The IEP Meeting: Perceptions of Parents of Students Who Receive Special Education Services

Wade W. Fish

ABSTRACT: The author investigated parental perceptions of the individualized education program (IEP) meeting among 51 parents of students who were receiving special education services from 1 family support service agency. Survey questions pertained to the following areas: (a) IEP meeting experiences, (b) knowledge level of special education law, (c) relations with educators, (d) IEP meeting outcomes, and (e) recommended areas for improvement. The majority of parents responded favorably that their overall IEP meeting experiences had been positive. Most respondents had positive perceptions of the IEP meeting because of educators' valuing parents' input while treating parents with respect and as equal decision makers. Also, most parents agreed that they had a clear understanding of the IEP process and special education law.

KEYWORDS: *IDEIA, IEP meeting, parent–educator collaboration, parental perceptions, special education law*

THE EDUCATION FOR ALL HANDICAPPED CHILDREN ACT (1975) and the reauthorizations of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 1990, 1997) mandated active parental participation in all aspects of educational programming for students who are receiving special education services (Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000; Pruitt, Wandry, & Hollums, 1998). The IDEA was created for schools and parents to share responsibility in ensuring that students who are receiving special education services have access to equal educational opportunities (McAfee & Vergason, 1979).

The individualized education program (IEP) was the primary component of Part B of the IDEA. Through reauthorizations of the IDEA, the IEP has continued to direct (a) educational needs, (b) goals and objectives, (c) placement, (d) evaluation criteria, (e) present levels of educational performance, and (f) duration of programming modifications for students who receive special education services (Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001; Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA], 2004). The IEP functions as the blueprint for services to be provided for students, because IEP regulations identify meeting dates, parental and student consent and accountability, and responsibilities of educational agencies (Huefner, 2000).

Members of the IEP meeting function to develop an educational plan based on a student's needs and to determine placement based on the most effective delivery of instruction in a least restrictive environment. The IEP team consists of parents of a student with a disability, at least one regular education teacher, special education teacher, local educational agency representative, campus administrator, the student with a disability if he or she is at least 14 years of age, and other individuals who are familiar with the student, including related services personnel (IDEIA, 2004).

Quality educator–parent collaboration in an IEP meeting beyond minimal legislative compliance is necessary to establish effective educational programs (Garriott et al., 2000; Simpson, 1996). The IEP meeting provides the ideal opportunity to facilitate quality collaboration between educators and parents. The IDEA requires a school district's personnel to ensure meaningful parental involvement or active participation in the IEP process (Drasgow et al., 2001; Salas, 2004) and confirm understanding of procedural rights and proceedings (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000; Yell, Katsiyannis, Drasgow, & Herbst, 2003).

A school district's personnel must notify parents in advance of the date of the IEP meeting. They must also allow parents the opportunity to agree on a date. Meeting times and places should be convenient for all IEP team members, including parents (Simpson, 1996). Parents must be equal partners throughout the IEP decision-making

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process (Drasgow et al., 2001; Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2002; Simpson). Furthermore, a school district's personnel should allocate enough time to conduct an IEP meeting so that parents do not feel rushed or uncomfortable (Johns et al.).

Despite federal law (i.e., IDEA), many parents feel alienated because educators continue to dominate the decision-making process (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988). According to Kalyanpur et al. (2000), decision making during an IEP meeting is more heavily influenced by educational assessment expertise than by parents' anecdotal reports. In general, parents are not actively involved in the IEP process (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995), but rather they are limited to being recipients of information (Garriott et al., 2000; Vaughn et al.) and to signing documents. Collaborative relationships have failed to exist in particular for families of low socioeconomic status and cultural diversity (Kalyanpur et al.).

Pruitt et al. (1998) interviewed 73 parents of children who were receiving special educational services; their study revealed that it was common that educators were unwilling to listen to parents' input. Salas (2004) concluded from studying Mexican American parents of children with special needs that their input was frequently not respected during IEP meetings. In my (2006) case study, I measured the perceptions of IEP meetings among parents of students with autism. Most of the parents I interviewed indicated that their overall meeting experiences had been negative because they had previously experienced negative treatment by educators during the IEP process. Although many of these parents received positive treatment from educators as they built rapport with their school district's personnel, still there were adversarial relationships between several of the parents and educators.

