I, Amy Debelak, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Special Education.

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Facilitators and Barriers to Shared Decision-Making during IEP Meetings

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by

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Abstract

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires the parent, the special education teacher, the general education teacher and a district representative to meet the requirements of a full Individual Education Program meeting. However, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act does not operationally define the roles of each of the Individual Education Program team members. In Doug C. v. Hawaii Board of Education, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit determined parents must play a central role in the Individual Education Program decision-making process. However, when reading the decision, it is challenging not to infer that the court uses the terms attendance and participation interchangeably. This mixed-method study explored how Smithville Schools could better improve their policies and procedures to prepare parents from being attendees at Individual Education Program meetings to equal decision-making members of the Individual Education Program team. Phase one of the study surveyed parents of special education students in the district as well as certified staff members of the district who provided services to learners with Individual Education Programs. The survey included statements asking about satisfaction with communication, school and staff relationships, perspectives of the Individual Education Program process, and the bureaucratic nature of Individual Education Program meetings. After data analysis of the survey, the two most satisfied staff members, the two most satisfied parent as well as the two most dissatisfied staff members and the two most dissatisfied parents were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interview allowed for parents and staff to share their unique perspectives on facilitators and barriers to shared decision-making to the Individual Education Program process at Smithville Schools.
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Facilitators and Barriers to Shared Decision-Making during IEP Meetings

During the 2014-2015 school year, 16% of students in Ohio received specially designed instruction through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) (Ohio Department of Education [ODE], 2016). Under IDEA, a school district is required to develop an Individual Education Program (IEP) that provides a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to the student. As stated in IDEA (2004), a provision of FAPE is that the parents be meaningful participants in the development of the IEP. The school and the family are required to work collaboratively to develop an educational plan that meets the unique educational needs of the child with a disability (IDEA, 2004). However, many schools struggle to engage families as equal educational partners in IEP development (Fish, 2008).

IDEA (2004) requires the school district allow parental participation by providing the families with adequate notice of an IEP meeting, scheduling the meeting at a time and place agreed upon by both the family and the school, informing the family of their right to bring someone of their choice to the meeting, and informing the parent of the time, location, purpose and attendees of the IEP meeting (Yell, Katsiyannis & Losinski, 2015). The U. S. Circuit Court ruled in Doug C. v. Hawaii (2013) IDEA requires parents to be part of the “creation process” (p. 1048) of the IEP not just attendees at the meeting. Per Doug C. v. Hawaii (2013), by not involving parents in the creation of the IEP document a school district violates a student’s right to FAPE. Prior to Doug C. v. Hawaii (2013), IDEA (2004) emphasized parental participation through “meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children” (Mueller, 2015). It did not delineate parental involvement in the creation of the IEP document.

The initial 1975 legislation from which IDEA has evolved, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, mandated parent participation in decision making. Though over forty
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years have passed since the original legislation, parents still report that school IEP teams primarily drive decisions at the IEP meeting (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Zeitlin and Curcic (2014) described parental perceptions of the IEP meeting as “depersonalized, an emotional event, and an asymmetrical relationship” which leads to an IEP document that is deficit-focused and challenging to read.

If during the IEP process parents and school district personnel do not come to an agreement on an educational decision, the processes in place are often adversarial (Mueller, 2015). IDEA assumes families of students with disabilities possess the knowledge and understanding of special education law to advocate for their children (Mueller, 2015). Regardless of the necessity of filing a due process complaint, most parents do not have the money, stamina, or knowledge to follow through (Mueller, 2015).

Administrators and parents may have divergent views on the level of shared decision-making that takes place during an IEP meeting. The purpose of the present study, in addition to contributing to the literature, is to improve shared decision-making between parents and school personnel on behalf of the students in a Midwestern, suburban school district.

Conceptual Framework

Epistemological Knowledge

This study explored both the school’s and the parents’ perceptions of facilitators and barriers to shared decision-making in the IEP process. The study was conducted through the epistemology of constructivism-interpretivism which assumes people construct multiple realities in the mind of the individual (Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivism-interpretivism is a hermeneutical approach that asserts meaning is hidden and only revealed through reflection (Ponterotto, 2005). Within the context of constructivism-interpretivism, the primary researcher
assumed people construct their reality from personal interactions and their own belief systems (Neuman, 2012). People behave in response to their own understanding of cultural, social and political constructs as defined by their own belief system (Neuman, 2012). For the purpose of the study, it is imperative to understand each participant defines race, gender, and disability through the lens of their own experiences and societal expectations and behaves according. The social construct of disability exerts influence on IEP teams. Smithville Schools serves students from a large number of different cultures and countries. As a result, members of the IEP team may have very different views of gender, race, and most importantly, disabilities. Constructivism-interpretivism allowed the researcher to explore each participant’s response as valid and true to each person’s experience.

The philosophy of constructivism-interpretivism influenced the methods of the study. The primary researcher developed research questions based on the literature review and survey results which were framed by constructivism-interpretivism philosophical underpinnings. Constructivism-interpretivism requires the research to question participants’ beliefs and feelings and how they influence individual decision-making (Neuman, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005).

This study revealed a rich and detailed description of parents of students with IEPs and staff who serve the special education students at Smithville Schools. A mixed-methods study from a constructive-interpretive perspective allowed the researcher to explore the participants’ reflection on their subjective experiences of the IEP process for school improvement. Each person’s perception is a perceived subjective reality that is their understanding of the reality of the IEP process as experienced by her or him. Shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language regarding shared decision-making during the IEP process emerged (Creswell, 2013). The goal of the study was to provide descriptions of both parent and staff experiences as no singular
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experience can guide school improvement to include parents as shared decision-makers on the IEP team (Moustakas, 1994).

Theoretical Framework

**Ecological theory of human development model.** Bronfenbrenner (1977) postulates that to understand someone’s reality, the researcher must understand the “multiperson system of interaction” (p. 514) that takes into consideration four environmental systems. One of the theoretical underpinnings of the study was Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecology Theory of Human Development Model (ETHDM). For the study, it is imperative to understand each family, as well as each staff member, brings unique backgrounds, education and work experiences to their understanding of reality (Christensen, 2016).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ETHDM identifies four environmental systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. The microsystem is a person’s daily life, including family, school, friends, church, or work. The person is an active participant in shaping these environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Christensen, 2016). In regard to the IEP team, parents bring prior experiences with the current IEP team as well as past IEP teams to the interaction.

The mesosystem is the interaction between one person’s different microsystems, such as the school/home connection (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Christensen, 2016). Many families at Smithville Schools are involved in organizations to help support the child with an IEP which may influence IEP development and IEP team interactions. Additionally, school personnel may be part of the same social, educational or religious organizations which could influence the IEP team dynamic. The overlapping of the mesosystem and microsystem could inadvertently
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influence parents to not advocate for their students as it may upset other social dynamics in the team's life.

The exosystem is the outside influence of someone else’s microsystem coming into their life (e.g., a parent’s job may directly influence a child’s home life) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Christensen, 2016). Individual IEP meetings can be influenced by a plethora of outside forces. It is important team members understand stress levels can vary from day to day with team members and they are not always long standing barriers to shared-decision making.

The macrosystem is the “overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). The macrosystem is defined by social laws and norms (Christensen, 2016). There are several macrosystems influencing IEP teams. IDEA, state laws, and district resources all create a school culture in which the IEP team exists. Acknowledgment of large-scale, uncontrollable influences can allow IEP teams to set norms which are non-negotiable.

The ETHDM focuses on relationships between individuals as well as the relationship between systems (Christensen, 2016). When examined through constructivism-interpretivism, ETHDM gives structure to the participants’ understanding of one another’s perceptions of the IEP process. As defined by IDEA (2004) parents and staff are equal members of the IEP team. However, each person experiences team meetings uniquely based on her or his unique environmental systems, as proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1977). If the team could view each person’s reality as equally true or valid, the team may respect one other’s opinion more equally, leading to less of a power imbalance.

Relational-cultural theory. Jean Baker Miller first introduced Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) in 1976 as a feminist therapeutic method to help women (Jordan, 2010). RCT
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postulates people grow through connections with others. By building healthy relationships based on mutual empathy, trust, and responsiveness, all people in the relationship become mutually empowered (Jordan, 2014). When power imbalances are inherent in relationships, the consequences often lead to disconnection and passive-aggressive behaviors by the person without power (Jordan, 2010). Therefore, relationships built upon these foundations evoke more equitable power arrangements (Jordan, 2014).

RCT proposes people constantly change as part of relational systems and how a person reacts to change within the context of relationships forms a person’s concept of reality based on their experiences (Jordan, 2010). Looking at shared decision-making on IEP teams, through the lens of RTC, examines the question of whether a dominant group would ever willingly relinquish power to the non-dominant group unless forced to do so (Jordan, 2010). IDEA (2004) created a power so blatantly in the school district’s favor that the study needed to be analyzed in the context of why would the district want shared decision-making for parents? RCT sheds light on how the school district could benefit by relinquishing power to families for a more equitable relationship.

Justification for theories. Both ETHDM and RTC needed to underpin the study as they worked together to support the purpose of the study, which is examined the facilitators and barriers to shared decision-making at Smithville Schools. The ultimate goal was to assist the school district in empowering parents to become decision-makers and advocates for their students. By acknowledging all team members come to the IEP table with their own environmental systems, as explained by Bronfenbrenner (1977), which influence interactions, the school can apply RCT to develop mutual empathy and move toward growth connections (Jordan, 2010) amongst team members for a more equitable power structure.
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IDEA governs special education at the federal, state, and school level. IDEA is a federal law written to instill rights upon students with disabilities. The fact that students and families require federal legislation to access their educational rights reveals a power imbalance in the relationship between parents and families.

When examining relationships between families and schools, it is critical to understand internal and external influences on both the family and the school. Bronfenbrenner’s ETHDM (1977) creates a perspective that promotes understanding of the different realities all members of the IEP team perceive. It is necessary for staff to understand a family’s macrosystem when conducting an IEP meeting. It is important to note and respect disability as a construct within society, culture, law, and medicine (Bacon & Causton-Theoharris, 2013). Each person at the IEP meeting brings her/his own construct of disability as part of their macrosystem. When creating an IEP, schools, and parents must reach a common understanding of the child’s educational profile to design instruction to meet a learner's needs.

In Bronfenbrenner’s ETHDM (1977), the IEP meeting itself is a manifestation of a team members’ mesosystem. Christensen (2016) uses the home/school connection as an example of a mesosystem. For the purposes of school improvement, using the framework of Ecology of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), Smithville Schools must acknowledge the outside influences impacting the IEP process and look at the possibility of changes through the lens of RCT; all team member should value the different experiences one another incorporates into the IEP process. Acknowledging the IEP as a mesosystem and working through the IEP process with mutual respect and empathy could increase shared decision-making within the IEP team.

Literature Review
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A literature review was conducted using a keyword search for “parent,” “individual education program” and “participation” using Academic Search Complete, Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and Education Research Complete. The following set of criteria was applied for study inclusion: a) research study; b) published between 2008 and 2016; c) peer reviewed; d) conducted in a school in the United States; e) included parents of students with an IEP; f) must discuss decision making in the IEP process. Ten articles met the inclusion criteria.

A second search was conducted using a keyword search for “school,” “individual education program,” and “participation ” using Academic Search Complete, Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and Education Research Complete. The following set of criteria was applied for study inclusion: (a) research study; (b) published between 2008 and 2016; (c) peer-reviewed; (d) conducted in a school in the United States; (e) included staff who participate in special education meetings; (f) must discuss decision making in IEP process. No articles were discovered that met the criteria. The keyword search included all articles included in the keyword search with the word parent included. However, no articles were located focusing exclusively on school staff.

The lack of recent studies examining school staff’s beliefs or perceptions of their involvement in the IEP process is interesting. It calls for an inquiry into the perceptions and beliefs of the educational half of the IEP team. Twelve years after the reauthorization of IDEA, parents still report that school personnel on the IEP teams primarily drive decisions at the IEP meeting (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Since schools control the decisions at the IEP, researchers may have indicated they had no reason to explore the staff’s beliefs if they had decision-making power. Legally, the district representative at an IEP meeting has the ability to override a team decision; the parents’ only recourse is to ask for mediation or due process (ODE, 2014). The
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Power imbalance inherent in IDEA creates a professional team which may be unwilling to relinquish power to parents.

IDEA includes safeguards for families who believe the school violated their child’s rights. Parents are entitled to an administrative review, mediation, IEP facilitation, state complaint procedures, an impartial due process hearing, and a resolution meeting facilitation as a means for dispute resolution (ODE, 2012). It is important to note when a dispute arises on the IEP team; the burden is on the family to prove the school team is in violation of IDEA. Filing for administrative review, mediation, IEP facilitation, state complaint procedures, an impartial due process hearing, or a resolution meeting is difficult, time-consuming and potentially expensive.

The booklet, Whose IDEA is this? (ODE, 2012) explains the differences between a complaint, mediation, and a due process hearing. A complaint may be filed by a parent or the school district and can affect one particular student or many students claiming a violation of IDEA (ODE, 2012). When requesting a due process hearing, both families and schools can claim a violation under IDEA but only regarding a specific student (ODE, 2012). Under both a complaint and a due process request, the issue is raised with the Ohio Department of Education (ODE, 2012).

Under an administrative review, parents present complaints to the local school district’s superintendent involving a singular student’s evaluation, placement, and appropriate services (ODE, 2012).

Without filing a complaint or a request for a due process hearing, the school district and parent can agree to mediation to assist in resolving an impasse (ODE, 2012). Mediation is a voluntary process which brings both parties to the table with a mutually agreed upon mediator provided at no cost to either party by the Office of Exceptional Children (ODE, 2012). Mediation cannot be used to delay a due process hearing if the parents or school file a due process request.
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The process is private and cannot be employed by either party as evidence in a future due process hearing. If an agreement is reached during mediation, a legal document is created which outlines the resolution and dismisses any formal complaints or due process requests (ODE, 2012). Mediation does not require school districts to pay parent attorney fees unless it is clearly stated in the resolution agreement (ODE, 2012).

A due process hearing is held when agreement cannot be reached in mediation or a facilitated IEP meeting. An impartial hearing officer, who is an attorney with an understanding of IDEA, conducts a hearing at the cost of the school (ODE, 2012). Parents pay for their attorney, experts, and witnesses but can recoup their costs if they prevail at the due process hearing (ODE, 2012). During the due process hearing, the student remains in her/his current educational program (ODE, 2012).

