An Examination of Parents' Perceptions of School Factors that Contribute to and Hinder the Academic Success of Students with Disabilities Attending an Intermediate School in Southeastern Virginia

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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities have historically underperformed on achievement tests in comparison to their non-disabled peers (Eckes & Swando, 2009; Hurt, 2012). This qualitative study explored parents' perceptions of school factors that contribute to and hinder the academic success of students with disabilities. The researcher collected data by interviewing a purposeful sample of parents of students with disabilities and gathered and reviewed their child's academic information. This qualitative research study utilized a phenomenological design approach that allowed the researcher to gain insights into parents' perceptions of students' lived experiences.

Participants included a sample of parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities attending an intermediate school in southeastern Virginia. The researcher collected data for this study in the spring of 2017. Interviews were administered in one session, allowing the researcher to ascertain from responses to the 22 interview questions which school factors parents perceive as contributing to and hindering academic progress. The results of this study indicated that the success of students with disabilities was impacted by staff members' understanding of multi-modality learning, needs of students with disabilities, and the level of support needed by students. The findings also indicated large class size and the physical and cosmetic characteristics of a classroom had an impact on achievement. Parents recommended mentoring programs, restructuring the classroom environment, improving parent-teacher communication, and meeting the unique needs of students with disabilities as areas of improvement.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities have historically performed lower on tests than students without disabilities (Eckes & Swando, 2009; Hurt, 2012). This study explored parents' perceptions of school factors that contribute to and hinder the success of students with disabilities. The researcher collected data by interviewing parents of students with disabilities and gathered and reviewed their child's academic information.

Participants included a sample of parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities attending an grades 3-5 school in southeastern Virginia. The researcher collected data for this study in the spring of 2017. Interviews were administered in one session, allowing the researcher to ascertain from responses to the 22 interview questions which school factors parents perceive as contributing to and hindering academic progress. The results of this study indicated that the success of students with disabilities was impacted by staff members' understanding of multi-modality learning, needs of students with disabilities, and the level of support needed by students. The findings also indicated large class size and the physical and cosmetic characteristics of a classroom had an impact on achievement. Parents recommended mentoring programs, restructuring the classroom environment, improving parent-teacher communication, and meeting the unique needs of students with disabilities as areas of improvement.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all those before me who have made sacrifices and paved the way for me to have this opportunity. I dedicate this to my parents, Norfleet and Parthenia, for instilling in me a strong work ethic and love of learning. You have been constant cheerleaders throughout this process; inspiring me every step of the way. Thanks, mom and dad for always believing in me and encouraging me to reach for the stars no matter how far away they may appear.

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Thank you to my students who remind me each and every day to persevere no matter the challenge. Because of you, I have a deep passion for children. It is my mission to support my students as they strive to be the very best version of themselves. Because of you, I am a lifelong learner.

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Lastly, I thank my parents and my brother for the daily support and encouragement which made it possible for me to arrive at my destination. It is my prayer that the fruits of my labor will benefit children for many years to come.

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Chapter One

The Introduction

"Today, children and youth with disabilities have a place in our classrooms alongside their peers, and are graduating with the knowledge and skills needed for postsecondary education and beyond." B. Obama

Background of the Problem

Students with disabilities have historically underperformed on achievement tests in comparison to their non-disabled peers (Eckes & Swando, 2009; Hurt, 2012). This trend was evident in national, state, and local assessment data (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2015b). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), created by Congress in 1969, served as the largest national assessment provided to a representative sample group of over 700,000 fourth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade students (NAEP, n.d.a).

This assessment measured students' abilities and inabilities in various subject areas. Performance on the NAEP assessments served as a source of comparison data for national student performance. Data reported in the 2013 NAEP assessment reflected that 18% of fourth-grade students with disabilities reached proficient and advanced levels on the math assessment while 45% of students without disabilities reached proficient and advanced levels on the math assessment (NAEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2015b). These results reflected that an achievement gap existed between fourth-grade students with and without disabilities.

Additionally, 8% of eighth-grade students with disabilities reached proficient and advanced levels on the math assessment in contrast to 39% of students without disabilities reaching proficient and advanced levels on the math assessment. These results also reflected that a math achievement gap existed between eighth-grade students with and without disabilities. Similarly, in the area of reading, 11% of fourth-grade students with disabilities reached proficient and advanced levels on the assessment while 38% of students without disabilities reached proficient and advanced levels on the assessment (NAEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2015b). These assessment results were indicative of an achievement gap in the area of reading. Likewise, 9% of eighth-grade students with disabilities reached proficient and advanced levels on the reading assessment while 40% of students without disabilities reached proficient and advanced levels on the reading assessment. In addition, these results were reflective of an achievement gap between

students with and without disabilities. Discrepancies in performance at the national level were reflected in the NAEP assessment results and therefore demonstrated the need for educators to examine student achievement at the local and state levels.

The Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) "establish minimum expectations for what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade or course in English, mathematics, science, history/social science and other subjects" (VDOE, n.d.b). Virginia identified the SOL as the curricular and assessment tool used to measure adequate yearly progress toward predetermined achievement goals. Assessments were administered at established intervals to measure progress toward SOL. Data reported by the VDOE on the 2015–2016 *Commonwealth of Virginia State Report Card* results revealed that in 2015–2016, 80% of all students passed the state SOL English Reading Assessment compared to 46% of students with disabilities (VDOE, 2016). Similarly, 80% of all students passed the state SOL Mathematics Assessment compared to 49% of students with disabilities (VDOE, 2016). The SOL test scores of students with disabilities were significantly lower than the average scores of all students. The differences in student performance resulted in the state, schools, and school divisions failing to meet federal annual measurable objectives (AMOs) (VDOE, 2015b). AMOs were established to identify minimum expectations for pass rates in reading and mathematics for various groups of students in an effort to close achievement gaps amongst various subgroups to include students with disabilities. SOL scores for subgroups are reported to ensure that the scores of an entire student body do not overshadow the scores and achievement gaps of various subgroups (VDOE, 2013).

Performance trends on the Virginia SOL were parallel to the results of the NAEP assessments in the areas of reading and math. According to the VDOE 2016 *Virginia Cohort Report*, the graduation rate of students with and without disabilities also reflected discrepancies (VDOE, 2016). The cohort graduation rate for all students was 92.5% with a dropout rate of 5.3%. Students with disabilities graduated at a rate of 87.7% with a dropout rate of 9.7%. Approximately 53% of students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) graduated with a regular diploma during the 2014–2015 school year (VDOE, 2015a).

Students with disabilities in one large school division in Virginia scored commensurate with the average state and national results. The 2016 graduation rate for this division was approximately 91% for students with IEPs (VDOE, 2016). The dropout rate in 2016 for these

students was approximately 7%. Additionally, results from published data on the performance of students in the same division on the 2015–2016 English Reading SOL Assessment reflected that the pass rate for all students in grades 3–5 was 78% while the pass rate for students with disabilities was 49% (VDOE, 2016). Likewise, the pass rate for all students who took the mathematics assessment was 81% while students with disabilities performed with a 54% pass rate. According to the VDOE *State Report Card* (2016), the results for a local intermediate school in a southeastern Virginia school division were similar.

Federal, state, and local governments along with school systems are responsible for providing a free education to all students. Unfortunately, all students were not benefiting from this free education at the same rate. More specifically, students with disabilities were not performing at the same rate as their non-disabled peers (VDOE, 2016).

According to O'Rourke and Houghton (2006), "There is a dearth of empirical research pertaining to the perceptions of students with mild disabilities of the academic and social outcomes of classroom support mechanisms" (p. 232). Additionally, there are only a few well-documented studies about school factors that contributed to the academic success of students with disabilities (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004). However, several studies documented the benefits and drawbacks of factors such as inclusive practices in the school setting (Dawkins, 2010; Harrison, 2011; Hurt, 2012; Lingo, Barton-Arwood, & Jolivette, 2011; Powell, 2009; Rudloff, 2014). Researchers such as Hattie (2009) studied the factors that have the greatest impact on learning and achievement. Additionally, Marzano facilitated a group of researchers in conducting a meta-analysis on teaching practices and determined that the individual instructional strategies that a teacher uses have a substantial effect on student learning (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollack, 2001). Furthermore, the study concluded that a single teacher could have a large impact on the instruction within a school's control. Wilson and Michaels (2006) examined the perceptions of students with disabilities and found that students attributed their improved literacy skills to learning in an inclusive co-taught setting.

Overview of the Study

In the fall of 2011, Georgia Southern University doctoral candidate, Gertrude Rolland, submitted and successfully defended a dissertation entitled *African American Male Students' Perceptions of Factors That Contribute to Their Academic Success*, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education (Rolland, 2011). Rolland's research

methodology utilized a qualitative research design to collect reliable and valid insights of school factors that contribute to the academic success of African American boys. Rolland based her conclusions on data drawn from interview results and demographic profile data collected from six high school African American boys. Rolland's study and results were limited to three junior and three senior African American students attending a rural high school in Georgia. The students identified several factors as factors influencing their academic success: "(a) supportive parents, (b) caring teachers, (c) positive school environment, (d) peer support, and (e) community initiatives" (Rolland, 2011, p. 1). The study also identified several factors that hindered academic achievement: "a) lack of after school community activities, (b) negative stereotypes, (c) lack of self-initiative, (d) negative images, and (e) lack of belief in self" (Rolland, 2011, iii).

This study will differ from Rolland's (2011) study in four distinctive ways: (1) study participants will be parents of students enrolled in a fifth-grade classroom, (2) the study will explore perceptions of parents with students enrolled in a suburban school in southeastern Virginia, (3) the study will examine the perceptions of parents with students with disabilities, and (4) study participants will have children who are currently enrolled as special education students and have attended the same school for at least 2 years. Similarly, this study will use qualitative methods to collect data through an interview with each purposefully sampled parent of a student with a disability to gain a better understanding of their perceptions of school factors that each participant attributes to their child's academic performance. The results may suggest parents' perceptions of how instructional personnel, instructional practices, school resources, and school leadership influence their child's learning experiences.

Historical Perspective

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965) into law to advance educational benefits for all students (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015). In January of 2002, President George W. Bush passed Public Law PL 107-110 recognized as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002), and further promoted President Johnson's mission and identified accountability measures for state assessments (NCLB, 2002). After its enactment, President Bush declared, "And today begins a new era, a new time in public education in our country" (White House Archives, 2002). He further indicated, "Our schools will have higher expectations. We believe every child can

learn … From this day forward all students will have a better chance to learn, to excel, and to live out their dreams" (White House Archives, 2002).

NCLB was designed to make certain that all children achieve high standards and are provided education to reach those high standards (NCLB, 2002). As a result of this law, policymakers, researchers, and educators increased their focus on the academic achievement of students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandated that states should educate students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers to the appropriate extent (White House Archives, 2002). It also reflects a core requirement of IDEA, known as the "least restrictive environment," requiring that "students with disabilities—to the maximum extent possible—must be educated with their peers who do not have disabilities" (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p. 16). IDEA was reauthorized and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). For the first time, IDEIA called for special education students to have further access to a free and appropriate education with improved educational benefit.

Student achievement results have revealed areas where students are making significant progress and, likewise, areas where students needed to improve despite their learning background. Significant performance gaps existed amongst various student groups including students with disabilities (NAEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2015b). School leaders implemented various practices over the years to close the gaps with varying results (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). Historically, schools across the nation struggled to meet federal and state accountability thresholds.

Statement of the Problem

Students with disabilities pass the Virginia SOL assessments at a lower rate than students without disabilities do (VDOE, 2015b). The VDOE reported on the 2015–2016 SOL test administration that 80% of all students tested passed state SOL English Reading Assessments compared to a 46% pass rate for the students with disabilities subgroup (VDOE, 2016). Likewise, 80% of all students passed the SOL Mathematics Assessments compared to 49% of students with disabilities. Similarly, the report card for a large division in southeastern Virginia indicated that at the intermediate level, 78% of all students tested passed, while 49% of students with disabilities tested met the standard in English reading and 80% of all students met the standard in mathematics, while only 64% of students with disabilities tested passed (VDOE,

2015b). The scores of intermediate students in southeastern Virginia were commensurate with the state and division performance of students with and without disabilities (VDOE, 2016).

Students with disabilities are expected to meet similar standards as students without disabilities to graduate with a standard diploma (VDOE, n.d.a). If students with disabilities do not have equal access to the general education curriculum, they may not achieve educational levels commensurate to students without disabilities (Hogan-Young, 2013). Data show that students with disabilities are more likely to drop out of high school than their non-disabled peers are (United States Department of Education Office of Special Education Program, 2006). Poor performance on the SOL has an adverse impact on a student's ability to graduate with a standard diploma. Students who received special education services also had higher rates of unemployment—14.5% compared to 9% of students served in the general education setting—and were 17% less likely to obtain any form of postsecondary education (United States Department of Education Office of Special Education Program, 2006).

Table 1 displays the differences in achievement between all intermediate students and intermediate students with disabilities in Virginia tested during the 2015–2016 school year.

Table 1

Achievement Gaps between Students with and without Disabilities in Virginia in 2016

Assessment	All Students	Students with Disabilities
Grade Three Reading	76	49
Grade Three Math	77	47
Grade Four Reading	77	48
Grade Four Math	83	55
Grade Five Reading	81	50
Grade Five Math	79	69

Note: Data from the VDOE (2016).

Significance of the Study

Students with disabilities are not achieving commensurate with their non-disabled peers as measured by the NAEP, SOL, and even the graduation rate. In Virginia, satisfactory performance on the SOL is a gateway to earning a high school-verified credit and is essential to meeting the requirements for graduation with a diploma commensurate to their non-disabled peers. How do educators improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities without exploring perceptions of their lived experiences? This phenomenological study researched

parents' perceptions of school factors that affected their child's academic achievement and identified their recommendations for improvement. These recommendations can be considered by educational leaders when making decisions that will support effective practices to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities and ultimately increase the graduation rates. The results of this study may impact local school leaders and educators in making educational decisions that have the potential to positively influence achievement for disabled students in Virginia and beyond.

Secondly, at the local level, parents, teachers, building administrators, special education administrators, and central office administrators could consider parents of students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors that contributed to their academic success to make decisions that have a positive impact on their academic success. This information may assist education policymakers when designing and providing professional development for administrators and teachers that give educators insights into student perspectives. Finally, the results of the study could determine which school factors are perceived by parents to hinder student achievement and which school factors are perceived by parents to improve student achievement for students with disabilities. The results of the study could be useful to administrators, general and special education teachers, and service providers as they design and implement special education programs in their schools and classrooms.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore, understand, and analyze parents of intermediate students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors that impacted their child's academic achievement. Specifically, this study focused on parents of students with disabilities' perceptions in three major areas: (a) school factors that contributed to their child's academic success, (b) school factors that hindered their child's academic success, and (c) recommendations for improving their child's success. The objective of this study was to describe parents of students with disabilities' perceptions of their child's lived experiences. Findings from this study could encourage educational administrators to work collaboratively to discuss and consider parents' perceptions of students' lived experiences and their recommendations when making professional development and instructional decisions that endeavor to promote improvement in student achievement levels.

Rolland (2011) endeavored to collect reliable and valid insights of school factors that contribute to the academic success of junior and senior African American boys at a rural high school in Georgia. This study differed from Rolland's study in four distinctive ways: (1) study participants were parents of students enrolled in a fifth-grade classroom, (2) the study explored perceptions of parents with students enrolled in a suburban school in southeastern Virginia, (3) the study examined the perceptions of parents with students with disabilities, (4) and the study participants had children who were currently enrolled as special education students and had attended the same school for at least 2 years.

Justification of the Study

Limited research into the students with disabilities' perceptions of the impact of school factors on their academic achievement exist and there is a need to evaluate the factors that students attribute to various levels of performance (O'Rourke & Houghton, 2006). Data collected in this study can provide researchers with a better understanding of students' perceptions of school factors that can contribute to and hinder the academic success of a population of underperforming students through the voice of their parents.

Qualitative Research Questions

The research questions that will guide this qualitative study are:

1. What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?
2. What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors responsible for hindering their child's achievement?
3. What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of recommendations for how to improve their child's academic success?

Conceptual Framework

Academic achievement is impacted by several key influences (Hattie, 2009). The conceptual framework of this study was derived from the research and analysis of the literature exploring factors impacting the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Parents perceive that various factors (to include school, cultural, and socio-economic factors) impact the achievement of students with disabilities. The framework of this study will, however, focus

primarily on the perceived school factors that impact the achievement of students with disabilities and are within the control of school leaders. In the end, as referenced in the bottom portion of Figure 1.1, the framework for this study suggests that some school factors are responsible for the achievement of students with disabilities and some are responsible for hindering the achievement of students with disabilities, as measured by performance on the SOL assessments. Ultimately, information on which school factors have a negative and positive impact on student achievement can be utilized to shape school leaders' decisions in identifying recommendations for school improvement.

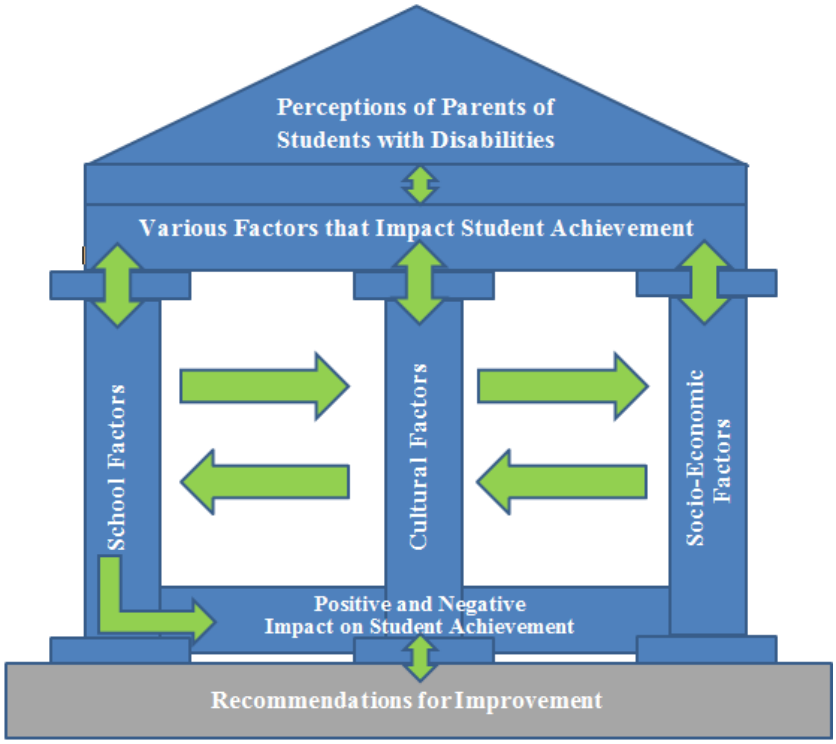

Figure 1.1. Conceptual framework. The conceptual framework of the factors influencing parents of students with disabilities' perceptions of factors that impact their child's student achievement and influence recommendations for improvement.

Definition of Terms

For clarity and to facilitate understanding, key terms in the study will be defined as follows:

Achievement Gap. The dissimilarity in the performance between groups of students within a participating school or school division and the statewide average performance in English reading and mathematics as measured by the assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

A Child with Disabilities. A Parent's Guide to Special Education identifies a child with disabilities as a child or student who meets the criteria defined by the VDOE for a disability and whose disability creates a need for "special education and related services" (VDOE, p. 64).

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This national assessment is also referred to as *The Nation's Report Card*. The test assesses the reading and math achievement of a sample of students who represent each state. The assessment is administered every 2 years and provides comparison data on progress amongst states toward increasing achievement (VDOE, 2015b).

Specially Designed Instruction. Instruction "in which the content, methodology, or delivery is specifically adapted to address unique needs that result from a student's disability, and ensure access to the general curriculum so that the student can meet educational standards that apply to all children" (Bays & Crockett, 2007, p. 145).

Special Education. The VDOE (2016) defines special education as specifically planned teaching that is provided at no cost to meet the diverse needs of a student with a disability.

Special Education Student. "A student who has been identified as needing special education services. This student has a current IEP which is being implemented in the general education classroom or a separate special education room" (Gaddis, 2005, p. 11).

