

**PARENTS' VIEWS OF AND PARTICIPATION
IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS**

by

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(ABSTRACT)

Parents' views of and participation in the special education process are important in light of parents' expanded membership in all decision making groups, specifically those that make eligibility and placement decisions guaranteed by The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA '97). The purpose of this study was to understand how parents view the special education process and their participation from their child's referral to eligibility determination. Furthermore, this study sought to determine how parents' understanding and participation in the special education process could be enhanced.

Nine parents' journeys through the special education referral and evaluation process were chronicled through pre-and post-eligibility parent interviews and observations of eligibility meetings. This data was contextualized through educator post-eligibility interviews to determine representativeness of parents' participation and meeting characteristics.

Individual and cross case analyses were used to analyze data. Findings indicate that little has changed in the past 25 years in the day-to-day implementation of the special education evaluation process. That is, parents know little of the process and participate minimally. Furthermore, parents express feelings about their child and the process that indicate that they care deeply and feel a vested interest in outcomes. However, parents express a need for greater understanding and participation in the process. A model for the effective implementation of the special education process is offered.

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My intention is to be brief (which I have been accurately accused of not being able to do on more than one occasion). Those who were instrumental in helping me throughout this process deserve more than I can express in a few lines. Hopefully, they know the depth of my sincere appreciation.

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CHAPTER 1

An examination of parents' views of and their participation in the special education process is timely in light of the recently amended and re-authorized legislation, Public Law 105-17, otherwise known as the "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments" (IDEA '97). This important legislation expands parents' roles and their right to participate in decision-making groups throughout the special education process. Specifically, parents gained the right to "participate in meetings with respect to the identification, evaluation, and educational placement of the child and the provision of FAPE (free and appropriate public education) to the child" (Federal Register, p. 12448). IDEA '97 also assures that parents are "members of *any group* (emphasis added) that makes decisions on the educational placement of their child" (Federal Register, p. 12448). Prior to IDEA '97, federal legislation only guaranteed parents a role in individualized educational program (IEP) planning. This chapter reviews and critiques literature related to parents' perceptions of their participation in the special education process and offers considerations for future research.

The topic of parents' views of and their participation in the special education process is important. First, while IDEA '97 assures and further expands parents' right to participate in decision-making groups, it does not address how meaningful participation can be achieved. In other words, schools can be in compliance without having parent participation. Examining parents' views could yield many types of useful information that may help local education agencies (LEAs) in developing policies and practices that encourage and assist parents to participate meaningfully.

Second, states concede that parent participation is still an important issue with which they struggle. The Federal Resource Center for Special Education Academy for Educational Development recently released their document *Synthesis of State Needs Identified by State Education Agencies in the 1998 State Improvement Grant Applications* (1999). This publication synthesizes findings from states' applications for the 1998 federally funded State Improvement Grants. Of the 17 states whose applications were chosen for funding, 70% indicated some type of major problem or barrier associated with parent involvement, and 29% of those indicated specific problems associated with the special education process. Examples include "poor parent participation in the IEP process" (Michigan) and "parents feeling alienated in the process of eligibility determination and IEP development" (Idaho) to "parents' perception that they are not equal partners in decision making process" (Missouri) and "and the lack of parity with professionals" (Virginia). Obviously, even after 25 years of parental participation in the special education process, states are still perplexed over how to achieve meaningful parent participation.

Given these highlighted reasons, it seems more important than ever to assess parents' views of and their participation in the special education process.

Situating Parent Participation in Special Education: Examining Parent Participation in K-12 General Education

"Special education is not an island. It is merely a subsystem within the larger system of public education" (Skrtic, p. 445).

The expectation of increased parent participation is present in both general and special education. A national priority in general education toward greater parent participation was precipitated by major educational legislation, the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* and the 1994 reauthorized *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* (Baker & Soden, 1997). For instance, a requirement for schools' eligibility for federal Title I, ESEA money is that schools form "compacts" with families, agreements where both parties take responsibility for children's learning. Likewise, federal legislation passed over the past 25 years has insured parent participation in the special education process. I will discuss this participation in the next section, "Special Education and Parent Participation."

Figure 1 is a chart that provides a visual representation of how general and special education parents of children may participate in K-12 settings. This figure is based on a study conducted by Joyce Epstein (1987) on types of parent involvement. She and her colleagues surveyed over 3700 elementary school teachers and their principals in 600 schools in Maryland. In addition, they surveyed over 1200 parents and conducted in-depth interviews with 82 teachers in order to characterize parents' involvement at home and in schools. The results indicated that parents and teachers both view parents in traditional roles: to be providers at home and supporters of education both at home and school.

Represented in italics to the far right in Figure 1 are additional opportunities guaranteed by special education legislation, which pertain to a smaller subgroup of parents whose children are in the special education evaluation process or who have been found eligible to receive services. Since approximately 12% of children in kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) receive special education services (National Center for Education Statistics), then we can estimate this subgroup of parents at 13% of the total K-12 parent group. This participation squarely places parents as members of decision-making teams that determine eligibility, educational programming and placement for their children. It is critical to understand that these rights guaranteeing parent participation in decision-making elevate parents to the status of *equal partner* in decision making. Furthermore, these rights far surpass any decision-making roles for parents in general education.

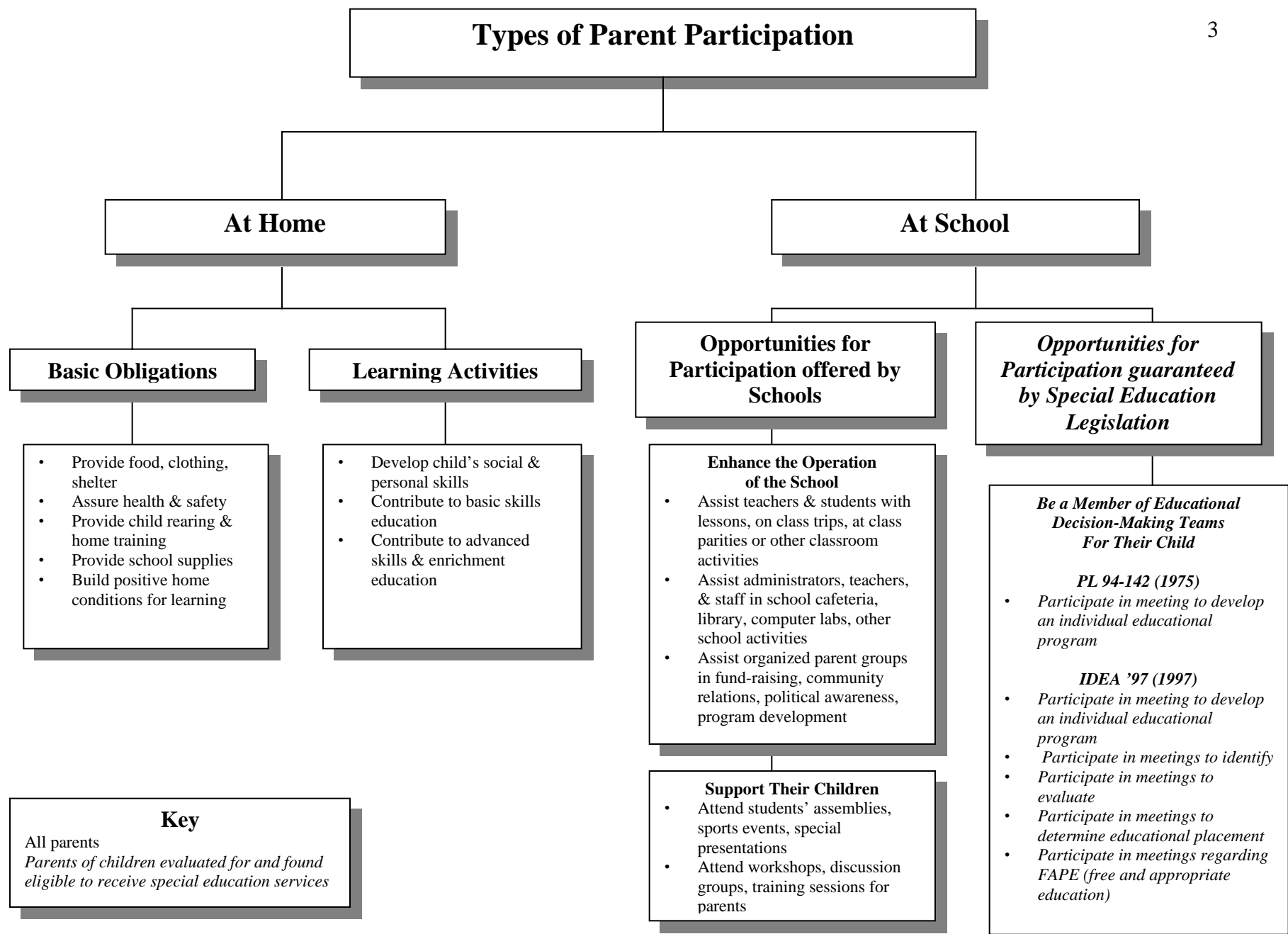


Figure 1. Types of participation for parents of children in K-12 settings.
[Based on results of study by Epstein (1987) & Federal Legislation]

Special Education and Parental Participation

Parents of children with disabilities played an important role in bringing about changes that guaranteed their children a place in public education. Likewise, legislators who passed the landmark special education law, Public Law 94-142, recognized the importance of incorporating parent participation into the special education process. A brief review of parent participation as addressed by special education legislation for the past 25 years can provide a framework for understanding how parents' role in decision making has evolved and expanded.

Parents' Role in Influencing Special Education Legislation

Historically, parents of children with disabilities have been instrumental in influencing changes that led to legislative bills that addressed equal educational opportunities for their children. Typically parents banded together in groups to bring about these changes. The first such parent group came together in 1933 in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. The group, known as the Cuyahoga County Ohio Council for the Retarded Child, was composed of five mothers of children with mental retardation who came together to support each other, work for change, and protest their children's exclusion from public school (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998). The group's protest led to the establishment of a special class for their children, even though the parents themselves sponsored the class.

Almost four decades later, in the early 1970s, two particular events occurred, initiated by parents and parent groups. In 1972, a parental advocacy group, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children, along with parents of children with mild to severe disabilities, sued the state and won their case to establish a free appropriate education for all children with mental retardation between the ages of 6 and 21 in Pennsylvania (*Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*).

About the same time parents and guardians of a small group of children with disabilities brought a class action suit against the District of Columbia Board of Education (*Mills v. Board of Education*). The suit, brought on behalf of over 18,000 children in the District, was based on the Fourteenth Amendment and claimed that children with disabilities were excluded from public education without due process of law. The court ruled in favor of the claimants and ordered that the District provide all students with disabilities a public education and due process safeguards (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998).

Enormous parental influence and advocacy efforts have also been instrumental in the recognition and inclusion of new disability categories into federal legislation. For example, "specific learning disabilities" was recognized and added as a new disability category in The *Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975*. Parent advocacy efforts that helped bring about the addition of this category began twelve years earlier when parents first joined forces at a national conference held in Chicago in 1963. There they formed the *Association for Children with Learning Disabilities*. Another critical event occurred at the conference. Samuel Kirk, the conference speaker, first used the term

“learning disabilities” which parents received enthusiastically. These two events represent the official beginning of the learning disabilities movement (Mercer, 1994).

Clearly, parental advocacy on children’s behalf was instrumental in creating an atmosphere conducive to the passage of special education legislation.

Special Education Law, 1975-Present and Parent Participation

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA) [Public Law (P.L.) 94-142]

This legislation was signed into law on November 29, 1975 and as Smith (1990) so aptly puts, “Succinctly, the EAHCA was intended to provide administrators with proof of compliance, teachers with formalized plans, parents with a voice, and students with an appropriate education” (p. 6). In other words, children with disabilities, regardless of the severity of their disability, were guaranteed a free appropriate public education designed to meet their unique educational needs. Along with assurances of nondiscriminatory evaluation, individualized educational planning, and education in the least restrictive environment, *P. L. 94-142* was landmark legislation because it “...resulted in an increase in the rights of the child and his parents and concomitant eroding of the school’s authority in making placement decisions” (Yoshida & Gottlieb, p. 17). Several parent rights were guaranteed. Parents gained the right to participate in the process of evaluating their children and the development of their individualized education program (IEP). Parents were extended the right to give or refuse permission for their children’s initial evaluation and placement, and they gained the right to access their children’s school records. Finally, parents were accorded the right to procedural due process, a mechanism for recourse when they were not in agreement with the local education agency (LEA).

Congress’s inclusion of parent participation provisions in *P. L. 94-142* was radical and deliberate. No legislation prior to *P. L. 92-142* gave parents such sweeping rights to participation, enforceable by law. A review of the published legislative history of *P. L. 94-142* by Turnbull, Turnbull, and Wheat (1982) led the authors to reason that Congress’s rationale for legislating parent participation was two-fold. First, Congress viewed parent participation as helpful to children with disabilities and their parents and schools. Parents and schools working together collaboratively on behalf of children was good professional practice. The authors also felt that Congress believed parents could make no assumptions about the education of their disabled children, that schools had a history of being untrustworthy and that parents needed a way to safeguard their child’s interests.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997

This most recent legislation to address students with disabilities amends and re-authorizes *IDEA*. Specifically, one area of significant change was in parent participation. Parents’ right to be involved in decision making was significantly expanded.

The Congressional Committee Reports on the *IDEA Amendments of 1997* express the view that the Amendments provide an opportunity for strengthening the role of the parents, and emphasize that one of the purposes of the Amendments is to

expand opportunities for parents and key public staff (e.g., special education, related services, regular education, and early intervention service providers, and other personnel) to work in new partnerships at both the State and local levels” (Federal Register, March 12, 1999, p. 12472).

IDEA ‘97 requires that parents have the opportunity to participate in *all* meetings concerning the identification, evaluation, and educational placement of their children. This means that parents are invited members of groups that make decisions about data collection and groups that determine their child’s eligibility for special education services. Congress’s move to extend parents right to participate in decision making that previously had been exclusively the domain of schools is a powerful message about what they envision the value of parent participation to be, that of a reciprocal partner.

Prior to IDEA ‘97, parents were only guaranteed to be part of the group that developed their child’s IEP. However, with IDEA ‘97 Congress further strengthened and specified parents’ role in their child’s IEP, too.

The parents of a child with a disability are expected to be *equal participants* (emphasis added) along with school personnel, in developing, reviewing, and revising the IEP for their child. This is an active role in which parents (1) provide critical information regarding the strengths of their child and express their concerns for enhancing the education of their child: (2) participate in the discussions about the child’s need for special education and related services and supplementary aids and services: and (3) join with the other participants in deciding how the child will be involved and progress in the general curriculum and participate in State and district-wide assessments, and what services the agency will provide to the child and in what setting. (Federal Register, p. 12473).

IDEA ‘97 goes so far to say that parents’ specific concerns and information they bring to the IEP meeting must be considered by the IEP team as it develops and reviews the child’s IEP. Clearly, Congress envisions parents as equal partners in decision making. By specifying parents’ role in IEP development and extending rights to parents to participate in additional decision making groups in IDEA ‘97, Congress has set the standard and has institutionalized the value of parent participating as equal partners in the special education process.

Purpose and Overview

The primary purpose of the literature review for this chapter was to review and critically examine existing research on parents’ views of and their participation in the special education process. Specifically, this review: (a) provided a conceptual framework for dimensions of parent participation in the special education process and the variables associated with them, (b) analyzed the existing literature base of parents’ views of and their participation in the special education process, (c) described conceptual and methodological considerations, and (d) discussed needs for future research.

In order to conduct this review, computer searches were completed of ERIC, Psychological Abstracts, and Dissertation Abstracts International. References located within articles, book chapters, and dissertations provided additional resources. The parameters for studies included in this review were those from 1978 to 2000 that:

- were conducted with parents of children in grades K-12 whose disability categories included, but were not limited to, specific learning disability (SLD), emotional disturbance (ED), or mild mental retardation (MMR);
- examined parents' views or researchers' observations of parent participation; and
- focused on part or all the special education process, from referral to initiation of special education services.

The rationale for focusing on studies that included children with the previously mentioned disability labels was twofold. First, these were "high incidence" categories of special education for which most eligible children were identified. Second, these "high incidence" categories were also "high judgment". That is, some disabling conditions, such as a visual or a hearing impairment, were evident or could be determined through a single examination that determined the extent of the disabling condition. In other words, the condition did not require extensive discussion to determine if the child met the disability criteria. Other disabilities, however, such as a specific learning disability, required both a thorough evaluation of several aspects of the child's functioning and review of the data to determine if the child met eligibility criteria. These decisions involved a high amount of judgment among the team, rather than a reliance on a single instrument.

Studies that exclusively examined perceptions of parents of pre-school children were excluded. First, the focus of this review was parents of school-age children. Second, many children were identified in the birth through age 5 group who had significant congenital disabilities that were apparent early on, and therefore, did not involve high judgement. In addition, a significant body of studies existed for parents' participation in the special education process for the birth through age 5 population.

Finally, studies that focused exclusively on parents' perceptions of their child's special education program, not the identification and placement process, were excluded from this review.

Defining Parent Participation

"Parent participation" was not universally defined. There were different terms and meanings that appeared in the literature that provide information on this topic. This section details the search terms used in the literature review.

The goal of the literature search was to identify literature that addresses parents' perception of their participation in the special education process. Parent participation was the primary area of the search; therefore, *parent participation* was used as the primary search term. However, in order to capture all literature that may address parent participation, other terms such as *parent involvement*, *parent role* and *parent decision making* were searched and yielded studies that also addressed the topic. From there, *parent understanding*, *parent views*, *parent perception*, *parent comprehension*, and *parent satisfaction* were added to the search terms and the literature was reduced to include only those studies of participation from parents' perspective or from researchers' perspective.

The second area of search related to the term that encompasses a specified time span which included several activities, *the special education process*. The primary search

term used in combination with *parent participation* and its related terms was *special education process*. Other terms used to locate relevant studies to *special education process* were *referral, assessment, evaluation, eligibility, individualized education program* and *IEP*.

Studies Included for Review

The 21 studies included in this review and their descriptions are located in Table 1. The limited number of studies of parents' perceptions of the special education process was surprising given the fact that parent participation was an important guiding principle of P. L. 94-142, passed 25 years ago. The information in this table includes: (a) the purpose(s) of the study, (b) how parent participation is defined, (c) methodology and sample, and (d) results.

An analysis of the studies in Table 1 revealed that researchers used a variety of methodological approaches when examining parents' perception of their participation in the special education process. Most research was conducted using survey/questionnaire methodology exclusively (Horner, 1986; Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992; Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981; Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984; O'Brien, 1987; Romero, 1989; Scalon, Arick, & Phelps, 1981; Wiener & Kohler, 1986; Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984; Weddig, 1984). Other studies used interviews (Caines, 1998; Denton, 1983; Lynch & Stein, 1987; Lynch & Stein, 1982; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). One study used observations exclusively (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 1982), while others used observations in combination with interviews/questionnaires (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Harry, 1992; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988).

Researchers also examined different aspects of parents' perception of the special education process including parents' involvement (Horner, 1986; Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992; Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981; Scalon, Arick, & Phelps, 1981), variables concerning parent involvement in and attitude toward their child's special education process (O'Brien, 1987; Romero, 1989; Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984), and parents' ability to understand written reports used in special education decision making (Weddig, 1984; Wiener & Kohler, 1986).

Parent participation was defined and examined in the literature from a quantitative perspective, such as numbers or kinds of parent comments made during a meeting, (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 1982) or level of parent attendance at meetings (Scanlon, Arick, & Phelps, 1981) as well as from a qualitative perspective, such as parents' role in the special education process (Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981). Others examined parent participation from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective (Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988).

Researchers examined parents' participation at different points throughout the special education process. However, most studies addressed parents' participation primarily during the IEP process and meeting (Goldstein, Strickland, & Turnbull, 1980; Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992; Lynch & Stein, 1987; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982; Scanlon, Arick, & Phelps, 1981; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988; Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984). This is understandable since prior to the passage of the IDEA Amendments

of 1997, parents' primary participatory role in decision making afforded them by PL 94-142 was in the development of their child's individualized education program.

Some researchers examined parents' participation in a broader range of activities than just the IEP development and meeting. These studies examined parents' perceptions of the special education system and their involvement in decision making on behalf of their child throughout the special education process, including their educational program (Caines, 1998; Harry, 1982; Horner, 1996; Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981; Lynch & Stein, 1987; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Mitchell, 1982; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996).

A small group of studies investigated parents' understanding of information that came from written psychological reports (Wedding, 1984; Wiener & Kohler, 1986) or an oral summation of written psychological reports (Zake & Wendt, 1991). These are important studies to the topic of parent participation since written reports are used at eligibility and IEP meetings.

One ethnographic study of how schools classify students provided an in-depth examination of the decision-making of eligibility teams and parents' involvement in that decision-making (Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986).

No studies were found that examined parent participation in identification, evaluation, and educational placement decision making for children K-12. This is understandable given parents were not guaranteed membership in teams that make these decisions until the recent passage of IDEA '97.

TABLE 1

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS

Author/Year	Study purpose(s)	Definition of parent participation	Methodology/Sample	Results
Caines (1998-dissertation)	To discover how parents experience the IEP process	Parent involvement in the IEP process (initial contact with the school, IEP meeting and plan development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the IEP)	In depth semi-structured open ended interviews (original and followup);4 parents of children with mental disabilities	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents indicated barriers to parent participation in the IEP process existed and included: • Issues related to attitudes of school system personnel toward the child and the parents • Issues related to trust and respect for these individuals • Issues related teacher professionalism • Issues related to ownership with respect to the child's program
Denton (1983-dissertation)	To examine 4 aspects of parents' experience within the special education process	Parents' memories, feelings, concerns and recommendations for change, & changes they experienced in interpersonal relationships and their own self-concept as a result of their experiences in the process during the referral period, at the IEP meeting, and during the program	Semi-structured interviews; 20 parents representing 19 families(19 mothers, 1 father) of children with learning disabilities or severe language impairments (who had been receiving services from three or more years to within 6 months of the interview) from 7 school divisions in Michigan, ranging from lower middle to upper middle SES	<p><i>Selected Major Findings:</i></p> <p>Using within-subject assessment & between-subject assessment it appeared:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents most vivid memories were of the IEP meeting (in this state the eligibility determination and IEP development occurred at the same meeting) • High intensity feelings, whether positive or negative, were reported equally often for the referral and meeting • Parents made more suggestions for improvement, or stated concerns about the referral process—recommendations for the IEP process were at an intermediate level • Parents reported more negative & anxious feelings about the referral and IEP meeting & positive feelings about the program • Parents recommendations included providing: • more information (about law, certification, & program options), • understandable forms (reported trouble reading forms, understanding educational jargon, & understanding informational pamphlets) • quicker action in initiating the referral and assessment • 50% of parents reported being given misinformation during the referral process • Half the parents reported the IEP meeting was not what they thought it would be (COMMUNICATION ISSUE) • Only 30% of participants reported taking part in the eligibility decision (certification) and IEP programming
Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry (1980)	To determine frequency of parent involvement in IEP conferences and topics discussed To determine participants' satisfaction with IEP conference	Involvement in the IEP conference	Observed 14 IEP conferences & administered questionnaires to participants; 14 parents in North Carolina of children labeled MR or SLD	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both parents attended none, generally the mother attended • Resource teachers spoke twice as much as parents • Parents were primary recipients of comments (63%) • Topics ranked from curriculum (3.6%), behavior (2.5%), and performance (2.4%) to future contact (.1%) and future plans (-). • All participants were satisfied with conference; no significant differences between groups <p><i>Factors that Limit Parent Participation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IEPs prepared prior to meeting • IEPs reviewed by resource teacher, others members not participating • Scheduling of meetings at times not convenient for parents • Back to back meetings that imposed time limits

<p>Harry (1992)</p>	<p>To determine the ways parents of minority students perceive the special education system, especially their views of the process by which their children are labeled “disabled” (particular to this review: To what extent do parents participate and wish to participate in decisions regarding special education for their children? What factors facilitate or obstruct parents’ effective participation?)</p>	<p>Involvement in decision making</p>	<p>Minimum of 3 unstructured interviews with participants, observations of school-based and community events, and review of student records, “triangulation” of data by interviewing certain school personnel; 12 Hispanic mothers and 4 fathers of school age children with labels of “mentally retarded” and “learning disabled”, participant selection based on social workers’ input</p>	<p><i>Selected Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents showed a considerable amount of deference to school authority • Many parents found it difficult to disagree openly with professionals because of their perceived status • Overall, parents felt they had little control over decision making • Parents did not understand that particular terms stood for specific events and activities that were established procedure in special education process • Parents felt overwhelmed by the large amount of written communication used in the various procedures of special education and viewed letters as powerful messages coming from an unseen and unnamed “them” <p><i>Factors that Limit Parent Participation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written communication to parents from the school often was unclear due to educational jargon and the inadequate informational and experiential base of parents and because of a need for a more personalized mode of communication • Many of the parents did not believe they had real power and responded by withdrawing as a kind of passive resistance show of disapproval (e.g., not attending meetings or returning forms they were supposed to return) <p><i>Factors that Promote Parent Participation in Meetings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tone of absolute support for the student (including their cultural identity) • Atmosphere of absolute respect for the parent (including their cultural identity)
<p>Horner (1986-Dissertation)</p>	<p>To determine staff and parent ratings of current and preferred involvement of parents in special education</p>	<p>Involvement in decision making, communication, & activities</p>	<p>Questionnaires; random sample of 1,270 subjects (501 parents of children receiving special education, 235 educators with non-special- education assignments, & 534 special educators) within a large metropolitan school district</p>	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents preferred a significantly greater level of involvement in decision making, activities, and frequency of communication than they currently experience • Children’s age, type of placement in special education, or family income level were not factors in parents’ preference for involvement • Educators also preferred a significantly higher level of involvement for most parents in activities than did parents • Greater levels of parent education (college degrees) had a slight effect on preferences for a greater role in decision making and participation in parent activities
<p>Katsiyannis & Ward (1992)</p>	<p>To examine school division compliance with the state of Virginia and federal regulations</p>	<p>Role in decision making, especially in IEP development</p>	<p>State administrative review summaries of parent surveys and summaries of noncompliance citations for 1985-1989; One review cycle for 130 school divisions (5 divisions were missing) including 10,662 parent surveys.</p>	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through parent surveys, they indicated greatest problem was with transmitting and explaining their rights • 10.5% indicated they did not get a written copy of their rights • 13.3% did not get an explanation of their rights • 17.5% were not told they could get outside testing if they did not agree with test results • 16.1% were not told what to do if they disagreed with their child’s program • 19.8% did not attend the IEP meeting • 10.4% reported they did not get a copy of the IEP <p><i>Factors that Limit Parent Participation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7% were not invited in time to make arrangements • 5% were not invited

Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs (1981)	To understand parents' positions on the roles they currently have and the roles they would like to have in the decision process	Roles in decision making related to: discipline, proper class placement, evaluation of child's abilities, types of records that should be kept, grouping for instruction within the classroom, medical services, transportation, provision of special resources, & transfer to another school	Questionnaire; 170 parents of children in self-contained and resource classes, randomly selected from 8 elementary schools in a middle class suburban district	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most parents currently found themselves in the role of giving and receiving information; the role of no involvement was second; and the role of having decision making control third • 50% or more of all parents wished to continue in an informational role for 6 of the 9 issues-however, 3 areas emerged where parents wanted more control over decisions—the kind of records that should be kept about their child, medical services for the child, and transferring the child to another school
Lynch & Stein (1987)	To determine Hispanic parents' satisfaction and participation in their child's special education program & to compare their participation with African-American and Anglo families	Participation in the development of the IEP & opportunities to participation in their child's educational program	Semi-structured interview in Spanish; 213 Mexican-American families randomly chosen for subject pool, 63 interviewed (compared results with a previous study of African-American and Anglo families)	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <p><i>Hispanics:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 55% knew services listed on IEP • 50% felt their children were receiving all those services • 80% felt district identified their children as early as possible; 85% were satisfied with time taken to provide services • 97% rated professional effective who worked with their child • 45% indicated they were part of the assessment process • 50% felt they were not active participants in the IEP development • 34% offered suggestions during the IEP meeting • Less than 50% felt they & the teacher could work together on the IEP goals and objectives <p><i>All:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 82% of parents had no response when asked what the school could do to solve the problem of parent participation in their child's special education program • Hispanic parents felt significantly less involved in the assessment process than Anglos, but not significantly less than Afro-Americans • Hispanics offered significantly fewer suggestions at IEP meetings than Anglos, but not significantly than Afro-Americans <p><i>Factors that Limit Parent Participation in Meetings: (across ethnic & income groups)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work • Time conflicts • Transportation • Child care needs

<p>Lynch & Stein (1987)</p>	<p>To determine Hispanic parents' satisfaction and participation in their child's special education program & to compare their participation with African-American and Anglo families</p>	<p>Participation in the development of the IEP & opportunities to participation in their child's educational program</p>	<p>Semi-structured interview in Spanish; 213 Mexican-American families randomly chosen for subject pool, 63 interviewed (compared results with a previous study of African-American and Anglo families)</p>	<p><i>Factors that Promote Parent Participation in Meetings:</i> <i>Hispanic (rank ordered)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent education (95%) • Small group meetings or one-to-one situations (74%) • Hold bilingual meetings • Select convenient times for parents • Provide transportation • Provide more advance notice of meetings • Provide child care <p><i>Other (rank ordered)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjects that pertain to their children • More interesting subjects or speakers • Personal calls & notes about meetings • More advanced notice of meetings <p><i>Factors that Limit Parent Participation in Their Child's Special Education Program:</i> <i>Hispanic (Rank ordered)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work • Nothing • No bilingual communication • General communication concerns/problems
<p>Lynch & Stein (1982)</p>	<p>To determine parents' participation and attitude toward their child's special education program</p> <p>To determine how parents' perceived participation in planning varies by child's age, ethnicity program placement and SES</p>	<p>Participation in IEP process</p>	<p>In-home interviews using a 64-item questionnaire; random sample of 400 families selected from a school district in California</p>	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 71% parents felt actively involved in IEP development <i>expressed as:</i> Expressed opinion/made suggestion (14.6%) Worked with, helped, & trusted the professional who set up the program and goals (11.2%) Listened & agreed to teacher recommendations (7.5%) Understood everything because it was explained clearly and in detail (6.3%) • 47% indicated they offered a suggestion at the IEP meeting • 92% said they signed and received a copy of the IEP • Caucasian parents were significantly more aware of services listed on their child's IEP than Afro-American and Hispanic parents • Parents of children with physical disabilities and parents of 13 & 14 year old children reported significantly less participation in the IEP meeting than parents of children in other age and disability categories
<p>McKinney & Hocutt (1982)</p>	<p>To determine the nature and extent of involvement of parents of students with LD compared to that of average achievers (non-LD) who were placed in the same mainstream classroom</p> <p>To describe the involvement of parents of children with LD in the development and implementation of their child's special education program</p>	<p>Participation in IEP development & implementation</p>	<p>Self-administered Likert-like Parent Involvement Questionnaire and Interviews; 32 parents of elementary school age children with learning disabilities within 4 school divisions that primarily urban city, a mixed suburban county, a rural county, and academic community</p>	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 43% said they did not fully participate in the IEP development • 31% indicated they helped write the IEP; however, only 16% of these parents could specify their contribution • 1/4 of parents could not recall the IEP document itself <p><i>Factors that Limit Parent Participation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no evidence to suggest that negative attitudes or parent dissatisfaction with the school were barriers to either quantity or quality of participation

