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# Parents' Knowledge and Perceptions Regarding Their Rights During the IEP Process

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PARENTS' KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THEIR RIGHTS DURING  
THE IEP PROCESS

by

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A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

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TITLE: PARENTS' KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THEIR RIGHTS  
DURING THE IEP PROCESS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Deborah Bruns

This paper aimed to examine what parents of children aged three to six understand about their rights during the IEP process. Literature from the past ten years (2002-2012) revealed that parents had some understanding of the IEP process including planning and contributing to development of IEP documents and participating in IEP meetings. Findings regarding parents being valued during the IEP process varied. In terms of the results of communication strategies utilized during the IEP process, literature showed that parents understood terminology used during IEP meetings better during the subsequent ones than the initial one. However, written documents such as the prior written notice were often difficult for parents to understand. Limitations and implications are addressed along with recommendations for future studies to assess the generalizability of the current findings.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT .....	i
CHAPTERS	
CHAPTER 1 – Introduction to Special Education Law .....	1
1.1 Overview of the IDEA .....	1
1.2 Principles of the IDEA .....	2
1.3 Parental Participation and Shared Decision Making .....	4
CHAPTER 2 – Methodology .....	7
2.1 Search Engine .....	7
2.2 Reference Lists.....	11
2.3 Websites of Journals and Others.....	11
CHAPTER 3 – Literature Review .....	13
3.1 Parental Perceptions of the IEP Meetings.....	13
3.2 Parental Perceptions of Their Value During the IEP Process.....	15
3.3 Parental Perceptions of Communication Strategies Used During the IEP Process .....	16
CHAPTER 4 – Discussion .....	19
4.1 Conclusions and Discussion .....	19
4.2 Limitations .....	20
4.3 Implications.....	22
4.4 Scope of Future Studies .....	24
REFERENCES .....	26

VITA.....29

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL EDUCATION LAW

#### 1.1 OVERVIEW OF THE IDEA

Prior to 1975, students with disabilities had limited access to education (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001). Many of them either did not receive related educational services or received inappropriate educational services. Beginning in the 1970s, advocacy organizations and parents of children with disabilities started to fight for their rights for their children by suing states and schools, claiming the education given was inappropriate and violated equal education opportunities regulated by the U.S. Constitution (Katsiyannis et al., 2001; Turnbull, Stowe, & Huerta, 2007). The two significant court cases (i.e., *Mills v. District of Columbia Board of Education* (1972) and *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972)), thus, established students' rights to public education. These two cases also initiated the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (Katsiyannis et al., 2001; Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Shogren, 2012; Yell, Rogers, & Lodge Rogers, 1998). In 1990, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), reflecting person first language and replacing the term *handicapped* with the term *disabilities*. The enactment of the IDEA is to ensure students with disabilities receive education and services that met their needs and to provide them opportunities to receive educational services in public school settings. Parental involvement and participation in their children's education was also highlighted in the IDEA (Conroy, Yell, Katsiyannis, & Collins, 2010; Katsiyannis et al., 2001; Valle & Aponte, 2002).

The IDEA benefits infants and toddlers from birth through age two, young children ages three to five and school-age students through 21 years of age. There are four sections in the law.

Part A includes definitions of key terms. National policies with regard to the education of students with disabilities are also described in this section, such as ensuring equal opportunities, further education and independent living. Part C, formerly Part H, addresses infants and toddlers with disabilities from birth to age two. The fourth section, Part D, focuses on activities to support and improve the education of students with disabilities including personnel preparation and development as well as parent training centers.

## 1.2 PRINCIPLES OF THE IDEA

The majority of the rules and regulations under the IDEA are governed by six principles to assist states to provide effective services and education to students with disabilities (Turnbull et al., 2007; Turnbull et al., 2012). The six principles are zero reject, nondiscriminatory evaluation, free, appropriate public education (FAPE), least restrictive environment (LRE), procedural due process, as well as parent participation and shared decision making. The six principles not only ensure students' with disabilities access to public education, but also give parents' rights to participate and be involved in decision making regarding their children's education.