Stoner et al. (2005) concluded from studying parents' perceptions that all participants perceived that their children's initial IEP meeting had been traumatic, confusing, and complicated, and that their perception led to dissatisfaction with the special education system. Lack of knowledge pertaining to students' disabilities likely contributes to lack of participation among many parents (Fish, 2006; Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Shriver & Kramer, 1993). Many educators assume that parents enter IEP meetings with sufficient knowledge (Fitzgerald & Watkins; Skinner, 1991), whereas parents are often reluctant to convey their lack of special education knowledge (Simpson, 1996).

Parents who are unable to understand special education jargon and terminology are likely to perceive themselves as unprepared to address their children's educational needs (Goldstein, 1993; Lytle & Bordin, 2001). Parents are at a disadvantage when they lack the expertise that their professional counterparts have. Parents who feel ill equipped in making educational decisions regarding their children allow educators to convince them easily that decision making should be left to the educators (Rock, 2000).

The establishment of effective educational experiences for students who receive special education services depends on parents' involvement in educational programming (Stoner et al., 2005), which signifies the importance of equal partnerships between parents and educators (Fish, 2006). Parents' participation in IEP meetings facilitates quality programming, strategies for resolving problems, parents' satisfaction, and positive outcomes. Educators should use parents' knowledge because Goodall and Bruder (1986) emphasized that no one knows a child better than his or her parent.

Purpose

The purpose of the present study was to investigate how parents of children who receive special education services perceive IEP meetings and how they perceive their being valued by educators during the process. I aimed to determine factors that contributed to the belief that parents held of whether IEP meetings were properly serving their children. Furthermore, I investigated participants' input regarding measures that both parents and educators can take to improve IEP meetings.

Method

Participants

Participants were 51 parents of students who were receiving special education services from one family support service agency whose purpose was to provide services to students with special needs and their family members. The family support service agency helped me to access participants. The agency mailed its members a cover letter that explained the purpose of the study, a copy of the survey, and a self-addressed stamped envelope. All participants had children who attended school in districts in a particular region of a southwestern U.S. state.

The majority of the participants were from middle- to upper middle-class socioeconomic families. Most of the students were elementary school-aged children who were receiving special education services primarily in resource or self-contained classroom settings. Table 1 provides demographic data including student disability, educational placement, grade level, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Survey questions were created by using literature review research on parents' perceptions of IEP meetings, experiences of IEP meetings by the researcher, and findings from a previous case study researching parents' perceptions of students with autism toward IEP meetings (Fish, 2006). I used a survey instrument comprising 11 demographic questions, 32

TABLE 1. Participants Demographic Information

Variable	% of participants
Student disability	
Mental retardation	29
Autism	21
Learning disabilities	14
Multiple disabilities	12
Orthopedic impairments	8
Other health impairments	6
Speech or language impairments	4
Developmental delay	4
Emotional disturbance	2
Educational placement	
Self-contained classroom	31
Resource classroom	25
General education classroom	22
Separate special education school	20
Homebound, hospital	2
Residential facility	0
Racial–ethnicity category	
White, non-Hispanic	80
Black, non-Hispanic	6
Hispanic	12
Asian or Pacific Islander	0
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2
Student grade level	
Early childhood (preschool)	16
Elementary school (Grades K–5)	51
Middle school (Grades 6–8)	16
High school (Grades 9–12)	17
Median annual income	
More than $79,000	33
$60,000–$79,000	10
$40,000–$59,000	21
$20,000–$39,000	20
Less than $20,000	16

Likert-type scale questions, and 2 open-ended questions to obtain parents' perceptions of the IEP meeting. The survey instrument was previously pilot tested on parent support group members from a different region of the state. I formatted the instrument into six sections: (a) demographic information, (b) IEP meeting experiences, (c) knowledge of IEP process and special education law, (d) relations with educators, (e) IEP outcomes, and (f) recommended areas for improvement. I used a combination of descriptive statistics and qualitative methods to analyze results from the 32 Likert scale questions and the responses to the 2 open-ended questions.

