

IMPROVING PARENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE IEP PROCESS:

AN APPLIED STUDY

by

Rhonda Renay Clanton-Davis

An Applied Research Report Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this applied study was to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. The central research question was: How can the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process be solved at Brown Elementary School in central Texas? In a virtual setting, I used content analysis of the following participants: parents of children with disabilities, general and special education teachers, and public education administrators. I collected data collected using quantitative and qualitative approaches from surveys, interviews, and a focus group with administration and teachers to analyze and inform experiences within the IEP process. I analyzed data using codes and themes, as well as the Likert scale. Results may be used to develop procedures to improve parents' IEP knowledge at a central Texas elementary school.

Keywords: parent advocacy, inclusive education, individualized education program, IEP meeting process, IDEA, procedural violations

Dedication

This work is dedicated to every parent who has been blessed with an exceptional child! I pray this work helps improve parent knowledge, the quality of education for children with special needs, and empowers families to be the best possible advocate for their loved one(s). Moreover, I pray this paper helps students with special education needs receive the education they deserve.

Acknowledgments

Lord, thank you for blessing me with the talent to promote advocacy for children with special needs. Thank you for my soulmate. Theodore, thank you for believing in me! I love you beyond words and cannot thank you enough for the unwavering support during this process and always! To my first babies, Jhalyn and Rodesha, I am, because you are! Thank you for loving me and for being exceptional role models to your siblings. Jordan and Justin, never allow fear to stop your excellence! Remember, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

“As irons sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Prov 27:17). Lord, thank you, for my mom, Ron, my sisters, and my sorority sisters who sharpened me, inspired me, encouraged me, and pushed me forward! We did it! A special “thank you” to my pastor, Dr. Larry D. Brown Sr., and my Gravel Run Baptist Church family, you all have been true inspirations and supporters. To my watch care family and friends at Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church, Texas, thank you for your continued prayers and religious insight. Last but not least, I would like to extend gratitude to Drs. Frank Bailey, Meredith Park, and Patricia Stoudt, for your guidance and mentorship throughout this process. Your support has been unparalleled and I could not have accomplished this goal without your prayers and expertise. Wishing you all abundant blessings and uncommon favor!

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List of Abbreviations

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Center for Parent Information and Resources (CPIR)

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Local Education Agency (LEA)

Special Education Needs (SEN)

United States Department of Education (USDOE)

World Health Organization (WHO)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Parenting may be challenging and having a child with a disability may add to those challenges, complicating parents' responsiveness to their child's unique needs. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), 1,000,000,000 people have some form of disability. In recent years, more than 7,000,000 students with disabilities receive special education and related services through American public schools (Frey, 2019; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2017). One example is, Brown Elementary School (fictitious name) in central Texas. This public school offers a variety of special education services and recognizes the importance of individualizing educational experiences to meet the unique needs of many students. Meeting the individual needs of students is accomplished through an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The overarching purpose of the federal mandate, Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), is to ensure that all children with disabilities have access to free appropriate public education that provides services to meet their unique needs (IDEA, 2004). Brown Elementary School (fictitious name) acknowledges the importance of parents as contributing members of the IEP team. Unfortunately, educational terminology and the complexities of the law can make it difficult for some parents to navigate through special education law and IEP processes (Goldman & Burke, 2017). Limited research has been conducted on the IEP knowledge of parents of children with disabilities. The purpose of this applied study was to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. The central research question is: How can the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process be solved at Brown Elementary School in

central Texas?

In the following section, I provide background information comprised of the historical, theoretical, and social contexts. I will also address the problem statement, purpose, and significance of this study. This chapter concludes with a list of the research questions, definitions of terms used throughout this study, and a summary.

Background

Schools are required to use IEPs as the essential strategy involved in educating students with special educational needs (SEN; B. Elder et al., 2018; Timothy & Agbenyega, 2018). Each IEP is created by a team of parents, teachers, and other school staff who work together to discuss the student's unique needs and to design a truly *individualized* document (USDOE, 2010). Therefore, an investigation of parents' knowledge and experience of IEPs in public schools is essential. The IEP serves as a roadmap for special education services (Center for Parent Information [CPIR], 2017b). Recent research focused mainly on the IEP as a process, with emphasis on promoting student participation and improving student and family experiences at IEP meetings (Kozik, 2018; Mueller & Vick, 2019; Rossetti et al., 2017). However, the role of parent participation on this roadmap is critical as well.

As the cornerstone of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, no document is more significant for ensuring effective and compliant program design, implementing, monitoring, and enforcing the law than the IEP (Rotter, 2014). An IEP is a written statement of the educational program designed to meet a child's individual needs (CPIR, 2017b). The IEP is developed by a team of individuals that includes vital school staff and the child's parents, and each child's IEP must contain specific information as listed within the IDEA. The group meets, reviews the assessment information available about the child, and designs an

education program to address the child's educational needs (CPIR, 2017a). Family engagement in special education has been federally mandated for 45 years when Public Law 94-142 was passed in 1975 and later reauthorized as the IDEA (2004). In fact, the IDEA emphasized family engagement in children's education as a crucial element in improving the effectiveness of special education programs (Kurth et al., 2019).

The IDEA established the rights of parents of children with disabilities to participate in decision-making processes and to hold schools accountable. Understanding the law and acting on their rights is a complicated and often overwhelming task for parents (Connor & Cavendish, 2018). Advocacy programs emerged to assist parents in exercising their rights (Goldman et al., 2019). Special education advocates are trained individuals who do not offer legal advice but provide support and guidance for families as they navigate the special education process (Goldman et al., 2017). Counts et al. (2018) suggested school personnel must try to recruit stakeholders to serve as advocates within the community and build opportunities to provide parent education.

Moreover, parents of children with disabilities have indicated placement and other decisions were often already made before the IEP meeting, and families have felt school personnel only wanted parents in the process to sign previously determined decisions (Kurth et al., 2019). Yet, the IDEA placed prime responsibility on families, including understanding the stipulations of the IDEA (Turnbull, 2005). Thus, many caregivers struggle to advocate for their child due to a lack of special education knowledge, a power imbalance with the school, and procedural barriers (Burke & Goldman, 2017; Spies & Cheatham, 2018). Subsequently, the central research question for this applied research study was: How can the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process be solved at Brown Elementary School in central

Texas?

Historical Context

Over a half-century ago, Cruickshank and Dolphin (1951) wrote:

Parents of handicapped children need help from people who can be honest with them and give them guidance and understanding, as they attempt to meet the needs of these children. Carefully planned education experiences are a requisite to the school system's effort to meet the needs of deviating children. (p. 124)

These planned educational experiences became mandates with the passage of Public Law 94-142, which required an IEP for students with disabilities (EAHCA, 1975). Children and youth with disabilities have historically received unequal treatment in the public education system (Forte, 2017). The history of special education law is a chronicle of the efforts of parents and advocacy groups in the courts and legislatures of this country to provide equal educational opportunities and rights for children with disabilities (Forte, 2017). This history includes compulsory attendance and the exclusion of students with disabilities, then concludes with parent advocacy.

Compulsory Attendance

Public education is viewed as a birthright in this country that leads to an informed constituency without which no viable democracy would exist (Levine & Wexler, 1981). By 1918, compulsory education laws were established in all states (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1984). A common misconception regarding public education is that the federal constitution guarantees it; however, the 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution suggested that education is the responsibility of state government (Forte, 2017). Despite the enactment of compulsory education laws, children with disabilities were often excluded from public schools (Forte, 2017).

The Exclusion of Students with Disabilities

For decades after the compulsory education law enactment, the courts continued to exclude students with disabilities. In 1893, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that a child who was weak minded, and could not benefit from instruction, was troublesome to other children, and who was unable to take ordinary, physical care of himself, could be expelled from public school (*Watson v. City of Cambridge*, 1893). Nearly three decades later, the Wisconsin Supreme Court, in *Beattie v. Board of Education* (1919), ruled that school officials could exclude a fifth-grade student who had a condition that caused drooling and facial contortions. As recently as 1969, the courts upheld legislation that prohibited including students whom school officials judged would not benefit from public education or who might be disruptive to other students (Yell et al., 1998). In 1969, North Carolina determined it a crime for parents to pursue the attendance of a child with disabilities after expulsion from public school (Weber, 1992). Not until 1975 did the Congress pass, and President Ford signed P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which allowed children with disabilities to attend school and their parents to advocate for them.

Parent Advocacy

Indeed, parents may be the best advocates for their children (Kurth et al., 2018). Caregivers have unique perspectives and understanding of raising a child with a disability and working with the school on the child's behalf (Spies & Cheatham, 2018). A landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954; hereafter *Brown*), was a significant victory for persons with disabilities. Activists for students with disabilities, citing *Brown*, claimed students with disabilities had the same rights as students without disabilities (Yell et al., 1998). Since the 1970s in the United States, parent interest groups (e.g., The Arc and United Cerebral Palsy) have

advocated for legislative changes for individuals with disabilities (Burke et al., 2018; Forte, 2017).

The progress made in special education can be attributed in great part to the success of parents as advocates for their children. Advocacy groups instituted primarily by and for parents and families of individuals include United Cerebral Palsy, founded in 1949; the National Society for Autistic Children, founded in 1961; and the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, founded in 1964 (Yell et al., 1998). Additional advocacy groups include Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, National Parent Leadership Institute, Colorado Family Leadership Training, and Community Organizing and Family Issues, which offers parent-school partnerships that train parents and community leaders to become effective advocates (National Center, 2019). Insufficient knowledge of special education or the legislative process may preclude legislative advocacy (Burke et al., 2018). Moreover, the IDEA (2004) required parents to be a part of the educational placement and other decisions as compulsory members of the IEP team, 20 U.S.C. §614 (e), and the IEP process, 20 U.S.C. § 614 (d)(1)(B)(i). Counts et al. (2018) discerned school personnel must make a conscious effort to communicate with parents and build opportunities for active engagement; they can work together in the decision-making process of the IEP, which is ultimately in the best interest of the child.

Social Context

The emphasis on parent participation is further evident in the IDEA accountability system, which compels states to annually document the percentages of parents who report schools that facilitated their involvement (Kurth et al., 2019). Parent advocacy is essential, and recent case law further acknowledged the central role of parents in the IEP decision-making

process (Forte, 2017). However, existing research documents an overall lack of school openness to parent input (Kurth, Love et al., 2020). Parents report that schools generally do not solicit parent input, are not responsive to parent input, and are unwilling to consider alternatives to plans or services advised by school personnel (Ilik & Er, 2019).

Parent experiences include adverse treatment from educators, feeling disempowered as advocates for their child (Stanberry, 2019), and being frustrated by low expectations and limited knowledge from educators (Rossetti et al., 2017). Additionally, parents of children with disabilities have indicated placement and other decisions were often already made before the IEP meeting (Kurth, McQueston et al., 2019). Yet, the IDEA placed considerable responsibility on families, including understanding the stipulations of the IDEA (Turnbull, 2005). Despite negative experiences, parents of children with disabilities generally want to be more involved with educational decision-making (Zirkel & Hetrick, 2017). The finding that many parents are not included to be able to work cooperatively with schools as intended in the IDEA, and the lack of such collaborative relationships, is significantly impacting families' experiences and student services (Ilik & Er, 2019).

Theoretical Context

The theoretical framework applied in this research is founded on the historical landmarks of special education and children with disabilities. Special education is viewed in different ways depending on the political and social context. Some have considered special education as meeting the unmet needs of children with appropriate and effective interventions within the general education school systems (Pang et al., 2019). For special education, the issues of ethics and political theory are especially important because children with disabilities are a minority and the interests of children are always juxtaposed with majority interests (Putnam et al., 2019). This

theoretical context aligns as special education has an extensive historical foundation and helps provide an understanding of the need for parent IEP knowledge as determined by Turnbull (2005).

Following the historical landmarks of special education and children with disabilities is the theoretical concept of inclusive education relating to social learning theory (Bandura, 1971). Today, more than one in 10 students in public schools have an identified disability (USDOE, 2017), and federal legislation requires these students be educated alongside their typically developing peers to the extent possible, in what is referred to as the least restrictive environment (LRE; IDEA, 2004). One impetus for such inclusive programming is the hypothesis that children with disabilities can be positively affected by being educated alongside typically developing peers (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020). This programming is also informed by social learning theory, in which Bandura (1971) asserted that learning occurs in the process of social interactions, wherein children observe, imitate, internalize, and model the behaviors of more competent peers (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020).

Problem Statement

The problem is parents' knowledge of the IEP process is insufficient in a central Texas elementary school. When requesting services, parents should have a knowledge base of what special education services they can obtain for their child (Burke & Goldman, 2017). Knowledge of special education services is valuable to the parent, the child, and the IEP team (PACER, 2019). Parents often interpret the actions of educators as a violation of their procedural rights and court rulings suggest a divide between parents and school districts while planning, writing, and implementing IEPs (Claxton, 2018). Moreover, many disputes have arisen in which parents of students in special education have challenged school districts in due process hearings alleging

that the school district failed in their duty to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to their child (Yell et al., 2017). Zirkel and Hetrick (2017) revealed IEP team parent-participation procedural violations were most frequently adjudicated, and the outcome of these court cases ruled in favor of the school districts at a ratio of approximately 3:1. Another study focusing on due process hearings found districts prevailed in roughly 72% of cases from 2011 to 2015, while a different study addressed parents of students with disabilities lost more than 85% of the time against school districts (Richman, 2019).

Currently, many IEP teams rely upon special education advocates to develop a rapport with the parent, establish clear expectations, learn about the child and the family, educate, and empower the parent, and participate in IEP meetings (Burke & Goldman, 2017). However, advocates are not always available to educate and empower the parents, combating parents' lack of knowledge. Justice Breyer expressed concern that judges, who do not know much about education policy, would be called upon to second-guess the judgment of experts and, in doing so, would encourage still more litigation, saying, "I foresee taking money that ought to go to children and spending it on lawsuits and lawyers and all kinds of things that are extraneous" (Dunn, 2017, p. 7). Due to this parental lack of knowledge, federal courts may continue to end up dealing with special education rulings. Current research supports parent-teacher collaboration and trust-building; however, a gap exists in literature supporting ways to improve parents' knowledge of the IEP process. Therefore, a multimethod research effort is required in addressing the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process, which may result in reducing the frequency of litigation.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this applied study was to examine the problem of parents' insufficient

knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. I utilized a multimethod design of qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze data from surveys with parents, interviews with parents demonstrating the most need for improved IEP process knowledge, and a focus group with education professionals. Creswell (2014) suggested qualitative and quantitative data combined provides a better understanding of research than each type could independently. I used these approaches to improve parents' understanding of IEP processes in becoming advocates for their children. MacLeod et al. (2017) suggested a collaboration between schools and parents is the first approach to accurate educational planning and rests primarily on two principles of the IDEA: parent participation and procedural process. Parents can use knowledge about the IEP process to positively influence their children's learning experiences throughout their education (Spies & Cheatham, 2018).

Strong parent advocates tend to gather information and ask relevant questions, understand how the educational systems are designed, build relationships with and, organize others, as well as identify problems, propose solutions, and set goals (Goldman & Burke, 2017). Through this study, I hoped to promote effective strategies and professional development opportunities to strengthen relationships between staff and families and improve the quality of education for children with special needs. Healthy staff and family relationships promote opportunities for open communication and validated parental concerns (Kurth, McQueston et al., 2019). These healthy relationships also encourage mutual family-school relationships and position parents as experts (Welton & Freelon, 2017). Unfortunately, other researchers in current literature only addressed the results of parents' insufficient knowledge of Public Law 94-142 and fail to discuss the importance of parents' knowledge of the IEP process.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is in its contribution to closing the gap in the body of literature supporting ways to improve parents' knowledge of the IEP process. Furthermore, this study may increase the level of parental knowledge of the IEP process in a central Texas school district. This increased knowledge may subsequently increase parental involvement in the process, thus reducing litigation and its inherent costs for the central Texas school district. This study is important given the significant rise in special education disputes in Texas school districts. In recent school years, claims filed alleged the county school system: (a) prevented parents from contribution that developed their children's IEP; (b) banned parents and advocates of special needs students from school property minus the benefit of a due process hearing; and (c) generally created an unfriendly and non-supportive environment for those parents, and other advocates who are vocal about ongoing violations of federal law in the central Texas school district (Dodd, 2022). A current audit uncovered that Texas school districts were spending a substantial amount of time and taxpayer money in court fighting parents of children with SEN in court (Dodd, 2022). However, better ways to resolve these issues include increasing parent knowledge, building partnerships, and providing mediation (Meador, 2020). Special Education is one of the highest non-discretionary expenditures of this district (2020-21 Budget Proposal, 2020). This study is significant as it may promote a more informed special education community, while dramatically cutting public expenses for litigation.

Research Questions

Central Question: How can the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process be solved at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Sub-question 1: How would quantitative survey data inform the problem of parents'

insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Sub-question 2: How would parents in an interview solve the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Sub-question 3: How would education professionals in a focus group solve the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Definitions

1. *Disability* - Disability is defined by any of these categories: autism, deafness, deaf-blindness, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, hearing impairment, development delay, traumatic brain injury, emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairment, a special learning disability, speech or language impairment, or visual impairment, including blindness (IDEA, 2004).
2. **Disabled children* - Disabled children are evaluated in accordance with U.S. Sec 300.304 – 300.311 as having mental retardation, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as “emotional disturbance”), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, and other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple blindness, and who, by reason thereof needs special education and related services (IDEA, 2004). * Disclaimer: In this study, the term “children with disabilities” is used to comply with people-first ideology.
3. *FAPE* - Free appropriate public education is special education and related services, which (a) have been provided at the public expense, under public supervision [471 U.S. 359, 368] and direction, and without charge, (b) meet the standards of the State educational

agency, (c) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the State involved, and (d) are provided in conformity with an individualized education program (IDEA, 1990).

4. *IDEA* – The IDEA makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children. The IDEA was initially known as Public Law 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975); however, in 1990, amendments to the law were passed and the law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004).
5. *IEP* - The Individualized Education Program is a written plan/program developed by the schools' special education team with input from parents and specifies the student's academic goals and the method to obtain these goals. The IEP is required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, the federal law designed to carry out the due process rights guaranteed by PL94-142 (IDEA, 2004; Watson, 2019).
6. *Inclusive education* - Inclusive education occurs when all students, regardless of any challenges they may have, are placed in age-appropriate general education classes that are in their own neighborhood schools to receive high-quality instruction, interventions, and supports that enable them to meet success in the core curriculum (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Bui et al., 2010).
7. *Parent* - A parent is a natural, adoptive, or foster parent of a child (unless a foster parent is prohibited by State law from serving as a parent); a guardian (but not the State if the child is a ward of the State); an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent (including a grandparent, stepparent, or other relative) with whom the child lives,

or an individual who is legally responsible for the child's welfare; or except as used in sections 1415(b)(2) and 1439(a)(5) of this title, an individual assigned under either of those sections to be a surrogate parent (IDEA, 2004).