The literature review revealed three major themes which parents viewed as facilitators or barriers to shared decision-making in the IEP process. Parents perceived communication as a barrier in some contexts and a facilitator in other situations. Parents also saw the bureaucratic nature of IEP meetings as an obstacle. Finally, parents viewed relationships with school staff as an essential element to building an appropriate IEP for their child.

Communication

Communication between the parent and school team emerged as both a barrier and a facilitator for meaningful engagement in the IEP process. Families craved more collaboration and communication between home and school (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Increased communication between families and school personnel could increase the effectiveness of meetings and parent participation. Two studies discussed parent frustration with not receiving agendas and information before IEP meetings (Cathorn & Caemmerer, 2014; Wilson, 2015).
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Parents also viewed infrequent IEP meetings as problematic because they did not allow them a regular chance to discuss their child and their child’s program with the school IEP team (Cathorn & Caemmerer, 2014).

Openness, honesty, and predetermination of goals are key points of parent concern (Fish, 2008). Predetermination prohibits parents from being shared decision-makers because school teams come to the meeting with goals and objectives created without parental input. Wilson’s (2015) research confirmed Fish’s finding that school IEP teams often predetermine goals thus alienating parents from the decision-making process. Predetermination of goals by the school team reinforced the parent’s perception of not being equal IEP team members. While IDEA does not mandate parents receive a draft of the IEP before the meeting, allowing parents to review goals and objectives and provide feedback before or during the meeting could lead to greater shared decision-making and lessen the power imbalance at the IEP meeting. While parents did not believe the school IEP team included them in goal and objective development, Fish did find 47% of parents indicated the team discussed educational objectives at the IEP meeting (2008). However, discussing goals and objectives with families falls short of the Doug C. v. Hawaii (2013) ruling which calls for parental input into the creation of the IEP document.

Parents also shared they often disagreed with and did not feel part of the determination of their child’s least restrictive environment (LRE) (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Fish, 2008; IDEA, 2004). As defined by the Ohio Operation Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities (ODE, 2014) parents must be included in any discussion of a child’s educational placement, meaning the parents must be included in any conversation regarding where special education services are provided. A child’s LRE is a further delineation of a child’s educational placement. LRE can include special education services be provided in a variety of locations.
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included but not limited to; the general education classroom, a resource room, a self-contained special education classroom, or a private special education school (ODE, 2012).

Fish (2008) and Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2013) discussed parents’ disagreement with their child’s LRE. Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2013) explained parents often believed the primary reason schools rejected the general education classroom as the LRE was because they deemed a disability to be too complex or significant to be included. However, IDEA states that a child should be educated in the general education classroom whenever possible with necessary supports and services (IDEA, 2004). For a child to receive FAPE, a parent must be a full partner with equal decision-making power in the LRE decision (IDEA, 2004). Isolating children from their general education peers in order to receive special education services is a decision that must be made by the entire IEP team as it can only be done when the “nature and severity of the disability is such that education in regular education classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (ODE, 2014 p. 149).” Excluding parents from LRE discussions is a clear violation of IDEA.

The literature review included conflicting information on parents’ level of knowledge of the IEP process. Lack of knowledge of the IEP process and special education law could limit parents ability to be shared decision-makers. Larios and Zetlin (2012) reported low parental knowledge of the IEP process with only one of eight parents reporting being confident in her/his knowledge of the IEP process. Jones and Gansle (2010) studied school personnel and parents participating in a mini-conference before the IEP meeting to explain and develop the IEP. However, they found the mini-conference participation did not increase parent level of involvement in the discussions of IEP goals and objectives at the IEP meeting. Zeitlin and Curcic
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(2014) reported parents perceived the IEP document as hard to understand, which could decrease parental participation in IEP development.

**Bureaucratic Nature of IEP Meetings**

The structure of the IEP meeting itself has also been identified as a barrier to parent involvement (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Parents indicated the time allotted for an IEP meeting was not sufficient to meet the family’s needs (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). School staff typically encounter time restraints with building and individual schedules which could influence the amount of time planned for each IEP meeting. However, if schools do not provide drafts of the IEP and agendas for the meetings to the parents despite being asked for their input before the meeting (Wilson, 2015), additional time may be necessary to engage the family as equal partners of the team. Denying parents equal access to the IEP document prior to the meeting further decreases their power as equal participants of the IEP team.

Parents also discussed the depersonalized nature of the IEP meeting (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Electronic IEP systems which allow staff to utilize a software program to write IEPs can be viewed as time-saving for IEP writing but can also limit the individualized nature of the IEP document. Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2013) reported parents’ frustration of being unable to add needed accommodations and other individually essential elements to the IEP because the electronic IEP system did not allow options that were not preloaded into the drop down boxes. The electronic IEP systems with limited capability, by nature, predetermine the allowable accommodations and modifications, limiting parents’ influence as team members. While school teams can also be limited by these programs, the school district chose the IEP system limiting the child’s and family’s options.
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Lack of a consistent special education policy between school districts has also caused frustration for parents (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). Special education law is often interpreted differently despite IDEA being federal legislation. Parents viewed different schools’ and states’ interpretation of IDEA and the effect on their child’s IEP as a barrier. Children transfer buildings within districts, families move for a variety of reasons, and when these moves happen, the lack of consistent interpretation of IDEA does sometimes lead to a lack of consistent educational programming for learners (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). Seen in conjunction with Larios and Zetlin’s (2012) finding of parents’ lack of knowledge in special education, the inconsistent interpretation of IDEA further diminishes parents’ ability to be equal decision-makers.

The bureaucratic nature of IEP meetings highlights the inherent power imbalance of IDEA between the family and school parts of the IEP team. The school team’s knowledge base of IDEA, the ability to interpret IDEA as viewed through individual state laws, and the ability to write and propose the IEP document itself in isolation create a distinct inequity for the parents. Acknowledging the barriers to shared decision-making is a step in the direction of creating a culture which encourages an equal voice for all IEP team members.

Relationship with School Staff

The relationship between parents and staff emerged as a primary theme in the literature review as both a barrier and a facilitator to shared decision-making. The IEP process is an emotional process for families (Zeitlin & Curic, 2014) and strong bonds between the school and home can facilitate collaborative IEP meetings. Williams-Diehm, Brandes, Chestnut, and Haring (2014) postulated that high teacher turnover in urban areas leads to parent dissatisfaction with the IEP process due to lack of school and parent relationships. They believed the high staff turnover
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prevented strong relationships from being built between family and teachers. Strong relationships can allow uncomfortable, but necessary, conversations about student strengths and weaknesses to occur.

The majority of parents in two different studies exploring parent perception of the IEP process reported they prefer collaboration with school staff around their child’s educational program (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Many parents believed parent advocates are seen as adversarial and viewed direct conversation as the most efficient way to gain input into the IEP (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). While IDEA called for meaningful participation, the court only recently began reinforcing the necessity of parental participation and collaboration for a child to receive FAPE (Yell, Katsiyannis, & Losinski, 2015). IDEA (2004) clearly defined participations as providing the families with adequate notice of an IEP meeting, scheduling the meeting at a time and place agreed upon by both the family and the school, informing the family of their right to bring someone of their choice to the meeting, and informing the parent of the time, location, purpose and attendees of the IEP meeting (Yell, Katsiyannis & Losinski, 2015). However, it wasn’t until Doug. C. v. Hawaii (2013) that the courts clarified participation and collaboration between school and home as the requirement that parents must be involved in creating the IEP document for the school to meet the requirement of full parental participation for a child to receive FAPE (Yell, Katsiyannis & Losinski, 2015).

Despite several studies discussing parental dissatisfaction with the IEP process, several studies reported parents’ positive views of the IEP process. Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2013) stated that parents saw teachers as the person on the school team to give balanced views of a child’s strengths and weaknesses, which reinforced the strong belief that relationships between
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the home and school effect parent participation in the IEP process. Fish (2008) reported 71% of parents indicated they had a strong relationship with the school and 65% of parents indicated they were part of the decision-making process. Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javit, and Valdes (2012) reported 70% of parents indicated they had about the right amount of involvement in the IEP process.

Research Goal

The purpose of this mixed-method study is to: (a) better understand the parent and staff perceptions of facilitators and barriers to shared decision-making in the IEP process; (b) examine common themes amongst parents to systematically support shared decision-making in their child’s educational program; and (c) examine common themes amongst school staff responses to determine how to support meaningful engagement of families in the IEP process to become shared decision-makers on the IEP team.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What are barriers and facilitators of shared decision-making as perceived by parents?; (2) What are barriers and facilitators of shared decision-making as perceived by school personnel?; and (3) What is the relationship between barriers and facilitators identified by school personnel and parents?

Method

Subjectivity Statement

As a researcher it is my goal to give equal voice to all participants in the study, both parents and staff equally. However, it is essential I acknowledge the bias which could influence my study based on a variety of my personal and professional experiences as they framed my
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When I chose a topic and a conceptual framework, I was cognizant of the fact that I framed the study as both an educator and a parent of a child who received special education services through an IEP.

Additionally, I played several roles in the study; a researcher, a parent, a teacher, and an administrator. Engaging in the research from a variety of perspectives had both positive and negative aspects which I planned for both in sending out the survey and conducting the interviews. When creating the survey, I did not ask overly specific questions about where a student attended school, or where a staff member worked to try and maintain the anonymity of participants. I did not force anyone to answer all questions in the survey to encourage families and staff to participate in the survey within in their own comfort level. Furthermore, I stressed participation was voluntary, and all answers would remain confidential. Participants were not forced to give names or contact information as a condition of the survey. Rather, they were asked to give contact information if they would like to participate in a follow-up interview. I also involved a third party graduate student in all interviews as an observer to ensure I did not exert any pressure on staff or parents to answer one question in a specific manner. As an administrator, I ran the risk of perceived intimidation if I did not allow for a neutral observer.

I am currently an Assistant Principal at a public school in Smithville School District. Before entering administration, I taught general education, reading intervention, and special education for close to two decades. I attend IEP meetings professionally and also as a parent of a child who receives special education services. As a teacher, I observed parents frequently behave quite differently in IEP meetings than in parent-teacher conferences. At parent-teacher conferences, parents typically engaged actively in the conversation, reported home behaviors and offered advice to me about how to meet their child’s unique learning needs. However, I noted
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during IEP meetings that the same parents could be hesitant to share home information and deferred to the IEP team without making suggestions, despite my attempts to ask if they had questions or concerns. Some parents came to the meetings prepared to be confrontational despite a cordial daily relationship with the school team. The same observations hold true now that I am in an administrative role and serve as the school’s case manager for special education. I believe that parents often are not shared decision-makers in the IEP process.

My role as a parent galvanized me to explore parents as shared decision-makers in the IEP process. As an educator, I noted the lack of shared decision-making in IEP meetings between the school district and the parents. However, when I became a parent of a child on an IEP, my perception of the IEP “team” was altered. Attending IEP meeting as an administrator or a teacher allowed me to be the authoritative voice at the table. My role as the special education teacher included writing the IEP with input from related service providers and parents. However, if I disagreed with their opinion, they needed to persuade me for their goal to be part of the legal document.

As I parent, I realized if I did not agree with the school team, I was suddenly cast in the role of the persuader. My Master’s degree in Special Education did not bestow equal decision-making rights in the IEP process. The school considered my input and told me they disagreed with me and handed me a state-prepared booklet entitled *Whose IDEA is this?* (ODE, 2012). *Whose IDEA is this?* is an attempt by the Ohio Department of Education to synthesize and explain IDEA to parents in regards to their rights as parents and their child’s rights as a student. My options included accepting the IEP as written by the school, filing a complaint, or filing due process. None of these options seemed a reasonable path to obtain necessary services for my child.
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I filed a due process complaint, which influenced both of my children’s educational experiences. Over the course of the next five years, the damage to the trust between the school team and me during due process and mediation made shared decision-making impossible. While my husband and I ultimately chose to change our child’s educational placement to a more collaborative school, my goal is to ensure the families at Smithville Schools feel they are equal partners in shared-decision making in the IEP process.

Research Site

The researcher conducted the study through Smithville Schools’ Office of Student Services. Smithville Schools is a mid-sized suburban school district in the Mid-West. Smithville Schools educates approximately 5,200 students (see Table 1). The district consists of a high school, a junior high school, an intermediate school, and four elementary schools. Of the approximately 5,955 students at Smithville, 448 students received special education services under IDEA for the 2015-2016 school year (see Table 2). The number of students serviced is fluid as families relocated in and out of the district and the IEP teams identified new students as having a disability under IDEA. Smithville School is a culturally and socio-economically diverse school district.

Table 1

District Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Junior High</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Elementary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>5955</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>2190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Students Low SES</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Minorities</th>
<th>35%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>34%</th>
<th>34%</th>
<th>42%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Table 2

District Special Education Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>6.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Learning Disability</td>
<td>24.97%</td>
<td>41.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otherwise health Impaired Minor</td>
<td>22.45%</td>
<td>14.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Disability</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>9.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>9.03%</td>
<td>11.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Disability</td>
<td>6.31%</td>
<td>5.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Disturbance</td>
<td>3.35%</td>
<td>6.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Delay</td>
<td>2.19%</td>
<td>1.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing Impairment</td>
<td>1.79%</td>
<td>0.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthopedic Impairment</td>
<td>1.38%</td>
<td>0.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otherwise health Impaired Major</td>
<td>0.786%</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic Brain Injury</td>
<td>0.55%</td>
<td>0.65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Smithville School collects discipline data at the building level. The assistant principals report behavior through Data Analysis for Student Learning (DASL), the reporting software purchased by the school district. DASL only forwards specific behavioral incidents to the Education Management Information System (EMIS) as determined by ODE. ODE collects behavior incidents involving violence, possession or use of drugs and weapons, truancy, and disruptive behavior. While ODE requests information regarding whether a student does or does not have a disability, Smithville Schools did not report if a child had a disability in any EMIS reported discipline incidence. Therefore, there is no disciplinary data specific to students with disabilities available.

Sample and Participant Selection

Participants of the study were parents of students with an IEP at Smithville Schools or direct service providers of a student with an IEP. Parents of students who attended a private
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School within Smithville Schools or who received the Autism Scholarship or Jon Peterson Scholarship and never attended Smithville Schools were excluded from the study. When students’ families chose the scholarship options, they declined FAPE under IDEA, and their rights differ from students receiving services in the public school setting. The sampling is purposive as Smithville Schools is investigating parents and guardians of students with IEPs and staff that support students with disabilities (Creswell, 2014). The findings were shared with the school district for the purpose of school improvement.