According to the IDEA, the zero reject principle is to guarantee that all students receive free and appropriate education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, 34 C.F.R. § 300.101 (a)). In other words, schools are prohibited from excluding any student from receiving special educational services and supports because of their disabilities. Also, all students with disabilities should be provided appropriate education at public schools' expense. School districts are responsible for locating school-age students who may be eligible for special education services under Part B (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, 34 C.F.R. § 300.111). For infants and toddlers who may be eligible for early intervention services (Part C) due to developmental delays

or diagnosed disability, all states are mandated to implement a comprehensive Child Find system to identify, locate and evaluate young children.

The nondiscriminatory evaluation principle is to ensure that before a child or a student receives special education and related services, nondiscriminatory evaluations should be completed and documented (Yell & Drasgow, 2007; Turnbull et al, 2007). The evaluation will be implemented by a multidisciplinary team to examine a child's or a student's current performance and needs in various areas. Information gathered from the evaluations will then be used to plan his or her Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

The principle of FAPE ensures that students with disabilities receive free and appropriate education at public expense as long as they are determined eligible for services (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, 34 C.F.R. § 300.101(a)). To determine if the education and related services provided are FAPE is to individualize (Katsiyannis et al., 2001; Turnbull et al., 2012). For students with disabilities from three to 21 years of age, an IEP describing their goals and objectives as well as how their progress is measured will be developed. An Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) is developed for infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays and their families.

The IDEA mandated that students with disabilities should be educated with students without disabilities to the maximum possible extent. Students with disabilities should receive education in general education classrooms as much as possible (Turnbull et al., 2007; Turnbull et al., 2012). For children age from birth to two, the LRE principle refers to providing related services to them in their natural environment such as in the home or a child care center.

All of the four principles mentioned above are to assure that students with disabilities receive appropriate education and related services needed. The other two principles (i.e.,

procedural safeguard and parent participation and shared decision making) are to ensure that the four principles are implemented properly (Turnbull et al., 2007; Turnbull et al., 2012). Therefore, the procedural safeguard principle seeks to protect families' rights when the other principles are not followed such as zero reject, nondiscriminatory evaluation and FAPE (Katsiyannis et al., 2001; Turnbull et al., 2007; Turnbull et al., 2012; Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, & Katsiyannis, 2009). The other principle, parent participation and shared decision making, assures that parents are informed of their rights, are involved in decision-making process, as well as are aware of their rights to challenge decisions made by their child's IEP team (Katsiyannis et al., 2001; Turnbull et al., 2007; Turnbull et al., 2012; Valle & Aponte, 2002; Yell et al., 2009).

### 1.3 PARENTAL PARTICIPATION AND SHARED DECISION MAKING

The core of the IDEA is to ensure students with disabilities are provided with equal access to appropriate educational services and supports. Meanwhile, the IDEA recognizes the important role parents play in the decision making process to help support and secure their children's education (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Turnbull et al., 2007). However, Turnbull and colleagues (2007) point out that some professionals expect parents to play traditional roles. Traditionally, parents with children with disabilities play various roles in their children's education, such as passive recipients of professional decisions, and service developers for their children (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006; Turnbull et al., 2007). Currently, parents' roles are shifting in the direction of greater participation and decision making. In the IDEA, for instance, parents are required to participate in their children's IEP meetings as decision-makers on behalf of their children. Turnbull and colleagues (2006) also discuss parents as collaborators or partners with professionals.

Parents are provided with different rights and responsibilities under Part B and Part C of the IDEA (Turnbull et al., 2007). Under Part C, parents' rights and roles in early intervention (EI) are recognized by professionals. For example, parents are encouraged to decide what services their infant or toddler should receive and the setting (e.g., home, child care). Part B emphasizes students' rights to a FAPE (Turnbull et al., 2007; Yell et al., 2009). Students are major beneficiaries and parents are seen as secondary beneficiaries (Turnbull et al., 2007). Unless direct attention is paid to collaboration with parents, coordination between home and school may not occur.

Regardless of what parents' roles are, parental participation is a foundation of the IDEA (Yell et al., 2009). Parents are experts about their children and know their children's needs and interests (Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2002). Also, since the IEP documents educational decisions, parental involvement and participation in the IEP process is significant. Moreover, as stated in the law, it is mandatory for parents to be involved in the IEP process. Therefore, parents have a critical role in their children's education.