Results and Discussion

IEP Meeting Experiences

In the first section of the survey, participants were asked questions regarding their IEP meeting experiences, specifi-

cally whether they (a) had positive experiences within the IEP setting and engaged in a thorough discussion of the IEP objectives in these meetings, (b) believed that educators used time wisely, and (c) were given sufficient time to provide input during the meetings. The majority of parents whom I surveyed believed that their overall IEP experiences were positive. Of participants, 47% agreed and 16% strongly agreed, whereas 12% disagreed and only 4% strongly disagreed. In addition, 47% of parents agreed that student objectives were thoroughly discussed during the IEP meetings, whereas only 2% strongly disagreed. Furthermore, most parents responded favorably in their belief that educators allotted the IEP meeting time wisely in that parents were given enough time to express concerns, ask questions, and offer input regarding educational programming. Table 2 provides a distribution of responses pertaining to IEP meeting experiences.

Findings from this study are consistent with those of Garriott et al. (2000), Salembier and Furney (1997), and Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003). Garriott et al. inferred from their parents' perception study that 46% of parents were satisfied with their involvement level (i.e., role) during IEP meetings, whereas 27% were clearly not satisfied with that role. According to Salembier and Furney's study, approximately 66% of parents expressed satisfaction with participation levels, whereas 30% expressed dissatisfaction. On the basis of their research of perceptions among 45 parents of children with autism, Spann et al. concluded that most were satisfied with their involvement in the IEP process. However, parents of older students reported lower levels of satisfaction regarding their involvement in the IEP process.

Although 27% of whom I parents surveyed in the present study indicated that there were generally no disagreements with educators during IEP meetings, academic curriculum accounted for the primary disagreements with educators for 27%. Placement served as the primary source for disagreements during IEP meetings for 20% of parents. Of participants, 18% indicated that their primary disagreements with educators revolved around services, whereas 8% indicated that disagreements were attributed to disciplinary issues.

Parents' Knowledge of the IEP Process and Special Education Law

In the second section of the survey, I asked participants about their perceptions of their knowledge level in addition to the educators' knowledge levels regarding the IEP process and special education law. The majority of parents whom I surveyed believed that they had realistic expectations regarding services that the school district's personnel were required to provide their children under special education law. Of parents, 39% agreed and 24% strongly agreed that they had a clear understanding of the IEP process; these percentages are consistent with Spann et al.'s (2003)

TABLE 2. Parental Responses (in Percentages) to Questions About Individualized Education Program (IEP) Meeting Experiences

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Positive IEP experiences	4	12	21	47	16
Thorough discussion of IEP objectives during IEP meetings	2	14	21	47	16
Educators use allotted time wisely during IEP meetings	6	12	12	52	18
Sufficient time allotted for parents' input	6	10	20	48	16

TABLE 3. Parental Responses (in Percentages) to Questions About Knowledge of Individualized Education Program Process and Special Education Law

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Parent has clear understanding of services	6	10	21	39	24
Parent has realistic expectations	0	10	8	57	25
Educators provide sufficient knowledge to parents	10	24	18	32	16
Parent desires more knowledge	8	12	22	27	31
Educators are knowledgeable	6	12	31	37	14

study that concluded that 78% of parents indicated that they exhibited a moderate to high level of knowledge of IEP documentation.

Regarding whether their school district's personnel conveyed sufficient knowledge of the IEP process, 24% of parents disagreed and 10% strongly disagreed; these percentages approximately match the 32% who agreed and 16% who strongly agreed. Of parents, 44% indicated that they acquired most of their knowledge of special education law by self-education; however, 24% of parents indicated that their school district's personnel provided the majority of information, and 16% of participants indicated that advocacy support groups did. Despite these statistics, 31% of parents strongly agreed that they desired more knowledge of special education law.

The last question in this section involved the level of perceived educator knowledge of the IEP process and special education law. The results are encouraging; the majority of parents agreed that educators were knowledgeable enough of special education law to serve their children effectively during the IEP process, and that finding was expected. Of participants, only 6% strongly disagreed and 12% disagreed with this concept. Table 3 provides a distribution of parents' responses regarding their knowledge of the IEP process and special education law.

These findings signify that it is important for educators to have sufficient knowledge of special education law to conduct effective IEP meetings. Educators should be properly trained in determining educational needs, assessing current performance levels accurately, and writing IEP objectives

that benefit students (Johns et al., 2002). Also, a school district's personnel should be properly trained in team building, conflict resolution, problem solving, and effective communication skills (Garriott et al., 2000).