8. *Readability* - Readability is the ability to understand the imparted information, read the information at optimal speed, and find the information of interest (Gray et al., 2019; Kerry-Henkel & Eklund, 2015).
9. *Special education* - Special education is specifically designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings (IDEA, 2004).

Summary

The purpose of this applied study was to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. Parents cannot be effective advocates for their children during the IEP process if they are not fully knowledgeable of the stipulations of the IDEA (Turnbull, 2005). The underlying principles of the IDEA, the IEP, and parental involvement can be the catalyst for student success.

Promoting the parents' role in the IEP process has many benefits, including parent participation and legal compliance with strict procedural processes (MacLeod et al., 2017). Claxton (2018) asserted that parental engagement encourages learning, high achievement expectations, and commitment. Unfortunately, many barriers exist which impede parents' knowledge of and involvement in this vital process (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). The goal of this study was to present findings, to identify barriers, and to increase collaboration between

parents and the school, to decrease the lack of knowledge that may affect identifying students' needs. Through this study, I sought to eliminate these barriers and help parents work effectively with their school partners to create a positive environment needed to facilitate the best educational plan. As well, I hope to inform teachers and administrators on how to solve the problem of insufficient IEP knowledge of parents.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of the literature review is to examine literature related to the problem of inadequate Individualized Education Program (IEP) knowledge of parents of children with disabilities. This section consists of an overview, a theoretical framework, a presentation of related literature, and a summary. In greater detail, the theoretical framework covers social learning theory and social development theory, while the related literature section consists of historical disability landmarks, overarching themes of obstacles to parent participation, and procedural protections in the IEP process. These themes include the subtopics of parent IEP expectations and barriers to parental involvement. As a result of these obstacles, the succeeding sections include IEP violations and suggestions for improving parents' and school professionals' relationships.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework supporting this study included Bandura's (1971) social learning theory and Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory. These theories addressed learning in a social environment and have impacted special education. The key to this study is for IEP teams, which include parents, to determine the best environment for each student to learn. Bandura's and Vygotsky's theories provided a backdrop for IEP teams, school professionals, and parents, as they discover the least restrictive placements for each student.

Social Learning Theory

The philosophies leading special education have changed in the last 30 years, and a large part of this revolution is based upon the idea that students with disabilities should receive their education in the least restrictive environment (LRE; Bolourian et al., 2020; Wehmeyer et al.,

2020). According to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, 1975), students with disabilities from ages 5–21 are required to be educated with their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent possible, regardless of the nature and severity of their disabilities (Rossetti et al., 2017). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) again mandated that students with disabilities should be educated with students who do not have disabilities, to the greatest extent possible, which is considered the LRE (Center for Parent Information [CPIR], 2017a). Unfortunately, the vagueness of this statute language has forced parents to step into the role of advocate, fighting for what they believe to be the least restrictive placement for their child. Wehmeyer et al. (2020) purported the principles of LRE, and progress in the general curriculum has been translated in ways that perpetuate segregation, rather than increasing students' access to meaningful curriculum in inclusive educational contexts. Nonetheless, Bandura (1977) indicated most human behavior is learned observationally through observing others. From observation one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action (Bandura, 1977).

Albert Bandura suggested that people learn from one another, via observation, imitation, and modeling, which is theorized as social learning theory (Strauss, 2017). Social learning theory has four underlying components: (a) attention, including modeled events (distinctiveness, affective valence, complexity, prevalence, functional value) and observer characteristics (sensory capacities, arousal level, perceptual set, past reinforcement); (b) retention, including symbolic coding, cognitive organization, symbolic rehearsal, motor rehearsal; (c) motor reproduction, including physical capabilities, self-observation of reproduction, accuracy of feedback; and (d) motivation, including external, vicarious, and self-reinforcement (Bandura, 1971).

A person's ability to learn by imitating others enables him to acquire large scale

behaviors without having to experience the patterns of tedious tests and mistakes (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020). In the social learning theory, learning by direct experience and modeling can result in new patterns of behavior. Bandura (1971) further explained most of the behaviors displayed by people are learned through the influence of examples. If children do not have exposure to hear dialog, for example, it would be inconceivable to instill in them linguistic skills that constitute a language (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020).

Social Development Theory

Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory is complementary to Bandura's social learning theory. The work of Lev Vygotsky in the 1930s laid the foundation of the social development theory. Vygotsky concentrated on the relationships between people and the sociocultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences (Padmanabha, 2018). Every function in the child's traditional development appears on the social level, and later, on an individual level. The child's cultural development occurs first between people—interpsychological—and then within the child—intrapsychological (Vygotsky, 1978). Another aspect of Vygotsky's theory is the concept that the potential for cognitive development depends upon the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) declared ZPD is an imperative concept that relates to the disparity between what a child can accomplish autonomously and what a child can achieve with support and encouragement from a skilled partner. ZPD is attained when children engage in social behavior (Culatta, 2019). With appropriate assistance from an adult or a more progressive peer, children are capable of much more learning than on their own.

Vygotsky's idea of ZPD has made a significant impact on educating students with disabilities, as his position of social learning is applicable to the instruction, practices, supports, and services of special education (Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019). Special education was the

catalyst from which Vygotsky obtained data to support his general theoretical conceptions in that learning disabilities are not originally biologically grounded but rather socio-cultural (Toomela, 2018). Vygotsky desired to provide instruction that included varied social interactions and adequate methods of education that develop unconventional but equivalent roads for cultural maturity (Padmanabha, 2018). Students with disabilities should spend less time isolated and more time interacting with their peers. From 1989–2010, the time students with disabilities spent in LRE increased 90% (Anderson, 2018). In alignment with the IDEA (2004), which may require that students with disabilities are educated with peers without disabilities and offer an LRE based on the parent and school professional teams' determination, Vygotsky's ZPD is appropriate for this study.

The theoretical framework consisted of Albert Bandura's (1971) social learning theory and Lev Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory. These ideas play an important role in special education. A key characteristic of the IDEA (2004) was the requirement that each child receiving special education services must have an IEP. With the LRE and the IDEA mandate for students with disabilities, I sought to maintain the social interactions toward cultural development, directly related to Vygotsky's and Bandura's theories.

Related Literature

Block et al. (2019) maintained groundbreaking laws and policies implemented over five decades ago transformed special education into what it is today. Here, developments in special education and disability advocacy will be considered through a historical context and address past decisions made toward the management of persons with disabilities and the enactment of laws to protect these individuals within the United States and abroad. Throughout history, the topic of disability has been discussed nationally and internationally, including the Civil Rights

Act of 1964, the Children Act of 1989, the Children (Scotland) Act of 1995, the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 as well as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Some of these efforts will be communicated to provide a timeline for the current position of special education within public education and special education realms.

A History of Special Education

Many reviews on the history of special education in the United States focus on reforms from the 1960s to the 1970s. However, the record of disability sponsorship and the development of special education in the United States commenced a century earlier with reorganizers engaged in shifting the plight of people with disabilities, specifically through changing societal attitudes, establishing legal rights, and ensuring training and education (Block et al., 2019; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Three definite eras of special education in the United States can be categorized as (a) Early Reform (1800–1860); (b) Stagnation and Regression (1860–1950); and (c) Contemporary Reform (1950–present) (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

Early Reform Period (1800–1860)

During the Early Reform period, people with disabilities faced unmitigated hardships, including exploitation, isolation, expulsion, and in some cases, execution (Block et al., 2019; Rushton, 2020). Moreover, people with disabilities were viewed as less than human and qualitatively different (WHO, 2022). People with disabilities have less access to education and work opportunities (WHO, 2022).

However, by the dawn of the 19th century, special education began to grow through philosophical thought, medical and scientific advancement, and economic motivations (Block et al., 2019; WHO, 2022). Widespread interest in educating people with disabilities first emerged as French Enlightenment philosophers inquired about the essence of human nature, language

development, and intellect (Winzer, 1993). Yet, Dorothea Dix (1802-1887) motivated a revolution in how people with disabilities were perceived and treated in the United States (Carey, 2009). By establishing disability as differences in degree, not kind, Dix was able to convey the importance of proper care, training, and education, and helped develop hospitals, schools, and training facilities (van Drenth, 2005). Despite reformists' good intentions, reform ideology gave way to practical necessity and unintended consequences.

Stagnation and Regression Period (1860–1950)

Philosophical thought, empirical inquiry, and economic pressures in the latter part of the 1800s caused society to seek ways to explain, control, and eliminate disability deviance, thus establishing the Stagnation and Regression era (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Charles Darwin's conclusions about the animal world in *On the Origin of Species* were broadly applied to human society with negative repercussions in the treatment and education of people with disabilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Primarily, eugenics arose as a philosophy to solve social and economic troubles, and intelligence tests were developed as an instrument to identify, measure, and segregate disability from society (Carey, 2009). Throughout this era of stagnation, motivations to eliminate disability hindered the forward progress of special education through reduced funding and increased instructional methods that tended toward control (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

Contemporary Reform Period (1950 to present)

Following World War II, societal perceptions of disability changed, leading to Contemporary Reform (Tsatsou, 2021). This period also included the establishment of specific management and auditing requirements for special education services (Tsatsou, 2021). Parent groups lobbied for services for their children through litigation and legislation (Spaulding &

Pratt, 2015). As court cases were won and laws passed in favor of those with disabilities, schools were mandated to provide education to all children (Radford, 2017)

In the early 1970s, several landmark court decisions positioned states to provide special education resources to students with special needs and these decisions had a significant impact of special education history (All Education Schools, 2018). Teachers have created inclusion classrooms conducive to IEP implementation. These teachers are evaluated to ensure student with special needs are making progress (Bateman & Cline, 2019; Crispel & Kasperski, 2019). The inclusion classroom affords all students more instructional time and increased social benefits to better relate to diverse populations (Anderson, 2018).

Historical Disability Landmarks

The Civil Rights Act

The Civil Rights Act (1964) resounded for the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the public school system (Percy, 2018). This same Act provided Title 1 funding and aimed at closing the achievement gap (Hanushek et al., 2019). Moreover, schools were required to provide an equal education to all people of the United States (Kauffman et al., 2017). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 deemed discrimination illegal based on race, religion, sex, or national origin; it did not guarantee anti-discrimination measures for people with disabilities (Steinborn, 2017). During the same decade, former Vice President Hubert Humphrey pushed for the inclusion of disabilities as a category in this landmark act, but the Senate rejected his argument.

Early Childhood and School-Age Laws

As a response to parents and other advocacy groups, the Handicapped Children's Early Education Assistance Act (P.L. 90-538) was passed in 1968 (Kauffman et al., 2017). P.L. 90-538 authorized the Commissioner of Education, through the Bureau of Education for the

Handicapped, to make contracts and grants to public and private agencies and organizations for the establishment of experimental preschool and early education programs for the handicapped (LaVor & Krivit, 1969). Marian Wright Edelman found that schools were still segregating students with disabilities. If students with special needs were not spending their days in an institution, they were segregated from their peers at district school in separate classrooms (WHO, 2022).

Thus, special education served as a practice that reaffirmed segregation, wherein students were devalued based on their (dis)ability, race, gender, and socioeconomic status (T. Elder et al., 2021). Mobilizing parents and educating the public about this injustice, Edelman contributed to the passage of the EAHCA, currently known as the IDEA (Steinborn, 2017). In 1975, Public Law 94-142, EAHCA, was enacted by Congress to support states in protecting the rights of students with disabilities by improving their educational outcomes with the following purposes:

- (a) To ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living;
- (b) To ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected;
- (c) To assist states, localities, educational service agencies, and federal agencies to provide for the education of all children with disabilities; and
- (d) To assess and ensure the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities.

(Sec 300.1)

PL 94-142 was one of the first major federal laws designed to make a positive difference for students with special needs and their families and was enacted to provide an alternative to

having students with disabilities ostracized by society and sent away to institutions (Claxton, 2018). However, in 1990, amendments to this law were passed, and the law was renamed the IDEA. These amendments were significant to parental involvement and input in the special education process. CPIR (2017b) interpreted some of the IDEA's purposes as the following:

the IDEA has been amended many times, while always maintaining its original purpose—to ensure that children with disabilities have access to a free appropriate public education. This amendment emphasized special education and related services designed to meet student's unique needs and prepare them for further education to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected to assess and ensure the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities. (para. 1)

Protections for Students with Disabilities

Legislation throughout history has accumulatively added protection for individuals with disabilities. Some of these laws are specific to school-aged children, while others address people of any age with disabilities. Some of these laws include the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), the IDEA (2004) and its iterations over time, and No Child Left Behind Act (Block et al., 2019).

The Americans with Disabilities Act

The passing of the ADA in 1990 also served as a landmark in advocating for persons with disabilities. Steinborn (2017) suggested the roots of the ADA can be traced back to April 1977, when disabled activists banded together to demand signage of Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act as Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary Joseph Califano refused to sign. Simultaneously, Califano signed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. In the early 20th century, an exclusion ideology pervaded American schools, fomenting the

rise of academic tracking and the explicit division between general education and special education (Steinborn, 2017). The rise of special education ensured that inclusive and equal schooling would be actualized, but more work was needed. The ADA was amended and renamed the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (Amendments Act). The Amendments Act broadened the interpretation of disability in Section 504 (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2010). While the ADA addressed the rights of people in general with disabilities, students with disabilities faced unique challenges, so more specific laws addressing the school-aged population were developed to ensure that school districts give them an equal opportunity for academic success. Students with disabilities in K–12 public schools have two overlapping levels of coverage under federal law, the IDEA (1990) and Section 504. The IDEA is the primary and central coverage and provides the funding for special education (Zirkel, 2017).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Just as the laws of the ADA and Section 504 ensured students with disabilities receive the accommodations they need, the IDEA is designed to guarantee these students have access to respective appropriate education programs (Tuchman et al., 2019). The IDEA included six main principles to guarantee all children with disabilities are provided a FAPE that meets their individual needs. The USDOE (2010) defined FAPE as follows:

Recipients operating federally funded programs must provide education and related services free of charge to students with disabilities and their parents or guardians.

Provisions of free education and related services without cost to the person with a disability or his or her parents or guardians, except for fees equally imposed on nondisabled persons or their parents or guardians. (Part B)

The same document provided the following guiding principles:

1. All children between the ages of 6 and 17 with disabilities must be served by the local public school district; if education is provided to ages before or after these ages, then the state must provide education services to children with disabilities within those age ranges.
2. Testing and evaluation must be free from discrimination or bias based on race, culture, language, or disability. The testing must be comprehensive and determine whether special education is appropriate for the child.
3. The education is provided at no cost to the family and provided at public expense. An individual education plan (IEP) is to be set forth, explaining the nature of the disability.
4. This education is also to be provided in the least restrictive environment possible, meaning the student with disabilities should participate to the greatest extent with nondisabled peers in academic, elective, and other activities during the school day.
5. Safeguards must be put into effect to protect the child and their family's rights during the evaluation process. Consent must be obtained by the legal guardian prior to beginning the evaluation and for all decisions impacting the educational needs of the child. Parents have the right to disagree with the school's evaluation and have an independent evaluation completed.
6. Parents and students with disabilities are to be part of the evaluation process and the implementation of special education services. (Section 1412)

Also, under the IDEA, parents are active participants in the decision-making process to determine if their child needs an education plan. For example:

If parents believe their children should be evaluated to receive special education and the school denies their request, the IDEA has a due process system in place so they can get a hearing and present their case before a qualified, independent office. Similarly, the act gives parents the right to refuse certain services if they do not believe these services are appropriate. As a result, schools must get permission from parents before initiating evaluations or placing children into special education classes. (Tuchman et al., 2019)

After an assessment determines that a student is eligible to be placed in special education courses, or receive special services, the law mandates that an IEP is created (Tuchman et al., 2019).

Individualized Education Program

The foundation of the IDEA is the IEP, which is a thorough statement of the needs of a child with disabilities and outlines specially designed instruction and related services to address those needs (IDEA, 2004). In several places, the IDEA (2004) emphasized the participation of the parents in developing the child's educational program and assessing its effectiveness. The importance of early intervention was recognized in the 1997 reauthorization of the IDEA (P.L. 105-17). For the first time, states were mandated to provide FAPE in the LRE (Block et al., 2019). A considerable body of research suggested that children with disabilities are subjected to persistent discrimination and disadvantage (Losinski et al., 2019; Porter & Walter, 2017).

According to the USDOE, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (2007) website, all public-school students who receive special education and related services must have an IEP. This same source purported the IEP creates opportunities for all applicable stakeholders to work together to improve educational results for children with disabilities. The IEP is considered a roadmap outlining the student's plan, and by the establishment of the IEP

that students' current levels of accomplishment are known, measurable yearly goals are constructed, special education and related services to be provided are suggested, and annual goals are established (Roberts et al., 2018). Per the law, certain individuals must be involved in writing a child's IEP, and parents are key members of the IEP team as they can provide insight into how their child learns, what his or her interests are, and other aspects of the child that only a parent knows. Unfortunately, not all parents are aware of their essential role in this meeting. Whether at the pre-IEP conference or during the IEP conference, parents can guide their child's educational course (Classen et al., 2019; Connor & Cavendish, 2018). Harry (1992b) discerned parents are given two roles in special education: consent giver and educational planner. The consent-giver role is the only generally offered to parents, due to the IDEA's minimal requirement for parental participation, to grant consent for their child to receive special education services (Harry, 1992b).

An IEP highlights the student's academic strengths as well as needs resulting from the disability and includes explanations to the extent to which the student requires services, modifications, and accommodations to access the general education curriculum (Spies & Cheatham, 2018). The IEP also clarifies how often the student receives services and specifies who provides the services (Claxton, 2018). Ilik and Er (2019) advised the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is based on the family's ability to: (a) create a home environment that encourages learning; (b) express high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children's achievement and future careers; and (c) become involved in their children's education at school and in the community. The IEP team is to develop and implement an individualized plan to meet a child's academic and behavioral strengths and needs related to the disability, providing supports and services to help the child potentially fully access the general

education curriculum (CPIR, 2017a).

Collaboration Between Parents and Professionals

The importance of strong relationships between schools and families goes beyond the education of the child (Jones, 2020). A partnership is based on a reciprocal relationship between equal roles and responsibilities (B. Elder, 2019). Ilik and Er (2019) revealed the number of parents who trusted the education professional had a significant impact on the degree of the parents' involvement. Families of children with disabilities and school professionals collaborate at many levels during the IEP meeting process, and when these groups fail to connect, a lack of collaboration may impact parent participation (Jones, 2020). Claxton (2018) purported parents have insight, and an effective teacher will aggressively seek information from parents and use it to benefit the student. The IEP meeting mandates parental involvement from the development, review, and revision of the IEP. Additionally, parents should make educational placement decisions, determine what data needs to be collected during evaluation, review evaluation data, and plan transition services by the time the child turns 14 years of age (The Arc, 2017).