In order for IEP meetings to meet IDEA stipulations, it is important that parents know their rights and responsibilities. For instance, the IDEA requires the local education agency (LEA) to follow specific steps to ensure parental participation in IEP meetings such as advance notice, scheduling a mutually convenient time, and offering different forms of parental participation such as conference calls (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.322-328).

To examine if current practices follow requirements under the law, this paper aims to examine what parents of children aged three to six understand about their rights during the IEP process. Specifically, how parents of children aged three to six with disabilities perceived IEP

meetings (initial and subsequent) as well as how they perceived being valued by professionals during the IEP process will also be investigated. Parental perceptions in relation to communication strategies utilized during the IEP process will be discussed.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

Chapter Two summarizes how articles reviewed in Chapter Three were located and retrieved. The methods include the use of search engines, examination of reference lists from found articles as well as via other means such as direct contact with researchers.

#### 2.1 SEARCH ENGINE

The use of search engine aimed to target studies examining perceptions of parents with preschoolers with disabilities concerning the IEP process, including IDEA guidelines, IEP meetings, and parents' rights about the IEP process. To ensure studies examining perceptions of parents with preschoolers with disabilities were included, as long as perceptions of parents with preschoolers with disabilities were included in studies, these studies were taken into consideration. However, studies examining perceptions of parents with older age groups but excluding preschool aged children were not taken into consideration. The search for articles began on EBSCO. After typing in terms "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)" and "Parents' rights", the search result showed 68,394 articles. Then, the search results were narrowed to locate relevant articles by refining publication years to within the past ten years (2002-2012) because studies older than ten years may be considered old and may not be representative. Additional key terms "Individualized Education Program (IEP)" and "Preschooler's parents' rights" were also added to the search. Thirty-three articles were found but none were appropriate for this paper because many of them were related to the least restrictive environment and developmental delays.

A new search was initiated by using the terms "IDEA" and "parents' rights". There were

501,328 articles found. Additional key terms “IEP meetings” and “preschoolers” were added to the search and the result was reduced to 467. The term “IEP meetings” and “parents’ rights” were changed to “IEP conference” and “parents’ rights and knowledge”, respectively. The result was further reduced to 221. By examining the first 50 articles listed, it was concluded that articles found under these key terms were inappropriate to the topic of this paper because none of them included the topic of the IEP process. Most of the results were associated with topics about early childhood education, inclusive education and family support.

A new search using the key terms “IEP meetings” and “parents’ perceptions about their rights” were used and resulted in 3,115 articles. An additional key term “preschooler” was added to the search. Of 279 articles, one potential article was identified after examining the first 50 articles from the result. The reason why only the first 50 articles were examined was because the first 20 articles were associated with parents’ right and special education; nevertheless, after the first 20 articles, the following results were associated with parents and students with disabilities but had little to do with parents’ understandings about IEP meetings. After the first 50 articles, the results were more and more inappropriate to the research topic.

Another two combinations of key terms, one being “Parents’ knowledge about their rights” and “IEP meetings” for a search, as well as the other one being “IEP meetings”, “parents’ rights”, “preschooler” and “[not] transition” or “[not] youth” were entered to search, but no articles were identified under either of the search. However, when the key term “IEP conference”, “parents’ rights” and “[not] school-age students” were entered, of 2,899 from the results, three potential articles were identified from examining the first 50 articles from the result. An additional search using the key terms “perceptions of parents of preschooler” and “IEP meeting”, one article was on topic from examining the first 50 of 488 articles from the result but

that article was identical to one already identified.

Another search using the key terms “parents’ perceptions towards IEP meetings” was conducted and 3,836 articles were found. Additional key terms “[not] transition” and “[not] teachers’ perception” were added to narrow the search results. Of 49, four relevant articles were identified, but only one of which was new; the other three were articles found using previous key terms. One more new article was also located under the search of key terms “parents’ understanding towards IEP meeting”, “young children” and “[not] youth”. More specifically, the search of these terms found 1,458 articles. One relevant article was retrieved from examining the first 50 articles. Examination of the first 50 articles resulted in that they were related to topics associated with working with parents, family engagement and parents’ perceptions about children’s disabilities but only one of them addressed the topic about parents’ understandings about IEP meetings.