School districts should routinely train their educators on how to initiate productive IEP meetings and how to create effective special education programs to facilitate proper implementation of services for students. Educators who are properly trained in special education practices have the knowledge to understand student needs; this knowledge enables a school district's personnel to implement programs to better serve students who receive special education services. School district personnel who are effectively trained in special education are likely to understand the importance of organizing properly conducted IEP meetings and treating parents as equal partners of the IEP process.

Relations With Educators

In this section, I asked the participants whether educators (a) maintained positive relationships with them, (b) provided a welcoming atmosphere, and (c) treated them as equal partners in IEP meetings. According to the participants' perceptions, relationships with educators remained relatively positive: 51% of parents agreed and 20% strongly agreed that IEP team members maintained positive relationships with them during IEP meetings. Only 4% of parents disagreed that IEP team members maintained positive relationships with parents. Positive relationships with IEP team

members were attributed by participants who perceived that educators generally treated them as equal partners during the IEP process, respected and valued their input, and allowed parents the freedom to openly discuss their child's education programming during IEP meetings. Results from this survey revealed that 47% of parents agreed that educators provided a welcoming atmosphere during IEP meetings and 25% strongly agreed, which allowed the majority of participants to feel comfortable generally during IEP meetings. Table 4 provides a distribution of responses regarding the participants' relationships with educators.

These finding are consistent with previous research (Garriott et al., 2000; Vaughn et al., 1988). Garriott et al. concluded that 45% of parents felt that they were respected and treated as equal members during IEP meetings, whereas 27% believed that they were usually treated equally. These parents considered themselves actively involved in that they provided substantial feedback during meetings. In my (2006) study, I concluded from interviewing parents of children with autism that positive and equal interaction between educators and parents was likely to enhance the effectiveness of IEP meetings, and that inference further signifies the importance of equal partnerships.

Some measures that educators can take to enhance the parents' comfort level include (a) conducting meetings at times that are convenient for all parties (Garriott et al., 2000; Johns et al., 2002); (b) introducing all members before the meeting begins; (c) explaining the purpose of the meeting; (d) not rushing through the meeting; and (e) seating parents next to the IEP chair (Johns et al.). Reviewing strengths before student deficits and seeking parents' input throughout the meeting also facilitate the parents' comfort levels.

IEP Meeting Outcomes

In this section, I asked parents to rate whether (a) the outcomes of IEP meetings benefited their children who receive special education services, (b) they believed that their involvement enhanced the IEP meetings, and (c) they felt their decisions influenced the outcomes of the IEP meetings. In all, 39% and 17% of parents whom I surveyed agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, that IEP meetings benefited their children, whereas only 10% disagreed and 6% strongly disagreed. Most of the participants indicated not only that their overall involvement had positively influenced IEP meetings but also that their decisions influenced outcomes of IEP meetings.

Although most participants responded favorably to the question regarding whether their involvement benefited the IEP meetings, only 2% of participants indicated that previous IEP meeting experiences had resulted in their becoming less involved in their children's education. Of parents, 22% indicated that they would like to have had significantly more influence and 35% of participants desired more influence in the meetings. It is not surprising that there were no parents who desired to have less influence in the IEP meetings. Table 5 provides the distribution of responses regarding parents' perceptions of IEP outcomes.

TABLE 4. Parents' Responses (in Percentages) to Questions About Relationships With Educators

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Treated with respect	0	6	16	51	27
Treated as equal decision maker	6	18	21	39	16
Maintained positive relationships	0	4	25	51	20
Had freedom to discuss	0	8	25	49	17
Valued by educators	2	10	31	37	20
Welcomed by educators	0	4	24	47	25
Felt comfortable	4	8	17	57	14

TABLE 5. Parents' Responses (in Percentages) to Questions About Perceptions of Individualized Education Program (IEP) Outcomes

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
IEP meetings benefited student	6	10	28	39	17
Parental involvement enhanced IEP meetings	2	10	17	43	28
Parental decisions influenced outcomes of IEP meetings	2	8	25	43	22

Recommended Areas for Improvement

In the first open-ended survey question, I asked the participants to identify measures that the school district's personnel could take to improve IEP meetings. Increased parental participation, parent education on special education law, and proper adherence of educators to IEP protocol were common measures that parents repeatedly suggested that educators take to improve IEP meetings. Parents also suggested other actions such as educators should be more honest and IEP team members should not predetermine objectives in the parents' absence before a meeting.