Research supported parent involvement in the educational process as a key component for student's academic success (Erdener & Knoeppel, 2018; Meehan & Meehan, 2018). Parent involvement is required by special education law and has a positive impact on students with disabilities, including greater continuity in interventions, greater generalization and maintenance of treatment gains, more effective strategies for solving problems, and greater academic performance (Goldman & Burke, 2017; Kasper, 2019). The IDEA has specifically validated an emerging role for parents as collaborators, where families and schools work together to create and enact shared visions and educational goals for each child (MacLeod et al., 2017). The policy recommends that school specialists not only inform parents of their rights but also incorporate

parents' knowledge of their child in the IEP process (ASK, 2017). Jourdan et al. (2018) discerned special educators and families of students with disabilities must establish and sustain partnerships to support the special education process.

In addition to these established and sustained relationships and collaborative opportunities, parents are a necessary factor in the evaluation process. Parents of children with disabilities are involved in the request, consent, and referral processes, and the law specifies that local educational agencies must gather from the parent functional, developmental, and academic information (ASK, 2017). Unfortunately, some parents arrive at their IEP meeting with anxiety, which creates an obstacle for full collaborative participation on the team (Lehmann, 2018; Stanberry, 2019).

Obstacles to Parent Participation and IEP Knowledge

Parent involvement in IEP meetings is legally mandated, as these meetings are the forums to make decisions about special education eligibility and impact on the child's education (Goldman & Burke, 2017; IDEA, 2004). Kasper (2019) suggested the only contact between parents and schools occur during the annual Admit, Review, and Dismissal meeting and some parents choose not to attend these meetings. Studies show parents are not always satisfied with their collaboration with educators (Johnson, 2018; Stanberry, 2019). Frequently, parents of students with special needs come to an IEP team meeting and feel threatened by the very people who are responsible for providing a safe and nurturing learning environment for their child (MacLeod et al., 2017). Congress recognized the potential for obstacles impeding parental participation, therefore emphasized the need for strengthening the parental role and responsibility to ensure that families of children with disabilities have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home (IDEA, 2004). Sadly, barriers still exist

preventing parent participation in procedural protections in the IEP process, as reported in the literature. Barriers highlighted in this review of literature include: (a) poor IEP experiences, (b) professionals' attitudes (MacLeod et al., 2017), (c) special education documents, (d) parent expectations, and (e) procedural issues (Ilik & Er, 2019). Another perspective indicates it can be difficult to establish the most basic relationship and even more difficult to get parents actively involved in their student's special education services (Kasper, 2019).

Poor IEP Experiences

Negative IEP experiences can be an obstacle to parents learning the IEP knowledge needed to perform effectively in their role on the IEP team. Although the law states parents and schools must work together to develop a plan for each child, the law does not say the two parties must respect each other, embrace each other's ideas, or strive for a trusted and positive working relationship (Kurth, McQueston et al., 2019). MacLeod et al. (2017) revealed parents' experience the IEP meeting as a highly emotional event and as a site of lop-sided relationships. Furthermore, research suggested that parents of children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to stress. For example, high levels of stress have been found in up to 70% of mothers and 40% of fathers of children with severe disabilities (Sloper & Turner, 1993). While supporting parents to alleviate stress will not inevitably result in the well-being of the child, the lack of parent support and high levels of parental stress will affect the child's well-being (Golfenshtein et al., 2017). A school that welcomes parents, encourages participation, and provides user-friendly information and other supports can derive numerous benefits from increased parental involvement, including improved student achievement (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Koch, 2020). Increased parental involvement in school systems has been positively correlated with academic performance, school climate, and positive post-school outcomes in general education and special education contexts

(Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Increasing parents' knowledge of the IEP process can have a positive impact on the parents and the children.

Another aspect of poor IEP experiences is related to cultural differences. Parents who are culturally and linguistically diverse face additional barriers to meaningful participation in the IEP (Counts et al., 2018). In general, culturally and linguistically diverse populations have been marginalized and may not have experienced positive interactions or supports from public school systems (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018). Cultural differences can impose communication barriers and impede parental and professional collaborations in IEPs (Counts et al., 2019; Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018). The education of diverse exceptional learners is proven within special education and culturally and linguistically diverse education (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018); however, Lukacs and Steeley (2019) revealed a lack of knowledge and emotional difficulties hindered parents of students with disabilities from different cultural backgrounds from having an active role.

Special Education Documents

The forms and other materials produced through the special education process also may be limiting parental involvement. A typical special education referral, evaluation, and determination of eligibility for a specific learning disability may easily contain more than 50 pages of printed material that is required by law to be provided to parents (Perry, 2020). According to the IDEA (2004), the IEP alone must contain information that includes present levels of academic performance, a statement of measurable goals, a description of how progress will be measured, and specific details on how and when services will be implemented.

An additional mandated document is a statement of procedural safeguards, many of which are lengthy. The model procedural safeguards form provided by the USDOE's Office of

Special Education website (2007) is more than 40 pages in length. In addition to the length, the readability of these documents has also been a concern. Special education documents are very extensive and legalistic, and Perry (2020) found this process impedes parent engagement.

Furthermore, Snowling et al. (2007) reported the well-established links among families between genetics and environment, pointing to the increased possibility that parents of children with reading disabilities probably had experienced similar challenges in school themselves. Learning disabilities are an umbrella term for a wide variety of learning difficulties (Helpguide, 2020). Parents' reports that IEP documents are hard to understand (Perry, 2020), combined with the possibility of some parents having reading difficulties (Snowling et al., 2007), contribute to parent dissatisfaction, confusion, and mistrust. Perry (2020) revealed a group of parents reported IEP documents were hard to understand but offered recommendations to make the materials more parent-friendly and more qualitative and less quantitative. McGinley (2019) advised the laws applicable to individuals with special needs can be challenging to navigate and comprehend. It is important for interdisciplinary teams and parents to be knowledgeable about students' entitlements. Aligning with some of the parent recommendations, Goldman and Burke (2017) suggested that parents participate in training sessions to increase their understanding and self-confidence about their role in the IEP process. However, some obstacles cannot be solved by parent education, especially if the obstacle stems from inherent teacher attitudes or lack of training.

Teacher Training and Attitudes

The IDEA amendment of 1997 was the beginning of parents being viewed as equal partners in the IEP process (Yell et al., 2016). Kurth, McQueston et al. (2019) found federal intention for parents to be equal partners is not equally realized for all students served under the

IDEA. Despite Public Law 94-142 and its movement spearheaded by parents advocating for their children with disabilities, researchers argued that parent and educator collaboration challenges remain in the IEP process (Goldman & Burke, 2017; Perry, 2020). Block et al. (2019) established that special educators and administrators exert considerable control over the direction of IEP meetings and content, while families are frequently passive participants. Parents also reported feelings of being passive recipients of professional decisions (Rigglesman & Buchter, 2017). In such unbalanced situations, professionals are the actual decision-makers, which can lead to families' anger over hierarchical relationships and ultimately conflict in the parent-school relationship (MacLeod et al., 2017).

Another type of training for IEP team members can take place in collaboration, which includes special education teachers providing mentorship to newer special education teachers and general education teachers. General education teachers also need training to ensure smooth placement for students with IEPs who are fully included in the general education classroom (Block et al., 2019; Olson & Roberts, 2018). Collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers is an essential element to the successful implementation of inclusive practices (Block et al., 2019). General education teachers need training to be effective in providing learning elements for students with disabilities (Perry, 2020; Sokal & Sharma, 2017). Koch (2020) offered another consideration for collaboration of parent interaction with pre-service general education teachers. The impact of linking general education teachers with parents of children with disabilities has potential to influence pre-service teachers' attitudes, feeling of comfort, and collaborative partnerships.

General education teachers do not regularly receive training in inclusive practices, which can ultimately result in poor academic outcomes for students with disabilities (Adusei et al.,

2016; Alanko, 2017). Inclusion is a process of providing students with disabilities equal opportunities to receive effective educational services. Inclusion environments have the needed supplementary aids and support services, in age-appropriate classrooms in their neighborhood schools, to prepare students for productive lives as full members of society (Bolourian et al., 2020). Adusei et al. (2016) reported a most common barrier identified by special education teachers was negative general education teacher attitude. Educators believe when training and experience are promoted, better professional attitudes will emerge (Goldman & Burke, 2017).

Parent Expectations

In addition to poor IEP experiences, struggles with IEP documents, and poor teacher attitudes, parent expectations can present obstacles to the IEP process. Parents may have expectations involving hopes for their child's academic achievement, preferences for their child's placement, and anticipations for the IEP process. Parents and professionals may differ in their perspectives on advocacy. Regarding advocacy views, although caregivers and teachers share similar perceptions of how parents advocate, they have different perspectives regarding the outcomes of advocacy at school (Burke et al., 2018). Regarding academic hopes and expectations, the extent to which a child with disabilities will be able to meet parents' expectations for literacy and writing may be limited (Fazil et al., 2002). With placement expectations, obstacles have been encountered due to inadequate resources and funding (Mngo & Mngo, 2018). Concerning IEP procedural expectations, Zirkel and Hetrick (2017) revealed parent participation procedural violations on the part of the IEP team were the most frequently adjudicated, and the outcome of these court cases ruled in favor of the school districts at a ratio of approximately 3:1. Many parents interpret the actions of educators as a violation of their procedural rights and the court's ruling suggests a robust perception divide between the parents

and the school districts while planning, writing, and implementing IEPs (Claxton, 2018).

Procedural Violations and Protections

Printed procedural safeguards are distributed to each family to help them be aware of their rights in the IEP process. When IEP procedures are violated, parents can invoke due process, and if not settled, due process can lead to formal litigation. This section will present several examples of such litigation.

IEP Procedural Violations

Special education litigation has been on the rise in recent decades, and special education practitioners can benefit from knowing IDEA violations (Zirkel & Hetrick, 2017). These authors analyzed court decisions specifically related to IEP procedural violations, which can be categorized. The violations were related to IEP components, IEP development, IEP teams, and parent participation (Zirkel & Hetrick, 2017). Of these categories, parent participation was the most frequently adjudicated category. Leading district special education attorneys identified several procedural violations, such as predetermining the IEP, failing to provide required notices to parents (Perry, 2018), failing to give parents procedural safeguard notice, and not having all required IEP team members present (Zirkel & Hetrick, 2017). Other examples of procedural questions lie in whether the district is required to uphold each detail of the IEP, as in the following cases.

Board of Education v. Rowley (1982). Parent expectations of a deaf child were minimized when the school refused to provide a sign-language interpreter as part of an IEP because the student had successfully passed to the next grade without the additional resource. The school board agreed with *Rowley* because this student could not reach her full potential without this accommodation and thus did not receive free appropriate public education, which is

a violation of the IDEA. The Second Circuit Court affirmed that the denial of an interpreter prevented the student from achieving her full potential as compared to opportunities provided to other children. However, the Supreme Court reversed this decision claiming the district court and the Second Circuit Court misinterpreted the meaning of *appropriate* in FAPE, and clarified that FAPE consists of educational instruction specially designed to meet the unique needs of the handicapped child, supported by such services as are necessary to permit the child to gain from the instruction (IDEA, 2004). These parents assumed the law would enable their child with disabilities to obtain the supportive services needed to help her reach her full potential. However, the law that was intended to open the door of public education for handicapped children did not guarantee any level of quality of education when the child was in the school (Smith, 2018).

Before this case, Congress sought to make public education available to handicapped children but did not intend to impose specialized educational services on schools. This monumental case began with trying to distinguish procedural violations from substantive FAPE infringements, yet the case resulted in clarifying FAPE. This case established that a court must consider a two-pronged mandate. Courts must consider (a) whether the state has satisfied the IDEA's procedural requirements and (b) if the child's educational program was sufficiently established to render educational benefits.

Van Duyn v. Baker School District (2007). Where *Rowley* (1982) was concerned with the content of the IEP and provided the groundwork explaining why the IDEA does not require maximization of the child's potential, only access to FAPE, *Van Duyn v. Baker School District* (2007) was concerned with the implementation of the IEP and the listed goals. These parents' expectations were curtailed when the Supreme Court upheld that the school district did not have to follow the IEP verbatim. The IEP is the contract used to set goals and objectives needed to

bring a child to a successful level as agreed upon by the IEP team. Van Duyn believed the school district neglected to execute key portions of his son's IEP. This case detailed IEP implementation violations related to the *contract* Van Duyn signed. The district deviated from the goals listed in that IEP in multiple ways; however, the Supreme Court upheld that the district does not have to perform as called for in the child's IEP (Henderson, 2020). A judge ultimately ruled the district failed to provide the student sufficient math instruction, but otherwise determined the IEP was adequately implemented. The two-pronged FAPE consideration was applied and the court established the school did not violate the IDEA in offering the student appropriate education.

A failure occurred when the services provided to a child with disabilities fell significantly short of those required by the IEP. Collaborative oversight of the IEP team, including parents, may enhance communications to prevent failure to implement appropriate services for a child with disabilities. Van Duyn (2007) did not get the results he intended but insufficient math instruction was corrected, and partial legal fees were granted. Ultimately, the student received FAPE in compliance with the IDEA as services provided to the disabled child did not fall significantly short of those required by the IEP (Henderson, 2020).

Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017). In a recent case, the expectation of parents was altered when this court case clarified what is required to meet substantive obligations under the IDEA. In greater detail, a school district must offer an IEP reasonably calculated to enable the child to make progress according to the child's circumstances. In exact terms, "An IEP must aim to enable the child to make progress; the essential function of an IEP is to set a plan for pursuing academic and functional advancement" (Richert, 2017). Like *Rowley* (1982), *Andrew* helped decide how much benefit IEPs must provide. Because a boy with autism made no progress on his IEP goals, the court determined that IEPs must give children with

disabilities more than a minimal educational benefit, as this level of support can be achieved in the regular classroom absent an IEP. The IDEA demands more of IEPs, and the vision and intent are for objectives to be appropriately motivated (*Endrew*, 2017).

The former cases provided examples of how the lack of parent IEP knowledge may have contributed to flawed parent expectations and barriers to knowledge. From January 2000 to January 2008, an average of 374 cases were filed in federal court each year (Dunn & West, 2010). The IDEA was designed to provide reasonable accommodations to children with disabilities via an IEP and with the input of parents, implement the plan to help students become successful students and citizens. IEP team members have no reason to amend this agreement without taking the appropriate measures for change. In *Rowley* (1982), the Supreme Court interpreted the IDEA requires a school to provide a handicapped student with an education equal to non-handicapped. In *Van Duyn* (2007), the Supreme Court upheld that failures by the district to implement the IEP did not constitute violations of the IDEA's procedural requirements. Most recently, *Endrew* (2017) resulted in rejecting the "de minimis" standard and held that the progress monitored by the IEP must be appropriate considering the students' capabilities. These cases were monumental. After several decades, each federal circuit developed its interpretation of how much benefit is required to provide FAPE for IDEA eligible students, ranging from "more than de minimis" to "some benefit" to "meaningful benefit" (*Endrew*, 2017, p. 999). Helping parents understand the particulars of these significant educational events may prevent future misunderstandings and encourage stakeholders to meet IDEA statutes.

In *Phyllene W. v. Huntsville* (2015) the following ruling was determined because an ineffective IEP was developed:

The Board violated ... IDEA by failing to evaluate M.W. when faced with evidence that

she suffered from a suspected hearing impairment. As a result of its failure to obtain necessary medical information regarding M.W.'s hearing, the Board further failed to provide her with FAPE. The lack of medical information rendered the accomplishment of the IDEA's goals impossible because no meaningful IEP was developed, and the IEPs put into place lacked necessary elements concerning the services that M.W. should have been provided. In short, the failure of the Board to evaluate M.W. with respect to her hearing loss deprived M.W. of the opportunity to benefit educationally from an appropriate IEP. (p. 25)

Another case, *Doug C. v. Hawaii* (2013), rendered an important decision about parental participation at IEP meetings. A key discrepancy, in this case, was that the special education coordinator held an IEP meeting without the parent, child, or a representative present. The Court noted, "The department's central argument is that it could not accommodate Doug C.'s request to reschedule because of the impending annual IEP deadline on November 13" (p. 13). The Court further explained,

When confronted with the situation of complying with one procedural requirement of the IDEA or another, we hold that the agency must make a reasonable determination of which course of action promotes the purposes of the IDEA and is least likely to result in the denial of a FAPE. (p.15)

The department's decision to prioritize strict deadline compliance over parental participation was not reasonable regardless of the department's efforts to include Doug C. in the November IEP meeting (Katsiyannis, 2016). The Court explained, parental involvement in the creation process requires the agency to include the parents in an IEP meeting unless they affirmatively refuse to attend (Katsiyannis, 2016).

One of the most critical lessons gleaned from *Doug C. v. Hawaii* (2013) is that examining the mission statement of the law and the purpose of the law is necessary when confronted with a legal and or procedural issue about the proper course of action. The IEP process was designed to create a strategic plan to ensure the collective involvement of parents and educators aligned to address students' needs and the IDEA. Unfortunately, the unintended consequences of the IEP process have put a focus on paperwork and depersonalized meetings rather than focusing on parent collaboration (Goldman & Burke, 2017).

Procedural Protections in the IEP Process

The courts have become commonplace when parents and school personnel are unable to reach IEP consensus (Salamone, 2019). White (2014) explained that the 1990s amendments provided parents with several alternatives for legal recourse when they alleged educators were noncompliant with the terms of the IEP or mandates of the IDEA. Educational specialists give a document called *Procedural Safeguards* to all parents of children who receive special education services with (Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018). Procedural Safeguards describe the parents' and students' legal rights, the IEP process, and the protocol to follow when a disagreement arises about a child's services (USDOE, 2007). More recently, Perry (2018) suggested the next IEP is written in the voices of parents. Even with the mandates for parent involvement and a growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of parent involvement, overwhelming evidence shows parents of children with disabilities still face many barriers to this process (Gershwin-Mueller, 2015; Ilik & Er, 2019). Boduch (2019) elaborated the need for special education advocates and to become involved in the IEP process to assist with parent and educator collaboration.

The ruling in *Burlington v. Massachusetts* (1985) provided clarification on procedural

safeguards, parents' role in educational decision-making, and parents' right to reimbursement for private school tuition if free public education cannot be provided (Wright & Wright, 2013).