Google Scholar was also used to search for relevant articles. The same search procedures used on EBSCO were used to find additional, relevant articles. Although search results from Google Scholar revealed articles identified by EBSCO, the combination of different key terms listed above located four additional potential articles. To be more specific, three articles were identified by both search engines. The four new articles identified on Google Scholar were found using, “parents’ understanding about IEP”, “preschooler”, “IEP meetings” and “parental perception”. To illustrate, search under key terms “IEP meetings” and “parental understanding”, 12,700 articles were found. An additional key term, “[not] high school” was added to the search to narrow the result to 35 articles. Of 35 articles, one potential article was retrieved. Another search was conducted by using key terms “IEP meetings”, “parental perception”, “[not] early intervention” and “[not] student perception” and three additional articles were retrieved.

In addition to listing articles relevant to the key terms, links to additional articles were also provided on Google Scholar. All ten articles identified by both EBSCO and Google Scholar were typed in the search bar again one by one to examine what articles have been cited these ten articles. By examining articles citing the ten articles identified earlier, one thesis, one dissertation and three more potential articles were retrieved. The reason why the thesis and dissertation were taken into consideration was because their examinations were on topic; thus, their reference lists might help locate additional articles.

In addition, searches of author names were conducted to locate additional articles. The selection of author names was decided on their research interest, focusing on topics associated with parent-professional interaction and collaboration within the IEP process. Another criterion was that similar studies on topic were done in the past by authors but either different age groups were examined or the studies were beyond the ten year window used in this literature. Based on these criteria, two authors were identified, i.e., Wade fish and Julia B. Stoner. However, searching author names on EBSCO and Google Scholar did not locate any additional articles. Specifically, search using the author name “Wade Fish” and refining publication years to within the past ten years (2002-2012) resulted in 11 articles on EBSCO and 22 articles on Google Scholar; among which, two articles both on EBSCO and Google Scholar were relevant but were already identified. Another search of author name using “Julia B. Stoner” yielded 44 articles on EBSCO and 34 on Google Scholar. Examination from both findings resulted in one relevant article but which was already identified.

In total, 13 potential articles, one thesis and one dissertation were located through EBSCO and Google Scholar mentioned above. Of the total 13 potential articles, one thesis and one dissertation, three articles and one dissertation were found on topic. The remaining articles

either addressed an older age group or did not provide empirical findings.

## 2.2 REFERENCE LISTS

Another means to locate additional articles was to examine reference lists from each article found through the use of search engine, including 13 potential articles, one thesis and one dissertation. Ten articles and one dissertation from the references were found relevant to the topic. However, only two of them were appropriate, one of which was a dissertation. Of ten, six were already identified. Two of them were unsuitable because they were published in 1988 and 1981 which was beyond the 10 year window used in this literature review. The remaining one was inappropriate due to its focus on an older age group.

## 2.3 WEBSITES OF JOURNALS AND OTHERS

Official websites of journals were also examined to locate articles. For instance, the website of the Council for Exceptional Children, publisher of *Exceptional Children* and *Teaching Exceptional Children* (<http://cec.metapress.com/journals>) was searched for additional articles. The table contents of each issue in the past five year were examined. As a result, three more potential articles were located but did not provide empirical results.

To locate additional articles, authors whose research interest was related to the topic were contacted through e-mails. Two authors, Fish and Stoner, were contacted for any manuscripts or articles under review. Fish did not reply after two attempts. Stoner replied with her curriculum vitae attached. Results from examining Stoner's curriculum vitae did not yield additional articles from what had been found through the search engines.

All in all, articles searched through the methods of search engine, reference lists, websites of journals and direct contact with authors through e-mails yielded four articles and two

dissertations.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews research examining parental perceptions of the IEP process for their preschoolers with disabilities within the past ten years (2002-2012). Due to the limited number of studies examining only preschool aged children, parents with children with disabilities up to six years old were also examined. Therefore, the term preschoolers used in this paper includes children between three and six years of age.

The survey instruments developed in the literature were pilot tested on groups of families different from the groups examined. Types of questions on the survey included knowledge of IEP process and special education law, experiences with IEP meeting, knowledge with IEP documents, and degree of involvement with the IEP document and meetings. Findings yielded from these types of questions helped generalize the focus of this literature.