Data Collection

Data were collected in two phases. Phase One data collection consisted of a survey of parents of students with an IEP as well as school IEP team members. Phase two included semi-structured interviews with parents and school IEP team members. The district and researcher analyzed survey responses to identify common themes of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The researcher analyzed the questions related to the themes of communication, the bureaucratic nature of IEP meetings, perspectives, and shared decision-making. Parents and staff who were willing to answer follow up questions were sorted from the general responses. The researcher again analyzed the data to identify parents and staff who scored the highest and lowest level of satisfaction for the survey questions. The two parents who scored the highest level mean score of the overall questions (i.e., most satisfied) and the two parents who scored the lowest level mean score of the overall questions (i.e., least satisfied) were interviewed. The researcher followed the same process to select the two most and least satisfied staff members.

Using two different data collection methods allowed for complementary and expanded knowledge (Maxwell, 2013) to allow for a deeper understanding of the shared-decision making process. Furthermore, the literature review revealed survey studies of parents showed a high
level of parent satisfaction with the IEP process (Fish, 2008). However, interview studies such as Zeilten and Curic (2016), as well as Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2012), revealed a much lower satisfaction rate with the IEP process. Using both a survey method and an interview method allowed for a broader picture of parent and staff satisfaction with the IEP process.

**Phase one.** A cross-sectional survey was developed from the findings of the literature review. The themes of communication, the bureaucratic nature of IEP meetings, predetermination of IEP elements, and the relationship with staff drove the development of the statements on the survey that staff and parents rated. A modified form of Lawshes Content Validity Ratio was employed to help determine the content validity of the survey statements. In its true form, Lawshes Content Validity Ration utilizes a mathematical formula to rate the inclusion of items on a survey (Wilson, Pan, & Schumsky, 2012).

For a survey item to be deemed valid, an expert panel is employed; more than 50% of the panel must determine the item is supported by the research to include in the survey. The greater the agreement amongst experts, the higher validity score the item receives (Wilson et al., 2012). A panel of three experts analyzed the survey statements along with the literature review. The mathematical formula of Lawshes Content Validity Ratio was not utilized. However, the researcher only included statements agreed upon by two of the three experts on the panel. The survey was divided into sections to match the themes revealed in the literature review.

After the researcher created the survey, a series of think-aloud activities were conducted with three parents of learners with IEPs and one staff member who works with general education students. The parents who participated in the think-aloud included: a father with a high school education, a mother with a bachelor’s degree, and a mother of three children with IEPs who required different levels of educational support per their IEPs. The activity specifically recruited
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these parents as they all had different educational levels, varying degrees of parental involvement, and at various times had discussed their child’s IEP with the researcher. None of the parents interviewed had students who attend Smithville Schools and were not participants in the formal study. The general education teacher who participated in the think aloud was a volunteer who did not teach at Smithville Schools.

A cognitive interview is a tool used to determine if a survey question is interpreted by respondents in the manner the researcher intended (Willis & Artino, 2013). Respondents were asked to participate in a “think aloud” which is a specific type of cognitive interview when the interviewer requests the participants verbally talk through their response to each survey question (Willis & Artino, 2013). The cognitive interview allowed the interviewer to make changes in the survey questions to allow for respondents’ background and how their backgrounds can influence understanding of the statements in the survey (Willis & Artino, 2013). The think aloud aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s Theory of Human Development (1977) which is one of the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The Theory of Human Developments states people bring their belief system to any situation and these beliefs influence a person’s reality (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The cognitive think aloud took place before the survey launch. The researcher asked the respondents to answer each question as if they were participants in the survey. The survey itself used branch logic based on the respondents’ role, so each participant was asked to answer based upon their role on the IEP team. Branch logic is a tool within Qualtrics that forces respondents through a specific series of questions predetermined by their response to one or two specific questions. In this study, the participant’s branch was determined by the answer to the question of “What is your role on the IEP team?” The researcher took detailed notes about each statement and how each respondent answered.
Several questions revealed themselves to be unclear to all respondents. The question that asked “What is your child’s least restrictive environment (LRE)?” was confusing as none of the three parents knew what a least restrictive environment was in general or what their child’s least restrictive environment was at school. Rather than change the question, it was determined the definition of LRE needed to be operationally defined within the response options. The researcher followed up with all parents after revising the question responses, and all parents were able to answer what their child’s current LRE was for the 2016-2017 school year.

The statement of “IEP meeting bring up a lot of feelings.” evoked strong emotion from both parent and staff respondents. All respondents suggested different verbs. The suggested verbs included: evoke, elicit, trigger, reveal, and unveil. Parents reported many of the verbs had negative connotations and believed the statement needed to be included but could be viewed by most survey respondents in different manners. The respondents did not come to a consensus. The researcher decided to use the statement “IEP meetings elicit a lot of feelings.” since the verb elicit received the least amount of negative feedback.

Another statement adjusted after the think aloud was “Parent participation is not related to socio-economic status.” All feedback rejected the term socio-economic status. The think aloud revealed parent work schedules, if both parents worked, family finances, and if the parents were divorced affected IEP participation the most. The statement was changed to read, “Parent participation is influenced by work schedules, family finances, and family structure.”

The researcher collected data through a cross-sectional survey for two full weeks. A cross-sectional survey allowed for a broad cross-section that could be generalized to a smaller sample for interviews during Phase two of the study (Creswell, 2014). An online Qualtrics survey was utilized to collect data to draw inferences about facilitators and barriers to the IEP
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process from the parents and school IEP team (Creswell, 2014). The 25 question survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey design allowed for a quick turnaround time and allowed responses from a large number of participants (Creswell, 2014). Participants were asked to voluntarily include their name and email address for a follow-up interview. Demographic data such as child’s grade, disability category, and least restrictive environment were collected. The respondents were given two full weeks to respond to the survey.

The school district emailed the survey to all general education teachers, special education teachers, related service providers, and special education case managers/administrators for a total of 443 staff members. The Office of Student Services at Smithville Schools emailed the parents of students on an IEP in the district for a total of 445 families. Smithville Schools used the school enrollment database to identify parents of students with disabilities. The district sent an email reminder to all participants who had not yet responded one week before the survey closed and then again, one day before the survey closed.

Phase two. Phase two of the project involved semi-structured one-to-one interviews with survey participants. The two parents who scored the highest level of satisfaction and the two parents who scored the lowest level of satisfaction were interviewed after analysis of the survey. The same procedure was followed for the two school IEP team members who scored the highest level of satisfaction and the two school IEP team members who scored the lowest level of satisfaction.

Questions were constructed using the data analysis from the survey. The researcher was careful to be sensitive to interviewee’s potential reactions when formulating the questions (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher’s experiential knowledge as both a staff IEP team member and a parent IEP team member helped frame the interview discussion. The questions were developed
to elicit opinions on barriers and facilitators to the IEP process for improving the shared
decision-making process in Smithville Schools. A second, independent graduate student
observed all interviews and took field notes which included impressions and observations.

An observation protocol was developed to collect descriptive and reflective notes
(Creswell, 2014). All interviews were audio recorded, but hand notes were also taken by the
interviewer and the second observer. Data were collected about the setting, verbal and non-
verbal responses, as well as researcher’s personal reflection of the interview.

Data Analysis

The survey data were analyzed in three steps (Creswell, 2014). The initial step involved
determining the exact number of surveys sent and returned. The researcher analyzed
demographic information during this step. The researcher ensured a cross-sectional
representation of parents and staff by including people who held varying roles at the IEP
meeting. The second step was a wave analysis to determine whether response bias was an issue
(Creswell, 2014). The researcher looked at the first and second weeks’ survey returns and
determined the average response decrease each time an email prompt was sent. Since the replies
varied near the close of the survey, it is possible the non-respondents’ answers could have
affected the results of the survey (Creswell, 2014).

The third step of the survey analysis provided a descriptive analysis of the dependent and
independent variables in the survey (Creswell, 2014). The staff and parent responses were
analyzed separately to determine the different perspectives of the two samples. Analyzing the
roles of the participants in relation to the responses needed to be considered to see if the power
imbalance inherent in IDEA influenced overall satisfaction with the IEP process at Smithville
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Schools. When examined through the lens of RCT, the primary researcher sought parents and staff members who indicated they believed themselves to be disenfranchised by the IEP process. Each survey was analyzed to determine the two parents and two staff members who viewed the IEP process in the most positive light as well as the two parents and two staff members who viewed the IEP process in the most negative light. These eight respondents were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview to allow for a more in-depth exploration of their experiences and perceptions of shared decision-making in the IEP process. Both satisfied and dissatisfied parents and staff were interviewed as one person’s experience can’t encapsulate the phenomenon of being a member of an IEP team (Moustakas, 1994). Asking team members within a variety of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems which influence the IEP process also gave a fuller picture of the influences affecting shared decision-making (Christensen, 2016).

Interviews were transcribed using Transcribe Me and listened to by the primary researcher two additional times to ensure accuracy. NVivo coding was used to conduct an initial analysis of the data (Saldana, 2016). NVivo coding utilizes exact terms used by the participants rather than inference from the researcher (Saldana, 2016). Special education parents and staff speak a unique language derived from IDEA, medical and educational influences. Verbatim coding was essential to honor the participants’ voice in the study (Saldana, 2016).

The initial coding evolved into themes after analytic reflection (Salanda, 2016). Isolated words and phrases emerged revealing common words and phrases that families and staff members used when describing the IEP development process. “Theming the data” formulates common themes from the verbatim codes in the initial coding (Saldana, 2016). The themes were used to describe the facilitators and barriers to shared decision-making (Creswell, 2014).
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Validity and reliability. Validity was strengthened through the use of triangulation and member checking (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). Data from both the survey and the interviews were analyzed to build a justification for the themes presented. Collecting data from both parents and staff member using two different methods increased the generalizations from the individual to the school district as an entity (Maxwell, 2013).

The researcher conducted member checking with the interview participants only. Member check included sending an email of the transcribed interview to each interviewee as well as a follow-up phone call to ensure the accuracy from the participants’ perspective (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). The participants were asked to comment on the themes derived from the researcher’s data analysis. Four of the eight interviewees responded to the follow-up phone call and agreed upon the themes derived and that the interview transcription accurately reflected the interview.

Reliability was ensured using several methods. The researcher verified the interview transcripts to ensure accuracy by listening to the interviews twice and reading the transcript simultaneously (Creswell, 2014). The Director of Student Services, the District Parent Advocate, and the primary researcher’s advisor also read one transcript after names and identifying markers were removed to ensure confidentiality and analyzed the survey data to assure intercoder agreement for at least 80% of the codes derived and development of the survey questions (Creswell, 2014). The transcript sent to the academic advisor was randomly selected. The interview shared with the school district was purposely selected as the disability category, and specifics of the students involved were generic enough to not break participants confidentiality.

Findings

Survey Data
The district’s parent advocate emailed 445 parents, and the district sent the link to 443 staff members. The district and parent advocate emailed the survey a total of three times in hopes of increasing the participation rate. Parent responded at a rate of 22% with 98 parents completing the survey. Staff responded at a rate of 35% with 154 staff members completing the survey. The primary researcher did not require participants to answer all survey questions to encourage participants to continue the survey if they did not want to respond to a specific question. Each survey had to be 75% completed to be included in the findings. The survey included an option for parents with multiple children with IEPs so a number of parent responses may vary from the number of actual parent participants.

Parents represented approximately 39% of respondents while teaching staff represented 61% of responses (see Table 3). Representatives from all roles within the school team completed the survey to give a wide range of views on the facilitators and barriers to shared decision-making in the IEP process. The inclusion of related services and school psychologists brought unique professional experiences to the study even though they are not considered required team members under IDEA. The majority of respondents had obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher with 40% of parents holding a Master’s degree or a Doctorate degree (see Table 4).

With a parent response rate of 22% and a staff response rate of 35%, it is important to address the possibility of nonresponse bias. Nonresponse bias can be present when the people who did not respond to the survey didn’t respond due to factors being probed on the survey (Phillips, Reddy, & Durning, 2016). Two findings from the survey results suggested nonresponse bias may be a factor in the analysis of the survey results. Of the survey respondents, 8% held a high school diploma, and 9% held an Associate’s degree. In the State of Ohio, 66% of the population held an Associate’s degree or less (ideadata.org). Additionally, the survey prompt
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“Parent and guardian participation is influenced by work schedules and structures” generated an 84% strongly agree or somewhat agree response from parents and guardians. It is possible the parents who did not respond did not do so due to factors associated with work or family situations. While educational levels and work/family structures are different factors, it is likely there is some connection between the two factors. The nonrespondent responses could have been impactful in the results had they participated in the survey.

Demographics.

Table 3

Categories of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Category</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent/Guardian</td>
<td>38.89%</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Education Teacher</td>
<td>34.92%</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>13.89%</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Psychologist</td>
<td>1.59%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Case Manager/Administrator</td>
<td>5.56%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related Service Provider</td>
<td>5.16%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

Educational Level of Respondents
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Category</th>
<th>Parent/ Guardian</th>
<th>Percentage of Parent</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Percentage of Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School Associates Degree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.42%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.47%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master Degree</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Degree</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30.52%</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>11.57%</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>1.66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted in the demographic information for all of Smithville Schools, Smithville Schools educates a disproportionate percentage of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and students with Multiple Disabilities (MD) (see Table 2). Parents of learners with ASD accounted for 30% of parent respondents and parents of learners with MD accounted for 29% of parent respondents (see Table 5). Parents reported that 79% of their children spend some time in the general education classroom (see Table 6). Additionally, 58% of parents said their children received all or some of their special education services within the general education classroom (see Table 6).

Table 5

Disability Category of Children’s Parents Surveyed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Category</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Disabilities</td>
<td>29.24%</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf-Blindness</td>
<td>0.0 %</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing Impairment</td>
<td>&gt;1 %</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Impairment</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech or Language Impairment</td>
<td>6.60 %</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthopedic Impairment</td>
<td>&gt;1 %</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Disturbance</td>
<td>&gt; 1%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Disability</td>
<td>5.66 %</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Learning Disability</td>
<td>8.49 %</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6

*Parent Responses to Child’s Least Restrictive Environment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Placement</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Out of District</td>
<td>8.18%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homebound Instruction</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-contained Classroom for Majority of Day</td>
<td>10.90%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Services in Resource Room</td>
<td>10.90%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Services in Both Resource Room and General Education Classroom</td>
<td>46.36%</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education services in General Education Classroom</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey collected multiple responses to capture what disability categories special education teachers served within the school day. The responses captured the multitude of disability categories a teacher sees in a given school day (see Table 7). The 116 teachers at Smithville Schools who responded to the question service all disability categories listed under IDEA.