These procedures include the parents' right to participate in the development of the IEP for the child and to challenge in administrative and court proceedings a proposed IEP with which they disagree (IDEA, 2004). Congress stated the purpose of the IDEA is as follows:

IDEA makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children. IDEA was initially known as Public Law 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975); however, in 1990, amendments to the law were passed and the law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (IDEA, 2004)

Moreover, the Education of the Handicapped Act (now IDEA) defined a "free appropriate public education" to mean:

special education and related services which (A) have been provided at the public expense, under public supervision [471 U.S. 359, 368] and direction, and without charge, (B) meet the standards of the State educational agency, (C) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the State involved, and (D) are provided in conformity with an individualized education program. (IDEA, 1990)

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

The ADA opened doors for individuals with disabilities, and the IDEA extended legal rights into public schools. The second level of coverage for public school students with disabilities is under Section 504, which is alongside ADA (2012) and prohibits discrimination based on disability. Section 504 does not offer federal funding but offers civil rights protection and remedies for students within its scope of coverage (Zirkel, 2017). Like the ADA, Section

504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (2012) provides protections for K–12 students who have disabilities by ensuring they are treated like their counterparts who do not have physical or mental limitations. Under this anti-discrimination law, students with a variety of disabilities must be offered tools or accommodations to meet their classroom needs, so they can enjoy similar benefits as other students (Tuchman et al., 2019). Students who are considered “504-only” are not eligible for special education services under the IDEA but are eligible for certain accommodations under the broader definition of disability in Section 504 as amended by the Amendments Act (Zirkel, 2017).

Parent IEP knowledge is vital, as parents must prove claims of an inadequate IEP. *Schaffer v. Weast* (2005) focused on who has the burden of persuasion in disputed cases under the IDEA. In *Schaffer v. Weast* the Supreme Court ruled that parents, not school officials, have the burden of proving a parent’s claim that an IEP does not satisfy the child’s needs. Initially, when parents challenged their child’s IEP, the District Court held that absent IDEA specification, the weight of persuasion was on the school officials. Ultimately, the Fourth Circuit determined the burden of proof in an administrative hearing challenging an IEP is properly placed on the party seeking relief, whether that is the representative of the child with disabilities or the school district. The numerous legal cases have taught districts about compliance with IEPs and have taught parents how to better advocate for their children with disabilities.

Strategies Employed by Parents in Advocating for Their Children

Parents of children with disabilities believed they are the best advocates to represent their children’s interest and expressed concern that their child’s point of view would not be heard if parents were not involved in the IEP process (Lee & Park, 2016; Perry, 2018). Parental advocacy has been found to serve three primary functions: advocating for services to meet the child’s

needs; acting as an expert on their own child; and protecting the child from incompetent or uninformed professionals (Lee & Park, 2016). Rehm et al. (2013) explored parental advocacy styles in special education settings and identified three styles for these parents, and 43 of these 61 parents were satisfied with outcomes in negotiations for school services for their children. The recognized styles were: (a) *high profile parents* who insisted on specific, wide-ranging services for their children that often resulted in conflict with educators; (b) *strategic parents* who negotiated for selected goals and were willing to compromise, and (c) *grateful gratifier parents* who formed close relationships with educators and trusted them to make appropriate decisions. Teachers need to understand the role parents play in the special education process and consider parental views (Civitillo et al., 2016; Lee, 2019).

Educators of all students, but more importantly, teachers of students with special learning needs, must be comfortable with working in partnership with parents of their students (Nyatuka, 2017; Rispoli et al., 2019). A good relationship between informal caregivers and educators seems essential for a clear distribution of responsibilities and trust (Wittenberg et al., 2018). In response to the past deplorable conditions their children with special needs had to endure in school, as well as the negative experiences and feelings of powerlessness, parents began to band together (Rafferty & Sullivan, 2017). This collaboration of parents has resulted in the establishment of many organizations for advocacy groups. The advocacy movement on behalf of individuals with disabilities was critical to the development of special education services of today (Block et al., 2019). The increase in parent advocacy is dependent on the attitudes and behaviors of education staff as well as the knowledge and skills of parents (Goldman & Burke, 2017; Koch, 2020).

The Organization of Advocacy Groups

In 1977, Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER, 2019) began with

one project, Parent Helping Parents. In the years to follow, more than 30 programs remained, staffed by parents of children with disabilities committed to educating other parents and improving the knowledge of those families. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) host annual summits and allow advocates to share with members of Congress about FAPE, early intervention services, and robust funding for the IDEA (Garvey, 2019). Many parents continue to band together to protest the exclusion and mistreatment of their children with special needs in school districts (Pak-Harvey, 2019).

Summary

The purpose of this applied study was to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. The theoretical framework includes social learning and social development theories, while the related literature consisted of historical disability landmarks, obstacles to parent participation, and procedural protections in the IEP process. As suggested by the research, the history of experiences of parents in the IEP process is inundated with disputes and litigation (Pak-Harvey, 2019). Numerous Supreme Court cases are particularly relevant to these points of IEP procedural violations including *Rowley* (1982), *Endrew* (2017), and *Van Duyn* (2007). These developments in the courts and legislature have a significant impact on local school districts working with students with disabilities (Adams, 2019). Education professionals and parents need to be able to understand federal requirements for IEP meetings to ensure compliance and to increase ability to recognize potential violations (McGinley, 2019).

The IEP process has created unintended consequences such as depersonalized meetings,

necessary but overwhelming documentation, and parents feeling disrespected (Counts et al., 2018). Parents are the most important members on the IEP team and should be informed as mandated by the IDEA. Koch (2020) discerned when parents and specialists perceive each other as equal partners, they can work together in the decision-making process for the IEP, which is ultimately in the best interest of the child. A school that welcomes parents and provides user-friendly information and other supports can derive numerous benefits from increased parental involvement (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Koch, 2020). General education teachers also need training to ensure smooth placement for students with IEPs who are fully included in the general education classroom (Block et al., 2019; Olson & Roberts, 2018). The IDEA mandates not only affect the lives of children with SEN but have a significant impact on the lives of all children, teachers, administrators, and parents, because every child with SEN is entitled to an education at his or her optimal level of ability and with the children who do not have SEN as much as possible (IDEA, 2004). Moreover, the IDEA was developed to ensure adequate educational opportunities were available for children with disabilities; however, the laws and documentation surrounding this process are ambiguous and subjective resulting in a conflict between parent expectations and what IEP teams consider most appropriate (CPIR, 2017a; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Sadly, barriers still exist preventing parent participation in procedural protections in the IEP process, as reported in the literature.

CHAPTER THREE: PROPOSED METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this applied study was to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve IEP knowledge and involvement. The problem is parental knowledge of the IEP process is insufficient in a central Texas elementary school. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandated parental participation in the IEP process. Research supports the benefits of parental involvement and training; however, research also indicates parent knowledge and involvement in the IEP process is lacking (Connor & Cavendish, 2018; Ilik & Er, 2019), which sometimes results in litigation (Adams, 2019; Shepherd & Kervick, 2015). Parents' lack of awareness can be due to lack of receiving information, lack of participating in the educational process, lack of training, or lack of understanding the process in which they are participating (Harry, 1992b). This chapter includes the design, research questions, setting, participants, researcher's role, procedures, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and concludes with a summary.

Design

For this applied research I used a multimethod design, which included qualitative and quantitative methods. An applied research design was appropriate as it tested the existence of a causal association between two or more variables (Bickman & Rog, 2009) and may be able to identify possible solutions to address parents' insufficient IEP knowledge. Creswell (2014) suggested qualitative and quantitative data together provide a better understanding of research than either type would in isolation. Three data collection approaches are required for an applied dissertation. The three chosen for this study were a quantitative survey, qualitative interviews,

and a qualitative focus group.

Research Questions

Central Question: How can the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process be solved at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Sub-question 1: How would quantitative survey data inform the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Sub-question 2: How would parents in an interview solve the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Sub-question 3: How would education professionals in a focus group solve the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Setting

This study was conducted virtually in central Texas. This location was selected due to the availability of parents and educators who meet the research participation criteria. Brown Elementary School is in a school district with the following student population: African American (89%), White (8%), Hispanic (2%), and other (1%) (District Website, 2018). The educators in this school district have similar demographics (District Website, 2018). Furthermore, 25% of the students are reported as having disabilities. The leadership at Brown Elementary School included a principal and an assistant principal, and the organizational structure and hierarchy consisted of an off-site superintendent who supervised and managed the central staff and principals. The principal hired and evaluated staff, provided leadership and direction within the school to enforce school policies, and maintained effective educational programs to improve teaching and learning. The assistant principal focused on issues of school

management, student services, community relations, and curriculum instruction; general education and special education teachers created differentiated lesson plans to accommodate a range of learning styles, while ensuring classroom management. Licensed and unlicensed support staff interacted with the students to provide maintenance, security, food services, clerical, and other services.

Participants

The participants were parents of students with IEPs, administrators, and special and general education teachers. These participants were a purposive, nonprobability sample (Bickman & Rog, 2009). This sampling type can be used to provide information about specific cases or members of the study population intrinsically interesting for the study (Bickman & Rog, 2009). Purposive sampling allows selection of individuals particularly knowledgeable about the investigative issues (Chambliss & Schutt, 2010). I notified potential participants through direct email, the school's parent-teacher organization's Facebook page, and other available social media outlets.

First, I conducted a survey of parents who had to be 18 years or older and have a child with a disability as determined by an IEP. I recruited survey recipients via a flyer, social media platforms, and email requests to gain volunteers. Once volunteers were obtained, I electronically distributed consent forms and the link to the online survey. Liberty University (2019) requires the survey sample size range from 15 to 30 participants.

I analyzed the data on the surveys and selected the seven parents who scored the lowest in IEP process knowledge and invited them to participate in individual interviews. I conducted interviews on the telephone through freeconferencecall.com. I assigned pseudonyms for the participants as Interview Participant 1 (IP1), Interview Participant 2 (IP2), and so forth to protect

identity. I gave these parents a \$25 Walmart/Amazon gift card as a token of gratitude for their time.

To complete triangulation, I conducted a virtual focus group with seven education professionals and recruited these education professionals via email requests. I sent emails to professionals based on their credentials including position, certification, and years of experience that I deemed would provide the best information. I used expert sampling to select these education professionals. Expert sampling was the best method as these professionals were certified by the Department of Education and were most immersed in the IEP process. Purposive sampling is a technique where I relied on my judgment to choose participants (Black, 2010). I compiled participants' demographics upon completion of the research study. The focus group participants were either administrators or teachers. I gave these participants pseudonyms of Focus Group Participant 1 (FG1) through FG7. FG1 and FG2 were administrators, and FG3 through FG7 were teachers. I gave these participants \$25 Walmart/Amazon gift card as a token of gratitude for their time.

The Researcher's Role

The motivation for conducting this research, in part, was based on personal IEP process experiences. I looked to the educational professionals for their knowledge and guidance. Although pleasant, these professionals inundated my family with a plethora of paperwork, jargon, and processes. We became overwhelmed and unaware of how to advocate for our loved ones. My initial IEP process experience involved my niece. My sister was unaware of the IEP process and asked my participation because I was an educator. As a first-year educator, I had knowledge of the teacher's role in IEPs, but lacked a full grasp of a parent's role. Several years later, my son became eligible for special education services. I am confident my prior experiences

with my niece prepared me for this time; however, after attending an IEP information seminar for parents, I realized some parents remain overwhelmed and unsure of the IEP process.

Although I participated in an IEP information session at this location, I am not employed at this school district, nor does my son receive special education services at Brown Elementary School. I do not hold a position of authority over nor have a personal relationship with any of the potential participants.

As the researcher, I did not allow my professional educational role to interfere with my role as parent, nor allow either of these roles interfere with my role as researcher. Based on my role as a parent with a child with an IEP, I might assume all professionals treat parents the way the professionals dealt with my niece's or my son's situation. I bracketed those assumptions, so I could analyze without bias what the data indicates throughout the data collection process. Identifying my assumptions and bracketing them helped me be neutral in my role as a researcher (Tattersall et al., 2007).

Furthermore, based on my professional role, I could assume all parents have inadequate IEP knowledge. With my experiences as a parent with a child who has an IEP, I had to determine if I assumed all parents would feel overwhelmed as I did. I maintained research trustworthiness through dependability of the qualitative research methods and objectivity of the quantitative research methods creating reliability and validity to the processes of collecting, analyzing, and presenting the findings.

Procedures

I applied to the Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to conduct this study (Appendix A). Additionally, I obtained written permission to conduct this study from the superintendent of the site district and the principal of Brown Elementary School

(see Appendices B & C). I, also, contacted the school for permission to recruit volunteers via the school's social media parent-teacher and school's website platforms to provide contact information for parents and educational professionals (see Appendices D & E). For recruiting participants for the survey and interviews, I provided a brief description of the importance of the study and a consent form (see Appendix F). I also provided a consent form specific to the focus group (see Appendix G).

After consent forms were returned, I emailed the respective volunteers a link to an online Likert survey and conducted the interviews and the focus group by video conference. I gave participants the consent form to sign electronically and reminded them they could stop the recording and interview at any time, for any reason, without any consequence. I sent respective transcripts to interview and focus group participants for member checking, inviting them to email me at [REDACTED]@liberty.edu if a transcription required an edit. I followed-up all emails with a phone call to discuss responses.

Data Collection and Analysis

Three data collection approaches are required for an applied dissertation. The first approach was a survey, followed by interviews, and a focus group. The questions pertaining to improving parental IEP knowledge were based on studies from Fish (2008), Gershwin-Mueller (2015), Maltz (2001), Panico (2019), and Zeitlin and Curcic (2014). I used the data to answer the central research question: How can parents' IEP knowledge be improved at Brown Elementary School in central Texas? I subsequently analyzed this data and used it to design training to address the problem.

Survey

I based the survey questions on the first sub-question: How would quantitative survey

data inform the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas? The sample size was required to be 15 to 30 and 15 individuals did participate. I emailed to potential parent volunteers a link to an online Likert survey. An online survey is simple to create, minimizes download times, and is compatible with a wide variety of browsers, even outdated ones (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

The response type was closed-ended statements and participants placed an X to each question for data collection to be successful. I specified that only one parent was to complete the survey and gave instructions for submitting the completed survey. I used responses to determine which participants most lacked IEP process knowledge, identifying whom to invite to participate in interviews.

Surveys allow for easy data collection and responses were in a Likert-scale format. Likert-scales, developed in 1932 with a five-point response, are tools utilized in quantitative research and are instruments used to quantify opinions by measuring the extent to which the participants agree or disagree with the topic (McLeod, 2019). The combined possible points on this survey range from 14 to 70 points. I based the survey largely on parental knowledge of PL 94-142 (Grossman, 2020; Meller, 1996; Nelson, 2020) and included six demographic questions to elicit information about the parent completing the survey, followed by 14 statements pertaining to the IDEA and additional comments to improve IEP process knowledge training (see Appendix H). I grounded the survey questions in literature within the last five years and piloted the survey questions with education professionals. I used the responses to the survey questions to measure the knowledge of the IEP process according to the following provisions of the IDEA: FAPE, Appropriate Evaluation, IEP, LRE, Parent Participation, and Procedural Safeguards (Grossman, 2020; IDEA, 2020). Response options were: 1 = *Strongly Agree*; 2 = *Agree*; 3 =

Neutral; 4 = *Disagree*; or 5 = *Strongly Disagree*. The survey questions are as follow:

1. The special education services my child receives at school are free. This question was appropriate as it determined parents' understanding of free appropriate public education (FAPE), which is considered the cornerstone of the IDEA, in that each eligible child with a disability is entitled to FAPE (Grossman, 2020). FAPE emphasizes services designed to meet the unique needs of the child and prepares them for further education, employment, and living independently (CPIR, 2017a).

2. An IEP is written and designed for each student individually. This question elicited information to help explain the purpose of the IEP. With the data from this question, I gained parents' insight about their perceived purpose of the IEP and compare with the IDEA's intended purpose of the IEP (CPIR, 2017b; Grossman, 2020).

3. I know how to get the services to help my child learn. Inquiring how to access the various services their child is entitled to is the most common question parents ask (Nelson, 2020). This question was appropriate as it determined parents' understanding of available resources. Special education covers a range of needs and understanding how to access these available resources can promote a more informed community.

4. I know the school has a deadline to test my child for special services to improve their learning. Some parents do not know that timelines for special education evaluations exist. If a student is new to the special education system, the school must evaluate the child within 30 school days, and after 15 days meet with the child's family (Nelson, 2020). This question determined parents' awareness of special education processes.

5. My school district provided services during the COVID-19 pandemic. This question was appropriate in measuring parents' knowledge of COVID-19 impact on special education

services. The COVID-19 pandemic caused many changes in K-12 education and interfered with eligible student's access to special education services. The federal government declared the IDEA would remain in force; however, this declaration was difficult for schools to implement (Nelson, 2020).

6. The school does not need to tell me when they make changes to my child's IEP. This question was important to clarify parents' understanding of approving changes to an IEP. These changes must have parent concurrence (Nelson, 2020). In making changes to a child's IEP, the parent of a child with a disability may agree not to convene an IEP meeting for changes, and instead may develop a written document to amend or modify the child's current IEP (IDEA, 2020).

7. I did not know what an IEP was when I started. Some parents report they did not know what an IEP was when they were introduced to the IEP process (Grossman, 2020). This question was important as a possible consideration for improving practice. These perspectives can provide further insight and can be vital in developing best-practices for improving IEP awareness and expectations.

8. The school district must provide me a fair hearing when I feel my rights have been violated. Whenever a complaint has been received, the parents and school district shall have an opportunity for an impartial due process hearing (IDEA, 2020). The state law or state educational agency will convene a meeting with the parties involved in the complaint. A hearing and resolution session are normal steps to impartial due process hearings.

9. I know my child has the right to be taught in a classroom (least restrictive environment) with their peers who are without disabilities. To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled (IDEA, 2020).

Removal of children with disabilities from a regular educational environment can only occur when supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (IDEA, 2020). These perspectives can provide further insight and can be vital in developing best-practices for improving IEP awareness and expectations.

10. If I disagree with the school's test results, I can have an outside test done. Parents can have their child tested by a professional outside of the school system. It is helpful to have the opinion and suggestions from an independent professional who can assess how your child best learns (Grossman, 2020). This question helped identify parents' knowledge of the option to get a second opinion.

11. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) must be reviewed yearly by the school. If a child has an IEP, then by law it is rewritten each year (IDEA, 2020). Additionally, the child must be reevaluated every three years to determine whether they are still eligible for special education (Grossman, 2020; Nelson, 2020). I used this question to measure parents' knowledge of IEP evaluation requirements.

12. I can choose additional people to attend my child's IEP meeting with me. Parents can invite persons they believe are appropriate to attend the IEP meeting with them. Advanced notice must be given to the school (Grossman, 2020). This question was appropriate in measuring parents' knowledge of representation during the IEP meeting.