This literature review contains three sections. The first section examines perceptions of parents of children aged three to six with disabilities about IEP meetings (initial and subsequent). Second, parents' perceptions of being valued by professionals during the IEP process will be discussed including input to IEP development and decision-making. The last section reviews how parents perceive communication strategies utilized by professionals and on documents during the IEP process.

#### 3.1 PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF IEP MEETINGS

IDEA guarantees parents' rights to participate in collaborative decision making regarding their children's education plan (IDEA, 2004). During the IEP process, professionals are required to ensure parental participation and confirm their understanding of the process and procedural rights. Studies have indicated that parents have some understanding of the IEP process. For

instance, Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003), via telephone interviews, surveyed 45 families with children aged four to 18 with autism or “related pervasive developmental disabilities” (p.229) attending a parent support group. Parents received information about their rights and special education law through quarterly newsletters, annual workshops, direct contact with parents, monthly family support meetings as well as websites. Specifically, within the group of parents of children aged four to five with disabilities (n=11), all parents indicated that they had some understanding of their child’s IEP document. However, when asked to rate their level of understanding from high, moderate to low, 2 (19%) believed they have low levels of knowledge about their child’s IEP documents including initial or subsequent IEPs (type was not specified by the researchers).

Similar findings were presented in Fish’s (2008) study examining parents with preschoolers to 12<sup>th</sup> graders with disabilities (e.g., autism, learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, developmental delay) from diverse backgrounds (e.g., economic level, race). The sample was recruited from a family support service agency, offering “services to students with special needs and their family members” (Fish, 2008, p.9). Specifically, on a five-point Likert-type scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, 20 (39%) and 12 (24%) parents agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, they were knowledgeable about the IEP process (Findings from parents with preschoolers with disabilities were not presented separately). This finding was consistent with Spann and colleagues’ (2003); yet, the focus of which was on knowledge about IEP documents. Twenty-nine (57%) and 13 (25%) parents agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, they had realistic expectations of what their school districts were supposed to follow and to provide their children. The researcher also found that less than half of the sample (n=22, 44%) pointed out they educated themselves information and knowledge about

special education law. Twenty parents (40%) received their knowledge through their school district's personnel and family advocacy support groups. When asked if they would like to receive more knowledge regarding the IEP process, 30 parents (58%) indicated having a desire to obtain more information. Specific type(s) of information was not provided by the researcher.

Research also revealed that when comparing their initial IEP meetings experiences with subsequent ones, parents reported that they had better knowledge about the IEP process during later meetings (Comer, 2009; Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005). In Stoner and colleagues' (2005) study, four married, middle-class couples from a parent support group (three couples experienced the transition from EI services) with children with autism spectrum disorder ranging in age from six to eight years described their initial IEP meetings as confusing and complicated. One parent reported feeling "totally lost". Parents also stated difficulties with receiving services to meet their children's needs. Since three of the families had received EI services, changes from IFSP to IEP were discussed as difficult. Nevertheless, in subsequent IEP meetings, parents were better able to communicate with education professionals to ensure all of their child's service needs were provided. Parents expressed a better understanding about the process and felt more prepared to work with professionals. Comer (2009) highlighted how perceptions of parents with children with disabilities ages three to 21 toward IEP meetings changed from being not clear about the process when first participating in the meetings to having a better understanding of how the meetings are structured during their second and third meetings.

### 3.2 PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR VALUE DURING THE IEP PROCESS

By law, each family is required to be informed of their right to participate in the IEP process (IDEA, 2004). Parents with children with disabilities should also be viewed as equal

partners with professionals. However, the degree of parental perceptions of being valued as an equal partner by professionals during the IEP process varies. Some researchers indicated that parents' input was valued during the IEP process (e.g., Comer, 2009; Fish, 2008; Pruitt, 2003). Comer (2009) concluded that parents were involved in decision-making and their input was acquired prior to and during IEP meetings. Fish (2008) presented similar findings in which parents were offered opportunities to express their ideas and concerns during IEP meetings. Also, 12 parents (24%) believed that they were not treated as equal partners during the IEP process.

