collaboration, encourage parental involvement, and give teachers the tools to support families (Francisco et al., 2020; Hughes-Scholes & Gavidia-Payne, 2019; McWilliam et al., 2019; Movahedazarhouligh, 2021). Ultimately, further research is needed to assess the continued effectiveness of family-centered practices and the experiences that parents can share about those practices.

## Summary

This chapter describes what is currently known and unknown about theories regarding the role of a parent in the education of a child, the purpose and process of developing an IEP, parental influence in the child's education, and experiences about the support parents receive teachers and school personnel. The existing literature shows that parents of preschoolers with an IEP often report little to no support when trying to collaborate with children's teachers concerning IEPs, even though such investigations are sparse and in need of additional research (MacLeod et al., 2017; Gershwin, 2020; Sucuoglu & Bakkalouglu, 2018; Rispoli et al., 2018). At this point, the volume of experiences from parents with public-school preschool-aged children is

limited and can benefit from continued investigation and analysis. However, the documented research on the barriers that prevent parent involvement makes it evident that in the past, parents have felt that they need further support from teachers, need to be more involved, and need positive collaboration when navigating the IEP process (Azad et al.,2018; Boshoff et al., 2018; Rossetti et al., 2021; Seigel, 2017; Bettini et al., 2017).

Parents of children who attend elementary and secondary schools and have IEPs have reported a lack of support and collaboration related to the IEP process (Buren et al., 2020; Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Doyle et al., 2017). Researchers agree that parents should have an active voice during the IEP process (Doyle, 2017; Heiskanen et al., 2019; Kirksey et al., 2022; Rios et al.,2020). However, the total volume of representatives from parents with preschool-age children is scant.

Larios and Zetlin (2018) conducted a study on the experience of involvement and support of CLD parents during the IEP process. They found that CLD parents felt uncomfortable when attending an IEP meeting due to the verbiage used during the IEP process (Larios & Zetlin, 2018). In addition, CLD parents reported a lack of preparation by teachers before IEP meetings to address any language barrier issues (Burke et al., 2021; Cavendish & Conner, 2017). The experiences of CLD parents indicate a need for more cooperative partnerships concerning their children's educational process (Azad et al., 2018; Burke et al., 2021; Rossetti et al., 2020). Continued investigation into these types of experiences could add to the depth of the research.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) EST, Epstein's (2018) EPIM, and the HSMPI by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) provide a comprehensive framework to help gain a better understanding of the experience that parents of public-school preschoolers have for the support they receive from their children's teachers. The EST framework addresses establishing effective

home-school partnerships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994; Erickson et al., 2018; Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017; Ruppar et al., 2017; Woods et al., 2018). Like Bronfenbrenner, EPIM assists educators in developing better school-family partnerships (Epstein, 2018; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Griffin & Steen, 2010). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) support explaining why parents choose to be involved, how they choose to be affected, and the impact of that involvement. The different frameworks and models for parental participation show that the process is multi-faceted and interconnected because social interaction is complex (Bronfenbrenner's, 1994; Epstein, 2018; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Griffin & Steen, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997). Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) EST serves as the foundation for the other involvement frameworks and unites the different layers into a more comprehensive description of parental involvement. Investigating parents' experiences of teacher support related to children's IEPs using EST, EPIM, and HSMPI could help better understand the need for further support, collaboration, and parental involvement when preparing for IEP meetings. Additionally, this study seeks to address a research gap.

Well documented is the need for support, parental involvement, and collaboration with parents whose children attend private preschool, elementary, and secondary schools during the IEP process (Burke et al., 2018; Grandpierre et al., 2017; Jansen et al., 2016; McNamara et al., 2021; West et al., 2017). Understanding the experience of public-school preschool parents regarding the IEP process is vital. Unfortunately, however, there is little documentation on the experiences of those experiences from parents of public-school preschoolers who have an IEP. Therefore, this study aims to narrow this gap in the literature and share insights that could improve and better educational outcomes for all stakeholders.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

## Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study examines parents' experiences of the support they receive from their children's teachers when those children have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and attend public-school preschools. This study sought to share the understanding of parents' experiences of support given by their children's teachers and how those experiences contribute to the collective body of relevant literature. The following chapter describes the research design to address the research questions. The methodology includes sampling, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Additionally, this chapter addresses the issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations for the investigation. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the discussed components.

## Design

This study uses a qualitative methodology to gather and describe parents' experiences on the support they receive from their children's teachers during the IEP process at public-school preschools. A qualitative method is appropriate for collecting and analyzing data for this study's phenomenon because it contains the voices of participants, allows for reflexivity of the researcher, provides a detailed description and interpretation of the problem, and contributes to the current body of literature on the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, qualitative methods are suitable for this study as parents share their experiences and have their voices heard (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, this study uses qualitative data collection methods, including interviews, focus groups, and a review of documents so that parents' experiences of teacher support related to their children's IEPs are more fully understood.

The specific approach for this qualitative study is a transcendental phenomenological methodology. Creswell and Poth (2018) define phenomenology as a qualitative research method. Phenomenology designs investigate different phenomena and focus on the commonality of lived experiences within a particular group (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Using a phenomenological method allows the researcher to develop and perform procedures that can result in an organized, disciplined, and systematic study (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, it will enable the researcher to focus on specific participant experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I chose the transcendental phenomenological method for this study as it best explores the phenomenon of parents' experiences of support received from their public-school preschool children's teachers related to the IEP process. In addition, a transcendental approach focuses on collecting information or data that can describe the essence of the focused experience (Moustakas, 1994).

## Research Questions

Parents need support, involvement, and collaboration with their child's during the IEP process. The following research questions address how parents of preschoolers attending public schools perceive support from their children's teachers related to their children's IEPs. Along with three sub-questions, the central research question provides a guiding foundation for data collection. The central research question asks: *How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-school preschool describe the support provided by their children's teachers?* The three sub-questions are:

1. How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-school preschool describe their role and the teacher's role during the IEP process?

2. What are parents' experiences of the ways teachers can support them during the IEP process?
3. What are parents' experiences of the support and relationship challenges between parents and public-school preschool teachers during the IEP process?

## Setting

This study takes place within the Southeastern United States. The preschool classrooms represented in the study are considered public-school preschool programs and are part of public-school systems. There are four significant types of public-school preschool classrooms within the districts. All four types of classrooms serve students who have IEPs. One type of class receives Title I support and serves some typically developing students ages four and five who are at risk for failing kindergarten if they do not receive Title I support. In addition, these classrooms obligate four or more spaces for students who have IEPs. The second type of classroom consists entirely of students with developmental delays between three and five and have IEPs. In this type of classroom, no more than 12 students attend each day. The third classroom-type is a highly structured classroom in which only nine students attend each day due to higher needs for those students to receive services. All students are between three and five in this class and have IEPs. Finally, the last kind of classroom consists of students with IEPs with more than one qualifying disability. The parents who participated in data collection had students who represented these classroom types. The parents provided insights into their experience of the support they receive from their children's teachers related to the IEP process.

School A in the study has a student population of 530 students. The student population consists of 29% African American, 19.5% Hispanic or Latino, 47.1% White, 3.1% Multiracial, 0.2% Native American, and 1.2% not specified (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Furthermore, 37.8% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The student body consists of 52% males and 48% females (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The school administrators comprised one principal, one assistant principal, a treasurer, a data manager, and a full-time secretary. The teacher-student ratio is 12:1. In addition, the school has one part-time social worker, a part-time psychologist, a part-time law enforcement officer, and a full-time counselor.

Additionally, six special content area teachers teach the subjects of art, music, library, gym, English as a second language, and technology. Interviews and focus groups took place using a virtual face-to-face format through the Zoom platform. Finally, participants submitted any documents they deemed helpful to the study via email. Participants' comfortability and convenience throughout data collection were deliberately and purposefully addressed (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Participants

The researcher only gathered participants' background information for demographic purposes (Appendix E). This study utilized two purposeful sampling techniques. Purposeful sampling allows the intentional selection of a group of people who can best inform the researcher about the research phenomenon under examination (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful sampling establishes specific criteria for inclusion in the sample and is essential to the study to ensure that all participants have experiences with the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The criteria for selecting participants for phenomenological studies is that they share common experiences, have an interest in the study, and are committed to participating in all data collection activities for an investigation (Moustakas, 1994). The study intentionally includes only parents who have children with IEPs enrolled in a Southeastern United States public-school

preschool program.

The purposeful sampling recruited 10 participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that 10 to 12 participants are needed in a transcendental phenomenological study to reach thematic saturation. Thematic saturation is “the point during a series of interviews where few or no new ideas, themes, or codes appear” (Weller et al., 2018, p. 1). I recruited a minimal number of 10 participants and observed thematic saturation with that population of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All participants have students enrolled in a Southeastern public-school preschool program. In addition, each participant’s preschool child has an IEP, an essential element for purposeful sampling in this study. Since this study seeks to discover how parents of public-school preschooler students describe their experiences of teacher support related to their children’s IEPs, data was limited to these families because of their relevant experiences. These findings and discussion for this study used the term teacher to represent teachers and service providers who interact with parents in the IEP process.

Additionally, snowball sampling assisted in recruiting potential participants after selecting the first participants. Snowball sampling allows the researcher to recruit a participant when recruitment is hard to obtain (Parker et al., 2019). In addition, snowball sampling enables any participant to recruit other participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used a recruitment flyer (Appendix A) to publicize information about the study via social media outlets, paper flyers, and email. Upon approval and agreement to participate, I also assigned pseudonyms for each participant to maintain their privacy.

## Procedures

Before collecting any data, I sought permission from school districts to share information about the study (see Appendix B) and then applied to Liberty University’s Institutional Review

Board (IRB; see Appendix C). Upon IRB approval, I began the data collection process. A formal letter introduced myself and the purpose of my study, which was provided to the superintendent and school administrators (See Appendix D). I received provisional permission from the desired school district regarding the willingness of the site to participate in the research. I asked schools to send an email to potential participants who met the criteria for this study. The email contained a participant solicitation letter (See Appendix E), a consent form (See Appendix F), a preliminary question form for demographic information (See Appendix G). In addition, the email asked potential participants to submit any documentation that may inform interview questions and shed light on the phenomenon. Participants submitted all forms and documentation with their initial contact email to me. Although the disruption caused by Covid-19 hindered full participation at the school level, I was able to build the participant pool using primarily snowball sampling

Upon receiving contact from potential participants of their desire to participate, I immediately assigned a pseudonym to each person to ensure confidentiality. I then reviewed all documentation submitted by participants before contacting them. These documents ultimately inform research questions and discussions during individual interviews and focus groups. I analyzed documents by first reading line for line. I then created codes to help determine if there were any themes related to my study. Next, I reached out individually to participants via email or a telephone call to go over the consent form required by IRB (Appendix F) and discuss individual and focus group interviews. At that time, I scheduled a virtual face-to-face Zoom interview. Participants received a reminder email one week before a planned face-to-face Zoom interview and another reminder before focus group sessions.

Two weeks after all scheduled virtual face-to-face interviews were transcribed then sent

to the appropriate individual participants for member-checking to verify and clarify any items that needed correcting; there were no corrections. Next, I scheduled focus group meetings and sent out reminder emails one week before each session. Next, I organized the parents into two focus groups, each with five participants. Once focus groups were complete, I transcribed the responses. Finally, participants were sent a transcription for the focus group in which they participated for member-checking; there were no corrections. After data collection, analysis of the data began.