Standards of Learning (SOL). The Virginia SOL establishes "minimum expectations for what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade or course in English, mathematics, science, history/social science and other subjects" (VDOE, 2016). Assessments are administered at identified intervals to measure progress toward SOL.

Limitations

This study focused on parents of fifth-grade students with a disability in an intermediate school within southeastern Virginia. Several limitations of this study served as factors beyond the researcher's control:

1. The population was limited to all parents of students with disabilities in grade 5 at an intermediate school in southeastern Virginia who participated in SOL testing during the 2014–2016 school years.

2. The sample size was limited to eight fifth-grade parents of students with disabilities.
3. The willingness of parents to participate could not be guaranteed.
4. The willingness of parents to be open and honest when sharing their perceptions of school factors impacting their child's academic performance could not be guaranteed.
5. Parents' perceptions may have included experiences gained before their child became a student at the current school.
6. Parents' perceptions may have included experiences gained before their child was identified as a student with a disability.
7. Results may have been limited to the memory of the participants.
8. The thoughts of the participants may have been limited to their knowledge of their child's experiences.
9. The building principal interviewed the participants. This may have resulted in the participants sharing information they believed would be pleasing to the researcher.

Delimitations

1. This study only examined the perceptions of parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities who currently attend the intermediate school in southeastern Virginia.
2. The study took place in one school in a large school division in southeastern Virginia.
3. Parents were familiar with and, therefore, more comfortable with the interviewer.

Organization of the Study

This study examined the parents' perceptions of school factors that contributed to and hindered the academic success of students with disabilities attending an intermediate school in southeast Virginia. This report on their perceptions is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction, background of the problem, an overview of the study, historical perspective, statement of the problem, the significance of the study, the purpose of the study, justification of the study, qualitative research questions, conceptual framework, definition of terms, limitations and delimitations, and organization of the study. Chapter 2 comprises of a review of selected literature related to the achievement of students with disabilities. The methodology utilized to collect the data for the study is presented in Chapter 3. The outcomes of the data collection and the answers to the research questions are provided in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 provides the findings, implications of the findings, and recommendations for further study.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Purpose of the Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of literature related to students with disabilities and factors that contribute to and hinder their achievement. The purpose of this literature review is to evaluate the historical context of special education, school factors, cultural factors, and socio-economic factors that have an impact on the academic achievement of students with disabilities. This review of the literature will establish a theoretical framework for the topic of study and examine previous research studies.

If educators are to ensure that students demonstrate academic achievement, then administrators and teachers need to have a fundamental understanding of the factors that impact the education of students with disabilities so that they can offer valuable input into the development and implementation of IEPs that will provide for the most success (Williams, 2012). Historically, students with disabilities do not perform commensurate with their non-disabled peers. Therefore, individuals who are making instructional decisions for students with disabilities should consider school, cultural, and socio-economic factors, and the impact these factors could have on students' academic achievement. This review of the literature includes the following sections: (a) landmark court cases in education; (b) the history of education legislation; (c) leadership; (d) measures of academic performance; (e) life experiences and conditions affecting student achievement; (f) teacher quality, recruitment, retention, and the impact on student achievement; (g) school influences and the impact on student achievement; (h) service-delivery models and the impact on student achievement; (i) student placement and the impact on student achievement; (j) the case for inclusion; (k) the case against inclusion; (l) educational setting options; (m) summary of the literature review; (n) gaps and limitations in the literature; and (o) the need for further research.

Literature Review and Search Process

Several approaches were utilized to conduct a wide-range search of literature relating to special education service delivery and the impact on student achievement. Google Scholar and the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Library Summons were the primary search engines employed to locate literature and empirical research related to this topic of study.

A search of the keywords “special education,” “student achievement,” “special education placement,” “factors impacting learning,” and “parent perceptions” generated dissertations, theses, books, journal articles, and other relevant resources on the topic. This search was narrowed by limiting the results to education-related topics, peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, theses, legislation, and court cases. Additionally, a subsequent analysis of the reference lists from the generated sources was reviewed and considered for relevance and incorporation into the literature review.

Landmark Court Cases in Education

The foundation for the education of special education students can be traced back to the 1954 United States Supreme Court Case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. At the time, students were segregated into different schools based upon their race (Russo & Osborne, 2008). As a result, in 1951, 13 parents filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court against the Topeka Board of Education asking for schools to be desegregated (*Brown v. Board,* 1954). The U.S. Supreme Court found that although a separate but equal education was provided, the segregation of students based upon race was unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board,* 1954). While this case focused upon desegregation by race, it has since been used as the premise for many arguments supporting the education of students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers (Hurt, 2012).

One case, *Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children v. Commonwealth* (1971), detailed a lawsuit that was filed on behalf of retarded children who were challenging the constitutionality of a statute that excluded these students from public education. The district court hearing the case found that denying admission to students with cognitive disabilities was unconstitutional and required that the State of Pennsylvania guarantee the right to free education for students with disabilities at an appropriate level for the individual child (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010). Also, in 1972, *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972) assigned the responsibility to educate students with a disability to state and local agencies.

Subsequently, in 1989, during the *Daniel R.R. v. State of Texas Board of Education* case, the Supreme Court ruled that when determining the placement for individuals with disabilities, IEP teams must consider (a) if the student can receive any educational and non-educational benefit in the general education setting with supplementary aids and services, (b) the effect that

placement in a general education setting would have on individuals without disabilities, and (c) how to mainstream the student to the extent possible if the placement will be outside of the general education setting. This case gave students with disabilities an educational importance when determining placement. Students with disabilities continued to be a priority in 2010 when President Obama signed Rosa's Law (Rosa's Law, 2010), which called for a change in terminology from a "mentally retarded person" to a "person with an intellectual disability."

History of Education Legislation

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the ESEA into law to advance educational benefits for all students (Thomas & Brady, 2005). Attempts to close achievement gaps began with the implementation of ESEA and continued for many years thereafter. In January of 2002, President George W. Bush passed Public Law PL 107-110, recognized as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002), and further promoted President Johnson's mission and identified accountability measures for state assessments (White House Archives, 2002). After its enactment, President Bush declared, "And today begins a new era, a new time in public education in our country" (White House Archives, 2002). He further indicated, "Our schools will have higher expectations. We believe every child can learn … From this day forward all students will have a better chance to learn, to excel, and to live out their dreams" (White House Archives, 2002). NCLB was designed to make states accountable for ensuring that all children achieved high standards and are provided education to reach those high standards. As a result of this law, policymakers, researchers, and educators increased their focus on the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

The ESEA is the principal federal education law in the United States and has most recently been updated through the enactment of the ESSA, S. 1177, which was signed into law by President Obama on December 10, 2015 (ESSA, 2015). ESSA was enacted to make available to all children the opportunity to receive a highly-rated, fair, and equal education that will close existing achievement gaps. The impact this Act will have on students with disabilities is not known at this time.

The IDEA (2004) mandated that states should educate students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers to the appropriate extent. It also reflects a core requirement, known as the least restrictive environment, which requires students with disabilities to the extent possible to be educated with their non-disabled peers. IDEA was reauthorized and renamed IDEIA (2014). For

the first time, IDEIA called for special education students to have further access to a free and appropriate education with improved educational benefit.

Although education law calls for improved student achievement and educational benefit, student achievement results continue to reveal areas where students are making significant progress and, likewise, areas where students needed to improve despite their learning background. Significant performance gaps existed amongst various student groups including students with disabilities (NAEP, n.d.a; VDOE, 2015b). Schools leaders have implemented various practices over the years to close the gaps with varying results (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). Historically, schools across the nation struggled to meet federal and state accountability thresholds.

The process of educating students with special needs has evolved with the onset of education legislation and laws, policies, and processes governing the educating of students with disabilities (Mason, 2013). The 10th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution assigns the obligation of educating students to each state. Article VIII, Section I of the Virginia Constitution states:

> The General Assembly shall provide for a system for free public elementary and secondary schools for all children of school age throughout the Commonwealth, and shall seek to ensure that an educational program of high quality is established and continually maintained. (U.S. Const. art. VIII, § 1)

Therefore, it is the State of Virginia's responsibility to provide educational programming for all students, although there is a federal impact on the implementation as the programming is often linked to federal funding (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010).

Leadership

In 2010, Duncan, former United States Secretary of Education stated, "No belief is more damaging in education than the misperception that children with disabilities cannot really and shouldn't be challenged to reach the same high standards as all children" (Duncan, 2010). Subsequently, in 2014, Arne Duncan indicated that the U.S. Department of Education would monitor the performance through an evaluation of "special education students' scores on standardized tests [specifically NAEP], the gap in test scores between students with and without disabilities, the high school graduation rate for disabled students and other measures of achievement" (Duncan, 2010). Although there is a continued focus on federal monitoring of

special education achievement, performance gaps still occur between students with and without disabilities (VDOE, 2015a).

Likewise, the Obama Administration recognized a need to place a focus on adequately preparing students for success throughout their K-12 education and beyond. Subsequently, in 2015, the reauthorized ESEA, the ESSA, was signed by the President and is anticipated to provide more educational opportunities and increased student outcomes (ESSA, 2015). President Obama stated, "With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamentally American ideal—that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will" (ESSA, 2015). ESSA "advances equity by upholding critical protections for America's disadvantaged and high-needs students" (ESSA, 2015). Additionally, the Act mandates that all students be educated utilizing high standards that will ensure that they are prepared to be successful in college and beyond (ESSA, 2015). Although ESSA gives more flexibility to the states and districts to identify accountability measures (ESSA, 2015), it continues to be important for principals to make instructional decisions that encourage the greatest outcomes for student success (Bays & Crockett, 2007).

With laws and regulations in place, it now becomes the administrators' role to provide leadership and support in the educating of students with special needs. This is not an easy job with the numerous responsibilities given to administrators today. Bays and Crockett (2007) noted that, "the principal must *negotiate* among *competing priorities* and *contextual factors* to fulfill this role, and the outcome of this negotiation is the *dispersal of responsibility for special education among administrative and teaching personnel*" (p. 150 [emphasis added]; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). Annually, administrators enter the principalship faced with the task of serving as instructional leaders, managing the school budgets, overseeing personnel, and facilitating special education programs. Therefore, it is necessary for administrators to work to foster shared responsibility in identifying ways to support educators in meeting the needs of students with disabilities (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010).

Educational leaders often employ either an instructional leadership or transformational leadership style (Hattie, 2009). Instructional leaders focus on providing an environment conducive to delivering instruction while transformational leaders focus on developing relationships that build the capacity for teachers to teach students. Hattie (2009) reviewed a variety of studies that support instructional leadership as a style that promotes a positive effect

on student outcomes: “It is school leaders who promote challenging goals, and then establish safe environments for teachers to critique, question, and support other teachers to reach these goals together that have the most effect on student outcomes” (p. 83). The effects of instructional leadership were higher at the elementary levels than at the secondary levels (Hattie, 2009). Although teachers prefer transformational leadership, the effects are not as profound.

Measures of Academic Performance

The VDOE (2015a) annually reports on the performance of students with disabilities as required by the IDEA. The June 1, 2015, *Special Education Performance Report* reports performance on state targets as described in 14 indicators. The indicators measure performance in the following areas: (1) graduation, (2) dropouts, (3) participation and performance on statewide assessments (4) suspension/expulsion, (5) school age least restrictive environment, (6) preschool least restrictive environment, (7) preschool outcomes, (8) parental involvement, (9) districts with disproportionate representation in special education and related services, (10) districts with disproportionate representation in specific disability categories, (11) timeline for eligibility, (12) Part C to Part B transition, (13) secondary IEP goals and transition services, and (14) postsecondary outcomes (VDOE, 2015a). The State of Virginia met the benchmarks for 7 of the 14 targets set for each indicator. Specific areas in need of improvement include graduation rate, statewide assessment performance, suspension/expulsion rates, the percentage of students participating in the regular education classroom for 80% or more of the day, following eligibility timelines, following timelines for Part C to Part B transition, and IEP goals that support secondary transitions.

The NAEP is administered to students nationally to measure academic achievement in both math and reading (NAEP, n.d.a). The NAEP is given approximately every 2 years to a representative group of both fourth- and eighth-grade students. Student performance in each subject area is designated as below basic, basic, proficient, or advanced. The gaps in the performance of students with and without disabilities can be seen in the results of this assessment. Specifically, “There has been no significant improvement seen in the NAEP performance for students with disabilities in the last three administrations (2009, 2011, 2013)” (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p. 18). Results from the 2013 administration show that approximately 69% of students with disabilities performed at the below basic level in the area of reading while 31% of the students performed at the basic, proficient, and advanced levels

combined (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Likewise, approximately 27% of students without disabilities performed at the below basic level in the same area while 72% of the students performed at the basic, proficient, and advanced levels combined (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Performance on the math assessment also indicated that students without disabilities outperformed their disabled peers. Although students with disabilities are being educated in the general education setting at higher rates, performance on this assessment is reflective of a disparity between these two groups of students despite the increase in time in the general education setting (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Virginia identified the SOL as the curricular and assessment tool used to measure adequate yearly progress toward identified achievement goals. In Virginia, the SOL test scores of students with disabilities were significantly lower than the average scores of all students. Data reported by the VDOE on *Standards of Learning (SOL) Test Results for Schools, School Divisions and the Commonwealth* revealed that in 2014–2015, 79% of all students passed the state SOL Reading and Language Arts Assessment compared to 45% of students with disabilities. Similarly, 79% of all students passed the state SOL Math Assessment compared to 48% of students with disabilities. The differences in student performance resulted in the state, several schools, and school divisions failing to meet federal AMOs (VDOE, 2015b). AMOs can be met using current year test scores, 3-year averaged scores, or a 10% reduction in failure rate. While AMO targets increase annually, the 2015–2016 VDOE *Summary of Accountability Results* indicates that the state has met AMO targets in the areas of reading and math for all students; Gap Group 1, which includes "Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners, Economically Disadvantaged Students" (p. 1); Gap Group 3, which includes students who are black; and Gap Group 3, which includes students who are Hispanic (VDOE, 2015b). Although participation AMOs were met, Table 2 displays the variances in student achievement amongst all students and students with disabilities between 2012 and 2015.

Table 2

Achievement of All Students and Students with Disabilities in Virginia

Assessment	All Students			Students with Disabilities		
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
English/reading proficiency rate	75%	74%	79%	43%	43%	45%
Math proficiency rate	71%	74%	79%	41%	43%	48%

Note: Data from VDOE (2015b).

In a study conducted by Hurt (2012), it was found that students who were assessed using the SOL assessment had lower rates of proficiency than students who participated in the Virginia Grade-Level Assessment (VGLA), which was administered to students with disabilities who participated in an alternate assessment program. Hurt (2012) conducted a study in which he found that there was a "relationship between assessment method (SOL assessment or VGLA) and proficiency in reading and math" (p. 3), with students participating in the VGLA scoring higher.

Life Experiences and Conditions Affecting Student Achievement

A variety of school and cultural factors may impact student achievement at varying levels (Barton & Coley, 2009). Barton and Coley (2009) conducted a synthesis of research studies and found that "16 factors related to life experiences and conditions are correlated with cognitive development and academic achievement" (p. 3). Specifically, curriculum rigor, teacher preparation, teacher experience, teacher absence and turnover, class size, availability of classroom technology, and fear and safety at school were identified as school factors that impact achievement. Barton and Coley (2009) assert that while correlates such as class size have been heavily researched, curriculum rigor has not been studied as frequently.

In addition, Barton and Coley (2009) find that increasing the home–school partnership and increasing parent participation in school activities have been attributed to having a positive impact on school performance. The researchers also examined factors outside of the schools' control that have an impact on students. These may start at birth with low birth weight. This is important, as students with low birth weight are often enrolled in special education programs (Barton & Corley, 2009). Additionally, children may be subjected to environmental hazards, poor nutrition, single-family homes, and even frequently transitioning from school to school. Through Barton and Corley's (2009) research, correlations between the 16 factors and

race/ethnicity and income were made. Barton and Corley (2009) analyzed research on correlates of achievement "to identify the sources of the achievement gaps among students of different racial/ethnic groups and of different levels of family income" (p. 6). The results indicate that the presence of multiple correlated factors and in wavering combinations impact the student achievement of subgroups in varying ways. This synthesis, however, does not focus specifically on students with disabilities. A review of research has not synthesized a list of correlates of achievement for students with disabilities.

Hattie (2009) conducted a synthesis of research and described that the performance of students was directly correlated to the contributions of the student and the contributions from home. Specifically, the prior performance, personality, and experiences during preschool strongly predict their future success. In addition, the socio-economic status (SES) of the student's family, the family structure, and the home environment impact performance. Hattie (2009) offered insight into home variables impacting achievement:

> Across all home variables, parental aspirations and expectations for children's educational achievement has the strongest relationship with achievement (d = 0.80), while communication (interest in homework and school work, assistance with homework, discussing school progress: d = 0.38) have a moderate size effect, and parental home supervision (e.g. home rules for watching television, home surroundings conducive to doing school work: d = 0.18) is the weakest" (p. 70).

Teacher Professional Development, Teacher Quality, and the Impact on Achievement

One factor that may impact student achievement is the recruitment and retention of teaching personnel who are experienced and qualified to do the job. "Special education teachers have traditionally been prepared and licensed as specialists in addressing characteristics and applying interventions best suited to students who have unusual learning needs" (Bays & Crockett, 2007, p. 145). However, Hallahan and Cohen (2008) find that at the University of Virginia, it is becoming more difficult to ensure that pre-service special education teachers have meaningful experiences with their cooperating teacher as, "Their time is all used up shadowing their supervising teacher as she shadows the general education teacher" (p. 5). Since services can be delivered in a variety of structures, administrators have the responsibility to design an instructional program and provide professional development that will prepare pre-service teachers and practicing educators to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

Allen and Hughes-Hassell (2010) conducted a study in a North Carolina school division to determine school librarians' readiness to assist students with disabilities. The results of the study survey showed that half of the participants indicated that they preferred to receive information on best practices from special education professionals and 28% preferred to receive this information through "school-sponsored professional development" (Allen & Hughes-Hassell, 2010, p. 53). Furthermore, 90% of participants "graded themselves" with a C, D, or E on a question "on their knowledge of best practice in education" (Allen & Hughes-Hassell, 2010, p. 53). The researchers asserted that the use of best practices would only be effective if the practices were designed to meet the unique needs of each student (Allen & Hughes-Hassell, 2010). Findings reveal that a majority of the participants were ignorant of both best practices in special education and of the needs of individual students with disabilities in their buildings (Allen & Hughes-Hassell, 2010).

"Teachers who are most effective at raising overall academic standards are likely to have a lower tolerance for students with special needs" (Hocutt, 1996, p. 83). Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron, and Vanhover (2006) conducted a study that used case studies to explore the impact of eight general education teachers' participation in teacher learning communities (TLCs) on improved performance of students with disabilities. The researchers asserted that general education teachers "play a primary role in the education of students with disabilities ... [but] often they report feeling unprepared to undertake this role" (Brownell et al., 2006, p. 171).

The teachers' ability to monitor the unique needs of students and adjust the practices used to address these needs accordingly was monitored through classroom observations. A synthesis of the findings indicated that teachers adopted and implemented what they learned through TLCs at varying levels: (1) high, (2) moderate, and (3) low. "High adopters believed interesting instruction was foundational to classroom management, and this belief was evident in how they spoke about their classroom" (Brownell et al., 2006, p. 79). Conversely, low adopters took a teacher-centered approach to instructing and displayed limited abilities to adapt instruction to the students' learning, behavioral, and social needs (Brownell et al., 2006). Mock and Kauffman (2002) identify special education teachers as specialists who are trained and prepared to educate students with disabilities. These teachers have been exposed to explicit strategies that support students with disabilities. Mock and Kauffman (2002) assert that general education teachers have not been provided with this specialized training, although in inclusive settings, these teachers are

expected to serve as specialists to students with disabilities. In addition, Mock and Kauffman (2002) question why general education teachers are expected to be skilled in teaching all students and special educators are only expected to be skilled in meeting the needs of designated populations of students.