Table 7

*Disability Categories Served by Responding Special Education Teachers*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Disabilities</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf-Blindness</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing Impairment</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Impairment</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech or Language Impairment</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthopedic Impairment</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Disturbance</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Disability</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Learning Disability</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic Brain Injury</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Health Impaired Major</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Health Impaired Minor</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Disability</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>560</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The primary researcher structured the survey to align with the themes revealed in the literature review. The themes suggested further research was needed in the areas of communication and the bureaucratic nature of IEP meetings. The primary researcher decided to add two additional categories of perceptions of the IEP process and specific questions regarding shared decision-making. The categories allowed greater delving into research question of what are barriers and facilitators to shared decision-making in the IEP process.

**Communication.** Both parents and staff at Smithville Schools reported parents are comfortable talking with school staff about their students as 82% of parents somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the statement and 80% of staff agreed or strongly agreed with the declaration (see Table 8). Similarly, 71% of parents and 89% of staff indicated teachers were comfortable discussing issues with parents in regards to their children. Parents somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Teachers and professionals communicate with parents and guardians regularly.” with a 69% frequency. Staff somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

same statement with an 84% response. The staff agreed or strongly agreed with 15% higher rate than parents, suggesting parents would like more communication that staff is currently providing.

Further statements were created to explore the area of communication included “An IEP draft is given prior to the meeting, so parents and guardians have time to evaluate and give feedback.” and “Agendas are developed with families before the IEP meeting.” 82% of parents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed they receive drafts of the IEP before the meeting to meaningfully engage in the IEP meeting and 85% of staff strongly agreed or somewhat agreed suggesting drafts are in fact sent to parents ahead of the meeting. Findings suggest agendas are not sent ahead of the meeting with 57% of parents reporting they receive an agenda ahead of the meeting and only 47% of staff somewhat agreeing or strongly agreeing they send the agenda ahead of the meeting.

Table 8

*Parent and Staff Responses on Communication Survey Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents and guardians are comfortable talking about their child with teachers and administrators.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers are comfortable talking about their students to parents and guardians.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers and professionals communicate with parents and guardians regularly.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>An IEP draft is given prior to the meeting so parents and guardians have time to evaluate and give feedback.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>63%</th>
<th>22%</th>
<th>9%</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>2%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agendas are developed with families prior to the IEP meeting.</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Bureaucratic nature of IEP meeting.** In the literature review, many parents reported the bureaucratic nature of the IEP meeting as a barrier to meaningful participation and shared decision-making in the IEP process. The statements developed reflected the practical implications of IDEA that force school districts into inflexibility in some areas of the IEP process. IDEA clearly defines the processes and procedures in regards to IEP development; individualization can be challenging if a student requires accommodations or services which are outside the norm of special education services.

Based on the literature review, which identified software-based IEPs as a barrier (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013) and a recent change at Smithville Schools, the primary researcher derived the two statements “Software-based IEPs are an obstacle at IEP meetings.” and the statement “Software-based IEPs are an obstacle at IEP meetings.” Smithville Schools recently changed their IEP software program to a larger company in hopes it would better reflect student needs. Parents (44%) strongly agreed or somewhat agreed the software programs helped IEP meetings run smoothly (see Table 8). Of the staff who responded, 48% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed the software programs helped meetings. Neither parents nor staff saw the IEP software program as a barrier with 34% of families somewhat disagreeing or strongly disagreeing the software was an obstacle. 36% of staff somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed with the software presented an obstacle.

Table 9

*Parent and Staff Responses on Bureaucratic Nature of IEP Survey Questions*
The primary investigator created several statements to gauge parent and staff satisfaction with the flexibility of scheduling IEP meetings. The statements addressed length of the meeting, the frequency of meetings, and parent scheduling needs. IDEA (2004) requires parents needs be accommodated in scheduling an IEP meeting time and location. Parents may also request an IEP meeting at any time to discuss their child’s educational program.

Parents somewhat agreed or strongly agreed one hour is enough time for an IEP meeting in 50% of responses (see Table 9). Staff somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the statement more frequently in 64% of the responses. Parents and staff also reported they somewhat disagree
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

or strongly disagree an IEP meeting is scheduled more than once a year; 47% of parents and 45% of staff responded that they disagree. IEPs are living documents which can be amended at any time to meet students evolving needs. Both parents and staff believed Smithville Schools scheduled IEP meetings to meet parent and guardian needs, as 66% of parents and 76% of staff responded favorably.

The statement “The IEP is written in easily understood language.” could be placed under the theme of communication or the bureaucratic nature of the IEP. The researcher placed it under the bureaucratic nature of the IEP category as structure and language of the IEP is predetermined by IDEA (2004). However, parents somewhat agreed or strongly agreed their child’s teacher and related service providers write IEPs in easily understood language with a 62% response rate (see Table 9). Staff somewhat agreed or strongly agreed they write the IEP in easily understandable language at a 57% rate.

The statement “Special education services are the same from school to school in the district.” revealed a parental and staff barrier (see Table 9). Of parents who answered the question, 27% somewhat disagreed, and 25% strongly disagreed. Of staff who responded to the question, 41% somewhat disagreed, and 14% strongly disagreed. Since both populations believed there is a discrepancy in services amongst buildings at Smithville Schools, a follow-up interview question was developed and asked during the interviews.

Perceptions of the IEP process. The survey explored parent and staff perceptions of the IEP process. To establish the facilitators and barriers to shared decision-making, the primary investigator wanted to discover how staff and parents view the focus, efficiency, and effectiveness of IEPs and what outside influences factor into a parent’s ability to be a participant
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

in the process. The issue of parent advocacy was explored as some parents at Smithville Schools access advocate services.

To gauge the overall perception of the IEP process, the primary investigator created two statements to explore how parents and staff feel about IEPs. Parents responded as 65% agreed or strongly agreed “IEP meetings are a positive experience.” (see Table 10). 70% of staff responded they agreed or strongly agreed “IEP meetings are a positive experience.” Additionally, 81% of parents agreed or strongly agreed “IEPs elicit strong feelings.” Staff agreed or strongly agreed “IEPs elicit strong feelings.” with an 87% response. Due to the high agreement of the statement, a follow-up question was included in the one-to-one interviews to further explore staff and parent emotional response to the IEP process.

Table 10

*Parent and Staff Responses on Perspective Survey Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A parent advocate contributes to an IEP.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP meetings are a positive experience.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The IEP team emphasized on building a child’s strengths.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The IEP focuses on a child’s weaknesses.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education is based on how a child falls short of grade-level expectations.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP meetings are efficient.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IEP meetings are effective in laying out a yearlong plan.</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent and guardian participation is influenced by work schedules and family structures.</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEPs elicit strong feelings.</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statement “The IEP focuses on a child’s weakness.” was met with an agreement rate of 64% from parents and 64% of staff (see Table 10). The statement “the IEP team emphasized on building a child’s strengths.” showed a high level of 76% agreement from parents and 72% of staff. Parents believed “IEPs are effective on laying out a yearlong plan.” as 59% somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Staff also agreed “IEPs are effective on laying out a yearlong plan.” as 76% somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Most parents felt IEPs meetings are efficient with 64% responding positively as well as 69% of staff members.

Almost all parents and staff respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that “Parent and guardian participation is influenced by work schedules and structures.” (see Table 10). The influences family structure and work schedules exert on the IEP process are outside of the realm of school control. However, it is heartening that 90% of the staff acknowledged the pressures a family deals with in attending and participating in the IEP.

The primary researcher inquired if a parent advocate acted as a facilitator or a barrier to the shared decision-making. The statement read, “A parent advocate contributes to an IEP.” Parents shared 43% strongly agreed, and 19% somewhat agreed. Staff indicated 14% strongly
agreed and 32% somewhat agreed. While the primary researcher did not ask a specific follow-up question regarding the contributions of an advocate, many interviewees shared their opinions if an advocate contributes to the IEP process.

**Shared decision-making.** The final section of the survey explored parent and staff beliefs regarding the current practices regarding shared decision-making at Smithville Schools. Of the parent respondents, 45% strongly agreed with the statement “Parents/Guardians are an equal part of the decision-making process,” while 36% somewhat agreed (see Table 10). Staff responses were equivalent to parent response as 45% strongly agreed, and 35% somewhat agreed that parents and guardians are an equal part of the decision-making process on the IEP team. When asked to respond to the statement “School staff help parents and guardians participate as part of the IEP team,” 26% of parents said they strongly agreed while 51% of staff strongly agreed with the same statement. The discrepancy in the responses led to an interview question being developed to further explore the topic.

Parents indicated “Parent and guardian input is encouraged.” when 59% strongly agreed with the statement, and 29% somewhat agreed with the statement (see Table 10). When asked to respond to the same statement, staff strongly agreed “Parent and guardian input is encouraged.” with 70% responding they strongly agreed, and 25% somewhat agreed. Parents and guardians indicated knowledgeable about the IEP process when 66% either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement. Staff concurred at a 63% rate of strongly or somewhat agreeing with the statement.

IDEA (2004) requires schools to allow a parent to participate in the IEP development. However, the researcher asked if the schools go further than encouraging mere attendance at IEP
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meetings by offering assistance to parents who struggle to understand and participate in the development of their child’s IEP. Parents expressed “School staff helps parents and guardians participate as part of the IEP team.” as 74% of parents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement (see Table 11). Staff expressed a higher rate of strong agreement or somewhat agreement with an 89% response. The issue of LRE relates to shared decision-making; the researcher inquired if the “Least restrictive environment is a school team decision.” Parents strongly agreed with the statement (28%) or somewhat agreed with the statement (46%) suggesting the school team primarily drove the LRE decision. Staff agreed at a lower percentage with 15% responding they strongly agreed, and 30% somewhat agreed LRE is currently a school team decision.

Table 11

Parent and Staff Responses on Shared Decision-Making Survey Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents/Guardians are an equal part of the decision-making process.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent and guardian input is encouraged.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and guardians are knowledgeable about the IEP process.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School staff helps parents and guardians participate as part of the IEP team.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least restrictive environment is a school team decision.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The final step of data analysis entailed choosing the two most satisfied and two most dissatisfied parents as well as the two most satisfied and two dissatisfied staff members. The primary researcher looked at the overall score of the survey as well as people who offered to participate in the interview process. A high mean score correlated to a high rate of dissatisfaction. Of the initial eight people contacted, seven agreed to meet and answer follow-up questions. One mother initially scheduled an interview and changed her mind. The researcher went to the next volunteer, and the mother agreed to and attended an interview.

The two most satisfied staff members included a special education teacher who taught elementary students. She scored 50 on the survey and was the most satisfied of all staff members. The other satisfied staff member was a school psychologist who scored 64 on the survey. The psychologist also serviced students at the elementary school level.

The two most dissatisfied staff members included an administrator. She scored 73 on the survey and actively reached out to the primary researcher to be interviewed. She scored the highest level of dissatisfaction of all staff members. The other dissatisfied staff member was a special education teacher at the intermediate level who had a mean score of 65.

The most satisfied parents included a parent of a junior high student with a disability category of Other Health Impaired and scored a 54 on the survey. The other parent scored a 63, and her child’s disability category was Other Health Impaired Minor and attended the intermediate school.

The two most dissatisfied parents had children placed outside of the district. One mother’s child was junior high-aged with a disability category of Autism, and the mother scored a mean score of 90 on the survey. The other mother scored 64 and also had a child with a disability category of Autism and was of intermediate school age.
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

After analyzing the survey data, the primary researcher developed six open-ended questions to assist in creating a richer picture of facilitators and barriers to shared decision-making at Smithville Schools. The six questions were:

- Please tell me about your child/student (name, age, grade, and placement).
- What do parents need to know to be on equal footing with staff during IEP meetings?
- What do teachers and staff need to know to understand the perspectives of parents?
- What do you expect from an IEP meeting?
- What needs to happen to have the decisions made at IEP meetings be truly shared-decisions?
- What are you feeling before, during, and after the IEP meeting? Why?

Interview Data

Parents and staff who agreed to participate in a follow-up interview shared additional information about their background and/or their child’s background. The participants chose the location of the interview. All participants agreed to an audio recording of the interview. They also agreed to allow another graduate student to act as a neutral observer to ensure the primary researcher remained neutral as she was an employee of Smithville Schools.

Interview questions. The interview questions were derived from the parent and staff responses to the survey statements. The primary interviewer developed the questions based upon discrepancies in parent and staff response or if a large percentage of staff or parents strongly disagreed with a statement. The findings are organized by the order the six question was asked of the interviewees.
Table 12

*Survey Statements Influence on Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographic information</td>
<td>Please tell me about your child/student (name, age, grade, and placement).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least restrictive environment is a school team decision.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and guardians are comfortable talking about their child with teachers and administrators</td>
<td>What do parents need to know to be on equal footing with staff during IEP meetings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and guardians are knowledgeable about the IEP process.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent and guardian participation is influenced by work schedules and family structures.</td>
<td>What do teachers and staff need to know to understand the perspectives of parents?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An hour is enough time for an IEP.</td>
<td>What do you expect from an IEP meeting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An IEP meeting is scheduled more than once a year.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education services are the same from school to school in the district</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A parent advocate contributes to an IEP.</td>
<td>What needs to happen to have the decisions made at IEP meetings be truly shared-decisions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/Guardians are an equal part of the decision-making process.</td>
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<td>School staff helps parents and guardians participate as part of the IEP team.</td>
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<td>Parent and guardian input is encouraged.</td>
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<td>IEPs elicit strong feelings.</td>
<td>What are you feeling before, during, and after the IEP meeting? Why?</td>
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*Background of interviewees.* Audrey was the mother of Michelle who was an 11.5-year-old who was born with a congenital heart defect. Michelle’s educational category was Otherwise Health Impaired-Minor (OHI-Minor). Audrey reported Michelle was followed medically by the local children’s hospital and also accessed the hospital's neurodevelopmental clinic for educational concerns. Audrey stated Michelle was impacted by short-term memory problems and
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Attention Deficit Disorder. Audrey always brings an educational specialist to Michelle’s IEP meetings as part of the IEP team. Michelle began receiving special education services at a neighboring local school district before the family moved to Smithville Schools specifically for special education services. Audrey acquired a Master’s degree and worked part-time as a coach at the time of the study. Michelle’s current LRE was the general education classroom at the district’s intermediate school with additional special education services in the resource room. Michelle did not receive any related services. The interview took place in an office at Smithville Schools. Audrey scored as one of the most satisfied parents on the parent survey.