Mehan, Hertwick, & Meihls (1986)	To examine how schools classify students and provide educational opportunities to them based on this classification	Participation of parents in the decision-making of the Eligibility and Placement Committee	Ethnography study-observations, videotapes of eligibility/ placement committee-meetings, open-ended, Q & A format interviews with committee members, review of documents used in and produced during the meeting; 53 E & P meetings ('78-'79 school year)	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports of (professionals)psychologist & nurse were presented, without question or challenge, by people in high-status positions in a single, uninterrupted report using a standard format (summary of results of tests and her interpretation and based on educational tests) of indirect observations (though guided or structured), with claims based on technical knowledge and expertise • Reports of lay persons (mothers & classroom teachers) were presented by people in low-status or temporary positions, elicited by other committee members in response to questions, constantly interrupted with requests for more information or clarifications, based on first-hand observations and common-sense knowledge • There was a correlation between topic of discussion & speaker; academic information was the domain of psychologists, teachers, and nurses; emotions and feelings were the domain of parents and classroom teachers
O'Brien (1987-dissertation)	To determine if there is a significant relationship between variables concerning parent involvement in and satisfaction with IEP development	Participation in the IEP development	Self-administered Questionnaire;168 parents of children with disabilities (all disabilities, but mostly LD and speech/language impairment) ranging from preschool to high school age , in a rural school district in Maryland	<p><i>Selected Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Perceived attitude of school personnel" was the most significant factor in contributing to "parent involvement" and "parent satisfaction" levels • A significant positive relationship was found between "information level" and "parent involvement level" • Parents indicated they wanted to help school staff prepare their child's IEP (M=4.3, range 1-5)
Romero (1989-dissertation)	Selected Purpose: To determine the relationships between participation and parental knowledge and satisfaction with special education programs and services	Participation in decision-making during events of referral, assessment, placement, development of an IEP, and annual review	53-item, structured and open ended questionnaire (Parent Participation Questionnaire- PPQ);58 Puerto Rican parents (low SES) in the South Bronx of elementary school age children with mild to moderate disabilities who had been enrolled in special education programs for 1 or more years	<p><i>Selected Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was significant relationship between parental participation and parental knowledge • There was no significant relationship between parental participation and parental satisfaction • There was no significant relationship between parental knowledge and parental satisfaction
Scanlon, Arick, & Phelps (1981)	To determine the degree to which committee members were active in developing IEPs	Attendance at IEP conferences	Multiple choice parent questionnaire; 168 parents of school age disabled children living in Oregon, ranging in age from 10 to 17+, disabilities of EMR, TMR, ED, D/B, PH, and LD	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special education teachers and parents were those who most frequently attended (75%) at least one IEP conference • Mothers attended 2 IEP conferences at a rate of over 50% versus fathers, over 10% • Mothers of children with ED label were attended IEP conferences at a lower rate (77.7% of the time) than mothers of children with all other disabilities (99%)
Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky (1988)	To determine if parents had assumed an active role in the IEP process and to ascertain their perceptions regarding the process	Participation in the IEP process	Observations of initial placement/IEP conferences and post meeting interviews; parents of 26 elementary students suspected of having learning disabilities	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mean conference length was 42 minutes • 69% of parents felt positive and appreciative about the placement/IEP meeting while 23% felt nervous and cautious and 8% felt confused or overwhelmed • 65% of parents indicated that they had no questions & felt all there questions had been answered • Parents spent on average 8.3% of time initiating comments, 5.6% making responses, and .9% asking questions • The number of participants in the conference was not correlated with parent participation • No parents indicated that they perceived that the school desired parents to be a decision maker when asked to give their perception of the school's goals for them-more than 1/3 of parents indicated "help child at home", and 19% indicated "keep in touch to sign forms and attend meetings"

Weddig (1984)	<p>To determine the reading levels of traditional psychoeducational reports</p> <p>To evaluate the effectiveness of adapting psychoeducational reports to facilitate parental interpretation</p>	Understanding of psychological reports so they may participate in the decision-making process to determine appropriate educational services for their child	<p><i>Step 1:</i> Selection of a single psychoeducational report of a random sample of 50 (from a special education cooperative serving 29 school divisions in Illinois) written at the median reading level of the sample (written at the 15th grade level)</p> <p><i>Step 2:</i> Modifications to the report (6th grade reading level, shorten report by 1/2 of the original length with same coverage, replace educational & psychological terms with behavioral descriptors, and elimination of information that is irrelevant for making educational placement)</p> <p><i>Step 3:</i> Design of a 19-item multiple choice instrument to objectively test parents' interpretation (Reliability coefficient using KR formula for original report, $r = .59$ & modified report, $r = .80$); 114 parents (of disabled and non-disabled children) in attendance at school related meetings within 6 Illinois communities</p>	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents reading the modified report combined over all 3 educational levels (HS, some college, college degree) were more accurate in their interpretation than parents reading the traditional report Parents completing higher levels of education combined over both levels of reports were more accurate in their interpretation than parent reporting lower levels of educational attainment
Wiener & Kohler (1986)	To investigate parents' comprehension of and preferences for different report-writing format and style of written psychological reports	Understanding of psychological reports so they may participate in the decision-making process and support their children's educational programming	14 item, multiple choice questionnaire & 10-item semantical differential (coded on a 5-point scale); 45 parents (34 mothers, 11 fathers) of children (27 LD, 7 gifted, 13 developmentally disabled, 7 no disability) were randomly assigned to read a report	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In regard to comprehension, there was no significant difference between "Psychological Report" and "Q & A", but these two formats differed significantly from "Short Form" (lower comprehension scores) Parents tended to prefer the "Q & A" over the "Short Form" but "Psychological Report" did not differ significantly from "Short Form" or "Q & A" No significant main effects or interactions were found for sex of parents for comparing their preferences and comprehension; however, a significant main effect for education was found for comprehension—those who attended college or had a university degree obtained higher comprehension scores than those with only a high school diploma No significant main effect for education was found for the preferences scores Parents comprehend better reports that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> organize information by functional domain describe strengths and problems in clear behavioral terms describe the child's learning style fully state specific and elaborate program recommendations

Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith (1984)	To explore variables which influence parental attitudes toward IEP staffings	Attitudes toward IEP staffings	Likert-like survey; 243 parents in Colorado of children with emotional difficulties, hearing impairments, learning disabilities, mild retardation, moderate/severe retardation, multiple handicaps, physical handicaps, speech and language handicaps, and visual impairments	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall parental satisfaction was high (4.57 on a 6.0 point scale) • More highly educated mothers were less satisfied with staffings ($p < .05$) <p><i>Factors that Promote Parent Participation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 78% of the variance in parental satisfaction was explained by 6 factors ($R = .88$): • allowing enough time for staffing (19%) • attribution of blame to sources other than parents (in other words, they did not feel blamed for their child's problem) (18%) • input from a number of people to come up with a good educational program (16%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> amount of parental participation (7%) number of persons at staffing (3%) preparing parents for what to expect at the staffing (1%)
Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell (1982)	To determine to what extent characteristics of effective teaming were evident at placement team meetings (Specific to parents: To what extent do team members encourage or discourage parent participation?)	Participation on teams	Observations ; 34 placement team meetings (parents were at 14 meetings)	<p><i>Factors that Limit Parent Participation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles of team members were not clearly defined, no statements were made encouraging participation • Parents were never asked about their understanding of the purpose or expectations for meeting • Parental input was in the form of verification of an observed problem • Technical terms and jargon • Lack of consensus decision making <p><i>Factors that Promote Parent Participation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured meetings • Consensus decision making • Clarity of goals
Zake & Wendt (1991)	To investigate the relationship between parental recall and understanding of information given by the school psychologist at parent conferences and characteristics of parents	Parent understanding of assessment information presented at a post-assessment conference	Two Tailed Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients to determine the relationship between the independent variables (language level, assertion level, & anxiety level) and the dependent variable (the results of the "conference understanding evaluation"); 42 mothers of school aged children who were going through initial evaluation for special education or were participating in a diagnostic reading evaluation	<p><i>Major Findings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was a significant relationship between mothers' language level (as measured by the PPVT) and recall of conference information (correlational results of $.54$ ($p < .001$)) • The relationship between assertion or anxiety with recall was not significant • Marital status, race of participants and sex, and grade of the student were not significant factors when considering recall of data • Low and high SES parent groups had significant mean score differences, with the high SES group having better results
Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson (1996)	To get information from culturally diverse parents of children with developmental disabilities about their attitudes toward and experiences with the special education system	Parents attitudes, understanding, and involvement in the special education system (evaluation, IEP, placement, and program)	Semi-structured interviews; 5 Latin American families (mothers) of a low-income area in Los Angeles (3 preschool cases-excluded, 2 school-age cases-included for this review)	<p><i>Factors that Limit Parent Participation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent not informed of new diagnosis before the IEP meeting • Language barrier, in both oral and written communication • No assessment information shared with parents prior to the IEP meeting • Teacher prepared IEP prior to meeting • Lack of understanding of the purpose of the IEP • No request for parental input at the IEP meeting • IEPs that stay the same from year to year

Parents' Perceptions of Their Participation in the Special Education Process

A significant amount of what we know about parents' perceptions of their participation in the special education process comes from mothers. Ten studies identified mothers as the sole or primary source of information (Caines, 1998; Denton, 1983; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Harry, 1992; Romero, 1989; Scanlon, Arick, & Phelps, 1981; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988; Wiener & Kohler, 1986; Zake & Wendt, 1991; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). So it appears that often only one parent participates in the special education process on behalf of their child.

Two pictures emerge from this review of parents' perception of their participation in the special education process. First, clearly not all parents participate in the decision making process for their child to the extent that legislation authorizes. Second, parents' views about their participation represent a continuum of beliefs. For example, some parents wished to retain their current role as information provider (Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981) while others wished to take a more active role in the decision making for their child (Horner, 1996). Certain parents expressed satisfaction with the special education conference (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984), while others indicated that parents desired either more information to help them prepare for meetings (Denton, 1983) or parent education on special education (Lynch & Stein, 1987). The Vaughn et al. (1988) study reported that 69% of the parent participants felt positive and appreciative about their child's placement/IEP meeting. In addition, 65% indicated they had no questions about the conference and that all their questions had been answered. Yet, further interviewing revealed that parents had unresolved concerns about explaining their children's learning problem to them and the upcoming changes to their educational program. Parents also expressed concerns about explaining the outcomes of the conference to their spouse. Diversity of parents' views may be due to several factors that will be explored in this review.

Visual Organizer for Research on Parents' Perceptions and Participation in the Special Education Process

Research on parents' perceptions and participation in the special education process is presented using an organizational framework, Figure 2, Visual Organizer for Research on Parents' Perceptions and Participation in the Special Education Process. I do so with the caveat that the issue of parent participation is complex and multi-dimensional, and that variables that influence parent participation are not always so easily separated and compartmentalized.

At the top of the Figure 2 is "federal and state regulations". The regulations provide the charge of parent participation, which is the impetus for parents and educators working together during the special education process. Therefore, the arrows pointing from "federal and state regulations" to "parent-related factors" and "school-related factors" represent that both parents and educators are affected by the regulations. While there certainly are other societal, economic, and institutional factors that influence the

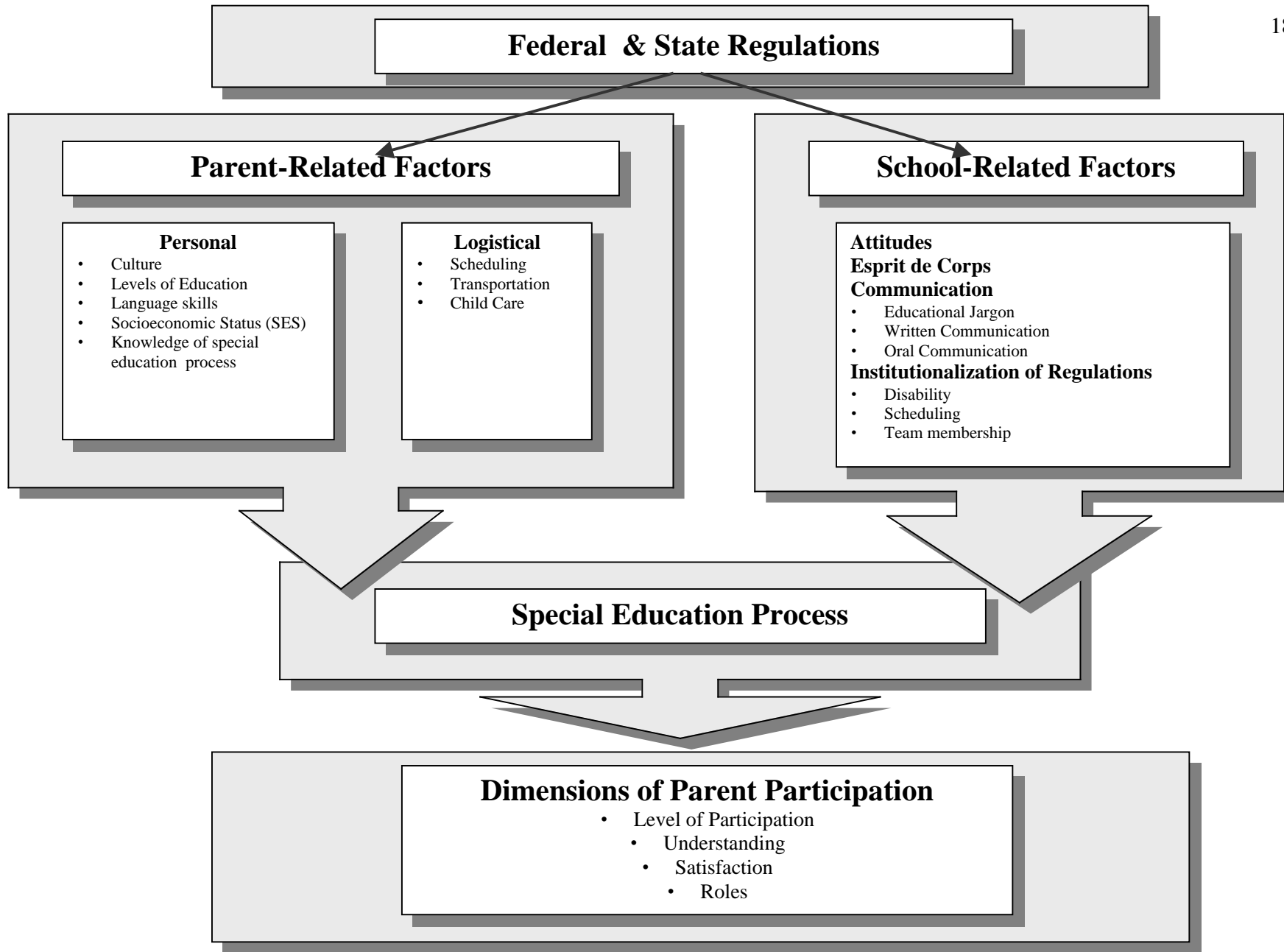


Figure 2. Visual organizer for research on parents' perception of and participation in the special education process.

special education process, this literature review focuses on the fact the process is driven by federal and state regulations that affect both parents and schools.

Moving down from “federal and state regulation” are to the left, “parent factors”, and to the right, “school factors”. “Parent factors,” on the left side of the figure, include “personal” and “logistical” factors that are unique to parents or to their situation. Personal factors include “culture,” “level of education,” “language skills,” “socioeconomic status,” and “knowledge of special education.” Logistical factors include “scheduling,” “transportation,” and “child care.” On right side of the figure are “school factors,” which include three major areas- “esprit de corps,” “communication,” and “institutionalization of regulations.” Esprit de corps includes the examples of “decisions made before meetings” and “decisions made at meetings.” Communication includes “educational jargon,” “written communication,” and “oral communication.” Last, institutionalization of regulations includes “disability,” “scheduling,” and “team membership.” The arrows pointing down to “special education process” from both parent and school factors indicate that both these types of factors influence how parents come to make meaning of the special education process.

Directly beneath parent and school factors is the mediating variable, the “special education process”. Parents’ experiences in the special education process influence their beliefs and how they make sense of the special education process and their participation in it. The arrow pointing down from “special education process” to “dimensions of parent participation” represents this.

At the bottom of the Figure 2 is “dimensions of parent participation,” which represents how parents view their participation. Four dimensions of participation that are addressed in the literature are “level of participation,” “understanding,” “satisfaction,” and “roles.” The following sections are arranged according to topics of the visual organizer.

Parent Factors

Parents themselves influence and help shape their views of their participation in the special education process. Parents’ personal attributes and circumstances of their lives are what they bring to negotiate the meaning of their participation and the special education process. Parent factors include personal factors such as culture, levels of education, language skills, socioeconomic status, and knowledge of special education. This range of factors represents general influences, such as their culture, to the more narrow influence of their knowledge of the special education process. In addition, there are logistical factors related to parent circumstances that influence their ability to participate in the special education process. Parents often have little or no control of these factors. They include work, time conflict, transportation, and childcare.

Personal Factors

Nothing was found in the literature to support a commonly-held teacher belief that parents’ lack of participation is an expression of parent apathy. On the contrary, parents of children in both special and general education, from all backgrounds and abilities, expressed interest in their child’s education (Horner, 1986; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson,

1996). Reasons, both expressed or unexpressed, can explain parents' lack of participation. For example, parents may feel powerless and react by withdrawing (e.g., not attending meetings or returning forms) as a type of passive resistance show of disapproval (Harry, 1992).

Five important personal factors affect parents' participation in the special education process. These factors include culture, levels of education, language skills, socioeconomic status, and knowledge of the special education process.

Culture

Findings indicate that factors related to different cultural norms and values from that of the majority can influence parents' participation in the special education process. (Harry, 1992; Lynch & Stein, 1982; Lynch & Stein, 1987; Romero, 1989; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). This is an important in light of the current diverse ethnic and racial composition of the United States. The authors of IDEA '97 projected this diversity in the American people where "...nearly one of every three of whom will be either African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, or American Indian" by the year 2000 (IDEA '97, p. 6).

Five studies included in this literature review examined minority parents' point of view and beliefs. These studies examined Hispanic (Harry, 1992; Lynch & Stein, 1987; Romero, 1989; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996) and Hispanic and African-American parents (Lynch & Stein, 1982).

Parents from minority cultures express a desire for more personal communication and interactions. Harry (1992) points out that Hispanic parents in her study found written communication impersonal and viewed it coming from an unknown "ellos" (they), usually the nameless administrators who were responsible for sending out the paperwork. Lynch and Stein (1987) found that 74% of the 63 Hispanic parents interviewed in their study indicated that small group meetings or one-on-one situations would promote parent participation.

Findings from all five studies suggested that cultural norms influence minority parents' expectations for participating in the process. That is, there is incongruity between parents' cultures and the school culture, including the culture of the school personnel. Zetlin, Padron, and Wilson (1996) pointed out that "the kinds of attitudes and behaviors expected by teachers and which underlie parental involvement (i.e., active and assertive participation, and comfort with questioning authority) are not necessarily typical of the kinds of behavior patterns found among minority groups" (p. 23). In fact, it was suggested that Western cultures and values on which school operate--efficiency, independence, and equity-- may be in conflict with the family culture and values of minority families (Sileo, Sileo, & Prates, 1996). For example, in regard to equity, schools operate on the Western cultural assumptions of parents as equal partners and active parent participation and information sharing. On the other hand, the minority family culture may influence parents to perceive the professional as "above" the family and to view teachers as the experts and act as passive recipients of information. This point could possibly explain why in Lynch and Stein's (1987) study of Hispanic parents' satisfaction and participation in their child's special education program that parents

indicated they offered significantly fewer suggestions at IEP meetings than Anglos, but not significantly less than African-American parents. Similarly, Hispanic parents felt significantly less involved in the assessment process than Anglos, but not significantly less than African-American parents. Parents of culturally different children not only have to deal with the special education process, they have to do so through the additional barriers sometimes associated with being part of a minority or different race or culture.

Language is an integral part of culture, so it is not surprising that language differences between the majority culture and minority parents were cited as affecting parents' ability to fully understand the special education process. Harry (1992) conducted a series of interviews with twelve Hispanic parents of children with labels of "mentally retarded" and "learning disabled" in her qualitative study of how minority parents perceive the special education system. Because English was the second language for many of the parents, school personnel provided interpreters for parents at meetings. However, some parents were dissatisfied with particular interpreters assigned to meetings and did not trust them. As a matter of fact, parents expressed that often they would not reveal how much English they knew in order to make sure that the interpreter was accurately translating information. Likewise, Zetlin, Padron, and Wilson (1996) found in their interviews with 5 Latin American families that while all parents were notified of meetings in their native language and interpreters were available for meetings, one of the parents still expressed that she did not fully understand the purpose of the IEP or the meeting. Obviously, while providing interpreters may help the language barrier, it does not insure parent understanding. Not all parents' experiences with interpreters were the same. For some families where English was a second language, the interpreters not only provided translation, they went one step further by insisting that all educational jargon be explained in lay terms so they could, in turn, provide the real meaning of the jargon to the parents (Harry, 1982). This resulted in a clearer understanding of the proceedings, as was the case in the following situation.

In the case of Juan's meeting, Elizabeth's careful, lay translation of the report made it a meaningful, though difficult exercise. The interpreter insisted that every statement in the report be given in lay terms in English, and then she would translate into Spanish in almost identical words (p. 198).

While federal regulations require schools to provide notification of meetings in their native language and interpreters at the meetings, no requirement exists that IEPs be provided to parents in their native language. Zetlin et al. (1996) found that IEPs were not always made available in Spanish; thus, interfering with parents' input into their child's special education process.

Although federal regulation provides that students must be assessed in their native language to insure that the assessment is a fair appraisal of ability and achievement, there are no assurances for a cultural match. In Zetlin, Padron, and Wilson's (1996) study, one parent expressed concern that while the assessment was conducted in the child's native language, the evaluator, who was from a different culture than the child, did not understand the child's responses. The parent believed that the child's most recent change in educational label from LD to educable mentally retarded was due, at least in part, to

the lack of understanding on the part of the evaluator of the child's culture and the meaning of the child's responses.

Levels of Education

Some research findings link parents' level of education to their ability and desire to participate in the special education process (Horner, 1986; Wiener & Kohler, 1986). Wiener and Kohler found parents who attended college or held a university degree obtained higher scores on understanding written reports than did those parents with only a high school diploma.

Likewise, the level of parent education has been linked to parent preference for participation. Horner (1986) found that greater level of parent education (college degrees) had an effect on parents' preferences for a greater role in decision-making. Teacher participants in Horner's study frequently speculated that "fear" may play a major role in parents' decision to not be more participatory, that the parents' own unpleasant past history in school may influence their participation. Parents' level of education, as an indication of their success in school, may be a factor that influences their own comfort level with participating in the special education process. Given the complexity and magnitude of the special education process—its forms, procedures, regulations, and specialized language, it is not surprising that parents with less *savoir-faire* would find the process difficult to understand and participate in meaningful ways.

Language Skills

Parents' language skills influence their ability to participate in and understand the special education proceeding. Zake and Wendt (1991) conducted a study of 42 mothers of school-age children who were going through an initial evaluation for special education or were participating in a diagnostic reading evaluation. After the assessment information was shared with the parents at a conference, a post-conference comprehension measure was given to parents to assess their understanding of the information presented at the conference. The researchers found that there was a significant relationship between the parents' language level, as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised, and their recall of conference information. The study also revealed that neither anxiety nor assertion was related to parents' language level. While this was the only study of its kind in this review of the literature, it supports other studies' findings (Horner, 1986; Wiener & Kohler, 1986) that parents' level of education influences their understanding of the special education process. While this finding is not surprising, it is important given the socioeconomic and educational range of parents whose children attend public schools.

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

There is little evidence that SES specifically is associated with parent involvement in the special education process. In fact, evidence suggested that parents' SES is not a factor in parents' preference for involvement in special education (Horner, 1986) nor in general education (Chavkin & Williams, 1989). However, there is an association between SES and other parent factors that make SES worthy of mention. Results from one study linked SES with parent understanding of the proceedings. In order

for parents to participate in decision-making, they need to understand assessment information used in deliberations. Zake and Wendt (1991) reported in their study of parents' understanding of assessment information presented at a post-assessment conference that high SES parents were significantly better at recalling and understanding information presented. A more likely association between SES and education and language skills could probably better explain this association between low SES and poor understanding. In other words, the low SES parents in Zake and Wendt's study probably did not understand the information due to less formal education and weaker language skills than higher SES participants.

Knowledge of the Special Education Process

Parents' lack of knowledge of special education negatively influences their ability to understand and participate in the process (O'Brien, 1987; Romero, 1989; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). Providing more information about the process and parents' rights were most often suggested by parents as a way to improve and enhance their participation in the special education process (Denton, 1983; Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981; Lynch & Stein, 1987). Often parents did not realize the significance of the terms, that they stood for specific events and activities that were established procedures in the special education process (Harry, 1992). In a study of parents' participation in their child's IEP development, results suggested there is a significant positive relationship between information level and parent involvement level (O'Brien 1987). Katsiyannis and Ward's (1992) study examined state administrative review summaries of 10,662 parent surveys in the state of Virginia. Results revealed that parents cited the greatest problem they experienced with the special education process as schools transmitting and explaining parents' rights. Parents indicated problems with receiving a written copy of their rights (10.5%), not receiving an explanation of their rights (13.3%), not being told that they could get outside testing if they did not agree with test results (17.5%), and not being told what to do if they disagreed with their child's program (16.1%). It is a paradox that schools are naturally the logical primary provider of information to parents about the special education process, yet parents report that they lack knowledge of the special education process.

Logistical Factors

Parents indicate that some factors related to their ability to attend meetings influence their participation in the special education process. All of the factors discussed in the following section influence parents' ability to control the logistics of their situation. Therefore, these are referred to as logistical factors. Scheduling, transportation, and childcare have all been cited by parents as factors that influence their ability to fully participate in the special education process.

Scheduling

Some findings suggest that work is a barrier to active parent participation in the special education process. Lynch and Stein (1987) interviewed Mexican-American parents regarding their participation in the development of the IEP and opportunities to

participate in their child's educational program. They then compared the results with a previous study of African-American and Anglo parents. Across all ethnic and income groups, "work" was one of the main reasons parents cited for not attending IEP meetings. Horner (1986) found in her study of parents' involvement in decision making, communication, and activities that both parents and educators indicated that parents' work was a major factor in preventing greater levels of parent involvement. Horner's study was based on a random sample of 516 parents living within a large metropolitan school district on the West Coast. Likewise, McKinney and Hocutt (1982) indicated that both parents of children with learning disabilities and parents of children without learning disabilities expressed their own employment and home situation as their biggest barriers to greater participation. These findings are not surprising given that the business of schooling children, including the special education process and its meetings, occurs during the same daytime hours that most parents are at their jobs.

Parents also cited time conflict as a factor in their ability to participate (Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992; Lynch & Stein, 1987). Findings from Katsiyannis and Ward's (1992) study indicated that an average of almost 20% of parents stated they did not attend their child's IEP meetings and of those, 7% indicated they did not receive notification in time to make arrangements. "Time conflict" may or may not be related to the "work" factor cited by other studies; however, the school-related factor, scheduling, can influence whether "time conflict" and "work" become a factor that influences parents' participation.

Transportation

Transportation has been cited as a factor in parents' participation in the special education process. In Lynch and Stein's (1987) study, parents indicated that transportation limited their participation in meetings. In addition, Hispanic parents listed "provide transportation" as a way to promote parent participation in meetings. Transportation was also cited as a barrier by parents in a study from general education (Chavkin & Williams, 1989). However, parents who cite a lack of transportation as a barrier are typically low SES parents who may not own a car and who must rely on friends or public transportation.

Child Care

Child care is also mentioned as a logistical factor that interferes in parents' participation in the special education process, across ethnic and income groups (Lynch & Stein, 1987). However, in Lynch and Stein's study when parents rank-ordered factors that limit their participation, "child care needs" was fourth. The same study rank-ordered factors that parents indicated would promote their participation, and "provide child care" was named by Hispanics, but not other groups. Even so, it ranked seventh in importance for Hispanics suggesting that child care may be a factor, but perhaps one related to other factors, related to scheduling. For example, all groups cited "more advanced notice" as a way to promote parent participation and Hispanics specifically mentioned "select convenient times for parents". So, while child care has been cited as a concern for parents, it actually may be a secondary factor that influences parents' participation.

Summary

Although several parent related factors have been linked to parents' perspectives of the special education process and their participation in that process, it is important to note that these factors do not suggest parent fault or parent-created barriers. On the contrary, for every parent-related factor mentioned in this section, there exists a potential institution-generated solution.

School Related Factors

Further, if professionals view compliance with the law as an end in itself, its implementation will inevitably be in the mode of confinement, since the law exists only as an abstraction—a set of principles whose actualization can only be documented by measures such as deadlines, statistics, and in the case of parents, signed consent forms. Professionals who view the law as a vehicle for the assurance of equity, however, will devise strategies for including rather than excluding parents, for sharing rather than appropriating power... they will demonstrate the...posture of reciprocity. (Harry, p. 208)

The special education process, as outlined in the federal regulations, is a set of procedures characterized by collaboration and reciprocity and based on the principle that participation and input from all, including parents, is important to the process. If those who control the process, namely school personnel, embrace this principle, then it becomes part of their value system and guides their attitudes and actions.

Some parents perceive that school personnel do not embrace the same spirit of collaboration and reciprocity that the regulations intended and that it is reflected in schools' policies and in educators' attitudes and actions. These parents feel that particular school factors impact their participation in the special education process. These factors include educators' willingness to conduct business with "esprit de corps", their communication methods, and the manner in which school personnel have institutionalized federal and state regulations.

School Personnel's Attitude

Parents indicate that the attitude of school personnel affects their perception of an involvement in the special education process. O'Brien (1987) noted that parents identified "perceived attitude of school personnel" as the most significant factor in contributing to parent involvement and parent satisfaction levels with IEP development. Caines (1998) suggested that "attitudes" is a barrier to the IEP process in his study of four families of children with disabilities. Harry (1992) points out that a "tone of absolute support for the student" and an "atmosphere of respect for the parent" is necessary to promote parent participation in the special education process.

"Esprit de Corps"

"Esprit de corps" refers to the team spirit and cooperation in decision-making exhibited by school personnel, and refers to the principle upon which P.L 94-142 and IDEA '97 are predicated—collaboration and reciprocity. Esprit de corps is influenced by one's preservice training and the culture of the school and is projected through one's

actions. Examples of a lack of collaboration and reciprocity or “esprit de corps” have been noted in decisions made before or at special education meetings.