Marzano (2007) and Stronge (2007) identified teachers as the most important factor impacting student achievement and progress. Similar findings were found in a meta-analysis conducted by Hattie (2009), where he describes how student outcomes can be impacted by the passion of the teacher who is supporting students in understanding their perspectives, communicating their perspective to them, teaching in a way that meets their students' needs, learning, providing ongoing feedback, and demonstrating a love for what they do. In addition, Hattie (2009) further supports that teachers with positive impacts on student achievement are those individuals who pay attention to what is working and what is not working, and who make adjustments as necessary.

School Influences and the Impact on Student Achievement

Marzano (2007) described how:

> A teacher's beliefs about students' chances of success in school influence the teacher's actions with students, which in turn influence students' achievement. If the teacher believes students can succeed, she tends to behave in ways that help them succeed. (p. 162)

Likewise, Hattie (2009) identifies teachers as having an impact on student performance. Some researchers believe that the teacher is most important to student achievement and progress (Marzano, 2007; Stronge, 2007). Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges (2004) stated:

> The question of whether teachers differ dramatically in their effectiveness in promoting their students' academic achievement is fundamental to educational research. If differences in teacher effectiveness are large, then identification of more effective teachers and the factors that cause them to be more effective is important both for basic research and for educational reform. (p. 237)

A teacher who maintains positive attitudes about student growth and learning fosters positive learning environments where student growth and achievement occurs (Wasicsko, 2007).

According to Hattie (2009), "The most powerful effects of the school relate to features within schools, such as the climate of the classroom, peer influences, and the lack of disruptive

students in the classroom" (p. 33). Educators often believe the factors such as school uniforms have a positive effect on achievement; however, there is no impact at the elementary level and a negative impact at the secondary level. Other school influences that have close to zero impact include mainstreaming, the size of classes, and summer school (Hattie, 2009). Student achievement is likewise negatively impacted by teacher retention and students frequently transferring from school to school.

> A safe environment for the learner (and for the teacher) is an environment where errors are welcomed and fostered—because we learn so much from errors and from the feedback that accrues from going in the wrong direction or not going sufficiently fluently in the right direction. (Hattie, 2009, p. 23)

Hattie (2009) identifies that teachers need to be prepared to implement a variety of strategies, identify when the strategies are or are not working, and be prepared to modify and adjust instructional practices as necessary.

Nagle, Hernandez, Embler, McLaughlin, and Doh (2006) explored factors associated with elementary schools that demonstrated relatively high levels of academic performance amongst students with disabilities. An analysis of the data revealed that these high-performing schools had four unique characteristics.

> [E]mphasis on high standards for student performance and behavior and access to the general education curriculum; stability within the school community; close ties between the school, parents, and community; and flexible school instructional arrangements, creative use of resources, and support for at risk students. (Nagle et al., 2006, p. 6)

Nagel et al. (2006) recommended that school leaders should establish a clear process to assist with ongoing communication between parents and teachers.

Building Conditions and Student Achievement

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between building conditions and student achievement. Studies conducted by Bullock (2007), Crook (2006), Lanham (1999), Hines (1996), and Cash (1993) explored this relationship. These studies were completed using comparable methodologies and studied students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The findings suggested there is a relationship between student achievement and the status of the building conditions. The studies identified various elements of the physical and cosmetic classroom environment that had an impact on student achievement. This finding was also

supported in research by Cheryan, Ziegler, Plaut, and Meltzo (2014) that suggests that both the symbolic and structural features of the classroom have an impact on student achievement. The conditions of building factors to include temperature, lights, sound, and accessibility can have a negative or positive impact on achievement. Students are cited as having more educational benefit when they are educated in a classroom with natural light. Likewise, a classroom where a student with a disability can access classroom resources without obstacles through accessibility of properly arranged furniture, ramps, and seating has more educational benefit.

Class Size and the Impact on Student Achievement

The topic of class size is an ongoing conversation amongst educators. Maples (2009) conducted a study to explore the effects of class size on student performance in reading and mathematics. The study analyzed the differences in achievement of students in grades 6, 7, and 8 with varying class sizes. The results indicated that students in larger classes—more than 25 students—had a higher mean score on end-of-grade (EOG) assessments in reading and mathematics in grades 7 and 8. There was no significant difference in scores for sixth-grade students on the Reading EOG Assessment.

In addition, Wilson (2011) conducted a quantitative, correlational study to examine the relationship between class size and academic achievement of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students in reading and mathematics. Achievement was measured by the citywide test scores of over 400 intermediate school children in New York. The study found that no statistically significant relationship was present between citywide reading and mathematics test scores and class size. Likewise, no statistically significant relationship was present amongst reading scores and class size in the special education setting when controlling for the type of classroom, the number of personnel in each class, the amount of money allocated per student, and the teacher's experience.

Arico (2011) conducted research using a mixed-method approach to determine if a reduction in the class size of students served in an inclusion setting affected performance on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (ASK). The study explored teachers' perceptions of the impact of class size on student achievement. Arico (2011) reported that teachers believed that smaller class sizes would positively impact the academic performance of students with disabilities. The findings of the study suggest that students with disabilities served in a smaller inclusion setting outperformed students served in a larger inclusion setting on the

New Jersey ASK. Robertson (2005) and Shin & Chung (2009) also explored the impact of class size on student achievement and found that the lower the class size, the higher the achievement amongst students in the class.

Student Engagement and Academic Achievement

Hafen et al. (2012) conducted a study of high school students' perceptions of student independence, teacher–student relations, and academic performance as predictors in the engagement of students. The results indicated that students with limited engagement normally experienced more challenges with academics and grades than their peers who were more engaged did. Valentine and Collins (2011) explored the relationship between engagement and performance on achievement in middle school classes. The results indicated that students performed higher on achievement tests when there was more engagement in the classroom. In addition, Hafen et al. (2012) found that students educated in a "supportive learning environment that allows them an opportunity to express curiosity and become involved in the learning process will always fare better and engage more than a student who is subjected to lack of stimulation or a threatening environment" (p. 252). According to Meece, Anderman, and Anderman (2006), educators who establish achievement goals that center on "engaging, choosing, and persisting at different learning activities" (p. 490) produce higher achievement results.

Service-Delivery Models and the Impact on Student Achievement

"Definitions of service-delivery models or settings vary from researcher to researcher, and descriptions of the treatments being implemented in those models or settings are woefully inadequate" (Zigmond, 2003, p. 196). "The number of children and youth ages 3–21 receiving special education services was 6.4 million, or about 13% of all public school students, in 2012–13" (Kena et al., 2015, p. 88). Students with disabilities have been educated using different delivery models.

Students with disabilities have not always been included in the general education setting (Hogan-Young, 2013). In recent years, the continuum-of-services model has evolved, thus allowing students with disabilities more opportunities to be educated with their non-disabled peers. The models of educating these students have changed over the years. These include general education settings (mainstreaming and inclusion), special classes, special schools, home instruction, hospital settings, pull-out settings, separate classrooms, and separate schools (Lingo

et al., 2011). While special education delivery models have changed, concerns have surfaced regarding the effectiveness of the various levels of services provided to students. The identified placement option "must meet the requirements of a free appropriate public education and the least restrictive environment" (Mason, 2013, p. 37). According to the U.S. Department of Education and Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (2014), approximately 95% of school-aged students were served under IDEA.

> More than 60% of students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, (61.1 percent), were educated inside the regular class 80% or more of the day. A total of 19.8 percent were educated inside the regular class less than 40% of the day. (U.S. Department of Education and Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2014, p. xxvi)

Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, and Theoharis (2013) cited the *Data Accountability Center 2010 Report* which indicated that:

> Recent data on the exclusion of students with disabilities indicate approximately 50% of students with disabilities spend a significant amount of time learning outside of the general education classroom and these rates of exclusion have remained relatively consistent over the past ten years. (p. 323)

However, students with learning disabilities (LDs) are spending increasing amounts of the school day in general education settings (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). According to Cortiella and Horowitz (2014), "Sixty-six percent of students with LD spend 80 percent or more of their school day in general education classrooms" (p. 16). This reflects an increase of 47% from 2004 (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Some research finds that increased instruction in the general education setting is associated with positive academic outcomes for students with disabilities (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Hang & Rabren, 2009; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Although the amount of time students with LDs spend in the general education classroom is increasing, the gap between the performance of general education students and students with learning disabilities continues to exist (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Eckes & Swando, 2009). McLeskey and Waldron (2011) state that the controversy over service delivery is rooted in the debate over the amount of time students with disabilities spend in the general education setting and the identification of which service location provides anticipated student outcomes. Although this controversy continues, data reported indicate that there is a history of an increase in the number of students with disabilities that are served in the general education setting for the majority of the

day (Fore III, Hagan-Burke, Burke, Boon, & Smith, 2008; U.S. Department of Education and Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2014).

Student Placement and the Impact on Student Achievement

IDEA created a new urgency for educators to determine where students with disabilities should be educated (Zigmond, 2003).

> With the additional requirement that students with disabilities participate in (and perform respectably on) statewide assessments and accountability procedures, pressures to favor one kind of placement (e.g., inclusion in the general education classroom) over any other (e.g., providing pull-out services in some other place) mounted. (Zigmond, 2003, p. 194)

According to Hallahan and Cohen (2008), "for many students the regular classroom doesn't offer them the intensive, individualized instruction they so desperately need" (p. 2). The NCLB Act of 2001 "requires that 90% of all students with disabilities be tested" on the SOL (Hurt, 2012, p. 23). This created a new level of pressure for educators to ensure that students with disabilities participated in standardized testing and demonstrated success.

The review of the literature includes several studies that explored the achievement of students who were instructed using various service-delivery models. Considerable differences were noted in several of the studies. The outcomes indicate that there is no consensus on the model that provides increased student achievement for students with disabilities. For example, McLeskey and Waldron (2011) reviewed research on the effectiveness of inclusive programs for elementary students with LDs. With varying results, they found that some students were more successful in full-inclusion settings while other students were more successful in a more restrictive environment that provided resource support. McLeskey and Waldron (2011) also present research that shows that students with LDs can make significant academic gains above those educated in an inclusive environment when they are provided with pull-out instruction that is of high quality. Additionally, McLeskey and Waldron's (2011) review of the studies found that the variance in student performance in the two studies could be attributed to the differences in the quality of instruction that was provided to the students. They find that the results of the study can be misleading as both settings can produce improved academic achievement for elementary students with LDs. They argue that the success is linked to the prevalence of effective instruction and not the instructional setting. These researchers also note that student performance in a pull-out program where high-quality instruction is provided can yield greater

achievement results for LD students than for those students educated in an inclusive classroom. Additionally, they assert that pull-out services provide the opportunity for students to receive small group, specialized instruction on noted areas of need, unlike services provided in an inclusive setting.

Taylor (2015) conducted a study in an urban elementary school in Tennessee during the 2013–2015 school years. Three groups of students were analyzed: (a) learning-disabled students who were served by the general education teacher in the inclusion setting, (b) learning-disabled students who were served by the special education teacher in the special education setting, and (3) students without disabilities who were taught in the general education setting (Taylor, 2015; Tremblay, 2013). Students were administered the Discovery Education Assessment in Reading and Math along with the iReady Assessment in Reading. The findings indicated that "students in this study, who have been identified as having a disability, are not making adequate academic gains in an inclusive setting or pull-out setting" (Taylor, 2015, p. 54) as compared to their non-disabled peers. This may be linked to the survey administered as a part of the research study, which indicated that "students who received special education services in the general education class through inclusion and through pull-out services have a low self-efficacy regarding academic and social success" (Taylor, 2015, p. 53). Taylor (2015) found that while teachers felt comfortable delivering special education services and accommodations in the general education setting, the student self-efficacy surveys showed that students did not feel academically comfortable in the inclusive environment (Taylor, 2015). This may be attributed to the fact that the general education teacher and students were supported by paraprofessionals who were previously not as instrumental in instructional support (Taylor, 2015).

Likewise, Tremblay (2013) reported on a study that compared the co-teaching inclusion model and solo-taught special education models and the impact each model had on the academic achievement of primary students with and without LDs. There was also a balance between the two groups in average age, gender, economic level of the parents, nationality, and intelligence quotient (Tremblay, 2013). Students in the inclusion model had an average IQ of 80.95 and the students in the special education model had an average IQ of 80.26 (Tremblay, 2013).

In 2007–2008, an initial comparison examined the reading/writing and mathematics performance of the sample group of grade 1 students in the areas of reading and math as measured by the Observation Survey and TEDI-Math Assessments. During the review of

October pre-assessment data, no significant differences between students served in both locations were noted. The June post-assessment produced different results. Tremblay (2013) reported, "the *t*-test showed that these differences were significant ($t = 3.271$, $P = 0.002$) in reading/writing for the students in the inclusion setting, but not in math ($t = -0.363$, $P = 0.718$)" (Tremblay, 2013, p. 255). In summary, students in the inclusive co-teaching setting demonstrated significant progress in reading and writing. A decline or plateau in performance was noted for students served in the special education environment. During the 2008–2009 school year, the performance of these students continued to be analyzed during grade 2. The June assessment indicated that there continued to be a difference between the performance of the two groups in reading/writing "($t = -5.066$, $P = 0.000$) and in math ($t = -5.169$, $P = 0.000$)" (Tremblay, 2013, p. 256). The performance gap increased between grade 1 and grade 2.

A study was conducted in Texas that compared the number of students with disabilities who received 80% or more of their services in the general education setting from 2003 to 2009 to the performance of students on the grade-level Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) state assessment (Roden, Borgemenke, & Holt, 2013). Students with disabilities who passed Math and Reading/English Language Arts (ELA) TAKS tests were compared to their non-disabled peers. The results of this study found that students with disabilities who had access to the general education curriculum for at least 80% of the day scored higher on the TAKS Assessment and increased in both the areas of Math and Reading/ELA than students who did not have this access.

In 2010, Dawkins conducted a study that examined the impact that inclusion of high school special education students had on academic achievement. The results of the study revealed that students who were included for English 1 did not benefit academically from the inclusion model (Dawkins, 2010). Male, female, Black, and White students with disabilities were more successful when they received resource services (Dawkins, 2010). The results differed for Biology 1, as students with disabilities showed improved academic achievement while receiving inclusion services (Dawkins, 2010).

According to Cosier et al. (2013), for every hour a student spent in the general education setting, achievement improved about a half of a point on the reading achievement assessment. Similar results were observed with mathematics achievement. As a result, it is recommended that

administrators examine current educational practices in their schools when programming for students with disabilities (Cosier et al., 2013).

Similarly, Fore III et al. (2008) conducted a study that examined the differences in performance between secondary students with LDs in inclusive and non-inclusive settings and found no statistically significant difference. An extensive review of empirical research on educating students with disabilities in the general education setting and special education setting is filled with many perspectives (Cosier et al., 2013). Overall, the review indicated that students with disabilities demonstrated varying success in a variety of service-delivery models and with varying service time. Fore III et al. (2008) suggest that further studies should examine more than where services are delivered in determining the impact on student achievement.

The Case for Inclusion

There has been an increase in the number of students with disabilities placed in general education classrooms (Hurt, 2012; McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2012). The presumption of the law under IDEA is that:

> To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including those in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and that special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment only occurs if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (§300.550)

Researchers who support inclusion often reference the academic and social benefits for students with disabilities and sometimes students without disabilities (Hocutt, 1996). Advocates for inclusion argue that academic achievement is enhanced when students with disabilities are expected to achieve to the same standards as their non-disabled peers. Several studies support the integration of students with disabilities, suggesting that inclusion may improve student self-esteem, self-confidence, and ultimately improve student social skills and academic performance (Hang & Rabren, 2009; Hocutt, 1996). Additionally, it is important to consider the relationship between the percentage of the day students with disabilities spend in the general education setting and student achievement. McLeskey and Waldron (2011) conducted a study amongst elementary students with LDs educated in a full-inclusion setting. The results of the study indicated that when students were educated in an inclusion setting with adequate student support,

sufficient funding, and appropriate instruction, students were provided with an increased chance at being successful in the areas of reading and mathematics in the inclusion setting.

The Case Against Inclusion

As the number of students with disabilities placed in general education settings increased, the number of researchers who questioned the effectiveness of the full-inclusion service-delivery model for all students with disabilities increased likewise. Hocutt (1996) found that although some students with disabilities benefit from inclusion, the greatest outcomes for student success were achieved through intense specialized instruction, the pull-out model, and strategic participation with non-disabled peers. Zigmond and Baker (1996) also challenged the concept of full inclusion as the only model for the delivery of special education services. Although they support full inclusion for some, they argue that access to the general education setting should not be provided at the expense of a student not receiving intensive, strategic, individualized instruction designed specifically for each student. Research conducted by Fore III et al. (2008) challenges full inclusion, as students with disabilities who require specialized instruction may not achieve at optimal levels when placed in inclusive settings where the instruction is more generalized. In addition, they contend that students in specialized settings such as pull-out may not reach their full academic potential if they are not provided access to the general curriculum and instruction provided by a highly-qualified educator.

Pick-Bowers (2003) surveyed middle and high school general education teachers to study their trepidations at including students with disabilities in their regular education classrooms. The findings indicated that over 80% of the participants felt that they did not have adequate training on meeting the needs of students with disabilities in the general education setting. Likewise, over 85% of the participants indicated they did not receive annual training on how to serve students with disabilities. Over 70% of participants further supported the use of the special education classroom as a means for students with disabilities to receive adequate support.

Summary of the Literature Review

This chapter contained a review of the literature relevant to factors that may impact the achievement of students with disabilities. Barton and Coley (2009) assert there are “16 factors related to life experiences and conditions are correlated with cognitive development and academic achievement” (p. 3). The literature on this topic is not clear on parents’ perceptions of

factors that contribute to and hinder their child's academic achievement. Likewise, the literature does not clearly support either inclusion or pull-out services for students with disabilities as the most effective educational placement (Fore III et al., 2008). Some researchers contend that service locations for students with disabilities have an impact on their performance. Although the regulation for educating students in the least restrictive environment is appealing to some, there are opposing views about its effectiveness. The debate is centered around the inquiry of how much time students with disabilities spend in the general education setting and the educational benefit these students receive as a result (Ford, 2013). While some researchers contend that students with disabilities can be educated with their non-disabled peers, other researchers assert that educating students with disabilities in the general education setting is unfavorable to the learning-disabled students.

The available research promotes the need for practitioners to plan for the implementation of quality education for all students (Cosier et al., 2013). Life experiences, teachers, building conditions, class size, student placement, inclusion practices, and self-contained services have been identified as factors affecting student achievement. In reviewing the literature, it is clear that there is a lack of phenomenological research on the perceptions of parents regarding school factors impacting student achievement, thus making it difficult for practitioners to plan for the highest level of student achievement (Fore III et al., 2008).

Gaps and Limitations in the Literature

According to Eckes and Swando (2009) and Hurt (2012), students with disabilities have historically underperformed on achievement tests in comparison to their non-disabled peers. The current structure of schools supports the success of particular groups of students and rarely considers and acts upon the viewpoint of students with disabilities (Powell, 2009). Moreover, O'Rourke and Houghton (2006) found that schools do not consider students with disabilities' insights and views in the structure of their educational settings and structures of educational support. Rueda (2011) asserts:

> [W]e must keep in mind that more expansive frameworks help remind us that when we "take apart" students' behavior and performance for analysis, diagnosis, and intervention, it is incumbent upon us to remember that there is a whole child that must be accounted for in the end. (p. 181)

This was evident in the review of the literature, as limited studies were available that considered the perceptions of parents of elementary students with disabilities on school factors that impact their child's student achievement.

Need for Further Research

Cosier et al. (2013) suggest that additional research should be conducted on student achievement that uses differing measures of achievement and examines various factors that impact achievement. Further research should be conducted to gain more insight into the lived experiences of parents of elementary students with disabilities. The limited research suggests a need for an analysis of parents of students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors that impact their academic achievement in three major areas: (a) school factors that contribute to their child's academic success, (b) school factors that hinder their child's academic success, and (c) recommendations for improving their child's success. Further research could assist school leaders in modifying instructional programs and practices to better serve students with disabilities to improve student achievement.