Olivia was the mother of John (13 years old) who was an eighth grader at Smithville Junior High School. Olivia was a nurse who held a Master’s degree. John was classified as OHI-Minor for multiple chronic illnesses. Olivia reported John’s diagnosis’ included an autoimmune disorder, a connective tissue disorder, a heart condition, a kidney condition, and narcolepsy. John also had Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity (ADHD). As a result of the ADHD diagnosis, the majority of John’s IEP goals centered on executive function concerns, per Olivia. Additionally, Olivia said John was inquisitive and was strongly interested in robotics. Olivia stated John was a “very sweet, sweet boy, compassionate. I honestly think some of his medical things have made him more compassionate.” John’s LRE was currently a guided study hall where he worked on his executive function goals. His services decreased last year from specialized instruction during a set bell time. Olivia scored as a highly satisfied parent at Smithville Schools on the survey tool. The interview took place at an office at Smithville Schools at Olivia’s request.

Kerrie provided an extensive medical and educational history for her son Alex. Alex received special education and related services under the category of Autism. He received
special education services, occupational therapy services, speech-language services and physical therapy services. Kerrie reported, “Really from the very beginning; he seemed a little off. Just nothing you could really put your finger on. And I always kept hoping that it was just me but he didn't meet his milestones on time. So by the time he was nine months he really couldn't sit up. So we were more aggressive in getting him help, so he got therapy for a while.” The children’s hospital gave Alex a medical diagnosis of Autism after conducting a multi-factored evaluation at the parent’s request. Both Kerrie and her husband were pediatricians. Alex began preschool at a school which focuses on Applied Behavior Analysis. When Alex’s siblings reached school age, his parents requested he attend the local elementary school so the children could attend the same school.

The school and family worked together to develop educational programming for Alex. Alex completed elementary school with an LRE of a specialized classroom in his school with some level of inclusion. When Alex transitioned to the intermediate school, the family chose to access the Autism Scholarship provided by the State. Alex’s current LRE was the same school he attended as a younger child which specialized in Applied Behavior Analysis. If he were to return to Smithville Schools, he would be educated at the Junior High in a self-contained special education classroom and included where appropriate per his IEP. The interview took place at Kerrie’s home at her request.

Angela was a mother of a 13-year-old son, Christopher, with an educational disability category of Multiple Disabilities. His disabilities included intellectual disability, Autism, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Explosive Intermittent Disorder. His LRE was a school which specialized in Applied Behavior Analysis. He was placed at the specialized school at the district’s expense as it was an IEP decision. Christopher’s mother believed the LRE decision
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was solely a school-based decision but was happy with his current placement as he had acclimated to his new environment. Christopher began his educational career at another school district which educated him at a school for learners with ASD and ADHD. His parents moved to Smithville Schools due to their reputation for educating learners with significant disabilities.

Angela shared her initial contact with the district was a negative experience. While the special education school Christopher attended had already informed parents they were unable to meet his needs, Angela assumed Smithville would be able to meet his needs. After one observation, Smithville Schools informed Angela they did not feel they could meet Christopher’s needs and recommended a placement at a school operated by a County Educational Service Center. Angela strongly indicated the school team made the decision independently of parental input. Christopher attended the county school for a little over one school year. Angela did not feel the county school met Christopher’s needs and petitioned the school to place Christopher at his home elementary school. Christopher continued to struggle, despite the change in placement, and the IEP team decided he could be best served at a school which specialized in Applied Behavior Analysis. Christopher received special education, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. Angela reported she filed complaints with the Ohio Department of Education to gain access to assistive technology and allow Christopher to attend his local elementary school. Angela scored as dissatisfied on the survey. The interview was conducted at an office in Smithville Schools at Angela’s request.

Rosie was a special education teacher with a Master’s degree in Special Education from the kindergarten to fourth-grade level at Smithville Schools. She was a veteran teacher who has specialized in special education for 20 years. Her caseload included learners with disability
categories of Specific Learning Disability and OHI-Minor. She serviced students in a co-teaching model, which allowed her to plan with the general education teacher and remediate the students within the general education classroom. She also provided services in a resource room to address specific skill-based deficits for learners who need additional support. Rosie scored in the satisfied range of the survey. The interview took place in her homeschool in the administrator’s office at her request.

Joe was a school psychologist at the preschool through the fourth-grade level. He earned a Master’s degree in School Psychology and want Educational Specialist. He had been a school psychologist for approximately 15 years. Joe divided his time between two elementary school buildings in the school district. As the school psychologist, he conducted Evaluation Team Reports (ETR), did Functional Behavior Assessments, supported teachers and families, and assisted with transitions from preschool to elementary school. Joe scored as a satisfied participant in the study. His interview was conducted in the conference room of one the school he serviced.

Sarah was a building principal. She was new to Smithville School within the last two school years. Prior to being a building principal, she worked in the district office of a different school district. Sarah scored in the dissatisfied range on the survey. Additional background information has been excluded for confidentiality.

Erin was a newer special education teacher at the intermediate level at Smithville Schools. She taught learners with significant disabilities such as ASD and MD, in a self-contained classroom. She was working on a Master’s degree in the education field. She worked closely with families, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, and general education teachers to develop educational programs to meet the educational, communication,
and sensory needs of her learners. Erin scored in the dissatisfied range on the survey tool. The interview took place in the office of the primary investigator at Erin’s request. Further background information has been excluded for confidentiality.

**Parents as equal partners.** The question “What do you think parents need to know to be on equal footing with staff during IEP meetings?” was asked of all participants. Audrey shared, “It would be nice for parents to know in the simple format, here are the goals. You read an IEP; it's a bit complex.” Her parent advocate from the children’s hospital was a great support to her during IEP meetings and explained many procedural aspects of the IEP, but Audrey realized not all families utilize an advocate. Audrey expressed some frustration with being handed a copy of “Whose IDEA is this Anyway?” rather than her rights being explained to her by the school staff. She again discussed how her advocate was the person who explained her and her child’s rights under IDEA. Audrey talked about the need for parents to understand “what your rights are, how much you can control, realistic expectations as far as what the school can and cannot do.” She used the example of parents sometimes wanting goals in the IEP that do not necessarily have an educational impact, but it being very important to a parent that the child is able to complete the goal because it is impactful at home. She discussed she understood the perception of the divergent purposes of the IEP goals of school and parents but was frustrated IEP goals must be educational in nature.

Audrey discussed at length the need for additional meetings throughout the school year in order for parents to feel they are on equal footing with the school team. She shared, “I feel like you almost need a conference every quarter would be very helpful, even if it's on the phone or Skype or whatever. Real quick, 10 minutes. Here's what we're noticing in class, or we feel like maybe she's not getting her homework done because I'm always told, hey, it's done. I look on the
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blackboard, it's good, and sometimes it isn't. So those kinds of things coming into a meeting would be helpful because then they could be addressed in the IEP how we can resolve them, so they aren't an issue moving forward.” She thought short informal conversations throughout the school year would reduce the number of issues that need to be discussed at the actual annual IEP meeting.

Olivia also discussed parents need to understand IDEA as being essential to being equal partners at an IEP meeting. She also referenced “Whose IDEA is this Anyway?” “packet” offered to parents at every IEP meeting. She shared, “That's a lot of information to digest. And I think that most people just take the packet and tuck it to the side because it's too much, but I think the information in there is important. And that's how they get to feel like they're on equal ground because they have a better understanding of the whole process.” Olivia believed it is the school’s responsibility to explain parents’ rights under IDEA in a more explicit way. Olivia also discussed the use of parent advocates in an IEP meeting. She believed parents should bring in a neutral party with expertise in the field of the child’s disability. Olivia runs an organization that provides this service to other families who have a child with the same medical condition as her son.

Additionally, Olivia discussed parents’ need to feel respected as experts in the own child. School staff automatically come to the table regarded as experts in the field of education and special education. While parents may not be experts in the educational field, they know their child and their child’s needs better than any other person at the IEP meeting. Olivia discussed coming to the table in a true partnership to help create a plan for the student. She believed if everyone respected everyone else's expertise and used the language of partnership that would make all team members equal. She shared, “I think even just if you open it with we all are bringing our own expertise to the table and just saying as the parent, you know your child best.
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And that's what we're relying on you to help us. I think using that language, that partnership language, is so important. And I think that it sets people off on a good foot as opposed to-- you hear so many times that's when things don't go well. And so I think a lot of times parents feel like they're coming and that it's them and us. And I think it can go a long way just to set the tone that this is a partnership. We're all here to help this child do the best that they can.”

Angela also indicated parents would be on an equal playing field if they were viewed as experts in the area of their child. She said, “Parents know their child. If a parent is saying this isn't going to work, then you need to take the time and listen, because a parent is with that child and has been with that child all their lives, and they have seen that child in all different environments.”

Angela discussed parents’ lack of understanding of the special education laws as a barrier to shared decision-making. She said she has been “overwhelmed” by the paperwork and has sometimes felt she signs papers she does not fully understand. She was aware the school district offered a parent advocate, but she has not accessed the district advocate due to lack of trust in the school district. Angela had accessed a free parent advocate when her son attended a different school district but discontinued her relationship with the advocate since moving to Smithville Schools. Angela suggested a facilitator to shared decision-making would be for families to have one point of contact when dealing with school IEP teams. She shared her belief that only interfacing with one person informally prior to the IEP meeting could decrease her feeling of being overwhelmed.

Kerrie also discussed the need for a “legal advocate” at one IEP meeting a school year. She shared her two other children currently attended school in Smithville Schools district and was very happy with the education they received. Kerrie shared she does not like to be
“confrontational or contentious” and believes if an advocate was simply provided annually without her requesting one it would make her an equal part of the IEP team. She clarified, “If you have any kind of mistrust at all, it's confusing. I guess if there was a parent advocate there maybe it would be enough, but I'm so suspicious. I think that for a lot of parents a legal advocate might be better.”

Kerrie shared she thought school teams need to view parents as an expert when it comes to IEP goal development. Kerrie used the example of the school team feeling it was very important her child learn to read an analog clock. Kerrie indicated learning to read an analog clock would not help her child become a more independent adult. She stated, “I feel like he needed more functional skills in fifth and sixth grade. And the school district was not set up for that. They were still making him learn stuff I thought was stupid.” She discussed her and her husband’s desire for her son to learn to use a seat belt and say hello to his sisters; as parents, they did not feel heard or respected. Ultimately, the family’s disenchantment led to them accessing the Autism Scholarship and disengaging from the IEP team.

As a teacher, Rosie, explained parents need to understand a student’s strengths and weaknesses both individually and in comparison with their general education peers. She said, “[I] think that parents need to understand the expectations of their child's grade level so that they can see the weakness areas and how it affects their learning and the difference between a typical peer and where they're achieving and where their child is performing, achieving.” Rosie expressed concerns about parents’ lack of legal knowledge about the IEP as a legal document. She discussed it as a barrier to shared decision-making. “I always try and get the point across that it's a working document and that parents are an equal team member. So if they have concerns that come up as the school year goes on or as that IEP year goes on, that they are an equal team
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member, and they can call a meeting. They can call and ask questions. They can call and say, "I have some concerns." And that that IEP is a working document, so it can be amended. I know a lot of parents don't understand that.” She indicated part of her role is to help parents understand the process of an IEP year. She wanted parents to know children receive IEP progress notes when report cards are distributed and will be reevaluated every three years under IDEA.

Joe believed parents need information prior to the IEP meeting in order to be equal IEP team partners. He shared his belief that schools do have a responsibility in helping parents understand the IEP document. Joe perceived the legal nature of the IEP document as a barrier to shared decision-making. He discussed systematic flaws which prevent understanding of the IEP document, saying “Bridge of looking at what looks to be and is a legal document with a bunch of things that were driven by legal issues, sometimes that doesn't blend real well with the humanist issues and the direct information you need to know. So it can be redundant. It can be not clear. And sometimes that's not the fault of the staff, and it's not the fault of the parents not digesting it. It's the fault that the process, and some of the terminology, and the forms aren't as clear as they could be.” He further explained, “I think some of that miscommunication and it reads as an overly legalistic system. It reads like I'm now trying to write you a loan or a mortgage, and you have to be real careful because what this says or doesn't say may trip you up. And if you sign it, that's a legal document. And it's not clear. And I'm not clear from the person trying to explain it, because they may not be clear on it... But most of the time, you probably could, particularly if there's trust with the providers. But I think that that format is a real barrier to that.”

Sarah believed parents and school teams could be on an equal footing by setting meeting norms at the start of IEP meetings. She indicated this would allow for greater respect on both sides of the table. She shared her concerns that staff’s professional opinions can be undervalued
and diminished by strong parent advocates. She thought, “Letting everybody know that even though a parent, you might disagree with what the teacher is saying. The teacher has been invited here, just like you've been invited here, to share his or her professional opinion.”

Erin believed parents need specific information and understanding of their child’s school day to be equal IEP team members. She shared, “Sometimes I've found that something might be under-communicated about who the staffing is that's supporting them, what their inclusion level really truly is, and sometimes that can also be over-communicated and that kind of creates issues with the parents then becoming expecting to become too involved.” Erin expressed school teams need to let parents truly understand the learner’s LRE in order to understand the goals and objectives in the IEP document.

Like most of the participants, Erin saw the IEP document itself as a barrier to parents being equal IEP members. She explained, “I feel like a lot of times the parents don't even understand the process of these documents. Sometimes they're just extremely overwhelmed by what they're even signing off on and what these annual goals are really supposed to look like, and if it's truly measurable, if it's attainable if it's just way out of reach. And again, sometimes that's just because it can just be really overwhelming about what this document really is for their kid. I think section seven is the hardest to understand because we use all this language to explain what we're doing, but that's not really a language that they're used to, right, when talking about their child. I think the minutes are really difficult for them to understand, like what is a reasonable amount of time for the special ed teacher to be providing minutes or a related service? Sometimes they're okay with a really low amount of minutes, and sometimes they want a ton more. But do they understand what's really happening in the building with the hundreds of other
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kids that sometimes need to see the related service, or with all the other kids on a teacher's caseload.”