13. Many parents feel the job of education falls to the schools and the schools need to figure it out (Grossman, 2020). This information was necessary in capturing parents' understanding of school versus parent responsibility in the IEP process. Construction of IEP goals is a dual effort of the parent and school. The IDEA has specifically validated an emerging role for parents as collaborators, for families and schools work together to create educational

goals for each child (MacLeod et al., 2017).

14. I would voluntarily attend special education training to help me understand my child's IEP goals and development. The IEP is considered a roadmap outlining the student's plan, and by the establishment of the IEP that students' current levels of accomplishment are known, measurable yearly goals are constructed, special education and related services to be provided are suggested, and annual goals are established (Roberts et al., 2018). Per the law, certain individuals must be involved in writing a child's IEP, and parents are key members of the IEP team as they can provide insight into how their child learns, what his or her interests are, and other aspects of the child that only a parent knows. To meet the standards of the state in which services are provided, family training is mandated (IDEA, 2020).

Trustworthiness with this data collection method was maintained through objectivity (Malakoff, 2012). Focusing on the facts and maintaining an appropriate distance between the researcher and participants lessens bias (Malakoff, 2012). Furthermore, threats to internal validity were minimized by using Meller's (1996) study and adapting it to this study (Malakoff, 2012).

I analyzed survey data using descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics are the appropriate analyses when the goal of the research is to present responses to address the research questions (Stat Solutions, 2020). I calculated interval data to produce frequencies and percentages and displayed the data using tables. I also calculated means, where appropriate.

Interviews

I based the interview questions on the second sub-question: How would parents in an interview solve the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas? I recorded and transcribed the semi-structured interviews.

To ensure confidentiality, I stored this data on a password protected personal computer.

Semi-structured interviews consist of several key questions that help define the areas to be explored yet allow the interviewer flexibility to pursue an idea or response in more detail (Britten, 1999). I asked the parents a total of 15 semi-structured and open-ended questions (see Appendix I). An explanation of each question follows:

1. Please share the number of IEP meetings you have attended. This question was used to determine if parent responses are based on one or multiple experiences. Having this background knowledge helped me better analyze responses. Stoner et al. (2005) concluded that many parents perceived their initial IEP meeting had been traumatic, confusing, and complicated, and led to dissatisfaction with the special education system.

2. What is the purpose of the IEP? This question can elicit information to help explain the purpose of the IEP. With the data from this question, I gained insight about parents' perceived purposes of the IEP and compare with the IDEA's intended purpose of the IEP. Every student who qualifies for special education services are provided a written plan designed to meet the child's individual needs, called an IEP. The purpose of the IEP is to ensure that every student receives a free and appropriate public education (CPIR, 2017a).

3. What has been your experience when attending IEP meetings? Fish (2008) purports many parents had an overall favorable experience with IEP meetings according to his demographics. Fish's group reported positive experiences with the IEP setting, engagement with IEP team members, and had thorough discussion of the IEP objectives during these meetings. I collected demographics to compare if the findings from this study are consistent with those of Fish.

4. Please lists all the people who are required to attend IEP meetings? The IDEA (2004)

lists the IEP team members as parents of students with a disability, a minimum of one general education teacher, a special education teacher, a school administrator, a local educational agency representative, the child, if applicable, and any other related service personnel? Members of the IEP meeting function to develop an IEP and to determine placement of the least restrictive environment (Fish, 2008). This question was used to determine if IEP process training should include identifying IEP team members and their functions.

5. What has been your experience with IEP team members? This question was important in determining if parent and education professional collaboration efforts should be a training topic. Some parents report IEP meeting experiences of depersonalization, highly emotional, and as a site of asymmetrical relationships (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). I analyzed a comparison of the findings from this study for consistency with those of Fish (2008).

6. Were the IEP goals completed before the meeting? The IEP is created at an IEP meeting (Mauro, 2019). However, Zeitlin and Curcic (2014) reported prewritten forms and goals before IEP meetings. I used this question to determine if more collaboration is required.

7. What happens at an IEP meeting? These meetings can be an open and honest exchange of information, or they can be an emotionally difficult experience. IEP meetings focus on arranging testing, giving a classification, and assessing needs (Mauro, 2019). I used this question to record what happens at IEP meetings for these parents' perspectives.

8. How did education professionals prepare you for your first IEP meeting? Parents who are unable to understand special education terminology believe they are unprepared to advocate for their child's education needs (Fish, 2008). This question was important as a possible consideration for improving practice. These perspectives can provide further insight and can be vital in developing best-practices guidelines for conducting IEP meetings.

9. Were you offered an advocate to help you during this process? Advocacy programs emerged to assist parents in exercising their rights (Goldman et al., 2019). Special education advocates are trained individuals who do not offer legal advice but provide support and guidance for families as they navigate the special education process (Goldman et al., 2017). This question elicited opinions on special education advocates.

10. School districts have been winning special education court cases against parental lawsuits. Why do you believe parents are losing special education courts cases against school districts? Special education litigation has been on the rise in recent decades. Zirkel and Hetrick (2017) reported parent concerns for the obligation of school districts to provide FAPE and procedural violations. However, school districts are winning in average of 3:1. This question brought awareness to the results of court decisions specific to IEP-related procedural violations.

11. Who is responsible for writing the IEP goals? Parents are equal partners throughout the IEP decision-making process and your opinions matter (Johns et al., 2002). Because parent knowledge and advocacy are imperative aspects in this process, parents' perspectives on their level of participating in IEP meetings can be helpful in the development of parent IEP training materials (McKittrick, 2019). This question helped identify parents' attitudes towards their input during IEP meetings.

12. Tell me about the process of having your child evaluated for special education services, and what led up to that. An evaluation is a process used to determine whether a child has a disability and can lead to getting the targeted support needed to help a child thrive in school (PACER, 2019). Evaluations are the first steps to understanding the child's challenges and strengths. This question explored if parents understand the steps required to request a school evaluation and the benefits of having the child evaluated.

13. How would you improve the IEP process? Parents often feel persistent fears and anxieties when collaborating with educators (MacLeod et al., 2017). This question elicited suggestions on how educators can improve the IEP process. I explored specific ideas to create positive collaboration with parents of children with disabilities and educators to make the IEP process more inviting and mutual.

14. Are you interested in attending training to promote effective communication and collaboration with education professionals? Why or Why not? This question was important to provide structured interventions as a tool to shift parent and professional attitudes towards collaboration. A primary goal of this study was collaboration: to create sustainable changes and shift views between school districts and parents of students with disabilities (Yell et al., 2017). MacLeod et al. (2017) shared highlights that positive collaborative experiences were probable when these groups were flexible and willing to learn strategies to improve partnerships.

15. Would you like to add anything that may not have been covered in this interview? This question was important to identify any areas parents would like the researcher to consider to help improve their IEP knowledge. This question was also a great opportunity to reiterate that their input matters.

I analyzed interview data using coding and themes and used NVivo to identify themes from first level coding. NVivo is a software program which streamlines qualitative and mixed-methods analysis. I audio recorded and transcribed interviews using REV, an audio and voice recorder application. REV audio and voice recorder is a free voice recording application that provides superior sound quality, user-friendly functionality, and quick transcription services (REV, 2020). Integrated with NVivo, I used REV to analyze transcribed data in order to code and categorize information into themes. For qualitative data analysis, interview data must be

transcribed in order to code and categorize information into themes (Liberty University, 2019). I used tables to display demographic information, and sent respective transcripts for member checking, inviting participants to please contact me by a specific date at [REDACTED]@liberty.edu to report any part of this transcript that did not accurately convey the content of their contributions to the focus group. I maintained confidentiality by using pseudonyms: Interview Participant 1 (IP1), Interview Participant 2 (IP2), etc.

Focus Group

I based the focus group questions on the third sub-question: How would education professionals in a focus group solve the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas? A focus group is a group discussion on a topic organized for research purposes and is guided, monitored, and recorded by a researcher, sometimes called a moderator or facilitator (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1998). Focus groups are used for generating information on collective views, and the meanings that lie behind those views (Gill et al., 2008). Bickman and Rog (2009) suggested focus groups allow researchers to interact directly with respondents and the opportunity to obtain large and rich amounts of data in the respondents' own words.

I facilitated discussion for approximately 60 minutes with seven education professionals selected through expert sampling. I based the discussion on 15 questions, which I piloted with educational professionals (see Appendix J). Peters (2019) suggested to pilot questions with others who are knowledgeable about the project and its local culture. I piloted these questions in advance with educational professionals, to ensure the questions were easy for participants to understand and the questions were not leading, judgmental, or confusing. Questions should reflect emic interpretations of language and culture (Peters, 2019). Participants responded via

MS Teams video conferencing from their respective locations. I sent respective transcripts for member checking, inviting participants to please contact me by a specific date at [REDACTED]@liberty.edu to report any part of the transcript that did not accurately convey the content of their contributions to the focus group. To maintain confidentiality, I have password protected and used the following pseudonyms for transcribed responses: Focus Group Participant 1 (FG1) through FG7. FG1 and FG2 were administrators, and FG3 through FG7 were teachers.

I analyzed focus group data using coding and themes, audio recorded, and transcribed focus group interactions using REV, an audio and voice recorder application. REV (2020) audio and voice recorder is a free voice recording application that provides superior sound quality, user-friendly functionality, and quick transcription services. Computer-assisted approaches to focus group content analysis are increasingly being applied to maintain much of the rigor of traditional analysis while greatly reducing the time and cost (Stewart, 2006). Integrated with NVivo, I used REV to analyze transcribed data to code and categorize information into themes. I displayed responses to survey questions via tables using frequencies, percentages, and means, as appropriate for the following questions:

1. What is your current position? This question served as an introduction and outlined the participants' fields of expertise. I collected age, gender, ethnicity, and education demographics at the end of this focus group as well. Demographic information provides data regarding research participants and is necessary for the determination of whether the individuals are a representation of the general population (Salkind, 2010).

2. Please list all the people who are required to attend IEP meetings? The IDEA (2004) lists the IEP team members as parents of students with a disability, a minimum of one general education teacher, a special education teacher, a school administrator, a local educational agency

representative, the child, if applicable, and any other related service personnel? Members of the IEP meeting function to develop an IEP and to determine placement of the least restrictive environment (Fish, 2008). This question was used to determine if IEP process training should include identifying IEP team members and their functions.

3. Share your perspective of a parent's role in the IEP process? I chose this question as focus group discussions commonly begin with open-ended "grand tour" questions that seek to obtain participants' overall orientation toward a topic (Stewart, 2006, p. 6). The question promoted discussion about respective viewpoints. The question also encouraged the interchange of possible differing viewpoints among faculty in a safe environment.

4. What is your role in helping parents understand the IEP process? Research purports that parents do not fully understand their role in the IEP process (Zirkel & Hetrick, 2017). The IEP process can be complicated to navigate. This question focused on one of the specific rights to which parents are entitled to under the IDEA.

5. What suggestions would you offer to mitigate FAPE misunderstanding for parents? Special education litigation has been on the rise in recent decades. Zirkel and Hetrick (2017) reported parent concerns for the obligation of school districts to provide FAPE coupled with procedural violations. However, school districts are winning in average of 3:1. This question brought awareness to the results of court decisions specific to IEP-related procedural violations.

6. What suggestions can you offer to promote meaningful parent participation? According to a report by Zirkel and Hetrick (2017), parents are being denied the opportunity for meaningful participation during the IEP process. The IEP team is obligated to help parents understand the services and supports that are available so they can offer meaningful input. IEP meetings should be a risk-free environment for parents to ask for help (ASK, 2018). This

question could benefit IEP team members and bring awareness to which alleged procedural violations are most adjudicated.

7. Have you had any experiences with a special education advocate? If so, describe the experience and the role the advocate played in the meeting. Given that many parents have difficulty navigating the special education system, having an advocate present could help parents secure appropriate educational services and understand the IEP process. Additionally, parents may need advocates to assert their special education rights (Burke, 2013). This question elicited professional perspectives of the presence of special education advocates at IEP meetings.

8. What current training exists to help education professionals understand the IEP process? Special education teacher preparation programs offer limited curriculum for working with parent of student with disabilities (Strassfeld, 2018). This question probed insight into resources regarding home-school collaboration, conflict resolution, and programmatic support to enhance knowledge and improve relationships. Data revealed suggestions for faculty development or refining parent involvement curricula.

9. What resources exist in ensuring parents' knowledge of the IEP process is supported? This question highlighted any existing resources available to parents to understand the IEP process. This question also examined parent involvement provision established by the IDEA (Strassfeld, 2018). I provided a collection of these resources to parents to improve their IEP process knowledge.

10. What resources or ideas would you recommend for enhancing parents' IEP knowledge? PSNP (2019) suggested several effective ways to improve the IEP process for parents: looking at each step from the parents' point of view, providing as much notice as possible for IEP meetings, developing an overview of the IEP process, and supporting parent

engagement through clear communication. This question elicited ideas for how to explicitly welcome and enhance parent involvement.

11. If the district offered training to promote effective communication and collaboration with education professional, what topics should be included? This question was important to provide structured interventions as a tool to shift parent and professional attitudes towards collaboration. A primary goal of this collaboration was to create sustainable changes and shift views between school districts and parents of students with disabilities (Conner & Cavendish, 2018). MacLeod et al. (2017) shared highlights that positive collaborative experiences were probable when these groups were flexible and willing to learn strategies to improve partnerships.

Questions 12–15 elicited additional demographics about the participants. I used these demographics to collect and describe the age, gender, ethnicity, and education of the participants. Inclusion of such demographics greatly added to the field’s knowledge base and understanding of universals and variations that exist among populations (Hammer, 2011).

12. Which category best describes your age in years? The question of age was relevant as it provided information needed for research syntheses and secondary data analyses (Beins, 2009). 13. What is your sex? The question of gender elicited participants’ description and allowed researchers to determine to whom research findings generalize and comparisons across study replications (Hammer, 2011). 14. What is your race? Ethnicity information can help researchers assess disparities in environments (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). 15. What is the highest educational level you have achieved? This question was important to possibly determine if education level and IEP experience has any correlation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical research practice entails skillful planning and effective communication, reduction

of risk, and creation of benefits relating to the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I am not employed by the district or school chosen for the study site. Nor do I have a personal relationship with any of the education professionals at this study site. My child is not receiving services at the Brown Elementary School.

After receiving completed consent forms from participants, I assigned pseudonyms to protect participants' confidentiality. Survey responses contained no identifying information. I invited member-checking from interview and focus group participants. I secured documentation on a password-protected computer, and I will be the only one with access to the data for 3 years. Honesty and integrity have remained the foundation for this research and results flowed from the data, not from my own personal or subjective opinion. I invited participants to review the transcripts and redact or edit any comments they have made as part of this process. I gave interviewees and focus group participants a \$25 Walmart/Amazon gift card as a token of gratitude for their time.

Summary

Chapter One introduced the research. The chapter began with an overview and continued with background information comprised of the historical, theoretical, and social contexts used to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve it. In Chapter One I further addressed the problem and purpose statements, significance of the study, and concluded with a list of the research questions and definitions of terms used throughout this study. In the same regard, Chapter Two outlined the literature review established to address the inadequate IEP knowledge of parents of children with disabilities. Once more, this section consisted of an overview, a theoretical framework section, and a related literature section comprised of historical disability

landmarks, overarching themes of obstacles to parent participation, and procedural protections in the IEP process. Lastly, in Chapter Three I detailed the multimethod design, the central research questions, the researcher's role, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations.

Meeting the individual needs of these students is accomplished through an IEP process. Unfortunately, a gap exists in the literature on parents' knowledge of the IEP process. Thus, the purpose of this applied study was to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. To achieve increased parental IEP knowledge at this school, I utilized three data collection approaches including a quantitative survey, qualitative interviews, and a qualitative focus group. Through parent, administrator, and teacher participation, I collected data to inform training designed to empower the community.

Special education is one of the highest non-discretionary expenditures (2020-21 Budget Proposal, 2020). This study is important given the significant rise in special education disputes in Texas school districts. I assume increased parent IEP process knowledge may promote a more informed special education community by decreasing erroneous allegations, while dramatically cutting district expenses for litigation. Legal fees can be repurposed for more intentional causes.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this applied study was to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. The problem was parents' knowledge of the IEP process is insufficient in a central Texas elementary school. This chapter commences with participant demographics, results, discussion, and summary. With the analyzed data I answered the following research questions:

Central Question: How can the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process be solved at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Sub-question 1: How would quantitative survey data inform the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Sub-question 2: How would parents in an interview solve the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Sub-question 3: How would education professionals in a focus group solve the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Participant Demographics

Participants included parents and education professionals from Brown Elementary School in central Texas. At the time of this study, the student population was African American (89%), White (8%), Hispanic (2%), and other (1%) (District Website, 2018). The educators had similar demographics (District Website, 2018).

Survey Participants

Survey participants included 15 parents of students with disabilities. I asked them to respond to a series of Likert scale survey questions. I calculated frequencies and percentages for the demographic data (see Table 1).

The most frequently observed Age category was 40–49 ($n = 6$, 40%), while most of the respondents were Black ($n = 14$, 93%). The most frequently observed Sex category was F ($n = 10$, 67%). Bachelor degree, Graduate degree, and Associate degree, each with an observed frequency of 4 (27%), were the most observed Education category. The most frequently observed Income category was 50K ($n = 6$, 40%). The most frequently observed IEP category was 0–2 ($n = 8$, 53%).

Table 1

Survey Participants

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
20–29	3	20.00
50–59	3	20.00
30–39	3	20.00
40–49	6	40.00
Race		
Not Hispanic	1	6.67
Black	14	93.33
Sex		
M	5	33.33
F	10	66.67
Education		
Bachelor degree	4	26.67
High school diploma	2	13.33
Graduate degree	4	26.67
Associate degree	4	26.67
Doctoral degree	1	6.67

Income		
100+	1	6.67
50K	6	40.00
25K	2	13.33
<25k	3	20.00
100K	3	20.00
IEP		
3–5	1	6.67
0–2	8	53.33
6–8	3	20.00
9+	3	20.00

Note. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not equal 100%. For the purposes of this study Black and African American are used interchangeably.

Interview Participants

Parent survey responses were used to determine who lacked the most IEP process knowledge. Seven of these participants were invited to one-on-one interviews. The description of the seven interviewees is provided in Table 2.

The most frequently observed Age category was 40–49 ($n = 4$, 57%). The most frequently observed Race category was Black ($n = 7$, 100%). The most frequently observed Sex category was F ($n = 6$, 86%). The most frequently observed Education category was Bachelor degree, at ($n = 3$, 43%). The most frequently observed Income category was \$50K ($n = 3$, 43%). The most frequently observed IEP category was 0–2 ($n = 3$, 43%).