Chapter Three
Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the research design and method that was utilized during the study and is organized into the following sections: Purpose of the Study, Research Design, Research Design Justification, Qualitative Research Questions, Site/Sample Selection, Data-Collection Procedures, Data-Gathering Procedures, Instrument Design, Instrument Validation, Data Treatment, Data Management, Data-Analysis Techniques, and the Timeline. This chapter also details the process used to conduct the research. A summary of the research methodology concludes this chapter.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore, understand, and analyze parents of intermediate students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors that impact their child's academic achievement. Specifically, this study focused on parents of students with disabilities' perceptions in three major areas: (a) school factors that contribute to their child's academic success, (b) school factors that hinder their child's academic success, and (c) recommendations for improving their child's success. The objective of this study was to describe parents of students with disabilities' perceptions of their child's lived experiences. Findings from this study could encourage educational administrators to work collaboratively to discuss and consider parents of students with disabilities' perceptions of their child's lived experiences and recommendations when making professional development and instructional decisions that endeavor to promote improvements in student achievement levels.

The study is similar to Rolland's (2011) study that endeavored to collect reliable and valid insights of school factors that contribute to the academic success of junior and senior African American boys at a rural high school in Georgia. This study differs from Rolland's (2011) study in four distinctive ways: (1) the study includes parents of students enrolled in a suburban school in southeastern Virginia, (2) study participants are parents of students enrolled in a fifth-grade classroom, (3) the study examines the perceptions of parents of students with disabilities, (4) and participants are parents of students enrolled as special education students who have attended the same school for at least 2 years.

Research Design

The research design employed qualitative research methods to address the research questions. The methodology utilized research questions to examine the perceptions of parents of students with disabilities on the factors they perceive to contribute to and hinder their child's academic achievement. By exploring the perceptions of parents of students with disabilities who have had experiences with school factors impacting their child's learning, it was possible to obtain multiple perspectives that further our understanding of the school factors that impact student achievement.

This study was intended to increase the understanding of the perceptions of parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities on school factors that impact their child's student achievement and perceived recommendations for improving student achievement. Merriam (1998) stated that qualitative research provides "the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education," since it is "focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspective of those being studied" (p. 1). The research questions for this study focused on the perceptions of parents of students with disabilities whose child's academic performance was impacted by school factors; thus, qualitative methods were most appropriate. The voice given to parents of students with disabilities provides educators with a better understanding of the school factors that can contribute to and hinder the academic success of a subgroup of underperforming students; thus, implementing professional development and striving to improve student achievement, graduation rates, and employment rates.

Research Design Justification

A variety of research designs can be considered when conducting a study to include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches (Creswell, 2014). For this study, a qualitative design was utilized to address research questions and gain insight into parents of students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors that contribute to and hinder their child's academic achievement. McMillan and Wergin (2010) described qualitative research as a way for researchers to identify and understand individual experiences and perspectives in the participants' natural settings. Similarly, Creswell (2014) describes qualitative research as a method for researchers to explore and gain further knowledge of the participant's view on the

presented subject matter. Qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study, as Merriam (2009) noted that qualitative researchers are interested in "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose was to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 23).

Rolland (2011) conducted a qualitative research study similar to the proposed study. Specifically, the researcher examined participant insights while studying African American male students' perceptions of factors that contribute to their academic success using participant perspectives. This approach allowed the researcher to engage with the research participants and learn directly from them about their thoughts and perspectives on the topic. This phenomenological study will explore parents of students with disabilities' perceptions and describe and interpret the perceptions of those included in the study to help others understand the experiences of the participants (McMillan and Wergin, 2010).

This study methodology was selected because, "In summarizing phenomenological studies, the researchers are careful to suspend their way of describing and use the participant's language, terms, and phrases to illustrate shared meanings and consciousness" (McMillan & Wergin, 2010, p. 90). Rossman and Rallis (2011) assert that "there are few truths that constitute universal knowledge. Rather, there are multiple perspectives about the world" (p. 36). By exploring the perceptions of parents of students with disabilities whose children have had various achievement outcomes, it will be possible to gain multiple perspectives, and further gain knowledge on the school factors that contribute to and hinder their child's student achievement.

Limited research into the parents of students with disabilities' perceptions of the impact of school factors on their child's academic achievement exist and there is a need to evaluate the factors that parents attribute to various levels of performance (O'Rourke & Houghton, 2006). The data collected in this study will provide researchers with a better understanding of the school factors that can contribute to and hinder the academic success of a population of underperforming students. It, however, cannot be assumed that the results of qualitative research can be generalized when determining trends and patterns with varying student populations.

Qualitative Research Questions

The research questions that guided this qualitative study are:

1. What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?
2. What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors responsible for hindering their child's achievement?
3. What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of recommendations for how to improve their child's academic success?

Site/Sample Selection

Creswell (2014) identified the setting, research participants, research questions, process, and procedures as critical components of a qualitative study. Qualitative research collection takes place in the natural setting where participants experience the problem studied (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the site for this study was in the intermediate school that the participants' children attend.

The Sample Intermediate School's (SIS) (pseudonym) enrollment was 761 students for the 2016–2017 school year. Under IDEA, the school served 145 students with disabilities, as prescribed in their IEPs. The student registration in the intermediate school is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Student Enrollment in 2016–2017

Grade Level	# of Homerooms	# of students per grade level	# of students with disabilities per grade level
Third	9	243	44
Fourth	9	259	53
Fifth	9	259	48

There are 27 general education teachers, 3 general teacher assistants, 11 special education teachers, 11 special education teacher assistants, and 5 therapists. Twenty-five of the 27 classrooms are supported by a regular education teacher, special education teacher, and paraprofessional. The special education teachers and paraprofessionals rotate between classrooms based on the needs of the students. SIS has one special education department chair, one assistant principal, and one principal.

This school was identified as the population because students with disabilities enrolled at SIS demonstrated disparities in performance on the Virginia SOL despite a focused effort to improve achievement for these students. Also, this school had consistent leadership with the current principal serving for 3 consecutive years. The pass rate for students with disabilities on the English Reading SOL was 44% in 2013–2014, 43% in 2014–2015, and 32% in 2015–2016. The results were similar to the Mathematics SOL Assessment with the overall pass rate for students with disabilities at 47% in 2013–2014, 38% in 2014–2015, and 39% in 2015–2016. This performance was reflective on the *Virginia State Report Card* (VDOE, 2016).

"Individuals who become participants are selected on the bases of their experience with the phenomena being studied and on their willingness to be interviewed and observed" (McMillan & Wergin, 2010, p. 90). Creswell (2014) asserts that the premise of qualitative research is to "purposefully select" the study participants who are information rich and a study site that will best assist the researcher with understanding the research problem and research questions. Therefore, to conduct an extensive, detailed, and thorough study, the recommendation by Creswell (2014) to limit the actors in a phenomenological study to three to ten participants will be followed.

This study utilized a purposeful sample of parents of students with disabilities enrolled at an intermediate school in southeastern Virginia. According to Creswell (2014), purposefully selecting the site and participants allows the researcher to gain information that will be useful and assist participants in answering the research questions. To further seek the perspective of parents of students with disabilities regarding the school factors that contribute to and hinder their child's academic performance, the following criteria was used for selection. The initial criteria for participation was limited to parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities who were enrolled at SIS for the 2 previous years. Additionally, parents of students were identified to participate if their child received special education services during grades 3 and 4.

Furthermore, research participants were limited to parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities whose child participated in and passed at least one third- or fourth-grade English Reading or Mathematics Virginia SOL Assessment. This multiyear experience with SOL, testing, and special education, and knowledge of their child's academic record gave participants a more detailed perspective of their child's academic success. Reading and mathematics were the primary focus as these areas are tested in both the third and fourth grades and are also evaluated

by the NAEP. The sample size was further limited to include parents who have expressed their willingness to participate in the study as reflected by signed receipt of the informed consent form (see Appendix A).

Data-Collection Procedures

After Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Letter was received (see Appendix B), a formal request to complete a study on school factors that contribute to and hinder the academic success of students with disabilities in a suburban intermediate school in southeastern Virginia was submitted to the school division (see Appendix C). Once approval was received from the school division (see Appendix D), teachers who served students with disabilities in grade 5 were asked to identify parents of students who meet the criteria and may be willing and able to offer open and candid opinions on their perceptive of school factors impacting their child's student achievement. Additionally, the researcher conducted a review of the participants' child's academic profile to include standardized testing, enrollment status, and special education disability category to confirm their eligibility for participation in the study (see Appendix E). Once parents were identified, consent forms were distributed to notify the prospective participants of the purpose of the study and the procedures and conditions of their participation. The researcher attained signed informed consent (see Appendix A) from potential participants. Consent forms were reviewed, and the first ten complete forms were utilized to identify participants who were willing to participate in the study on a voluntary basis. The researcher contacted each participant by telephone to confirm their consent and apprise them as to whether (or not) they had been identified to participate in the study.

The participants were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Each interview was conducted on a date and at a time that was agreeable to the participant. The interview was conducted in an environment that was comfortable to the interviewee. Participants were encouraged to be open and honest when they responded to the 22-item interview (see Appendix F) statements. The researcher asked follow-up questions when clarity or additional information was needed.

The researcher used an audio-recorder and took notes on the responses provided to each interview question with permission from the participants. To protect the privacy of participants, each individual was assigned a participant pseudonym. The researcher notes reflecting the names of participants and their participant pseudonyms were kept separate from one another in a secure

place to protect the identity of the study participants. Each participant was able to review the transcript of their interview to ensure that their perceptions had been accurately recorded.

Data-Gathering Procedures

Upon receipt of approval from the IRB and the division superintendent, letters of request were sent to the parents to explain the purpose of the research study. After receiving approval, data were gathered through interviews of a purposeful sample of parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities who had attended SIS in grades, 3, 4, and 5. In addition, data were collected through a review of academic records to determine enrollment and achievement status.

Since some parents may have had difficulty recalling prior experiences, a semi-structured interview format was utilized. This provided the interviewer flexibility in asking follow-up questions for clarity of understanding. In addition, participants were interviewed in both a familiar and comfortable location to increase the relaxation level of participants. No more than ten parents were selected to participate in this study due to the extensiveness of the interview protocol. This allowed for a thorough analysis of participants' responses to interview questions.

During the interview session, the researcher described the study and data-collection process, developed a rapport with each study participant, and had each participant verbally respond to the interview questions. A semi-structured interview format was utilized to not only allow the researcher to ask a preset list of questions, but also to allow the researcher to ask clarifying questions. An electronic voice-recording device was used with permission during each interview to capture the content and essence of each response. In addition to the data recordings, the researcher took notes on non-verbal responses to questions throughout the interview so that all data would be available for later analysis (Merriam, 2009). After each interview was concluded, the researcher transcribed each interview and allowed each participant to review their transcription to ensure the accuracy of the content.

Instrument Design

The semi-structured interview guide that was utilized in this study was modified with permission from the guide originally utilized in Rolland's (2011) study. The electronic email detailing the request for permission is included in Appendix G. Rolland authorized the use of her interview questions with modifications. The modifications included (a) rephrasing questions to exclude the phrase "African American" and include the phrase "students with disabilities," (b)

simplifying questions so that they could be understood by parents, (c) omitting questions that were not related to school factors, and (d) adding a question that would inquire about what else would assist students with disabilities to become more successful students.

This study presented 22 open-ended research questions to participants to gain an understanding of their perceptions of school factors that may hinder their child from academic achievement and also to allow participants the opportunity to provide recommendations for ways to improve their child's academic success. The interview was divided into four sections. Section one aimed to learn about the participants' perceptions of student achievement. Section two asked ten questions about factors that contribute to academic success. The third section asked six questions about factors that hinder academic success. Section four inquired about recommendations for improvement. Participants were encouraged to answer each question honestly. Probing questions were asked when necessary to gain a full understanding of their lived experiences. In addition, the questions allowed the researcher to obtain a rich understanding of the participants' perceptions necessary to clarify the meaning of their responses.

Instrument Validation

This research study utilized interview questions originally developed by Rolland (2011) that were modified to answer the research questions for the study. Permission was granted by Rolland (2011) to utilize a modified version of her validated instrument. Creswell (2014) indicated that the validity of an instrument is perilous to the meaningful interpretation of the data attained from the instrument. Rolland's (2011) instrument was validated by a retired elementary teacher and retired high school librarian. In addition, two students were selected to participate in a pilot study conducted by Rolland. Each student provided feedback on the study questions. Likewise, for this study, the modified version of the interview questions was reviewed and validated by a panel of current public school parents, teachers, and administrators.

Data Treatment

The audio recordings, transcriptions, demographic information, researcher notes, and identifying information were stored separately in a space that is only accessible by the researcher. Participants were informed that all information would remain confidential and that they would not be identifiable through the information that would be shared. In addition, they

were informed that only the researcher and committee chair would have access to the information. Participants were also given access to review their transcripts to verify the accuracy of the information recorded. Study participants were identified by pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of individuals in the study.

Data Management

The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA, 2010) suggests, "Before sharing data, delete any personally identifiable information or code that would make it possible to reestablish a link to an individual participant's identity" (p. 12). For this study, all data reflecting participants' names and pseudonyms, interview responses, and demographic information were maintained separately in a locked cabinet that is only accessible to the researcher and committee chair. The data for this study will be destroyed upon successful defense of the study.

Data-Analysis Techniques

The qualitative analysis focused on developing an understanding of the perceptions of parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities of the school factors that improve and hinder their child's academic achievement. Qualitative data were gathered through parents' responses to 22 open-ended questions. All interviews were audio recorded, reviewed, and transcribed. Once transcribed, participants reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy. The researcher made adjustments to the transcriptions after these reviews. The following procedures were utilized to analyze the data for this study: (a) The audio-taped interviews were listened to several times to determine categories, subcategories, and themes. (b) Data were reviewed to identify keywords, key phrases, similarities, and differences. (c) Themes were organized and presented visually using a chart. (d) Then, each interview was reviewed and coded for common themes and similarities and differences in responses.

Timeline

Upon completion of IRB training (See Appendix H), a request for IRB approval to conduct this study was submitted in December 2016. Once received, a request to conduct the study was submitted to the superintendent of the local school division. Upon approval, a letter requesting permission to conduct a study in the division was sent to the division representative

(see Appendix C). Following approval (see Appendix D), a letter explaining the study and requesting permission to study and interview selected parents was mailed. Participants who did not complete the documents were called to ensure that the researcher would be able to solicit a high return rate. A week later, a follow-up reminder notice was sent to parents who had not submitted a written reply to the request. During the spring of 2017, no later than a week after parent permission had been granted, phone calls were made to the first eight parents who had submitted all necessary documents to confirm their participation in the study. In addition, the researcher scheduled the initial interview at this time. No more than a week after the confirmation calls were made, a reminder was provided to participants. The remaining parents of those invited to participate were notified of non-participation.

No more than 2 weeks after the initial interview, the researcher transcribed each interview and provided the participants the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy. Upon completion of the interviews, the interviewer reviewed the final transcriptions for commonalities, differences, and themes that emerged from the review of the data. This information was compiled and served as a reference for administrators to utilize when making instructional decisions for students with disabilities.

Methodology Summary

O'Rourke and Houghton (2006) contended that schools do not consider students with disabilities' insights and views. This study strived to focus on parents' lived experiences by seeking answers to which school factors contribute to and hinder the academic performance of students with disabilities enrolled at an intermediate school. The researcher facilitated an interview with each purposefully sampled parent of a student with a disability who had attended SIS for the 2 previous years. In addition, the data included a review of the scholastic record of each participant's child. The findings from the study could prove beneficial to educational leaders, central office administrators, and instructional personnel as well as other researchers in the field. This study will influence educational decision making and practices at the intermediate level by contributing to the array of strategies that improve the achievement levels of intermediate students with disabilities.

Chapter Four

Report on the Data and Data Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore, understand, and analyze parents of intermediate students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors that impacted their child's academic achievement. Additionally, this study focused on parents of students with disabilities' perceptions in three major areas: (a) school factors that contributed to their child's academic success, (b) school factors that hindered their child's academic success, and (c) recommendations for improving their child's success. The qualitative data analysis focused on developing an understanding of the perceptions of parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities of the school factors that improve and hinder their child's academic achievement.

Qualitative data were gathered through parents' responses to 22 open-ended questions. All interviews were audio recorded, reviewed, and transcribed. Once transcribed, participants reviewed their transcriptions for accuracy. The researcher made adjustments to the transcriptions after the review process. The following procedures were utilized to analyze the data for this study: (a) The audio-taped interviews were listened to several times to determine categories, subcategories, and themes. (b) Data were reviewed to identify keywords, key phrases, similarities, and differences. (c) Then, themes were organized and presented visually using charts.

The study was conducted at a suburban intermediate school with an enrollment of 761 students in grades 3–5. At the time of the study, 19% of the students were students with disabilities and 81% were students without disabilities. The objective of this study was to describe parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of their child's lived experiences. The researcher used a semi-structured interview guide to interview eight parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities attending the school in grades 3–5 and who had previously passed at least one SOL test. This chapter contains academic profiles of each participant's child and an analysis of the data collected from interviews with eight parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities.

Participant Description

The profiles of the eight participants included a heterogeneous group of parents of students with disabilities. Two of the 8 parents represented students who were enrolled in the gifted program. The eight participants were parents of students with disabilities. The students were eligible for Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Other Health Impairment (OHI), and Autism (AUT) services. Tables 4–11 provide academic profile information for each parent's child. Each profile includes information on the student's SOL performance in grades 3 and 4, their disability category, and services received.

Parent 1 (P1) is the parent of a student with an OHI, rhombencephalosynapsis. The student has been enrolled in the intermediate school in grades 3, 4, and 5. A review of his academic profile indicates that the student has passed two of the four administered SOL assessments. The student receives SLD services. P1 defines academic success as continued growth (see Appendix I). P5 described their child as being more successful when the teacher focuses on the student's needs.

Table 4

Academic Profile of Parent 1's (P1) Student with a Disability

Assessment	SOL Score	Disability Category	Services
Grade Three Reading	Fail	OHI	SLD
Grade Three Math	Pass		
Grade Four Reading	Fail		
Grade Four Math	Pass		

Parent 2 (P2) is the parent of a student with an OHI, pervasive developmental disorder–not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), anxiety disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and developmental coordination disorder. The student has attended the current school for 2 years. A review of the academic profile indicates that the student has passed the third-grade Math SOL Assessment. The student receives SLD services. P2 defines academic success as a child's ability to apply and use what has been learned (see Appendix I). The parent describes the child as having average overall performance in school. In addition, P2 describes their child as academically successful when the child is interested in the lesson. The performance varies with the student's interest level.

Table 5

Academic Profile of Parent 2's (P2) Student with a Disability

Assessment	SOL Score	Disability Category	Services
Grade Three Reading	Fail	OHI	SLD
Grade Three Math	Pass		
Grade Four Reading	Fail		
Grade Four Math	Fail		

Parent 3 (P3) is the parent of a student with an OHI, ADHD. The student has been enrolled in the current school for 3 years. A review of the academic profile indicates that the student has passed all four Reading and Math SOL Assessments. The student receives ED and gifted services. P3 describes academic success as "meeting your established goal either by way of grades, attendance, behavior, interactions, skills and the like of a set grade level" (P3, *l*24–25). The parent reports that their child is a passing student (see Appendix I).

Table 6

Academic Profile of Parent 3's (P3) Student with a Disability

Assessment	SOL Score	Disability Category	Services
Grade Three Reading	Pass	OHI	ED
Grade Three Math	Pass		Gifted
Grade Four Reading	Pass		
Grade Four Math	Pass		

Parent 4 (P4) is the parent of a student on the autism spectrum. The student has attended the current school in grades 3, 4, and 5. A review of the academic profile indicates that the student has passed all four Reading and Math SOL Assessments. The student receives AUT and gifted services. P4 considers grades and behavior when defining academic success (see Appendix I). The parent describes the child's overall academic performance as passing. Likewise, P4 shared that the student's intermediate years represented a time when the child was a good student.