## The Researcher's Role

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is critical. The researcher is responsible for collecting and analyzing data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Potential biases should be recognized and appropriately addressed during the research process. Therefore, before conducting any data collection, the researcher should undertake a process known as epoché (Moustakas, 1994). Introduced by Edmund Husserl, Moustakas (1994) described epoché as the ability to move prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas out of the research.

A potential bias that I recognized was my prior experiences working with parents of students with IEPs. I have worked with parents of preschoolers for six years, where I taught children with IEPs. I also have 15 total years of teaching experience. Therefore, I often focus on the negative aspects of my experiences when dealing with parents whose children have IEPs, such as parents who do not show up for scheduled meetings or who never return phone calls. In addition, I was saddened by the sometimes uncaring and degrading attitudes of teachers towards parents during the IEP process. Therefore, it was beneficial and vital for me to set aside my personal opinions and experiences to examine the participants' views of their experiences in an unbiased and non-judgmental manner.

When gathering stories by individual interviews and focus groups, I used researcher memoing to organize and record my initial thoughts. Recording these thoughts helped identify related themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, Memoing was reviewed during analysis to help provide a richer analysis of the context of the interviews and focus groups recognizable from only a verbatim transcript. As the researcher, I also recognized comparisons from the different participants' responses. This process allows the researcher to identify and communicate patterns and significant ideas that may appear in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My motivation is to understand better the experiences and experiences of support shared by parents of preschoolers who have IEPs. Therefore, as a researcher, I relied upon the experiences gained as a teacher and the memoing during the data collection process to help guide participant data analysis.

## Data Collection

I collected data for this qualitative study through a review of participant-provided documents, individual interviews, and focus group sessions. Using these three forms of data collection ensured triangulation. Triangulation uses diverse experiences to clarify meaning and verify possible repetitive operations or interpretations (Umanailo, 2019). Triangulation can give validity to a study because of the multiple forms of confirming data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the triangulation of data sources, methods, and investigations further establishes trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I reviewed documents to inform research questions and discussions that shed light during this transcendental phenomenological study. This type of data comes from existing material (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants submitted any documents they felt were essential to the study. Interviews sessions generated data from individuals who have experienced the same

phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews also allow social interaction and the construction of knowledge between the interviewer and the interviewee (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus groups are the third type of data collection. Focus groups consisted of two sessions with five participants assigned to each group. Targeted research questions guided each focus group session (See Appendix G). One focus group meeting lasted around 45 minutes, while the other lasted about 52 minutes. Each participant engaged in a one-on-one interview session and a focus group session; the total time commitment for participating in an interview and a focus group was less than two hours.

**Review of Documents**

Karppinen and Moe (2019) refer to documents as "social facts," produced, shared, and used in socially organized ways (p. 249). Before the individual virtual face-to-face interviews, participants provided any documentation they felt would provide additional clarity and understanding on the phenomenon for the study. I looked for information that informed the research questions and discussions during interviews and focuses groups. I also used existing documentation to gain background information on participants that added meaning, understanding, and insight to the study. Gaining a greater appreciation regarding the participants' experiences contributed to a richer understanding of the phenomenon shared by the total pool of participants. Submitted documents helped identify new interview questions that needed asking during the virtual interview sessions. All submitted documents remain confidential and only shared with the participants' consent.

**Interviews**

Phenomenological interviews involve open-ended questions that are interactive and informal (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews for this study were semi-structured to allow

participants to fully explain their experiences and allow me to deviate from the questions to clarify any answers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I tested the recording equipment for sensitivity for location before the official recording of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each one-on-one interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes per participant. I discussed any participants' concerns about the consent form (Appendix F) and reminded them that they could drop out of the study before data collection. I will also provide an overview of the interview process, and participants understood that they could stop the interview process without any repercussions. After reviewing the consent form and an overview of the interview session, I asked participants predetermined open-ended questions (See Appendix H) that sought to answer the central research question and the sub-questions. The predetermined open-ended questions for each interview were the same for each participant. The standardized open-ended interview questions included:

1. How are you today?
2. Do you have any concerns before we get started?
3. Please describe your family to me.
4. Where does your child attend school?
5. What type of support have you experienced from your child’s teachers related to the IEP process?
6. How do you describe your role during the IEP process?
7. How do you describe the teachers’ role during the IEP process?
8. How can you become more involved in the IEP process?
9. How can your child’s teacher support your involvement during the IEP process?

10. What types of challenges have you had with the support provided by your child's teachers related to the IEP process?
11. What questions on the IEP document do you find uncomfortable answering?
12. What questions would you like to see asked on the IEP document?
13. I would like to thank you for your time and participation. I have one final question. What, if anything, do you feel would be essential to add about your experiences of support from your child's teachers concerning the IEP process for your child?

Questions one through four are questions helped me build rapport with the participants. Research suggests that these questions make the participants feel comfortable with the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Question five is explicitly based on the central question for the study and gave parents whose children attend a public-school preschool the opportunity to describe their experiences of teacher support. Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) emphasizes parents as equal partners in the IEP process. Questions six and seven are open-ended questions that allow parents to explain their knowledge and understanding of parent and teacher roles during the IEP process. These questions informed the answer for sub-question two. These questions build on Hoover-Dempsey and Sanders's theoretical framework (1995, 1997). These questions allow the researcher to obtain data that will generate a textual and organizational account of the participants' experiences and ultimately understand the participants' shared experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Parent involvement during the IEP process is essential as parents have valuable input concerning their child (Larios & Zetlin, 2018). The eighth, ninth, and tenth questions explained how parents described their ability to become involved and get support from their children's teachers concerning the IEP process. In the research literature, many parents have expressed that

those professionals made them feel uncomfortable and less critical during the IEP process (Doyle et al., 2017; West et al., 2017). Questions 11 and 12 address parents' confidence and comfortability during the IEP process. Parents have previously reported many challenges when collaborating with teachers concerning their children's IEPs (Burke et al., 2018; Sucuoglu & Bakkalouglu, 2018; Wood et al., 2018). Questions 13 allows parents to address issues left out of previous questions. The open-ended questions that concluded the interviews allowed participants to share experiences relevant to their experiences. These interview questions support the valuable data collection for a phenomenological study as they connected the responses from individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon that this study addresses (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I conducted pilot testing on interview questions before including any interviews into the data for the study. Research suggests pilot testing with a smaller sample size than the pool of participants included in the study (Carpenter, 2018). The pilot study consisted of one participant who had the same characteristics as the potential participants in the study. The interview included the same questions used with the participants in the study. The pilot interview lasted about 30 minutes and addressed the purpose of the study. The pilot study provided insight into sensitivity, social validity, and flow for the interviews I used to collect data for the analysis. Carpenter (2018) suggests that pilot testing allows the researcher to practice and fine-tune interview procedures. Based on the pilot interview, I did not need to change the protocol for the official interviews used to collect data for the study. Therefore, I did not include information from the pilot testing in this study. Also, a participant in the pilot study was not eligible to participate in the study.

**Focus Groups**

During qualitative research, focus groups attempt to focus on one topic with people who

have the same type of knowledge and can be advantageous when the researcher gains valuable information through the participants' interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus groups are different from other forms of qualitative data collection in that the significant element of the focus group is the facilitation of interaction among participants (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers should present questions to elicit responses that lead to a discussion (Adler et al., 2019). When selecting a setting for a focus group, researchers should seek a calm area free from distractions (Adler et al., 2019).

The two focus groups lasted 45 and 52 minutes, respectively. The sessions were audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each focus group consisted of half of the parents who participated in the study. I asked the same questions within both focus groups. Questions for the focus group (See Appendix I) focused on the central research question and sub-questions. Participants understood the purpose of the study, which is to describe how parents of public-school preschoolers perceive their experiences of teacher support related to their children's IEPs. Participants understood that teachers include lead instructors and service providers who interact with their children's IEP processes. Additionally, participants understood that they could discontinue their participation in focus groups without any repercussions. The following standardized open-ended focus questions guided the discussion in the focus groups:

1. Describe your initial goals for your child during their enrollment in the public-school preschool program?
2. Describe your expectations for an IEP meeting?
3. What areas of the IEP process are you most satisfied with?
4. What areas of the IEP process are you most dissatisfied with?
5. What recommendations do you have for improving the IEP process?

6. Thank you so much for your time.
7. What other information do you feel is important to add to this interview?

These focus group questions revealed shared understandings from the experiences of different participants. The focus group questions allowed participants to offer more extensive insight into the phenomenon (Adler et al., 2019). The questions also gave me an understanding of participants' reasoning behind their described thinking concerning the research problem. The social context of a group discussion provides the researcher with a different type of experience than could be shared in a person-to-person interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Data Analysis

Data analysis procedures in qualitative research are the methods researchers use to find meaning from the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The collected data must provide answers to the research questions. This study utilizes Moustakas's (1994) model, including epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and a synthesis of composite textural and structural descriptions. I first transcribed the interviews and focused groups verbatim from the recordings. Participants verified the accuracy of the transcriptions through member-checking. Next, I reread the member-checked interviews to ensure that I fully understand the richness within the transcriptions. I then used the NVivo transcription service to develop codes. The NVivo program transcribed recordings, interpreted text, coded the text, and created reports. I organized the codes into sub-themes and themes. In addition, this software allowed me to use a digital format to manage, upload, and store data along with the discovered themes.

I incorporated Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological reduction as a qualitative data analysis method (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The steps during reduction were used for both interviews and focus group sessions. The first step in this process is the practice of

bracketing. *B*racketing is how researchers set aside prejudgments concerning a studied phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). For example, I am a teacher in an exceptional children's public-school preschool classroom, and each student in my class has an IEP. I recognize that prior experiences with parents and the IEP process could foster prejudgments for bracketing. Acknowledging potential biases that arise from my experiences helps me intentionally set them aside as I begin to analyze the data. From this point, the phenomenological reduction occurred by incorporating horizontalization.

Horizontalization was the next step that I took as I followed Moustakas' (1994) guidance for transcendental phenomenological reduction. The horizontalization process involves identifying wordings and phrases shared by multiple participants and giving those expressions of a similar experience equal importance during data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I identified significant phrases or sentences that pertained directly to parents' lived experiences of support from their children's teachers to accomplish this step. The textual meaning of the phenomenon occurred by eliminating vague, repetitive, or overlapping. Excluding vague, redundant, and overlapping statements allowed me to develop clusters and themes common among all participants' transcripts from individual interviews and focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Again, the NVivo transcription service helped me code the data and find sub-themes and themes.

In Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological reduction process, the subsequent step is individual textual descriptions. In this analysis stage, I wrote textural descriptions for each participant. I used "significant statements and themes to write a description of "what" the participants experienced" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 81). Moustakas (1994) conveyed the importance of using the participants' own words to get a distinctive experience of

the investigated phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon of focus is parents' experiences. Next, I used imaginative variation to develop structural descriptions. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe structural descriptions as the researcher documenting how the experienced phenomenon. In this study, the structural description is how parents share those experiences through their experiences about the support received from their children's teachers concerning the IEP process. Once I transcribed and organized data, I looked to classify and interpret the textual and structural descriptions from the collected data into codes and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The final step in Moustakas' (1994) model of phenomenological data analysis is the synthesis of meaning and essence. When combining and synthesizing textual and structural descriptions, I composed accounts of the significance, and the essence of parents' experiences of teacher support received in the IEP process from their children's teachers. Finally, I shared findings with the participants for verification.