Decisions Made before Meetings

Parents report that educators make decisions before parents come to meetings. Specifically, teachers come to meetings with prepared IEP documents (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). The National Committee for Citizens in Education surveyed 2,300 parents and over half reported that their child’s IEP was completed before the meeting and their input was not solicited (Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984). One parent in the Zetlin et al. study (1996) reported that she believed that her 11-year-old son’s IEP had not changed since he started school. If true, this would reflect a “worst case scenario” of what happens when parents’ input is not valued and IEPs are seen as only a legal requirement. IEPs prepared prior to meetings contribute to the notions that IEPs are more about the document than the process and that parents do not have much to contribute, or even more, that their only contribution is their signature of approval on the IEP form.

Decisions Made at Meetings

Studies show a pattern of school personnel not requesting parent input during meetings (Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1982; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 1982; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). Not inviting parents to participate in decision making shows a lack of esprit de corps and violates the intent of the law. Ysseldyke and his colleagues (1982) found in their observations of 14 placement meetings where parents were present, not one statement was made encouraging parents to participate. Parents were recipients of comments, and resource teachers tended to be the primary speaker (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980). In fact, their study highlighted the fact that of the 14 observed IEP conferences, there was only one where time was devoted to writing goals jointly between the parent and the educator. In this case, the researchers pointed out that this was most likely because the father of the child was a school psychologist who was familiar with the purpose and nature of the IEP meeting. He had indicated to the special education teacher that his wife would be attending the meeting expressively to participate in writing their child’s goals and objectives.

Other research supports the notion that joint goal writing at IEP meetings is rare, and moreover, not valued by school personnel. Gerber, Banbury, Miller, and Griffin (1986) found 44% of the 145 special education teacher participants in their study perceived the IEP conference as nothing but a formality, and 71 % of the participants felt parents should be given the option to waive their right to attend IEP meetings. Interestingly, 104 of the participants (71.7%) were elementary and secondary teachers of children with “high incidence” disabilities labels-SLD, ED, and MMR.

Schools may unknowingly close parents out of decision making at meetings. Mehan and his associates (1982) speak about the “discourse of persuasion” (p. 109) at meetings where decisions are made. They discussed their observations of one particular eligibility and placement committee meeting for Shane, a 9-year-old boy who was found

“learning disabled”. The information given by the school nurse and psychologist was *presented*. However, the information from the parents and general education teacher were *elicited* and often interrupted by questions from other committee members asking for additional information or clarification of previous statements. The mother was further closed out of the decision making through school personnel’s use of technical language and their reliance on test results. Since P. L. 94-142 did not guarantee parental attendance, let alone input at eligibility and placement meetings, it can be said that the school did not violate the law. Even so, the details of the case provide insight into why many parents interpret “decision making” as “decision telling” and why they are passive participants in the special education process. Future studies are warranted to determine how parents perceive their expanded role in decision-making afforded them by IDEA ’97.

Communication

The influence of communication is particularly important to parents and how they view the special education process. As a matter of fact, in one study where parents were asked to give specific recommendations for improving their child’s IEP meeting, over 71% of the total recommendations were specific to improved communication—more information at the meeting (35%); information prior to the meeting (23%), and no jargon (14%) (Denton, 1983). Since some findings suggest that parents desire greater participation in their child’s special education process (Horner, 1986; O’Brien, 1987), it follows that they need to understand the proceedings and forms used in the process. Three influences will be discussed in this section—educational jargon, written communication, and oral communication.

Educational Jargon

Parents and researchers indicated that parents do not understand educational jargon (Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996) and that the use of jargon affected parents’ participation and satisfaction with the special education process (Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986). Even general educators, who have training and work in education, are sometimes intimidated by the unfamiliar procedures and jargon of special education because they are not familiar with the special education process (Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986). The use of jargon and parents’ difficulty understanding it seem to be pervasive in both oral and written communication of the special education process (Denton, 1983; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Harry, 1992; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Weddig, 1984; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 1982).

Written Communication

While schools may endeavor to make all written communication comprehensible, parents still report difficulty understanding school’s written communication. These written communications are forms that inform parents of upcoming meetings, outcomes of meetings, and requests for parental consent. Written communication also includes the “centerpiece” document of the special education process, the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Parents report that schools' written communication falls short of being clear. Denton (1983) reported that half of the participants in her qualitative study found the meetings were not what they had expected. "One parent, who had completed 2 years of college and was employed in a professional field, reported having read the letter of invitation several times. Yet, when she arrived at the meeting, she was surprised that the focus was to review the results of assessments and not to plan what assessments would be done" (Denton, pp. 53-54). Likewise, in another study, almost 1,500 of 10,662 parents surveyed reported that they did not know their rights or what actions to take in particular situations, even though they may have received a written copy of their procedural safeguards (Katsiyannis, 1992). These examples illustrate that schools' efforts to meet their obligation by providing written communication do not guarantee parent understanding.

The reading level at which a report is written can influence parents' understanding of its content. In Weddig's study (1984) of readability of psychological reports, he found that the median reading level of a random sample of 50 psychoeducational reports was at the 15th grade level, even though the reports represented several different authors. When Weddig took a report written at the 15th grade level and reduced its readability level to a 6th grade reading level, shortened it, replaced educational and psychological terms with behavioral descriptors, and eliminated irrelevant information, parents from all educational levels were more accurate in their interpretation of the report than those parents who read the traditional report. Denton (1983) also reported that parents expressed difficulty with reading forms and suggested that it is reasonable to assume those parents whose children have significant reading and educational problems will also have the same type of difficulties.

Report writing format and style has also been identified as a problem in written communication. Wiener and Kohler (1986) examined parents' comprehension of and preference for different report writing formats and styles of written psychological reports. The researchers studied parents' preferences for and comprehension of three different report-writing formats—short form, psychoeducational report, and question-and-answer. The short form was brief, to the point and without elaborations, and included educational jargon. Both the psychoeducational report and question-and-answer format included a half-page handout describing a word banking method, used little jargon and explained the jargon it did use, and included clear explanations. The major difference between these two formats was the organization of information. There was no significant difference between these two formats in regard to parents' comprehension; however their comprehension scores for the short form were significantly lower than the other two formats.

While the intent of written communication may be to provide a vehicle for delivery of information to parents, parents sometime find the quantity and constant flow of written communication overwhelming. Harry (1992) points out that parents in her study of Hispanic parents of children with disabilities found it challenging to keep track of the large quantity of letters and paperwork generated by the school during the process. "Anna said she had about seven boxes of papers and had to stop her husband from

throwing them out. She tried to keep them all but she often became fed up...” (Harry, page 171).

Finally, findings suggest that parents do not consistently receive written communication regarding meetings nor copies of written documents, such as IEPs (Harry, 1992; Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992). Additionally, parents have also suggested that it would improve their child’s IEP meeting if they received more information prior to the meeting (Denton, 1983). All these problems together suggest that parents view written communication as impersonal and insufficient.

Oral Communication

Parents found school personnel-parent communication, both in meetings and outside of meetings, a factor in their participation in the special education process (Caines, 1998; Denton, 1983; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Harry, 1992; Lynch & Stein, 1987; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 1982; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). Parents expressed that school personnel missed natural opportunities to communicate about IEP development with them (Caines, 1998). Parents made themselves accessible to teachers by volunteering in their child’s school; however, parents perceived teachers distanced themselves from them, even avoiding them at times. “I mean the teacher wouldn’t even talk to me. She would see me on the playground and she’d turn and walk the other way “ (Caines, 221) Topics discussed at IEP conferences revealed virtually no discussion about future contact between school and parents (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980).

Genuine communication between two or more persons is a complex process. On a basic level there is the speaker and listener, and they both are responsibility parties in the construction of understanding. In other words, meaning is negotiated; understanding cannot be assumed just because the speaker speaks. Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls (1986) point out that “...a first maxim of conversation is that speakers speak clearly; they intend to make sense and be understood. Hearers contribute to meaning of discourse by making inferences from the conversational string of utterances” (p. 129-130). Hearers display their understanding through various signals such as eye contact, head nodding, and vocalizations such as “uh-huh” or “I understand”. If hearers do not understand, then they have the obligation to ask for elaborations or clarifications. Mehan et al. offer insight as to what might happen in school personnel-parent discourse when spoken communication is strained and one-sided, and when parents feel frustrated and withdraw from participation. They assert when technical language, or jargon, is used during the course of meetings, the underpinnings for negotiated meaning are removed. Technical language connotes a particular mystique. Consequently, the implication is that the user is superior and has specialized knowledge and qualifications. First, this can result in parents feeling that any requests for clarification will be taken as a challenge to the speaker’s authority. Second, parents may relinquish their role in negotiating meaning. “Instead of signaling a lack of understanding... the committee members (including parents) remain silent, thereby implicitly contributing to the guise that understanding has been achieved” (p.131).

Institutionalization of Federal and State Regulations

Schools' day-to-day business is to carry out the special education process as prescribed by federal and state regulations. How schools make sense of the regulations and interpret them determine how the regulations are woven into the policies and practices of schools. In other words, schools "institutionalize" the regulations. When schools partially or inappropriately apply these regulations, misunderstandings can develop. Parents have identified "disability", "scheduling", and "team membership" as school related factors that influence parents' perceptions of the special education process.

Disability

Parents have identified the way in which schools sometimes characterize and talk about "disability" as an influence on their views of the special education process. Specifically, some parents indicate that schools' practice of pinpointing the reason for the disability *in the child* as an influence to perceptions of the special education process. Parents may feel guilty about their actions or inaction and may feel they are the source of their child's disability (Denton, 1983). Moreover, Denton reported none of the parents who offered sources for the cause of their child's disability believed it to be intrinsic to their child. Likewise, Witt, Miller, McIntyre, and Smith (1984) reported that "attribution of blame to sources other than parents" was a significant variable that positively influenced parents' attitudes toward IEP staffings.

Some parents have reported that schools' use of deficit-oriented language is offensive. Caines (1998) conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with parents of four children with mental disabilities to determine how they experienced the IEP process. He reported that parents found that deficit first, negative language interfered with the IEP process. "Everything about Molly was negative and whatever she (the teacher) had to say or write, or whatever, was always done in a negative tone. Molly is *confined to a wheelchair and can't participate* at this time" (Caines, page 207.)

Federal regulations call for the IEP team to consider the child's strengths as well as the most recent evaluation when developing the IEP. The intent is to develop a plan that is even-handed and that describes the whole child and is based on the premise that the child's disability is not the total sum of who he or she is.

Scheduling

When meetings are scheduled without regard to parent preferences for scheduling or their ability to attend, then it is a disingenuous attempt to get their input and may more aptly reflect schools' poorly institutionalized practices to meet the letter of the law, but not the spirit of the law. Getting parental input is critical since work, childcare, and transportation issue can determine parents' ability to attend meetings. Issues related to scheduling have been identified by parents as barriers to their participation in decision-making meetings. Parents report influences on their participation include meetings scheduled at inconvenient times, set up back-to-back with other meetings, with insufficient time for discussion, and scheduled with short notice (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992; Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981; Lynch & Stein, 1982; Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984). In fact, Witt, Miller,

McIntyre, and Smith found parents most frequently cited “allowing enough time for staffings” of the six factors that explained 78% of the variance in parent satisfaction with IEP staffs. Likewise, Harry (1992) recounts the conclusion of a meeting, which ended abruptly.

Rita’s meeting for Rafael, which began with incomplete introductions of committee members and inadequate information regarding Rafael’s placement, was concluded in a perfunctory and unusually careless manner. The first attempt to conclude the meeting came unexpectedly, when, at the end of reports from two teachers and the speech pathologist, there was a pause, broken after seconds by an interjection from the man seated at the head of the table, who had never been introduced either by name or status, but who seemed to be chairing the meeting. He said suddenly: “So, are we finished?” Before anyone could answer, he rose and left the room. (p. 203)

Schools that have institutionalized the federal mandate of parental input as only an obligation to notify parents of meetings without genuine attempts to involve parents, demonstrate a lack of value for parent participation.

Team Membership

Team membership may be thought of as the overall characteristics of the team as well as those persons who serve on the team and their role in the team’s decision-making. Both numbers of persons in the team and the qualifications they bring appear to be important to parents. It seems that team membership influences parents’ participation in the special education process.

People in attendance who can contribute to good educational programming influenced parental attitudes toward IEP staffings (Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984). Parents want knowledgeable persons present who can contribute to decision-making for their child. However, they find it difficult to openly disagree with these professionals because of their perceived status (Harry, 1992). This may create tension within parents who want to actively participate but who may feel less knowledgeable and qualified to contribute.

If parents are uncertain as to why team members are present, it may affect their comfort and willingness to participate. Denton (1983) found that 15% of parents in her study reported they did not recognize certain members or know why they were present.

Some of the most interesting observations made about parents’ membership on decision-making teams were by Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls (1986). They observed and videotaped eligibility and placement meetings and afterward interviewed each of the members. In discussing the differences between lay and professional reports, Mehan and his colleagues noted that parents were *temporary* members in committee meetings. Whether they meant temporary in the sense that parents were not invited to all meetings, which was legally appropriate in 1986, or that parents were asked to attend for only a portion of the committee meeting is unclear. However, the term still aptly applies to parents’ membership in the special education process today. That is, while parents may be members of all teams that meet on behalf of their child, the “core” team, the psychologist, administrator, special education teachers, and related service staff continue

to function as members of a more longstanding team that meets on *all children* in their school who are in the special education process.

Summary

Sometimes flawed interpretations of federal and state regulations lead to poorly institutionalized practices by schools. These practices may meet the letter of the law, but they do not meet the spirit of the law.

Dimensions of Parent Participation

Parent participation is multidimensional and has many nuances; therefore, it is not surprising that researchers have chosen to examine the topic from different perspectives. The level of detail at which parent participation is examined also varies. This section is organized according to themes that describe the dimensions of parent participation.

Level of Participation

The issue of level of parent participation has been addressed in the literature as who attended meetings on behalf of their child, how much they desired to contribute, and how much they actually contributed when they attended.

Most of what we know about parents' perceptions of the special education process comes from mothers (Caines, 1998; Denton, 1983; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Harry, 1992; Romero, 1989; Scanlon, Arick, & Phelps, 1981; Wiener & Kohler, 1986; Zake & Wendt, 1991; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). Speculation for reasons why mothers act as single representatives for their child include: (a) ease in attending (they are not employed outside the home or have more flexibility than fathers in leaving their work); (b) acting as the head of household (not a two-parent household); (c) special education process is viewed as a formality, not a decision-making process, so only one person needs to attend.

Parents preferred a significantly greater level of involvement in decision making than they actually experienced (Horner, 1986; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982). Parents want to assist school personnel in preparing their child's IEP (O'Brien, 1987). McKinney and Hocutt reported that 43% of the 32 parents they interviewed revealed they did not fully participate in the development of their child's IEP, yet they wanted to be more involved. Denton (1983) reported only 30% of parents took part in the eligibility decision and IEP program planning. While educators indicate they desire more parent participation, too, overall, educators tend toward schools making decisions (Horner).

Findings suggest that parents desire greater participation in the special education process (Denton, 1983; Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984), although there is contrary evidence that school personnel do not view lack of parental involvement as a significant problem (Gerber, Banbury, & Miller, 1986; Pfeiffer, 1981). In fact, findings suggest that parents are not encouraged to participate in the IEP meeting (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 1982). If parents are not encouraged to participate, then parents may view their presence as unnecessary, only a meaningless or intrusive act.

Understanding

The special education process is a complicated set of procedures, forms, and meetings, so it is not surprising that parents do not understand the process. Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Mitchell (1982) observed 34 placement teams to determine what effective team practices were being used and found that no parents were ever asked about their understanding of the purpose or expectations for the meeting. Romero (1989) found a significant relationship between parent participation and parent knowledge. That is, parents who participated more in the referral process were more likely to engage in monitoring activities, and these parents expressed greater knowledge of the special education services received by their children than parents who participated less in the referral process.

Satisfaction

Some research findings suggest parents are satisfied with parts of the special education process, while other studies suggest otherwise. Parents express satisfaction with IEP conferences (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984) and with the time taken to provide services for their child (Lynch & Stein, 1987). Witt, et al. surveyed 243 parents in order to determine the variables that influenced parents' attitudes toward staffing meetings. They found that 78% of the variance in parental satisfaction was explained by 6 factors. Those factors were allowing enough time for staffings (19%), attribution of blame to sources other than parents (18%), input from a number of people to come up with a good educational program (16%), amount of parent participation (7%), number of persons at staffings (3%), and preparing parents for what to expect at the staffings (1%). However, parents' reported high level of satisfaction might be inflated for two reasons. First, if meetings previous to the special education process were in response to a call about their child's misbehavior, parents may view meetings negatively. Yet, an invitation to participate in a process to help their child, not precipitated by a particular misbehavior, may be a welcomed difference, and so parents may be more likely to be satisfied with the special education meeting. Second, parents may be satisfied because they do not fully understand the extent to which their participation is guaranteed by the law.

It is argued that parents do not fully understand the framework of the special education process with its procedures and documents (Harry, 1992), nor do they fully understand their rights to participate in the special education process (Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992).

Roles

Generally, research shows that parents do not see themselves as active decision-makers (Lynch & Stein, 1987; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982); however, some findings suggest parents felt they were active participants in their child's IEP development (Lynch & Stein, 1982). Parents primarily view themselves as information providers and receivers (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981), verifiers of information (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 1982), and consent givers (Harry, 1992). In fact, Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, and Lasky (1988) noted striking similarities

between their research findings and findings from the late 1970s and early 1980s. The authors suggested, on the whole, parents' participation was unchanged and that they still retained a passive role during the initial placement/IEP conference.

Summary

Although two and a half decades have passed since P. L. 94-142, parent participation in the special education process is far short of what it was intended. While parents express relatively high satisfaction with their participation, they desire greater input. Parents generally describe their role in the process as passive. This description has not changed over the years.

Parents' role in the special education process was expanded with IDEA '97 to all decision making group of the special education process. However, we do not know parents' views on their expanded role or how it has affected their participation. We need to know how IDEA '97 has impacted both school practices and parent participation.

Summary

This literature review examined studies from 1978 to the present that addressed perceptions of K-12 parents of their participation in their child's special education process. The review has illustrated the scarcity and inconsistencies in research regarding parents' views of the special education process. Even so, some conclusions can be drawn from the data:

- Most of what we know about parents' perceptions of the special education process comes from mothers;
- Parents are generally passive participants in the process, a role that has remained relatively unchanged for the last two decades;
- "Parent apathy" is a misnomer; parents' lack of participation can be attributed to a variety of reasons;
- Parents generally are satisfied with the special education process; however, they would like to participate more;
- Parents' lack of knowledge of special education negatively influences their ability to understand and participate in the process;
- Poor communication, including the use of special education jargon, negatively influences parents' understanding and participation in the process;
- School personnel can follow special education procedures, be in compliance and still act in ways that discourage parent participation.

Research Considerations

The research findings presented in this review offer some insight into parents' perspectives on their participation in the special education process; however, a broader knowledge base of this topic should be developed. Several conceptual and methodological issues are present in the studies of this review including different definitions of participation, insufficient conceptual models, questionable sampling practices, and methods of measuring participation. Future research needs to address these limitations.

Conceptual Considerations

In order to improve the quality of future studies, conceptual limitations should be considered including definitions of parent participation and comparison groups.

Definitions

The first conceptual consideration of this review is a lack of definition for parent participation. In other words, there was no universal agreement found in these studies about what constitutes “parent participation” which was evident through the different ways in which studies examined the topic. This made it difficult to analyze and interpret the studies’ results. For example, some studies characterized parent participation as attendance at meetings (Scanlon, Arick, & Phelps, 1981) or their type or amount of verbal contributions while attending meetings (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 1982) while other studies characterized parent participation as parents’ perceptions of their experiences at specific meetings or during the entire special education process (Caines, 1998; Denton, 1983; Harry, 1992; Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). There were other studies that characterized parent participation through their ability to understand events or forms (Weddig, 1984; Wiener & Kohler, 1986; Zake & Wendt, 1991). In fact, the term “parent participation” is a misnomer as applied to studies of this review since each overwhelmingly represents mothers’ views. The lack of definition and different measures of parent participation makes it difficult to assess the current status of the knowledge in the field. Another possible consideration is that a standard definition for parent participation is not possible or desirable. This will be discussed further in the “needs for future study” section.

Comparison Groups

Distinct groups of parents may have different experiences and perceptions of the special education process; therefore, future research should carefully examine the issue of groupings. For example, parents who are experiencing the full evaluation process for the first time may have different impressions than those parents who have been through the process on more than one occasion. Only a small number of studies (Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988; Zake & Wendt, 1991) considered this in their sampling.

Methodological Considerations

Some methodological problems found in the research of this review may be significant and should be considered in future studies. These problems include sampling procedures and methods of study.

Sampling Procedures

Sample selection used for some of the studies included in this review showed areas of weaknesses. First, some studies used parent participants who did not represent the full spectrum of the parent population. Specifically, participants in one group of

studies over-represented parents who most likely participate anyway such as those who attended state department of education parent workshops (Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984), school-related meetings (Weddig, 1984), or members of support groups for children with disabilities (Wiener & Kohler, 1986). However, these are most likely those who would participate in their children education or who would most favorably view schools, and they may not represent the full range of diversity of parents of children with disability. Another group of studies included particular participants or meetings suggested by school or agency members (Caines, 1998; Denton, 1983; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Harry, 1992). Because school or agency personnel assisted in the identification, parents interviewed in these studies may be different in some ways such as "... more aggressive, better educated, or have a particular axe to grind...", and consequently they may not represent the full range of views of parents of children with disabilities (Harry, 1992). Another sampling concern is response rate. Low response rate, as experienced in the O'Brien study (1987) may have implications for the results of studies and may it harder to generalize the results to other populations or settings. Participant recruitment that represents sufficient randomness is an issue.

Methods of Study

Several studies gathered data exclusively through the use of questionnaires or surveys (Horner, 1986; Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992; Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982; O'Brien, 1987; Witt, Miller, McIntyre, & Smith, 1984). While this methodology can be useful in gathering certain kinds of information, it does not allow for explanations and personal stories that can more fully explain parents' responses. This may be especially true when choices are limited to "yes/no" or "agree/disagree" responses. Parents may feel forced to choose responses that do not accurately portray their perceptions. In addition, choices may be value laden and parents may choose responses that they believe are the favorable choice.

A number of the studies used self-report as their sole measure of parent participation that may reflect more what parents say they do than what they actually do. For example, in one study 71% of parents indicated they felt actively involved in their child's IEP development, yet when asked to explain how they were involved 14.6% said they expressed an opinion or made a suggestion, 11.2% indicated they worked with, helped, and trusted the professional who set up the program and goals, 7.5% said they listened and agreed to teacher recommendations, and 6.3% indicated they understood everything because it was explained clearly (Lynch & Stein, 1982).

Needs for Future Study

A paucity of studies and gaps in the research warrant additional study of parent perception of their participation in the special education process. We need to learn how to invite and foster parent participation, make it the collaborative endeavor that P. L. 94-142 and IDEA' 97 intend, and make it a meaningful experience for parents. Therefore, careful consideration should be given to the following points in order to extend the current body of collective knowledge on parents' perceptions.

Participants

- *Parents of children who are experiencing the full special education process for the first time*

Parents' initial experiences shape and influence their beliefs about the special education process and their role in it. Parents' beliefs will most likely crystallize and remain relatively unchanged throughout their future experiences with the special education process. Consequently, it is critical to understand parents' views of and participation in the special education process who are not all that familiar with the process.

- *Parents of social and economic diversity*

Ours is an ever-growing diverse nation of people of different means, from different ethnic and cultural groups. It follows that schools reflect the diversity of our society. Future research should include parents who reflect this diversity.

- *Parents of children beginning considered for "learning disabilities"*

Children with learning disabilities make up approximately 50 % of those children in K-12 who currently qualify to receive special education; yet, only two studies could be found that exclusively addressed perspectives of parents of children with learning disabilities: McKinney and Hocutt (1982) and Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, and Lasky (1988). Parent understanding and participation in decision making for these "high judgement" students is especially significant given the multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings attached to the term "learning disabled" (Smith, Osborne, Crim, & Rhu, 1986); the interstate disparities in diagnosis of students with learning disabilities and the concomitant demographic and sociopolitical factors associated with diagnosis (Lester & Kelman, 1997); and the rise in more inclusive state definitions and criteria for learning disabilities (Mercer, Jordon, Allsopp, & Mercer, 1996).

Areas for Future Research

- *Parents' perceptions of the special education process*

IDEA '97 extended parents' right to be members of teams that make referral, eligibility, and placement decisions. Future research is warranted into parents' views of and their participation on these additional teams.

- *Parents' participation in the special education process*

Uniform, ideal parent participation may not be possible or desirable given many factors including the increasing, racial, social, and cultural diversity and varied family structures that exist in America today. If we do not believe uniform, ideal participation is possible or desirable for all parents, then we need to acknowledge, as researchers have suggested, that parents must individually determine their own personal *ideal parent participation* (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988). Therefore, future research may need to focus on what parents want their participation to be in the special education process.

Last but most important, the results of this literature review should be considered in light of the larger context that it represents- two cultures, an organizational and a family culture, that have a mandate to work together through a process on behalf of a

child's welfare. Given this, two things become apparent. First, parents' and researchers' perceptions may provide insight into only part of a larger issue. For example, special education teachers' decisions to bring prepared IEPs to meetings may reflect their best intentions. However, bringing prepared IEPs to meetings may actually be a reflection of a larger, institutional culture issue such as insufficient teacher preservice or inservice training, lack of administrative support for meeting and planning time, or practices that are accepted as status quo because they are deeply woven into the school culture. Second, parents' and researchers' perceptions provide information that should be considered, then inversely viewed. For instance, research indicates that there is a significant relationship between parents' language level and their recall of conference information (Zake & Wendt, 1991). While language skills is a parent-related factor that influences parents' participation, the implication is that language skills are also an institution-related factor when school personnel do not take measures to insure that parents understand forms, meetings, or procedures.

In conclusion, although almost twenty-five years have passed since parent participation was assured by the landmark legislation, P. L. 94-142, parent participation has remained relatively unchanged and passive. With IDEA '97, we now face the dawning of a new era of expanded opportunities for parent participation in the special education process. It is important to listen to parents' voices and to find ways to promote and support their participation in the process in order to enhance the process for all those involved- educators, children, and parents alike.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

This was a naturalistic inquiry, using emergent design, of parents' views of and participation in the special education process. The purpose of this study is to examine and describe parents' views of and their participation in the evaluation and eligibility process, specifically since parents' right to participate as members of eligibility teams was recently guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Act Amendments (IDEA '97).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the goal of naturalistic inquiry is to "make sense of the data in ways that will, first, facilitate the continuing unfolding of the inquiry, and, second lead to a maximal understanding of the phenomenon being studied in its context (pp. 224-225). I used a multiple-case study design and approach where individual cases "serve only as the evidentiary base for the study and are used solely in the cross-case analysis" (Yin, p. 137). This was supplemented by Boyatzis's (1998) inductive method for analyzing data.

This chapter contains four sections. The first section, "Research Propositions and Questions," provides the foundations for the methodology of this study. The second section titled "Respondents" includes a description of the respondents, respondent selection, study setting, and study events. The third section titled "Research Procedures" explains the data sources and collection procedures. [A study timeline can be found in Appendix A]. Finally, the fourth section titled "Data Analysis Procedures" describes the methods that were used to analyze data as well as how trustworthiness was addressed.

Research Propositions & Questions

This study's propositions emerged from a literature review of parents' views of and participation in the special education process and my own personal experiences as an educator. Propositions for this study are:

- Parents' perspectives and participation in the eligibility process are influenced by school personnel, policies, and procedures;
- Although IDEA '97 guarantees parent participation on decision-making teams (i.e., eligibility teams), both educators and parents view parents' participation as "information recipients", not decision-makers; and
- Parents have concerns about the eligibility process and insights into how the process might be enhanced.

This study addressed the following research questions:

- How do educators communicate with parents during the evaluation process?
- How do parents participate in the evaluation process?
- How do parents perceive the evaluation process?
- How can parents' understanding of and participation in the evaluation process be enhanced?

Respondents

Description of Respondents

Parents of 9 children, ages ranging from 7 to 12, from 5 elementary schools in a southwest Virginia school division were the primary respondents for this study. In all but one case, the child's mother was the respondent. The term mother included two cases where the child was living with a legal guardian, in one case an aunt and another case the grandparents. In one case, respondents were the mother and father. The ethnicity of the respondents included 6 Caucasian and 4 African-American parents. Respondents' educational background ranged from high school graduate to college graduate. While each respondent's socio-economic status was not data collected from parents, schools' attendance zones were considered. Consequently, the study included one parent who lived in a federally subsidized housing project and eight who lived in lower middle to middle class neighborhoods. Additional demographic data are located in Appendix B.

While parents' views of and participation in the process were the centerpiece focus of this study, viewpoints and observations of others involved with the process were necessary to bracket and contextually situate parents' perspectives. Patton (1990) refers to this as maintaining a "holistic perspective"; that is, striving to understand the whole phenomenon *and* its complex interdependencies. In all but one case, the child's classroom teacher and a special education eligibility team member were interviewed after the eligibility meeting. The interviews served two purposes: first, to establish if the meeting was typical (e.g., length, persons present, members' participation, procedures) and the parent's participation typical and second to learn more about the school-parent communication and parent involvement during the evaluation process. Interviewing other respondents helped me be as accurate as possible in reporting and increased the study's trustworthiness.

As the study progressed, I decided to interview the special education director to provide context to the study and to get a sense of his views on the school division's special education procedures and any changes enacted since the passage of the IDEA Amendments of 1997 related to parent participation.

Study Setting

The setting for this study was a school division in a city of approximately 100,000 in southwestern Virginia. The aggregate student population for this school division for Fall 2000 was 13,511 students.

Site Selection

Two criteria were used to select the schools. First, the schools needed to represent different geographical regions of the school division. Schools were selected to represent different geographical regions of the school division and offer some ethnic and socioeconomic diversity.

After initial discussions with the Director of Special Education, I met with each school's administrator to schedule a meeting to discuss specifics of the study. Of the original five targeted schools, three administrators agreed to participate. Two more

schools were added that met the study criterion after additional discussions with other school administrators.

Respondent Selection

Selection of parents

Since this study sought information from specific respondents, parents were chosen using purposeful sampling. This study sought to examine parent participation in the special education process for parents who met two specific criteria. First, these parents were of elementary school age (K-5) children. Second, these parents were of children who were referred primarily because they were experiencing academic or behavior difficulty. That is, the initial reason for referral was neither suspicion of physical disability (e.g., visual or hearing impairment) nor severe cognitive disability. In addition, cases where the primary suspected disability was a speech impairment would not meet the criterion for selection. My desire in focusing on children with academic difficulties was to potentially follow parents of children with learning disabilities through the process. These are the parents who most frequently experience the special education process since over 2.8 million, 50.8% of children ages 6 to 21 received special education services under IDEA under specific learning disabilities (22nd Annual Report to Congress, 2000). Even so, my concern was not with the outcome of the evaluation (i.e., whether or not the child is found eligible for special education services as learning disabled) but the parents' journey.

Third, these were parents of children referred for a full special education evaluation for the first time, with one exception. One child already received speech services. Likewise, it appeared from parent reports and school records that at least 4 of the children were previously referred to their school's student support or child study teams. Nonetheless, their cases were not forwarded for a full special education evaluation and in-school interventions were attempted instead. Finally, three parents had experiences with the full special education process for another child, however their experiences occurred years before this study. Consequently, with one exception, each case included in this study was an initial, full evaluation.