Although several studies showed positive findings of parental perceptions of being valued by professionals during IEP meetings (Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008; Spann et al., 2003), some IEP teams do not. As a result, some parents stated they did not feel they were included in the planning process. For example, parents in two studies indicated that they did not have opportunities to provide their input to development of their child's IEP because IEP documents were written and completed prior to IEP meetings (Fish, 2008; Spann et al., 2003). A parent in the Spann and colleagues' (2003) study also stated she was the only one who did not have a copy of her child's IEP at her recent IEP meeting. Similar findings were presented in Fish's (2008) study in which parents suggested that IEP teams should not predetermine IEP objectives without parental presence and input before IEP meetings.

These findings contradicted the IDEA requirements. By law, IEP documents educational decisions. Therefore, it is essential and mandatory for parents to be involved in the IEP process. Findings discussed here indicated that professional practices did not support the law.

### 3.3 PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES DURING THE IEP PROCESS

Under IDEA, professionals are required to inform and confirm parents' understanding of their rights, responsibilities and actions to be taken concerning special education (IDEA 2004). During the IEP process, oral communication during IEP meetings and written communication on IEP documents should be easy-to-understand. Technical language and educational jargon should be avoided. Comer (2009) indicated that all parents (n=91) with children with disabilities including 34 with a speech or language impairment (37.4%) and most parents completing some post-secondary education (n=35, 38.5%) or having a post-secondary degree (n=35, 38.5%), reported understanding communication during IEP meetings. However, when comparing their initial IEP meetings with subsequent meetings, they tended to not understand language used during their initial meetings. Results revealed significant difference ( $p = .002$ ) with parents' understanding of terminology was found between parents attending the first IEP meeting ( $M = 3.09$ ) and subsequent meetings (e.g.,  $M = 3.63$  at second or third IEP meeting,  $M = 3.59$  at sixth or more meeting). The researcher suggested that parents' understanding of terminology was based on their experience with IEP meetings. The researcher thus concluded that parents had greater understanding of language used when attending later IEP meetings.

Pruitt (2003) focused on the understanding and knowledge parents with children in Grades K- eight receiving special education services have concerning special education documents and forms, including consent for initial assessment, invitation to a meeting, consent for re-evaluation, prior written notice, parent's procedural rights as well as IEP. Approximately 75% of parents (n=70) completed at least some high school education. The researcher revealed that many parents claimed that the prior written notice was confusing and difficult to read and understand. As a result, they reported attending IEP meetings without knowing what to expect.

Findings from the literature indicated that parents had some understanding of the IEP

process. It appears that the more experiences parents had with the IEP process, the more knowledgeable they became. Specially, when comparing their initial IEP meetings with subsequent ones, they were more knowledgeable and had a better understanding about the process during later meetings. Parents' perspectives of being valued within the context of IEP meetings varied. For instance, some parents reported being included and were given opportunities to voice their concerns and ideas (Comer, 2009; Pruitt, 2003); while others stated that their child's IEP was completed without their input prior to their meetings (Fish, 2008; Spann et al., 2003). In addition, communication strategies utilized were not deemed effective to keep parents informed. Based on the findings above, it can be speculated that some current practices contradict IDEA requirements which emphasized the importance of parental involvement and participation as well as shared decision making.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This literature review aimed to investigate parental perceptions concerning IEP meetings, being valued by professionals during these meetings as well as communication strategies used during the IEP process.

Literature from the past ten years (2002-2012) revealed that parents had some understanding of the IEP process including planning and contributing to development of IEP documents and participating in IEP meetings (Fish, 2008; Spann et al., 2003). When comparing their initial IEP meetings with subsequent ones, many parents pointed out they were more knowledgeable and had a better understanding about the process during latter meetings (Comer, 2009; Stoner et al., 2005).

Findings regarding parents being valued during the IEP process varied. Some showed that parents involved in decision-making process and were seen as equal partners with professionals (e.g., Comer, 2009; Esquivel et al., 2008; Fish, 2008; Pruitt, 2003; Spann et al., 2003). They were offered opportunities to express their concerns and ideas. In contrast, other authors showed that parents' input was not valued (e.g., not requested) (e.g., Fish, 2008; Spann et al., 2003). In terms of the results of communication strategies utilized during the IEP process, literature showed that parents understood terminology used during IEP meetings better during the subsequent ones than the initial one (Comer, 2009). However, written documents such as the prior written notice were hard for them to read and understand. Parents reported attending IEP meetings without knowing what to expect (Pruitt, 2003).