**Trustworthiness**

I developed trustworthiness in this study primarily through data triangulation and the detailing of the collection and analysis of the data. Stahl and King (2020) define trustworthiness as "the degree of confidence in data interpretation and methods used to ensure the quality of the study" (p. 28). Stahl and King (2020) further assert that trustworthiness is accomplished by triangulating the data and maintaining a chain of evidence. Multiple means of gathering data in this study included a review of documentation, interviews, and focus groups. Due to debates on what constitutes trustworthiness, I used the criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Trustworthy criteria for this study include credibility, dependability, transferability, and

confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition to triangulation, member-checks along with detailed and thick descriptions are used as strategies to enhance trustworthiness.

**Dependability**

Dependability is essential to this study as it ensures that the study maintains consistent procedural approaches (Stahl & King, 2020). Dependability is vital in establishing trustworthiness as it reinforces consistency and compatibility within the research findings. Dependability ensures that the results of a qualitative inquiry can be replicated in a step-by-step process using the same cohort of participants, coders, and texts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was strengthened through data triangulation. Triangulation involves using a variety of data collection to obtain reliable and accurate results (Tenny et al., 2020). Triangulation also provides details that are rich in context to maintain the interest in the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Credibility**

Credibility is essential in research as it seeks to show accuracy in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member-checking in this study ensured the credibility of the qualitative data analysis. Participants had the opportunity to review and respond to transcribed findings verbatim. This process is possibly the most critical technique for establishing credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, it allows participants to comment on the accuracy of the interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I utilized a peer-review method to establish additional credibility. The peer-reviews consisted of the researcher and peers who have obtained their doctorate using a qualitative approach. The peer-review helped to ensure the honesty of the researcher and the clarity of the findings. Peer review allows the researcher to discuss their study with disinterested peers who will rigorously question the research approach and critically assess known patterns

(Anderson, 2017). Peer-review sessions took place during the completion of Chapter Four and again after I composed the initial draft of Chapter Five.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is essential as it further assists in establishing trustworthiness. To demonstrate confirmability in this study, I created an audit trail. When used in qualitative research, audit trails describe data collection, means of developing categories, and bases for the decisions made during the inquiry (Burkholder et al., 2020). Data for this study was peer-reviewed, and there was a collaboration with participants using member-checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study also used triangulation to establish confirmability by using multiple sources to validate the basis of a claim (Burkholder et al., 2020).

**Transferability**

Transferability is vital to this study as it allows descriptive data for informative purposes and potential application in the future. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized the importance of researchers providing an index for transferability. Descriptive data can convey information about a study with sufficient detail to become significant to outsiders (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This process can also provide information so that it may transfer to other settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, once the experiences of the support teachers have given to parents of public-school preschoolers who have IEPs were analyzed, I developed interpretation and discussion so that the study's implications could potentially transfer to other preschool settings where parents and teachers work together in similar instances. In addition, I utilized descriptive data that emerged from interviews, focus groups, and the review of documents to establish transferability further.

## Ethical Considerations

I followed ethical principles based on the steps outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). According to Creswell and Poth, ethical issues can arise during the process of a qualitative study. Therefore, I considered vital ethical concerns throughout the research process for studies that include participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, I requested permission to share my study with qualifying schools. Second, I obtained the Liberty University IRB, gaining approval that complies with ethical guidelines for conducting research. Third, informed consent was explained, discussed, and secured with all participants. Fourth, I provided full disclosure concerning the researchers' purpose for this study and the required time commitments. Fifth, when collecting and sharing data, pseudonyms are used for all participants and schools so that I continue to respect the anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy of all the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Additionally, I respected the atmosphere of all individual and group meetings and avoided any unnecessary distractions during those sessions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All collected data will be kept for three years and then destroyed to comply with IRB guidelines. I informed participants that I would immediately destroy any information I gained if they wished to withdraw from the study; however, no participant withdrew. Finally, I avoided plagiarism when analyzing and reporting data, taking sides with participants, falsifying authorship, data, findings, or conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All these ethical considerations protect the participants in the study and the moral integrity of data collection and analysis.

## Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study describes parents’ experiences about the support teachers provide for them during the IEP process when parents have children who attend

public-school preschools and have IEPs. A transcendental phenomenological method offers insight into a shared experience. In Chapter Three, I presented this study's chosen research design and analysis. The data collection methods include document review, individual interviews, and focus group participation. These methods triangulate data and provide a detailed description of the shared experiences that the parents have had during the IEP process. This design offers valuable information to answer the central research question and the sub-questions. In addition to having public-school preschool children with IEPs, the participant pool is from the Southeastern region of the United States. Ten participants qualified.

The chapter also describes the role of the researcher, the step-by-step process for collecting data, and the method used for data analysis. Specifically, the proposed data analysis follows Moustakas' (1994) model and includes epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of composite textural descriptions. I used the coding software NVivo software to create a digital record of the data and analysis. Ethical concerns established ways to protect personal identities and comply with IRB guidelines before data collection. The chapter concludes with the essential trustworthiness aspects of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The emphasis of trustworthiness for the study is to ensure integrity in the research process and the potential application to similar instances so that the data and analysis are both transparent and pertinent.

# CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

## Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study describes parents' experiences about the support teachers provide during the IEP process when parents have children with an individual education plan (IEP) and those children attend public-school preschools. First, the chapter presents data collected from documents submitted by the participants, interviews with each participant, and information gathered from the participants during focus groups. Next, the chapter presents a description of each participant, the research findings, and the themes from data analysis. Finally, the chapter concludes with collective answers to the central research question and the three sub-questions.

## Participants

Using purposeful sampling, a final population of 10 participants who have children who attend a public-school preschool and have an IEP developed. Criterion sampling was necessary because the study was specific to parents with children who attend public-school preschool and have an IEP. The initial recruitment yielded only six participants from school districts that helped recruit parents; social media and snowball sampling were used to recruit the remaining four participants. Interviews occurred once participants submitted consent forms, demographic forms, and documents (see Appendix F & G). Figure 4 provides the demographic information of each participant. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed using NVivo software, with the researcher verifying the transcripts. Each participant member checked the transcript for their interview. After member-checking, I scheduled focus groups. I formed two focus groups with five participants in each group. While five participants attended the first group, only four participants participated in the meeting with the second group; one participant did not participate

in the focus group and did not communicate the reason for not attending. Data saturation emerged after I gathered data from the ninth. In addition, no new themes emerged from the interviews following the ninth interview. I assigned a pseudonym to each participant and used it throughout the manuscript to maintain anonymity. The following section describes each participant.

**Figure 4**

*Participant Demographic Data*

| Participant Name | Age | Gender | Ethnicity | Child's Area of Eligibility | Educational Level | Yearly Income | Employed | Occupation | Both Parents in Home |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Marge | 43 | Female | African/ American | Autism | Some College | 55,000 | Yes | Cosmetology | Yes |
| Joy | 32 | Female | African/ American | Speech/ Language | Some College | 44,000 | Yes | Dental Assistant | No |
| Chrissy | 34 | Female | Multiracial | Speech/ Language | Bachelor's Degree | N/A | No | N/A | Yes |
| Jewel | 25 | Female | African/ American | Speech/ Language/ Developmental Delay | Associate Degree | 20,000 | No | N/A | No |
| Jessica | 41 | Female | Caucasian | Autism | Bachelor's Degree | 41,000 | Yes | Teacher EC Resource | Yes |
| Rose | 56 | Female | African/ American | Speech/ Language | Some College | 22,000 | No | Student | No |
| Debra | 32 | Female | Caucasian | Autism/ Speech/ Language | Some College | N/A | No | N/A | Yes |
| Faye | 31 | Female | Asian | Speech/ Language/ Cognitive | Associate Degree | 180,000 | No | Student | Yes |
| Leah | 36 | Female | Pacific Islander | Autism | Master's Degree | 180,000 | Yes | Project Manager | Yes |
| Amber | 30 | Female | African/ American | Speech/ Language | Associate | 50,000 | Yes | Health Care | Yes |

## Marge

Marge (age 43) holds a Cosmetology License and runs her own business. She is married with four children. Her youngest son became eligible for early childhood services when he was diagnosed with autism. He is four years old, and the current school year is the first time he has spent time away from his mom for long periods. He attends a public-school preschool five days a week in a separate classroom. He receives occupational, speech, and social-emotional therapies. Marge believed that "during the IEP process, parents should have more input regarding their child's placement."

**Joy**

Joy (age 32) is a single parent raising three boys. She works as a full-time dental assistant. Her three-year-old son attends a public-preschool three days a week. He has developmental delays and requires occupational, social, and emotional therapy. The son struggles with separation issues, such as when he arrives at school each morning. He shuts down and will not engage with anyone during the first hour in class. Joy shared the concern that "teachers do not reach out to her before developing goals for her son, and they have no interest in building any type of rapport with her."

**Chrissy**

Chrissy (age 34) is a stay-at-home mom. She is married with two children and is currently expecting a child. Her eight-year-old son was diagnosed with autism. Additionally, her four-year-old son has a speech delay and attends a Title I public-school preschool five days a week. He receives speech therapy and participates in special academic classes once a week. The four-year-old is very shy and seems to communicate more with teachers than his peers. Chrissy mentioned that she "feels little to no connection with her child's teachers."

**Jewel**

Jewel (age 25) is a stay-at-home mom of five children. She holds an associate degree in criminal justice. Her four-year-old son attends public-school preschool five days a week. He is not yet able to express his wants and needs verbally and requires prompting to communicate. He receives services for speech and developmental delays. According to his IEP, he should receive speech therapy for 30 minutes twice a week, occupational therapy for 30 minutes twice a week, and social-emotional therapy for 20 minutes three times a week. Typically, he is pulled out of class at least weekly for speech. In addition, he receives occupational, social, and emotional services in the classroom. Jewel wanted her son's teachers and service providers to "be better listeners and try to understand what parents are saying during IEP meetings."

**Jessica**

Jessica (age 41) is married with three children. She is a resource teacher at a local middle school. She has two daughters and a son; all three of her children have a special needs diagnosis. Her husband also has an autism diagnosis. Her youngest daughter has been diagnosed with autism and attends a public-preschool five days a week where she receives early intervention services. The daughter's services include speech, occupational, social, and emotional therapy. The daughter also does not sleep well and has difficulty communicating with both teachers and peers, causing many meltdowns during the school day. Jessica believed the preschool program "could involve parents more when decision-making."

**Rose**

Rose (age 56) is a stay-at-home grandmother. She has an associate degree in business and is currently pursuing a master's degree in internet technology. Rose's daughter and three grandchildren now live with her. Her two youngest grandchildren, one girl, and one boy, both attend a public-school preschool five days a week. Both grandchildren are in a Title I classroom.

Her granddaughter has an IEP because of a speech delay; she receives 30 minutes of speech therapy three times a week. The therapy sessions with the granddaughter take place inside the classroom. Rose believed “teachers should focus on helping her child to speak better.”