A selection procedure was used to determine cases that were included in the study. At each school, I met and discussed with principals the respondent selection criterion. Principals discussed upcoming cases without revealing students' identities. Of the four administrators, three shared information about more than one upcoming case that met the criterion. Administrators from two schools mentioned more than one case but indicated the case they wanted me to pursue. The administrator at a third school allowed me to indicate which cases I wanted to include of those that she described that met the criterion. The other two administrators did not indicate how many students they had who fit the criterion; they just gave me names. Consequently, I was not sure if the parents they contacted were the only ones who met the criterion for the study or those who they wanted to include. Each administrator contacted the parents, briefly explained the study, and if the parents expressed an interest, asked their permission for me to contact them

with more information. Each child's parents who were contacted by the school's administrator expressed an interest in participating in the study.

Then I contacted interested parents and gave them additional information over the telephone about the study and what it would entail for their involvement. All parents who were contacted agreed to participate in the study. I gave parents assurances of confidentiality and informed them that all audio-tapes and transcripts would remain in my sole possession. Once parents agreed to participate, a cover letter and two copies of informed consent forms were mailed or given to parents with the direction to return one and keep the other for their records. All but one parent returned these forms by mail or at our first meeting. One parent, who agreed to participate in the study, did not return her parent consent forms after repeated contacts, so she was dropped from the study.

Selection of eligibility team members

As mentioned previously, a member of each child's eligibility team was a respondent for this study. These persons were determined by the needs of the study, with the common characteristics as persons having knowledge about the child's case history, the events leading up to the eligibility meeting, and proceedings at typical eligibility meetings. In each case, these characteristics also required that the child's classroom teacher be interviewed since the classroom teacher was knowledgeable of the student and parent and communication that took place between school and parents during the evaluation process. Likewise, these teachers were often familiar with eligibility meetings and able to describe how the meetings of this study compared to others they had attended. In all but one of the cases, the classroom teacher was interviewed. The one case that did not include a teacher interview was due the administrator's decision to exclude the teacher's participation. In addition to classroom teachers, a special educator, usually the eligibility chairperson from each eligibility team was interviewed regarding school-home communication during the special education process and their views as to how the eligibility meeting compared to others in which they had participated. The study was explained to these respondents and they were given two copies of Informed Consent forms with directions to read, sign, and return one copy and retain the other for their records (see Appendices C through E).

Research Procedures

This section will address the research procedures used for the study including data sources as collection procedures and timeline.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

Data sources for this study included interviews with parents and eligibility team members, observations of eligibility meetings, written school documents, field notes, and the inquirer's personal journal.

Interview guidelines

Standardized, open-ended interview questions were developed to use in all interviews (see Appendices F through H). This meant interview questions were written

out in advance the way they were intended to be asked during the interview (Patton, 1990). Probes were placed throughout interviews to encourage respondents to add more information or clarify their responses. However, during the actual interviews, these questions were more of a guide, and the interview format became more flexible, relaxed and conversational in tone. For example, sometimes questions were phrased differently and asked in a different order, depending on respondents' comments. Other times, respondents answered more than one question in their responses and so other questions were put aside. Sometimes, respondents answered in a way that led to other topics that were not central to the study, but these were explored so that I could better understand the respondents' thinking.

I reviewed the purpose of the study with parent respondents prior to each pre-eligibility interview. The interview included basic demographic questions including their age, occupation, highest level of education, and the age of their child. Each parent respondent's interview was audio-taped and transcribed afterward for content analysis.

Interview settings

All interviews took place at convenient times and places for respondents. Consequently, interviews were held at schools, restaurants, and in respondents' homes. Interviews took place during the school day, after school, and during evening hours. During the interview, I placed the tape recorder between the respondent and myself. Each interview began with "small talk" in order to connect with and begin to build rapport with the respondent. I made an effort to match respondents' language level, and I refrained from using any special education jargon, in particular, when speaking with parents. My goal was to help respondents feel comfortable to speak openly and to not view me primarily as "an educator completing a study" but as a person who genuinely cared about what they had to say.

The rapport I established with parents as a result of my repeated contacts and conversations with them led me on more than one occasion to provide information to parents. For example, on one occasion when a parent expressed that she thought the eligibility decision had to be approved by the school board or a body in the state government, I assured her that the team's decision was final. I also shared information with some parents who seemed to want more information about special education. In one case, a parent seemed unaware that her child was going through an evaluation to determine if her child qualified for special education. I shared with her, based on the forms she had received from the school, that indeed her child was being evaluated and then tried to explain what that meant. I also referred her to school personnel to discuss the topic more thoroughly. Consequently, while I strove to remain neutral, I was also human.

Field-testing interviews

Before this study was initiated, the parent pre and post-interview questions were piloted with a set of parents to determine if the both the language level and content of the questions were appropriate and comprehensible to parents. This also helped me gauge if the interview questions elicited responses that addressed the research questions. With the assistance of a school administrator, parents for the pilot interview were chosen. The

mother participated in the pre-eligibility interview and the mother and stepfather participated in the post eligibility interview. After the second interview, the parents were asked about their comfort with and the clarity of the questions. Transcriptions of each interview were made and studied as to whether they sufficiently addressed the research questions. Based on the pilot parents' input and this analysis, some wording was changed and questions added to interview questions.

Interview schedule

Interviews were conducted with each child's parent or parents before and after their child's eligibility meeting. Pre-eligibility meeting interviews were conducted within two weeks of meetings, after the evaluation process and any parent involvement in the evaluation was completed. In two cases, two eligibility meetings were conducted since both teams reconvened in order to gather more evaluation components in order to determine the child's eligibility. In one of the two cases, the parent attended both eligibility meetings and was interviewed after each. In the other case, the parent attended the first meeting but was not present for the second. Nevertheless, this parent also agreed to be interviewed after the second eligibility meeting. All but one of the parent post-eligibility interviews was held within two weeks of eligibility meetings. Two post-eligibility parent interviews were conducted over the telephone and with parents' permission, recorded.

In all but one case, I, as the inquirer, made arrangements with each principal to visit the school prior to the eligibility meetings in order to meet briefly with school employees who planned to participate in the eligibility meeting. One principal expressed her desire to convey the information and forms to the appropriate persons herself. The purpose of meeting the participants was to explain the study and the taping of the meetings, explain the informed consent forms, and to answer any of their questions about the study. Each participant was given a copy of his or her signed informed consent form. When principals identified other school personnel who would be at the meeting (e.g., related service providers, agency representatives, or psychologist), I contacted and informed them of the study and secured their informed consent and permission for audio taping.

Tape-recorded interviews with classroom teachers and eligibility team members took place as soon as possible after eligibility meetings. These persons were asked questions specific to the case study parents' participation in the evaluation process and eligibility meeting. Eligibility team members were asked more general questions about their perception of parents' participation in the eligibility process.

Observations

Eligibility meetings were observed so that I could contextually situate and better understand respondents' perceptions of that activity. In addition, observations of other eligibility participants and their interactions with parents within the context of the entire eligibility meeting provided me insight into how the observed teams determined each child's eligibility.

An observation form was developed and used for gathering data during observations (Appendix I, Eligibility Meeting Observation Form). It includes a section where each meeting's specific logistical information is recorded (e.g., location of the table in the room, where persons sit at the table, and objects present in the room,). This form includes a section for specific information such as date, time, names and titles of participants, and duration of the meeting. The form also has a section to record how participants enter and leave the room and how the meeting starts and ends. While it has some structure, the form includes a blank section for keeping a chronological narrative of the meeting and a blank section with the eligibility meeting questions.

Whenever possible, I timed my arrival at eligibility meetings for 20 minutes prior to meetings so that I could observe how participants arrived, chose their seats, were introduced, and how meetings began. Likewise, I delayed my departure after meetings were adjourned to make additional post-meeting observations. I took notes during these pre and post meeting times and recorded them on the Eligibility Meeting Observation Form.

Audio-taping

All interviews and eligibility meetings were audio-taped. It was paramount to record these events since personal observations alone could not capture all the dialogue and nuances of conversations. As Patton (1990) states, "No matter what style of interviewing is used, and no matter how carefully one words interview questions, it all comes to naught if the interviewer fails to capture the actual words of the person being interviewed" (p. 347). Tape recording provided the verbatim, narrative chronicle of meetings to help address some of my research questions. It was my intention during both interviews and eligibility meetings to place the recorder in an unobtrusive location; however, given the size of some groups and different speaking levels of participants, it became imperative to place the recorder close and central to all in order to record all dialogue. Consequently, the tape recorder was usually placed in the center of the group or between the person being interviewed.

Written documents

Certain written documents related to each child's special education process were important to this study. Parents were asked to gather and bring any special education documents to the interviews in order that they may be used as data and prompts to elicit more detailed responses from the parents during the interviews. However, not all parents were able to bring this information to their interviews so written parent permission was secured to review their child's school records and copy any information that would help establish the timeline of their child's involvement in the special education evaluation. Written documents that respondents shared with me were reviewed and with permission, copied. These documents included written notification of meetings, reports, or handwritten notes.

Field notes and personal journal

I recorded field notes at various times throughout the study. These times included before, during, and after eligibility meetings and interviews. I developed a form specifically for note taking during eligibility meetings, as described in the “Observations” section.

Field notes were taken during interviews. Taking some notes helped me formulate additional questions, in particular to further explore respondent’s points during the interview. Taking notes can help locate important points later in the transcript analysis (Patton, 1990). However, notes were kept brief, so that I could hold up my end of the conversation, which was to be attentive and to give my full attention to the other speaker.

In addition to field notes, I kept a personal journal to chronicle my daily experiences, thoughts, leads, and reflections. The journal also was instrumental as an organizational tool to catalogue tasks that needed to be completed throughout the study. Both field notes and a personal journal were techniques that provided a rich source of information for making sense of the data.

Data Analysis Procedures

This section describes the data analysis procedures used for this study and details how the data was analyzed and reported and how trustworthiness was operationalized.

Data Analysis Approach

This study employed the case study research strategy. Yin describes this as a comprehensive strategy that not only extends to the manner in which data is collected but also to the manner in which it is analyzed (1994). This strategy was supplemented by Boyatzis’s (1998) inductive method for analyzing data.

This study centered on multiple case studies that met respondent and setting selection criterion; therefore, analysis included both within and across-case examination. Boyatzis’s (1998) inductive, data driven approach for within and cross-case thematic analysis and code development was used. The steps of this approach are (1) reducing the raw data, (2) identifying themes within cases, (3) comparing themes across cases, and (4) creating and applying a code.

The first step taken was to reduce the raw data. However, before I could do this, I had to convert audio-taped data to print. A third party transcriptionist, with no connection or familiarity with the school division or the participants, was used to assist with transcribing interviews and eligibility meetings. She listened to the audiocassette tapes and transcribed and produced a computer file for each eligibility meeting and respondent interview. She used a transcribing format provided to her by the inquirer. As the transcriptionist submitted each transcription, I carefully listened to the tapes and reviewed the transcripts. The specific points that were checked were a) speaker identification, b) accuracy of transcribing, and c) the completion of terms or test names. All transcriptions were corrected prior to their analysis. After transcripts were produced and corrected, I listened to and read each piece of datum collected and generated for a case (i.e., parent and school personnel interviews, observations, documents, field notes and researcher journal notes) several times. Source information was marked (i.e., underlining relevant

words or phrases and taking notes in the margins) for the purpose of creating a synopsis or summary of the paraphrased or marked information of each piece of datum. This process allows the inquirer to process the information both consciously as well as unconsciously and “provides for close contact and familiarity with the raw information” (Boyatzis, p. 45). This process was carried out in an ongoing manner for each case, as data became available. Overlap between cases occurred since they did not occur sequentially and transcriptions were not always completed in the order they were submitted.

The second step involved comparing all the summaries of each piece of datum within a case to identify themes (i.e., determine similarities or patterns) among them. This task was facilitated by the initial processing of the information summaries created for each piece of datum. This step also assisted with constructing the individual case studies. Case studies were written as a chronology, and sections included case background information; events leading to the child’s referral to special education; from referral to the eligibility meeting; and the eligibility meeting. Post-eligibility sections included the inquirer’s impressions of the eligibility meeting; educators’ impressions of the parent, eligibility process, and the meeting; and parent’s perceptions of the school, the eligibility process, and the eligibility meeting.

In the next step, I made comparisons across cases for the purpose of uncovering related themes (i.e., comparing similarities and differences between cases). Boyatzis (1998) indicates that the aim of this step is to reduce the raw information into smaller “packets”, with the intent that they “contain most of the energy of the raw information and be more manageable than the complete raw data” (p. 47).

Once the cross-case themes were developed in the previous step, they served as a preliminary coding system. I then returned to the raw data of each case, with the code, and carefully reread and listened again for the purpose of determining the presence or absence of each of the preliminary themes. I found that keeping my research focus central and research questions at hand as I worked through this step helped in this process. As a result, I reconstructed and refined some of the themes of the code. Afterward, the code was further refined and organized by clustering the themes.

How Trustworthiness Criteria was Operationalized

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) there is “still a major gulf between theoretical definitions of the trustworthiness criteria and the means of operationalizing them” (p. 329) and that those who use natural inquiry should show “humility in asserting that a “new and truer (more natural?) path to knowledge” has been found” (p. 331). Furthermore, they point out that criteria of trustworthiness in a naturalistic study are open-ended and “can never be satisfied to such an extent that the trustworthiness of the inquiry could be labeled as unassailable” (p. 329). Given these particulars, trustworthiness was operationalized in this study through addressing its credibility, transferability, and dependability and confirmability.

Credibility

Techniques were used to address credibility for this study; that is, so the likelihood that credible findings and interpretations were produced (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Techniques included prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and member and peer checking. Over the course of this study I had a prolonged engagement with parent participants, meeting them at least twice and speaking with them over the course of several weeks. This allowed me to build trust with parents and test for any misinformation introduced by my distortions or of the respondents' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By using persistent observation, I was able to identify events and interchanges during observations to pursue and focus on in greater detail with respondents. Triangulation of multiple data sources--interviews, observations and transcripts, field notes and journal entries --was used to increase the potential that data could be verified by more than one source. For example, a situation where triangulation of data was useful was when the observation of one eligibility meeting indicated that a child had been identified for special education services as other health impaired. However, the eligibility minutes, the parent notification, and the parent post eligibility interview indicated that the child was eligible as for special education services as learning disabled. In addition to the previously mentioned strategies, member checking was used. This technique was used throughout the study as well as at its conclusion. As the study progressed, I used this method through asking questions for clarification such as "Do I understand you to mean...?" As each case was completed, I wrote individual case study reports for parents to review and confirm as written or provide additional information for further clarification and interpretation. The purpose was to provide "...a way of corroborating the essential facts and evidence presented" (Yin, p. 144), not to shape the researcher's conclusions and interpretations nor provide the respondents with veto power. Each respondent was mailed a cover letter and feedback form (see Appendix J) and a copy of their draft case study report. The direction was to only return the feedback form if they had corrections or feedback about their case study. Two parents returned their form. One feedback form contained corrections related to the age of the participants. The other parent sent her feedback form with no corrections but with the comment, "Just to let you know. The case summary was right on. You did good." In addition to member checks, a peer was given the opportunity to review two case studies and provide feedback about their scope and detail in portraying individual cases.

Transferability

The goal of naturalistic inquiry is not generalizability. In fact, Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that "the only generalization is: there is no generalization" (p. 110). The widest range of information for inclusion in this study was taken into consideration and reported. In addition, I used purposeful sampling to assist others in making a decision as to whether transfer is possible (i.e., parents of elementary age children who were referred for academic difficulties and whose children were receiving the full evaluation).

Dependability and Confirmability

A complete evidentiary database was maintained including raw data; data reduction and analysis products; data reconstruction and synthesis products; process notes; material related to intentions and dispositions; and instrument development information. This database thus is available so that it can be reviewed in order to determine if “the data and interpretations of the study are grounded in events rather than the inquirer’s personal constructions” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 324). In addition, this study followed parents through the complete cycle of the process, strengthening its dependability.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Introduction

This study examined parents' views of and participation in the special education eligibility process of elementary-age children were experiencing academic difficulty. The findings of this study are presented in this chapter in two sections. The first section is presented in Figure 3, A Visual Organizer for Parents' Views of and Participation in the Special Education Process. The second section of this chapter addresses parents' recommendations for enhancing their understanding and participation in the special education process.

Parents' Views of and Participation in the Special Education Process

A framework for the research findings is presented in Figure 3 and is displayed under 5 themes. The first three include:

- Parents' Feelings and Concerns;
- Parents' Participation in the Process; and
- Parents' Reactions to Eligibility Decisions.

These findings are presented situated in the context of two additional themes:

- Parents' Knowledge of the Process, and
- Administration of the Process.

The framework shows the stages of the eligibility process that were the focus of this study. These stages include "circumstances leading up to the child's referral" through "child's eligibility determination" (see the bottom of Figure 3).

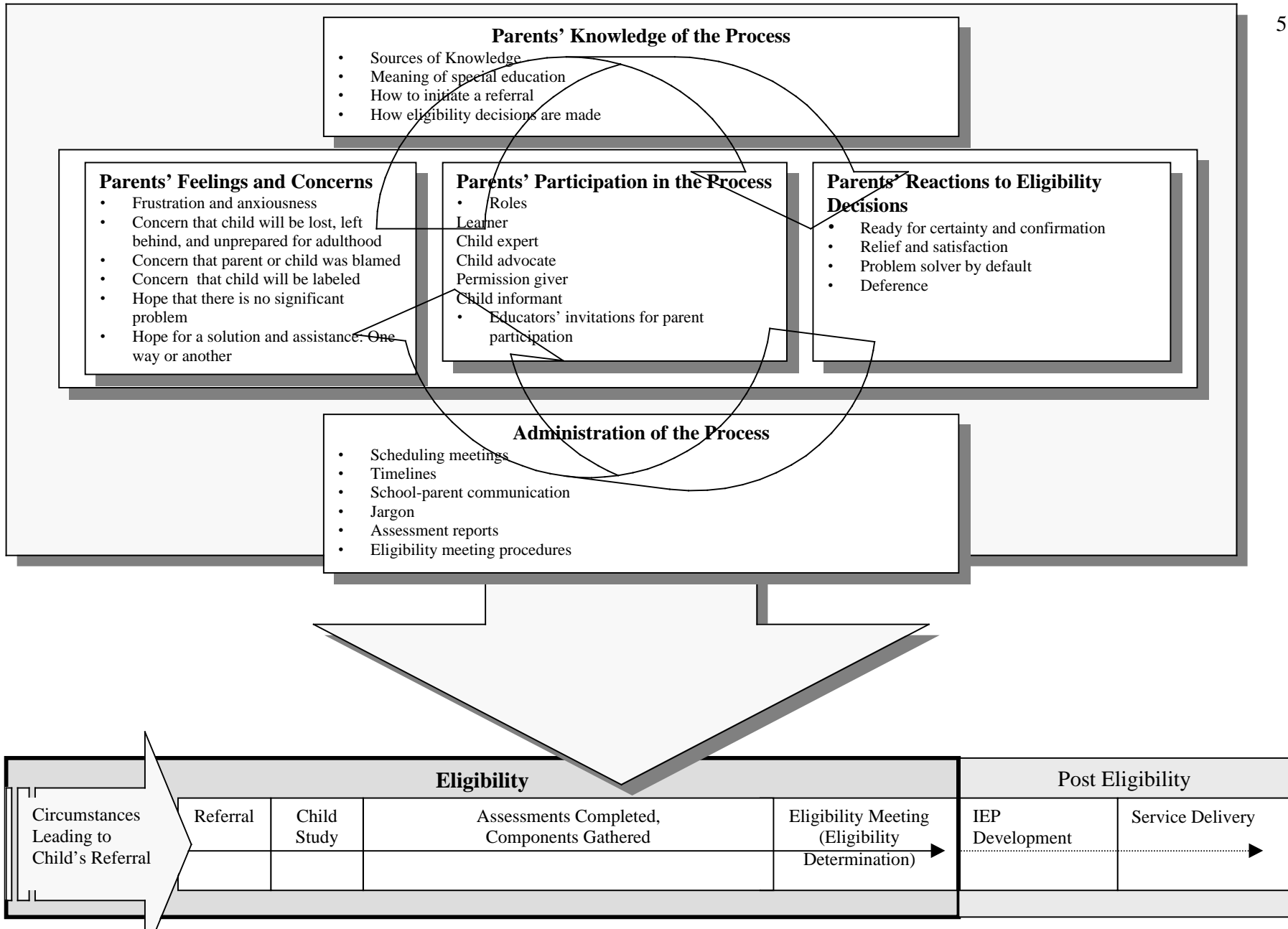


Figure 3. A visual organizer for initial-experiencer parents' views of and participation in the special education eligibility process.

Before progressing, a caveat must be made regarding the representation of something so complex as parents' thoughts and experiences in a two-dimensional display. These themes are connected and related in ways that cannot be so easily separated. Thus, the arrows overlaying Figure 3 represent the dynamic and interactive nature of the identified findings within and among these major themes.

Finally, it is important to frame the findings of this study. First, the findings were based on parents' views of and the inquirer's observations. Second, educators and the special education director provided the overall description of the parents and circumstances of this study. Specifically, school personnel regarded the parents who participated in this study as typical to well informed, in terms of their knowledge of the special education process. Likewise, most educators described these parents' participation in their child's eligibility meeting as typical to more involved than most. In addition, educators described school-home communication and the eligibility meetings as typical. However, two educators described the eligibility meetings as longer and more detailed than usual and attributed this variation to their perceptions of these particular parents' tendency toward greater involvement. The special education director felt that IDEA '97 had no impact on the special education process as it related to the evaluation and identification portion of the special education process in this school division. The director also described school-home communication during the process as, "...the minimal based on what we require to be sent...but beyond that I would say that the variation would be tremendous." Hence, the findings of this study are based on parents' views and circumstances that educators describe as typical for parents of elementary-age children referred for evaluation due to academic difficulties in this school division.

Parents' Feelings and Concerns

Parents expressed a wide range of emotions related to their child's struggle in school and the evaluation process. Parents were well aware of their child's difficulties before the referral was made and expressed frustration, concerns and hopes regarding the dilemma and potential outcomes of the evaluation

Frustration and Anxiousness

Parents expressed frustration and anxiousness because of their perception of the school's delayed or ineffective responses and their own inability to get school personnel to take action. One parent of a 4th grade student, described how she felt school personnel did not respond to her repeated pleas for assistance over the years. This mother assured me that her child's difficulties were not recent.

Parent: It's been there awhile, and I have been mentioned it to them, I been like she is having a hard time cause you all sit there. Do something. I met with them about like, she was in the first grade. I know it was about there. Then second grade you know, it still was going on, I thought well she needs some special help you know.

Inquirer: And what was the response?

Parent: The reply that they gave me, they was like, "Well, Mrs. Allen, we will send her to the summer school and maybe that will help her out a little bit" or

“Mrs. Allen, we will get an extra helper in Chapter One and maybe that will help her out a little bit” or “Mrs. Allen we will see if we can help her a little more. We will send her a little bit more material home for you to help work on her.”

Her daughter continued to fall further behind and then developed acting out behaviors in school that the parent believed were related to her child’s learning difficulties. “I was thinking to myself, if she’s doing this why don’t you all look into this and see that this child needs some serious help?” This parent shared her frustration about the school’s past efforts. “I am tired. I am tired of my child trying to learn, but ain’t nobody trying to help her. I feel like they all just gave up on my baby.” Later, this parent indicated her long-standing concern for her child and her reaction to the school’s recent decision to assess her child.

Then it’s like well, “Oh, Mrs. Allen, maybe your daughter do need to be tested for special ed, do you agree for it?” Yes, I do, I been agreeing. I have been agreeing every since we was in elementary school [referring to the PK-2 school she attending prior to her current school]. I think you all need to help my baby.

A parent of another young girl in the fourth grade shared her past pleas for assistance and the long road of difficulties and failure that her child endured prior to her referral. This parent was custodian of her niece, due to her sister’s untimely death two years before. She anxiously explained.

Before she repeated fourth grade, I kept telling them “She’s struggling, she’s struggling”, and I spoke with her fourth grade teacher. And we had a meeting back then, before she even flunked the fourth grade...she had been tested in the first grade....We all met and somehow they suggested summer school. I say, “You know she failed three classes.” She had flunked the fourth grade and they suggested summer school. Well, she went to summer school. Failed straight out. She flunked out of summer school, unsatisfactorily, straight across the board. It didn’t help.... Well, she was retained. She didn’t do good in summer school so she was *completely* retained.

The father of a third grader, expressed that over the years he and his wife kept bringing their concerns about their daughter’s slow reading progress to teachers’ attention. “I would have liked for it to have happened in first grade at the latest, but it didn’t happen.” His frustration continued to grow, not sure how to get things moving along as his child neared the end of second grade.

It was in second grade toward the end of the year I told the teacher that this child was still learning to read and she’s going into the third grade. I think the comment was, “Well, let her read during the summer time and then we will evaluate it at the first of the third grade.” So it still dragged on...I could not understand why they were not responding to something as evident, as we could see that it was evident, and ...it would be evident to any educator that a child is still learning to read.

Concern that child will be lost, left behind, and unprepared for adulthood

Parents expressed concern that their child would become lost or left behind in the educational system and as a consequence, have to struggle in school and be unprepared

for adulthood. Parents' choice of words painted a grim picture of their worst fear of their child as an educational casualty:

- “So I wanted them to help her because I don’t want her to be lost. That was my main concern.”
- “She was going to fall through the cracks.”
- “It’s so subtle that she would have slipped through the cracks.”
- “I saw it, where it was going to be too late.”
- “He’s going to really be lost.”
- “She’ll be cut loose.”
- “She got lost in the tracks.”
- “They’ll say, “I’m sorry, you know, we can’t help your child.””

Other parents expressed concern that without assistance their child would be less prepared for adulthood. For instance, one parent shared how others might take advantage of her daughter as an adult if she did not get the skills she needed in school.

When she get older maybe because she can’t read, she can’t write, she can’t add somebody is going to take advantage of her and she is going to wind up with nothing because they are going to always use her, and I don’t want her to be one of those in society, I don’t. I really don’t, I don’t want somebody to say well you know “You gave me five dollars” and maybe you know she gave them twenty and not knowing, but she know five from twenty, but you know at that time she get older if doesn’t learn it now, she is going to forget. You know that’s my main concern of her being taken advantage of ...I want her to be responsible, be able to handle herself, be able to read a contract, don’t sign nothing that she doesn’t understand. I want her to be able to hold down a job where she can count money and do things that she is supposed to do for herself.

Another parent voiced a similar sentiment when asked to elaborate on her comment that she was a concerned parent. “The children grow up and when they get to be adults, you want to make sure they are on the same ground and they can function in society like everyone else, you know?” One parent felt that the corners of her neighborhood were loaded with young adult males who were early educational casualties of a failed school system that left children unprepared to function as adults. Her comments to her son revealed her concern for his future.

I tell him I say, "Son, you are not going to be like all these other guys that you think it’s cool because their pants are hanging down, they are wearing, you know, boots and you know their shoelaces aren’t tied” and I said, “But you have got to understand, they can’t read, they cannot write.” I said, “That’s the only thing they know is standing on this corner”....And I said, “They can’t read and write.” I said, “You think they can, but they can’t.” And I said, “I just don’t want you to be them, you know?”

Concern that parent or child was blamed

Parents expressed concern that they or their child were blamed for their child’s lack of success. Some parents felt blamed for their child’s difficulties. For example, a

parent spoke about her perception that some educators focused on home factors, with the intent of blaming her daughter's difficulties on her husband and her.

I am kind of ticked off at them in a way because I said that they are making it seem like it's more, like something could be going on in the house that could be causing her learning problems. The psychologist, she was saying, you know, she was like, "Well, I don't know if it could be learning, or I don't know if it could be the medication or there be something else there." And the first thing that came to my mind, "Oh what do you think, that there's something going on in the home?" I don't think so, you know. They will always try to find some other thing trying to say like maybe we are doing something bad there to make her not do her work here. It ain't got nothing to do with her family thing, you know?

Another parent felt she was blamed for the difficulties her daughter was experiencing. Her child had a history of illnesses that caused her to miss a number of school days. While the parent acknowledged that her daughter's spotty attendance might have had some influence on her difficulties, she did not accept that it explained her child's pervasive difficulties in school. She felt blamed for her daughter's difficulties.

I am not saying that attendance doesn't hurt, but I don't think it's as much as a factors as they try to make it out to be. I really don't because it's like when you go in there, and you try to talk to them and you try to explain the situation, for some reason, the attendance is the (snaps fingers) first thing to come up, you know? Well, boom, she missed this many days. Well, if they are not in school, they can't be learning. OK, you know, right, you know, it's not like we don't help her at home.

Other times, parents felt their child was blamed for his or her own lack of success. For example, a parent received a letter after her child's eligibility meeting notifying her that her child was going to be retained. She read the letter out loud.

These last weeks of school are very important. Your child has not mastered the skills needed to go to the next grade level. You are hereby notified that your daughter will be retained in the 3rd grade for the 2000-2001 school year.

This parent felt that "the letter sounds like my daughter hasn't done her part or tried and she has." She said the wording of the letter disturbed her and she felt it could have been worded differently. Likewise, she felt the letter completely skirted the issue that her daughter has difficulty learning.

Concern that their child will be labeled

Parents worried about their child being labeled and its possible implications. In particular, they worried that their child's identity might be damaged or altered or that their child might be viewed and treated by others based on the label. The need to label is part of the human psyche and helps us understand and create order out of chaos. However, the type of labeling that parents feared is more of the order of what Kunc (1995) characterizes as *disability spread*, where a person's entire identity is displaced by the disability label and others treat the person solely in response to and on the basis of the label. Erving Goffman refers to labeling as "spoiled identity" (1963), a socially constructed stigmatizing of human worth based on labels. For instance, one parent felt

teachers had already “unofficially” labeled her child for some of her recent behavior difficulties. This parent felt teachers viewed her daughter as a *bad* child, that the label was “sticking” to her child, and she was being treated accordingly.

You are a bad child. You gone and did something wrong, you are considered as a bad child...I feel like if she did something yesterday, don't throw it up in her face what she did yesterday because yesterday is gone....I feel like they treat her, you know, about what she did the day before.

Another parent felt that because her son was identified as having a problem, his teachers were singling him out and blaming him for his own learning difficulties. “Well, I just feel like...they kind of pick on my child. That's my feeling.” One particular parent who did not want her son to be labeled felt people would interpret the label to mean that her son was “stupid.”

It's like a skull and crossbones. I don't want it. I think it's scary as a parent and it's scary as a child to know that, ooh!, you are special education. It's a scary word when you are in school, you know? Somebody's telling you that you need special education. Well, what's wrong with me? You know that would be the first thing, what are you trying to say-I am stupid? That would be the way I would see it.

Another parent opposed her child being declared eligible for special education because she had “seen the kids in special ed and these kids have, something is not right up here [pointing to her head], you know?” At one point, she referred to special education as “you know, *that word*” and another time whispered it, as if saying “special education” aloud would make it a reality for her child. This parent was so against her child being labeled that she made it clear to the principal that if her child were declared eligible for special education services that she would remove her from the school and place her in another before she would consent to her child's placement in a special education program.