Table 2

Interview Participants

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
30–39	1	14.28
50–59	2	28.57
40–49	4	57.14

Race		
Black	7	100.00
Sex		
M	1	14.28
F	6	85.71
Education		
Bachelor degree	3	42.86
High school diploma	2	28.57
Associate degree	1	14.28
Doctoral degree	1	14.28
Income		
100+	1	14.28
50K	2	28.57
25K	2	28.57
100K	2	28.57
IEP		
3–5	1	14.28
0–2	3	42.86
9+	3	42.86

Note. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not equal 100%.

Virtual interviews were conducted in a one-on-one format. I implemented standard interview protocol (Claxton & Michael, 2021). I asked participants 0 semi-structured interview questions. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed immediately for analysis. The interviewees are briefly described as follows:

IP1

IP1 was a 40–49-year-old Black female. She had two children who received special education services. She had access to advocates and was financially able to afford supplemental support for her children outside of the services she received from the school.

IP2

IP2 was a 40–49-year-old Black female. She believed both of her children required services; however, her son was the only child found eligible for special education services. She

was intentional to reinforce homework completion to help her children obtain academic success.

IP3

IP3 was a 50–59 Black grandparent with custody of her granddaughter. Whenever IEP meetings were scheduled, she invited her sister to attend with her. Her sister understood the IEP process and served as the family advocate.

IP4

IP4 was a 30–39-year-old Black female. She had a daughter who received special education services. She believed the IEP was effective, but her child's teacher did not provide the level of support indicated in the IEP. IP4 believed it was important to let the child attend the IEP meetings. Her child attended meetings whenever possible.

IP5

IP5 was a 40–49-year-old Black male. This father was unaware of IEP processes and depended on his wife for implementation. When attending his first IEP meeting about his son, he depended on his spouse for guidance and to answer questions. He did not know his son's disability qualified him for services within the special education continuum.

IP6

IP6 was a 40–49-year-old Black female. She had a son and a daughter eligible for special education services. She had numerous experiences with IEP processes throughout her many relocations across varying school districts.

IP7

IP7 was a 50–59-year-old Black grandmother who provided care to her granddaughter. Her granddaughter received services for over seven years and IP7 found extreme disappointment in the IEP process. She shared her granddaughter remained unable to read at grade-level and was

concerned the IEP process was inconsistent.

Focus Group Participants

I recruited seven education professionals using purposeful sampling as they could inform the research problem. These participants consisted of two administrators (FG1 and FG2), two special education teachers (FG4 and FG6), and three general education teachers (FG3, FG5, and FG7).

Results

I conducted a quantitative survey to determine which parents lacked the most IEP process knowledge. I identified seven parents and invited them to participate in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Finally, I also conducted a focus group with education professionals to discuss themes and to design materials to improve parent IEP knowledge. The following is an overview of themes that arose during these conversations, including direct quotes from participants to further illustrate the findings.

Sub-Question 1

To address the research question, I generated descriptive statistics from the responses to each survey question. All survey questions were Likert scale, and I calculated the frequencies and percentages for each question (see Table 4).

Strongly agreed was the most observed category when asked if the respondents thought special education services were free ($n = 7$, 47%). *Agree* was the most observed category when asked if their child received an individualized IEP ($n = 10$, 67%). *Disagree* or *strongly disagree* was the most observed category when asked if they knew how to use the services for assisting their child ($n = 8$, 53%). *Agree* or *strongly agree* was the most observed category when asked if they were aware of testing deadlines ($n = 8$, 53%). *Neutral* was the most observed category when

asked if services were provided during the COVID-19 pandemic ($n = 6, 40\%$). *Strongly disagree* was the most observed category when asked if they were informed about changes to their child's IEP ($n = 7, 47\%$). *Strongly agree* was the most observed category when asked if they were not aware of IEPs before they started ($n = 8, 53\%$). *Strongly agree* was the most observed category when participants were asked if they believed the district must provide a fair hearing if they feel their rights have been violated ($n = 7, 47\%$). *Strongly agreed* was the most observed category when asked if their children had the right to learn with their peers who do not have a disability ($n = 8, 53\%$). *Strongly agree* was the most observed category when participants were asked if they were able to have outside tests done ($n = 6, 40\%$). *Agree* was the most observed category when asked if their child's IEP must be annually reviewed by the school ($n = 9, 60\%$). *Disagree* was the most frequently observed category when asked if additional attendees were able to attend IEP meeting ($n = 5, 33\%$). *Strongly disagree* was the most frequently observed category when asked if many parents felt that education is the school's responsibility ($n = 8, 53\%$). *Strongly agree* was the most frequently observed category when participants were asked if they were willing to attend special education training to assist with child development ($n = 6, 40\%$).

Table 3

Responses to Survey Questions

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Special education services are free		
Neutral	4	26.67
Agree	4	26.67
Strongly Agree	7	46.67
Individualized IEP		
Neutral	1	6.67
Agree	10	66.67
Strongly Agree	4	26.67
Know how to utilize resources		
Strongly Disagree	4	26.67

Disagree	4	26.67
Neutral	1	6.67
Agree	3	20.00
Strongly Agree	3	20.00
Aware of testing deadlines		
Neutral	7	46.67
Agree	6	40.00
Strongly Agree	2	13.33
Services provided during COVID-19		
Strongly Disagree	1	6.67
Disagree	4	26.67
Neutral	6	40.00
Agree	4	26.67
Informed about changes to child's IEP		
Strongly Disagree	7	46.67
Disagree	5	33.33
Neutral	2	13.33
Agree	1	6.67
Lack of prior awareness of IEP		
Strongly Disagree	1	6.67
Neutral	1	6.67
Agree	5	33.33
Strongly Agree	8	53.33
District must provide fair hearing for violations		
Neutral	2	13.33
Agree	6	40.00
Strongly Agree	7	46.67
Child has right to learn with their peers without disabilities		
Neutral	1	6.67
Agree	6	40.00
Strongly Agree	8	53.33
Able to have outside tests done		
Neutral	4	26.67
Agree	5	33.33
Strongly Agree	6	40.00
IEP must be reviewed annually		
Neutral	1	6.67
Agree	9	60.00
Strongly Agree	5	33.33
Additional attendees able to attend IEP		

Strongly Disagree	2	13.33
Disagree	5	33.33
Neutral	2	13.33
Agree	3	20.00
Strongly Agree	3	20.00
Most parents feel that education is the school's responsibility		
Strongly Disagree	8	53.33
Disagree	6	40.00
Neutral	1	6.67
Willing to attend special education training to assist with child development		
Disagree	1	6.67
Neutral	3	20.00
Agree	5	33.33
Strongly Agree	6	40.00

Note. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not equal 100%.

Sub-Question 2

Interview participants had attended several IEP meetings for their children. In individual interviews, participants shared their experiences from IEP meetings. Data analysis revealed two themes that addressed sub-question 2: (a) IEP meetings are positive experiences, and (b) ways to improve IEP meetings and processes. Each of these themes will be discussed in this section.

Theme 1: IEP Meetings are Positive Experiences

According to participants, the purpose of IEP meetings is to create accommodations to provide a better education for their children. IP6 explained the purpose as “to ensure that our children are getting the services, the federal services, that will meet their needs.” IP2 also believed the IEP meetings were designed to provide accommodations for a better education for children. IP2 said the purpose was “to help our children get a little bit more time when it comes to testing and stuff, ‘cause they have some sort of learning disability.” IP3 described the purpose as “to better educate your child.”

Experiences with IEP Meetings. Except for two interview participants, all others described positive experiences with IEP meetings. Participants expressed that the IEP team members had their child's best interests in mind and that the process was informative and collaborative. IP2, who did not know what to expect going into the meeting, said, "It was very informative," which was the same word IP4 used to describe the meeting. IP5 felt that all members of the child's IEP team had the child's wellbeing in mind. "They didn't make it seem like it was a problem. ... They made me feel like they recognized it was an issue ... and they really wanted to help him and us ... I felt good about it" (IP5). IP6 described a similar experience, saying the team "went above and beyond" for the child.

Two parents had less positive experiences, for different reasons. IP3's negative experience involved having a lack of understanding and feeling as though the interview participant personally did not know what was going on. "I really didn't understand everything they went through until they explained it to me a little bit better," recalled IP3, implying that once processes were explained and she had a greater understanding, this improved the experience. According to IP7, the IEP meeting experience was negative because "a lot of talking and no action" occurred.

Experiences with IEP Team Members. In addition to positive experiences with meetings, some parent participants had positive experiences with team members, though not all. IP4 and IP5 described feeling as though the IEP team worked collaboratively in meetings. IP4 recalled how at the meetings, "everybody is on the same page, especially when the child is there, and we're learning what plans we can come up with to help the child with their schoolwork and accommodate them for their learning." IP6 said, despite taking part in only a single meeting, she felt the team cared about her child and fully informed her of available resources. "I had a pretty

good experience,” IP6 stated.

Other parent participants encountered challenges working with the IEP team. IP2 was unsure of what to expect, indicating she might not have been told in advance what to expect during the meeting and working with the team. IP1 described the experience with the team as “overwhelming” in the beginning, and the initial feeling of defensiveness that “there’s nothing wrong with my child.” Once IP1 had a chance to step away from the moment, the participant realized, “it’s not about something being wrong with my child, it’s just that my child learns differently.”

Two participants, IP6 and IP7, had negative experiences with some IEP team members and the feeling that the IEP was not being followed. IP6’s child had been taught to self-advocate but discovered the IEP had not been implemented. When she called to follow-up, she learned the teacher had not read the IEP document. IP7 had a similar experience, placing the blame on the teacher for failing to implement the IEP. IP7 described the IEP team members as “all talk, but no action.”

Theme 2: Ways to Improve IEP Meetings and Processes

Advocacy. Despite the relatively positive experiences with IEP meetings and team members, interview participants also recognized and suggested ways IEP-related processes could be improved. Interview participants noted they were not informed they could have an advocate present with them in the meetings, nor were they offered one. Only two interview participants were told they could have an advocate or were provided one. The other four were not afforded this option, and one was unclear about the process. IP5’s spouse did most of the legwork related to the IEP, and therefore he was unclear about the process. “I don’t know because my wife dealt with that a lot. ... If she were offered, I’m sure she told them we would be all right,” said IP5.

IP2 described the feeling of learning on the go. “We didn’t have anybody to hold our hand ... it was hard,” said IP2.

Interview participants were clear their job was to be their children’s advocate in the process, whether they were provided an advocate during meetings or not. IP1 said, “I thought my role was to be supportive of my child ... support them in what they need it, whatever they need.” Others similarly believed their role was to be supportive and advocate for their children. IP6 said her role was “to advocate for my child,” and IP7 said, “As a parent, I have to be the best advocate possible.” IP5 concurred, explaining that beyond simple advocacy, “My role is to reinforce the plan. When they gave homework ... We had to review that and make sure it was done.”

Increased Involvement and Communication. As advocates for their children, interview participants wanted to be more involved in the IEP process and be given more information. One way the process could be improved was by providing clearer information to parents in advance of meetings. Though participants were often notified of the meeting in advance, many were not. IP3 recalled receiving a notice of the meeting via email. “They sent me an email, and I just went ... I was going to explain, to find out why my child was failing the way they were.” IP6 and IP7 said they were totally unprepared for their IEP meeting. When asked, IP6 said, “Oh, they didn’t prepare me,” and IP7 said, “They didn’t prepare me. They told me the schedule, date, and the time of the IEP meeting.” IP1 said, “I didn’t understand everything going into the meeting, but everything was explained at the meeting.”

I also asked interview participants directly to identify certain process improvements that would help them and their children. IP1 believed that if information were easier to find and “more readily available,” and if the team members were “more forthcoming with the programs

that's available to children," this would be a benefit to parents. IP3 also desired "more information about what's going on," and preferred this information be communicated in writing.

IP5 wanted more information about "going through an IEP process," but thought the experience of establishing an IEP for the child was a good experience. To provide more information to parents of children with IEPs, training might be helpful. Four participants responded *yes*, when asked if they would want or attend a training about the IEP process, while the other three participants said *no*, they were not interested in any type of training.

Sub-Question 3

Focus group professionals yielded data to address Sub-Question 3. The focus group participants shared the concerns they had for parents going through the IEP process and how parents could be helped and supported through the process. Analysis of the focus group data yielded one theme: improving parents' knowledge of the IEP process, which is presented in this section.

Improving Parents' Knowledge of the IEP Process

This theme was generated based on data from a focus group about the IEP process conducted with focus group participants. Focus group participants were clear that parents lacked information about the IEP process and meetings and those processes could be improved for parents. One teacher identified streamlining processes that differed among districts, states, and counties as an area for improvement. Nearly all focus group participants believed a parent's role in the IEP process included being aware of the different requirements if they moved among districts or counties. FG6 thought parents would benefit from more information so they could help their children be advocates for themselves.

FG5 had experiences as a teacher and parent of a child with an IEP, and agreed parents needed more information about the IEP so they could advocate for their children. Focus group participants, especially the teachers, believed increased information about the IEP process would be mutually beneficial. To improve teachers' access to information about their students' IEPs, many had forms they were required to sign acknowledging receipt of the IEP. However, this did not ensure the teachers read the IEP or followed it. According to FG5, improving this process would benefit teachers and parents.

Focus group participants were familiar with some existing resources available for parents related to the IEP. FG4 referred to the state's Department of Education website for resources on IEPs and special education, which parents could access. FG3 suggested devoting a session at Back-to-School Night for special education so parents could learn about other resources available to them. FG3 further explained, "We made all of our parent sessions very specific to either content or the need of our students. The parents attended them a lot, way more than some of our other events. They wanted that information from the school."

If schools were to provide more training on IEPs for parents, focus group participants had suggestions for possible training topics. FG2 believed teaching parents about the organization of the educational cycle for students who needed IEPs would be helpful, because "if you can organize yourself as a student and as a family, I think that that's gonna be a big component to their educational cycle." FG7 thought parents would benefit from training about the eligibility process, because "just because their child, or just the student is struggling, doesn't necessarily mean they actually have a disability."

Discussion

The theoretical framework supporting this study included Bandura's (1971) social

learning theory and Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory. These theories addressed learning in a social environment and have impacted special education. The perspectives of the participants support an alignment of parent and teacher expectations relating to determining the best learning environment for the child. Interview participants and focus group participants agreed with the existing mandate, which requires that students with disabilities should be educated with students who do not have disabilities, to the greatest extent possible, which is considered the least restrictive environment (LRE; CIPR, 2017b). The IEP, prepared by a team, also mandates the active participation of every individual who is responsible for the education of the child with special needs (Ilik & Er, 2019). Participant responses corroborated cooperative relationships between teachers and parents of students with disabilities remain critical to student success.

Since parents are typically primary caretakers of children with disabilities, their participation in the IEP process is imperative (IDEA, 2004). However, literature reveals parents are not always included in every stage of the IEP process (Ilik & Er, 2019). Parents of children with disabilities have indicated placement and other decisions were often already made before the IEP meeting, and families have felt school personnel only wanted parents in the process to sign previously determined decisions (Kurth, Love et al., 2019). Some parent experiences include feeling disempowered as advocates for their child (Stanberry, 2019), and being frustrated by low expectations and limited knowledge from educators (Rossetti et al., 2017). Yet, data suggested otherwise. Most of the parent participants believed the IEP meetings were designed to provide accommodations for a better education for children and the IEP team worked collaboratively in meetings. FG7 expressed, "Everybody is on the same page, especially when the child is there, and we're learning what plans we can come up with to help the child with their

schoolwork and accommodate them for their learning.” Parafiniuk (2020) claimed it is of the utmost importance to communicate clearly and ensure that every member of the IEP team is on the same page regarding student’s goals and progress.

Contrary to what some participants have experienced, Burke and Goldman (2017) purported IEP teams rely upon special education advocates to develop rapport with parents, establish clear expectations, learn about the child and the family, and participate in IEP meetings. Ilik and Er (2019) suggested special education teachers are responsible for making parents actively participate in the process and providing parents with the support they need. Due to a dearth of special education advocates, participants revealed that parents are relying on teachers as subject matter experts and building rapport with their child’s teacher to increase their ability to advocate for their child. Strong parent advocates tend to gather information and ask relevant questions, understand how the educational systems are designed, build relationships with, and organize others, as well as identify problems, propose solutions, and set goals (Goldman & Burke, 2017).

As advocates for their children, parents wanted to be more involved in the IEP process and be given more information. Counts et al. (2018) asserted school personnel must make a conscious effort to communicate with parents and build opportunities for active engagement; they can work together in the decision-making process of the IEP, which is ultimately in the best interest of the child. In agreement with scholars, this research supports parent-teacher collaboration and trust-building; however, a gap exists in literature supporting ways to improve parents’ knowledge of the IEP process.

Sub-Question 1

The survey responses from Sub-Question 1: How would quantitative survey data inform the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas, suggests majority of the parents understand free and appropriate public education (FAPE). They strongly agree when asked if special education services were free ($n = 7$, 47%). FAPE requires services that are designed to meet the unique needs of the child and prepares them for further education, employment, and living independently (CPIR, 2017b). Another survey question references that an IEP is written and designed for each student individually. This question elicited information to help gain parents' insight about their perceived purpose of the IEP compared with the IDEA's intended purpose of the IEP (CPIR, 2017a; Grossman, 2020). Compared with existing literature, 67% of the respondents believe their child's IEP aligned with the IDEA's intended purpose of the IEP ($n = 10$, 67%).

Additional survey questions focused on awareness of resources and services received during the COVID-19 pandemic. The opinions of parents regarding these areas determined more than half of participants selected disagree or strongly disagree when asked if they knew how to use the services for assisting their child ($n = 8$, 53%). Inquiring how to access the various services their child is entitled to is the most common question parents ask (Nelson, 2020). Special education covers a range of needs and understanding how to access these available resources can promote a more informed community. Parents expressed a desire to learn more about the availability of resources and how to access more special education resources. The COVID-19 pandemic increased parents' aspirations for resources to ensure their child's special education needs are being met. In the world of special education services during COVID-19, writing IEPs and holding an IEP meeting for each exceptional student is one of the most

important elements to take place during the student's special education program (Parafiniuk, 2020).

Sub-Question 2

Interview participants indicated interest in being more prepared for IEP meetings and their willingness to attend training to improve their IEP knowledge. Responses to Sub-Question 2: How would parents in an interview solve the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas, yielded two themes: IEP meetings are positive experiences, and ways to improve IEP meetings and processes. Interview participants believed the purpose of IEP meetings was to create accommodations to provide a better education for their children and meetings have been more positive experiences.