Table 7

Academic Profile of Parent 4's (P4) Student with a Disability

Assessment	SOL Score	Disability Category	Services
Grade Three Reading	Pass	AUT	AUT
Grade Three Math	Pass		Gifted
Grade Four Reading	Pass		
Grade Four Math	Pass		

Parent 5 (P5) is the parent of a student with an SLD in reading and writing. The student also has an OHI, ADHD. The student attended the current school in grades 3, grades 4, and grades 5. A review of the academic profile indicates that the student was successful on the third-grade Math SOL Assessment. The student receives SLD services. P5 associates grades, social engagement, and happiness with academic success (see Appendix I). P5 described their child as having average performance with untapped success. The parent refers to the child as a good student when the teacher is encouraging and the student is engaged.

Table 8

Academic Profile of Parent 5's (P5) Student with a Disability

Assessment	SOL Score	Disability Category	Services
Grade Three Reading	Fail	OHI	SLD
Grade Three Math	Pass	SLD	
Grade Four Reading	Fail		
Grade Four Math	Fail		

Parent 6 (P6) is the parent of a student with an SLD in reading and writing. The student has attended the current school for 3 years. A review of the academic profile indicates that the student has passed the fourth-grade Reading and Math SOL Assessments. The student receives SLD services. P6 defines academic success as being the best you can be. The parent states that their child's performance in school varies by subject because of learning challenges (see Appendix I). P5 did not describe a time when the child was a good student.

Table 9

Academic Profile of Parent 6's (P6) Student with a Disability

Assessment	SOL Score	Disability Category	Services
Grade Three Reading	Fail	SLD	SLD
Grade Three Math	Fail		
Grade Four Reading	Pass		
Grade Four Math	Pass		

Parent 7 (P7) is the parent of a student with an SLD in reading and writing. The student has attended the current school for 3 years. A review of the academic profile indicates that the student has passed the third-grade Math SOL Assessment. The student receives SLD services. P7 defined academic success as an improvement in grades (see Appendix I). The parent shared that their child has always been a good student who began to grow and show progress with the support of the IEP.

Table 10

Academic Profile of Parent 7's (P7) Student with a Disability

Assessment	SOL Score	Disability Category	Services
Grade Three Reading	Fail	SLD	SLD
Grade Three Math	Pass		
Grade Four Reading	Fail		
Grade Four Math	Fail		

Parent 8 (P8) is the parent of a student with an SLD in writing. The student has attended the current school in grades 3, grades 4, and grades 5. A review of the academic profile indicates that the student was successful on three of the four Math and Reading SOL Assessments. The student receives SLD services. P8 defines academic success as the student having confidence and success as an adult (see Appendix I). The parent discussed their child's performance as growing due to the increase in confidence. The student has always been a good student who needed to develop confidence.

Table 11

Academic Profile of Parent 8's (P8) Student with a Disability

Assessment	SOL Score	Disability Category	Services
Grade Three Reading	Pass	SLD	SLD
Grade Three Math	Fail		
Grade Four Reading	Pass		
Grade Four Math	Pass		

Research Questions

The inquiry into factors that impact the achievement of students with disabilities was guided by three overarching questions:

1. What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?
2. What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors responsible for hindering their child's achievement?
3. What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of recommendations for how to improve their child's academic success?

The data collected in this study can provide researchers with a better understanding of school factors that can contribute to and hinder the academic success of a population of underperforming fifth-grade students with disabilities. It, however, cannot be assumed that the results of this qualitative research can be generalized when determining trends and patterns with other underperforming student populations.

Research Question 1: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?

Interview Question 6: Can you describe the things at school that have helped your child become a good student?

Participants identified members of the school staff, support systems, and specialized instruction as factors that are connected to their child becoming a good student. Six of the eight participants acknowledged a teacher or teacher assistant as someone who helped their child. Two participants identified caring and dedicated staff members. Individualized attention and specialized instruction were likewise identified as contributing factors. Communication was

identified by two participants as a factor connected to their child becoming a good student. P1 described open communication with the teacher as a factor contributing to the child becoming a good student. “But like right now, his teacher, now I have her [text] number. She will text me if there’s an issue and I can respond back. And you know not all teachers are going to do that” (P1, *l*76–78*)*. Communication was also important to P8, who described how the teacher “would always come and let me know how he’s doing and how he’s such a great student, and how she just loves having him in class” (P8, *l*91–93*)*. Likewise, P3 detailed her communication with the teacher.

> It’s her calling me late in the evening to tell me what successes they had or what big setback they had or something like that. It’s her texting me at work to say that he’s been good so she knows that he’s coming home to me that day and I can congratulate him. (P3, *l*165–168)

P5 shared how the caring nature of a teacher contributed to their child’s success. Teachers showed that they cared by meeting the student “on his level” (P5, *l*62). This parent believes that their child “can tell when someone really cares” (P5, *l*63–64). P5 described how their child does not want “to disappoint a teacher that is really genuinely caring about them” (P5, *l*65–66). P6 also saw teachers who took an interest in their student as a contributing factor. Teacher assistants have contributed to the success of P2’s child. Specifically, the teacher assistants provided “individualized attention” (P2, *l*55*)* and helped to “focus and redirect” (P2, *l*56*)* the student. P6 described the support the student has been receiving as a contributing factor. This parent indicated that the student would not be successful without this level of support, as P6 is unable to support the student in this way. Table 12 identifies participants’ responses to Interview Question 6 regarding things at school that have helped their child become a good student.

Table 12

Can You Describe the Things at School That Have Helped Your Child Become a Good Student?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Staff								
Caring staff					X			
Dedicated staff			X					
Staff						X		
Teacher			X		X	X	X	X
Teacher assistants		X	X			X		
Support systems								
Academic support			X					
Behavioral support			X					
Communication	X							X
Encouragement								X
Student redirection		X						
Specialized instruction								
Individualized attention		X		X				X
Specialized instruction		X			X	X		X

Interview Question 6 provided information in relation to things at school that have helped parents' children become good students. Parents indicated that staff, support systems, and specialized instruction helped their child become a good student. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 1: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?

Interview Question 7: Are there some academic (subjects) where you feel your child is more successful than others? Why?

Reading, math, science, and social studies were identified as subjects that at least one parent identified their child as being more successful in. One parent identified reading, five parents identified math, three parents identified science, and one parent identified social studies as subjects their child was more successful in than others. Parents described school and external factors responsible for their child's success. Participants attributed student success to the subjects being enjoyable, interesting, and interactive. In addition, parents referenced a student's natural gift in the subject, family support, and family members' success as factors contributing to their child's performance in the subject.

Some students have a natural ability to understand subjects as described by P5: "Math is definitely my child's strong subject. He just has a natural knack for math. Not so much when it

comes to word problems because his deficiency is in reading" (P5, *l*69–70). Multistep problems cause frustration for this student due to his inability to "decode and decipher what the word problem is asking for" (P5, *l*72). The parent attributed laziness in reading to hindering the student from reaching his full potential in math performance. Similarly, P3 reported that their child's "grades have always been inclined towards math" (P3, *l*123). The parent further explains how "sometimes people are just wired certain ways. They're just naturally going to be better in certain things than others" (P3, *l*123–125). P3 made comments similar to P5 regarding their child's performance, explaining that the student is more inclined to do well in this area. Furthermore, P3 shared, "there are a few smart people on the family's past that maybe encourage that" (P3, *l*127–128).

P1 and P6 discussed math as their child's favorite subject. P6 explained that "she just loves math" (P6, *l*58), while similarly, P1 shared how "it's just what he enjoys" (P1, *l*84–85). It is important to note that P2 shared that their child is most successful in science because the subject is "interactive and tactile" (P2, *l*67). Thus, the child tends to favor this subject. P6 identified math as one of the "best subjects" (P6, *l*58) because other subjects are "boring" (P6, *l*59) and also "dry" (P6, *l*59). Student interest, engagement, and enjoyment were a common theme amongst parent responses. P8's child has demonstrated success in reading in part because of the encouragement of his teachers. The parents explained that the student has always had a love for reading: "He was just kind of discouraged" (P8, *l*107). Now the student enjoys reading, continually improves in his reading scores, and frequently asks his parents to buy him new books. P7's child also receives encouragement to do well in math. The child's father works to help the student to be successful in this area. Table 13 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 7 regarding academic subjects where they feel their child is more successful than in others.

Table 13

Are There Some Academic (Subjects) Where You Feel Your Child Is More Successful Than Others? Why?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Reading								X
Math	X		X		X	X	X	
Science		X	X	X				
Social Studies				X				
Enjoyable	X					X		X
Interactive		X						
Family trait			X					
Natural gift					X			
Interesting						X		
Family support							X	

Interview Question 7 provided information in relation to academic subjects where parents feel their child is more successful than in others. Eight participants identified four different subjects in which their child was more successful than in others. The subjects included reading, math, science, and social studies. Math was the most identified subject with five participants identifying this subject. Through participants' responses, family traits, family support, the level of enjoyment, and interaction were identified as reasons parents felt their child was more successful in a subject than in others. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 1: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?

Interview Question 8: How does your child learn best?

The participants' reflections on how their child learns best were explicitly stated. During the interviews, four of the eight participants identified a more than one way their child learns best. The most prevalent ways that their child learns best included in an environment where information is presented in visual, tactile, and listening formats. Visual presentation was the most mentioned way that parents felt their child learned best. They perceived having an environment the child could learn in "by seeing" (P3, *l*131) was beneficial. P3 described, "if he read how do I change a tire, he wouldn't be able to change a tire necessarily very well, but if you showed him how to properly he would be like okay, I got this" (P3, *l*132–134). P4 also reported that their child is a visual learner. The parent explained that it "just irritates him to have to write" (P4, *l*56)

down information. P5 details that if their child has to learn using a format requiring "paper and pencil, he might zone out and begin to play" (P5, *l*82).

"Visual and tactile" (P2, *l*69) is how P2 describes their child's learning style. This student is defined as "a terrible listener" (P2, *l*69) by the parent. This is similar to the response from P3, who explains that their child also "learns best by doing" (P3, *l*131). P3 does not believe that students "necessarily learn best by reading" (P3, *l*131–132). Some students learn in various ways. P5 shared that their child learns by interacting. Their child also learns by listening. This parent reports, "If he can actually touch, if he can actually be involved in the learning process, that's going to help him definitely succeed more" (P5, *l*79–81). Because of this child's short attention span, becoming involved improves his ability to learn. Like P3's child who does not learn best by reading, P1's child likewise does not like a lot of reading. This child learns best when "listening to something rather than just being told to go and read a subject and then figure it out because he can repeat anything back that the teachers taught or said to him" (P1, *l*90–92). It becomes difficult for P1's child to learn when things are vague, as he learns best when there is "concrete guidance" (P1, *l*88) detailing "exactly" (P1, *l*88) how things should be done. This is consistent with P3's child, who "learns best by example" (P3, *l*132). Table 14 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 8 regarding how their child learns best.

Table 14

How Does Your Child Learn Best?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Visual		X	X	X				
Tactile		X			X			
Listening	X				X			
Interactive					X			
Engaging					X			
With examples			X					
Concrete teaching	X							
No response						X	X	X

Interview Question 8 provided information in relation to how participants' feel their child learns best. Five participants provided seven responses. Through participants' responses, the most prevalent ways that their child learns best included in an environment where information is presented in visual, tactile, and listening formats. Interactive, engaging learning opportunities

with examples, and concrete teaching were also provided as examples of ways children learn best. Specifically, all suggestions related to engaging one or more of the five senses. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 1: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?

Interview Question 9: If you could design the ideal classroom for your child, what would it look like?

Participants provided a plethora of ideas regarding how an ideal classroom for their child would look. Responses included suggestions in four areas. These included design, instruction, environment, and staff. P2 was one of two parents that described a classroom that was interactive, allowed for movement, and encouraged learning through hands-on exploration. P3 suggested hands-on learning, but questioned how an individual would make history hands on. The parent further exclaimed, "I'm not a teacher for a reason" (P3, *l*137). P8 recommended designing a classroom with several educational posters around the room. When asked this question, P5 responded, "So definitely computers, definitely colorful, definitely visual, a lot of visual aids and not sterile just pretty inviting" (P5, *l*93–94). Visuals, however, were not highly recommended by P1 who expressed, "I do like some of the classrooms that I've been in where there's not as much stuff on the walls. Limiting you know the cutesy stuff that goes on because it's a distraction" (P1, *l*112–114).

Helpful teachers who recognize when students need support were described by P6 and P7 as important elements of an ideal classroom. Specifically, P6 described a teacher who helped their child to stay on task, thus helping her to become more successful: "First off I would have a classroom with a smaller child-to-teacher ratio" (P6, *l*65–66). According to the parent, this would allow the teacher to recognize when a student does not understand and needs help: "Because if we have too many kids she gets overlooked" (P6, *l*69–70). More specifically, P1 suggested, "Fourteen to 17 students in rows not pods" (P1, *l*95). This parent shared that the pods get her student in trouble because "the pod grouping allows too much conversation between each other" P1, *l*100). Similarly, P4 identified that their child needed personal space while maintaining the opportunity to be included in the classroom. P3 explained a similar need for personal space and a comfortable environment. The parent expressed that if the "classroom was a little bit less like an industry and more like home I think I would be a lot more comfortable" (P3, *l*153–154) and

students would be “a lot more willing to open up and be comfortable” (P3, *l*154–155). Table 15 identifies participants’ responses to Interview Question 9 regarding what an ideal classroom for their child would look like.

Table 15

If You Could Design the Ideal Classroom for Your Child, What Would It Look Like?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Design								
Bright colors								X
Colorful					X			
Smaller class size	X	X				X		
A place to get rid of energy			X					
Room for personal space				X				
Rows	X							
Space for movement	X							
Varied lighting			X					
Instruction								
Centers		X						
Experiments and exploration								X
Different books at various levels						X		
Hands-on		X	X					
Individualized help		X						
Interactive		X						
Opportunity for inclusion				X				
Opportunity to ask lots of questions and gain knowledge								X
Visual aids					X			X
Environment								
Cozy comfortable seating for reading			X			X		
Inviting					X			
Limited visual distractions	X							
Lots of items on walls						X		

(continued)

Table 15 *(cont.)*

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Positive environment								X
Students included				X				
Staff								
Caring staff								X
Friendly								X
Happy and comfortable teacher						X		
Helping teacher						X	X	
Teacher keeps students on task							X	

Interview Question 9 provided the ideas of parents regarding how an ideal classroom for their child would look. All eight participants provided input into the design of an ideal classroom. Approximately 30 design factors were shared. Through participants' responses, classroom design, instruction, environment, and staff were identified as important elements in an ideal classroom. Participants provided a plethora of ideas regarding how an ideal classroom for their child would look. Responses included a smaller class size, helping staff, varied lighting, technology access, and individualized help were identified as some of the components of an ideal classroom. The size of the classroom, the helping nature of the teacher, and use of hands-on and visual practices were the most often-shared ideas. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 1: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?

Interview Question 10: Based on what you described, have any of your child's classrooms at their current school looked like this in any way?

When asked if any of their child's classrooms at their current school looked like this in any way, five of the eight participants responded "yes." The remaining participants did not believe that their child's classroom was ideal. Two participants reflected that their child's classroom had not had ideal characteristics since their children were in primary school where class sizes were smaller. "There were ten students and that was very nice" (P1, *l*123–124). P6 echoed the class size concerns of P1 and P2, indicating that although the classrooms are bigger at the intermediate school, the students and class sizes are bigger too.

Parents who describe their child's current classroom as ideal highlighted the adjustable lighting and cozy seating. One parent detailed how the teacher has "been able to put him where he is not going to disturb anybody or anything" (P4, *l*61). Likewise, P8 explained that their child's classroom was ideal in both fourth and fifth grade. Table 16 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 10 regarding whether any of their child's classrooms in their current school look like an ideal classroom.

Table 16

Based on What You Described, Have Any of Your Child's Classrooms at Their Current School Looked Like This in Any Way?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Yes			X	X	X		X	X
No	X	X				X		

Interview Question 10 provided participants' perceptions of whether any of their child's classrooms had the elements of an ideal classroom. Five participants indicated yes. Three participants indicated not. The reasons for their responses are further explained in the response to Interview Question 11.

Interview Question 11: Are there favorite teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, and/or any other staff members in your child's elementary school?

All eight participants identified their child as having a favorite teacher, teacher assistant, administrator, and/or any other staff member in their elementary school. Both instructional and non-instructional personnel were noted as favorites. Seven participants mentioned a special education teacher. The general education teacher was referenced three times as a favorite staff member. The administrative team was identified twice as a child's favorite staff member. The nurse, secretaries, security personnel, and staff were each identified once as a favorite. Five of eight participants identified more than one favorite staff member. Table 17 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 11 regarding whether there are any favorite people in their child's elementary school.

Table 17

Are There Any Favorite Teachers, Teacher Assistants, Administrators, and/or Any Other Staff Members in Your Child's Elementary School?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Yes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Nursing Staff	X							
Administrator	X				X			
Security	X							
Occupational therapist		X						
Special education teacher		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
General education teacher				X	X		X	
Secretaries	X							
Staff					X			

Interview Question 11 provided the ideas regarding who, if anyone, participants would identify as their child's favorite teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, and/or any other staff members in their child's elementary school. Each of the eight participants identified that their child had a favorite staff member. Through participants' responses, the special education teacher was identified as the most common response, which was provided by seven participants. General education teachers were the second most frequent response. In addition, non-instructional staff to include administrators, nurses, security staff, secretaries, and occupational therapists were identified. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 1: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?

Interview Question 12: How did this/these individual(s) help your child become successful?

When asked how did this/these individual(s) help your child become successful, participants provided an array of responses. Participants perceived the way the adult cares for students, the way the adult motivates and challenges students, and the relationship between the staff and the students as factors that helped their children to become successful. Many expressed the impact of the caring, friendly, encouraging, motivating, and helpful staff members. P3 remarked, "she cares differently. It's finding the perfect indestructible notebook because he likes to tear them apart" (P3, *l*161–163). Participants reported on the importance of relationships with

the staff. P1 commented on how the nurse, administration, teachers, and office staff, showed "an interest in the students and their personal lives. I think that adds to the comfort level. And you know I've had teachers through the years that I have not gotten along with. And that makes everything difficult" (P1, *l*133–136). She further remarked that she is impressed that the staff is "getting him. And I think it's a tough job in a school full of multiple personalities" (P1, *l*141).

Overall, participants commented on how staff members gave individualized attention to their child. P2's child felt special because of the attention he was provided. The teacher focused on the student's strengths to motivate him. The teacher found "out what interested him and then used that to motivate him to work harder" (P2, *l*87–88). P6 described how her child's teacher would motivate and encourage her child. The child would come home each day imitating the teacher. She became very excited when the teacher encouraged the child to pursue acting, "because she is such a good actress" (P6, *l*93). The teacher also taught her how to read while making it fun.

In addition, P4 highlighted how "The general education teacher also works with that student to make that student feel like they're just another student and not singling them out" (P5, *1*106–107). The teacher also remained aware that "this child is acting like this because of their disability" (P5, *l*108–109). Administrators also influenced this child's success by "being that extra support for the general and for the special education teacher" (P5, *1*110–111). Participants in this study agreed that adult interactions with students impacted the students' overall performance.

Participants found instructional staff to be valuable in motivating students: "Keeping him motivated or trying to get him back on track. Sometimes he'll fight them about it, but he usually does what they ask" (P4, *l*67–68). Overall, participants in this study agreed that educators were valuable contributors to their child's success. Table 18 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 12 regarding how their favorite people helped their child become successful.

Table 18

How Did This/These Individual(s) Help Your Child Become Successful?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Care								
Friendly	X							
Awesome personality								X
Makes the student feel special		X						
Genuinely cares					X			
Cares about child's development and learning								X
Cares differently			X					
Motivate and challenge students								
Hones in on student strengths		X						
Individualized attention		X						
Holds student accountable			X					
Keeps student motivated and gets him back on track				X				
Does not coddle					X			
Sees potential beyond disability					X			
Pushes student to fullest potential					X			
Encouraged the student						X		
Taught reading and made it fun						X		
General education teacher treating students like non-disabled students					X			
Motivates student		X						

(continued)

Table 18 *(cont.)*

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Relationships								
Knows everything about the child	X							
Going the extra mile to help the child succeed					X			
Administrators being the extra support for teachers					X			
Administrators making sure children feel loved and safe					X			
Built relationships						X		
Takes interest in child								X
No response							X	

Interview Question 12 provided information in relation to how the previously mentioned favorite staff member(s) helped the parents' child become successful. One participant did not provide a response to this question, while the remaining seven participants each provided a unique response specific to the staff member and their child. The common theme in participants' responses identified the way the adult cares for students, the way the adult motivates and challenges students, and the relationship between the staff and the students as factors that helped their children to become successful. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 1: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?