The results above emphasize whether practices followed requirements under IDEA. To illustrate, although most parents had some understanding of the IEP process, some still indicated a desire to receive more information. In addition, in some studies, decisions were made without parental input before IEP meetings. This is against IDEA guidelines mandating that collaborative decision-making is required between parents and professionals. By law, parents should participate in the development of their children's IEP and attend IEP meetings as decision-makers on behalf of their children. This should also remind professionals to view parents as equal partners and value their input. Also, findings describing communication strategies utilized during the IEP process suggests that to keep parents better informed, current practices should be improved.

In sum, it is important for professionals to actively involve parents during the IEP process. Reviewing parental perceptions and knowledge of their rights during the IEP process indicated a gap between IDEA guidelines and current practices.

#### 4.2 LIMITATIONS

The findings concluded that parents had some understanding of the IEP process including contributing to development of IEP documents and participating in IEP meetings. However, all, but two studies included participants with children ranging from pre-K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Results including parents of children older than six years old may not be representative for parents with younger children with disabilities. In addition, for parents with children who had received early intervention (EI) services, it is likely they had knowledge about the IEP process through transition meetings and working with their Service Coordinator (Fish, 2008).

The amount of experience parents had with the IEP process may have influenced the results. Specifically, the more IEP meetings parents attended, the more knowledge about their

rights they may have because they are more likely to have opportunities to receive information and ask questions.. Yet, only two studies explored parents' initial IEP meetings, conclusions presented in this literature review should not be generalized. If studies were longitudinal, the likelihood of different results may occur.

Also, experiences parents had with the IEP process may have affected their understanding of professional terminology and technical terms used by professionals and/or on documents. Due to the limited studies focusing on this topic, findings described here may not apply to all parents with children with disabilities.

In addition, most parents in the studies (e.g., Fish, 2008, Spann et al., 2003; Stoner, 2005) were either members of a parent support group or members of a family support service agency who received information relevant to IEP meetings and IDEA. For example, parents in Spann and colleagues' (2003) study were provided with regular information from quarterly newsletters, annual workshops, direct contact with other parents, monthly family support meetings as well as websites. Parents in these studies may be better informed of the IEP process than parents who do not participate or are offered these options.

Most parents in the reviewed studies were middle- to upper middle-class, and completed at least a high school degree. Their experiences may not represent the experiences of parents with different backgrounds. Some researchers pointed out that some parents from lower income families may lack extensive formal education (Olivos, Gallagher, & Aguilar, 2010) and believe in trusting and supporting, instead of intervening, involving in or providing input into educational decisions for their child (Esquivel et al., 2008). Parents' different expectations and roles may affect their understanding of the IEP meeting.

In addition, parents from culturally and linguistically diverse group with limited or no English knowledge were not examined extensively. Parents from culturally and linguistically diverse groups, especially those whose native language is not English, often bring a different cultural perspective as well as communication style to collaborating with professionals (Harry, 2008). For example, parents' lack of interaction or responses may be perceived as reluctant rather than interesting in their child's education (Harry & Klingner, 2006, as cited in Olivos et al., 2010). Also, parents' different perceptions of disabilities may influence ways they interact and collaborate with professionals. For instance, Palawat and May (2012) pointed out that during the process such as the evaluation process in which parental input to share their ideas and concerns are needed, confusion may occur due to different perspectives toward disabilities parents from culturally and linguistically diverse group have.

Not all of the survey instruments used in the literature were tested for validity and reliability before being administered to parents. It is thus suggested for future studies to have reliable survey instruments to help yield more valid and reliable results. For instance, survey instruments can be field tested before actually being implemented.

#### 4.3 IMPLICATIONS

Although parents have some understanding of the IEP process, some (such as parents in Fish's study (2008)) indicated having a desire to learn more. To help parents better understand their rights and responsibilities during the IEP process, professionals should be proactive and offer parents more information about special education services and the IEP process. This can be offered through trainings, workshops and seminars. This will be particularly beneficial and informative for parents during their first contact with the special education system. In addition,

especially for parents who are new to special education, professionals should inform and discuss relevant procedures, and parents' legal rights to help prepare for IEP meetings.