**Debra**

Debra (age 32) is married with two children. She is a stay-at-home mom. Her oldest son is in his second year of public-school preschool. He initially started in the separate-setting classroom and was moved to the Title I classroom in September 2021. He has autism and receives speech therapy for 20 minutes a session three times a week. Debra described her son as a loner who has difficulty initiating play with his peers. He sometimes becomes frustrated when trying to communicate verbally. Debra stated that “she is grateful for everyone involved in the IEP process and their willingness to communicate with her.”

**Faye**

Faye (age 31) lives with her husband and their 3-year-old twins. Faye is currently working on completing a master’s degree. Her twins both have an IEP and attend a public-preschool three days a week; they were made eligible for services due to global developmental delay. Their global developmental delay affects both speech and cognitive abilities. Both twins receive speech and occupational therapy. One of the twins is in a more restrictive setting because he requires more support. Faye wished that “the home-school communication was a little better when deciding the twins' needs at school.”

**Leah**

Leah (36) works as a project manager and part-time college professor. She holds a master’s degree in business and information technology. Leah lives with her husband and two children. Her youngest son has autism and attends a public-school preschool. The son has an

IEP, receives speech therapy, and participates four days a week in a separate classroom setting. He does not make friends easily and prefers to play alone. Leah feels frustrated "with how hard the IEP process has been."

### Amber

Amber (age 30) resides with her fiancé and two daughters, ages four and two. She works in the field of heath care and holds an associate degree. Her oldest daughter attends a public-preschool three days a week and has an IEP; she receives speech and occupational therapy. The daughter uses a visual board to communicate with her teachers. She has also learned to sign about four words. This year marks the first time that Amber's daughter has attended school, and the adjustment has been difficult. Amber mentioned, "it seems our children are excluded from so much at the school, and I do not like that."

## Results

This study describes parents' experiences of the support they receive from their children's teachers when those children have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and attend public-school preschool. I collected data from the documents submitted by six of the 10 participants, interviews with each of the 10 participants, and two focus groups. Data analysis used Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological model. The remainder of this chapter outlines the steps for developing themes, presenting the data that led to the themes, a detailed description of the data, and the responses to the central research question and sub-questions.

### Theme Development

Analyzed data answered the central research question and sub-questions. Themes described participants' experiences of the support teachers provide during the IEP process when their children have an IEP and attend public-school preschools. Themes emerged as I used

Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological reduction. In addition, sub-themes emerged.

Epoché throughout the data collection process helped remove any potential researcher bias. It was vital for me to set aside potential bias due to my experience as a public-school preschool teacher working with exceptional children. Spreadsheets helped compile and organize the data provided by documents submitted by the participants, interview responses, and focus group interactions, along with completion dates, member-checking dates, and email communication. The spreadsheets contributed to an audit trail. NVivo held all spreadsheets.

Six participants submitted IEP documents, classroom newsletters, school newsletters and transcribed school audio recordings from principals concerning school events (Table 1). I reviewed these documents before each face-to-face interview. As a result, I gained a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, the documents helped generate new questions during the interviews and focus group sessions that added meaning, understanding, and insight to the study. All new questions remained focused on a more profound understanding of how parents of public-school preschoolers with IEPs described the support from teachers as it relates to their children's IEPs. Furthermore, the documents contributed to a richer understanding of the experiences shared by each of the participants.

**Table 1**

*Participant Submitted Documents*

| Participant Name | IEP | Classroom Newsletter | School Newsletter | Principal Audio |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Marge | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Chrissy | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| Joy | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Jessica | No | Yes | No | Yes |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rose | Yes | No | No | Yes |
| Amber | No | No | Yes | No |

Participant interviews occurred from September 2021 through November 2021 via Zoom. A semi-structured format with open-ended questions (Appendix H) allowed participants to explain their experiences fully. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, with most interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes. I recorded and saved interviews using a Zoom platform. The NVivo program transcribed interviews following the completion of each one. I then reviewed the transcriptions and submitted the appropriate transcript to each participant for member-checking. There were no changes to any of the transcripts. After member-checking, I gathered data through the analysis of the transcripts.

I formed focus groups after all transcripts were member-checked. Participants were sent, via email, several dates, and times from which to choose. Upon receiving feedback from participants, I formed two focus groups with five participants in each group. All 10 participants agreed on the specific time and date for the focus group to which they were assigned. All five participants assigned to the first group attended the given session. However, only four of the five participants assigned to the second focus group participated in the second session. One participant did not participate in the focus group and did not communicate the reason for not attending. The first focus group session lasted 52 minutes, and the second focus group lasted 45 minutes. All participants who participated in the focus groups agreed that the focus group transcripts did not need editing. Therefore, data analysis included the original transcripts from both focus groups.

After collecting data, I used Moustakas' (1994) process of horizontalization to identify words and phrases that multiple participants shared; I developed codes and themes during

horizontalization. I gave each expression of a similar experience equal importance during data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). After listening and reading over the interviews several times, I identified significant phrases and sentences that pertained directly to the lived experiences of parents' support from their children's teachers. I excluded vague, repetitive, or overlapping statements because those statements did not contribute to a rich understanding of the participants' descriptions. By excluding vague, duplicative, and overlapping comments, I identified codes and themes common among all participant transcripts from individual interviews and the focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I assigned a particular color for the relevant statements and recorded them in NVivo to organize the data. Green highlighting represented comments related to support during the IEP process. I used blue highlighting to describe words related to communication. I used orange highlighting to describe words related to trust. Also, I used pink highlighting to describe words pertaining to advocacy. I highlighted any information concerning disrespectful behaviors from teachers in yellow. I highlighted statements related to decision-making in red. Finally, I circled all miscellaneous statements using black ink. Through this process, several themes emerged. Table 2 outlines the codes and themes that emerged.

**Table 2**

*Themes*

| Theme | Sub-theme | Description |
|---|---|---|

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Support during the process | Parent knowledge<br>Access to information<br>Explanation | Parental lack of understanding a factor in feeling unsupported |
| Communication | Timely response<br>Decision-making | Factors influencing parent involvement |
| Trust | Tone<br>Teacher knowledge | The impact of the attitudes of professionals on parent participation during IEP meetings |
| Advocacy | Support services<br>Placement<br>Parental rights | Parents need to be a voice for their child |

After I developed and analyzed themes, I wrote short textual and structural descriptions in the margins of the data to get the entire essence of participant statements. Moustakas (1994) conveyed the importance of using the participants' own words to get a distinctive experience of the investigated phenomenon. I explained the participants' experiences using textural descriptions within emergent themes as I described parents' experiences of support during the IEP process. The structural descriptions I created represent how parents shared their experiences regarding the experiences about the support received from their children's teachers concerning the IEP process. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe structural descriptions as the researcher documenting how participants' experienced the phenomenon. Textual and structural descriptions further help to explain the essence of the participants' experiences of support during the IEP process.

When combining and synthesizing textual and structural descriptions, I composed accounts of the significance, and the essence of parents' experiences of teacher support received

in the IEP process from their children's teachers. In addition, I created a group description based on the analysis of individual participant experiences. All participants were adamant regarding the need for more support during the IEP process but felt that they had to go along with the current nature of the process to get the services their children needed. Participants reported a lack of communication as a significant challenge to their involvement in the IEP process. Most of the group felt that the lack of trust between parents and the rest of the IEP teams created noticeable hindrances. In addition, the participants felt obligated to advocate on behalf of their children. Overall, the group felt that communication was the most important aspect among the emergent themes. Each theme is discussed below in individual sections.

**Support During the Process**

Nine participants mentioned a lack of experience with the IEP process. The lack of experience seemed to create frustration that participants could have avoided or lessened if someone had taken the initiative to prepare the participants about what to expect. Even the one participant who had some experience with the IEP process could not understand the process due to miscommunication, language usage, or laws with which she was unfamiliar. During her interview, Leah reflected on her first IEP team meeting by saying, "…and that process, I didn't know what I was getting myself into. There was nothing; they didn't tell me anything. They just said to be here at this time. I had no idea what it consisted of." Likewise, at the time of her interview, Rose mentioned that "even though I had support with scheduling and appointment reminders, I still had no idea what to expect when I got to the meeting." Despite some initial frustrations, increased support for parents during the IEP process led to more involvement and fewer frustrations as described through the Parent Knowledge, Access to Information, and Explanation sub-themes.

### *Parent Knowledge*

The IEP process was new to nine of the participants. Often, parents had not previously heard about their child's delays. They had no idea what information would appear in an IEP. The lack of knowledge caused parents to feel left out of the process. During the focus group, Joy remarked, "during the initial IEP meeting, I just sat there nodding and didn't say much of anything." She then stated, "when they described my son, I had no idea what they were talking about." Jewel, the one parent who had experience with an IEP, agreed with Joy and stated, "I went through this process with my older son, but these new labels and codes confused me. Why can't they use the full word instead of all these acronyms." The newness of the process and new information seemed to create barriers to participants' sense of involvement.

### *Access to Information*

All participants agreed that they expected the IEP team to support them in gaining access to the information they needed to understand the process better. For example, during her interview session, Jessica remembered trying to be proactive and contact a facilitator at the school. She stated, "I wanted to get a heads up on what to expect during the initial evaluation process, so I called the school's EC person. Unfortunately, the EC facilitator told me there was not much information she could give me, but I would understand more after the meeting. Jessica commented, "Well, I was still confused after the meeting."

Amber remarked that "after going to the district page ahead of my scheduled meeting and finding little to no information, I decided to wait and address my concerns with the team. Ha, no luck." During a focus group session, Leah, the most vocal of all participants, angrily recalled her frustrations in getting documented information on the IEP process: "I had to educate myself on the law and threaten legal action." The participants indicated a potential benefit to parents if the

IEP team offered made information concerning the IEP process available before the scheduled meetings.

***Explanation***

During the IEP meetings, the participants stated the need for team members to address any parents' misunderstandings or confusions. Marge and Debra wished that team members would consider the newness of this process from the parental experience. Marge recalled how "They would not give specific answers to how they came up with certain outcomes like evaluation scores or their reason for particular recommendations. So, when I would ask them to explain their decision, they would act as if I had not asked the question. In her interview, Marge referenced her child's IEP that she submitted to show me the goals for which there was no explanation or justification. Debra seemed to reflect the same type of experience during her interview when she remembered that:

> I had been sitting there trying to figure out what they meant by these percentages they kept throwing out. So finally, I asked, "could you please explain to me the percentages?" Well, the meeting leader decided we were running behind schedule and said I could get with the classroom teacher at a later date.

Essentially, some parents revealed that explaining information contained in an IEP could have helped parents increase their involvement and engagement in the process.

**Communication**

The participants felt that communication from teachers was important during the IEP process. During the focus group setting, Jessica remarked that "communication has been my biggest challenge during the IEP process. I feel that communication has played a crucial role in my relationship with the IEP team." Chrissy recalled, "since my child's principal or assistant

principal attends my IEP meeting, I seriously cannot understand why, when we get communication by school newsletters or audio recording; they never include the separate-setting preschool classroom. The Title I preschool classroom will get the information and have their classroom included in events, but not us. Chrissy's statement proved to be accurate; the school newsletter she submitted as a document had no inclusion of parents and children from separate-setting classrooms. Further elaboration about Communication includes the sub-themes of Timely Response and Decision-making.