Interview Question 13: Describe your child's elementary school in one word.

When asked to describe their child's elementary school in one word, participants identified seven different descriptors. Major themes emerging from the data identified the school as an overcrowded and positive environment. "Awesome" was the most commonly used descriptor of the school. The majority of the participants provided positive descriptors ranging from committed to caring, while two participants described the school as overcrowded and a herd. P2 further explained that the word "herd" was used to describe the school because the school utilizes the "same standards for everybody" (P2, *l*91). P6 explained that she described the building as comfortable because, "It's not overwhelming when you walk in here" (P6, *l*97–98*).*

Table 19 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 13, which asks participants to describe their child's elementary school in one word.

Table 19

Describe Your Child's Elementary School in One Word?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Overcrowded	X							
Herd		X						
Committed			X					
Awesome				X			X	
Nurturing					X			
Comfortable						X		
Caring								X

Interview Question 13 provided information on the one word participants would use to describe their child's elementary school. The table above reflects that six participants used positive words (committed, awesome, nurturing, comfortable, caring) to describe the school while the remaining two participants described the school as overcrowded and a herd. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 1: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?

Interview Question 14: Is this the same word you would use to describe your child's favorite staff member(s)? Why?

Five of the participants would use the same word to describe their child's elementary school as the word they would use to describe their child's favorite staff member. P3 described their child's teacher as committed "because she truly loves my son for good and bad days" (P4, *l*175–176). The parent described a teacher that does not give up on her child like many students and staff members have. "Awesome" is how P5 described their child's teacher because "She motivates him. He loves her" (P4, *l*76). Likewise, P5 described the teacher as nurturing. The parent reported that most staff members treat their profession like "more than a job" (P5, *l*118–119). The parent explained this further.

> It is something that comes from the heart and that's why I can use nurturing because when you're treating our kids like if they were your kids. And they are your kids. They're

here so many more hours in the day then they're at home. And you feel that—you genuinely feel that. (P5, *l*119–122)

Three of the participants described their child's favorite staff member using a different word from the word used to describe their child's elementary school. While P3 described the school as overcrowded, the teacher was described as funny. This parent's child likes "her sense of humor" (P1, *l*154). P2 also used a different word to describe their child's favorite staff member, the teacher. The parent used the word "attention" because, "He wasn't lumped in with the other children and was given special attention to his needs" (P2, *l*94–95). P6 described their child's teacher as funny. The parent explained that she was not in the classroom; however, she described how the teacher would read stories in an engaging way and encouraged students to repeat portions of the story back to her. This parent suggested that students would not be able to do so if the teacher did not use her humor to keep them actively engaged. Table 20 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 14, asking participants to identify if this is the same word they would use to describe their child's favorite staff member and why.

Table 20

Is This the Same Word You Would Use to Describe Your Child's Favorite Staff Member(s)? Why?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
No	X	X				X		
Funny because of sense of humor	X							
Funny						X		
Attention because she gives special attention to meet the needs		X						
Yes			X	X	X		X	X
Loves him for good and bad days			X					
She doesn't quit on him			X					
Enjoyed having same special education teacher 2 years in a row				X				
Teacher motivates him				X				
He loves her					X			
Staff takes this as more than a job								
Kids are treated like their own individual					X			
Caring								X

Interview Question 14 described whether (or not) participants would describe their child's favorite staff member using the same word and why. Five of the eight participants would use the same word to describe their favorite staff member and the school. Three of the participants would describe their favorite staff member and the school using different words. Table 20 provided a summary of responses. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 1: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?

Interview Question 15: Discuss other school factors that may contribute to your child's academic success.

When asked to discuss other school factors that may contribute to their child's academic success, participants spoke about learning experience, staff relationships with students, staff

support and understanding, and staff characteristics. While P8 did not suggest any other school factors that may contribute, the parent did discuss external factors that have an impact.

> I mean really the home. If the child doesn't have a positive reinforcement at the house, I don't think they are going to be very successful at school. Myself and my wife, we are always giving that positive encouragement to keep succeeding and trying not to give up. And learning doesn't just end at school. He is always asking questions at the house. So I think it's very important to have a positive home life as well where you have parents that are actually actively involved in what your children are doing. They can help that child continue on. It's important to know when they are bringing things to school or home, what it is, and what kind of grades they are getting. You want to make sure that it's completed. (P8, *l*151–159)

P1 spoke extensively on the need for staff members to understand the children they are working with and also each child's disability. Her child has "struggled a lot with the fine motor skills" (P1, *l*157). This impacts his ability to maintain organization, cut, and write. The parent expounded upon the needs of her child.

> But if things were just kind of cut, that way he could stay on top of things better because when he has to take twice as long as another student to do something that impacts his learning. And then that impacts him going home with the work and we're doing more work at home when he could be out playing. (P1, *1*167–171)

The parent further explained that this has had an impact on him as he has been at school the same amount of time as his peers; however, he is frustrated because it takes double the amount of time to complete his work as his peers because of his physical limitations. "He's been working for hours and not because he's being lazy or something but it's a physical disability" (P1, *l*172–173). Motivation helped P4's child. "The teachers and the staff motivate him. Anybody who sees him talks to him. You guys are very loving towards him" (P4, *l*79–80). P3 described her child's teacher as different from any before her. The parent suggested that the school could implement a mentorship program facilitated by her child's current teacher. This parent believes that this could be done through a formal or informal program, "So those good qualities that she possesses maybe she can convey them to other teachers" (P3, *l*187–188). The parent hoped that other teachers could share what they learned and that this would be of benefit

to the students and teachers: “a mentorship program I think it could work well for a lot of different aspects in a lot of different corporations or education systems” (P3, *l*200–201).

Classrooms should focus on reading is what P6 suggested, while P5 recommended that each classroom should be more engaging. She explained that students should have more learning experiences outside of the classroom. Field trips and outdoor learning labs were mentioned as ways that students could learn in alternative settings. The parent stated, “I know it’s hard because you have so many students” (P5, *l*126). She went on to share her thoughts about her son and the learning environment he required.

> The more that they will engage their students and I definitely think for my child the more creative the teacher is the more he’s going to be engaged. Because he’s kind of constantly on his toes. He doesn’t just like to come in class, sit down, and do your work at your desk. And I understand that that comes with academics and kids need to build up the tolerance for that, but I think the more we can have children realize that learning actually comes from experiencing. And I think that will definitely lead to more success. (P5, *l*129–136).

Table 21 identifies participants’ responses to Interview Question 15 regarding other school factors that may contribute to their child’s academic success.

Table 21

Discuss Other School Factors That May Contribute to Your Child’s Academic Success

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Learning experiences								
Art, music, and orchestra	X							
Comfortable classroom						X		
Hands-on experiences					X			
Frequent field trips					X			
Student movement					X			
Relationships								
Home-school relationship						X		
More interaction					X			

(continued)

Table 21 *(cont.)*

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Support and understanding								
Early intervention		X						
Assistance and accommodations to support limitations	X							
Being recognized for disability and not perceived as lazy	X							
Appropriate accommodations so that at home, work completion time is limited	X							
Assistance with organization	X							
Students getting the reading help they need						X		
Mentorship program			X					
Not being criticized for motor limitations	X							
Staff								
Helpful teacher						X		
Caring teacher			X					
Teachers and staff motivating students				X				
Staff interacting with student				X				
Loving staff				X				

Interview Question 15 inquired about other school factors that may contribute to the academic success of students with disabilities. All eight participants provided input into additional factors that may contribute to their child's success. Twenty-one additional school factors were identified. When asked to discuss other school factors that may contribute to their child's academic success, participants spoke about learning experience, staff relationships with students, staff support and understanding, and staff characteristics. Participants described comfortable classrooms, helpful and caring staff, student support, hands-on experiences, and appropriate accommodations were as some of the components of an ideal classroom. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 1: What are parents of fifth-grade

students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?

Research Question 2: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors responsible for hindering their child's achievement?

Interview Question 16: In Question 9 you described an ideal classroom. What type of classroom would make it difficult for your child to learn and be successful?

Participants identified several characteristics of classrooms they perceived as making it difficult for their child to learn and be successful in. Large class sizes, physical classroom attributes, and classroom attributes were factors noted by the participants as making it difficult for students with disabilities to learn and be successful. Specifically, participants described lots of items on the wall, traditional setup, pods, chaos, and isolation from peers were some of the key factors. Chaos, according to P4, would not be ideal for this parent's child as the child needs to have his own space. An overcrowded classroom would make it difficult for P8's child to learn because their child is shy. A class size larger than 30 was concerning for P6 as the parent felt that their child may be lost and teachers may overlook when their child is having a problem. Likewise, P8 explained, "I think an overcrowded classroom or a classroom with all white walls; something kind of dreary would also not be something very positive as well" (P8, *l*166–168). P5 also described a sterile classroom "that just had desk in it" (P5, *l*141) as one that may hinder achievement. In response to this question, P2 suggested a "traditional classroom where they are sitting and being talked at" (P2, *l*108) would not be ideal.

P3 told of how annually her child is "set apart, where his desk was reversed, his items were removed from his desk, and he was set apart because he wouldn't quit fiddling with the things in front of him" (P3, *l*208–209). The parent shared that this resulted in rebellious behavior.

> He really showed them how rebellious he could be. Because if you're going to put me aside and single me out, and reverse my desk, and take my stuff away, I'm going to show you how much I can earn that. (P3, *l*210–212)

The parent further explained that she does not believe that this behavior in the classroom is acceptable. She describes that if there is a problem with a student, the teacher and the parent should work together to identify an agreeable solution that is in the best interest of the child. Table 22 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 16 regarding the type of classroom that would make it difficult for their child to learn and be successful in.

Table 22

What Type of Classroom Would Make It Difficult for Your Child to Learn and Be Successful?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Large class size	X					X		X
Physical Attributes								
Chaotic setting with student seated in the middle				X				
Student without own personal space				X				
Sterile classroom with desks only					X			
Dreary classroom								X
Pods	X							
Lots of items on wall	X							
Traditional classroom		X						
Student isolated from peers			X					
Staff Attributes								
Classroom where teacher never recognized student was having a problem						X		
Students being talked at		X						
No response							X	

Interview Question 16 provided information in relation to the type of classroom that would make it difficult for participants' children to learn and be successful in. Seven of the eight participants provided a response. Approximately 10 descriptors were shared. Large class sizes, physical classroom attributes, and classroom attributes were factors noted by the participants as making it difficult for students with disabilities to learn and be successful. Through participants' responses, a traditionally designed classroom, chaos, a dreary classroom, lack of personal space for students, and clutter were classroom design factors impacting student success. The large size of the classroom was mentioned by three participants as a classroom design element that makes it difficult for children to learn and be successful in. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 2: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors responsible for hindering their child's achievement?

Interview Question 17: Has it sometimes been difficult for your child to be a good student? Why?

When asked if it had sometimes been difficult for their child to be a good student, six of the eight participants responded "yes." Participants cited a variety of reasons to include staff understanding, student characteristics, and other factors. Specifically, participants discussed student self-perception, adult knowledge and awareness, and student learning needs. Study skills were a skill that P6 "didn't understand that we had to teach her" (P6, *l*116). P2 explained that it is difficult for their child to apply what has been previously taught and learned to new concepts and even tests.

> He has trouble taking what he has learned in class and translating it to paper. He learns by rote so he only knows one answer. So when they switch it up on a test, which as he gets older, they will ask it a different way, he blanks out. He knows things backwards and forwards, I think, but when he gets to the test he fails the test. He is unable to apply what he learns and of course he is losing the foundation so he is unable to build on the concepts so I think this is our major flashing problem. (P2, *l*110–116)

P1's child also encountered difficulty with being a good student because staff did not always get him and his disability. This student has been diagnosed with rhombencephalosynapsis, which has an impact on the student's physical growth and cognitive development. The parent described how everything the child learns, he has to "process it and learn it … instead of knowing to right from day one" (P1, *l*204–205). The student is also impacted by aggression, attention and focus challenges, and a central-processing disorder, so "It's just finding teachers and staff that can recognize that he's getting ready to have that moment and needs basically a time out, his sensory time out" (P1, *l*212–214).

> We all know he's a smart kid, but just physically trying to stay up on some things, and I think we take for granted a lot of times because he looks and acts so normal. It's very easy to forget he has the disability. (P1, *l*182-185)

P5's child has a need for consistency and routines. The parent expressed that adults do not always understand his disability. When things are not routine, the child will sometimes shut down or even misbehave. "It's not that he's trying to misbehave. He does something before [he] even thinks about it; before he thinks about the repercussions or thinks about that what he has

done is even wrong" (P5, *l*149–151). While P5 identified roadblocks to success, P4 was unable to identify why their child is failing now, yet he had been on the honor roll in previous years.

P3 felt strongly that it is sometimes difficult for her child to be a good student because he spends hours at school each day attempting to complete classwork. When he gets home, he spends hours trying to complete homework. "I understand homework. I get it, but when I'm at work I'm at work. When I leave work, I leave work" (P3, *l*225–226). Table 23 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 17 regarding whether it has sometimes been difficult for their child to be a good student and why.

Table 23

Has It Sometimes Been Difficult for Your Child to Be a Good Student? Why?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
No							X	X
Yes	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Staff understanding								
Adults taking for granted student has a disability	X							
Adults forgetting student has a disability	X							
Adults not cognizant of negative peer interactions	X							
Staff not understanding meltdowns and aggression	X							
Staff not understanding the need for sensory breaks	X							
Staff not understanding that student does not learn things naturally	X							

(continued)

Table 23 *(cont.)*

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Student characteristics								
Not oral listener		X						
Difficult to translate knowledge to paper		X						
Can only demonstrate memorized material			X					
Cannot remember foundational skills			X					
Does not learn by reading			X					
Spends a lot of time completing schoolwork and homework at home–limited family time			X					
Disability								
Impulsivity					X			
Physically trying to keep up with peers	X							
Student doesn't like change					X			
Workload is too large–student shuts down					X			
Other factors								
The work or other factors				X				
Parents had to teach student to study						X		

Interview Question 17 provided participants' perceptions of whether it had sometimes been difficult for their child to be a good student and why. Two participants did not feel that it has been difficult for their child. The remaining six participants reported that it had sometimes been difficult for their child be a good student. They shared approximately 15 reasons. Through participants' responses, staff understanding, student characteristics, and other factors were identified as reasons it has sometimes been difficult for participants' child to be a good student. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 2: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors responsible for hindering their child's achievement?

Interview Question 18: What things make it difficult for your child to learn?

When asked what things make it difficult for the parents' child to learn, parents provided a variety of responses related to school characteristics, student challenges, and student needs. P1 shared that their child has "always unfortunately been put into an inclusion classroom because of his IEP and his disability" (P1, *l*221–222). She described that he may have been more successful if he had been placed in a smaller or even quieter classroom. She suggested, "That would make it easier for him to learn" (P1, *l*223). The parent also described how the student's bus is late to school almost daily. This produces challenges for the student as he requires daily routines in order to be successful and this becomes a disruption to his routine. Likewise, P4 stated that distractions make it difficult for their child to learn. This is similar to the input provided by P5 who shared that it is "Very hard for him to focus on certain things" (P5, *l*156).

> If it's something that's engaging him, you'll have his 100% attention and he'll be completely zoned in, but sometimes that can work against what he's trying to do because if his focus gets zoned in on something elsewhere then you will lose him, especially when it comes to written work. (P5, *l*156–160)

Because of hidden difficulties with focusing and attending, he also has a hard time with reading stamina. He will only attend if he really enjoys what he is reading. P6's child has also experienced challenges with reading. This is because of the child's limited vocabulary. The parent shared, "when I'm reading with her she doesn't know the words. And if you're not sitting beside her and notice this, she'll just make up a word or should change it and it doesn't mean anything in that sentence" (P7, *l*122–125). This has a direct impact on her comprehension.

P2 described their child as a "real rigid" child who "doesn't like to listen" and "likes to do things his way" (P2, *l*119–120). This is aligned with their child's personality. Contrarily, P5 described their child as erratic. But for her child, this is what feels normal to him. He experiences difficulties with learning sometimes because he will display impulsive behaviors or even climb on things so that he can release energy and have a feeling of normalcy. P3, however, described that their child "is not a normal kid" (P3, *l*241). She described that he did not get special accommodations for work completion because he is a student with a disability. Thus, for him to complete homework is like "pulling teeth" (P3, *l*241). The parent suggested, "school should be at school and home should be at home" (P3, *l*249–250). Because school work comes home and

homework goes to school, her child always takes what he did not finish into the next day. This does not give him a fresh start and a fresh opportunity to learn.

P8 described an experience they had at a prior school that made it difficult for their child to learn. Their child was having difficulties and the school would report the challenges to the parent. The parent became frustrated with this process, as solutions as to how to support their child were not provided. The parent felt discouraged and helpless in supporting their child. Table 24 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 18 regarding the things that make it difficult for their child to learn.

Table 24

What Things Make It Difficult for Your Child to Learn?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
School Characteristics								
Bus arriving late to school	X							
Rigid school		X						
When the school offers problems and no solutions								X
Student Challenges								
When things are vague	X							
Having to write things down makes student irritated				X	X			
Distractions				X				
Challenges with focusing		X						
When a lot of reading is required	X							
When student has to read to learn	X				X			
Classwork as homework			X					
Always having school and home failures hanging over his head			X					
Student doesn't like to listen		X						
Comprehension						X		
Limited vocabulary						X		
When student has to focus					X			

(continued)

Table 24 *(cont.)*

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Demonstrating learning by reading					X			
Limited reading stamina					X			
When student has to sit still					X			
Student likes to do things his way		X						
Student Needs								
Not having a way to release energy					X			
Not having teacher support when reading unknown words						X		
Being placed in an inclusion class	X							
Student requires routine to be successful		X						

Interview Question 18 inquired about the things that make it difficult for participants' children to learn. The eight participants provided approximately 20 factors that impact their child's ability to learn. Through participants' responses, school characteristics, student challenges, and student needs were cited as themes related to challenges. Parents discussed challenges with comprehension, vocabulary, and reading to learn. Likewise, inclusion, expectations for the student to listen, write, focus, and sit still were some of the factors that made it difficult for participants' children to learn. The most shared ideas included when the student had to read to learn and having to write things down made the student irritated. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 2: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors responsible for hindering their child's achievement?

Interview Question 19: Are there any teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, and/or any other staff members in your child's elementary school who could have been more helpful in encouraging your child's success?

Six of the eight participants did not identify any staff members who could have been more helpful in encouraging their child's success. The remaining two participants identified a resource teacher and a general education teacher who could have been more helpful. Table 25

identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 19 regarding staff members who could have been more helpful in encouraging their child's success.

Table 25

Are There Any Teachers, Teacher Assistants, Administrators, and/or Any Other Staff Members in Your Child's Elementary School Who Could Have Been More Helpful in Encouraging Your Child's Success?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
No		X		X	X	X	X	X
Yes	X		X					
Resource teacher	X							
General education teacher			X					

Interview Question 19 provided the ideas regarding who, if anyone, participants would identify as their child's teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, and/or any other staff members in their child's elementary school who could have been more helpful in encouraging student success. Six of the eight participants were unable to identify any staff members. Two participants identified a participant to include the resource and general education teacher. Through participants' responses, it was determined that teachers were the most mentioned staff member who could have been more helpful in encouraging success. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 2: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors responsible for hindering their child's achievement?

Interview Question 20: What could they have done differently?

When asked what they could have done differently, two participants shared suggestions for a resource teacher and a general education teacher who could have been more helpful. P1 discussed how the resource teacher could have taken a more active role in getting to know her child and understanding his disability. Because the teacher did not do this, the teacher and her student did not get along. The parent shared that the harder her child tried to do what was expected, the harder the teacher tried to get the student to do more; however, this just pushed the two further apart in their relationship.