To recognize and make parents equal partners, IEP teams should avoid making decisions without listening to parents' concerns and ideas. To be more specific, IEPs should not be written and completed prior to IEP meetings without parental input. Prior to IEP meetings, professionals can provide parents with an agenda so parents have sufficient time to prepare and ask questions before and at the meeting. Parents can also be given a copy of a draft of their child's IEP to review in advance of their child's meeting (Cheatham, Hart, Malian, & McDonald, 2012; Fish, 2008). During IEP meetings, professionals should provide as many opportunities as possible for parents to contribute to the development of their child's IEP such as inviting parents to add to the meeting's agenda, asking for parent input regarding their child's progress, encouraging parents to express their opinions and asking their input about decisions. A copy of their child's completed IEP should also be provided.

Information printed on the IEP document and forms completed during the IEP process are based on requirements under the law (Pruitt, 2003). To help parents understand information on IEP documents and forms, professionals can read and/or review them with parents. In addition, during IEP meetings, professionals should use easy-to-understand language and avoid utilizing professional terminology and educational jargon.

There is also a need to provide preservice and inservice training in this area. University coursework should address all components of IEP meetings including approaches to include parents in meaningful ways and support at meetings. Epstein (2005) stressed that inservice training helps professionals learn to work with and involve parents in their child's education. Therefore, it is essential for professionals to receive preservice and inservice opportunities to be

better able to assist parents during IEP meetings. For example, preservice students should be required to attend several IEP meetings and discuss their observations and questions with their cooperating teacher and, if possible, with other IEP team members including parents. This group as well as professionals in the field can be provided with a copy of their state's parent rights handbook (e.g., [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/spec-ed/pdfs/parent\\_guide\\_english\\_pf.pdf](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/spec-ed/pdfs/parent_guide_english_pf.pdf)) to better understand the topic and have a resource to share with parents. Preservice and inservice professionals should also participate in professional development workshops and conferences to learn about the topic and better work with parents during the IEP process. For example, the Division for Early Childhood offers conferences and workshops regularly for professionals to learn strategies to reinforce their current practices when working with parents.

#### 4.4 SCOPE OF FUTURE STUDIES

Participants examined in this literature review include parents of younger children and older children with a wide age range. In most studies, the perceptions of parents of younger children and older children were not investigated separately, but presented as a whole. Also, limited studies were found examining perspectives of parents with young children only. Therefore, it is suggested to have future studies examine perceptions of parents with preschoolers toward the IEP process to help professionals better work with this group and their, potentially, different needs and concerns. Additional information regarding perceptions of parents with younger children about the IEP process can be gathered starting from their initial IEP meetings.

In addition, experiences parents had with the IEP process may impact their knowledge and perceptions. Nonetheless, in this literature review, only few studies investigated parents' initial IEP meetings. Further research is needed to determine parents' perspectives toward their

initial IEP meetings. To yield more sound results, it is recommended for studies to compare parents' initial and subsequent IEP meetings to track their knowledge and perceptions over time.

Another recommendation for future studies is to examine perceptions of parents who are not members of family support groups or parent support service agencies. Members of family support groups or parent support service agencies are more likely to be active in obtaining information and knowledge. Future studies should also investigate and compare the perceptions of both groups. To identify parents not involving in parent support services, surveys can be distributed to all parents with children with disabilities within the same or different school districts. Equal amounts of surveys from parents who do and do not attend parent support services can be retrieved and examined.

In this literature review, parental perceptions toward the IEP process were explored. Perspectives of parents from lower socioeconomic levels and from culturally and linguistically diverse groups with limited or no English knowledge were not represented. It is suggested that future studies examine parents representing these groups to increase understanding of the IEP process and their involvement in it. Also, parents' experiences may be different based on their child's diagnosis. For instance, there may be more issues developing an IEP for a preschooler with severe autism compared to a young child with a language delay. Future studies should also examine this area as well.

It is important for professionals to listen to and understand perceptions of parents with children with disabilities concerning the IEP process. Conclusions from this literature review inform professionals of what can be done to facilitate achievement of shared goals at IEP meetings.

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