### *Timely Response*

Receiving information concerning their child's progress or lack thereof before an IEP meeting was essential to the participants. For example, during her interview, Jewel stated, "to get in the IEP meeting and tell me that my child is not where he needs to be and has behavioral problems was just downright wrong. She went on to say, "I see this woman every day, and she had not mentioned this to me." With agitation in her voice, she continued, "just a note home, email, or even a phone conversation would have been an option of communication; No, she waits until we are in a meeting, with a time limit, to bring this up." Amber noted in her interview that "no one communicated with me for over five months after my daughter's evaluation." Rose shared, "my child's speech therapist does a great job letting me know what progress or challenges my child makes. She will go over possible new or eliminated goals during the IEP meeting. I am grateful for this and feel more a part of the process." Appropriate and relevant communication emerged as a potential benefit before and during the IEP process.

### *Decision-Making*

Most of the participants did not feel as if they were part of the decision-making during the IEP process. During the focus group session, participants were very vocal on this issue. Leah

recalled, “After sitting in the meeting and realizing the team had made all the decisions, I calmly let them know that I did not get to go over any pre-made decisions. Leah stated, “I informed them I stop the meeting, reschedule, and review their recommendations. Leah had to stop at this point to compose her anger. She continued, “They proceeded to tell me I had to sign, or my son would lose services; I was livid and stuck to my guns.” Leah continued, “Needless to say, he did not lose services, but after doing my research, he got more services.”

Amber remembered telling the team:

> I know my child. I am not having the issues at home that you are at school. I feel we could have worked on these issues together if you had let me know about them. Now you have made these decisions that I am not in agreement with. At the end of the day, I signed the IEP and demanded they give me a heads-up about things.

Some participants did not feel like they were a part of the decision-making of the IEP and often became complacent and disconnected from the IEP team. Chris mentioned that “overall, I expected to play a bigger role in decision-making.” The results indicated that parental involvement during decision-making seemed to impact parental engagement and their feelings toward IEP development.

**Trust**

The data indicated that it is vital for team members to build trust among parents and other stakeholders. The participants indicated that trust could impact parental participation during IEP meetings. For example, Leah recalled in her interview that “the speech pathologist told me one thing during the initial evaluation, and during the IEP meeting, she said something different. Now, tell me how I am supposed to trust their recommendations.” Amber stated, “teachers can help me become more involved in the IEP process by first building my trust. Unfortunately,

because of my meeting experience, I have little trust in their motives concerning my child's needs." The sub-themes of Tone, Teacher Knowledge, and Lack of Respect help describe the aspect of Trust.

***Tone***

Some participants felt that an IEP team's level of compassion and concern when discussing a child left a considerable impression. During her interview, Faye recalled, "I was getting so frustrated with the special education teacher referencing my son as slow or special. It was just mean." Chrissy reflected during her interview that "when I just couldn't understand the service delivery, the EC facilitator laughingly asked me if I had a problem reading the document? I had to excuse myself to the bathroom just to keep from making a scene." Marge stated, "though the IEP process was confusing, the caring and compassionate tone that my therapist used gave me comfort that they would help my child." While a comforting tone could help create a smooth interaction, the participants described how a condescending or undermining tone could hinder a productive IEP experience.

***Teacher Knowledge***

Many of the participants in the study expected the teachers to be the experts concerning the IEP process. Multiple participants reported disappointment in the lack of knowledge among team members. During the focus group session, Joy commented, "It's frustrating to ask questions about things I don't understand only to have team members tell me they don't know or get back with me". But she quietly said," really, they should know the ins and outs concerning the IEP process and be prepared to answer my questions during meetings."

Debra remarked with the additional thought that:

> Untrained teachers should not teach in a special education classroom or hold IEP meetings. My child's teacher openly admitted that this was her first IEP meeting and her first year teaching this type of class. So, what, are you serious? How can you implement goals and stuff if you have no knowledge of what you're doing?

According to the participants, teacher inexperience created a reason for concern, further questioning, and possible distrust.

***Lack of Respect***

The participants also reported the importance of team members respecting parents during IEP meetings to foster more parental involvement. Some participants indicated that they left IEP meetings feeling disrespected and unheard. In her interview, Debra recalled, "like when I asked a question about a goal, the team members looked at each other and smirked like I was stupid." She continued aggressively, "Just no respect and looking at me like why I am challenging them." Faye stated, "while pleading for more support, some members were so disrespectful I just dropped the issue because I felt so defeated and unheard."

In contrast, during her interview, Rose remarked, "no matter the lack of communication or support during the process, I did feel as if some of the team members, like my child's teacher and speech therapist, respected my opinion." She also stated, "this made me a little more open to asking questions." Referencing her child's IEP document that she submitted, Rose pointed out the speech and language comments that her child's therapist made on his IEP, the comments reflected Rose's remembrance. The described respect that parents received from other IEP team members contributed to the overall trust, whether strong or weak, as shared by the participants about their experiences.

**Advocacy**

Many parents in the study became the primary advocate for their children during the IEP process. Participants explained that it was their responsibility to advocate for their child's needs during the proceedings. Focus group comments reflected the belief about parental advocacy. For example, Jewel stated, "I'm his advocate to make sure they're doing what they are supposed to do." Rose remarked, "you have to make sure you work with the team and advocate for your child." Likewise, Jessica commented, "my role is to advocate for my child." During her interview, Marge referred to the IEP document that she submitted. The document indicated multiple days of services recorded as only one day; however, her son goes to school five days a week and should receive services on numerous days. She stated: "the separate setting is automatically five days a week, so how did they get that wrong?" She went on to say, "I advocated for an immediate IEP meeting to get the correction on paper." She took a deep breath and remarked, "It was a fight, but I have a scheduled meeting."

As indicated through data analysis, parental advocacy for their children included the areas of Support Services, Placement, and Parental Rights.

***Support Services***

Some participants expressed frustrations at other IEP team members who decided on support service needs without their input. For example, Leah recalled in her interview:

> I knew my child needed speech and language. The team communicated he would have speech and language, then get in the meeting, and they said speech only. I submitted all these requested medical documents that clearly stated the need for speech and language. I stood my ground, and finally, he was able to get the support services he needed.

Joy, a parent whose child also has a speech-related need, remembered in her interview that. "I knew my child's delay in speech." But, she recalled, "during the evaluation, my child received an

autism eligibility, found to have sensory issues and cognitive delays." She hesitated, then stated, "yet, they felt he only needed two days a week in the classroom." With anger in her voice, she continued, "I lost it; we went back and forth on the issue of service days." Finally, Joy stated, "he received two days." In the interview, Joy paused for about two minutes and took sips of water. Then, she continued, "within a month, we had another meeting to up his days to five days due to his needs." With a tired voice, Joy commented, "I kept data and asked the teacher to keep data on my child's daily doings; It was draining." The IEP that Joy submitted included an explanation of the increase in in-service days. The most responsive participants expressed that they remained insistent during IEP meetings so that their children would receive the necessary services.

***Placement***

When discussing child placement during IEP meetings, many participants felt confused and left out of the process. One of the least vocal participants, Faye, has twins initially placed together in a less restrictive classroom. She recalled in her interview, "I knew my twins were not on the same developmental level because twin B needed less stimulation." With disgust in her voice, she stated, "as with other parts of the process, I had to accept the placement and felt like I was letting my child down." But, she continued, "once again, I got a called meeting within a month of Twin B being in his recommended placement to inform me that we needed to discuss placement." Which, Faye said, "led to Twin B's placement in a more restrictive classroom, which I told them initially."

In her interview, Amber recalled:

> I just wanted to know how they decided which classroom he required. I did not understand what least restrictive meant. I told the team I did not want my child in a classroom where she would regress. I even asked if I could observe the recommended

> classroom. First of all, the EC facilitator told me I shouldn't be concerned with the terminology. I told her if she couldn't explain it, I would find someone who could. I just wanted my child to be the best fit for her.

The experiences of these parents seemed to indicate that they had unique insights that could help determine the proper placement for their children with special educational needs. However, the parents also expressed that they operated with a level of required persistence so that their children would receive the appropriate education in the environment suited best for them.

### *Parental Rights*

The results indicated that parents' understanding of their rights brought about more participation, input, and decision-making during the IEP process. Many participants reported that they felt more confident once they understood their parental rights during the IEP process. Leah stated in her interview, "I made it my mission after the first meeting, which I walked out of, to educate myself on my parental rights." With a look of pride, she stated, "when I came to the next meeting, I was armed, ready, and confident in my position as a parent." Likewise, Marge also recalled, "I had no idea what I had a right to ask for. I found myself, at times, just sitting there and accepting whatever services they gave my child. I was so lost." Chrissy contributed to the discussion by commenting, "I left that first IEP meeting and immediately joined a Facebook group for parents who had children with an IEP, and I gained so much information." She went on to say, "just knowing that I could call a meeting anytime I wanted or that I could ask for time to review the document before the signing was a huge confidence booster."

According to the participants, increased and enhanced education about the IEP process facilitated greater clarity.

**Table 3**

*Theme Frequency*

| Themes | Frequency |
|---|---|
| Support During the Process | 122 |
| Communication | 126 |
| Trust | 66 |
| Advocacy | 84 |

**Summary of Themes**

In summary, the four themes that emerged through data analysis included: Support During the Process, Communication, Trust, and Advocacy. The frequency of these emergent themes appears in Table 3. The themes of Support During the Process and Communication occurred within the data with the greatest frequency, while the theme of Trust appeared less often within the codes. Along with the specific voices of the participants, I also generated descriptions to help create a richer understanding of the experiences.

## Research Question Responses

To answer the central research question and sub-questions, I relied on the responses of the 10 participants chosen through criterion sampling, each of whom described a parent's experience regarding the support from their child's teachers related to the IEP process. In addition, participants submitted data gained through documentation, individual interviews, and focus groups. Finally, I analyzed data using Moustakas' (1994) method for phenomenology. Based on the data's themes, sub-themes, and textualization, this section provides narrative answers to the central research question and each sub-question.

**Central Research Question**

The central research question asks: *How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-school preschool describe the support provided by their children's teachers?* Participants answered this question in the context of the four major themes: (a) support during the process, (b) communication, (c) trust, and (d) advocacy. These four themes appeared in all interviews, focus groups, and documentation. The overall participant experience indicated that there was little to no support during the process from their children's teachers; parents often expressed frustration and confusion when participating in the IEP process. For example, during her interview, Amber stated, "When thinking about the IEP process, I received little support from my child's teachers and therapist. Every time I met or talked with them; I became more confused." Likewise, Joy remarked, "Do they not understand? How am I supposed to participate in a process with no prior experience? No support from anyone. Teachers brush me off; therapist tells me to get with the teacher." Participants also reported that communication played an essential role in their feelings of support. When participants experienced good communication, they felt a sense of support. Rose stated, "the constant communication from the speech therapist provided me some much-needed support." Conversely, when communication was lacking, participants reported feeling unsupported.

During focus group discussions, when asked "how do they describe support provided by their child's teacher," participants frequently mentioned trust directly influences how they described support from their child's teacher. Amber repeatedly remarked, "teachers have not taken the time to build up trust and therefore never even understand the support I need. "Leah said, "I don't trust anything they say; they have no idea what support means."

In addition, when answering this central research question, participants reported a lack of teacher support when trying to advocate for their child during the IEP process. Faye recalled

"being brushed off when trying to advocate for services." Jewel stated numerous times, "I have to be the advocate for my child because the teacher will not." The summative description was minimal support provided to parents and an experience marked by persistent barriers that limited parents' understanding of the process. Participants shared common experiences, and study themes were distinct.