P3 detailed an incident that took place during a parent–teacher conference. The teacher conveyed that the parent's child was "told if you don't do your work, eventually [you] are not

going to graduate high school and then you're not going to have any type of job except for working at McDonalds" (P3, *l*261–264). This was discouraging to the student and the parent. The parent described her level of work and how successful she and her colleagues were with a high school education. She further described one of her colleagues.

> The guy sits 10 feet from me … makes almost six figures. Actually, including his retirement, he does make six figures and he has a high school diploma. So to hear that come out of the teacher's mouth … I know what their point was, but the bottom line is to tell my son that he's not going to amount to anything without a diploma. (P3, *l*266-270)

The parent further described how disheartening this was and the impact this statement had. She described herself as "living proof" (P3, *l*275) that a student can achieve more than a job at McDonalds with a high school diploma. "I would have said encouragement goes a long way, but discouragement doesn't" (P3, *l*280–281). Table 26 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 20 regarding what staff members could have done differently to encourage their child's success.

Table 26

What Could They Have Done Differently?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Not applicable		X		X	X	X	X	X
Tried to understand the student and his disabilities	X							
Encourage students and not tell them that if they don't do their work they will only be able to work at McDonalds			X					

Interview Question 20 provided suggestions regarding what the resource and general education teacher could have done differently to be helpful in encouraging the participants' child's success. The participants provided two suggestions. Participants' responses indicated that it would have been helpful and encouraging if the resource teacher attempted to better understand the student and also his disability. Likewise, the general education teacher could have encouraged the student more instead of telling the student their future would end with McDonalds. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 2: What are

parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors responsible for hindering their child's achievement?

Interview Question 21: Can you describe any other school factors that may hinder your child from achieving academic success?

Participants in this study identified several school factors that may hinder their child from achieving academic success. Five participants had additional factors to share. The challenges hindering academic success focused on the students' disabilities, the students themselves, students' perceptions of their peers, and lack of routine. For example, P2 described their child as "routine oriented" (P2, *l*131).

> He kind of falls apart when his routine gets messed up. But that's not … that's just the nature of the beast. He just needs to learn how to be more flexible and he just has not up to this point. (P2, *l*131–133)

P3 identified their child as another factor. More specifically, P4 explained that their child's performance is impacted by his fears and anxieties than manifest into a fear of heights. P5 described how her child's behavior can have an impact on his academic performance. She detailed how the repercussions of his behavior may interfere.

> [A]cademics, whether it be suspension or in school suspension. It takes him out of the classroom. So the only thing that could hinder is when he does get in trouble. The fact that he has a disability is not taken into account. And I think that if we look at it through that lens of this child has a disability and we don't want to punish him for that … and we make sure that we don't make the repercussion where it's hindering him. I would have to say that almost every day when I send him to school, I am just hoping that he has a great day, that his impulsiveness doesn't get him in trouble, which takes him away from his academics. (P5, *l*181–191)

Three of the eight parents did not identify any additional school factors that may impact their child's academic success. Table 27 identifies participants' responses to Interview Question 21, other school factors that may hinder their child from achieving academic success.

Table 27

Can You Describe Any Other School Factors That May Hinder Your Child from Achieving Academic Success?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
No	X						X	X
Yes		X	X	X	X	X		
When things are not routine oriented		X						
Student needs to be taught to be flexible		X						
Himself			X	X				
Student consequences (suspension) interfere with academics					X			
Not taking into account disability when consequences are provided					X			
Student intimidated with other students' performance						X		

Interview Question 21 inquired about other school factors that may hinder participants' children from achieving academic success. Five of the eight participants described additional factors. Six additional school factors were identified. Through participants' responses, lack of routine, students' inability to be flexible, the student, consequences, disabilities, and student perceptions of other student's performance were identified as additional factors that may hinder students with disabilities from achieving academic success. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 2: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors responsible for hindering their child's achievement?

Research Question 3: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of recommendations for how to improve their child's academic success?

Interview Question 22: What are your recommendations for ways to improve your child's academic success?

Five of the eight participants in this study were clear and knowledgeable about ways to improve their child's academic success. Participants provided a variety of ideas. Recommendations addressed student accountability, classroom features, communication,

learning opportunities, and adequate student support. Specifically, the parents discussed how continued encouragement and support with academics would continue to improve the performance of students. Also, P4 felt strongly that providing students with varied learning opportunities that included pre-discussions, outdoor learning opportunities, visits to museums, and other various field trips would be helpful. She further indicated that her child just needed to have more opportunities to interact. P4 detailed how more communication between the school and the parents would be beneficial. Specifically, the parent shared that this communication should come directly from the staff as the children cannot be responsible for delivering messages to parents.

More individualized assistance was a recommendation of P2. This would be helpful to their child who needs support with focus and redirection. Likewise, the school could support by learning to understand his learning style and how to get the student to learn things in a different way. P3 shared that accountability was key. “Hold them accountable good or bad. If it’s good—hold them accountable. If it’s not good—still hold them accountable” (P3, *l*304–305). This was important to her because she believes that students learn through both good and bad experiences. She places a high value on accountability. “So many things that I know lead to the success for my child [the] school already does. And I would just say do more of those things” (P5, *l*205–207). Table 28 identifies participants’ responses to Interview Question 22 regarding their recommendations for ways to improve their child’s success.

Table 28

What Are Your Recommendations for Ways to Improve Your Child's Academic Success?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Accountability								
Hold students accountable for good and bad behaviors			X					
Do not give extended time to finish work when it can be completed in allotted time			X					
Classroom Features								
Quieter classroom	X							
Smaller classroom size	X							
Communication								
More communication between parent and teacher				X				
Limit student responsibility for delivering communication				X				
Learning Opportunities								
Field trips					X			
Classroom learning before field trips					X			
Student Support								
Appropriate accommodations	X							
Understanding disability	X							
Teachers interacting with students					X			
More encouragement with reading						X		
Assistance with focus		X						
Support for specific learning styles	X	X						
Teach students how to learn differently		X						
None							X	X

Interview Question 22 provided recommendations for ways to improve the academic success of participants' children. Six of the eight participants provided input. Approximately 17 suggestions were shared. Participants provided a variety of ideas. Recommendations addressed student accountability, classroom features, communication, learning opportunities, and adequate student support. Through participants' responses, a smaller class size, helping staff, varied lighting, technology access, and individualized help were identified as some of the components of an ideal classroom. The size of the classroom, helping nature of the teacher, and use of hands-on practices were the most often-shared ideas. Responses to this question assisted in answering Research Question 3: What are your recommendations for ways to improve your child's academic success?

Data Analysis and Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to report on and analyze data collected during semi-structured interviews conducted with eight parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities attending an intermediate school. Specifically, this chapter reported on and analyzed parents of students with disabilities' perceptions in three major areas: (a) school factors that contributed to their child's academic success, (b) school factors that hindered their child's academic success, and (c) recommendations for improving their child's success. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher obtained the perceptions of a selection of parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities. The researcher identified and reported on common themes, patterns, and factors that contributed to student success; themes, patterns, and factors that hindered student success; and recommendations for ways to improve academic success. This chapter provided an overview of the interviews with eight parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities. Seven overarching themes emerged from the study: (1) the impact of relationships between students and school staff, (2) the characteristics of school staff, (3) staff understanding of student's disability and individualized needs, (4) various learning modalities, (5) class size, (6) comfortability of the classroom, and (7) favorite staff and content area.

Chapter Five

Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore, understand, and analyze parents of intermediate students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors that impact their child's academic achievement. Additionally, this study focused on parents of students with disabilities' perceptions in three major areas: (a) school factors that contributed to their child's academic success, (b) school factors that hindered their child's academic success, and (c) recommendations for improving their child's success. The qualitative data analysis focused on developing an understanding of the perceptions of eight parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities of the school factors that improve and hinder their child's academic achievement.

This phenomenological research study concentrated on three overarching research questions:

Research Question 1: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of the school factors responsible for their child's achievement?

Research Question 2: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors responsible for hindering their child's achievement?

Research Question 3: What are parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities' perceptions of recommendations for how to improve their child's academic success?

An analysis of the eight participants' responses to 22 semi-structured interview questions provided the identification of eight prevalent themes that revealed school factors that contribute to academic success, school factors that hinder academic success, and suggestions for improvement. This chapter includes emergent themes, a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and reflections.

Emergent Themes

Study participants defined academic success as (a) continued growth; (b) the ability to use and apply what had been learned; (c) meeting attendance, behavior, and academic goals; (d) social engagement and happiness; (e) being the best you can be; and (f) confidence and success as an adult. The interview responses revealed that 100% of parents identified factors that contributed to their child's academic success. Likewise, 100% of parents identified factors that

hindered their child's academic success. Some factors that contributed to the success of one child hindered the success of another child. After a review and analysis of the data collected in the study, seven themes emerged: (a) staff relationships with students, (b) staff level of awareness and understanding of students' needs, (c) class size, (d) physical characteristics of the classroom, (e) effective parent–teacher communication, (f) meeting the needs of students with disabilities, and (g) mentoring. The findings are summarized in the following section.

Summary of Findings

Finding one. Parent participants of fifth-grade students with disabilities perceive that school staff members are factors responsible for their child's achievement. One-hundred percent of the parents identified at least one staff member as their child's favorite. Seventy-five percent of parents believed that a teacher or teacher assistant contributed to their child being a good student. Parents identified a variety of favorite staff members who had an impact on their child's performance. Seven participants (88%) identified a special education teacher, three participants (38%) identified a general education teacher, two participants (25%) identified the administrators, one participant (18%) identified the nurse, one participant (18%) identified security staff, one participant (18%) identified the occupational therapist, one participant (18%) identified the secretaries, and one participant (18%) identified other staff members.

Additionally, two participants identified four favorite staff members, three participants identified two favorite staff members, and three participants identified one favorite staff member. The characteristics of the relationships between these staff members and students were described as positive, motivating, supportive, and nurturing. Seven of the eight participants (88%) characterized the staff members as displaying at least one of the following characteristics: caring, dedicated, friendly, motivating. In addition, these staff members were described as displaying at least one of the following characteristics: providers of effective communication, individualized attention, specialized instruction, encouragement, academic support, behavioral support, and student redirection to students.

Marzano (2007) and Stronge (2007) identified teachers as the most important factor impacting student achievement and progress. Similar findings were found in a meta-analysis conducted by Hattie (2009), where he describes how student outcomes can be impacted by the passion of the teacher who is supporting students in understanding their perspectives,

communicating their perspective to them, teaching in a way that meets their students' needs, learning, providing ongoing feedback, and demonstrating a love for what they do. In addition, Hattie (2009) further supports that teachers with positive impacts on student achievement are those individuals who pay attention to what is working and what is not working, and who make adjustments as necessary.

Finding two. Parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities perceive that staff members' understanding of students' multi-modality learning needs is a factor responsible for their child's academic achievement. Most parents indicated support from teachers. Eight parents (100%) spoke about at least one staff member who made a difference in their child's academic achievement because the individual understood the needs of their child. Five of the eight parents (63%) identified that their child's needs were met when the child was offered two or more of the following: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, interactive, concrete, or engaging learning opportunities. Seven of the eight parents (88%) characterized these staff members as caring and dedicated individuals who were friendly and motivating. Likewise, parents described how enjoyable and interesting learning opportunities offered by teachers benefited their child.

Similar findings were found in the study conducted by Valentine and Collins (2011), who explored the relationship between engagement and performance on achievement in middle school classes. The results indicated that students performed higher on achievement tests when there was more engagement in the classroom. Hafen et al. (2012) conducted a study of high school students' perceptions and found that students with limited engagement experienced more challenges with academics and grades than their peers who were more engaged did. In addition, Hafen et al. (2012) found that students educated in a "supportive learning environment that allows them an opportunity to express curiosity and become involved in the learning process will always fare better and engage more than a student who is subjected to lack of stimulation or a threatening environment" (p. 252).

Finding three. Parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities perceive that school factors that include staff members who are not understanding, not supportive, and not solutions-oriented are responsible for hindering their child's academic achievement. Four of the eight participants (50%) identified situations where a staff member was not supportive, understanding, or solutions-oriented when working with their student with a disability. This finding was aligned with the work of Hocutt (1996), Marzano (2007), and Wasicsko (2007).

Research finds that, “Teachers who are most effective at raising overall academic standards are likely to have a lower tolerance for students with special needs” (Hocutt, p. 83) and may have a reduced impact on student achievement. Pick-Bowers (2003) and Mock and Kauffman (2002) found that educators had not been provided with adequate training to understand and meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Marzano (2007) described how “A teacher’s beliefs about students’ chances of success in school influence the teacher’s actions with students, which in turn influence students’ achievement. If the teacher believes students can succeed, she tends to behave in ways that help them succeed” (p. 162). Teachers who maintain positive attitudes about student growth and learning foster positive learning environments where student growth and achievement occurs (Wasicsko, 2007).

Finding four. Parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities perceive that educational staff’s lack of understanding of the needs of students with disabilities, school characteristics, student characteristics, student challenges, and student needs as factor responsible for hindering their child’s achievement. Seven of the eight parents (88%) shared that their child has unique discipline needs, learning styles, attention spans, and levels of stamina that need to be addressed in order to limit the negative impact on the student.

This finding is supported by several researchers. Hattie (2009) asserts that teachers need to be prepared to implement a variety of strategies, identify when the strategies are not working, and be prepared to modify and adjust practices as necessary. McLeskey and Waldron (2011) attribute the success of students with LDs to the prevalence of high-quality, effective instruction. Brownell et al. (2006) assert that general education teachers “play a primary role in the education of students with disabilities ... [but] often they report feeling unprepared to undertake this role” (p. 171). Mock and Kauffman (2002) identify special education teachers as specialists who are trained and prepared to educate students with disabilities. These teachers have been exposed to explicit strategies that support students with disabilities. Mock and Kauffman (2002) assert that general education teachers have not been provided with specialized training, although these teachers are expected to serve as specialists to students with disabilities in inclusive settings. In addition, Mock and Kauffman (2002) question why general education teachers are expected to be skilled in teaching all students and special educators are only expected to be skilled in meeting the needs of designated populations of students.

Pick-Bowers (2003) surveyed middle and high school general education teachers to study their trepidations around including students with disabilities in their regular education classrooms. The findings indicated that over 80% of the participants felt that they did not have adequate training on meeting the needs of students with disabilities in the general education setting. Likewise, over 85% of the participants indicated they did not receive annual training on how to serve students with disabilities. Over 70% of participants further supported the use of the special education classroom as a means for students with disabilities to receive adequate support.

Finding five. Parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities perceive that large class sizes are a factor responsible for hindering their child's achievement. Four of the eight participants (50%) mentioned large class sizes as having a negative impact. Parents shared how students with disabilities need smaller settings with fewer distractions and specialized attention for students. This finding is supported by Arico (2011), whose study suggests that students with disabilities served in smaller inclusion settings outperformed students served in a larger inclusion setting on the New Jersey ASK. Conversely, Maples (2009) and Wilson (2011) found no significant relationship between class size and student achievement. Likewise, Hattie (2009) asserts that class size has close to zero impact on student achievement. McLeskey and Waldron (2011) suggest that pull-out services provide the opportunity for students to receive small group, specialized instruction on noted areas of need, unlike services provided in an inclusive setting.

Finding six. Parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities perceive that the physical and cosmetic characteristics of a classroom are responsible for contributing to and hindering their child's achievement. While several characteristics were identified as contributing to academic success, some of the same characteristics were attributed to hindering success. A smaller class size (50%), visuals (50%), varied lighting (13%), technology access (13%), and bright colors (25%) were identified by participants as some of the components of an ideal classroom responsible for contributing to academic success. A large class size (38%), traditional classroom design (13%), a dreary classroom (13%), lack of personal space for students (13%), and clutter (13%) were identified as design factors that make it difficult for students to learn.

Research conducted by Cash (1993), Hines (1996), Lanham (1999), Crook (2006), and Bullock (2007) suggests that various elements of the physical and cosmetic classroom environment affect student achievement. This finding is also supported in research by Cheryan et

al. (2014), which suggests that both the symbolic and structural features of the classroom have an impact on student achievement.

Finding seven. Parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities recommended establishing mentoring programs, restructuring the classroom environment, improving parent–teacher communication, and striving to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities as ways to improve their child's academic success. Seventy-five percent of the participants provided a recommendation for ways the school can improve their child's academic success. One parent suggested adding a mentoring program. Three parents recommended the classroom be quieter, smaller, and more engaging. One parent mentioned improving parent–teacher communication, and six parents made recommendations to better meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Mentoring is aligned with the findings of Brownell et al. (2006), which explored the impact of TLCs on student achievement. Teachers who believed strongly in an engaging student-centered approach to teaching and learning were effective at taking the information they learned from their peers as a result of TLCs and implementing the knowledge into the classroom. Hattie (2009) asserts, "It is school leaders who promote challenging goals, and then establish safe environments for teachers to critique, question, and support other teachers to reach these goals together that have the most effect on student outcomes" (p. 83).

Nagel et al. (2006) recommended that school leaders should establish a clear process to assist with ongoing communication between parents and teachers. The benefits of engaging classrooms are supported by the research of Meece, Anderman, and Anderman (2006), Hafen et al. (2012), and Valentine and Collins (2011). Arico (2011) and Maples (2009) found that students performed better when served in a classroom with a smaller class size. Hallahan and Cohen (2008) found that "for many students the regular classroom doesn't offer them the intensive, individualized instruction they so desperately need" (p. 2). Nagle et al. (2006) cited "close ties between the school, parents, and community" and "creative use of resources and support for at risk students" as observed characteristics improving student achievement (p. 6).

Discussion of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore, understand, and analyze parents of eight intermediate students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors that impacted their child's academic achievement. Additionally, this study focused on parents of students with disabilities'

perceptions in three major areas: (a) school factors that contributed to their child's academic success, (b) school factors that hindered their child's academic success, and (c) recommendations for improving their child's success.

The findings of the study indicate that parents of students with disabilities have varying perceptions of factors that contribute to and hinder their child's performance. Likewise, parents have several recommendations for improvement. Additionally, the study found that many of the perceptions of the participants are unique to the participant and their child. In addition, school educators have an integral role in the success of students with disabilities.

Implications for Practice

The study findings have implications for school division leaders and elementary school administrators as they strive to make programming and instructional decisions that will have positive student outcomes for students with disabilities. These findings will assist administrators who implement the recommendations in providing effective leadership to special education and general education teachers. In addition, the findings from this study will assist school administrators in leading teachers, paraprofessionals, support staff, and parents as they work collaboratively to develop IEPs that will provide targeted specialized instruction, accommodations, and services in an appropriate setting for the student.

Implications of the Findings

Implication one: Elementary school leaders should establish opportunities for instructional and non-instructional staff members to build relationships with students with disabilities. This implication is associated with Finding One; parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities perceive that school staff members are factors responsible for their child's achievement. It takes a village to raise a child. The more positive, motivating, supportive, understanding, and nurturing influences a child has, the better the opportunity for success the child is afforded.

Relationship building amongst students and staff could be fostered through pairing students with staff members who can meet the students' identified needs. Staff members and students need to be provided with the opportunity to get to know one another so that educators develop an understanding of the students and the students feel comfortable learning from adults in the building.

Implication two: Elementary school leaders should seek to hire educators who understand or have a desire to learn about students with disabilities. This implication is associated with Finding Two; parents identified staff members' understanding of students' multi-modality learning needs as a factor responsible for their child's academic achievement. Pre-service teachers often have minimal experience working with a variety of students with high-incidence and low-incidence disabilities. General education teachers are responsible for exposing both general education and special education students to the general education curriculum. In addition, special education teachers are responsible for supporting students with the general education curriculum and also meeting goals as prescribed in the IEPs. Teachers are not always fully trained, comfortable, and prepared to meet this goal. As a result, school leaders should seek to hire individuals who have received pre-service and on-the-job training on how to meet the needs of students with high-incidence disabilities. In addition, school leaders should develop, plan, and deliver ongoing training to staff members on how to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Implication three: Elementary school leaders should provide ongoing professional development to school employees on cultural sensitivity. This implication is associated with Finding Three; parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities perceive that staff members who are not understanding, not supportive, and not solutions-oriented are responsible for hindering their child's academic achievement. This outlook supports the need for elementary school leaders to offer training on cultural sensitivity. Students with disabilities are a population of students who want to learn and be accepted just like any other group of students. It takes a team of positive, innovative, understanding, and qualified educators to ensure the success of these students. It is no longer enough to be a good teacher. Educators need to possess the passion to work with students with disabilities. Leaders should coordinate ongoing professional development for instructional and non-instructional personnel. Training should focus on (1) understanding the characteristics of varying disabilities, (2) supporting the needs of students with disabilities, (3) exploring and identifying solutions that could be beneficial in supporting students with disabilities, and (4) monitoring and adjusting instructional practices that are not results-oriented.