**Staff understanding.** The question, “What do teachers and staff need to know to understand the perspectives of parents?” delved into the basic premise that the parent’s perception of the IEP process is significantly different than an educator's perspective of the IEP process. Audrey wanted staff members to know, “Trust that they are the professionals and that we are in the right place and that I've done my homework getting her to the right school.” She also expressed how she values honesty from staff and wants them to know it is okay not to “sugar coat” what is happening at school. As a parent, she is not at school all day with her child and needs open, honest and regular communication with teachers and therapist about her daughter. She used receiving her daughter's medical diagnosis as an example. She shared that the doctor said to her, “Your child is sick. And they have this, and we don't know if they're going to survive.” She suggested teachers say, "Here it is. They're not going to pass fourth grade." Or, "Here it is. They are way not meeting their goals." Because I still, I'll be honest with you, I feel I'm in the dark right now. Even though we just had the IEP meeting, I feel that it needs to be clearer as to, "Here's where she is in comparison to her peers." That has to be discussed at the meeting because that's what the parent wants to know.” Audrey continually stated she respected her child’s teachers for wanting to spare her feelings but wanted teachers to know it can be better to just be specific and direct. She wants educators to “respect the gap” between home and school perceptions.

Olivia also discussed her desire for the staff to give “clear, unbiased feedback about how things are going, whether positively or negatively. I expect it to be a team meeting and, like I said, collaborative.” She would like staff to understand her expectations are “at the end of the
day, that's what we're all here to do is to make sure that my child has everything that he needs to be successful in school.” Furthermore, she indicated schools should “open the door” for frank communication between staff members. She believed if the school team simply asked, “How are you feeling about how things should go?” it would allow parents to share their expectations, fears, and goals for their child.

Angela reiterated her desire to be seen as an expert in the area of her child. She wanted staff to understand “A parent is with that child and has been with that child all their lives, and they have seen that child in all different environments. And you can sit there with your educational degrees, and you can explain why that it’s a good idea on paper, but a parent is going to be the one to say, "This isn't going to work, and you need to respect that.” She blames the district for placing her son in an alternate setting she disagreed with as a parent. She believed if the district had respected her wishes as a mother, her child would not have a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as the incident that triggered the diagnosis occurred at her child’s out of district educational placement.

Kerrie asked that the school understand that her child does not come home from school and share what he did at school today. She hoped if school teams truly understood all school information came solely from them, they would be more willing to meet and share information about her child’s educational program. Kerrie discussed her desire for her child to Facetime her each day at school. She indicated it would dually teach him a new technology and also give her some insight as to what he was doing at school each day.

Kerrie would like school teams to remember she is not an educator. She stated, “I didn't know what to say to better understand the parent perspective other than, ‘I know you're an educator, but we're not.’” She believed the school team should be frank with parents when the
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parents’ goals and the school goals are discrepant. She indicated an honest statement, such as, “Our goals may not be educational. And if you're not allowed to work on those goals with our kids, you should be very concrete about that and say, ‘Look, I am obligated by the state to teach this. If you want a different curriculum, you should go to the autism school.’”

Rosie, as a teacher, thought teachers should keep in mind “Parents are coming from lots of different angles with their child's education. We don't know what's going on at home.” She sometimes shared that a teacher, who is highly educated, needs to respect not all students come from homes that run smoothly. She expounded on her answer by saying, “We as teachers need to be able to keep in mind, and when things aren't going so well, we need to keep in mind that we can't necessarily control what's going on at home, but we need to do the best that we can with the kids while they're here.”

As a school psychologist, Joe discussed how school staff brings their own life experiences to the table at IEP meetings and that influences how they view parents. He said, “I would tell you that the teachers that come to the table that have kids probably have a little bit better perspective out of being a parent than some of our young that was fresh from college that don't, right? I can tell you that our staff that have kids with disabilities and that have sat on the other side of the table understand what that feels better than kids that don't, staff that don't.” Joe also discussed how he believed it is imperative staff understand parents need to feel valued as equal educational partners. He reiterated Sarah’s desire for meeting norms. He feels by running the meeting in a professional manner we let the parents know the school team perceives them as equals. “That we start the meeting on time because we expect the parents to be on time. And we're going to end on our schedule. And that we come in. We're not late. We're not talking about other things. We're not drinking and eating breakfast. We're there listening. And then the simple
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thing of explaining what the purpose of the meeting is, and then giving the parents a chance to talk.”

Sarah discussed staff keeping in mind, “It is emotional on the parent's part because a child is a parent's most prized person in the world. And it's the job of the parent to advocate for the child. No question about that.” Some parents come to the meeting with the mindset they need to fight for their child, and this can make the meeting adversarial. Sarah believed if teachers respect the parent is coming from an emotional perspective that it will embolden them to stay in their professional mindset and not become equally as emotional.

Erin summed up the feeling of all interviewed staff members when she stated, “Sometimes we can't imagine what they do at home every day. It can be really easy to take things personally. As the teacher, it's really hard to remove yourself from that, but I think that's extremely important, especially if our job is just to continue to advocate for the kids. We're not always going to be in agreement, but we might also be having those hard conversations that might be hard for the parents for reasons that are out of our control-- if there are things going on at home.” Her perspective honored teachers’ and parents’ limited knowledge of the students discussed at IEP meetings. Parents and staff view students differently and have different responsibilities to the learner.

Expectations of an IEP meeting. All participants were asked, “What do you expect from an IEP meeting?” Audrey explained she expects, “Feedback about how my child is doing. That's the first thing, clear and concise feedback, which I think I do get. It always seems rushed, I don't like that, I think they need to lengthen it a little bit, because it's the one time a year you get to actually set out-- especially when you are bridging, I think there needs to be more time allowed in IEP meetings when you're going from a middle school to a junior high, or elementary school
to middle school.” She also expected all key team members to be present at the meeting, including someone from the building a child is transitioning to the next school year. Audrey shared an experience where different team members shared their perceptions of her daughter. As the meeting progressed, the team isolated time of day as a factor influencing her learning. The team problem solved and made accommodations to assist the child with fatigue as the school day progressed. Audrey did not believe the root cause would have been revealed had all stakeholders not been present at the IEP meeting. Audrey shared her discontent with a member of the junior high staff not being at the IEP meeting as she feels it would have beneficial for next year’s team to hear the discussion.

Olivia reiterated her need for a “Collaborative discussion on what the goals are. I expect to be heard and respected for my opinions. I expect the staff to give clear, unbiased feedback about how things are going, whether positively or negatively.” Olivia discussed throughout the interview her belief that mutual respect between the home and school team creates a functional team that can create a program to best meet her son’s health and educational needs. Her precision of language throughout the interview reinforced her strong belief system and willingness to work as a collaborative partner.

Angela shared “I expect to have my input considered. I know the school does their thing. And we're working with a great team – (redacted to ensure confidentiality) - but to have input into the IEP is [inaudible]. We know you guys do your testing, and you determine the baseline and how far you think you can move him in a year.” She discussed her husband’s desire for their son to learn to write his name legibly. As parents, they would like to school team to respect their need for their son’s IEP to reflect functional goals which can impact home life. Angela reiterated
her belief that the private school her son attends at district expense is more respectful in meeting the family’s expectation for IEP meetings.

Kerrie expected staff to explicitly explain why IEP goals and objectives are included in the IEP. She discussed her positive experience with a special education teacher at the local public elementary school within Smithville Schools. Kerrie explained further, “Like I felt like things were explained better, and I felt like I agreed more like I understood what was going on more, and I felt like people knew Alex. But I never felt like I was on an equal footing.” She likened the relationship between herself and the teacher as one of doctor and patient. Kerrie shared she trusted the teacher completely and when she had to switch “doctors” she did not have the same level of trust, and it affected her deeply when her son transitioned between buildings.

Rosie’s expectations included focusing on a child’s strengths rather than on weaknesses. She always starts her IEP meetings by discussing a positive aspect of the child in order to set the tone for the meeting. Rosie preferred when parents engage in conversation about their child’s goals and objectives. She explained, “I send home that parent input, but it doesn't always reflect exactly what parents feel, and I think if you can engage them in the conversation, you're going to get more out of the IEP, and it's going to fit the child's needs better.” She believed the conversation allows her to “dig deeper” to discover needs that may affect the student but not be seen at school. She discussed a meeting she had that morning where the conversation led the team to add a writing goal to the IEP. “She shared, “And we all kind of talked about it and the other teacher was like, "You know what? You had a very good point. Let's talk about that." And so we had a whole conversation about it, and we added it to the IEP.”

Rosie also discussed the pressure she feels as a teacher to get the IEP document signed by the parent. She stated, “Well, obviously our expectation is to get it signed [laughter]. To be in
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agreement. Are we all in agreement? That's always the big expectation.” While IDEA does not demand parents agree to the goals in an annual review IEP, Rosie expressed how Smithville Schools expected the school team to continue to work with the family to come to an agreement.

Joe very concisely explained his expectations for an IEP meeting. “My purpose is to be there to support a teacher or as the district rep, which does happen. I expect that our staff's going to be on time, that they have a good draft done, and that that draft's been shared with the parents, and some preliminary questions might have been answered. I expect that we're going to go through that document. And there's a balance. There's a balance between being respectful of everybody's time and making sure we're progressing.” While he also discussed the district pressure to get a signed document he still advises parents not to sign anything they don’t understand or agree to in the document.

Sarah succinctly stated, “In a perfect world, the expectation would be that a group of people with a variety of different perceptions and skill bases and skill sets are able to work through ways to support the student in a collaborative way, and provide feasible responses to the issues that do not overtax the system.” She expanded on her response by explaining currently in her school she believes “Decisions are made that do not support the student in a manner by which he or she can be successful and at the same time do not provide collaboration.” She implied getting parent agreement is the primary concern of district office rather than looking at staff and building capacity to support the finalized IEP document.

Erin expressed her expectation of the parents prior to the IEP meeting. She shared, “Honestly, the way that I operate is I always send it home early, and I expect the parent to have reviewed it. Because it's supposed to be a team discussion and sometimes it's just alarming how many times they don't review it, which again is understandable because that goes back to the
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previous question. There's so much going on at home. But in a perfect world, that is what my expectation would be because then that allows for so much more conversation.” She expressed her frustration with parents who do not read the draft and come prepared to be an active member of the IEP team. She felt it is not time-efficient and a one-hour IEP meeting is not enough time to bring the parents up to speed on the child's progress and then adjust the IEP document to reflect the parent’s concerns.

Erin expected all IEP team members, parents, general education teachers, and related services give initial input and feedback to the IEP draft. She said, “I like to collaborate on writing goals a lot because you can touch on a lot of different skills and different goals with their communication devices or with their fine motor skills. I think those conversations are really good to have with parents because they see how that kind of all works together.” Erin was the only staff member who indicated getting a parent signature at the meeting was an unrealistic expectation

**Shared decision-making.** Participants were asked, “What needs to happen to have the decisions made at IEP meetings truly shared decisions?” Audrey shared, “Let the parent know that ultimately what they say, what is feasible, and what is-- again, clear and concise, what is feasible, what is not feasible.” She also suggested staff remind families “Look. We really are here in the best interests of your child.” Audrey also reiterated the theme of trust between the school and families. She talked about her relationship with the school and how it had evolved over the years. She felt she had become more of a shared decision-maker as the trust between herself and staff has grown.

Audrey also recommended the district share successful strategies that have worked with other students. She discussed the role her advocate plays at IEP meetings but felt many parents
don’t have similar resources and would be better educational partners if they had a stronger knowledge base in regards to special education. Audrey suggested, “Even if it's a sheet you pass out. ‘Here are some tips that IEP parents need to know here are some guidelines of the IEP process. Here are your basic rights.’ Not what the state gives you.”

Olivia also discussed increasing parents’ knowledge base as a facilitator to being shared decision-makers. She explained, “Making sure that parents are as educated as they possibly can be and knowing that there's a wide variety of skill set on the parent's part. But I think that's where I see that a lot of parents feel like they're kind of, for lack of a better word, at the mercy of the school because they just don't understand all of the things that have to happen.” Olivia does not feel Whose IDEA is this? is sufficient to increase parents’ knowledge of special education law.

Olivia again discussed the possibility of all parents accessing an advocate as part of the pre-IEP planning. She also suggested the school act as an advocate for the family and asked specific questions prior to the draft of the IEP being written. Olivia expressed the school has a responsibility to parents to “Get them thinking about that ahead of the meeting so that when they walk into the meeting they're not-- and sometimes people don't-- people don't always think well on their feet.” She recommended, “Kind of guide them through that's something that they could/should consider doing for their child. Because I think you get the call, okay we're going to have the meeting. Then we go to the meeting and, ‘Okay, these are the goals.’ ‘Okay. Yeah. Sure, that sounds great.’ And then you walk out and, ‘Well, maybe I should have—’ And maybe, instead of going back and repeating in that process, moving it further up and getting them thinking about those things ahead of time.”

Angela discussed the importance of parents acquiring a draft of the IEP document prior to the IEP meeting. She stated, “Just let them be prepared. I mean you guys have already worked on
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this for how many weeks, and this is the first time we're seeing it. That would be a big help. It's just letting the parents have that preview. Send it home.” She discussed feeling “sucker punched” at an IEP meeting where her son’s LRE was changed. She suggested, “Maybe, again, have that liaison call, the school psychologist, the advocate, somebody call and say, ‘The school district is considering an out-of-school placement.’ Let the parents set up a tour. Let them look. Let them get to know the new school. Here's why we're doing it. Here's why we think it's best. I mean, both times we were told we were going to be placed out of the district, it just felt like a sucker punch.”

The primary researcher followed up by asking about parental input in regards to her son’s LRE. The statement in the survey read, “LRE is usually a school team based decision.” Parents strongly agreed with the statement (28%) or somewhat agreed with the statement (46%) suggesting the school team primarily drove the LRE decision. Angela strongly agreed with the statement. She shared, “Both times we were told we were going to be placed out of the district; it just was like a sucker punch.” She supported her perception by saying when she and her husband toured the out-of-district placement; the school already received a copy of her son’s IEP and ETR. This solidified her belief the placement was decided prior to the IEP meeting.