For one parent, the potential for “informal” labeling continued as long as her child was officially labeled, regardless of what others may say. “I don't care if you say, ““Oh, we don't label.”” Well yes, she would be labeled. It's on her records.” She continued with her own thinking about labels.

I think, well goodness, if this person is LD, I look at what I hear about it. My impression is oh dear, they have a problem, and I do look at them differently, unfortunately. I guess that's a mentality that I have.

She also was concerned that a consequence of her child being labeled might be her separation from peers and placement with children “who have disabilities that are more serious that could pull her down.”

Hope that there is no significant problem

A few parents half-heartedly expressed a hope that nothing was significantly wrong, that their child was experiencing a temporary set back or they would grow out of their difficulties. As one parent remarked, “I am hoping they are just going to tell us he needs to grow up. I believe that's normal [parent chuckles].” Another parent

acknowledged that while she felt her child would qualify for special education services, she would be happy if she had misjudged the situation.

I would be elated if she passed those tests and everything across the board. I really would. Nobody wants to see a decline. They want to see improvement, and if that's the case, I would be elated. Maybe it was just her immaturity mentally and maybe she's more mature now and maybe it's my misjudgment because I am speculating, too.

Yet, another parent felt that her child had already shown a lot of improvement over the past year in his attitude, which she believed was his biggest problem. She thought, given time, he would be able to make improvements in his academic progress. This parent remarked, "I just feel like with time, he will be where he needs to be. He just needs that extra push in the right direction."

Hope for a solution and assistance: One way or another

Parents expressed hope that the difficulties their child was experiencing in learning could be resolved or assistance would be offered to help them succeed, one way or another. Sometimes they did not care how that assistance came to them. As one parent stated, "when you get concrete evidence that a kid needs help, I think they just need to give it to them....They need help and there shouldn't be any questions." Another parent expressed her desire for some kind of help for her child, regardless of whether or not she was declared eligible.

I want them to sit there and if she don't be eligible for it, I want them to sit there and find some help for her. Some kind of help. I don't care if it's for her to stay after school or come in early. Some kind of help for that child. I just want them to find some kind of help. Then maybe she will be able to do a little bit better.

Some parents explicitly desired assistance for their children outside the realm of special education. For instance, one parent hoped that the evaluation would reveal her son needed help, but not necessarily special education services.

Parent: I would hope that they would see that my child does need special attention, that you know my main concern is that we go through all of this and that they do see that he you know he needs the help.

Inquirer: And when you say special attention, do you have in your mind, does that mean special education or could it mean just assistance or

Parent: Assistance, more like to assist him like to help him not like a special ed, like he has a problem, but you know someone there I guess in a one-on-one type setting, a smaller group who you know he's not going to be scared to like you know answer a question and won't be afraid if he gets it wrong you know.

Conversely, there were parents who expressed hope that their child would be eligible for special education services. For example, one mother felt access to special education services would help her child learn and that it would bring about changes in her attitude toward school.

Well, I'm hoping that she will be eligible for the program because it will give her better learning ability through school and I feel it will make her more comfortable

in school and she will take her learning more seriously. She will learn with ease and not with discomfort and she will want to go to school and learn.

Other parents expressed hope that their child would be declared eligible for special education services because they felt that there really were no other options left.

Yes, yes I am really hoping because if she don't [qualify] I think that she probably [she pauses] I couldn't do nothing but just pray, I mean that it get better if she don't, you know? They are going to have to do something.

She continued with her perception that special education was the only remaining option.

Parent: I hope that they sit there and do what they have to do. Give her some help with her education, help her you know learn a little bit more, be focused on task. That's what I hope happens that she do be able to get it and they work with her.

Inquirer: And perhaps you are thinking special education specifically?

Parent: Yeah, that's the only next step. What else could there be?

Another parent shared her hope that her son would be declared eligible for special education.

Inquirer: Do you have any desire or hope that he will be declared eligible for special education services or not?

Mother: In a way, I do because I know he will get, you know, extra attention, smaller classes, and I know if he doesn't qualify for special education... they are going to go on without him, you know?... So, yes, in a way, I do hope that he is eligible.

Summary

Parents felt many emotions regarding their child, themselves, and educators throughout this study. Their feelings were complex and multi-dimensional and reflected their deep concern about their child's welfare.

Parents' Participation in the Process

Parents' participation varied during the process and appeared to be related to two factors: how they chose and were invited to participate. Parents assumed varied roles throughout the process and participated in response to school personnel's invitations to participate. Some roles may seem contradictory, such as learner and child advocate, but they reflect the situation in which parents found themselves--between the known, their child, and the unknown, the process.

Roles

Parents' participated in the process in varied ways. Parents described their participation in terms of roles including learner, child expert, child advocate, permission giver and child informant.

Learner

Parents described their anticipated and actual participation in the process as a learner. Parents stated that they critically listened, learned, and asked questions, all which were expressions of their intent to learn. Specifically, they felt their role was to learn about the findings of the evaluation, which was not surprising since parents had entered a

realm about which they knew very little. Parents expressed their views about their role as a learner prior to the eligibility meeting.

“Well, I am a listener and then once I listen I weigh, I weigh all I need to weigh. I will ask questions. I am the type of person I have to study a situation and ask questions.”

“To hear all the things about all the testing...show me what they’ve done and what the results are.”

“To know what’s going on, you know? I want to know everything, all of it. If they can explain to me the whole situation, the basics of special education and the basics of his learning abilities and what they can do and what kind of program he needs to be on.”

After the eligibility meeting, parents still described their role as a learner.

“I listened, I looked...I was trying to take it all in and understand everything to my fullest capacity.”

“That’s what I went for, to listen to what they had to say.”

“I listened. I paid attention to the expressions of the ladies that were there.”

“I asked questions...and any part that I didn’t understand I asked questions about.”

“I listened. I was doing a lot of listening. I told you I was going to listen to see what they had to say.”

“Sit there and listen, then if I had a question, spoke.”

Child expert

Parents expressed they were experts on their child and that no one knew their child as well as they did. It was not surprising that parents felt that they knew their child best given the intimate nature of the parent-child relationship, including the longitudinal view that parents have of their child and their knowledge of their child’s functioning on a 24-hour rather than a 5 1/2-hour basis, the length of the school day. One parent offered a summarizing statement, “The parents know a lot more about their children than the school does.” Another parent indicated that she had intimate knowledge of the difficulties that her daughter experienced. “I live with her day in and day out. I see her struggle with the homework or this or that and children are not as open at school as they would be at home.” This parent later made reference to her deeper knowledge of her daughter’s thinking when the classroom teacher mentioned he had move the child’s desk in the classroom to deal with her misconduct.

She say, “Oh, if I act up I be bad today he’s going to move me over tomorrow” so right then and there she used him....They don’t know this child has really got a problem here that she’s really playing on their intelligence, but they don’t see that. I see it, see *I am the momma*, I see what she is doing.

Another parent indicated that she, too, had unique knowledge of her child:

If there was one thing that I would go on and do and explain to them is that maybe they don’t understand him the way I do. See what I’m saying? Maybe they don’t see that him having the attitude and his attention span is not necessarily his fault.

Yet, another parent felt she knew her *whole* child because she knew her son and his unique talents in ways educators never could.

It's like if you were around my son, you would be like, "This is the same child that, you know, I see on paper?" versus seeing him outside, you know? He goes down to my mother's house and my father and they built a motorized scooter together and he works on that and he's great with measuring...he can measure and he knows different things when it comes to working like that...I tried to tell them at the other school....So you know it's a lot of things that they don't see that I see in him.

Other parents shared that they, too, had unique knowledge of their child. For instance, one parent said, "I know my daughter's heart. She really desires to do well." Another parent shared that she felt compelled to share her unique knowledge of her child with her teachers.

I felt like it was my job to let teachers know that she's real sensitive and what you say, you know, may make her block just everything out. I mean she will get nervous, she won't listen to you, she won't want to go to school. I just feel like they need to know that.

Clearly, parents felt they saw their child as a total person and that they possessed unique and broader knowledge of their child than educators.

Child advocate

Without regard to how effective they were, some parents advocated on behalf of their child, regardless of their educational or socio-economic background. Parents did not use the term "advocate" or "advocacy", but their words and actions left little doubt; they were trying to promote what they thought was best for their child. As one parent said, "I ain't going to let that one down."

Parents advocated by expressing their concerns about their child, their opinions as to their child's eligibility, and their desire that their child receives help. A notable example of parent advocacy was a parent who repeatedly interjected comments throughout her daughter's eligibility meeting, as the decision of whether or not her daughter was eligible seemed to hang in the balance. She made the following comment, trying to point out that the difficulties her child experienced were not due to poor attendance. She emphasized her belief that her child had a learning problem.

Yeah, so that's no excuse. She's been like four days out of school this year so far so that's no excuse about absentees. It's just a learning problem there and it needs to be recognized because it's getting so it's getting to be carried away.

Again, she pointed out that she would not fade away.

I don't think she's making any progress, and I think if she don't be eligible for it, you all will be seeing me next year if she don't improve because there is something there that needs help and she needs some attention.

The following comment reflects this mother's willingness to remind the team of the serious situation. Responding to a team members' comment that the team had an obligation to strictly follow a formulaic calculation in order to determine a child's eligibility for service as learning disabled, she said "Being strict is not going to help her survive. She needs somebody to help her so she can learn."

Later she spoke of her resolution to continue the search for help for her child in the event she was not found eligible for special education services.

I am going to keep going. I am going to keep going. I am going to say, “Well, look, you ain’t finding her eligible this time. How long do I got to wait for you to try it again because something is wrong with this child? What are you all going to do?”

Another parent shared how she openly confronted the principal at her son’s former school who told her that the school’s eligibility team could not consider an independent psychological evaluation that the parent supplied them for their deliberations.

I just told her I said, “I wasn’t born yesterday. I know you can accept this. I think you should read up on what you can and cannot accept. I know you can accept this because they are a credible organization. They are a learning disability institute, you know, and they are very reputable in this area.”

Some parents advocated on behalf of their child by gathering and storing information throughout the process, acting as an archivist. One way these parents gathered information was by taking notes at their child’s eligibility meeting. A parent shared that she did so “because you never know what you may pick up that you may need to fall back on.” Another parent shared she took notes at the meeting; however, she and her husband also made a list of points beforehand and checked them off as they were addressed. Other parents kept information about their child and the process in file folders or notebooks. They kept, readily produced, and referred to their collection of special education letters of notification as well as other school-home notes and letters, standardized test achievement information, and report cards. One parent was anxious to share her folder of information during our pre-eligibility interview. When I remarked how thick the folder of materials was, this parent remarked, “Yes, girl, I don’t forget nothing.”

Permission giver

Parents acted as permission givers throughout the eligibility process. All parents identified their role as a permission giver at different points throughout the process. In fact, parents felt decisions regarding their child should include and be approved by them. One parent concisely offered, “I am the parent and that’s my child and I have the authority based on that.” Parents most frequently indicated their permission giving by mentioning they signed forms for an evaluation to be conducted. One parent’s comment is representative of others’ views on permission giving. She reflected on her role at child study and offered, “In the last meeting, it was my decision. If I hadn’t decided for them to do this, they would not have done it. They can’t do anything without my say and my signature.”

Furthermore, parents felt certain that school personnel had to secure parent permission for their child’s placement in any special education program. Parents’ statements such as “It’s completely up to me whether or not I want him in or not” and “I think parents always have the last say” reflect their certainty that their permission was needed prior to their child’s placement. Another parent offered the viewpoint that the team made the final decision of eligibility but she retained the final authority as to whether she would give her permission.

The final decision from them is what they are going to do, if he's going to be eligible for this or if they are going to find other classes for him or you know if they feel he needs to be retained, and then you know, I would of course say "yes" or "no."

Child informant

Most parents acted as child informants during the process and sought to help their child understand special education, the purpose and timing of tests and potential outcomes after the testing. For instance, one parent tried to help her child understand the meaning of "special education" and rather than speaking in technicalities, she offered her child a simple, positive explanation.

I tell my son, "It's not, it's special education, but it's because, you know, they want you to read, to write, and they want you to, you know, know your letters, your numbers and they are just giving you that extra special care. That's all it is." I let him know that, "It's about love, son." And I said, "And if a teacher loves you then she will show it by helping you."

This same parent tried to prepare her son for school personnel coming to the classroom to pull him for testing.

I told him I said, "Son, we are going through some tests." I said, "The tests are going to be like they did in Washington." I said, "Do you remember those?" He said, "Oh yeah. I remember those." And I said, "They are going to do the same thing. They are going to come and maybe take you out of class one day and they are going to take you and you are going to go do these tests, and I said, "You think you can do that?" He said, "Oh, yeah, I can do that mommy. I said, "OK."

Another parent shared how she had spoken with her child prior to the eligibility meeting, knew her child's feelings about special education, and tried to ready her for the possibility that she might qualify for services. "You know, she accepts what I say, but realistically no kid really wants it." Some parents spoke of explaining the eligibility meeting outcome to their child. One parent remembered the following when asked if she explained to her son what happened at the eligibility meeting.

Oh, as soon as we got in the car I told him everything. I explained to him in details what all his scores was and how, you know, some things he can take in better and how his short-term memory is better than his long-term memory.

Another parent explained how she informed her child after the meeting that she did not qualify for special education services. "So she come home and wanted to know what they said and I said, "You just, you have to struggle, you know? You are just always going to struggle."

Educators' invitations for parent participation

Parents' participation in the process was determined in part by how educators invited parents to participate. During the gathering of eligibility components, parents were not used as a source of information, with the exception of three parents who were asked to complete behavior rating scales or an ADD checklist. No socio-cultural evaluations were gathered in any of the cases. Moreover, no parents reported being asked

to bring any information or documentation to their child's eligibility meeting to share with the team.

While at their child's eligibility meeting, parents' spent most time listening; nonetheless, eligibility teams sometimes solicited parents' input. The most basic level of requests for parent participation were *quasi-invitations*. Specifically, *quasi-invitation* were requests that, to some degree, appeared to be solicitations for parent input but were no more than a checking for understanding (e.g., "Do you have any questions?" and "Do you understand?"). Sometimes *quasi-invitations* were extended after individual reports, but most times parents were asked at the end of the meeting if they had questions. At two meetings, parents were told to contact the team after the meeting if they thought of any more questions or wanted more information.

Educators also solicited parent input through *confirmations*. That is, educators asked parents to confirm the team's findings by indicating if they matched their own knowledge of their child. However, the questions were closed-ended and framed for "yes" "no" responses, such as, "Do you see that at home?" and "Is there anything that sounds different from what you know of your daughter?" One school psychologist framed one question more as an open-ended invitation to share when she asked, "How are you feeling about how she is doing and the help she is receiving and she's received up to this point and how you think she's making progress?" Educators asked parents for confirmations half as often as they issued quasi-invitations.

Beside *quasi-invitations* and *confirmations*, educators invited parents to provide *supplementary information*. Requests included questions about their child's medical history and condition, their most recent checkups, and visits to non-school professionals. Likewise, educators requested information about the child's educational history and the parents' observations of their child's work habits at home. Educators solicited this type of input more than any other type.

Finally, educators asked parents their *preferences* for decisions under consideration at their child's eligibility meeting; however, they did so infrequently. For instance, a principal directly asked parents their preference for their child's eligibility prior to the team making a final decision. "Do you want to go ahead with the language [referring to services]?" Another principal solicited a parent's input about the possible service options available under a particular disability category when she asked, "And you were leaning toward what?" Other decisions which teams solicited parental input included the child attending summer school, "Does she want to go to summer school?" and the team conducting additional tests, "Does that sound like a good game plan to you?" and "Do you want to go ahead and do the formal screening?" One parent was asked for her input for the decision regarding her child being retained.

In a couple of eligibility meetings, educators encouraged parents to participate when they realized the team may have appeared less than inviting in the way they communicated. For example, in one case, the school psychologist had just finished up a lengthy, uninterrupted report and asked the parent if she had any questions. When the parent indicated she had no questions, the principal made the following comment. "And sometimes we revert to teacher speak, so feel free to just kind of say clarify or translate or something." In another case, a parent had just asked a team member to explain what the

acronym ADD represented. The special education teacher answered her and then said, “Well, thanks for asking. Sometimes we forget.”

Summary

Parents’ participation was a function of at least two factors: how they chose to participate and how educators invited them to participate. Parents took on several roles during the process that ranged from learner to advocate. Educators did not invite parents to participate in the evaluation process as a source of information about their child. However, educators elicited some parent participation during eligibility decision making by asking questions and encouraging them to share information.

Parents’ Reactions to Eligibility Decisions

Five of the nine cases ended in the team’s decision that the child was eligible for some type of special education services (see Table 2, Case Data from Referral to Outcomes). Parents’ satisfaction and reactions to their child’s eligibility determination seemed to depend on what they had hoped would be the outcome.

Ready for certainty and confirmation

Parents expressed that they were ready for certainty and confirmation regardless of the outcome of the eligibility decision. After the eligibility meeting when I asked parents if they felt prepared for the meeting, some indicated they did because they had waited a long time and were ready to know the outcome, good or bad. As one parent shared “...either way I needed to know, you know? That’s how I am looking at it right now. I needed to know for his benefit and I needed to know for my benefit.” Another parent offered the following comment. “We were ready, and we wanted to know what they were finding so we would know if there was a problem or not, even if he had a learning problem we needed to know that.”

Parents whose children were declared eligible expressed they felt the eligibility decision confirmed that their child had a learning problem. For example, a parent whose child was found eligible due to a learning disability shared how the eligibility team corroborated her child’s difficulties and that her child had a genuine need.

They know she got a problem. They have finally, really know, know she’s got a problem instead of speculating about what this teacher say, what that teacher say.

Table 2

Case Data from Referral to Outcomes

Case #	School/ Area of City	Reason for Referral	Information Sources Considered at Eligibility Meeting ^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	Eligibility Outcome	Parent Reactions
1	Albright/ NW	Guardian requested (with classroom teacher's support); reading, written language, & math delays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational assessment • Formal observation • Speech and language evaluation (Receptive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test, Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test, Word-R Test, Test of Auditory Perceptual Skills) • Neuropsychological assessment (outside evaluation-WISC-III) 	Specific Learning Disability; Speech and Language Impairment (language delay)	Satisfied with outcome
2	Albright/ NW	Parent requested; weak reading skills, difficulty understanding and retaining concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal observation • Psychological assessment • Visual motor integration assessment • "An informal assessment of child's feelings" • Educational assessment (Woodcock Johnson) 	Specific Learning Disability	Satisfied with outcome
3	Benet Woods/ NW	Teacher requested; difficulty with processing auditory information, slow progress in reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational assessment • Psychological assessment • Central auditory processing evaluation 	Section 504 (central auditory processing impairment)	Partially satisfied with outcome-glad that child is not labeled, but feels child still needs help
4	Benet Woods/ NW	Teacher requested; slow academic progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational assessment (Woodcock Johnson) • Formal observation • Psychological assessment (including additional educational testing) • Behavioral rating scales 	Not eligible	Partially satisfied with outcome-glad child not labeled, but feels child still needs help. Feels personally responsible for helping child "catch up"
5	Benet Woods/ NW	Parent requested; difficulty with maintaining attention, completing written work, and spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational assessment (Woodcock Johnson; Test for Written Language) • Psychological assessment (including additional educational testing) • Formal observation • Occupational therapy evaluation (Development Test of Visual Perception) 	Section 504; (occupational therapy)	"Outcome" was a surprise; not sure what happens next; has concern that now child is "labeled" teachers are picking on child

¹ Additional information may have been gathered but was not discussed at the eligibility meeting

² Specific assessments, as named by team members, are listed when identified

³ Components are listed in the order they were presented

⁴ No medical or sociocultural component were gathered for any of the cases

⁵ Inquirer did not observe case # 3 eligibility meeting; components reflect teacher, school psychologist, and parent reports

Case #	School/ Area of City	Reason for Referral	Information Sources Considered at Eligibility Meeting ^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	Eligibility Outcome	Parent Reactions
6	Catfield/ NW	Parent requested (with classroom teacher's support); difficulty understanding and retaining concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educational assessment (Woodcock Johnson) Psychological assessment (including additional educational testing; a "brief screening to see if there is anything emotionally or psychologically") Informal speech screening 	Reconvene after receiving additional information	Hopeful since more testing is to follow; feels educators are "missing something"
		_____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speech and language evaluation (The Receptive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test, The Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised, The Test of Auditory Perceptual Skills, The Listening Test, another unnamed language processing test, an unnamed articulation test) 	Speech and Language Impairment (articulation delay)	Not satisfied, child still needs help; parent expresses a need to know how to help child
7	Druid Hills/SE	Parent requested (with support from other child's speech pathologist); weak reading skills; difficulty understanding and applying concepts; lack of focus; poor organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educational assessment (Woodcock Johnson) Speech and language evaluation (Assessing Semantic Skills through Everyday Things) Psychological assessment (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 3rd edition-WISC-III, including additional components- Burkes Behavioral Rating Scale; the Wide Range Achievement Test-Version 3; the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement-the brief form; the Bender Visual Motor Gestalt Test; "house, tree, person drawing"; and "make three wishes") ADD checklist 	Speech and Language Impairment (language delay)	Relieved-parents felt they regained a position of strength; not sure what happens next; still feels child has learning needs; concerned about child's future

¹ Additional information may have been gathered but was not discussed at the eligibility meeting

² Specific assessments, as named by team members, are listed when identified

³ Components are listed in the order they were presented

⁴ No medical or sociocultural component were gathered for any of the cases

⁵ Inquirer did not observe case # 3 eligibility meeting; components reflect teacher, school psychologist, and parent reports

Case #	School/ Area of City	Reason for Referral	Information Sources Considered at Eligibility Meeting ^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	Eligibility Outcome	Parent Reactions
8	Estate Ridge/ SW	Pediatrician requested; difficulty with maintaining attention and distractibility, reading problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educational assessment Psychological assessment (WISC) (including a formal observation; Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement a “test which looks at self-concept”; a behavior rating scale) Occupational therapy assessments (a handwriting test; Test of Clinical Observations) 	Occupational Therapy as a related service	Satisfied with outcome
9	Estate Ridge/ SW	Teacher requested; weak reading, math, and writing skills; inconsistent completion of work; difficulty staying on task & following directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educational assessment Psychological assessment (WISC) (including VMI; reading portion of the KTEA; behavioral rating scale) Occupational therapy evaluation (Test of Clinical Observations; a test on visual perception; a handwriting evaluation scale) 	Reconvene after receiving additional information	Satisfied-felt educators pinpointed child’s difficulties Hopeful that next meeting will reveal a need for special education services
		_____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neurological assessment Vision testing 	Not eligible; monitor progress and meet again at end of the first 9 week grading period in the fall	Hopeful –that educators will continue with the same pre-eligibility support to child in the general education setting Apprehensive-that child can catch up with peers

¹ Additional information may have been gathered but was not discussed at the eligibility meeting

² Specific assessments, as named by team members, are listed when identified

³ Components are listed in the order they were presented

⁴ No medical or sociocultural component were gathered for any of the cases

⁵ Inquirer did not observe case # 3 eligibility meeting; components reflect teacher, school psychologist, and parent reports

Some parents felt their suspicion that their child had learning difficulties was confirmed by the eligibility decision, even though their child was not declared eligible for special education. For instance, one parent saw the meeting as a collection of evidence that suggested that her child had an attention difficulty. "I think we already knew that so we were just more or less waiting for the final word, the proof on paper that said, "Yes, he may have a problem." Even though the eligibility team made it clear that it was not for them to determine that the child had an attention deficit disorder, she and her husband still saw the outcome of the meeting as a confirmation of the child's attention difficulties.

Inquirer: How did you feel when you and your husband left the school? What was your ...impression of the meeting?

Parent: Oh well, it's true. He's ADD (mother laughs).

Inquirer: So that was kind of your like "it's been confirmed"?

Mother: That's true.

Another parent whose child was not declared eligible for services shared that she still felt that the school's evaluation confirmed that her child had learning difficulties, something that his previous school did not acknowledge. She felt her suspicions had been confirmed.

You know how you have a knot in your stomach about things? That knot has been in my stomach for a long time because I have been worried about how I am going to get my son out of this slump or who's going to help me and who's going to see what I am seeing and understand what I am going through with him, you know? Then I went through the meeting and everybody was sitting there and they were telling me the same things that I have been trying to tell his other school for like two years. They had it pinpointed. It was like right on, you know?

Yet another parent whose child was not found eligible for special education services felt the team still confirmed that her child needed help. "It accomplished the fact that, you know, he needs help. Not where he needs special education help, but he does need help."

Relief and satisfaction

Some parents expressed relief and satisfaction about their child's eligibility outcome; however, these feelings were associated with whether or not parents' hopes for their child were realized and not a particular eligibility decision. For example, a parent who hoped her child would be found eligible expressed relief and satisfaction that her child was declared eligible for services and would finally get help.

I felt pretty good about it, pretty good and relieved. Relieved that it's happened, that you know it's happening and it's, that's a great big step right there, and it's a step forward in the right direction and she's going to get the help she needs. I do believe from that she will get the help she needs.

Another parent who hoped that her child would qualify for special education services shared her satisfaction with the eligibility decision. "I felt pretty good, matter of fact I feel pretty good about it because I feel like something is going to happen here, something good is going to happen." In another case, the first eligibility meeting was inconclusive in determining if the child had a disability so the team decided to gather additional assessments and reconvene. As a result of one of those components, the child's vision

was identified as needing correction. The parent felt some relief and satisfaction after her child's vision was identified as a factor that seemed to be interfering with his learning.

I said well, that's one accomplishment and it's out of my mind, you know? It made me feel so much better. I mean I have been so relaxed since he [ophthamologist] said that, you know? It's like one of those pressures off me.

Parents who did not want their child to qualify expressed relief and satisfaction that their child was not declared eligible for special education services. One particular parent shared how she felt when her son was not found eligible.

My only concern was that they was going to say that he had to be put in special education. When they said that he didn't, that just took that whole thought off my mind. I felt (mom audibly sighs) a big relief.

Another child's parents who did not want their child found eligible for special education services stated after the eligibility meeting, "Well, we were relieved that... the momentum had been put on halt."

Problem solver by default

When parents felt the eligibility decision was insufficient or the team did not render what parents believed were the necessary supports to help their child succeed, some felt abandoned by the school or compelled to take responsibility to solve their child's difficulties, without the school's assistance. For example, one parent felt that since her child did not appear to fit into any existing groups, the school had no answers for helping her succeed.

My child is not... stupid, she just, there's a lot of things she just cannot grasp, so what do you do? Do you just leave them hanging and hope that they catch up or hope that they eventually understand? I mean at that point what do you do? I mean I know she's not extremely slow, but there's no in-between I don't think there. Either you have got a lower class or a higher class, I don't think there's any in-between there.

This parent also felt that the school tried to pass off responsibility for her child's learning to her. "One thing that upsets me is they say, 'Well, help them at home, help them at home.' Well, you can help them at home, but that doesn't help them when they are in school."

Other parents mentioned teaching their own child, finding outside resources, or moving their child to a different school as possible ways to address their child's learning needs. For example, one parent believed that it was now primarily her responsibility to teach her child in order to help him learn. Her comments revealed her feeling of ownership for her child's learning. She said, "They told me in detail every area he is having problems in, which will help me know where I stand as far as trying to get him where he got to be." She continued, expressing what she perceived as her responsibility.

Now the hard part begins. Yeah, the hard part begins working towards getting him better, getting him where he needs to be for his future classes, his future education, for his next group of testing that he will have to do.

Later she explained how she planned to work with her son. "I have a plan. I am going to have to get a little bit rougher with him." She commented that "the weekdays is going to

be study. We are going to study for about an hour or two, read a book for an hour and study for an hour.” I asked her what she would do if her son’s grades still did not reflect significant progress. Then she said she would try to get a tutor for three nights a week to help him.

Another parent, whose child was not found eligible for special education services under IDEA ’97, planned to enroll her child in a summer course at a local reading center that promised a money-back guarantee for significant reading improvement in a matter of weeks. She believed the answer to helping her child improve her skills would be through the reading center, not the school because “no one could pinpoint why she has to struggle.” She added, “what I’m looking forward to is the Learning Center...that’s just what I’m thinking is going to fix her.”

Two parents remarked after their child’s eligibility meeting that they and their spouses had considered moving as a method to solve their child’s learning difficulties. This drastic measure was mentioned in response to parents’ perceptions in one case of a school that expected too much and the other case to the child’s upcoming graduation to a middle school that the parent perceived would not present a supportive environment for learning.

Deference

Parents’ whose child’s needs were not addressed in ways they hoped, accepted and showed deference to the eligibility team’s decision; namely, no parent took their concerns elsewhere. For instance, even though her child was not found eligible for special education services, one parent hoped her child’s classroom teachers would continue to support him.

I just hope that they will, you know, give him the attention or the materials that he needs....I think he needs a whole lot of extra attention because its like he lost a whole year, you know, and then he’s jut now really catching up from like a year ago so he really needs to catch up for this year to go into third grade.

Another parent felt her child’s problem had not been sufficiently addressed and the team “had missed something”, but she indicated that she was willing to accept that her child did not have a learning disability and that she and her husband would agree to the school’s recommendation that her child be retained the following school year. She cautiously added that if her daughter did not begin to show signs of improvement the following year, she would not let her be retained again.

Summary

Parents had multiple and varied reactions to the eligibility decision rendered for their child, and these reactions seemed to revolve around whether or not they believed the team had sufficiently addressed their child’s needs. Parents were ready for certainty and felt that the team confirmed their suspicions that their child had learning problems, whether or not their child was declared eligible. Even when parents felt that that teams insufficiently addressed their child’s learning problems, parents showed deference to the team’s decision and sometimes sought alternate ways to help their child succeed.

Parents' Knowledge of the Special Education Process

Parents expressed a cursory knowledge of the special education process even though they attended meetings and received the standard forms and parent information. As one parent shared, "I don't really know the extent of the whole eligibility process."

Sources of Knowledge

Parents reported being provided little information or resources about special education and the special education process beyond what was included in the standard special education notification forms and the parents' rights and due process information. Two parents vaguely remembered they were given a verbal timeline for the completion of the evaluation process. One parent was given print information at her daughter's eligibility meeting about central auditory process disorders and another parent was given information related to ways parents can help children recognize and positively direct their energy. No parents reported receiving any information when asked to identify other sources (e.g., materials, referrals to internal or external school system sources of information or assistance) for learning about the special education process shared with them by school personnel anytime during the process. This is despite the fact that the school division provided me information that indicated that schools were encouraged to send out a letter provided them by the school system's Parent Resource Center with every parent letter of invitation to child study meetings. Likewise, I was informed that the letter went out with parents' eligibility notification letter. However, when asked about such letters or the Parent Resource Center, parents indicated they had no knowledge of the center.