Implication four: Teacher preparation programs should seek to prepare general education teachers to instruct students with high-incidence disabilities in the general

education setting. This implication is associated with Finding Four; educational staff's lack of understanding of students' disabilities and related social, emotional, and instructional needs has a negative impact on the achievement of the children. Students with disabilities are included in the general education setting at higher rates. As a result, general education teachers are expected to work with special education teachers and paraprofessionals to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This can be a daunting task if the teacher has not had any pre-service experiences working with both general education and special education students with a variety of disabilities. Pre-service training would prepare novice teachers before they formally enter the classroom.

Implication five: School division leaders and elementary school leaders should use creative practices to meet the class size needs of students with disabilities. This is associated with Finding Five; parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities perceive that large class sizes are a factor responsible for hindering their child's achievement. Since parents of students with disabilities perceive that their children need smaller settings with fewer distractions and specialized attention, it is important for administrators to fully consider the voice of parents when planning specialized services for students with disabilities. School division and elementary school leaders should keep in mind that services provided to students with disabilities should be in accordance with their IEPs. If a student's present level of functioning indicates a need for instruction in a smaller setting, it will be necessary for the IEP team to consider the delivery of services in a smaller setting.

Implication six: Elementary school leaders should provide training to teachers on the physical and cosmetic characteristics of a classroom that can have a positive and negative impact on students. This implication is associated with Finding Six; parents believe that the physical and cosmetic characteristics of a classroom can have a positive or negative impact on students' ability to learn. Teachers should have autonomy over the design elements of their classrooms; however, they should have some training on best practices. Students with physical disabilities may need a classroom free of physical obstacles, while these obstructions may not cause a problem for a student with an LD. In addition, while a mosaic of visuals on the wall may be helpful for a student with a physical impairment, this may be distracting for a student with an OHI such as ADHD. Therefore, teachers need training on factors to consider when designing, arranging, and decorating their classrooms.

Implication seven: Elementary school leaders should identify master teachers to serve as mentors to underperforming teachers, new teachers, and teachers who need additional support serving students with disabilities. This implication is associated with Finding Seven; parents' recommendations for improving the academic success of students with disabilities focused on establishing mentoring programs, restructuring the classroom environment, improving parent–teacher communication, and striving to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Teacher mentors are often assigned to new teachers. School leaders should consider mentors for novice and veteran teachers. Every student and class make up is very different. As a result, teachers may benefit from working collaboratively through peer observations and professional learning communities to learn more about how to serve the needs of students with disabilities.

In addition, the staff member establishment of a mentoring program could nurture relationship building and trust amongst students and staff members. It could also break some of the barriers of school staff to understanding students with disabilities.

Implication eight: School division and elementary school leaders should provide ongoing professional development on differentiating instruction, characteristics of student disabilities, instructional strategies, inclusion models, and factors that impact the achievement of students with disabilities. This implication is associated with Finding Four; educational staff's lack of understanding of students' disabilities and related social, emotional, and instructional needs has a negative impact on the achievement of the children. Teachers cited a lack of training and professional development as factors that make them reluctant to serve students with disabilities. There would be value in surveying teachers to identify their training needs and then providing training in the suggested areas.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study was conducted to determine parents of students with disabilities' perceptions in three major areas: (a) school factors that contributed to their child's academic success, (b) school factors that hindered their child's academic success, and (c) recommendations for improving their child's success. Data for this study were collected from parents of students with disabilities whose child attended the same intermediate school in grades 3, 4, and 5. While this study produced several findings, these findings cannot be generalized as this study was

conducted utilizing parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities at one intermediate school. Below are recommendations for future research:

1. Expand this study to include interviews with elementary school parents of students without disabilities, elementary school teachers of students with and without disabilities, middle school parents and teachers of students with and without disabilities, and high school parents and teachers of students with and without disabilities. This would give the researcher a broader insight into the perceptions of a variety of individuals on the school factors that contribute to and hinder the academic achievement of students with and without disabilities across a broad spectrum of grade levels.
2. Compare the perspectives of parents and teachers at the intermediate, middle, and high school levels.
3. Expand the sample size and the geographic area of the participants.

Reflections

As an educator, I have observed numerous students with disabilities who have varied opportunities to participate in learning and extracurricular experiences because of the perceived limitations of their disability. I have often wondered what the drawback is to limiting their access to certain programs because a student may need accommodations, a certain service location, or even assistive technology. As a principal, it has been my mission to ensure that all students have optimal access to instruction, extracurricular activities, and impactful learning experiences.

I was inspired to conduct this study because students with disabilities are a growing population. I have a passion and a moral and ethical responsibility to ensure that all students are successful; and this is a group of students that is significantly underperforming. It was truly an honor to have the opportunity to facilitate one-on-one discussions with parents of students with disabilities who seek only the best for their child. I thank them for allowing me to learn about their perceptions and the experiences of their children.

The findings of this study reiterated the urgency for educators to understand the needs of a diverse population of students. Parents are a key element to understanding their children and they should be consulted when developing plans for success for these students. While the role of educators is multifaceted, implementing the suggestions of parents and utilizing strategies that promote specialized instruction and services for students with disabilities should render positive

academic achievement for students.

It is important to remember that the needs of students with disabilities are individualized; therefore, it is essential for educational leaders, parents, teachers, and support staff to work together to become knowledgeable of and sensitive to the needs of students as they work to develop an individualized plan to foster student success. It is recommended that administrators examine current educational practices in their schools when programming for students with disabilities (Cosier et al., 2013).

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent for Participants
In Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title of Project: *An Examination of Parents' Perceptions of School Factors That Contribute to and Hinder the Academic Success of Students with Disabilities Attending an Intermediate School in Southeastern Virginia*

Investigator(s):
Ms. Jatauné Jones jataune@vt.edu /757-638-7941
Dr. Ted Price pted7@vt.edu

I. Purpose of this Research Project
The purpose of this study is to explore, understand, and analyze parents of intermediate students with disabilities' perceptions of school factors that impact their child's academic achievement. Specifically, this study will focus on parents of students' with disabilities perceptions in three major areas: (a) school factors that contribute to their child's academic success (b) school factors that hinder their child's academic success, and (c) recommendations for improving their child's success. The objective of this study is to describe parents of students' with disabilities perceptions of their child's lived experiences. Findings from this study could encourage educational administrators to work collaboratively to discuss and consider parents of students' with disabilities perceptions of their child's lived experiences and recommendations when making professional development and instructional decisions that endeavor to promote improvement in student achievement levels.

This study will use audio recorded interviews to collect information from parents of students with disabilities. To participate in this study each parent's must have a child who was enrolled as a student with a disability in the school for the two previous years and passed at least one prior Standards of Learning assessment. Study findings will be used in the completion of a doctoral dissertation through Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

II. Procedures
If you agree to participate in this study you will participate in an audio recorded interview with the investigator. The interview will be conducted at a location comfortable to the interviewee (e.g., school, home, library). The focus of the study is your perception of factors that contribute to and hinder your child's academic performance. During the interview you will be asked to respond to a total of 22 questions. After the audio recording of the interview is transcribed, you will be asked to review the transcription for accuracy. All information collected and used during this study will be secured in a locked device accessible only by the investigator. No personal or identifiable information will be published.

Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board Project No. 17-022
Approved January 11, 2017 to January 10, 2018

III. Risks
There are limited risks as a result of your participation in this process. Your participation will not influence your child's grades or standing at the school. No personal or identifiable information will be published.

IV. Benefits
No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage you to participate. However, the information gathered from this study will hopefully assist educators in more successfully meeting the needs of students with disabilities in intermediate schools.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality
At no time will the researchers release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent. The Virginia Tech (VT) Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research. Any and all identifiable data and information will be stored separately, and securely from the coded data that will be published in the study. For example you will be identified with a pseudonym code which will allow the investigator to publish the findings without releasing your real name and information. All this information will only be accessible by investigator and VT advisor.

VI. Freedom to Withdraw
It is important for you to know that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VII. Questions or Concerns
Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact one of the research investigators whose contact information is included at the beginning of this document.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study's conduct or your rights as a research subject, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, Dr. David Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.

VIII. Subject's Consent
I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent to participate in a study entitled *An Examination of Parents' Perceptions of School Factors That Contribute to and Hinder the Academic Success of Students with Disabilities Attending an Intermediate School in Southeastern Virginia.*

_____ Date_____
Subject signature

_____
Subject printed name

Appendix B

Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board Approval Memo

VirginiaTech

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959
email irb@vt.edu
website http://www.irb.vt.edu

MEMORANDUM

DATE: January 12, 2017

TO: Ted S Price, Jataune Norkeisha Jones

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires January 29, 2021)

PROTOCOL TITLE: An Examination of Parents’ Perceptions of School Factors That Contribute to and Hinder the Academic Success of Students with Disabilities Attending an Intermediate School in Southeastern Virginia

IRB NUMBER: 17-022

Effective January 11, 2017, the Virginia Tech Institution Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As:	**Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7**
Protocol Approval Date:	**January 11, 2017**
Protocol Expiration Date:	**January 10, 2018**
Continuing Review Due Date*:	**December 27, 2017**

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

Date*	OSP Number	Sponsor	Grant Comparison Conducted?

* Date this proposal number was compared, assessed as not requiring comparison, or comparison information was revised.

If this IRB protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the IRB office (irbadmin@vt.edu) immediately.

Appendix C

Division Request for Approval: Letter to the Superintendent

Dear Superintendent,

I am currently enrolled in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Doctoral program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and I am in the process in writing my dissertation. The study is entitled: *An Examination of Parents' Perceptions of School Factors That Contribute to and Hinder the Academic Success of Students with Disabilities Attending an Intermediate School in Southeastern Virginia*. The purpose of this study is to determine parents of students with disabilities perceptions of school factors that contribute to and hinder the academic achievement of students with disabilities in an intermediate school in southeastern Virginia. This study will influence educational decision making and practices at the intermediate level by contributing to the array of strategies that improve the achievement levels of students with disabilities.

I am requesting your permission to interview parents at an intermediate school in the division. Once permission is formally granted by the school division, parents who are identified as potential participants will be given a consent forms (see attached) to be signed and returned to the researcher prior to the start of the interview process. A copy of the Semi-Structured Interview Protocol that will be utilized as a part of the study is attached. After consent is received, I will interview a purposefully sampled group of parents of fifth-grade students with disabilities utilizing a 22 question semi-structured interview guide to determine parents' perceptions of factors impacting student achievement.

Pseudonyms will be used to protect the privacy of study participants. Upon completion of the doctoral program, all interview protocols and audio recordings will be destroyed. Thank you for your time and consideration of this research request. If you have any questions, I can be contacted at (757) 638-7941.

Respectfully,

Jatauné Jones

Appendix D

Division Approval to Conduct Study

January 23, 2017

Dear Ms. Jatauné Jones:

Your request to conduct research for your doctoral dissertation titled *An Examination of Parents' Perceptions of School Factors That Contribute to and Hinder the Academic Success of Students with Disabilities Attending an Intermediate School in Southeastern Virginia* at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University is approved. The approval is granted with the understanding that the following conditions will apply:

- Participation of administrators, counselors, and teachers is strictly voluntary.
- Parent permission must be obtained for student participation (if applicable).
- Names of individuals, school names or the name of the school division cannot be used in the reporting of the results of your findings without prior permission from the Department of Staff Development.
- All copies, distribution, retrieval of materials and arrangement of interviews/collections will be your responsibility.
- Questions/procedures must be limited to those detailed in your prospectus.

You may use this letter as a cover letter when contacting administrators and teachers. Should you have further questions, please feel free to contact me at

Appendix E

Academic Profile

Participant Pseudonym:	Participant Disability Category:
Was the student enrolled at Sample Intermediate School during the noted years? ☐ 2014-2015 ☐ 2015-2016 ☐ 2016-2017	
2015-2016 **4th Grade Standards of Learning Performance**	
English: Reading(4) (Score/Rating)	Mathematics (4) (Score/Rating)
2014-2015 **3rd Grade Standards of Learning Performance**	
English: Reading(3) (Score/Rating)	Mathematics (3) (Score/Rating)

Appendix F

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Researcher Opening Script: Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this study. I will need your help to find out what school factors help your child to be successful at school and what school factors make it difficult for your child to be successful at school. I also want to learn how you believe educators can help your child to be more successful. Your thoughts and ideas are important. Since I want to be sure that I hear everything that you say, I will be audio recording and taking notes of the interview. After the interview, I will transcribe the recording. I will ask you to review the written record of the interview to ensure that I captured your message.

I will not allow anyone to read my notes, so they will not be able to connect you to what you say. Your name, your child's name, your child's school name, and teacher/staff name(s) will not be included in the study. Pseudonyms will be used in the study to protect your identity.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Opening

1. How would you define academic success?
2. Can you describe your child's overall academic performance in school?
3. Can you describe a time when you felt that your child was a good student (academically successful)?
4. Can you describe a time when you felt that your child was not a good student (not academically successful)?
5. How comfortable are you with your child attending their current elementary school? Why?

School Factors (that contribute)

6. Can you describe the things at school that have helped your child become a good student?
7. Are there some academic (subjects) where you feel your child is more successful than others? Why?
8. How does your child you learn best?
9. If you could design the ideal classroom for your child, what would it look like?
10. Based on what you described, have any of your child's classrooms at their current school looked like this in anyway?
11. Are there favorite teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, and/or any other staff members in your child's elementary school?
12. How did this/these individual(s) help your child become successful?
13. Describe your child's elementary school in one word?
14. Is this the same word you would use to describe your child's favorite staff member(s)? Why?
15. Discuss other school factors that may **contribute** to your child's academic success.

School Factors (that hinder)

16. In question 9 you described an ideal classroom. What type of classroom would make it difficult for your child to learn and be successful?
17. Has it sometimes been difficult for your child to be a good student? Why?
18. What things make it difficult for your child to learn?
19. Are there any teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, and/or any other staff members in your child's elementary school who could have been more helpful in encouraging your child's success?
20. What could they have done differently?
21. Can you describe any other school factors that may **hinder** your child from achieving academic success?

Closing

22. What are your recommendations for ways to improve your child's academic success?

Researcher Closing Script: Thank you for your participation in this interview. After the interview is transcribed, I will ask you to review the written transcription of the interview to ensure that I have accurately captured your message.

Appendix G

Electronic Permission from Dr. Rolland to Use Interview Questions

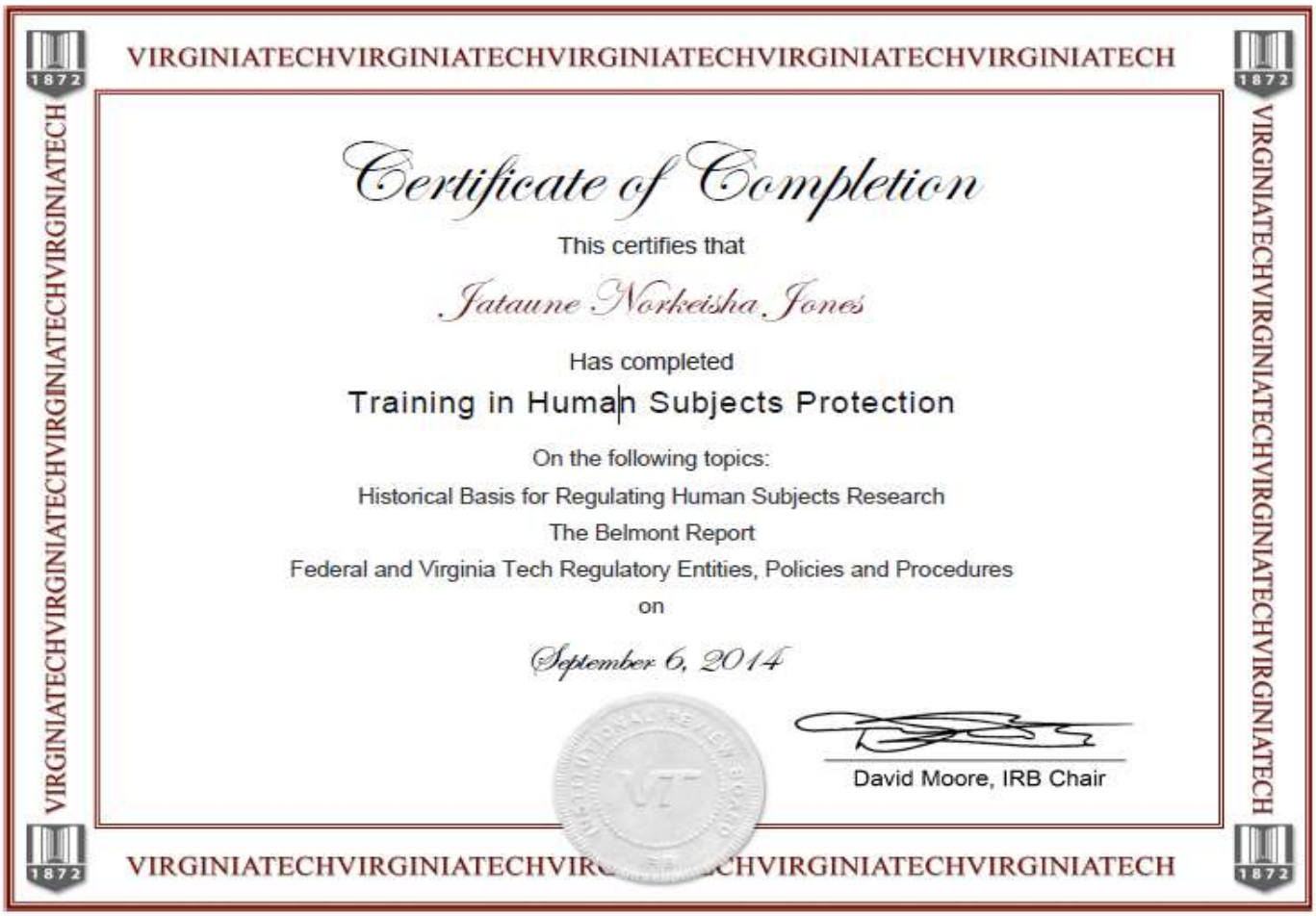
From: grolland <grolland@comcast.net>
Date: Sun, Nov 6, 2016 at 6:49 PM
Subject: RE: Request to Use your Semi-Structured Interview Guide and Research Questions
To: Jataune Jones jataune@vt.edu

I am delighted that your study will focus on student success. You have my permission to modify my guide and questions to aid you with your dissertation. Good luck with your study.

Sent from my Verizon, Samsung Galaxy smartphone

Appendix H

Institutional Review Board Training Certificate



Appendix I

Semi-Structured Interview Opening Responses

How Would You Define Academic Success?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Continued growth	X							
Grades			X	X	X		X	
Being the best you can be						X		
Confidence								X
Success as an adult								X
Socially engaged					X			
Happiness					X			
Apply/use what learned		X						
Attendance			X					
Behavior			X	X				

Can You Describe Your Child's Overall Academic Performance in School?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Ups and downs	X			X				
Passing			X					
Average		X			X			
Untapped success	X				X			
Growing							X	X
Confident								X
Varies by subject						X	X	X

Can You Describe a Time When You Felt That Your Child Was a Good Student (Academically Successful)?

Parent Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
No			X					
Varies		X						
Always							X	X
Intermediate school				X			X	
When teacher was encouraging					X			
When teacher focused on student needs	X							
When student was interested		X						
When student was confident								X
When student was engaged					X			