Kerrie shared she does not feel she is a shared decision-maker. She reported, “I’m always asked for my input. I write my own goals, and I write what I think Alex needs to work on. But then it seems like the final document is not even close to the simple five things I said he should work it turns into some discrete trial business.” Kerrie expressed her desire for conversation before or during an IEP meeting rather than a legal interaction. She stated, “I know there's a legal document, but I almost feel like it's secondary to having a conversation.” She suggested, “It
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wouldn't even have to be long. I would love to be able to drop by school and see a couple of his teachers and what was going on.”

Rosie agreed with parents. She believed, “In order for everyone to have a stake in it, I think we definitely have to have a conversation and listen to what parents have to say.” She also admitted “You don't necessarily tweak things” in response to those conversations. She thinks in order for parents to be truly shared decision-makers the school needs to make “sure that those concerns are being really considered and really thought about and discussed and sharing information both ways.” Joe also agreed with Rosie and parents stating, “It’s always good to end with allowing the parents time to ask questions or get clarity on certain things.” Rosie also discussed the value of data being shared with families prior to the meeting to ensure they understand and can ask questions as to why teachers included certain goals in the proposed IEP document.

When asked the question about how to make parents feel like shared decision-makers, Sarah reiterated her desire for clearly defined meeting norms at IEP meetings; she said, “By everybody knowing their role. By somebody taking control of the meeting. By giving parents enough information that they don't come in feeling like an outsider. To give everybody liberty to have a voice.” Sarah discussed meetings when parents and the school team disagree. She recommended the district provide a framework to support teachers and parents as they work through confrontations. She believed this would allow teachers some protection, make meetings more effective, and support parents in understanding there is the next step toward resolution.

Erin believed parents and schools need to work in tandem to allow parents to be shared decision-makers. She expressed, “I think we have to be willing to just share opinions and agree to disagree but then also come up with a compromise.” She discussed the anxiety that evolves
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from the anticipation of difficult conversations with families. Erin relayed she will invite an administrator to an IEP meeting if she feels it will be confrontational. She questioned her preemptive actions, “Is that really necessary or can we truly just have more collaborative conversations around it instead of this is what I want, this is what you want.” Again, parent and teachers appear to agree conversation among IEP team members leads to shared decision-making.

Feelings about IEP meeting. Participants responded to the question, “Please tell me how you feel before, during, and after the IEP meeting.” The primary researcher presented a copy of Parrott’s (2001) inventory of emotions. The inventory of emotions allowed participants to separate mood from emotions as emotions can strongly influence cognition (Parrott, 2001). Additionally, inquiring about participants’ emotions during the IEP influenced the implications as the delving into IEP team members’ emotional state helped the primary research create next steps to try and create a sense of connectivity and mutual empathy in accordance with RCT (Jordan, 2010).

Audrey, the mother of a student with a disability category of OHI at the Junior High School, reported nervousness and anxiety prior to the IEP meeting. She stated, “Before a big change for the child. Like when they go from elementary to middle, middle to junior. There's always some nervousness or anxiety.” Olivia, who is also a mother of a student with OHI at the Junior High explained her emotions prior to the meeting are highly dependent on what needs to be accomplished at that particular IEP meetings. She shared she typically feels “directed” as well as “optimistic.” However, she did discuss one IEP meeting where she went into the meeting feeling “frustrated.” At the IEP meeting, she believed the meeting would be contentious as she requested a neuropsychological exam from an outside psychologist.
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Kerrie and Angela are both parents of learners with a disability category of Autism. Both students attend the same school for students with Autism, and both students attended Smithville Schools in prior school years. Kerrie reported feeling “I feel fear and nervousness, anxiety, dread, and worry, and so there's a lot of words for anger here. So anger is a little too strong. Torment.” Angela says she felt, “Anxiety & nervous; don't eat, don't sleep. It's like in the last couple IEPs we've had, it's been really like all this build up like the month before that I know when the meeting's happening, and then it's like the meeting happens, and like that wasn't even worth it [laughter].”

Rosie, a special educator at the elementary level, indicated “Sometimes anxiety. It just depends on the timing of the year… there are definitely times where anxiety hits you because you feel like you're rushed...I would say anxiety leading up to the IEP meeting because I feel like I have trouble doing things at home. I don't have time to do IEP meetings here or IEP writing here.” Joe, the school psychologist, shared, “It depends on the role they expect me to play.” Joe sometimes took on the role of a district representative as well as the role of the school psychologist. He further explained if it is, “Just a general meeting, and I've done an ETR I know the kid. I've been involved with the parents. I feel very comfortable.” He also said when he acts as district representative with a contentious situation, “I feel apprehensive because if-- I work with really good administrators and I work with really good staff. At that point already and I've got to damage control, there's a real good chance I'm not going to be able to do anything they haven't already done.”

Sarah, an administrator, revealed strong feelings of anger before attending an IEP meeting. She shared, “So to me, there is a systemic fear always. Nervousness, anxiety, worry, distress, dread, all that down here on this spectrum.” Sarah continued with saying, “The anger, to
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me, is directed toward not understanding why this has to be so difficult is the best way to say it. And anger toward decisions that are made that nobody believes are in the best interest of the child or the school setting. It's an anger about a lack of a systemic framework.” Erin, a special educator at the intermediate school, says “Nine times out of ten, I feel stress before. You build it up so much before, and it ends up being fine because you've done all this prep work. And that means I over prepare, and I have all the data. I have more data than I need.”

During the IEP meeting, Audrey reported she feels, “nervous, distress about big decisions.” Olivia discussed feeling “Overwhelming, sad. That when you are pregnant and having a baby, this isn't the life that you thought you were going-- you didn't think you'd be sitting in IEP meetings for your child. So that can be sad.” Kerrie reiterated her feeling being similar to before the meeting. She shared feeling, “Torment, irritation. sympathy, mostly for my son. Rejection, during. Insecurity.” Angela said she often felt “Surprised, amazed, and astonished at what he can do at school. Proud. I'm happy for him. Just I'm proud. I'm proud of his accomplishments because I know how hard he's working.”

Rosie shared she feels “Confident that I can write an IEP that is going to serve them best and meet their needs the best way we possibly can.” She continued by saying “Actually, during the meeting, I'm usually pretty just kind of calm. I don't really get anxious during the meetings. It's all just the paperwork part, and getting it on paper, and getting it done, and getting it done in time and all that kind of stuff. “Rosie also reported “I also feel compassion for the students. I know there's a lot of times where I feel like after we finish the meeting and it's gone well, I feel like-- I just-- 'Do you want to know? I love your child, and I'm proud of them.'” Joe reported “I'm pretty comfortable during the meetings. If I'm just a person to be there and they want me there to answer certain questions, I feel very comfortable because I know special ed.”
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Sarah indicated “A really bad feeling of helplessness because you do want to do what's right for the child.” She also reported she feels anguish and frustration for both herself and her staff. She shared “There's another three-hour meeting that is going to result in more frustration and more anguish. I mean, it can be anguishing for people. I mean, people come into these offices, and grown people bawl their eyes out-- bawl their eyes out. I've never seen such a thing.” Erin discussed “Sometimes I feel surprised that it's going better than expected. And I think that also goes back to just being upfront and open and being willing to be collaborative with the parents. That makes such a huge difference in the meeting going better.”

Audrey indicated “Directed, sadness, hope, joy, optimism, and relief that went better than I thought” after the IEP meeting is completed. Olivia also reports she feels “Relief and then satisfaction that we're good and we're good for another year or until something else comes up. Accomplished.” Kerrie stated she also felt “relief” after the meeting. Angela expanded on the theme of relief saying, “Just relief. Everything went well. He's doing well. It's like [inaudible] big let down like, phew, and then like that hot mess period. I'm like, that wasn't worth it.”

Rosie reported feeling confident, accomplished and relief. She stated, “We've done what we needed to do and most IEP meetings, I would say, all really have a happy ending.” Joe discussed his realization regarding most IEP meetings generally going well. He explained, “I feel pretty good, because like I said, you can't account for the 1%, so I don't plan for the 1%. The 99% of the people, the parents are great, the kids are great. We've got good parent involvement, and it's been a good process for all of us. So 99% of the times, I feel great with how things turned out. That 1%, you're never going to feel good about, but afterward, I usually feel like we did what we could do and what was reasonable, and we'll just a follow-up as necessary.”
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Sarah indicated she had felt upset and stressed after IEP meetings. She discussed her responsibility to her staff as an administrator. She said, “I think that that's part of the response as a leader that I have learned, is in order to provide people who supervise comfort, if there are major issues with systems, while it's being fixed somebody needs to acknowledge that people are going through this.” Erin discussed her feelings of relief. She expanded on the theme of relief, “I feel beyond relieved after. Because it usually goes better than expected. And then we have a plan, even if the plan doesn't mean they're signing off at that meeting. But we have a plan on how to get there.”

Parents and staff openly shared their thoughts and perceptions of the IEP process. They discussed concerns and successes within the IEP planning and IEP meetings. Furthermore, the participants offered suggestions and guidance on how Smithville Schools can support IEP teams to work as equal members. The findings indicated teams strive towards shared decision-making with some outliers and welcome suggestions to help support a more equitable power balance.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the facilitators and barriers to shared decision-making during IEP meetings in the Smithville Schools. Using a mixed-methods methodology, parents and staff were invited to share their perceptions in surveys and interviews on the current IEP process and how it does or does not invite parents to be equal members of the IEP team. Currently, the U.S. court system confirmed for a child to receive FAPE, a parent must be invited to play an active role in the creation of the IEP document (Yell, Katsiyannis & Losinski, 2015). The survey targeted macro data to examine parent participation in the IEP process as defined by IDEA (2004). IDEA required parents are invited to an annual IEP meeting and are told the time, place, location and reminded they are allowed to bring someone
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of their choosing. The survey strove to more deeply explore individual experiences to get a nuanced perspective of staff and parents experiences.

Discussion from Survey

The survey indicated the majority of families and staff believed Smithville Schools implements special education services successfully for the majority of students and families with 65% of parents responding they strongly or somewhat agree the IEP process is a positive experience. Staff responded to the same statement of IEP meetings being a positive experience, with 70% of staff strongly agreeing or somewhat agreeing with the statement. The finding supports Fish’s (2008) study which reported parents view IEP meetings as a positive experience. Additionally, parents reported they received drafts of the IEP prior to the meeting with enough time to evaluate the IEP and give feedback to the staff with 82% strongly or somewhat agreeing with the statement. The survey supported that Smithville School is trying to engage parents in the IEP by sending them a draft with time to give feedback to the team.

While this meets the requirement of allowing the parent to help in the creation of the IEP document as defined by Doug C. v. Hawaii (2013) it is not the same as shared decision-making. When staff and parents were asked if parents/guardians were an equal part of the IEP decision-making process the results were in almost perfect alignment with 45% of parents and 41% of staff strongly agreeing with the statement and 36% of parents and 35% of staff somewhat agreeing. However, when both were asked about parents being knowledgeable about the IEP process only 11% of staff strongly agreed with the statement and 26% of parents. Additionally, 74% of parents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement LRE is primarily a school team decision, which supported Fish’s (2008) findings. While parents and staff seem to believe parents are equal decision makers when directly asked, additional survey statements
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negate the response which led the primary investigator to the interview question of “What needs to happen to have the decisions made at IEP meetings be truly shared-decisions?”

IEP teams function in the shadow of IDEA. It is the primary macroystem as defined by Bronfenbrenner (1977). A macrosystem is defined by society laws like IDEA. IDEA significantly tips the power on IEP teams to the school district. The statement reading, “Least restrictive environment is a school team decision” shines a light on the parents’ misconception of a true partnership. If 74% of parents strongly agree or somewhat agree on a topic as essential to a child’s IEP development such as LRE is primarily a school team decision, then they are not equal members of the team when it comes to making essential educational decisions. Parents may not even realize they are not equal team members as some parents work very hard to keep positive relationships with the school team and sometimes are uncomfortable being confrontational.

The interview question inquiring what both staff and parents what they expect from IEP meetings evolved from the statements around length and frequency of IEP meetings, as well as the statement “Special education services, are the same from school to school in the district.” Both parents and staff somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed with services being consistent throughout the school district with 52% of parents and 55% of staff responding in these categories. The Director of Student Services, as well as the parent advocate shared with the primary researcher that difficult transitions between school buildings within the district are problematic. The Director’s concern in conjunction with the high level of disagreement from both family and staff propelled further inquiry into what parents and staff expect from the IEP meetings in regards to frequency and content.
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The difference between staff and a parent responses to the statement “A parent advocate contributes to an IEP” implied parents discomfort with direct confrontation and their belief that they lack enough knowledge to successfully advocate for their children. Parents strongly agreed with the statement 43% responding favorably while only 14% of the staff strongly agreed with the statement. Jordan (2010) postulates that imbalances in power within a team or relationship can lead to passive-aggressive behavior by the person with lesser power. The parents’ need for an advocate was a theme threaded throughout the interviews.

The statement “Parents and guardians are comfortable talking about their child with teachers and administrators” also exposed a difference in parent and staff perception of the team dynamic. 49% of parents indicated they strongly agreed with the statement and are comfortable talking with the school team. Staff strongly agreed at a much lower rate of 34%. The difference in the response suggested staff realized parents’ unequal status. RTC proposed the power imbalance on teams leads to disconnectedness and a lack of sharing of information (Jordan, 2010). The survey response influenced the interview question of “What do parents need to know to be on equal footing with staff during IEP meetings?”

The survey statement “Parent and guardian participation is influenced by work schedules and family structures” explored the impact of different ecological systems upon the IEP team. Parents strongly agreed at the rate of 52% and staff strongly agreed at 44% which suggests the team understands the influence of the family’s macrosystems, exosystem, and mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Families on all IEP teams bring their emotions about their child’s educational needs. These emotions and belief are influenced by their culture, church, and family of origin (Christensen, 2016). For parents to be shared decision-makers school teams must accept parents’ perception of the IEP process may be dramatically different than the school team
because the social norms may diverge from the school teams. Additionally, the nature of the child’s needs may be an exosystem which influences one parent’s ability to work which can have an enormous impact on families. The parent and staff high rate of agreements required the primary investigator to further explore the ecological systems influencing IEP team with the question, “What do teachers and staff need to know to understand the perspectives of parents?” Interestingly, the development of the survey statement generated emotional discussion during the think alouds conducted with non-participating parents to ensure the survey statements were clear to future respondents. The high emotion showed in the think alouds further reinforced the need for an interview question.