In the second open-ended survey question, I asked the participants to identify measures that parents themselves could take to improve IEP meetings. Careful preparation before IEP meetings by self-education of special education law and the IEP process was the most common measure that parents expressed. Participants further emphasized that parents should be proactive during IEP meetings by not being afraid to ask questions and make suggestions. In my (2006) study, I concluded similar findings when I interviewed parents of children with autism. Through persistence and becoming knowledgeable on special education law, these parents were able to properly assist their children in acquiring the services and IEP implementation necessary for them to succeed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although the present study surveyed parents' perceptions across multiple disabilities and school districts, participants only represented one particular family service agency in a regional geographical area of a southwestern state. Participants were only 51 parents; therefore, the findings should not be generalized across the entire population of parents of students who receive special education services. Furthermore, educator perceptions of IEP meetings were not represented because the present study focused exclusively on parents' perceptions. Therefore, for further research, I recommend investigating (a) parents' perceptions of IEP meetings across different regions and family service agencies and (b) educators' perceptions of IEP meetings.

I sought to determine how parents of students who receive special education services perceived IEP meetings. The majority of participants in this study responded favorably by reporting that their overall IEP meeting experiences had been positive. Most respondents had positive perceptions of IEP meetings because educators valued parental input while treating parents with respect and as equal decision makers. The fact that parents considered themselves as equal partners in IEP meetings contributed to the perception that educators provided a welcoming atmosphere, which enhanced the comfort level of parents during IEP meetings. Also, most of the parents agreed that they had a clear understanding of the IEP process and special education law. It is likely that because the family service agency educated parents on

the IEP process, the majority of participants believed that they had sufficient knowledge of special education law.

Participants mentioned that parents could improve IEP meetings by becoming proactive and educating themselves on the IEP process and special education law. Emphasizing the importance of becoming knowledgeable on special education law likely contributed to the fact that the majority of parents indicated that they had sufficient knowledge of the IEP process. Parents' complete understanding of the IEP process provides better IEP meeting outcomes to effectively serve their children who receive special education services. Although parents often take the initiative to educate themselves, school districts' personnel should educate families on special education services and the IEP process through initiatives such as periodic workshops and seminars. If school districts provide services to educate parents, then these parents will perceive that educators value the importance of facilitating positive relationships with them.

Although most participants in thie present study indicated that they were generally satisfied with their child's IEP meetings, they also believed that educators can improve IEP meetings by educating parents further, granting sufficient time to conduct meetings, and allowing for increased parental involvement and participation. School districts can encourage parental involvement by creating a welcoming atmosphere, ensuring that family members have a familiar relationship with at least one other IEP team member, and encouraging parents to bring with them an advocate who is knowledgeable of the IEP process. To decrease confusion, IEP team members should use terms that parents are familiar with rather than unfamiliar jargon. Educators should (a) avoid predetermined decision making, (b) avoid completing IEP forms before the parent arrives at the meeting and is able to provide input, and (c) involve parents in writing goals and objectives. Educators should provide a copy of the IEP objectives a few weeks before the IEP meetings to give parents sufficient time to review and prepare questions for the IEP team.

Conclusions from this study reveal that it is important for educators to build positive relationships with parents during IEP meetings. By treating parents equally during IEP meetings, educators create fewer adversarial and intimidating experiences for parents of children who receive special education services. Having an equal voice regarding their child's education enhances parents' abilities to influence outcomes positively toward their child's process of obtaining quality services and building positive relations with educators. Educators should value parents as equal partners to facilitate a cooperative rather than an adversarial environment during IEP meetings. Educators should encourage parental input and collaboration to provide appropriate IEP outcomes to effectively serve students who receive special education services.

The purpose of conducting IEP meetings is for all IEP members, including parents, to collaborate in implementing the best and appropriate services for children who receive special education services. Positive relationships between parents and educators benefit the student. Effective planning of educational programs that maximize benefits for the student begins with collaboration between parents and educators in IEP meetings.

NOTE

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