Parents indicated that information provided them by educators through schools' standard forms (i.e., parents' rights and procedures information) was not helpful to them in understanding the special education process. Parents thought the information was difficult to read, intimidating, and needed interpreting by someone with knowledge. For example, while one parent read the parents' rights and procedures provided her, she hinted that the information in it was not very accessible. She said, "Sometimes with a paper like that I am sure you know you can read it and still not know what you have read." Another parent commented that nighttime was the only time he could read the parents' rights and procedures information "...when everything is shut down in the house. It's perfect quiet. You have your glasses on and you are concentrating on it because it's so boring that anything from the outside source takes your mind completely off it." This same parent misunderstood the intent of parents' rights and procedures information, which he found very intimidating. He shared his perception with the eligibility team.

This a legal document, plain and simple, black and white, the law...this is a hammer over the head of the parent...it shadows everything, you see, because in the end it gives you the position of strength, not the parent.

Meaning of "special education"

Parents did not understand the term special education and what it meant. "I don't understand what it's all completely balled up into special education," one parent

admitted. Most parents thought special education meant children who learned at a much slower rate. Several parents' thought special education meant children who had difficulty with self-control, with comments describing them as "a little high strung, hyper" and "kids who can't control themselves, who are always on the go", and "like kids on Ritalin." Parents also thought special education was one-on-one-assistance, less homework, or a different class. When one parent was asked if he knew what special education meant, he responded, "Not really." Another parent seemed unaware that her child was being evaluated to determine if she were eligible for special education services, even though she indicated that she attended the child study meeting and signed the consent form afterward.

Inquirer: Now when I first started off you seemed confused when I said that your daughter is being considered for special education services.

Parent: Yeah.

Inquirer: Did that not ring a bell with you?

Parent: Obviously, *you're* not with this (pointing to central auditory processing report prepared by a nearby university clinic), you are in a *whole* separate other thing.

Later on, I probed again to determine if she understood that her daughter was being evaluated to determine her eligibility for special education services and the parent responded, "I don't know really what special education is, and I have no idea what you are even about."

Two parents expressed different, but interesting views about their knowledge of the special education process. One parent felt that her child's need to be assessed was far more important than any lack of understanding she may have of the process.

I know she has to go through this process and I know I will not understand exactly everything that's on this piece of paper and yet they did, they explained it to me.

But it's just like she has to go through this whether I understand it or not. This has to be done, and I will take it one step at a time.

Another parent suggested that it was not so important for parents to understand the process as it was to understand their child. In this way, she explained, parents could determine what was best for their child when decisions had to be made.

It's just that to understand the process is to understand your child, and you know, what the needs of your child are and then from what they do at the eligibility part of it, I guess you can pinpoint what it is that you want for your child.

How to initiate a referral

Parents did not seem to understand that they could initiate a referral, even though some identified that it was they who started the process. However, their stories revealed that they actually kept bringing their concerns before the school, not that they realized they had the right to make a referral if they suspected their child had a disability. Parents' stories indicated that sometimes others were instrumental in getting the evaluation process started. For example, a child's pediatrician sent the school a request on his prescription pad to "please do psychological and educational testing" after receiving completed behavior rating scales. Another parent revealed that the speech pathologist was

“the one who instigated the push...if it hadn’t been for her, it would not have gotten past base one”, which hints that this parent did not know how to initiate a referral. There was a lone exception. A child’s private counselor referred one parent to a private psychologist, not to her school, when she indicated that her child was having difficulty in school. The parent mentioned this appointment to her child’s teacher at a fall parent-teacher conference who informed and encouraged her to refer her child to the school for a full evaluation, telling her that it was her right as a parent. This parent clearly articulated an understanding of her right to refer. “Her teacher this year said I can request this whether they want it or not, it was my right as a parent. She told me it was my decision regardless.”

How eligibility decisions are made

Parents were not sure how decision making for their child’s eligibility took place; that is, where that decision was made and who was involved in making it. Even though parents expressed they wanted to be involved in decision making and most felt that it probably took place at the eligibility meeting, some parents thought the eligibility team made decisions prior to meeting with them. For example, a parent offered the following viewpoint.

I thought they were going to come down and say this is what we are going to do, and this is it. It’s like, “This is what we have decided, we went all over this and you know, do you agree and sign the papers?”

Other parents thought the eligibility team’s decision had to be sanctioned by others. For instance, I asked one parent what would happen next after her child was declared eligible, thinking that she might say that she and certain team members would meet to talk about planning a program. Instead, she explained that the decision for her daughter’s eligibility had to be reviewed and approved by others.

It don’t stop right here. OK. What we are doing here is like getting heads and tails about where she is at and what we need to do. Those papers go up before a board that’s dealing with the kids that need this special help. What they read in their evaluation, everything that’s over here in their evaluation. If they come to agreement, see it’s like she’s being agreed on, voted on, voted on twice. OK. They can say, yeah it doesn’t matter, when she go up there to the State. It’s like government funded, so they can say no.

Another parent offered her insight as to how the eligibility decision was made.

“I know it probably goes to a higher level, maybe actually to Richmond....Possibly the City School Board, you know? I am pretty sure they would probably have more say in it than probably the State of Virginia, but I think the final decision probably would come from the City School Board.

Summary

Parents have a marginal understanding of special education and the process. Schools are parents’ greatest source of information about the special education process but most information is minimal and comes through standard forms and letters. Parents

are unaware of some of the basic components of the process including how to make a referral, how eligibility decisions are made, and the timelines of the process.

Administration of the Process

The administration of the special education process varied between schools and within teams. Administration is defined as how schools carry out the procedures of the special education process. The areas discussed in this section include scheduling meetings, timelines, school-parent communication, jargon, assessment reports and meeting procedure.

Scheduling Meetings

Parents were invited by school personnel to attend pre-child study meetings (known as student support meetings), child study meetings, and eligibility meetings; however, no parent acknowledged being contacted for their input prior to school personnel scheduling meetings. In fact, in four cases, meetings were scheduled at times that were problematic for parents to attend, given their work schedules or other appointments.

Most parents accepted without question that they had to change their schedules or make accommodations so they could attend their child's scheduled eligibility meeting. However, one parent requested that the morning eligibility meeting be delayed to accommodate getting her youngest child to school. She was told by the principal that it would be a "to do" to change the meeting time since all the other members of the eligibility team had already received their letters.

In another case, when it appeared that an ongoing eligibility meeting would need to be rescheduled because it appeared that a team member would not be able to attend, the eligibility chairperson looked at the school's calendar and gave the parent a date. When the parent indicated she could not attend on the suggested day due to a previously scheduled medical appointment for her child, rather than suggest another date, the chairperson said, "That's fine. Would you have any objection to us going ahead with the meeting?"

Timelines

Sometimes teams misinterpreted the intent of federally mandated timelines. As a case in point, an eligibility team determined that the school's speech and language pathologist needed to conduct additional testing and the team would reconvene the eligibility meeting after the testing was completed. While the parent signed the informed consent for additional testing, the speech and language pathologist erroneously informed her that she was allowed another 65 days to complete the additional assessments. However, she reassured the parent that she would conduct the testing within the next couple of weeks.

In another case, it appeared that the team was operating under an end of the year "cut-off" date for making referrals for assessment. The eligibility team met on April 25th and was considering whether or not to gather additional assessment information before the end of the school year, mid-June, in order to determine the child's eligibility. An open

discussion ensued between team members over whether or not the “deadline” had passed yet for sending in year-end requests for evaluation and whether “downtown” would accept a referral after the deadline. The parents did not understand and when they asked about the team’s concerns about the timeframe, the principal explained that “...we try to get the paperwork done early enough in the year so that it can be accomplished before the end of the year or at least in the summer.”

Another team seemed to misunderstand the 30 calendar-day requirement for IEP development and disregard the requirement for a representative from the eligibility team to be part of the IEP team. In this case, the parent was told that a “summer team” would be developing the child’s IEP, not the child’s current teachers who knew her or those who were involved in her assessment. This was surprising since there were another 24 calendar days until the end of the school year. Furthermore, the eligibility minutes listed “summer staff” under “eligibility committee representative to IEP”, so it seemed that the impression created at the meeting that no one from the eligibility team would serve as a representative to the IEP team was supported by the eligibility minutes.

School-parent communication

Most parents said they were well apprised of their child’s progress in school during the evaluation process; inversely, they reported receiving little communication or information from educators once they gave their initial consent for assessment except for a formal letter of notification about the eligibility meeting.

Formal letters of invitation and notification were brief, marginally informative, and not reflective of the spirit of IDEA ’97. Parents’ letters did not contain any reference to their child’s evaluation reports being available for review prior to the eligibility meeting, which is a point of guarantee in IDEA ’97. In addition, some parents at one school received letters of child study and eligibility meeting notification with misspelled words and grammatical errors. For example, one parents’ child study meeting notification letter was dated “November 12” and requested the parent to “Please call ate least 5 days prior to the meeting to acknowledge you attendance.” Some parent letters of invitation listed some names of individuals who would attend the meeting without identifying information as to their role or expertise. Finally, letters of notification invited parents “...to attend this meeting and participate in the decision making process” but did not offer specific suggestions as to how parents might prepare for or participate in decision making.

No parent cited any initiation by school personnel to contact them with the purpose of updating them about the progress of the process, although parents wondered what was happening and how soon it would be until the process was completed. Two parents reported being in their child’s school for other school functions (i.e., a school fund-raiser and a dance recital) when they ran into their child’s teacher who happened to mention the status of the assessment process. However, as one parent guessed, “Let’s say I hadn’t been there, OK...then I may not have known.” Other times it was parents who solicited information from school personnel. For example, a parent reported speaking on the telephone with the principal when the parent asked and was told her child’s eligibility meeting was scheduled and that she would soon get her notification letter. In addition,

some parents recounted learning of the status of the evaluation period through their children who indicated when they had been tested. Another parent contacted me during the evaluation process to ascertain the status of the evaluation since she had not heard from school personnel. Other than that, parents consistently reported they spent their time throughout the process waiting to hear information and waiting to meet. As one parent said who was waiting for her child's eligibility meeting to take place, "I filled out the forms and I guess I am like every other parent. I am just waiting for it to happen, you know?" Another parent shared, "Since I have been in the process, I'm waiting for the process to develop."

Jargon

It is a paradox that parents generally felt that teams explained their findings well yet my observations of meetings indicated otherwise. Educators used educational jargon without using supporting lay language. For the purposes of this analysis, jargon is defined as terminology specific to a field of study, in this case special education, that those with a deep knowledge would readily understand and use. One parent who already had faced jargon-filled conversations with school personnel prior to her child's eligibility meeting warned team members at the start of the meeting, "Don't use that lawyer talk."

Parents asked team members to explain language specific to education that they used including "attention deficit", "cognitive", and "perceptual motor coordination"; acronyms including OHI, ADHD, ADD, OT, SLI, and 504; and terms such as "downtown" that appeared to have significance to educators, but not to parents. The following brief excerpt illustrates a team's attempt to explain the meaning of the term "OHI" to the parent, how it differed from "LD" and why her child did not qualify as "LD" but would have access to services through an OHI label.

Principal: So what we are trying to do is do OHI, which means she is other health impaired and use the services that we have to be able to provide her some individual services.

Parent:OK.

Classroom teacher: So the LD monitoring would be under=

Principal: =Under the other health impaired.

Classroom teacher: A type of service under=

Parent:=That's what I am asking, I just wanted to make sure that's one and the same...it's not two different services.

Classroom teacher: It's one of the services that could be provided under that.

Parent:Oh, OK.

Speech pathologist: Speech would be what's called a related service, it wouldn't be under the OHI or the other related services.

Parent:Oh, OK.

Classroom teacher: And then the classroom modification, is that OHI?

Speech pathologist: That's under, that would be under speech, IEP the modification and modification pages, you would sit down at the IEP meeting and you would choose what modifications she would need.

Parent:Oh, OK.

Classroom teacher: She doesn't have the test scores to just automatically get her into LD.

Parent: Right.

Classroom teacher: So, but because she does have other health problems you can get her in that way, even if she doesn't have the scores to get her in because of the health problems [we] can go around and get her in that way. That's my understanding. ...So even though she doesn't have the scores she can get the services because of the health problems.

This collective explanation is reminiscent of the renowned Abbott and Costello routine of "Who's on first?" And, as it turned out, the child's eligibility minutes and justification forms indicated she was "eligible for special education in the SLD program" due to visual perceptual and memory deficits, not OHI.

In another case, after receiving written notification of her daughter's eligibility meeting, a parent immediately went to the school, with letter in hand, because she said she did not understand its meaning. She ran into the principal, pointed out the word "disabled", and asked for an explanation.

Parent: And he read it and he looked at me and before he could answer I said, "I have a problem with this word right here. And that's when he assured me, "Don't worry about that, we have to, that's how they have to do it because of the feds." And I'm like *DUH*.

Inquirer: Does that have any meaning to you, feds, because of the feds?

Parent: No, it didn't.

Assessment Reports

Several educators shared "undernourished" or "overstuffed" narrative reports of assessments at eligibility meetings. Frank Dempster, professor of educational psychology at the University of Nevada, used these terms to describe the state of textbooks in his article, *Exposing our students to less should help them learn more* (1993). These terms aptly described assessment reporting at eligibility meetings.

"Undernourished" narrative reports lacked the level of detail needed to communicate effectively since the information was less substantive and lacked the level of detail to be meaningful. The presentation of information was less an explanation and more of a telling or naming of the form, scores, or event. As a case in point, the following is the *entire* educational report given at an eligibility meeting for a 4th grader who had been retained twice, attended summer school the previous year, and yet whose achievement level in reading was two years behind her classmates.

I tested the child over a couple of days and what I had noticed was that her broad reading was at a third grade sixth month, her broad math score was a third grade sixth month. Her written language was a third grade seven-month, her broad knowledge was a fourth grade fourth month. Her word attack, which I thought was a little bit low was a third grade third month. What I noticed was she worked really hard for me, she worked really hard, she took time to, when she came upon a question she didn't know she was you know, willing to say you know, I don't know this and she went on, you know she worked hard. That's basically it.

“Overstuffed” narrative reports were those that had a lot of information, often with no clear distinction as to important or unimportant details. The important information was embedded among the unimportant or less significant information. It was an “information dump”, where the presenter unloaded until all the assessment information was shared, whether it was one assessment or more. For example, a psychologist who presented his report on the WISC-III shared every item and the child’s every response on each section of the instrument. He also included each of his prompts to each of the child’s responses. His presentation contained so many details that it was difficult to pick out the most important information. The following is a brief excerpt from his report.

She also was a little weaker on general information and knowledge. For example, tell me what to do, she was able to tell me how you, what you have to do to make water boil and name me two types of coins. She just shrugged. I asked her tell me the names of two coins again. She shrugged again and then she said 25 cents. And I said what else can you think of? She said 50 cents. I said well, yeah, that’s, you don’t see many of those or something like that know, and I said can you think of another one? She said dime, and I said yeah, that’s another one. What month comes after March? She got that right. How many days make a week? Name the four seasons of the year. She said summer, no spring, summer, August, and I said well August is a month, can you think of another season? She said winter. Then I asked her again and she was able to think of the fourth one, fall. How many things make a dozen? She said a lot. I said well how many would that be if you counted them, how many would there be? She said 100. How many hours make a day? She knew that, twenty-four, and she missed the next five in a row, so we stopped. What does your stomach do? She said I don’t know, and I asked her again, she shrugged. I asked her again and she said, again replied that she didn’t know. Who was Christopher Columbus? She said a president. I said what is he most famous for? She said she didn’t know. Name three oceans, she, first I got no response and I asked her again, she shrugged. Which month comes next? No I am sorry, wrong one, which month has an extra day every four years? This was you know, just a few weeks after February 29th so she guessed March. In what direction does the sun set? She said the east. So she was a little below average on that.

Other team members who shared their testing information more succinctly and for the most part using lay language to support their explanation of tests, scores, and terms, still tended to ramble, talking until they had reported all. However, they did not connect the information, summarize the highlights of their findings or make concluding remarks beyond asking parents if they had any questions.

When personnel who administered assessments were not present at eligibility meetings, other team members often presented the missing person’s report or observation. There were nine presentations made by team members who were not administrators of the assessment or observation, including five assessments (1 each of an occupational therapy assessment, vision assessment, neurological assessment, psychological, and central auditory processing disorder assessment) and four classroom observations. Only one team member who presented one of the five assessment reports

told the team that she contacted the professional who conducted the assessment and spoke with him regarding his findings. She shared the report and her telephone conversation of additional points with the team. Most often educators with similar educational training as the assessor shared reports; however, this was not always the case. Persons without similar training as the assessor sometimes shared reports. For example, one school administrator who shared an occupational therapy evaluation, gave a narrative report that was brief, filled with educational terms, and not entirely clear.

Let's hear what the OT says. The OT says that, she gave him a development test of visual perception, which assesses the motor reduced visual perception and then visual motor integration. And the standard score for average is between 8-12, and he scored between 8-13, so he is solidly average in the visual perceptual area. She did say that he had some difficulty in the gross motor assessment that she gave him, which she says is not standardized and she said a slight difficulty was noted with the visual scanning on a plane, and I guess that's tracking horizontally or tracking vertically. He couldn't always do it. So what she has recommended is that she give him some OT services just from now until the end of the year, just to get a better look at him and see if, if she can pick up on something that's she's missed. But his visual perception seems to be average to above average.

Team members, including parents, had no recourse to ask questions or get more information about a report when the assessor was not present. For example, when one team member presented the writing portion of a child's educational assessment, the psychologist questioned the validity of the writing test subscore since it was so much higher than results of her assessments. The team set the writing scores aside since the person who administered the test was not present for them to question. This same team member shared a classroom observation made by a person who was not present at the meeting. The observation was mostly a checklist format so it was difficult to get a clear understanding of what the person saw as she observed the child in his classroom setting. Most information was checked off as to what degree the behavior was observed (e.g., "more so", "average", "less", "not observed"), which the teacher noted as she worked her way through the form. Again, the observer's absence made it impossible for any team members to ask clarifying questions regarding her observations or ask for her general overall impressions.

Eligibility Meeting Procedures

Eligibility meetings varied in measurable ways such as length, number of attendees, and information presented (see Table 3, Data Summary for Eligibility Meetings), but they also varied in the way the meeting was conducted. While one school's eligibility team consistently seemed effective at meeting procedures (see Table 4, One School's Effective Eligibility Meeting Strategies) other schools appeared less effective for several reasons. Effectiveness was based on teams' compliance with regulations; characteristics of effective team meetings as put forth by Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Mitchell (1981); parents' observations; and my observations and experiences in special education. Teams did not clearly articulate their purpose for meeting (i.e., to determine the child's eligibility for special education) or the eligibility

Data Summary for Eligibility Meetings

#	School Name	Meetings		Attendees by Title									
		Length in minutes	# of Attendees	Parent(s)	Principal	School Psych.	Classroom Teacher	Special Ed. Teacher(s)	Speech & Lang. Path.	OT	Visiting Teacher	Guid. Coun.	Others
1	Albright	70	8	*2 aunt (guardian)	* 2	* E, B	* F * F	*A, *C, B	* C, B				
2	Albright	66	8	*2 mother	*2	* A,B,C	* F	* 2 * C			* 2		Reading Specialist * F
3	Benet Woods	60	6	*2 mother	*A	* C	* F	* B,C, E	* E				
4	Benet Woods	30	5	*2 mother	*A	* C	* F	* B, E					
5	Benet Woods	30	6	*2 mother	*A, E	* C	*F	*B,C,E * 2					
6	Catfield	58	6	* 2 mother	* A	* B,C	* F	* B, C	* 2				
		13	5	————	* A	* 1	* 2	* 2	* B. C				
7	Druid Hills	99	9	* 2 mother *2 father	*A	* C	*F	* B, C,E * 2	* C	* 2			
8	Estate Ridge	50	13	*2 grandmother *1 grandfather (guardians)	* A	* C	* F	* A, B * C * 2	* F	* C	* 1	* 1	Teaching Assistant * F
9	Estate Ridge	55	8	*2 mother	*A	*C	* F	* A, B * C, F		* F		* 1	
		42	8	*2 mother	*A	*2	* F	* A, E * F		* E	* 1		
Total	Range	13-99	5-13										
Total	Mean	64	9										

Key	
*1	Present at meeting, but did not participate
*2	Present at meeting & participated
Roles	
A	Facilitator (i.e., appeared to guide all or part of the meeting)
B	Scribe (i.e., completed all or part of the meeting minutes)
C	Assessment Administrator (i.e., administered and reported on assessment(s))
D	Observer (i.e., reported a formal student observation)
E	Reporter (i.e., reported another absent evaluator's assessment and/or formal student observation)
F	Sharer (i.e., reported child's current functioning/progress in school)

Table 4

Composite of One School's Effective Eligibility Meeting Strategies

One School's Effective Eligibility Meeting Strategies	
Meeting characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaxed, friendly • Members used humor (Principal referring to parents and she coming into the meeting last—"There's an advantage to coming in late. You get the big chairs.")
Initiation of meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent was met in the school's lobby and escorted from lobby to meeting room • Introductions with titles, whether they completed an assessment, and the type of assessment
Facilitators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear facilitation with: <i>Purpose statements</i> (e.g., "And we are just coming back today to go over all the results of the testing") <i>Transition statements</i> (e.g., for introducing new members to present—"Well, maybe Mrs. Tucker can give some information about that because she did the OT eval.; for the decision that needs to be made--Well now I guess at this point we just need to consider the findings that were just given as a group and decide as a committee if we think the child is eligible for these special education services at this time and if so, what type of services.") <i>Bringing team to consensus</i> (e.g., "So you all want to reconvene when we get the additional information then as a committee and discuss those?"; "Are we all in agreement that he's eligible for OT services?") <i>Clearly states team's recommendations</i> (e.g., Well, what this is Mrs. Coulter, is the committee discussed and presented information and the findings as well as the teacher and committee input and considered whether your child is eligible for any special education services at this time. The OT therapist has concerns with his visual perception and tracking, and the possibility of ADD. So we will reconvene upon receipt of this additional information as a committee"; "So this is what we are recommending- a neurological and vision testing.") <i>Clear delineation of the team's responsibilities from other's responsibilities, when necessary</i> (e.g., "I think originally the child's mother had talked to his classroom teacher about the attending problems and the possible attention deficit disorder, and in talking with the pediatrician before he would even consider medication intervention, you know, he wanted more information. And that was one of the reasons that we went ahead and did all the evaluations. So I think we have got a lot of information now to give him, you know? But it is a medical diagnosis, and of course, you know, he would be the one to make that decision. We can say this is what we are seeing, but it is a medical diagnosis.") • Familiar with records in the case (e.g., recent school moves) and references other relevant information from records (i.e., other recent evaluations, reports) • Forms and procedures were explained to parent (e.g., "And I need to get the Release signed. This just gives permission for us to share information that the vision doctor and the neurologist and for them to send the information back to us"; "Now because these evaluations are recommended by this committee what they will do is if you have insurance, they will bill insurance first, but anything insurance will not pay, the school system will pick up. Should you choose not to go through your insurance, the school system will pick up the costs.") • Did not rush meeting but also did not let it flounder

Team members who taught child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All instructional personnel (teachers and teaching aide) were present • Shared with team the original reason for the child's referral • All gave an update of how child is currently functioning in settings where they are with the child • Brought examples of current work • Shared the current instructional interventions and considerations given to accommodate child's difficulties (e.g., special reading program) • Attended to presentations and asked questions • Mentioned child's attributes (e.g., "He's so caring and he is a loving child", "I mean, he really likes to do well")
Team members who conducted assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All school personnel who tested child attended and presented their own findings <p><u>Substance of presentations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explained assessment and what it assessed • Explained how many testing sessions were conducted and length • Explained how child approached the testing situation and the testing tasks • Referenced results of assessment to other assessments (i.e., other recent similar assessments) • Gave examples of errors • Mentioned strengths and weaknesses • Presentations primarily used lay language; jargon was kept to a minimum; educational terms/scores were anchored (e.g., 100 is the average standard score, and scores within 85 to 115 are in the average range) • Presented summary statements of findings (e.g., So you know, summarizing, we are looking at a child who demonstrates solid average ability, solid average or better paper-pencil skills according to my findings, above average short-term memory, which is interesting, but you know we are talking about a different set of demands on him versus him being in a classroom situation with all its distractions, he did real well on that. Perceives himself as having a wonderful self-concept. His achievement is pretty much in line with his ability. I think that one of the main things that kind of sends up a red flag are the behaviors that are associated with a child with attention deficit, hyperactivity, the part, the restlessness, even on a one-on-one or small group situation.") <p><u>Presentation style</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy, as if talking among friends • Addressed entire team, not just parent • Assessments are presented sharing written report summaries and actual test protocols with parents
Non-school personnel (Independent) reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School personnel made telephone contact with assessor and discussed the report and findings prior to the eligibility meeting • School personnel shared the report and points made by the assessor in the phone conversation
Parent support & information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer was made for parent to observe a related service provider in order to understand what she would be doing with the child • Shared how they would continue to support child until the additional assessment information was available • Group generated possible suggestions to help parent and child (e.g., modifications to classroom testing administration that would be helpful to child given the testing results; ways parents can constructively channel child's high level of energy at home) • Immediate written suggestions were given to parent; meeting immediately after the eligibility meeting to share suggestions

outcome. For example, the lack of clear communication and facilitation at one meeting contributed to the parent's belief that her child was labeled "attention deficit disorder" by the eligibility team, which he was not. This parent did not realize that the team was waiting for her to bring back additional input from her child's physician indicating an ADD diagnosis before they would consider reconvening to discuss any further action. No clear, purposeful summary statement about the final recommendations was made to the parent and the rest of the team. Other times, introductions were not made, team members came late and left early, and held whispered *side bar* conversations or wrote notes to each other. Two parents felt their meetings were rushed. One parent expressed she thought the meeting was rushed, but "I figure that's the way it's supposed to be" and the other offered "that was really rushed...and when you rush through something even though you are good at what you do, there's a big room for error or a big room for missing something." Sometimes meetings seemed directionless and seemed to languish, as noted by following parents' comments. "It didn't seem like to me they were zeroing in on any kind of solution, not out of negligence or not knowing what they were doing, I just don't think they really knew where it was going."

Meetings have an unquantifiable component, the meeting atmosphere that is collectively created by the individuals at the meeting. Parents identified they felt welcome and comfortable to participate, whether by individual team members or the entire team. For example, one parent indicated that her child's teacher in particular made her feel comfortable on the morning of her son's eligibility meeting before she even entered the meeting room by greeting her and putting her at ease when she arrived at the school.

I walked in the school and she's like, "Oh, here you are. Great. We are upstairs. Just relax, you know, sit here. I will come down and get you." And, you know, and I was like, at first nervous, I didn't know what to expect, you know? But his teacher, she really made me feel good that morning."

Other parents felt that the team desired their input. As one parent remarked, "Well, our input was important it seemed like. They were not trying to brush us off. They were honestly wanting to hear what we had to say and have our thoughts." Another parent shared similar feelings.

Well, they really made me feel welcome, you know? It's like they made me feel like it was my floor, you know? It was like, you are here, this is what we have done, and we want to know do you agree with it and you know, how do you want to go about it? Is there other ways you want to, you know, go about helping your child? They just made it feel really open.

Another parent mentioned she felt comfortable because she thought her child's classroom teachers spoke up on her child's behalf during the meeting and had her best interests at heart.

One thing about the meeting that I liked was her teacher really stood up for her and her problems she was having in the classroom... it's just like they were on her side so to speak, the student's side, and I was very impressed with that.

Some parents mentioned that they felt comfortable and welcome to participate at the meeting by a pre-established relationship they had with educators at their child's

school. For instance, a parent offered this summarizing statement when asked if anything made her feel comfortable or welcome to participate at her child's eligibility meeting.

I feel like when we walk in, and again it may be simply because I have been going to the school since my oldest, who's 27, I feel like, I feel at home at the school.

Anyway, even though I have gone through different principals and teachers, I just feel at home when I go there. I think they are nice and good teachers. I think they make you feel welcome. They are very friendly. And you know, I can walk in there now and some of them I never knew because of this, they always speak. So you walk in, you know it's a friendly atmosphere when you walk in so you feel very comfortable.

Another parent talked about how the principal always made her feel welcome at the school and how she was accessible.

If anything is bothering me or I feel like something that I need to talk to someone about the school, I can call her. And I can talk directly to her, no going through secretaries or anyone else. It's her.

Yet another parent offered that "the principal is a wonderful person, and he always makes you feel welcome and to express what you need to say." Finally, a parent shared that she felt comfortable to participate because of her belief that the educators at her child's school were child-centered.

They are just so nice and it's like they are warm and they are real, you know? I just think the school is really, they care about children, not just, you know, that they are there and you know, they have to because that's their job, you know? I really feel that they love their job and it's just not something, you know, they are not in it for the money. It's more of a calling.

Summary

Translating policy and procedures into practice is what schools do as they administer the special education process. Observations and parents' comments reveal that schools often show a perfunctory compliance with policy and procedures, for whatever reasons, but a desire to make parents feel welcome and comfortable.

Parents' Recommendations to Enhance Their Understanding and Participation in the Special Education Process

Parents' recommendations clustered into the following areas when they were asked how educators could enhance the process to make it more understandable and to improve parent participation:

- provide more information about the special education process;
- provide more information about assessments;
- provide prior notification about timelines for testing;
- expedite the process;
- be empathetic toward parents;
- create a relaxed atmosphere at meetings; and
- get parents' input into scheduling special education meetings.

It is important to note that while the following suggestions are broken in distinct categories, they relate mutually to other suggestions across categories. Likewise, it is worth mentioning that at times parents' recommendations seemed to directly spring from their own favorable or unfavorable experiences and other times appeared to be a reflection of general brainstorming. A complete list of recommendations to improve the special education eligibility process based on special education legislation, parents' recommendations, and my suggestions based on observations and personal experience follows in Table 5, Recommendations for Enhancing Parents' Understanding and Participation in the Special Education Process.

Provide more information about the special education process

Parents wanted more information about the special education process. For instance, a parent suggested that parents need to know that special education programs exist. She felt that often parents were not aware that there were other options for parents to explore for children who struggle besides summer school. She felt that information workshops should be offered periodically to parents so if they suspected their child might have a learning problem, they could attend to learn more about specific disability characteristics. She also thought it would be a good idea to post special education information on the school's web site so that parents could access the information at anytime without having to ask school personnel. This same parent mentioned it would be helpful for them to receive written information prior to the eligibility meeting that explained special education terms to guide and inform parents.

That way, they will go into the meeting and say, "Well, this is something I read. I read this so I understand" or they can point blank ask questions....If they are given the chance to go over it and ask questions ahead of time and they can call the school or talk with the principal or anybody about what they don't understand, then by the time meeting time comes they are well ready.