**Sub-Question 1**

The first sub-question asks: *How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-school preschool describe their role and the teacher's role during the IEP process?* Participants' common responses included the belief that the teachers were the experts on the process and should communicate that knowledge to the parent. Each participant described their role as an advocate for their child. Faye conveyed in the interview, "I think it's important that I advocate for my child as hard as I can, but I do heavily rely on teachers because they are supposed to be the professional." Jessica's interview included the remark, "My role is to advocate for my child. That's my role." She added, "I expect the teachers to communicate information to me before the IEP meeting for preparation purposes."

Participants reported that teachers' roles include the teacher being knowledgeable in the IEP process. Joy commented during a focus group that "I expect them to be the expert; this is their job." Though participants expected and relied on teachers to be knowledgeable and share information about the IEP process, responses from participants revealed this was not always the case. Instead, participant responses supported the theme "trust," emphasizing the "teacher knowledge" sub-them. For example, Debra angrily shared with the focus group, "It's like the blind leading the blind; they have no idea about the process and need training." Likewise, Amber stated, "I expected the team to be able to answer my questions, but they seemed less

familiar with the process than I was. How can anyone make an informed decision if they have no idea what they are doing?" The experience in the responses indicates that a parent is a primary advocate for a child's education and coincides with the belief that teachers should support parents by using their expertise with IEPs.

While parents indicated their roles to be that of advocates, disappointment was expressed when professionals did not possess the knowledge of professionalism during IEP meetings. Although, in addition, parents discussed their concerns about wishing they were better at advocating for their children, there was no mention of wanting any other role than that of an advocate. Also, parents expected teachers to be the experts and wished teachers had a more professional attitude, were more knowledgeable, and shared their knowledge to help parents become better advocates for their children.

**Sub-Question 2**

The second sub-question for the research project asks: *What are parents' experiences of the ways teachers can support them during the IEP process?* Parents' common reply revolved around communication. The responses indicated the need for teachers to make information available to parents on time and include parents in the decision-making throughout the IEP process. Moreover, parents discussed making all the necessary arrangements to ensure they were at meetings on time. However, teachers would contact them at the last minute to cancel the appointment. Also, the discussion revealed at times; parents arrived at the meeting only to learn the conference would not occur. In addition, there was mutual agreement among parents that communication on the effort of the teachers needed to improve. Marge stated in her interview, "I have no problem attending IEP meetings, but it is frustrating when I get a two-day notice and have no resources to plan. I need them to do better." Participant documents showed that two out

of the four IEPs submitted were dated less than six days before the scheduled meetings. Debra commented, “I don’t do last minute; I need them to be more organized and let me know about upcoming meetings in time to make arrangements and at least have the opportunity to help make decisions.” Jessica stated, “communication is the key for me; they could do better.” Likewise, Debra said, “teachers can support me by listening and realizing I am part of the team and should be included in decision-making.” In the data, parents indicated a reliance upon teachers to facilitate the IEP process, and they also relied on teachers to include them as a valuable part of the team.

**Sub-Question 3**

The final sub-question asks: *What are parents’ experiences of the support and relationship challenges between parents and public-school preschool teachers during the IEP process?* When asked what types of challenges you have had with the support provided by your child’s teachers related to the IEP process, themes were evident in their responses. Participant responses pointed to teachers’ attitudes during the IEP process as causing relationship challenges for parents when trying to get support. Having trust and respect is essential in conducting effective IEP meetings. However, when attending IEP meetings, participants felt rushed, devalued, and disrespected. Although there were concerns during the meetings, participants felt uncomfortable asking questions due to teachers' negative and sometimes hasty attitudes. For example, in her interview, Chrissy stated, “The disrespectful attitude during the meetings makes it hard for me to trust the team.” Likewise, Amber recalled, “It was very challenging for me to communicate my concerns during the process because members were constantly rushing through information and using terms I didn’t understand.”

Most participants agreed that not knowing their rights and responsibilities made asking for support during the IEP process challenging. In addition, participants took it upon themselves to gain the information and knowledge concerning their rights and responsibilities during the IEP process. Also, the discussion revealed parents felt more empowered once they learned and understood their rights. Amber stated, “I just really felt dumb because it seems I was expected to know information that I had no idea about.” Leah confidently said, “oh, they got me initially; I couldn’t ask for support because I had no idea what I was entitled to.” Chrissy commented, “thank God for Facebook; hooking up with more experienced parents taught me how to ask for and understand the support I needed.” As indicated in the participant responses, a lack of knowledge, clarity, respect, and trust often caused negative experiences about parent and teacher relationships in the IEP process.

## Summary

Chapter Four presented the findings of this transcendental phenomenological study that describes parents’ experiences of the support they receive from their children’s preschool teachers when those children have an IEP. Using purposeful sampling, ten participants who have children with IEPs and attend public-school preschools participated in the study. Criterion sampling was necessary because the study was specific to parents with children who attend public-school preschool and have an IEP. While the initial recruitment yielded only six participants, social media and snowball sampling helped recruit the remaining four participants. Data analysis included the findings from documentation, interviews, and focus groups. The data was then analyzed utilizing Moustakas’ (1994) analysis method. Through data analysis, the themes that emerged included Support During the Process, Communication, Trust, and Advocacy. In addition, the answers to the central research question and sub-questions indicate a

parental experience that is reliant upon teachers' support during the IEP process, along with a clear recognition in the participant responses that improvements could be made and hopefully improve parents' experiences. Further discussion about the findings and implications of the results follows in Chapter Five.

# CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

## Overview

The problem is a lack of collaboration and support between parents of public-school preschoolers with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and their children's teachers (Burke et al., 2018; Siegel, 2017). Little to no research has included the experiences and experiences of support given to parents of public-school preschool children during the IEP process. This study aims to narrow the gap in research regarding public-school preschool parental support during the IEP process. This transcendental phenomenological study examines parents' experiences of the support they receive from their children's teachers when those children have IEPs and attend public-school preschools within the Southeastern United States. Chapter Five concludes this study with a summary and discussion of the study's findings, implications, limitations, and delimitations. Additionally, I provide recommendations for future research that could guide further investigation into this area that lacks representation in the current literature.

## Discussion

This section discusses the study's findings related to the developed themes. This section will address the interpretation of findings with support from empirical and theoretical sources. In addition, the section addresses implications to policy or practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

### Interpretation of Findings

This section includes a brief description of emergent themes as discussed in Chapter Four. The section also discusses interpretations determined to be significant to the researchers. In addition, I explain a connection between the studied phenomenon, the participants, setting, literature, and guiding theories to develop new insights on the subject.

### *Summary of Thematic Findings*

I conducted a transcendental phenomenological study to examine public-school preschool parents' experiences of support received from teachers during the IEP process. I triangulated data by collecting documents, interviews, and focus groups from 10 participants who have children attending a public-school preschool and whose preschool education is guided by an IEP. Individual interviews and focus groups provided the majority of the data. The submitted documents contributed to a richer understanding of the experiences that the participants shared. I recorded interviews and focus groups through Zoom and transcribed, coded, and analyzed the recordings. From this data, four common themes emerged: Support During the Process, Communication, Trust, and Advocacy. The insights from these themes helped to answer the research questions.

One central research question and three sub-questions guided the investigation. The central research question asks: *How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-school preschool describe the support provided by their children's teachers?* Parents expressed a lack of support, communication, trust, and advocacy during the IEP process regarding the central research question. Participants also described a need for help understanding the laws, language, and expectations during the IEP process. They indicated that a lack of support during the IEP process left them unable to fully engage in helping to determine the delivery of their children's education. The participants felt that communication was essential to have good collaboration and teamwork. They further described communication as hard to achieve with teachers leaving them with feelings of frustration and alienation during the process.

Additionally, participants reported some feelings of alienation stemming from exclusion from school communications such as newsletters and weekly principal audio updates.

Participants described having a general distrust towards teachers and the IEP process. Participants described negative attitudes from teachers during the IEP meetings, which contributed to mistrust. All participants expressed the necessity to advocate for their children's needs because teachers do not understand the children as well as parents do and do not usually listen to parents' input and concerns.

Research sub-question 1 asks: *How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-school preschool describe their role and the teacher's role during the IEP process?* The answer to sub-question 1 is that most participants viewed the teachers as the experts on IEPs. In addition, the participants described that those teachers possessed knowledge about their children's IEP needs and should disclose that information to them. When discussing their experiences of their role, participants explained that they had felt the need to advocate for their children because teachers may not be as knowledgeable, approachable, or concerned about their children's needs as participants felt that teachers should be.

Research sub-question 2 asks: *What are parents' experiences of the ways teachers can support them during the IEP process?* The answer to sub-question 2 is that parents expect teachers to provide information to them so that they can review and then ask relevant questions before an IEP meeting. Participants also expressed the need for teachers to include them in the decision-making process by listening to and incorporating their thoughts into the IEP process, which could benefit their children's education.

Research sub-question 3 asks: *What are parents' experiences of the support and relationship challenges between parents and public-school preschool teachers during the IEP process?* The answer to sub-question 3 is that participants expressed difficulty forming positive relationships with teachers. The participants shared some remarks about teachers' disrespectful

attitudes when parents asked questions during the IEP process, especially concerning support services and placement issues. Cultivating more positive relationships could have a beneficial impact on experiences regarding the IEP process.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) ecological systems theory (EST) guided this study. In addition, Joyce Epstein's (2018) six types of parent involvement model (EPIM) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) model of parental involvement (HSMPI) serve as supporting theories. Finally, I discuss study findings in light of the empirical literature relating to public-school preschoolers' parents' experience of the support received from their children's teachers when those students have an IEP.

EST is the foundation for this study, with further elaboration from HSMPI and EPIM. Since this study aims to describe the support given to parents of public-school preschool children during the IEP process, these theories seemed to be the most appropriate because they promote the implementation of support, collaboration, and parental involvement during the IEP process. Four themes emerged from data analysis: Support During the Process, Communication, Advocacy, and Trust. Participants discussed the need for more support during the IEP process. Data analysis also revealed that the lack of support during the IEP process impacted parent involvement. Bronfenbrenner's EST asserts that lack of support from teachers during the IEP process can have a negative impact on the meeting outcome (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Level 1 of HSMPI calls on teachers to support parents when parents feel that their skills and knowledge are inadequate (Ogg et al., 2020). Likewise, Epstein's (2018) framework encourages education courses and training for parents when needed.

Participants discussed communication from teachers as being important during the IEP process. Bronfenbrenner (1979) relays the importance of communication between parents and

schools within the mesosystem. Epstein's (2018) six types of parent involvement highlight communication as essential for parental involvement. How teachers communicate to parents can affect parents' level of participation (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Participants discussed feeling left out of the decision-making process due to communication issues. Communication for participants meant receiving information from teachers concerning their child and having the opportunity to make decisions during the IEP process. In addition, participants felt communication also meant being included in announcements.

Participants described having little trust in the teachers and the process. Though teachers invited parents to meetings, participants felt that it was just a formality given the overall tone of team members and, at times, their unpreparedness. HSMPI addresses the importance of understanding parents' experiences of invitation for involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Data supports the research on parents' feelings of mistrust during the IEP process (Hoover et al., 2018). In addition, studies reported parents experiencing many obstacles, such as a lack of trust (Hoover et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2018).