Despite the relatively positive experiences with the IEP meetings and team members, interview participants also recognized and suggested ways that the meetings and IEP-related processes could be improved. IP1 indicated, "A clear way to improve the process, then, would be to provide greater detail and more information to parents leading up to the meeting." Providing more positive communication before the meeting was a constant improvement offered by this group. Gathering materials and documents prior to the meeting was also recommended. The better the data, the better the meeting, and the better the result for the student (Parafiniuk, 2020). IP1 believed that if information were easier to find, and "more readily available," and if the team members were "more forthcoming with the programs that's available to children," this would be a benefit to parents.

Sub-Question 3

More benefits to parents are found in Sub-Question 3: How would education professionals in a focus group solve the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP

process at Brown Elementary School in central Texas? Focus group participants were clear that parents lacked information about the IEP process and meetings and that those processes could be improved for parents. Focus group participants spoke about the concerns they had for parents going through the IEP process and how parents could be helped and supported through the process. Many of the parents were affiliated with the military and have relocated several times. The parents reported that IEP processes differ district to district and the IEP process should be explained upon every relocation. However, regardless of the district, the IEP process must be facilitated and understood. Perspectives were also expressed about improving teacher IEP knowledge. Improving this process would benefit teachers and parents.

Focus group participants suggested some existing resources available for parents related to the IEP. FG6 referred to the state's Department of Education website and Child Find for resources on IEPs and special education, which parents could access. Another suggestion included devoting a session at Back-to-School Night for special education so parents could learn about other resources available to them.

Summary

I conducted a quantitative survey to determine which parents lacked the most IEP process knowledge. I identified seven parents and invited them to participate in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Finally, I conducted a focus group with seven education professionals to discuss themes and to design materials to improve parent IEP knowledge. The emerging themes from the interviews were: IEP meetings are positive experiences and providing ways to improve IEP meetings and processes. The theme from the focus group was improving parents' knowledge of the IEP process. In Chapter Five I will present a solution to the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and highlight

training resources to resolve the issue.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this applied study was to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. This chapter includes detailed solutions to the problem and the resources and funds required to implement them. The chapter also consists of roles and responsibilities, a timeline, negative and positive implications, an evaluation plan, and a summary.

Restatement of the Problem

The problem was parents' knowledge of the IEP process was insufficient in a central Texas elementary school. The parents who participated were from differing backgrounds yet shared a desire to be advocates for their child through improved IEP knowledge. Some military affiliated parents indicated their experiences with IEP processes varied from state to state. Other parents experienced differences by district, while some were unaware of IEP processes or the availability of resources.

Proposed Solution to the Central Question

The central research question was: How can the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process be solved at Brown Elementary School in central Texas? I addressed this question by conducting a quantitative survey of parents. I invited the parents with the lowest knowledge score to participate in one-on-one qualitative interviews. The emerging themes referenced parents' positive experiences at IEP meetings, yet they wanted ways to improve IEP meeting processes. I invited seven Department of Education-certified professionals,

selected by way of expert sampling, to meet virtually as a focus group. The focus group consisted of administrators, general education teachers, and special education specialists.

The recurring theme was the importance of improving parents' knowledge of the IEP process. The solution entails training sessions to improve parent IEP knowledge. This research indicated parents should also be trained on IEPs and is supported by section §300.34(c)(8) of the IDEA:

- d(8)(i) Parent counseling and training means assisting parents understanding the needs of their child;
- (ii) Providing parents with information about child development; and
- (iii) Helping parents to acquire the necessary skills that will allow them to support the implementation of their child's IEP or IFSP. (Lightner, 2020, para. 8)

When school administrators and staff provide IEP training to parents, the problem is addressed, and students benefit. In fact, members of the IEP team are obligated to provide training, as appropriate (IDEA, 2004); however, parents are often unaware they can ask for training as part of their child's special education eligibility (Lightner, 2020). Knowledge of special education services is valuable to the parent, the child, and the IEP team (PACER, 2019).

Interview and focus group participants suggested several training topics that could benefit all stakeholders. The training topics that could be used to solve the problem of parents' insufficient IEP knowledge are clarifying IEP eligibility processes, IEP process documents, the child's involvement in the IEP process, and existing special education resources. Respective themes are detailed in the following section as derived from data, themes, and the literature review.

Clarifying IEP Eligibility Processes

Providing training about the eligibility process for parents is vital to improving parent IEP knowledge. Parents need to understand IEPs cannot be requested. A child must first be evaluated for special education services. Child Find is federally mandated by the IDEA and is an important first step to finding children with disabilities and getting them the support and services they require to be successful in school (childfindtx.tea.texas.gov). Parents can contact their child's teacher, principal, or school special education representative to evaluate their child. An example email request is, "I noticed my child is experiencing the following challenges <insert concerns here>. I would like to have my child evaluated for services."

Poor academic performance and continued disruptions are examples of behavioral struggles parents might observe. IEPs can be written for academic, social, emotional, and behavioral disabilities (Olsen, 2021). IEPs are needs-based and if a need is not identified, the child will not qualify for special education services via an IEP (Lightner, 2020).

Streamlining IEP Processes

IDEA requires certain information in the IEP; however, states have flexibility to interpret, apply, and pass their own laws regarding students with disabilities (Bateman, 2021). These state special education laws cannot contradict the IDEA, only exceed IDEA's protections. Bateman (2021) discerned school administrators play a critical role in ensuring that high-quality IEPs are developed and implemented for eligible students. Following this process meets the procedural requirements of the IDEA; schools that do not, risk poor outcomes for students with disabilities and expose themselves and their districts to litigation (Bateman, 2021).

IDEA defines the role for parents as collaborators, where families and schools work together to create and enact shared visions and educational goals (MacLeod et al., 2017). IDEA

indicates that school specialists inform parents of their rights and incorporate their special knowledge of the child in the IEP process (ASK, 2017). Jourdan et al. (2018) posited special educators and families of students with disabilities must establish and sustain partnerships to support the special education process.

Back-to-School Night is an event hosted by many elementary schools to reconnect children, parents, and administrators in preparation for the school year. The program is an opportunity to learn about the curriculum and comprehensive resources. A segment of Back-to-School Night could feature elements of the IEP process using a PowerPoint presentation (Appendix K), Question & Answers (Q&A) (Appendix L), and interest forms (Appendix M) for parents who would like more information. Ensuring children engage in the presentation and Q&A can empower them to self-advocate in the least-restrictive environment. Data from the interest forms, newsletters, and other methods of mass communication can keep parents informed of deadlines, information sessions, and critical announcements.

Special Education Training

Parents also proposed more training for teachers. General education teachers need professional development to be effective in providing learning elements for students with disabilities (Perry, 2020; Sokal & Sharma, 2017). According to Koch (2020) the impact of linking general education teachers with parents of children with disabilities has potential to influence pre-service teachers' attitudes, feeling of comfort, and collaborative partnerships. Webinars can be incorporated into summer training sessions to help bridge the gap between teacher and parent perspectives and promote comprehensive resources. See Appendix N for a list of webinars. Administrators and special education teachers can create a parent support group, offering information sessions to parents and developing a parent buddy system using reference

materials from Appendix N. Additionally, education professionals can discuss the School Parent and Family Engagement Policy for effectively interacting with school and district websites, points of contact, and training (Appendix O).

Working Group

To help increase parents' IEP knowledge, interview and focus group participants proposed the administration assign a workgroup with representation from the administration, special education, general education teachers, and parent volunteers. The primary function of the workgroup will be to create ways to implement training based on the proposed solutions of this study. Collectively the group will decide the best way to introduce, promote, and facilitate training efforts (Appendix P).

Resources Needed

To clarify and streamline the IEP process, implement special education training, and compose a workgroup, the following resources are needed: a system for mass communication, presentation software, in-person location or virtual platform, access to Child Find, and subject matter experts to develop training and written material. Existing staff may use platforms including TED talks, YouTube, and many websites like Texas Education Agency containing recorded webinars, videos, and guidance to facilitate training. Acknowledging the nationwide shortage of teachers (Teacher Builder, 2020), an alternative approach to a workgroup is dissemination of a digital brochure containing quick guides, websites, and other accessible resources (See Appendix Q for a sample digital brochure). With the availability of Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Facebook Live, and similar platforms, parent training can be facilitated by teachers or local education agency's (LEAs). The primary barrier is securing a team to execute this solution. Ideally, the solution can be supported with volunteer efforts. However, due to

staffing shortages, outsourcing may be necessary.

Funds Needed

In the Brown Elementary School district, mass communication, presentation software, and in-person or virtual locations were available. Moreover, training materials can be derived from the Texas Education Agency (<https://tea.texas.gov/academics/special-student-populations/special-education>) and Child Find (<https://childfindtx.tea.texas.gov/index.html>) websites. If a volunteer workgroup is not obtainable, funds may need to be allocated to compensate outsourcing. LEAs will determine plausible funding sources.

Roles and Responsibilities

To clarify and streamline the IEP process, implement special education training, and compose a workgroup defined roles and responsibilities are required. The administration team must monitor the proposed problem solutions through check-ins and debriefs with participating staff. Administrators will present the solutions to the district representative for approval and guidance. Once approved, the LEA will coordinate with the working group to discuss the best way to introduce, promote, and facilitate training efforts. LEAs must engage in public and parent/guardian awareness activities such as Back-to-School Night events and parent support groups. LEAs maintain and report accurate data and provide training and professional development to all staff. The role of the Admission, Review, and Dismissal Committee is to develop the IEP to enable a child with disability to achieve the prescribed goals (childfindtx.tea.texas.gov). The role of the parent is to be engaged. Claxton (2018) asserted that parental engagement encourages learning, high achievement expectations, and commitment. Whether at the pre-IEP conference or during the conference, parents can guide their child's educational course (Classen et al., 2019; Connor & Cavendish, 2018). Harry (1992b) purported

parents are given two roles in special education: consent giver and educational planner.

Timeline

The purpose of this section is to provide a projected timeline to clarify and streamline the IEP process, implement special education training, and compose a workgroup. Solution implementation can be executed within three months of district and staff member buy-in. Once support is established with district leadership and staff members, Brown Elementary School administration should request special and general education teacher volunteers and parents of children with disabilities to serve on a workgroup to structure the training. See the following sample flyer:

Volunteers Needed

Improving Parents' Knowledge of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Process: Workgroup

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Are you a Certified General or Special Education Teacher?
- Are you a Parent of a Child who has an IEP?

If you answered **yes** to either of these questions, you may be eligible to participate.

The purpose of this workgroup is to structure training and help improve parent IEP process knowledge. Please contact Principal Brown at the 999-999-9999 or email at principalbrown@elementaryschool.edu for details.

The workgroup will develop objectives to clarify and streamline the IEP process and implement special education training. Workgroup initial steps could take 2 weeks to a month. Once objectives have been determined, workgroup members must research, collect, and evaluate available resources to facilitate and disseminate the training information. Using the attached digital brochure and PowerPoint presentation as a starting point, the workgroup can share this

information with teachers for critique and recommendations. This phase could take another month.

When the training information has been vetted, resources can be shared with parents and teachers via social media platforms or during parent conferences. Another recommendation is hosting special education presentations at the start of each school year as part of Back-to-School Night, Parent Teacher Association meetings, or by piloting an exclusive Special Education/IEP Night. Lastly, information can be shared through mass communications such as emails, newsletters, or text messaging. If a volunteer workgroup is formed, a 2- to 3-month timeline is required; however, if any of this work is outsourced, a timeline will be contingent upon consultant availability.

Solution Implications

In recent years, more than 7,000,000 students with disabilities received special education and related services through American public schools (Frey, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Brown Elementary School offered a variety of special education services and acknowledged the importance of parent involvement in this process. Unfortunately, educational terminology and the complexities of the law can make it difficult for some parents to navigate through special education law and IEP processes (Goldman & Burke, 2017).

Due to the availability and accessibility of existing resources, increased knowledge of the IEP process can be executed at no additional cost to Brown Elementary School, unless outsourcing is required. Likely consequences are increased parent-teacher collaborations, a possible decline in special education allegations, improved IEP experiences and expectations, and parents becoming their child's best advocate. A potential negative implication of improved knowledge is the exposure of parental safeguard violations in the IEP process. If violations are

found, time, money, and resources may be redirected to restore the purpose of the IDEA.

Whether the solution is positive or negative, the resulting benefit supports the intended purpose of the IDEA and of this study:

- (a) To ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living;
- (b) To ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected;
- (c) To assist States, localities, educational service agencies, and Federal agencies to provide for the education of all children with disabilities; and
- (d) To assess and ensure the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities.

(Sec 300.1)

Evaluation Plan

To evaluate the solution effectiveness, administration at Brown Elementary School can send a mass communication message via the school's notification service to gauge parent satisfaction. See Appendix R for a sample text message. A message can be sent via voice, short message service text, email, and social media to present a three to four question survey. Some example text survey questions are: Is your child currently receiving special education services? Are you satisfied with these services? Are you interested in learning more about the IEP process? Would you attend a virtual or in-person session as part of Back-to-School Night? These questions can confirm interest to improve IEP knowledge, willingness to attend virtual or in-person training, and determine which platform is preferred—virtual or in-person workshops. Another method to assess effectiveness is the evaluation of parent participation and feedback in

specific IEP training, workshops, and Back-to-School Night. If participation increases, positive collaborations and parent-teacher relationships may improve, and indicate solution effectiveness.

Furthermore, existing data collection, analysis, and performance reports such as the State Performance Plan Indicators, Special Education Ad Hoc Reporting System, State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report, and LEA Reports and Determinations can be used to compare and measure the progress of students with disabilities and parent perspective of services.

Improved student scores and parent satisfaction are indicators of solution effectiveness.

This study was limited to one school, parents were from the same geographical area, and administrators may not have experienced IEP processes in other school districts. Feedback may not reflect opinions of other elementary schools in the same area. Future studies could open the aperture to increase diversity of thought and involve an entire district assessment of parent IEP process knowledge.

Summary

With this applied study I sought to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. The problem was parents' knowledge of the IEP process is insufficient in a central Texas elementary school. Through data triangulation and subsequent analysis, themes emerged, and training solutions were suggested. This chapter included detailed solutions to the problem and the resources and funds required to implement them.

Within 2 to 3 months, solutions can be implemented, and parent IEP process knowledge can improve within the current school year. The proposed training can be presented with existing school events and facilitated by most teachers. The training has the potential to bridge the gap in

knowledge for parents of children with disabilities as well as inform parents who believe their child should be evaluated for special education services. Costs and negative consequences are minimal compared to the potential for improved school and community collaboration and increased understanding of IDEA special education resources. Ultimately, solution effectiveness depends on the support of parents, teachers, and leaders remaining committed to the success of children with disabilities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 23, 2021

Rhonda Clanton-Davis
Frank Bailey

Re: IRB Application - IRB-PY20-21-783 IMPROVING PARENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP) PROCESS: AN APPLIED STUDY

Dear Rhonda Clanton-Davis and Frank Bailey,

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 does not classify as human subjects research. This means you may begin your project with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your study is not considered human subjects research for the following reason:

(2) Your project will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" according to 45 CFR 46.102(f).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so. If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word research with the word project throughout both documents.

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your application's status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Superintendent Site Permission Letter

April 07, 2021

Dr. XXXXX
Superintendent
0000 Road
Somewhere, VA 23832

Dear Dr. XXXX:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is Improving Parents' Knowledge of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process: An Applied Study and the purpose is to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in Central County school district and contact members of your staff to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to complete a survey, schedule an interview, and/or attend a focus group. The data will be used to design training to address the problem of insufficient knowledge of parents about IEPs. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to @liberty.edu. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Rhonda Clanton-Davis
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix C: Principal Site Permission Letter

April 07, 2021

Principal
Brown Elementary School
0000 Road
Somewhere, VA 23836

Dear Principal:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is Improving Parents' Knowledge of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process: An Applied Study and the purpose is to address the problem of insufficient knowledge of parents about Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to resolve the issue.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at Brown Elementary School and contact members of your staff to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to complete a survey, schedule an interview, and/or attend a focus group. The data will be used to design training to address the problem of insufficient knowledge of parents about IEPs. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, pseudonyms will be used, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to @liberty.edu. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Rhonda Clanton-Davis
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D: Parent Recruitment Flyer

Improving Parents' Knowledge of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Process: An Applied Study

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Are you the parent of a child who is eligible for special education services?
 - Is your child on an IEP?

If you answered yes to these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a study.

The purpose of this applied study is to examine parents' knowledge about the IEP process in a central Virginia elementary school. Participants will be asked to complete a survey and selected participants will participate in an audio-recorded interview to explore experiences with the IEP process. The data will be used to design training to increase parent IEP knowledge. Interview participants will be asked to review their transcripts for accuracy. Select participants will receive a \$25 Walmart/Amazon gift card through text message as a "Thank you" gift for their time.

The study is being conducted virtually.

Rhonda Clanton-Davis, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Rhonda Clanton-Davis at [REDACTED]@liberty.edu for more information.

Appendix E: Focus Group Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed

Improving Parents' Knowledge of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Process: An Applied Study

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Are you a Certified General or Special Education Teacher?
 - Are you a Principal or an Assistant Principal?
 - Are you willing to meet virtually?

If you answered yes to either of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this applied study is to examine parents' knowledge about the IEP process in a central Virginia elementary school. Education professionals will participate in a focus group to discuss training materials and resources to address parents' IEP knowledge. Participants will receive a \$25 dollar gift card as a "Thank you" gift for your time.

The study is being conducted virtually.

Rhonda Clanton-Davis, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Rhonda Clanton-Davis at [REDACTED]@liberty.edu for more information.

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515

Appendix F: Parent Consent Form

Parent Consent

Title of the Project: Improving Parents' Knowledge of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Process: An Applied Study

Principal Investigator: Rhonda Clanton-Davis a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, be a parent of a child who is eligible for special education services, have a child on an Individualized Education Program (IEP), and willing to meet virtually. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this applied study is to examine parents' knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school. Parents will participate in surveys and interviews to explore experiences with the IEP process. The data will be used to design training to increase parent IEP knowledge. Select participants will receive a \$25 dollar gift card as a "Thank you" gift for your time.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participant in an online survey. The survey is 20 questions and will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. All responses will be kept confidential, and identities will remain anonymous.
2. Participant in an interview. The interview has 15 questions and will last about 30-45 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded, but the information will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include increased knowledge of the IEP process may lead to a possible decline in special education allegations, improved IEP experiences, and parents becoming the best advocate for their student.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. 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 anonymous. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms/codes. Interviews will be conducted telephonically 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 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.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Interview participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Upon completion of the interview, participants will receive a digital \$25 gift card for their time. Cell phone numbers will be requested for compensation purposes; however, they will be pulled and separated from your responses to maintain your anonymity.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform the researcher that you wish to discontinue your participation, and do not submit your study materials. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Rhonda Clanton-Davis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Frank Bailey, at [REDACTED]@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

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

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 me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix G: Focus Group Consent Form

Improving Parents' Knowledge of the Individualized Education
Program (IEP) Process: An Applied Study
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on Individualized Education Program knowledge of parents of children with disabilities. You were selected as a possible participant because you are involved in the IEP process as an educator or administrator. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Rhonda Clanton-Davis, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this applied study is to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. The central research question is: How can the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process be solved at Brown Elementary School in central Texas? Data will be collected by conducting parent surveys and interviews to explore experiences with the IEP process and through a focus group with education professionals to discuss training materials and resources to address parents' IEP process knowledge. The data will be used to design training to increase parent IEP knowledge. Increased knowledge of the IEP process may lead to a possible decline in special education allegations, improved IEP experiences, and parents becoming the best advocate for their student.