Table 5

Recommendations for Enhancing Parent Understanding and Participation in the Special Education Process

Recommendations for Enhancing Initial Parent Understanding and Participation in the Special Education Process	
<u>Information about the Process</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide parents a glossary of special education terms that may be used. • Individualize assistance and information to parents by providing and explaining a <i>Special Education Evaluation Checklist (SEEC)</i>. The SEEC items may include parent preferences for notification when assessments are completed, what to expect at the eligibility meeting, requests for copies of assessment reports prior to eligibility; schedule an individual parent session to explain information; request for internal and external-school information sources, more information about the process, disability specific information, timeline for process, or other items. • Post and keep current special education information on the school’s website (e.g., special education forms, timelines, procedures, and terms; links to other valuable websites). • Offer mini-workshops on topics related to the special education process that will help parents better understand and be an empowered partner in the process. • Provide parents with a pre-labeled, expandable accordion file when their child is referred to use throughout the process to bring to each meeting, to organize their information and materials and to bring their own data to meetings.
<u>Meetings</u>	<p>Scheduling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confer with parents before scheduling meetings. • Schedule sufficient time for meetings so they are not rushed and so that all participants can completely share and discuss information. <p>Before the Meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure all team members understand their role and its responsibilities. • Make sure arrangements are made so all classroom teachers who teach the child can be present. They each bring important information and unique perspectives. • If classroom teachers cannot be present at the meeting, they should provide a written summary of the child’s progress in their class to help the team see how the child functions across the day in all settings. • Be sure to have all necessary components at the meeting. • Encourage parents to participate in ways that feel comfortable to them. Prior to the meeting, offer them participation options such as “parent reporting”, parent input and Q & A. <p>The Day of the Meeting</p> <p><i>Protocol and Procedures</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greet parents in a common area and escort them to the meeting room. • Conduct meetings in welcoming, “neutral” territory (e.g., a small conference room). • Have name tags or tent cards to identify persons’ names, positions, and what component they administered. • Conduct the meeting using good meeting procedures (i.e. a clear beginning, introductions, purpose statement, discussion, closure with summary and clear ending). • Team members should introduce themselves and tell why they are present (e.g., what test they administered). • Make paper and pen available to parents. • Introduce persons who enter meetings late. • Provide refreshments for the meeting, if possible. Otherwise, individual team members should not bring drink or food to the meeting. • Use carbon paper-issue/action forms at eligibility meeting to record “non eligibility” decisions so that everyone is clear on what other decisions were made, the responsible parties, and the timeline for events to occur.

	<p><i>Building “Esprit de Corps” and Encouraging Parent Participation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct the meeting in a relaxed, informal manner. • Consider parents’ point of view. • Keep discussions “child-centered”. • Attend to the speaker--listen to their words and message. <p><i>Things to Avoid</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not use the meeting to spring unrelated, potential upsetting information on parents (e.g., “I had to move your daughter’s desk today because she was having a problem with the child next to her” or “Your child failed today’s math test”). • Do not hold “side bar” conversations, mouth comments to others, or write and pass notes during the meeting. • Do not flip through papers and files, examine fingernails, or complete other unrelated tasks during meetings. <p>After the Meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform all necessary persons who were not present of the meeting’s outcome(s). • Conduct a parent post eligibility contact after the eligibility meeting (1 week-10 days) to ascertain if they have any questions or need clarification. <p><i>Periodically conduct a post eligibility team debriefing and have school team members evaluate the meeting.</i></p>
<p><u>Communication</u></p>	<p>Among Professionals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child study chairpersons and eligibility chairpersons (if not the same person) should work together to coordinate efforts in terms of communication with parents and preparation and transition from one meeting to the next. <p>With Parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid jargon and use lay language as much as possible to sufficiently explain and contextualize specific special education terms and information such as acronyms (e.g., OHI), abbreviated terms (e.g., psych. for psychological assessment), and commercial names (e.g., the Woodcock–Johnson for educational assessment). • If parents indicate that they are having difficulty understanding information, re-explain, and then recheck with parents if the additional explanation helped with “Would you like more information?” rather than “Do you understand? Or “Does that make sense?” This takes the focus off what parents might perceive as an embarrassing admission of not understanding and frames it in terms of being provided sufficient information. • “Chunk” and summarize information when presenting and explain how the components fit together.
<p><u>Forms</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use forms that are friendly. Strong language can intimidate. • Use forms that are clear, up-to-date and accurate. • Make sure meeting participants’ names and title/role are listed in parent notification letters. • Explain forms carefully to parents. • Give parents sufficient time to read and understand forms. • Offer parents additional time to discuss forms with their spouse. • Direct parents whom to call if they have any questions about forms. • Provide detail in meeting notification letters that help parents understand generic statements (e.g., “You are encouraged to attend this meeting and participate in the decision making process” ; “Input from you is extremely important”)
<p><u>Assessments</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give parents the option to be notified before and/or after each assessment is completed. • Schedule a time to explain an assessment if parents express a desire to know more about it. • Provide parents copies of report summaries prior to the eligibility meeting to read and formulate questions for the eligibility meeting. • Make sure all that all evaluators are present to share their reports. If they cannot be present, the team member who is sharing the report should read and be familiar with the report. They should also speak with the assessor to get more details to accurately share the report • Provide parents with a summary sheet with names and summaries for specific assessments. • Use supporting techniques & visuals to share assessment results (e.g., sit next to parent, show profile, show protocol). • Share assessment data in narrative form. That is, do not read written reports. • Make sure the assessment information includes the right amount of detail, without being tedious or sparse. • After the full narrative report summarize assessment results, highlighting the important information so parents get the “nutshell” version.

She compared this information to “a sort of like a syllabus...to know what to expect.”

Another parent, who never really seemed to understand that her child was being assessed for special education, stated that it would be helpful if educators explain special education and its terms early in the process. One child’s parents suggested educators provide more detailed information about consent forms and give more time for parents to review and discuss forms before asking parents to make decisions or give consent.

Provide more information about assessments

Parents wanted more information about the assessments given to their child prior to the eligibility meeting. They cited that this knowledge would help them better understand the assessment results as they were presented at the eligibility meeting. Parents recommended that educators share more information about tests (i.e., the names of tests, what they assessed, how they were chosen, and what they comprised) so parents could be familiar with them prior to the eligibility meeting. Some parents specifically recommended school personnel sit down and explain the tests to them before the meeting. “If they would sit down and explain, you know, at the time when they are ready to do it, what they are going to do.” One parent commented that she wanted information “in detail, well not too much detail” prior to her child’s eligibility meeting suggesting that parents want to be informed but not overwhelmed with information. One particular parent made a recommendation, pulling directly from her own experiences. She suggested parents be given a copy of reports prior to walking into their child’s eligibility meeting.

I would have liked to have walked into the meeting with a copy of everything that they had already, give me the whole copy. When I sit down at the table, let me look at it as you explain it. You see they had it over there beside them and I was looking. So if it was my choice, I’d of rather had my own copy.

Another parent made the point that without specific knowledge of the assessments, a parent is hard pressed to think of legitimate questions to ask about the tests during the meeting.

You are thinking, “OK they did the test, certain things”, but you don’t quite understand exactly what all they did. Well,... I think it boils down to, you know, as far as the meeting, I mean you know, *you can say you did whatever, but that doesn’t really, I mean you know, help you understand what they are saying, but it doesn’t actually help to comprehend what all they actually did* [emphasis added]. So you don’t have a lot of questions other than the fact, you know, they ask the question.

Provide parents prior notification about testing timeline

Parents recommended that they be reasonably notified prior to their child being tested. They wanted to be notified a week to a day prior to their child’s assessments so they could make sure their child was well rested, they could share with their child that they were about to be tested, and they could communicate to their child the importance of trying their best. Some parents suggested that a parent would know of any circumstances with the child or family that would warrant suggesting that the assessments be delayed because the child would not likely perform well.

Expedite the process

Parents suggested that the special education process be expedited. Some parents felt that the special education process should be initiated sooner when educators first noticed a child struggling. Others felt the process itself took too long and wanted to see it shortened. One set of parents went on to suggest that hiring more psychologists to complete the psychological testing would cut back on the length of the evaluation period. The father remarked, “We’re the richest nation on Earth and yet we don’t have enough funds or resources to achieve this type of level.”

Be empathetic to parents

A few parents suggested that professionals show empathy toward parents. The most heartfelt plea for empathy came from a mother who was visibly agitated and spoke at length when she made her recommendation. Her child’s eligibility meeting had been contentious because members were divided regarding her eligibility. Most members felt the child was eligible for special education services, while two argued that she was ineligible because of what they thought was an insufficient discrepancy between her ability and achievement scores. This parent suggested that educators need to show empathy for parents.

I think they should have been a little bit more understanding.... Instead they are looking at it like professions, you know, how it’s supposed to be....And I think that’s unfair... I mean because you got to look at the parent’s point of view and how the parents feel, if the parents is uncomfortable with a lot of things that should make you sit back and say well what *if* it was my child, how would I feel? What would I do? How will I go about doing it?

Another parent suggested that educators explain assessment results in such a way that demonstrates empathy and understanding to parents. “I think they just need to remember how *they want* to be treated.”

Get parents’ input before scheduling meetings

Some parents suggested schools get parents’ input before scheduling meetings so parents could attend. For instance, one parent mentioned that she felt times are often scheduled that are inconvenient for parents and make it difficult for them to get off work to attend. She suggested that schools be more flexible and consider scheduling after-school and even late afternoon meetings since most parents work until 5 p.m. That way parents could leave work a little early and stop by the school on their way home from work, which would cause the least amount of disruption for them.

Create a relaxed atmosphere at meetings

Two parents recommended the meeting tone remain informal and relaxed because they felt it helped put parents at ease. As one parent stated, “If you have to, crack a little joke and see how they [parents] take it, see if that loosens it up a little bit. Don’t make it real stuffy and real formal.” Another parent recommended that the school personnel should “relax a little more instead of being so tense.”

Summary

Parents' recommendations included practices that they felt would help them become more informed and involved into the special education process. Parents' suggestions appear to enhance the process for parents by providing them information, strengthening lines of communication, involving them more, and creating a welcoming atmosphere in which parents can participate.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The IDEA Amendments of 1997 put renewed emphasis on parent involvement in the special education process. This study was driven by my desire to discover how parents participate in and view the special education process four years after the reauthorization of arguably one of the most revolutionary pieces of federal legislation, the 1975 Education for ALL Handicapped Children Act. This chapter contains a summary followed by discussion of the research findings, implications and a proposed model, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Parents' Views on the Special Education Evaluation Process

This study provides insight into parents' views of and participation during the special education eligibility process. The research findings of parents' views of and participation are presented through the following five themes, which are displayed on Figure 3, Chapter 3. The first three themes include: (1) Parents' Feelings and Concerns, (2) Parents' Participation in the Process, and (3) Parents' Reactions to Eligibility Decisions. These themes are presented situated in the context of two additional themes: (4) Parents' Knowledge of the Process and (5) Administration of the Process. Following these findings are parents' recommendations to enhance their understanding of and participation in the special education process. Parents' suggestions appeared to be based on their own personal experiences.

Historically, few studies have examined parents' views of and participation in the special education process at the level of intensity that included plural interviews combined with observations of meetings. Moreover, no studies were found that exclusively examined, at the elementary school level, parents' views of and participation in the evaluation portion of the special education process.

A value of this study is that it offers insight into how parents perceive the process. This insight may help educators examine their current practices and develop new thinking and procedures that facilitate parents' understanding and participation in the special education process. New thinking and revised practices and procedures may lead to greater, more meaningful, and sustained parent-school collaborations that, in turn, may lead to better schools in the 21st century.

Parents' Feelings and Concerns

Parents describe multiple and sometimes contrary feelings and concerns. Parents express frustration and anxiousness about their child's history of lack of success, what they perceive as the school's slow or ineffective responses and their own inability to get school personnel to take action. Parents express concern that without assistance their child will be lost or left behind and as a consequence be unprepared for adulthood.

Furthermore, parents worry that they or their child are blamed for the child's academic difficulties. Likewise, parents worry about their child being labeled and potential consequences of their labeling. On the other hand, parents hope that their child is only experiencing a temporary setback rather than a long term learning problem. However, parents hope for a solution and assistance for the difficulties their child is experiencing.

Parents' Participation in the Process

Parents' participation in the special education process is a reflection of two factors: how they choose to participate and how educators invite them to participate. First, parents describe their participation through varied roles. Foremost, parents view themselves as learners during the eligibility meeting and they do so by listening and questioning. Parents act as permission givers throughout the process for decisions related to their child. Parents also believe they are child experts because they possess unique knowledge, a knowledge with depth and breadth that cannot be matched by educators. Parents advocate for their child, without regard to their socioeconomic or educational background or their knowledge of the special education process. In addition, parents act as informants to their children, informing them of events, answering their questions, and helping them make sense of what is happening.

In addition to the aforementioned roles, parents' participation in the process also depends on how educators invite them to participate. Parents are seldom asked to serve as a source of information about their child prior to eligibility. Similarly, parents are not asked to come prepared to the meeting to share information about their child. Parents spend most time listening at their child's eligibility meeting. However, educators infrequently invite parents to participate through invitations to share that include *quasi-invitations* and requests for *confirmations*, *supplementary information*, and *parents' preferences*. Unfortunately, most of these invitations are framed for closed-ended rather than open-ended responses.

Parents' Reactions to Eligibility Decisions

Regardless of the outcome of their child's eligibility determination, afterwards parents express they were ready for closure and certainty about their child's academic difficulties. Parents express relief about the outcome of their child's eligibility decision when the decision rendered is to their satisfaction. In addition, when parents feel that the decision rendered will benefit their child, they express satisfaction that something positive will happen to help end their child's difficulties. On the other hand, parents also express disappointment, resignation, and a sense that they are problem solvers by default when they perceive that the decision rendered does not appear to adequately address the difficulties their child is experiencing.

Parents' Knowledge of the Process

Parents' knowledge of the special education process influence how they view and participate in the process. Educators serve as parents' primary source for information. Parents do not find the parents' rights and procedures information understandable or "parent friendly." Parents have a cursory and sometimes misinformed understanding of

special education and its eligibility process even though they participate in meetings and receive information.

Administration of the Process

The administration of the special education process affects how parents view and participate in the process. Specific to this study, educators do not solicit parent input prior to scheduling eligibility meetings. Timelines are misinterpreted and school-home communication during the process is formal and minimal. Educators use educational jargon often without explanations or supporting statements when communicating with parents. Narrative assessment reports are *overstuffed* or *undernourished* and sometimes delivered by those other than the assessor, which may lead to misunderstanding and removes the opportunity for questioning or dialogue. Effective meeting procedures are inconsistently practiced; however educators make parents feel comfortable at meetings through creating a welcoming atmosphere or by having a pre-existing relationship.

Parents' Recommendations to Enhance Parents' Understanding and Participation in the Special Education Process

Parents offer insight into how to improve their understanding and participation in the special education process. These suggestions include the following: provide more information about the special education process and assessments; provide prior notice about testing timelines; expedite the process; be empathetic toward parents; create a relaxed atmosphere at meetings; and get parents' input into scheduling meetings.

Discussion and Conclusions of Key Findings

The key findings of this study are discussed in this section and their relationship to the existing body of literature is addressed.

Information about the special education process comes from mothers. Mothers in this study were the participants in the special education process like previous studies (Caines, 1998; Denton, 1983; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Harry, 1992; Romero, 1989; Scanlon, Arick, & Phelps, 1981; Vaugh, Bos, Harrell, & Laskey, 1988; Wiener & Kohler, 1986; Zake & Wendt, 1991; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). This may be a reflection of a traditional division of parent responsibilities with fathers as *breadwinners* and mothers as caretakers with greater involvement in children's day-to-day lives. Mothers' involvement may also be due to an economic factor. Namely, meetings are held during work hours, so it may be that only one parent, typically the mother, can leave work to attend. This responsibility may fall to mothers' since fathers' job responsibilities and greater pay make their presence at meetings more difficult.

Parents care deeply about their children and their schooling and educational progress. Nothing in this study suggested that parents are apathetic to the educational process or the welfare of their children. On the contrary, parents seemed very concerned about their child's welfare. This study offers insight into parents' feelings, concerns, and hopes as they experience the process, which may in turn help us better understand, involve, and reach parents. Seeing the process through parents' eyes, the reciprocal

empathy that Turnbull and Turnbull (1986) describe, is the first step for improving the process for all.

Parents' ultimate concern and desire is that the evaluation process leads the team to ways to stem their child's academic difficulties and help their child be successful in school. All parents in this study recognized that their child was at the end of a long road of experiencing pervasive difficulty in learning and was in danger of losing significant educational ground. Given this, it is easy to understand why parents feel less than satisfied if they believe that schools do not adequately address their child's educational needs. Parents' desire for assistance should be educators' desire, too, regardless of the child's eligibility for special education services. This unspoken desire should translate to a voiced commitment by educators to maintain a child-centered focus during the study and a pledge to use the process as a fact finding journey to help develop adequate supports for the child. This insight into parents' thinking is a small, but valuable piece of information that educators can use to better understand parents and develop empathy for their situation.

Parents' overall participation in the special education process remains unchanged since the early days of PL 94-142; that is, they are largely passive participants. Parents still experience much of the eligibility process passively (i.e., as information receivers or non-participants) much like they have the past 25 years (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981; Lynch & Stein, 1987; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 1982; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). This finding is not a judgement call suggesting parents are disinterested or disengaged from the process but rather a statement about the level of parent participation that educators elicit.

Even though parents participate in meetings and receive information, it does not mean they understand the special education process. Parents in this study like others (Harry, 1992) did not understand the steps in the process or how decisions were made. In fact, some parents' misunderstanding comes from educators' *compacted* information that is best described as easy answers to more complex issues, such as telling a parent that "feds" require certain language in notification letters, but missing the opportunity to explain that the intent is to keep parents informed and to protect their rights throughout the process.

Educators do not involve parents in the process at the level guaranteed or intended by law. Parents in this study were not full participants in the process; specifically, educators did not schedule meetings with parent input or give sufficient notice, much like past studies (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992; Lynch & Stein, 1962). Beyond this, educators did not engage parents as partners in the process, although increased parent participation and involvement has been an intent of those who crafted special education legislature. As the individual who helped draft the "civil rights" section of PL 94-142 offered Sarason, "We were going to make damned sure that school personnel were no longer going to ignore parents, to act unilaterally without the involvement and approval of parents" (pp. 35-36). However, this study suggests that the intent for parent participation of this landmark legislation and of

increased parent participation in IDEA '97 have yet to translate into practice in a meaningful way.

There may be multiple reasons for the maintenance of the status quo of parental involvement in the special education process. One possible explanation for maintenance of the status quo is that parents may be seen, at their worst, as a hindrance to the decision making process. Parents may be assigned labels such as “difficult” or they may be metaphorically viewed as “road blocks” or as “throwing a monkey wrench” into the decision making process. However, educators who hold these views should be reminded that some of the best decision making can occur when there is conflict and a collective probing and working until all parties are satisfied. Another possible explanation for maintenance of the status quo is while educators believe parents have the right to be informed of decisions and even see them in their making, they do not believe that parents should have a voice in decisions because educators do not see potential assets that parents bring to the decision making process. Namely, educators value and understand what various professionals bring to the process, but they do not value or understand what assets “non-professionals” (i.e., parents) bring to the process. This is made clear by one of the educators in this study who seemed to imply that parents should not have a great role in the process since they did not understand it or bring specific expertise to the process.

I think parents should participate...but not too much because some parents do not understand the whole process and what's involved and they can't give a very good statement or judgement call regarding the whole issue if they really do not understand everything that's involved and if they don't understand the laws and if they don't understand the testing formats and process and all the things that are involved and how they all are intricate parts of a whole, because *you need the whole and with all those parts you get the whole* [emphasis added].

This educator is exactly right, but not in the way she intended. Educators need all the parts, including parents' input, to get the whole. A third possible explanation for maintenance of the status quo is that educators may feel threatened due to their perception that increased, meaningful parent participation would lead to educators' loss of control of the decision making process. This view is easy to understand and will be most likely hard to change. Right now, boundaries between professionals and educators are clear because professionals (i.e., educators) have a purpose at meetings; that is, they have been given the power and the voice to make decisions through their training and what they bring to share. “Educators speak as educators, for example, after becoming proficient in their professional discourses. Certifiably so. Following certification one is permitted or asked or compensated to speak with authority on education” (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 14). Educators may feel that increased parent participation blurs boundaries between professionals and parents and allows parents into an arena that they have never been permitted before. In his book, *Geographies of exclusion: Society and differences in the West*, David Sibley (1995) points out, mixing of roles can create zones of ambiguity in social categories. While the point of his discussion is social classes and their separation in society, the application also has meaning to parents and professionals and their roles in the special education process.

For the individual or group socialized into believing that the separation of categories is necessary or desirable, the liminal zone is a source of anxiety. It is a zone of abjection, one which should be eliminated in order to reduce anxiety, but this is not always possible. Individuals lack the power to organize their world into crisp sets and so eliminate spaces of ambiguity (p. 33).

This is the new challenge that educators must face. A final explanation for the maintenance of the status quo of parent participation is that it represents a complex set of issues. Making significant changes in the organizational operation of schools can be difficult in the context of societal pressures and scrutiny and diminishing resources and support.

Parents express a need to participate in the special education process, from having more input to scheduling meetings to making decisions about their child. Parents' express a desire to be more involved in the special education process as has been suggested previously (Horner, 1986). Their desire for involvement coincides with their right to participate based on the *political principle*, when "...decisions are made affecting you or your possessions, you should have a role, a voice in the process of decision making....It is a principle undergirding and embodied in our legal and political systems (Sarason, 1995, p. 19).

Parents report receiving a minimal amount of communication and information about the special education process but express a need to learn and understand more. Parents in this study reported receiving minimal communication and information, but they wanted to understand the process and wanted more information about the process and the tools used in decision making. This finding is consistent with others (Denton, 1983; Lynch & Stein, 1987; Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992) that found parents desire more understanding of the process and the outcomes. Better informed participants makes for a better decision making.

Educators' use jargon and cryptic reporting, which estranges parents from the process and inhibits their understanding. In this study educators used jargon and cryptic reporting (i.e., undernourished, overstuffed, or unclear reporting) which impeded understanding. Jargon use (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 1982) and its effect on parent understanding has been raised in the past (Harry, 1992; Weddig, 1984; Wiener & Kohler, 1986). As Surber (1995) pointed out in his article about written psychological reports, "...both novice and experienced readers are let to wade through jargon, attempting to ferret out the key elements that have relevance for the student...consequently items of greatest relevance become diluted in the sea of information being washed ashore" (p. 162).

Educators are key to parents' comfort and understanding and participation in the special education process. Parents who reported feeling welcomed, informed, or involved identified educators as the source for those feelings. This study finding relates to past studies (Harry, 1992; O'Brien, 1987). This finding is understandable given the fact that the special education process is a school-based and regulated process that is generally foreign to parents. Parents appreciate educators who care for their comfort and understanding of the process because this implies, at least to some degree, an acknowledgement of parity on educators' part toward parents or desire for parents' input.

To use a cliché, legislation can be passed mandating parent involvement *until the cows come home* and nothing will change until educators refocus their view of the call for parent involvement from that of an issue of compliance with regulations to an opportunity to seriously examine and reconstruct current practices. So while IDEA '97 contains high standards for informing and involving parents, these standards can only be translated as an unspoken mandate for educators to find ways to do so. It is educators, not legislators, who will lead the way for parents to be true partners in the special education process, beyond the level of just inviting them to meetings and explaining assessment results, which may be more like the *shadow boxing* that Sarason (1995) describes.

It is quite fashionable to proclaim the necessity and desirability of parent involvement in our public schools. Such proclamations have the ring of virtue, inclusion, and a democratic ethos. If this affirmation of value and goal is well intentioned, the fact is that it is too often empty rhetoric, and when it is not empty rhetoric, the actions they give rise to are more like shadow boxing or less frequently but fatefully, naïve in the extreme about the problems they will engender (p. 11).

Educators should use the spirit of special education legislature as a catalyst to examine and reconstruct practices in the special education process. However, viewing parents as real partners may be one of the hardest hurdles we face in special education (if not education) today.

Recommendations

A Model and Rationale for Implementing the Special Education Process

If educators are to seriously examine and reconstruct current practices, they should adopt a model and way of thinking about the special education process as they work with parents. I offer a model for schools to use (see Figure 4, Model for the Effective Implementation of the Special Education Process) with the caveat that one size does not fit all. In plain English, parents are unique and they will have personal preferences for being involved and informed. So, for example, while one parent may want detailed print information about all the assessments and a meeting with assessors to learn about the assessments before the eligibility meeting, other parents may want no more than the minimum information typically given to parents with name of tests and a general description of each. Therefore, educators' first responsibility will be to develop an instrument for determining parents' preferences for information and involvement at the beginning of the process.

At the top of this figure is "EVALUATE & CHOOSE A COURSE OF ACTION". Most educators assume that the sole goal of the special education process is

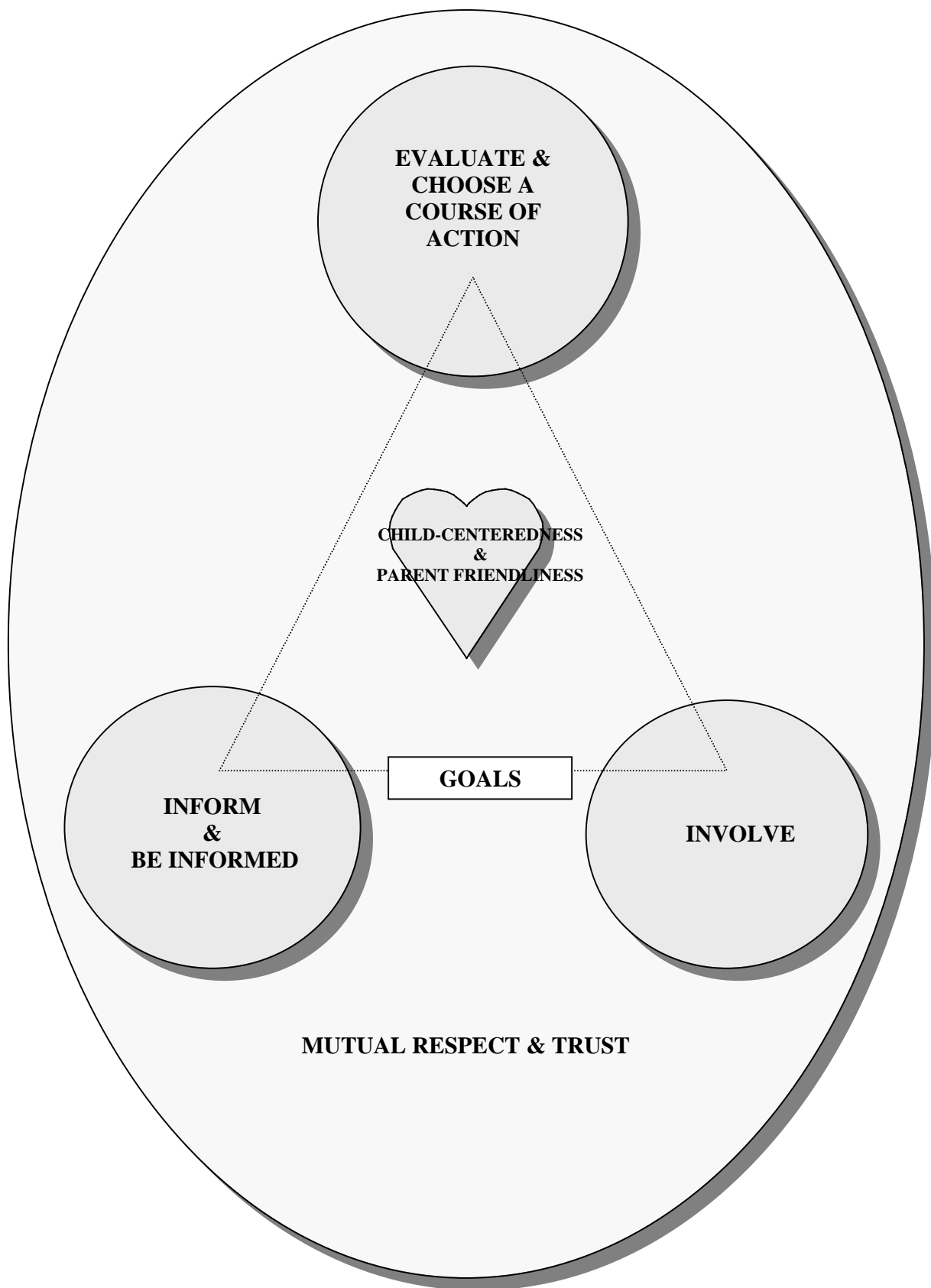


Figure 4. Model for the effective implementation of the special education process.

to determine a child's eligibility. Where the difference occurs in terms of the purpose as seen by educators and parents is in the purpose for evaluating the child. Educators are seeking an answer to the question; *does this child have a disability?* On the other hand, parents are seeking an answer to a larger question, *how can we help my child succeed in school?* This different view of goals may explain why some parents are less than satisfied after their child's eligibility meeting. First, if educators view the sole purpose of evaluation as a student's eligibility for special education, then it is understandable why they may consider their goal completed, whether or not a child was found eligible. If a child is not found eligible and no other action is taken to assist the child, then it is understandable why parents might feel dissatisfied or helpless. It would also be understandable why parents might believe that the responsibility for their child's success rests on their shoulders. The eligibility process must be viewed by all as an opportunity to gather information to make decisions as to what course of action seems the most appropriate to help a child succeed in school.

"INFORM & BE INFORMED" and "INVOLVE" are located at the bottom of Figure 4 and are the other two goals I put forth in this model. Parents in this study expressed other needs related to the special education process. They made it clear that they valued and wanted to be informed and involved in meaningful ways throughout the process. Informing parents involves commitment, based on the value and belief that persons are better partners when they are informed. Informing parents includes notification of events as well as providing them understandable information and a mechanism for accessing additional information. On the other hand, parents need to inform, too. They have unique and broader knowledge of their child than educators. How parents' contributions are viewed or used by educators will vary but their knowledge and views must be known by educators in order that teams can make informed decisions. Parents need opportunities to be meaningfully involved during the process. It will be up to educators to create appropriate ways to incorporate parent involvement throughout the process.

Core values, "CHILD CENTEREDNESS" and "PARENT FRIENDLINESS", lie at the heart of this model. Parents of every child being considered for special education eligibility have a retraceable path leading to their child's referral. These paths are lined with stories of failure, frustration, and worry. Consequently, when parents get to the evaluation process, they need compassion and understanding for themselves and their child. I suggest we maintain our focus on the child and the *other's* perspective. Turnbull and Turnbull (1986) describe the ability to adopt another's point of view as *empathetic reciprocity*. They note that *empathetic reciprocity* goes even further than adopting the other's views to adopting the others needs and wants and laying one's own aside. Therefore, educators who adopt the core values of child-centeredness and parent friendliness greatly enhance the special education process for all involved.

The goals of evaluating the child and informing and including the parent, along with the values of *child-centeredness* and *parent friendliness*, can only be meaningfully achieved if they are grounded in the context of "MUTUAL RESPECT & TRUST", represented on the model as the background for the process. Otherwise, the special

education process is nothing more than a mindless attempt to meet compliance with federal law.

The model I present fits with the expanded provisions for parent participation in IDEA 97; namely, parents' right to participation in decision making for eligibility and placement and parents' right to provide input about their child during evaluation. This model also seems a good fit given IDEA 97's focus on gathering functional and developmental information that will help the team determine whether or not the child has a disability and that assists persons in determining the educational needs of the child.