EST is built upon ecological context, which focuses on the need for support from parents, schools, and communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erickson et al., 2018). All 10 study participants described their role during the IEP process as advocates for their children. Participants expressed having to fight to be heard when gaining support services for their child, parental rights, and placement issues during the IEP process. In addition, data supports the research that lack of support from educators concerning the IEP process caused parents to become advocates for their children (Grandpierre et al., 2018; Siegel, 2017; Singh & Keese, 2020).

The IEP team comprises parents, teachers, therapists, administrators and can also include medical professionals, advocates, and other family members (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) EST, Epstein's (2018) EPIM, and the HSMPI by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) provide a comprehensive framework to help gain a better understanding of the experience that parents of public-school preschoolers have for the support they receive from their children's teachers related to IEPs. Participants acknowledged that they feared their child would not get the services they needed due to teachers not listening to them during the IEP process. The participants indicated that the framework surrounding a child's education must include improved cooperation between the team members to emerge with acceptable education outcomes.

There was little research regarding public-school preschool parents' experiences of teacher support during the IEP process. This study addresses the gap in the literature as it relates to this problem. This study examined parents' experiences of public-school preschoolers regarding teacher support during the IEP process. Clear and productive communication between parents and other IEP tea members is essential. Parents who participated in this study reported a lack of support from their child's teachers during the IEP process and hindrances to productive communication.

### *Parents' Experience of Support*

Based on the findings of my study, participants in this study reported experiencing little to no support during the IEP process. For example, Amber explained in her interview, "I had no support during the IEP process." Likewise, when interviewed, Jewel stated, "as for anyone reaching out to me to see if I had any concerns or needed clarification, there has been no support." In addition, parents in this study reported extreme frustrations when getting support on

what to expect during the process and how to get information that would prepare them for the process. For example, Joy explained, “it was hard to find information on the IEP process. I could not get in touch with a team member, and the online information was confusing considering I had no experience with the process.”

Many parents of children with IEPs depend on professionals for training and support (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019; Rispoli et al., 2018). Data collected in this study supports this idea as many parents believe teachers are the experts on the IEP process and should guide the parent. Chrissy commented, “the teacher’s role is to be the expert.” Data collected during this study reveals that when IEP team members showed up unprepared for meetings, the parents lost trust in the recommendations coming from the team.

***Parental Involvement***

During focus group discussions, parents in the current study expressed how teachers’ refusal to include them in the decision-making caused them to shut down during the IEP process. Jewel remembered:

> I had no experience with the IEP process, but I did know my child. So, when I saw that the decisions concerning his services were pre-filled in, I just sat there fuming and lost focus on what was going on around me.

Participants conveyed that they always expected to play a more significant role in the decision-making during the IEP process. Amber mentioned, “communication was nonexistent from the start. She went on to say, “I received a date and time of meeting with no idea what to bring, how long the meeting would be, or what exactly they would be looking for from my child.” Participants consistently mentioned the need for more communication from IEP team members to make informed decisions. Also, participants who submitted documentation were frustrated

over being excluded from schoolwide communications. Rose remarked, “there is no information in school newsletters concerning my grandchildren’s class.” In addition, she stated, “they don’t even mention us.” Participants expressed becoming so frustrated over being left out of the decision-making during the IEP process that they either stopped the meeting or just sat there and accepted the decisions.

Participants communicated that limited access to information left them out of the process and pushed them to become advocates for their children. For example, Leah stated, “I couldn’t get answers or information from IEP team members, so I started educating myself on the law and what certain terms meant.” Likewise, Debra recalled, “I knew if I wanted to have a voice at the table, I had to go outside the school and find out what I needed to know about this process. It wasn’t easy, but it was necessary.” Sentiments such as these support other descriptions shared in prior literature.

***Collaboration***

Participant data revealed that parents felt that team members’ lack of respect left them unwilling to collaborate. During focus group discussion, Jewel began to cry as she recalled, “I couldn’t understand the logic behind giving a four-year-old, who has never attended school, two days a week.” She tearfully continued, “when I questioned this, a team member said I should be glad I was getting two days off; I completely shut down.” Likewise, Leah stated, “how can I collaborate with people who think it’s ok to talk to me as if I am a two-year-old child.”. The described lack of respect was apparent regardless of the socioeconomic background of the participants.

Parents from this study reported having IEP team members cancel or schedule meetings without contacting them, eating during meetings, and having inappropriate conversations. For

example, during the focus group, Joy stated, “I sat in a meeting thinking to myself that I can’t work with these people. They are acting like they are at a cookout or something.” She went on to ask, “can someone please tell me how I can work with these people on goals for my child?” As expressed by the participants, teacher professionalism can significantly impact parents’ experiences.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings in this study provide implications to policy and practice changes for teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders involved in the public-school preschool IEP process. These implications narrow the gap in research regarding public-school preschool parents’ experiences of teacher support during the IEP process. Public-school preschool parents repeatedly expressed that their experiences with IEP team members lack professionalism during the IEP meetings. Public-school preschool parents have experienced feelings of disrespect, helplessness, and mistrust during the IEP process. Therefore, I recommend school leaders implement policies that mandate teachers and staff to take training related to appropriate conduct during IEP meetings.

Parents of public-school preschoolers who have an IEP need support during the IEP process. Teachers can support parents during the IEP process by including parents in decision-making. In addition, parents need necessary information ahead of meeting times (Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018; Rossetti et al., 2020). A practical implication would be for teachers to communicate IEP process expectations and collaborate with parents concerning goals, placement, and related services ahead of meeting times to ensure parent input.

Another practical implication is to make sure teachers know the IEP process. Teachers need to understand and explain the individual aspects of the IEP document to parents. Teachers

need to understand the strength and weaknesses of the child and make quality recommendations for services. Parents are coming into the IEP meetings expecting the teacher to have the knowledge necessary to help their child meet their IEP goals. It isn't very reassuring to parents when they seek more understanding about the IEP process, and the teachers who are supposed to implement the IEP do not have any idea about the process. The teacher's lack of knowledge and understanding about the IEP process scenario causes undo frustrations and mistrust among parents. It would benefit teachers to stay up to date on current issues concerning the IEP process. When parents see that teachers know the IEP process, it builds their trust and confidence in the teacher. In addition, I recommend that administrators add policies that will address the training needs of teachers and staff in the area of current issues and changes related to the IEP document and process.

Finally, parents need to have access to the information to make informed decisions. It is worthwhile for school leaders to provide resources that help public-school preschool parents navigate and learn about the IEP process. For example, many school district websites have little information on what to expect during the IEP process. Parents are more than willing to do the leg work when trying to gain more information on the IEP process. However, parents have struggled to find informed information on school or district websites to give them the tools to be effective participants during the IEP process. Parents have gone so far as joining several social media groups to find the support they need to become better advocates for their children regarding the IEP process. The implication to make websites more informative and parent-friendly would positively impact parent involvement during the IEP process. In addition, school leaders can host parent and teacher workshops on the IEP process.

In describing public-school preschool parents' experience of support from their child's teachers during the IEP process, teachers, administrators, and any other stakeholders in the public-school preschool setting gain a deeper understanding of the experience of public-school preschool parents whose child has an IEP. Additionally, this understanding helps strengthen school-home relationships. Also, the study asserts that improved communication, support, and trust among team members will likely positively impact educational outcomes. Finally, this study encourages teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders to educate themselves on the IEP process better.

**Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

The theoretical framework upon which this qualitative study is based is EST (Figure 1), developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994), which shows five support systems that surround a child's life. Supporting theories for the study include Epstein's (2018) EPIM (Figure 2), which consists of six types of family involvement, and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) HSMPI (Figure 3). In addition, EPMI and HSMPI both help provide a guide for research questions.

EST is built upon ecological contexts, which focus on the need for support among parents, schools, and communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erickson et al., 2018; Hirano et al., 2018). The EST framework addresses establishing effective home-school partnerships (Woods et al., 2018). Data from this study support existing research regarding the need for parents to have teacher support during the IEP process (Seigel, 2017; Bettini et al., 2017). There is a need for teacher support during the IEP process. In addition, my study revealed when parents received some level of support; they felt more confident during the IEP process. EST involves the interactions of parents and teachers when they coordinate their efforts to educate a child (Hirano

et al., 2018; Woods et al., 2018). The theory applies to all persons involved during the IEP process. Teachers must understand the role of the parent and collaborate with them during the IEP process. This study reported a lack of support, collaboration, and decision-making during the IEP process.

Joyce Epstein's (2018) six types of parent involvement (EPIM) supports the EST theory in that it offers a guide to teachers on how to implement better teacher and parent communication. This study found that parenting education, communication, and decision-making were important to parents during the IEP process, thus, providing evidence of this experience. EPIM recommends training and support programs for parents (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Epstein et al., 2002). Current study data supports existing research that states many parents of children with IEPs rely on teachers for training and support (Gershwin, 2020; Heiskanen et al., 2021). In addition, the theory offers communication recommendations in the form of conferencing with parents, using language translators, and providing effective notices, newsletters, and other communication. The study revealed parents' frustrations with receiving school and classroom newsletters that never related to their children. Public-school preschool parents interact daily with school administrators but feel left out of any type of school decisions. The same administrators participate in the IEP meetings of public-school preschool parents, yet there is no communication outside of the meetings. Administrators left parents feeling disconnected whenever administrators attended their IEP meeting.

EPIM asserts that educators should encourage parents to be active participants in the decision-making of their child's common education interest (Epstein, 2018). Parents feel left out of the decision-making during the IEP process. Current study data corroborates existing data that

conveys a lack of parental decision-making during the IEP process (Goldman et al., 2020; Hirano et al., 2018; Kurth et al., 2019; Love et al., 2017; Yell et al., 2020).

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) parental involvement model consist of five levels. First, HSMPI strengthens Bronfenbrenner's EST model by looking at a psychological experience of why parents become involved. HSMPI asserts that parents' view of their role determines their level of involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The study findings confirm that parents described their role during the IEP to be an advocate for their children. Unfortunately, because teachers made them feel inadequate, participants reported sitting in IEP meetings just going through the motions. This study corroborates existing research that states that professionals' disrespectful and inconsiderate attitudes often result in less parental participation during IEP meetings (Al-Shammari & Hornby, 2020). In addition, HSMPI conceptualizes how parent involvement impacts parents' experience of teacher support (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). Study data support existing research that reveals a greater need for parental involvement, yet parents report that educators do not provide adequate support for beneficial parental involvement (Goldman et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2028).

Data collected in this study supports these theories in their ability to address the need for support and collaboration among parents, schools, and the community. Data from the current study support existing research that acknowledges parents do not feel supported by teachers during the IEP process (Gershwin, 2020; Slade et al., 2018). However, most research on parents' experiences of teacher support during the IEP process focuses on parents who have children in grades K-12. Therefore, current research must include the viewpoints of these three theories when trying to understand the experiences of public-school preschool parents to help understand the support needed from teachers. Without this experience, there will remain a gap in research.

Due to the parents needing support from the teachers, it is essential to understand their experiences when seeking that support (Conger et al., 2019). The majority of existing research on parent support experiences during the IEP process focuses on parents whose children receive special education services and attend grades K-12 (Burke et al., 2018; Hoover et al., 2018; Larios & Zeitlin, 2018; Rossetti et al., 2020). Additionally, there was little research on public-school preschool parents' experiences of teacher support during the IEP process. This study helps to narrow the gap found in the existing literature.