Procedure: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following:
Participant in a focus group. The focus group will take approximately 60 minutes and will be audio recorded for transcribing purposes only.

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

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

Benefits to society include increased knowledge of the IEP process may lead to a possible decline in special education and free appropriated public education allegations and potential decreased costs for a central Texas school district. These changes may be as the result of educating parents on the IEP process, improving the overall IEP experience and building collaborations with parents, teachers and the school district. This study is important given the significant rise in special education disputes in Texas school districts.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study but will receive a \$25 Walmart/Amazon gift card as a token of gratitude for their time.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the focus group via video/tele conference.
- 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.
- Focus group responses 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.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not 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 University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey 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 Rhonda Clanton-Davis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Frank Bailey, at [REDACTED]@liberty.edu.

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.

Statement of Consent: 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/photograph] me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix H: Survey Questions

Purpose: The purpose of this applied study is to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. The central research question is: How can the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process be solved at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

Improving Parents' IEP Knowledge Survey

Instructions: Your school district is interested in improving parents' IEP knowledge. Your participation in this survey could help with this effort. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from this study at any time without consequence. The survey is confidential, and the information will be used to help inform leadership regarding improving IEP knowledge. The survey has 20 questions and takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. Please submit responses within 5 days to [REDACTED]@liberty.edu. Thank you again for participating.

Demographics Questions

(Mark only one answer for each question.)

1. Which category best describes your age in years?

☐ 21-29

☐ 30-39

☐ 40-49

☐ 50-59

☐ 60 or older

2. What is your race?

- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ White
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Other race (please specify): _____

3. What is your sex?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

4. What is the highest level of education you have achieved?

- ☐ Less than high school diploma or equivalent (e.g., did not graduate and no GED)
- ☐ High school diploma or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- ☐ Associate degree
- ☐ Bachelor degree
- ☐ Graduate degree
- ☐ Doctorate

5. What is your annual household income?

- ☐ Less than \$25,000
- ☐ \$25,000-\$49,999
- ☐ \$50,000-\$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000+

6. Number of IEP meetings you have attended.

- ☐ 0-2
- ☐ 3-5
- ☐ 6-8

___9 or more

Content Questions

(Mark only one answer for each question.)

These questions pertain to your experiences with your child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Knowledge of the IEP process will be measured by responses to 14 statements to the following provisions of IDEA: FAPE, Appropriate Evaluation, IEP, LRE, Parent Participation, and Procedural Safeguards (ed.gov, 2020).

1. The special education services my child receives at school are free.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

2. An IEP is written and designed for each student individually.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

3. I know how to get the services to help my child learn.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

4. I know the school has a deadline to test my child for special services to improve their learning.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

5. My school district provided services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

6. The school does not need to tell me when they make changes to my child's IEP.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

7. I did not know what an IEP was when I started.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

8. The school district must provide me a fair hearing when I feel my rights have been violated.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

9. I know my child has the right to be taught in a classroom (least restrictive environment) with their peers who are without disabilities.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

10. If I disagree with the school's test results, I can have an outside test done.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

11. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) must be reviewed yearly by the school.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

12. I can choose additional people to attend my child's IEP meeting with me.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

13. Many parents feel the job of education falls to the schools and the schools need to figure it out.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

14. I would voluntarily attend special education training to help me understand my child's IEP goals and development.

1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

Appendix I: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Purpose: The purpose of this applied study is to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. The central research question is: How can the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process be solved at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

1. Please share the number of IEP meetings you have attended.
2. What is the purpose of the IEP?
3. What has been your experience when attending IEP meetings?
4. Did you know IDEIA (2004) lists the IEP team members as parents of students with a disability, a minimum of one general education teacher, a special education teacher, a school administrator, a local educational agency representative, the child, if applicable, and any other related service personnel?
5. What has been your experience with IEP team members?
6. Were the IEP goals completed before the meeting?
7. What happens at an IEP meeting?
8. How did education professionals prepare you for your first IEP meeting?
9. Were you offered an advocate to help you during this process?
10. In your opinion, what is your role in the IEP process?
11. Who is responsible for writing the IEP goals?
12. Tell me about the process of having your child evaluated for special education services, and what led up to that.
13. How would you improve the IEP process?

14. Are you interested in attending training to promote effective communication and collaboration with education professionals? Why or Why not?

15. What is your preferred learning style? Do you learn best by listening, reading, or doing?

Appendix J: Focus Group Questions

Purpose: The purpose of this applied study is to examine the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge about the IEP process in a central Texas elementary school and to design training to improve parental IEP knowledge and involvement. The central research question is: How can the problem of parents' insufficient knowledge of the IEP process be solved at Brown Elementary School in central Texas?

1. Tell me about your current position and its role in the IEP process?
2. In your opinion, who is required to establish IEP goals?
3. Share your perspective of the parents' role in the IEP process?
4. What is your role in helping parents understand the IEP process?
5. What suggestions would you offer to mitigate free and appropriate public education misunderstanding for parents?
6. What suggestions can you offer to promote positive parent participation?
7. Have you had any experiences with a special education advocate? If so, describe the experience and the role the advocate played in the meeting.
8. What current training exists to help education professionals implement the IEP process?
9. What resources exist in ensuring parents' knowledge of the IEP process is supported?
10. What resources or ideas would you recommend for enhancing parents' IEP knowledge?
11. If the district offered training to promote effective communication and collaboration with education professionals, what topics should be included?

Questions 12–15 will be demographic questions.

12. Which category best describes your age in years?

☐ 18-20

☐ 21-29

☐ 30-39

☐ 40-49

☐ 50-59

☐ 60 or older?

13. What is your sex?

☐ Female

☐ Male

14. What is your race?

☐ Black or African American

☐ White

☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native

☐ Asian

☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

☐ Other race (please specify): _____

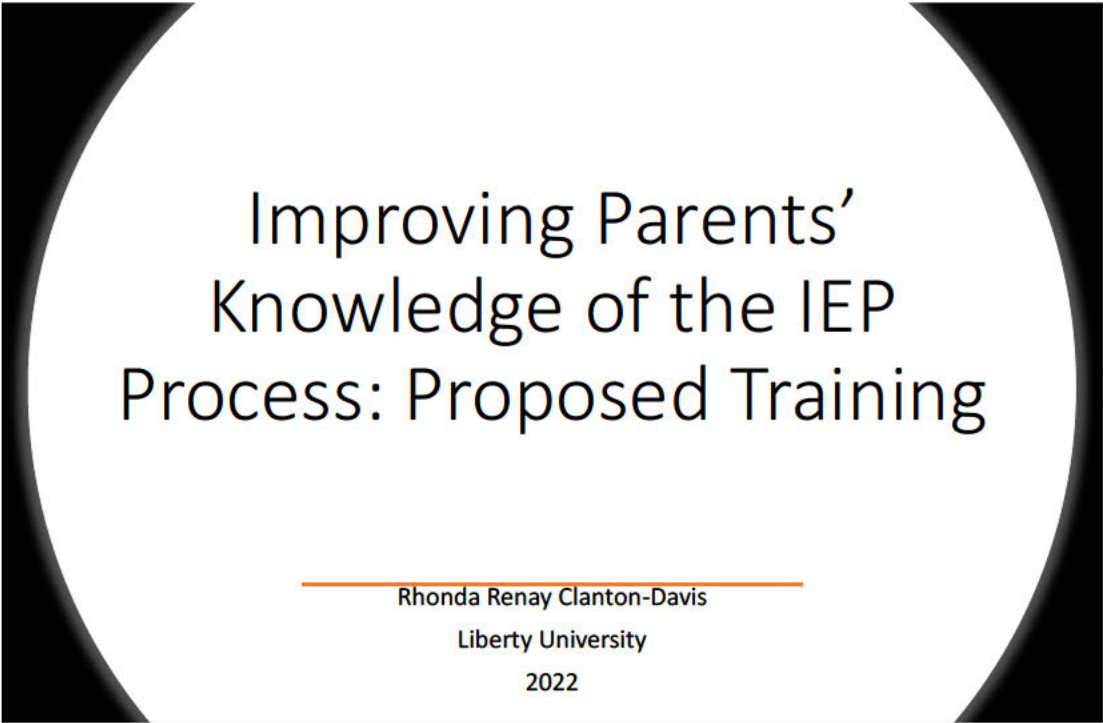
15. What is the highest level of education you have achieved?

☐ Bachelor degree

☐ Graduate degree

☐ Doctorate degree

Appendix K: Sample PowerPoint Presentation



Improving Parents' Knowledge of the IEP Process: Proposed Training

Rhonda Renay Clanton-Davis

Liberty University

2022

Appendix L: Sample Question & Answers (Q&A)

1. What does IEP stand for?
2. What is an IEP?
3. How can I get my child evacuated for special education services?
4. What data are used to determine IEP eligibility?
5. What determines student placement and accommodations?
6. Who are responsible for implementing these accommodations and modifications?
7. What is the role of the parent in the IEP process?
8. What is the next step after the IEP is written, approved, and signed by the IEP team?
9. What are the parental rights?
10. Are you interested in training to understand the IEP process?

Appendix M: Sample Interest Form

1. Does your child have an IEP?
2. Would you like assistance preparing for your next IEP meeting?
3. Would you attend Special Education information session as part of Back-to-School Night?
4. Is there a topic you would like discussed during these sessions?
5. Do you prefer virtual or in-person sessions?

Appendix N: Sample Webinars

The Center for Parent Information and Resources hosts a website of archived webinars to communicate information (<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/webinars/>). A few of these webinars are listed as follows.

Return to School: Child Find and Early Intervention Services

(<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/return-to-school-partc-webinar2022/>)

Return to School: Development and Implementation of IEPs

(<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/webinar-doe-iep-oct2021/>)

Updated Training Modules on the IEP and IDEA

(<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/webinar-training-modules-on-iep-idea/>)

Appendix O: Sample School/Community Engagement Policy

Brown Elementary pledges to offer parents and family members various opportunities to be involved.

We will aim to communicate through various means to include:

Individual and group phone calls, Virtual Learning Technology Platforms, Campus website, Students planners and weekly take-home folders, Parent Conferences (virtual/ or by appointment) Fliers and letters, Email, Online grades, and Teacher monthly newsletters/weekly updates

We'll do our best to assist you.

Parents may attend and participate in the Parent Advisory Council. Contact the Special Programs Department at (<https://tx.schoolwires.net/Page/2862>).

Appendix P: Working Group Outline

Goal: Improve Parents' Knowledge of the IEP Process through Working Group Implementation

Objectives: Clarify IEP Eligibility Processes, Streamline IEP Processes, Special Education Training

Introduce: Leadership must provide a brief overview of the training objectives and timelines

Promote: Coordinate with strategic communications team to promote training, create a shared training calendar, and consider an incentive or reward

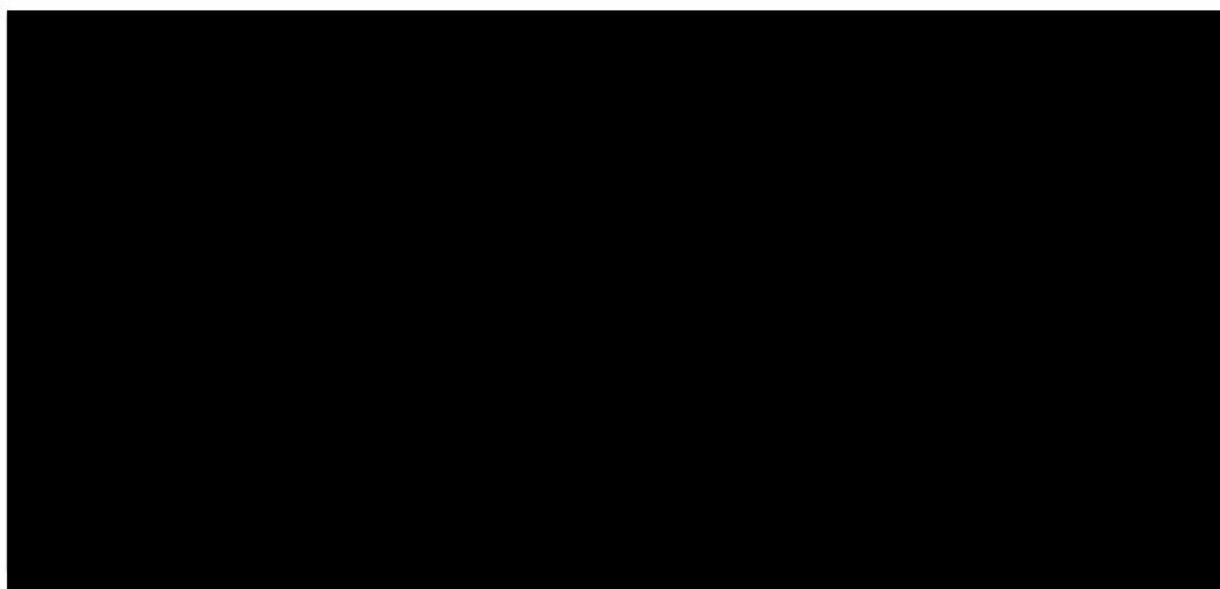
Facilitate: Choose training platforms; parent support groups or buddy systems; Back-to-School Nights, School Parent and Family Engagement Policy

Evaluate Training Effectiveness:

Kirkpatrick Taxonomy is one of the most widely used methods for evaluating the effectiveness of corporate training programs.

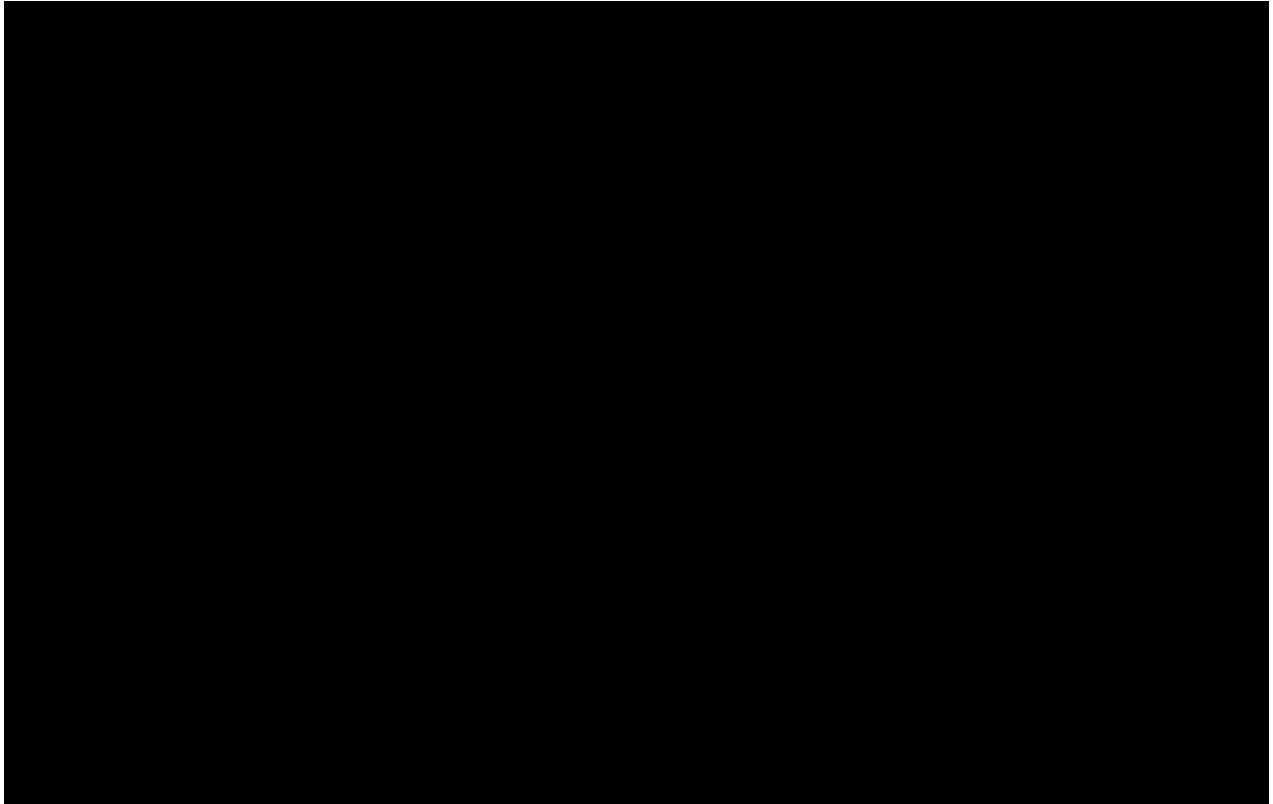
Developed and designed by Don Kirkpatrick, the framework offers a comprehensive four-level strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of any training course or program.

The four levels used in this are –



Source: <https://kitaboo.com/training-evaluation-evaluate-training-effectiveness-impact/>

Appendix Q: Digital Brochure



Websites

Have questions about special education services in Texas? SPEDTex can help! Visit this website for information and resources that can help you understand your child's disability, your rights and responsibilities under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (<https://www.spedtex.org/>).

Texas Education Agency: Special Education and IEP-related questions. You can also sign up for updates and gain access to webinars and newsletters via this link (<https://tea.texas.gov/academics/special-student-populations/special-education>).

Texas Center for Learning Disabilities: Texas Center for Learning Disabilities is a grant-funded research center developed to investigate the classification, early intervention, remediation of learning disabilities in K-12 students (<https://www.texasldcenter.org/>).

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs provides training for parents through the nationwide Parent Training and Information Centers and Community Parent Resource Centers at <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/the-parent-center-network/>.

Appendix R: Sample Text Messages

Did the information or support you received at the training help you work with the school to address a critical need related to your child's education?

Did the information or support you received increase your ability to access services for your child?

Has information or support helped you to communicate more effectively with professionals or work with the school?

Has your child received more appropriate services because you were able to put into use the information you learned at the training?

My child has received more appropriate services because I have used the information I learned at the training. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

These text message ideas and more can be found at <http://www.parentcentersurveyhub.org/>