Provide In-Depth Training to Educators on Meeting Procedures and the Decision Making Process

This study suggests that not much has changed over the last 20 years in how special education teams function since Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Mitchell conducted their study about team decision making (1982). Educators need to learn meeting procedures and the process for team decision making so they can operate effectively, make parents feel welcome to participate, and facilitate parent understanding.

Future Research

This study was conducted partially due to the paucity of research available on parents' views on the special education process. The majority of current research focuses on parents' perspectives and involvement in the IEP process and student programming or services. It is critical that we continue to examine parents' perspectives of initial referral children and their involvement in the evaluation process in order that we might one day meet the intent of special education legislation. While this research offers insight to parents' views, we can learn much more about parents' views of the special education process. We have just begun to scratch the surface of this topic.

This research was also conducted in part to take a pulse on the special education process since the passage of the IDEA Amendments of 1997. While parents' views were central to this study, additional study is warranted into educators' views on the process given the burgeoning expectations for the educational system.

This study was limited to parents' views of and participation in the special education process from referral to eligibility determination. Future research needs to be conducted focusing on parents' perspectives and participation during the entire special education cycle, from referral to the development of initial IEP. This breadth of study will help us better understand how parents experience the complete process.

We need to explore why some parents do not participate in the special education process. Why do they stay away? What do they perceive as barriers that interfere in their participation? Parents answers may help us increase parent participation and facilitate parents' continued participation in their child's educational programming, which can be said is more critical for children with disabilities.

Finally, although it is clear that change in special education policy can be legislated by Congress, real and long lasting changes in practice are controlled by those who implement policy. Therefore, we need to examine methods that educators believe

would better involve parents during the special education process since educators will more likely implement these methods if they feel they can reasonably be accomplished.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

December 1999 and January 2000

- Develop cover letter for respondents and informed consent forms;
- Develop and submit a completed “Request for Approval of Investigation involving Human Subjects” to Virginia Tech, Department of Teaching and Learning’s IRB representative;
- Develop and submit to the school division’s Director of Testing & Assessments the division’s application for “Permission to Conduct Research”;
- Develop interview questions;
- Once the research proposal has been approved by both the university and school division, contact the special education director for the purpose of enlisting parents of two children and one educator to serve as the pilot sample for the interview questions;
- Contact parents and educator for the pilot interview and conduct interview; and
- Review interview responses and revise interview questions, as needed.

January 2000 through May 2000

- Contact the special education director and principals of participating school sites for the purpose of choosing potential respondents for the study;
- Contact respondents by telephone to make arrangements for interviews;
- Interview each respondent within two weeks prior to their child’s eligibility meeting (take two tape recorders, blank tapes and extra batteries, consent forms, interview questions, field notes, and journal);
- Make arrangements with schools’ principals where respondents’ child attends to visit the school after respondents sign informed consent forms and prior to child’s eligibility meeting;
- At the visits, meet with each person who will attend eligibility meetings. Explain the purpose of the study and secure their permission on the informed consent forms. Give each participant a signed copy of the form;
- Observe each eligibility meeting (take additional consent forms, 2 tape recorders, blank tapes and extra batteries, field notes, and journal);

Appendix A
continued

- Explain the informed consent form to the eligibility team respondent who will be interviewed and interview eligibility team member immediately after the meeting;
- Interview parent respondents as soon as possible, within 2 weeks after eligibility meetings (take 2 tape recorders, blank tapes and extra batteries, field notes, and journal).

March 2000 through February 2001

- Continue with above events and;
- Transcribe interview tapes and analyze data for each case;
- Analyze data and write draft case study report for each case;
- Let each parent respondent review his or her draft case study report;
- Provide two case study reports for peer review;
- Revise case study reports, as needed;
- Conduct cross-case analysis, return to raw data;
- Write and revise results and discussion chapters; and
- Schedule final defense.

Appendix B
Demographic Information for Parents and their Children in the Special Education Process

Case #	School/ Area of the city	Gender of child	Child's Ethnicity	Grade/ Age	Education		Occupation	
					Mother	Father	Mother	Father
1	Albright/ NW	F	African- American	4/12	(aunt-guardian) Associates Degree	_____	(aunt-guardian) file clerk	_____
2	Albright/N W	F	African- American	4/10	HS	HS	fast food restaurant manager	fast food restaurant manager
3	Benet Woods/ NW	F	Caucasian	4/11	HS	HS	housecleaner	truck driver
4	Benet Woods/ NW	M	African- American	4/10	HS	_____	food service worker	_____
5	Benet Woods/ NW	M	Caucasian	4/10	Associates Degree	9 th grade	private duty nurse	chef
6	Catfield/ NW	F	Caucasian	3/8	HS + 5 months community college	GED	restaurant hostess	steelworker
7	Druid Hills/SE	F	Caucasian	3/9	BA	2 years community college	bookkeeper/ receptionist	district sales manager
8	Estate Ridge/ SW	M	Caucasian	2/7	(grandmother- guardian) Associates Degree	(grandfather- guardian) HS + 1 year college	(grandmother- guardian) clerical	(grandfather-guardian) engineering supervisor
9	Estate Ridge/ SW	M	African- American	2/8	BS	7 th grade	medical office assistant	electrician

Appendix C

Date

Dear Parent(s):

I am a doctoral student at Virginia Tech. I am interested in parents' involvement in the special education process.

I understand that you have given consent for your child to be evaluated for special education services. I would like to include you in my study of how parents view the eligibility process. Your involvement should take no more than 2 hours and would include:

- Sharing your views about the special education process. We would meet twice-- before and after your child's eligibility meeting;
- Giving your consent for me to observe your child's eligibility meeting and interview a school eligibility team member; and
- Looking over your case report to ensure accuracy.

All meetings, as well as your child's eligibility meeting, will be recorded in order to maintain accuracy. I will keep the tapes in a locked box. Only the person who transcribes the tapes and I will have access to the tapes.

All names of children, parents, educators, schools, and the school division will be kept confidential. When I write about your child's case, I will change all names.

Your case will become part of my dissertation study. A general summary will be provided to the City Schools, but this will not include names. I also may present this study at an education conference or submit it to an education journal, but, again, all names will be changed.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. If you have any questions, feel free to call me at 772-4790 or 800-848-2714. I will be glad to provide you additional information or further explain anything in this letter.

Sincerely,

Barbara Flanagan, Doctoral Candidate
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Appendix C continued

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Informed Consent for Participants of Investigative Projects
PARENT PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Parents' Perspectives on Their Participation in the Special Education Process
Investigator: Barbara Flanagan, M. S. and Bonnie S. Billingsley, Ed. D.

I. The Purpose of This Research

The purpose of this study is to look at parents' views of the eligibility process. The results of this study will be reported in a dissertation study. The results will also be included in a summary report to the City Schools. Results may also be reported in educational journals or at educational conferences.

II. Procedures

Your participation in this study will take about 2 hours of your time and will involve:

- Two conversations with me, at a convenient time and place for you. The first conversation will take place sometime in the two weeks before your child's eligibility meeting. The second conversation will take place within 2 weeks after the eligibility meeting;
- Allowing me to attend your child's eligibility meeting as an observer;
- Allowing me to tape record the eligibility meeting and all interviews;
- My interviewing a member of the eligibility meeting; and
- Your reviewing a summary of your case to make sure I have been accurate.

III. Risks

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for participating in this study.

IV. Benefits of this Project

There is no guarantee of benefits to you for taking part in this research study. However, a possible benefit includes information that could help other parents understand and meaningfully participate in the special education process.

You may contact the researcher for a summary of the project results after June 15, 2000 at 540-231-6875.

Appendix C continued

V. Extent of Confidentiality

Confidentiality will be followed throughout this study. Results of this study will be reported in the researcher's dissertation. In addition, results will be presented in a summary report to the City Schools. Additional reporting may include educational journals or conferences. However, no identifiable information (i.e. names of parents or children) will be used in any reporting.

As stated earlier, your child's eligibility meeting and all interviews will be tape recorded. Only two persons will listen to the tape--Barbara Flanagan and the person who will transcribe the tape. The tape will remain with Barbara Flanagan throughout the study except for about a week during the time that the transcriber is completing the transcripts. Afterward, the tape will be returned to Barbara Flanagan and stored in a locked box in her home. NO copies of the tape will be made.

While the information that you provide will not be disclosed in identifiable form, there are certain conditions where confidentiality may be broken. The Commonwealth of Virginia requires reporting information regarding certain communicable diseases, child abuse, or instances where the participant is believed to be a threat to herself/himself or others.

VI. Compensation

There is *no* payment or any other type of compensation for your participation in this study.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can stop participating in this study at any time. In addition, you are free not to answer any questions that you choose without penalty.

VIII. Approval of Research

This research has been approved, as required, by the Institutional review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, by the Department of Teaching and Learning and the City School System.

Appendix C
continued

IX. Parent's (Parents') Permission

I (We) have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. All my (our) questions have been answered. I (We) hereby acknowledge the above and give my (our) voluntary consent to participate in this project as described above.

If I (we) participate, I (we) may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Mother's Signature _____ Date _____

Father's Signature _____ Date _____

Should I (we) have any questions about this research or its conduct, I (we) may contact:

Barbara Flanagan, Investigator	530-231-6875
Bonnie Billingsley, Faculty Advisor	530-231-8335
Tom Hurd, Chair, IRB, Research Division	530-231-5281

Appendix D

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Informed Consent for Participants of Investigative Projects
**ELIGIBILITY TEAM MEMBER INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR
INTERVIEW**

Title of Project: Parents' Perspectives on Their Participation in the Special Education Process

Investigators: Barbara Flanagan, M. S. and Bonnie S. Billingsley, Ed. D.

I. The Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this study is to examine parents' views of the special education process.

II. Procedures

This study will involve:

- Interviewing a school eligibility team member as soon as possible after the child's eligibility meeting for the purposes of a) providing background information and discussing the eligibility meeting, and b) discussing his or her views on parent participation in the eligibility process. This interview will be tape-recorded.

III. Extent of Confidentiality

Confidentiality will be followed throughout this study. Results of this study will be reported in the researcher's dissertation. In addition, results will be presented in a summary report to the City Schools. Additional reporting may include educational journals or conferences. However, no identifiable information (i.e., names of parents or children) will be used in any reporting.

As stated earlier, the interview will be audio-taped. Only two persons will listen to the tape--Barbara Flanagan and the person who will transcribe the tape. The tape will be in the sole possession of Barbara Flanagan throughout the study except for about a week during the time that the transcriber is completing the transcripts. Afterward, the tape will be returned to Barbara Flanagan and stored in a locked box in her home. NO duplicates will be made of the tape.

**Appendix D
(continued)**

IV. Approval of Research

This research has been approved, as required, by the Institutional review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, by the Department of Teaching and Learning and the City School System.

V. Eligibility Team Member's Consent to be Interviewed

I have read and understand the Informed Consent. All my questions have been answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent to permit the audio taping of the interview.

Eligibility Team Member's Signature

Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact:

Barbara Flanagan, Investigator	530-231-6875
Bonnie Billingsley, Faculty Advisor	530-231-8335
Tom Hurd, Chair, IRB, Research Division	530-231-5281

Appendix E

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Informed Consent for Participants of Investigative Projects
ELIGIBILITY TEAM MEMBER INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Parents' Perspectives on Their Participation in the Special Education Process

Investigators: Barbara Flanagan, M. S. and Bonnie S. Billingsley, Ed. D.

I. The Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this study is to examine parents' views of the special education process.

II. Procedures

This study will involve the audio-tape recording of the eligibility meeting.

III. Extent of Confidentiality

Confidentiality will be followed throughout this study. Results of this study will be reported in the researcher's dissertation. In addition, results will be presented in a summary report to the City Schools. Additional reporting may include educational journals or conferences. However, no identifiable information (i.e. names of schools, educators, parents or children) will be used in any reporting.

As stated earlier, eligibility meetings will be audio-taped. Only two persons will listen to the tape--Barbara Flanagan and the person who will transcribe the tape. The tape will be in the sole possession of Barbara Flanagan throughout the study except for about a week during the time that the transcriber is completing the transcripts. Afterward, the tape will be returned to Barbara Flanagan and stored in a locked box in her home. NO duplicates will be made of the tape.

IV. Approval of Research

This research has been approved, as required, by the Institutional review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, by the Department of Teaching and Learning and the City School System.

Appendix E
(continued)

V. Eligibility Team Member's Consent to Audio-taping the Eligibility Meeting

I have read and understand the Informed Consent. All my questions have been answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent to permit the audio taping of the eligibility meeting in which I will be a participant for the child.

Eligibility Team Member's Signature

Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact:

Barbara Flanagan, Investigator	530-231-6875
Bonnie Billingsley, Faculty Advisor	530-231-8335
Tom Hurd, IRB, Research Division	530-231-5281

Appendix F

Pre-Eligibility Meeting Guiding Questions: (For All Parents)

Parent (s) name (s): Mother
(Check if present) Father

Case #:(ethnicity: _____)

Date:

Time:

Location:

I'd like to ask you some questions about what's happening in regard to "child's name" and the special education process? All right?

1. "Child's name" is being considered for special education services. Can you tell me more about that?
2. How did this all get started?
3. What has happened between then and now? (Probe: Have you been asked to do anything by the school since you gave permission?)
4. Where are you now with this process? (Probe: Have you heard anything from the school ? Letters? Phone Calls? Meetings?)
5. How informed do you think you are regarding the special education process?
6. What does "special education" mean? Tell me what you know about special education.

Follow-up probes:

When you say.....can you give me an example of what you mean?

What do you mean by....?

Can you explain.....?

Tell me more about.....

Appendix F
(continued)

Parent (s) name (s): Mother
(Check if present) Father

Case #: _____ (ethnicity: _____)

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

7. What's going to happen next?

(If parents' answer indicates an awareness of the eligibility meeting, note that and probe with the following questions. If parents answer doesn't indicate an awareness of the eligibility meeting, note that. Then mention "an eligibility meeting will take place" and probe with the following questions).

Probes:

- a. Will you be at the meeting? (Probe: Why or why not?)
- b. What do you think will happen at the meeting?
- c. What do you hope will happen at the meeting? (Probe: benefit(s), services, information, concerns that will be addressed?)
- d. What are *you* going to do at the meeting? (Probe: Why were you invited to attend? Are you taking anyone or anything with you to the meeting?)
- e. How do you think the decision is made as to your child's eligibility for special education services? Where do you think that decision is made? Who makes that decision? What do believe is your role in that decision making?

Follow-up probes:

When you say.....can you give me an example of what you mean?

What do you mean by....?

Can you explain.....?

Tell me more about.....

**Appendix F
(continued)**

Parent (s) name (s): Mother
(Check if present) Father

Case #: _____ (ethnicity: _____)

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

- 8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me or the school that you think would help parents understand or improve the process?** (Probe: Anything you want to tell me about that I haven't asked?)

Follow-up probes:

When you say.....can you give me an example of what you mean?

What do you mean by....?

Can you explain.....?

Tell me more about.....

Before we finish, I need to ask you a few background questions. All right?

Demographic Information

What is your age? Mother: _____ Father: _____

Do you work outside of the home? (If yes) What do you do?

Mother: _____ Father: _____

What was your last completed year of school?

Mother: _____ Father: _____

Have you known anyone else who has gone through the special education process ?

What is your child's age? _____

Thank you for your time. I will see you next at "**child's name**" eligibility meeting. If you think of anything before then and would like to contact me prior to the meeting, please feel free to do so. We can talk over the telephone or we can meet again at a time and place convenient for you. **(Give parent(s) my business card with home and work phone numbers.)**

Appendix G

Parent Post-Eligibility Meeting Guiding Questions: (For Cases Where One or Both Parents Attend the Meeting)

Parent (s) name (s): Mother
 (Check if present) Father
 Case #: _____
 Date: _____
 Time: _____
 Location: _____

I'd like to ask you a few questions about "child's name" eligibility meeting that you attended "insert date". Alright?

1. Tell me about the eligibility meeting for your child. (Can you walk me through it?)

Specific probes, if not covered by parent(s):

- a. What did you do during the meeting?
- b. What else did you want to do?
- c. What made you feel welcomed to speak or participate?
- d. What made you feel you shouldn't talk or participate?
- e. Did you feel prepared for this meeting? Why or why not?
- f. Was the meeting what you expected? Why or why not?
- g. What do you think was accomplished from this meeting?
- h. What concerns did you have going into the meeting that were not addressed?
- i. What concerns do you have now that came out of what was said or what happened at the meeting?

Potential follow-up probe stems:

When you say..., can you give me an example of what you mean?

What do you mean by...?

Can you explain...?

Tell me more about...

**Appendix G
(continued)**

2. Overall, how did you feel about the eligibility meeting? (Probe: Can you pinpoint at what point you started to feel.....? or Can you describe specific reasons why you feel.....?)

Potential follow-up probe stems:

When you say..., can you give me an example of what you mean?

What do you mean by...?

Can you explain...?

Tell me more about...

3. What would you like to see changed?

Potential follow-up probe stems:

When you say..., can you give me an example of what you mean?

What do you mean by...?

Can you explain...?

Tell me more about...

**Appendix G
(continued)**

4. What happens now? (Probe: How do you feel about that?)

Potential follow-up probe stems:

When you say..., can you give me an example of what you mean?

What do you mean by...?

Can you explain...?

Tell me more about...

Thank you for your time. If you think of anything else later that you would like to share with me, please feel free to contact me. We can talk over the telephone or we can meet again at a time and place convenient for you.

Appendix H

Post-Eligibility Meeting Guiding Questions (For Eligibility Team Representatives)

Eligibility Team Representative: _____

Title: _____

Case #: _____

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Demographic Information: # years in education: Age: Highest level of education:

I'd like to ask you a few questions regarding this child's parents and this specific eligibility meeting.

1. **Tell me how this eligibility meeting compares to others that you have participated in.** (Probe: Typical? Unusual? School team members' participation? Parents' participation? Length? Location? Both or one parent attending? **EXPLAIN**)

2. **Tell me about the communication between school and these parent(s) during the special education process.** (Probe: Formal communication?—forms? Informal communication? From parents? From school?)

3. **Did this parent(s) participate in the evaluation process? How so?** (Probe: How does (do) their participation compare to other parents? **CAN YOU GIVE ME CONCRETE OR SPECIFIC EXAMPLES?**)

4. **How informed do you think this parent(s) is about the special education process?**

5. **What do you think this parent understood about the information shared at the eligibility meeting?** (Probe: How well did he/she understand?)

**Appendix H
(continued)**

Eligibility Team Representative: _____

Title: _____

Case #: _____

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Demographic Information: # years in education: Age: Highest level of education:

I'd like to ask you a few general questions regarding the special education process.

6. Does this school typically

..... **communicate with parents during the eligibility process? How?**

.....**involve parents in the evaluation process? How?**

7. Ideally, how do you think parents should participate in

.....**the evaluation process?**

.....**in the eligibility meeting?**

8. How would you describe the IDEAL eligibility meeting? (Probe: What would happen? How would it be structured?)

9. Is there anyone else I should speak with who may have had more contact with the parents during the special education process?

Thank you for your time. If you think of anything else, please feel free to contact me. We can talk over the telephone or we can meet again.

Appendix I

Eligibility Meeting Observation Form

Case #:

Date:

Start Time:

End Time:

Location:

Persons Present & Titles: 1 Administrator- 2 Psychologist-

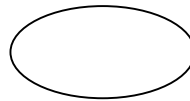
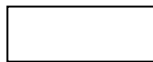
3 Visiting Teacher- 4 Speech Pathologist-

5 Parent(s)- 6 Classroom Teacher-

7 Special Ed. Teacher- 8 Guidance Counselor-

9 Other 10. Other-

Check appropriate shape of table & location of each person (by #, looking down from the ceiling):



Other:

Draw the configuration of the room (note location of table):

Describe the setting (location in building, appearance):

Describe how participants entered room:	Describe how the meeting started:
Describe how the meeting ended:	Describe how everyone left:

**Appendix I
(continued)**

Case #:

Date:

Start Time:

End Time:

Location:

Persons Present & Titles: 1 Administrator- 2 Psychologist-

3 Visiting Teacher- 4 Speech Pathologist-

5 Parent(s)- 6 Classroom Teacher-

7 Special Ed. Teacher- 8 Guidance Counselor-

9 Other 10. Other-

Chronicle the meeting (focusing on whatever seems information-rich—participants' demeanor, body language, etc.):

<u>Time</u>	<u>Observation</u>

Appendix J

August 17, 2000

Mr. & Mrs. Allen
123 State Street, S. W.
Anywhere, Virginia 12345

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Allen:

Thank you for your participation this spring in my dissertation study, *Parents' Views of and Participation in the Special Education Process*. When you agreed to participate in this study, you received a consent form outlining its particular components. As promised, I am providing you with a copy of Tatiana's case study for your review. *You will notice that all names of persons, schools and other agencies are changed in order to maintain the confidentiality promised to you when you agreed to participate.*

Please carefully read Tatiana's case study, specifically checking:

- Is all the factual information correct to the best of your knowledge?

Examples of factual information might include age and grade of your child (at the time of the study), family or medical information, time line information (when events occurred)

- Are there any points or interpretations made in the case study that you strongly disagree with or would like to comment on?

As you read Tatiana's case study you may want to let me know more information or you may not agree with my interpretation. I value and will consider all your input and will make changes wherever I can. If it is not possible for me to make changes, I will honor your input and report any discrepancy in our views within my final case study.

Please use the enclosed *Feedback Form* to guide your reading and to record any feedback that you want to share with me. If after reading the case study you have no corrections or comments, there is no need for you to return the form unless you want a copy of the dissertation results.

I have enclosed a self-addressed, stamped envelope for you to return the *Feedback Form*. You may keep the case study. Please return the form by September 15, 2000.

When my dissertation study is complete, if you like, I will send you a copy of the dissertation results. Please be sure to indicate your preference on the *Feedback Form*.

Again, let me thank you for participating in this study. I appreciate your openness and the time you allowed me to share with you as you went through the special education eligibility process for your child. I hope your child has a successful and happy school year!

Sincerely,

Barbara Flanagan
Doctoral Student
Virginia Tech

**Appendix J
(continued)**

FEEDBACK FORM

Directions: Please carefully read Tatiana's enclosed case study, specifically checking the following. Then use the space below to record your comments.

Is all the factual information correct to the best of your knowledge?

Examples of factual information might include age and grade of your child (at the time of the study), family or medical information, time line information (when events occurred)

Are there any points or interpretations made in the case study that you strongly disagree with or would like to comment on?

As you read your Tatiana's case study you may want to let me know more information or you may not agree with my interpretation.

Line number	Incorrect information/ Clarification/Concern	Correction/Feedback

Check here if you would like a copy of the dissertation results.

Return the *Feedback Form* in the enclosed, self addressed envelope

VITA

Barbara Grace Flanagan
 4482 Brentwood Court
 Roanoke, Virginia 24018
 (540) 772-4790

EDUCATION

- 2001 **Ph.D. Curriculum and Instruction**
 Dissertation: Parents' Views of and Participation in the Special Education
 Process
 Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, Blacksburg, Virginia
- 1988 **M.S. Educational Administration**
 Radford University, Radford, Virginia
- 1988 **Endorsement in Special Education Supervision**
 Virginia Department of Education
- 1985 **Endorsement in Specific Learning Disabilities (NK-12)**
 Virginia Department of Education
- 1977 **B.A. Spanish**
 Frostburg State University, Frostburg, Maryland

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 1996-present **Senior Research Associate, Training & Technical Assistance Center
 for Personnel Serving Students with Disabilities**
 College of Human Resources and Education
 Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University
 Blacksburg, Virginia
 Project Co-Director responsibilities include supervising the day to day-to-
 day operation of the Center and coordinating all workshop and conference
 activities, supervising project personnel and graduate assistants, and
 providing technical assistance (training, intervention strategies, and
 individual consultations) to teachers, administrators and families in 34
 school divisions in southwest Virginia in the area of special education and
 Title I programs.
- 1994-
 1996 **Senior Research Associate**
 Mild/Moderate Technical Assistance Center for Serving Individuals
 with Disabilities
 College of Education

Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University
Blacksburg, Virginia

Coordinator and Co-Principal Investigator: Responsibilities included managing the budget & writing quarterly and annual reports, planning and delivery of technical assistance (intervention strategies, training, inservices, individual consultations) to educators and administrators who support and teach students K-12 with LD, SED, EMH, TMH, and ADD disabilities in 38 school divisions in southwest Virginia.

- 1994-1995 **Adjunct Instructor, Special Education (Part-time)**
Radford University
Radford, Virginia
Teaching responsibilities included undergraduate and graduate level special education courses (introduction to special education, survey of special education, introduction to learning disabilities)
- 1993-1994 **Coordinator, Education Program for Incarcerated Youth**
Roanoke County/Salem Jail
Roanoke County Public Schools
Roanoke, Virginia
Responsibilities included acting as a liaison between school and jail supervisory personnel, ensuring that all timelines for special education procedures were met, participating in all eligibility and IEP meetings as the county representative, supervising and providing educational support to the jail educator, designing and implementing a transition program for incarcerated youth that focused on making vocational choices and improving interpersonal skills.
- 1991-1994 **Education Coordinator, Parent Resource Center**
Roanoke County Public Schools
Roanoke, Virginia
Responsibilities included providing information and referral services, maintaining a resource library, counseling and assisting parents in problem solving, and designing and delivering workshops to parents of children with disabilities. Wrote and disseminated bimonthly newsletter, THE FAMILY CONNECTION, (circulation-2,500) and coordinated the completion of the "Textbooks on Tape" project for grades 1-6.
- 1991-1993 **Program Area Coordinator, Learning Disabilities Program**
Roanoke County Public Schools
Roanoke, Virginia
Responsibilities included providing division-wide program and instructional leadership to 72 LD teachers, developing and implementing the LD program mission and annual goals, participating in eligibility and

IEP meetings, arranging and providing monthly inservice workshops for LD teachers, developing and revising curriculum, reviewing all IEPs for students with learning disabilities to ensure compliance with Virginia DOE standards, writing grants for supplemental funding for LD program, and managing the LD program budget. Accomplishments included initiating Roanoke County's computerized IEP system and Roanoke County's collaborative teaching program. Also developed Roanoke County's IEP modification pages, the Roanoke County Collaborative Teaching Manual for Teachers, Roanoke County Collaborative Teaching Manual for Administrators, Resource Manual for LD Specialists, and the Roanoke County IEP Handbook for Special Education Teachers.

- 1988-1993 **G.E.D. Adult Education Instructor** (part-time)
Responsibilities included teaching English and writing skills to adults to prepare them for the G.E.D. exam.
- 1987-1991 **LD Teacher**
Roanoke County Public Schools
Roanoke, Virginia
Responsibilities included teaching students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances in grades 4-6, designing IEPs, participating in child study, eligibility, and IEP meetings.
- 1980-1987 **LD Teacher**
Roanoke City Public Schools
Roanoke, Virginia
Responsibilities included teaching students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances in grades K-6, designing IEPs, participating in child study, eligibility, and IEP meetings.
- 1979-1980 **Spanish Teacher**
SHEDD School (non-graded, private school for students with learning disabilities)
Roanoke, Virginia
Responsibilities included teaching Spanish to students with learning disabilities (ages 9-13), tutoring students in reading using the APSL method, and writing detailed reports.

PUBLICATIONS

- 1997 Improving students' understanding of textbook content. In M. V. Epps, P. K. Neville, & D. E. Ormsby (Eds.), Readings in Exceptionality and Pedagogy. (pp. 197-201). Needham Heights, MA: Simon & Schuster.

PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

- 2000 *Children with Disabilities and Friendship*, New River Valley Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Annual Awards Meeting, Blacksburg, VA., April 2000.
- 1999 *Supporting Diverse Learners in General Education Settings*, The College of William & Mary's 10th Annual Resource & Collaborative Teaching Symposium, Williamsburg, VA., November, 1999.
Concept Maps & The Students Who Benefit From Them. Virginia Council for Learning Disabilities Annual Conference, Roanoke, VA., March 1999.
- 1998 *Strategies for Improving Comprehension of Textbook Content*. Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Annual Convention, Minneapolis, MN., April 1998.
Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities in Content Area Subjects. Virginia Council for Learning Disabilities Annual Conference, Charlottesville, VA., March 1998.
- 1997 *Yours, Mine, and Ours! Developing Collaborative IEPs*. 8th Annual Resource & Collaborative Teaching Symposium, Williamsburg, VA., November, 1997.
- 1996 *Training & Technical Assistance Center: Support to Schools*. Resource & Collaborative Teaching Symposium, Williamsburg, VA, November, 1996.
The Florida and Virginia Precollegiate Career Awareness Project: Be Someone Special! CEC Annual Convention, Orlando, FL, April, 1996.
- 1995 *Teaching and Learning Strategies to Improve Textbook Comprehension*. 9th Annual Virginia Council for Learning Disabilities Conference, Tyson's Corner, VA, March, 1995.
- 1994 *Improving Students' Comprehension Skills*. Virginia Learning Disabilities Association Annual Conference, Roanoke, VA, October, 1994.
What Next?: Creating A Future Oriented Focus for Incarcerated Youth, CEC Annual Convention, Denver, CO, April, 1994.
- 1993 *Project READ: Ways to Improve Reading, Comprehension, and Writing Skills*, Virginia Orton Society Annual Conference, Roanoke, VA, April, 1993.
- 1991 *What's in Your Trunk?: Tips for Being An Effective Teacher*, 5th Annual Virginia Council for Learning Disabilities Conference, Richmond, VA, March, 1991.

PRESENTATIONS DEVELOPED AS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TRAINING

- 2000 The Keys to IEP Planning & Writing

- Collaborative Teaching: Rebuilding the Classroom for All Students
 Designing and Implementing Adaptations and Modifications
- 1999 Diverse Learners: Share & Disseminate Workshop
- 1998 Scaffolding Student Comprehension in Content Areas
 Get Inspired: Get INSPIRATION
- 1997 Building Students' Textbook Comprehension Skills
- 1996 I Believe in IEPs!
- 1995 Students Taking on the Least Restrictive Environment and Making It
 (STREAM)
 STREAM II: The Support Module
- 1994 Interventions for Challenging Behavior

AWARDS

- 1991 Outstanding Teacher in Learning Disabilities, Council for Learning Disabilities
- 1991 Outstanding Teacher of the Year for Virginia, Virginia Council for Learning
 Disabilities

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

- 1998-2000 Professional Liaison, Virginia Council for Learning Disabilities
- 1997-1998 Past-President, Virginia Council for Learning Disabilities
- 1996-1997 President, Virginia Council for Learning Disabilities
- 1995-1996 President-Elect, Virginia Council for Learning Disabilities
- 1994-1995 Vice President, Virginia Council for Learning Disabilities
- 1995 Member, Review Panel, Excellence in Education Awards, College of
 Education, Virginia Tech
- 1993-1996 Member, Southwest Virginia Transition Center Advisory Board
- 1992-1994 Chairperson, Awards & Honors Committee, Virginia Council for
 Learning Disabilities
- 1993-1994 Member, Greater Roanoke Interagency Planning Council
- 1992-1993 Member, Roanoke Valley Learning Disabilities Association Advisory
 Board

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development
 Council for Exceptional Children
 Council for Learning Disabilities
 Delta Kappa Gamma Society
 Virginia Council for Learning Disabilities
 Phi Delta Kappa
 Phi Kappa Phi