Existing research reports teachers' lack of parental support during the IEP process (Burke et al., 2018; Gershwin, 2020). The current study supports these findings. The study found that parents received little to no support during the IEP process. Parents expected teachers to be more supportive because teachers were the experts on the IEP process.

Existing research found that lack of decision-making affected parental involvement during the IEP process (Goldman et al., 2020; Hirano et al., 2018; Kurth et al., 2019; Love et al., 2017; Yell et al., 2020). The current study confirms existing research on this issue. Parents often attended meetings with IEP goals and placement already filled out. The study further found that lack of decision-making made parents feel left out of the process.

Existing research reported that parents found it challenging to collaborate with disrespectful and insensitive teachers (Fogle et al., 2020; Woods et al. 2018). The current study supports this research finding. My findings revealed parents felt belittled and talked down to during IEP meetings. Though existing research revealed that disrespectfulness and rudeness were more likely to be experienced by low-income, minorities, and less-educated parents (Rispoli et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2018), this was not found to be the case in this current study. Participants

Faye and Leah are Asian and Pacific Islander who both have college degrees and make over $108,000 a year

From data collected in this study, four themes emerged: Support During the Process, Communication, Trust, and Advocacy. Other studies put great emphasis on support during the process, communication, and trust as it relates to specific ethnic groups, disability, or social-economic status among parents whose children were in grades K-12 and have IEPs (Lee et al., 2020; Rispoli et al., 2018 Rossetti et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2018). In addition, advocacy was emphasized as an essential part of the experience on support from their child's teachers during the IEP process.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

The study contained several delimitations. This transcendental phenomenological study examines parents' experiences of the support they receive from their children's teachers when those children have an IEP and attend public-school-preschool in Southeastern U.S. A transcendental approach focuses on collecting information or data that can describe the essence of the focused experience (Moustakas, 1994). I used purposeful sampling in participant selection. I chose purposeful sampling to draw experiences from parents who have a child in public-school preschool, and that child has an IEP. The suggested sample size for this study is 10 to 12 participants, placing delimitations on the study.

There were also limitations to this study. First, a sample size of 10 is small. Although saturation occurred and the sample size was appropriate for the study, it provided a limited view of the studied phenomenon. Additionally, all participants were female. However, this was not intentional. Geographical location was another limitation of this study. Participants were limited to persons who lived in the Southeastern U.S. Due to the few recruitments from initially

approved sites, I reached out to other schools in Southeastern U.S. and received no approvals. In addition, many areas had issues due to COVID-19 closures. Finally, participants were recruited through snowball sampling and social media. Therefore, the experiences shared in this sample of participants may not reflect all public-school preschool parents whose children have IEPs.

### Recommendations for Future Research

This study intended to describe parents' experience of the support they receive from their children's teachers when those children have an IEP. The participants from this study included ten parents from the Southeastern U.S. who have children's IEPs and attend public-school preschool. Future research could expand the geographic area to gain more consistency in the lived experiences across the country. I had a least seven potential participants who did not meet the criteria due to geographic location. Including research from the fathers' experience of the support, they receive from their children's teachers when those children have an IEP would be beneficial because they may have different experiences and experiences. Finally, additional research could include using quantitative methods to study this topic. A quantitative analysis could incorporate a larger sample size and gain responses using surveys that allow a more concentrated focus on specific themes.

## Conclusion

This transcendental phenomenological study examines parents' experience of the support they receive from their children's teachers when those children have an IEP. The central research question that guided this study was: *How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-school preschool describe the support provided by their children's teachers?* The three sub-questions included: *How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-school preschool perceive their role and the teacher's role during the IEP process? What are parents'*

*experiences of the ways teachers can support them during the IEP process?* and *What are parents' experiences of the support and relationship challenges between parents and public-school preschool teachers during the IEP process?* The data was collected from ten participants through documentation, individual interviews, and two focus groups. Data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) method of analysis. Through data collection, four themes emerged.

Study findings hold theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) EST (Figure 1), Epstein's (2018) EPIM (Figure 2), and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) HSMPI (Figure 3) address the need for support and collaboration among parents, schools, and the community. Parents need additional support from teachers during the IEP process. Teachers need to include parents in decision-making during the IEP process, and parents want to have a voice during the IEP process. Implications suggest there is a need for more teacher and parent training on the IEP process. I hope that this study will give representation in research for those parents who have felt left out of the conversation.

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**Appendix A**

Recruitment Flyer


- **Are you 18 years of age or older?**
- **Do you have a preschool child who attends a public-school preschool in Southeastern US?**
- **Does your preschooler have an Individual Education Plan (IEP)? (Preschooler must have an IEP)**

**If you answered yes to the above question, you may be eligible for a study that could improve the support that you receive during the IEP process.**

My research aims to examine parents' experiences of the support they receive from their children's teachers when those children have IEPs and attend public-school preschools.

Participants will be asked to: provide demographic data (10 minutes), provide any documentation they feel will provide additional clarity and understanding on the phenomenon for the study, participate in one recorded individual interview (60 minutes) and one recorded focus group (60 minutes). In addition, participants will be able to review their interview and focus group responses.

**Potential Benefits**

Participating in this study may improve the support you and other parents receive during the IEP process.
Sharing your experience may help teachers improve how they provide support for you.

## The study will be conducted via the Zoom platform

Linda H. Henderson, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

## Appendix B

Preliminary Permission to Conduct Research

[redacted]

November 16, 2020

Ms. Henderson,

I will help you contact our pre-school and make the introduction to our director. She will help you from there.

You can move forward to IRB with your proposal. We will need your written university IRB approval before we can grant you access to any information. Thank you.

[redacted]

## Appendix C

IRB

August 10, 2021

Linda Henderson Barbara White

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-1038 PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACHER SUPPORT RELATED TO THEIR CHILD'S INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLAN: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Linda Henderson, Barbara White,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required. Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d): Category 2. (ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording). Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation. Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your

research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration. Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account. If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu. Sincerely, G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

## Appendix D

School Permission Form

September 28, 2019

Southeastern US School District

Dear Administrator,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting a doctoral research study as part of the requirements for a Doctoral degree. The title of my research project is *Parents' Experiences of Teacher Support Related to Their Child's Individual Education Plan: A Phenomenological Study*. The purpose of my research is to describe the parents' experience of the teacher support that they receive related to their child's IEP and the IEP process.

I am writing to request your assistance in identifying qualified participants. Participant requirements are that t: (1) parents must have a child attending a public-school preschool in your district, and (2) the preschool child of those parents must have an IEP.

Participants will be asked to complete a demographic form, participate in a personal interview, participate in a focus group discussion, and submit any documentation they deem valuable to the study. The data will be used to understand parents' experiences of teacher support related to what they have experienced during the IEP process. Participants will be asked to contact me to indicate that they have an interest in participating in the study. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to their formal participation in the study. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

For education research, school/district permission should be on approved letterhead with the appropriate signature(s).

Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,

Linda H. Henderson, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

## Appendix E

Participant Solicitation Letter/Email

Dear Potential Participants:

As graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to examine parents' experiences of the support they receive from their children's teachers when those children have IEPs and attend public-school preschools. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, must have a child attending a public-school preschool in a Southeastern US school district, and parents preschooler must have an IEP.
Participants, if willing, will be asked to:

1. Provide demographic data through email before initial contact from researcher.
2. Participate in an individual interview via Zoom platform (approximately 1 hour)
3. Participate in focus group (approximately 1 hour
4. Member-check your transcribed interview as well as your focus group responses for data accuracy

Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the initial contact.

Linda H. Henderson, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

## Appendix F

Consent Form

PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACHER SUPPORT RELATED TO THEIR CHILD'S INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLAN: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by
Linda Henderson
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study *to describe parents' experiences of teacher support related to their child's IEP.* You were selected as a possible participant because you are at least 18 years of age, you have a child who attends a public-school preschool in the southeastern United States, and your child has an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP).
Participation in this study is voluntary.
Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Linda Henderson, a doctoral candidate/ in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information*:*** *The purpose of this study is to:*

- ✓ *examine parents' experiences of the support they receive from their children's teachers when those children have IEPs and attend public-school preschool.*
- ✓ *provide parents and teachers with information that will lead to better parent-teacher collaboration and support from teachers during the IEP process*

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Submit a completed preliminary question form of demographic information and any documentation that you feel is relevant to the study.
2. Participate in 1audio and video recorded individual interview via Zoom platform, lasting approximately 1 hour.
3. Participate in 1audio and video recorded focus group via Zoom platform, lasting approximately 1 hour

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study "are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life."

**Benefits:** Benefits to society include:

- ✓ Giving awareness to the need for better communication with families
- ✓ Add to the body of research literature about the described experiences of the group

**Compensation:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews/focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

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

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Linda H. Henderson. You may ask any questions you have now.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at irb@liberty.edu.

***Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.***

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations.*

*The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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

☐ The researcher has my permission to [audio-record/video-record/ me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Signature of Participant Date

_____

**Signature of Investigator**

## Appendix G

Preliminary Questions

1. What is your gender?
2. How old are you?
3. Are you employed?
4. What is your occupation?
5. How many children do you currently have who are attending a public-school preschool program and who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?
6. How old is your child?
7. What is your child's eligibility for services (e.g., visual impairment, developmental delay, Autism, etc.).?
8. What race do you consider yourself?
9. Are both parents living in the household?
10. What is your educational level?
11. What is your yearly income level?

## Appendix H

Interview Protocol

Before we begin, I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. Let me start by introducing myself. My name is Linda Henderson. I am a Doctoral student at Liberty University conducting research to describe PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACEHR SUPPORT RELATED TO THEIR CHILD'S INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLAN.

The questions in this interview are designed to answer the primary research question:

How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-preschool describe the support provided by their children's teachers?

1. How are you today?
2. Do you have any concerns before we get started?
3. Please describe your family to me.
4. Where does your child attend school?
5. Tell me, what type of support have you experienced from your child's teachers as it relates to the IEP process?
6. How do you perceive your role during the IEP process?
7. How do you perceive the teachers' role during the IEP process?
8. How can you become more involved in the IEP process?
9. How can your child's teacher support your involvement during the IEP process?
10. What types of challenges have you had with the support provided by your child's teachers related to the IEP process?
11. What questions on the IEP document do you find uncomfortable answering?
12. What questions would you like to see asked on the IEP document?

13. I would like to thank you for your time and participation. I have one final question. What, if anything, do you feel would be essential to add about your experiences of support from your child's teachers concerning the IEP process for your child?

# Appendix I

Focus Group Protocol

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research study. I would like to start by providing a brief introduction of myself and then have each parent do the same. My name is Linda Henderson. I am a Doctoral student at Liberty University conducting research on PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACHER SUPPORT RELATED TO THEIR CHILD'S INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLAN.

These questions are designed to answer the primary research question:

How do parents whose children have an IEP and attend public-preschool describe the support provided by their children's teachers?

1. Describe your initial goals for your child during their enrollment in the public-school preschool program?
2. Describe your expectations for an IEP meeting?
3. What areas of the IEP process are you most satisfied with?
4. What areas of the IEP process are you most dissatisfied with?
5. What recommendations do you have for improving the IEP process?
6. Thank you so much for your time.
7. What other information do you feel is important to add to this interview?