The statement that received the most strongly agree and somewhat agree responses in the survey was “IEPs elicit strong feelings.” 81% of parents strongly agreed with the statement and 87% of staff. Due to the extraordinarily high level of agreement with the statement, the primary investigator decided to clarify what strong emotions are staff and parents feeling before, during, and after the IEP meeting and why. The survey responses indicated emotions exert a large influence on IEP teams. RCT asserts teams need to meet each other from a place of emotion in order to build strong bonds to move toward growth and connectivity (Jordan, 2010). The interview question allowed parents and staff to identify specific emotions influencing preplanning, the meeting itself, and team relationships after the meeting.

**Themes from Interviews**

As indicated earlier, interview questions were derived from the survey results. Several themes emerged from the interviews. The themes of mutual respect, the need for parent advocates, the desire for increased communication, and the level of stress and anxiety surrounding the IEP meeting were shared among most participants. The examination of themes
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allowed the primary researcher to gain a richer understanding of the staff and parents “personal culture, history, and experience” (Creswell, 2014, p. 200).

**Mutual respect.** Participants, both staff, and parents desired to be viewed as experts in their respective field, either parenting or education. All participants expressed a need to be respected for their opinion during the IEP process and to have a voice as an equal member of the team. Parents need to feel respected as an expert in the area of their child. They stated they realized teachers are experts in education but would like to feel valued and listened to equally during the meeting. Staff confirmed the need to listen and respect parents as part of the shared decision-making process.

The theme of mutual respect is important to be viewed in light of both RCT and ETHDM. Per IDEA, school districts must allow parents to be part of the IEP creation and also schedule the IEP meeting at a time and place which is mutually convenient for the family and school (Yell, Katsiyannis & Losinski, 2015). However, if the school team and the parents disagree about a point in the student’s educational plan, the school team holds power to implement the IEP as they presented it to the parents or guardian (ODE, 2014). As discussed in the literature review, parents can follow a legal recourse of mediation, due process, and complaint. However, while the process is occurring the school can implement the IEP by simply sending a Prior Written Notice (PR-01) saying they included the parent in IEP development but the team could not reach an agreement so the IEP will be implemented (ODE, 2014). A PR-01 is a document that parents must receive from the school district when a change is proposed to the child’s FAPE, even if the parents agree with the change (ODE, 2014). Essentially, the PR-01 is a written summary of the IEP meeting which encapsulates discussions by the school team, agreed upon changes or updates to the IEP, and items upon with which the team is in
It is only through mutual empathy, respect, and connectivity that the school team may relinquish power to the parents because legally they are not required to do so. School teams must view parents as an equal “expert” in the field of special education. As the parent voices in the study reflected they know their child’s strengths and weaknesses better than anyone else and bring a valuable perspective to the conversation. Staff must respect the family’s quality of life, extended IEP goals beyond what may be deemed educationally relevant. Viewing the family through Bronfenbrenner’s theory (1977) encourages schools to see beyond the common core and into the family’s individual values system.

**Parent advocates.** Parents and staff both strongly indicated parents’ lack of knowledge of the IEP as a barrier to shared decision-making. All parents suggested the use of some type of an advocate to help parents understand their rights under IDEA, give input into goals and objectives, and engage with staff in IEP meetings. Parents’ desire for an advocate echoed the findings of Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2013) who also found parents crave the support of an advocate at an IEP meeting. Most staff members indicated it is their responsibility to help parents understand not only the IEP document but the family’s legal rights under IDEA which may explain their decreased desire for an advocate’s participation. Sarah indicated her frustration with advocates who appear to view the school and parents views as diametrically opposed. While parents see advocates as a facilitator, the school staff often saw the advocate as a barrier to a functional team.
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Parents’ desire for an advocate and staff’s resistance to a parent advocate embodies the power differential inherent in IDEA. While staff repeatedly shared their desire to assist families in understanding the IEP, their reluctance to include and outside professional who is educated in special education law implies the staff is unwilling to relinquish their power to families and make them equal decision-makers. It is possible the school IEP team is unaware of their hesitancy to engage with advocates as a way to maintain power in an unequal relationship.

Communication. Parents discussed the need for staff to be honest with them in regards to IEP goals, behavior, and discrepancies from typically developing peers. Staff shared parents also need to be honest with them about what is going on at home. Staff understood parents are under an incredible amount of stress at home and want to help but often require information to do so. Parents also believed more frequent and shorter IEP meetings would be less overwhelming in hopes to better understand the IEP document and educational programming.

Parents overwhelming described the need for honest communication from the school staff, including the vital information about their special education rights as well as information about their child. Parents are often completely dependent on the school team to give them information about their children. For parents of learners who are non-verbal, they need constant and specific information from the school. Kerrie discussed how not knowing what her child’s school schedule, academic expectations and even how much he liked specific subject placed her at a disadvantage at IEP meetings. Schools hold all of the information about a child’s school day because they are at school and parents are not. School teams need to do a better job of combining the child’s ecological systems to give parents information and power.

Overwhelmingly, all staff and parents touched on the theme of respectful collaboration that leads to the creation of an appropriate educational plan for the students. They discussed
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how mutual respect between team members allows for a collaborative meeting where all
participants are able to give honest feedback to one another. This finding supports the
theoretical framework of RCT which proposes relationships established on empathy, honesty,
and trust create more equitable power arrangements (Jordan, 2014).

**Stress and anxiety.** While the question, “Please tell me how you feel before, during, and
after the IEP meeting.” specifically inquired about participants emotions, the level of stress and
anxiety amongst all IEP team members was apparent in the majority of interviews. The finding
confirmed Zeitlin & Curcic’s (2014) study which reported that IEP meetings cause families
stress and anxiety. Parents Angela, Kerrie, and principal Sarah all radiated stress as noted by the
primary researcher and the observer in field notes. Angela and Kerrie both had children who left
the school district as a combination of their child’s needs and a dysfunctional IEP team. Both
mothers shared their actions of bringing an advocate and changing their child’s placement
resulted from their lack of control of IEP goals and LRE. Sarah, the school principal, shared her
level of stress directly related to her belief the parents held an incredible amount of power in
LRE decisions as well as scheduling which led school teams to implement IEPs which was not
in the child’s best interest.

These findings support the belief that teams with inherent power imbalances are
disconnected and unhealthy teams (Jordan, 2010). Parents indicated the school team has the
power because they can implement the IEP against the parents’ wishes and the principal
believed parents held power because they can file a due process complaint if the school district
implements the IEP without parental consent. While both of these beliefs are legally accurate,
the power is firmly in the district’s control as there is less of a risk financially and emotionally
when taking action against a parents’ wishes.
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Due to the high level of stress reported by all team members, the school may be willing to relinquish some power in hopes of creating connected and healthy teams under the RCT model (Jordan, 2010). While it is recommended the school give parents a greater amount of power on the IEP team, it is important to note the school system does need to safeguard the rights of other learners if the child’s behavior impacts the learning of others. The school is beholden to all learners and must retain enough authority to ensure all students’ educational needs are met.

Both parents and staff reported feeling stress and anxiety prior to the IEP meeting. The participants reported a variety of emotions during the IEP meeting. Parents shared they feel nervous, proud, sad, and amazed. Staff discussed feelings of helplessness, confidence, and a sense of calm. After the IEP meeting, almost all participants reported feeling a profound sense of relief the meeting was completed and the team had developed a solid plan moving forward. The findings confirm the survey results which indicated IEP meetings elicit a lot of emotions in all team members.

Limitations

The study is limited in scope and generalizability in that one suburban school district in the mid-west was involved. This limitation, however, is mitigated by the study’s purpose to generate action steps for Smithville Schools. Smithville Schools accesses funding through local, state, and federal sources. However, there are many different large companies located within the geographic boundaries of the district, which allows for a high level of financial support for special education services.

The study design allowed all participants to volunteer to be interviewed. However, participants needed to score in the most satisfied range or the most dissatisfied range to be
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Contacted if they offered an email or phone number. A limited number of staff and parents participated in the interview phase of the study and number of the individuals who volunteered to be interviewed were not selected. The primary researcher is an administrator in the school district. It is important to recognize prior relationships with staff members may have influenced responses. Additionally, the primary researcher being an administrator may have made parents hesitant to share their full negative experience due to the power differential inherent in IDEA. A neutral observer attended all interview sessions to ensure no overt bias in question. However, there is no way to measure participants’ feelings regarding the role of the researcher in Smithville Schools.

An additional limitation of the study is the high level of education amongst the majority of the participants. While it is expected that the staff would hold a disproportionately high level of education, the parents at Smithville Schools also are highly educated. In the State of Ohio, 31.28% of people hold a Bachelor’s degree or higher and the national average of 33.68% (ideadata.org). Of the parents who responded to the survey, 82% held a bachelor’s degree or greater. Of the four parents who participated in the interviews, three obtained a Master’s degree and one held a Bachelor’s degree but was working on her Master’s degree. The parents’ high level of education may influence their knowledge of special education law as well as their level of involvement in their child’s education.

A limited number of fathers volunteered to be interviewed for the study. As a result, only mothers participated in the interviews as they met the inclusion criteria for the two most or least satisfied survey respondents. The low response rate of fathers confirmed Mueller and Buckley’s (2014) study discussing the limited number of studies focusing on a father’s perspective of the
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special education process. It is possible by including a father in the interviews the results could be further generalized to other districts.

Implications

Since the purpose of the study is to examine facilitators and barriers to shared decision-making at Smithville Schools, it is imperative to move forward as a district and create opportunities to bring about equal partnership on the IEP teams. While Smithville Schools consistently is in compliance with IDEA by including families in IEP meetings and sending home IEP drafts, the study findings show there is an inherent inequity of power on the IEP teams due to the outside influence of IDEA. IDEA gives ultimate decision-making power to the schools unless the parents aggressively take it through legal recourse.

Smithville Schools needs to create a plan of action to encourage school teams to relinquish power to parents. Additionally, the school needs to design processes and procedures to encourage parents to access advocates, gain knowledge of their rights and construct a non-litigious or confrontational path to disagreement with the school team. By relinquishing power to families, Smithville Schools could gain valuable time currently spent managing disharmonious IEP teams.

Next steps. Parents and staff both expressed an understanding that the two parties within the team bring different perceptions to the IEP team. Exploring the ecological influences on the IEP team is essential in creating healthier team dynamics. School teams need to make an effort to understand the cultures, economic, and home backgrounds impacting the team members.

Smithville Schools should conduct professional development for its school teams on Culturally Responsive Practices (CRP). CRP teaches understanding to staff about the values, beliefs, and behaviors of people from cultures that may be different from their own belief systems (Robins,
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Lindsey, Lindsey & Terrell, 2002). Staff must understand parents interactions with school teams can be defined by the parents’ societal construct of disability which can be varied in different cultures. Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) four ecological systems all exert influence on the IEP team. By giving staff a better understanding of different cultures, they may be more inclined to be empathetic to a parents’ reluctance to ask questions or advocate for their child. Conversely, it may allow staff a deeper understanding of parents who exhibit aggressiveness and anger at IEP meetings and allow the staff to retain some emotional distance and depersonalize the emotion directed toward them.

Within the interviews, all parents discussed the inaccessibility of “Whose IDEA is this?” (ODE, 2012). They shared the document to be overly long and difficult to navigate to find pertinent information to their specific situation. Smithville Schools could craft a document as a companion to “Whose IDEA is this?” (ODE, 2012). The document could include a flow chart explaining the ETR process, the IEP process, and accompanying timelines. It could be beneficial to families for the district to also explicitly explain a parent's’ right to educational records, independent educational evaluations and a short cheat sheet defining all of the acronyms being used during the meeting.

Currently, Smithville School does employ a parent advocate which parents can access at no cost. However, interviewed parents showed some hesitancy in accessing her services since she was a paid district employee. The district could provide a list of free advocates who are independent of the school district as part of the companion to “Whose IDEA is this?” (ODE, 2012). By giving the list of advocates, the district accomplishes two objectives. They allow the concept of an advocate to be non-confrontational. RCT (Jordan, 2010) discussed people without power in a relationship can become passive aggressive. By giving the power of an advocate to
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

the parent, the parent may become more vocal at expressing their own concerns and hopes for their children.

Additionally, the district sets the tone of equal partnership within the team. By encouraging parents to access an advocate, they are acknowledging the need for a collaborative meeting where all members have an equal voice. Inviting parents to include advocates into the meeting on a regular basis may increase staff’s positivity toward advocates. Currently, staff reports negative emotions being associated with advocates being included in the IEP meetings. The equalizing of the power balance could allow for less conflict and better team relationships in regard to how advocates are perceived by the staff.

Parents also shared their concerns that the district is the sole entity that controls the IEP and supporting documentation. Kerrie discussed her frustration with the district singularly controlling the official record of IEP meetings. A simple process the district can put in place to ensure equal decision-making stems from the PR-01 document. Under IDEA (2004) when a team is not in agreement the school district can implement the IEP by sending the parents a PR-01. The PR-01 is a document that summarizes the meeting and states the IEP will be implemented by the school and why the parent has not signed consent. Typically, Smithville School writes a statement explaining they will continue to work with the family for resolution. However, the document summarizes the meeting and listing the concerns is written solely by the school without parent input. Smithville Schools should consider giving parents a forum on the PR-01 summarizing their perspective of the meeting and the areas of disagreement and have all team members sign the PR-01 saying they acknowledge but do not necessarily agree with the different point of view. The collaborative PR-01 gives voice to all participants’ perceptions of the meeting and does not accept any one person’s version of what occurred at the meeting.
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All parents expressed a need for more regular and less formal interactions with the staff. Parents lack regularly scheduled interactions with their child’s teachers and therapists which further exacerbates the power differential as it is hard to help create an educational program when parents don’t know what the current program is. Scheduling regular and frequent meetings between parents and school staff could also give parents an equal voice in decision-making. The parents interviewed all sought more information from the school throughout the year and especially prior to IEP development. By regularly scheduling parent and staff meetings, the school invites the parents to be a regular part of their child’s school experience. Regular meetings will give parents a better understanding of what their child’s program looks like and allows them a regular opportunity to give input into their child’s program.

It is important to note the need for flexibility within the context of more frequent and regular meetings between school staff and parents. Meetings may need to be more frequent at the beginning of a school year to build trust amongst the team members. By spending time front loading the meetings at the start of the year, there may be a reduced need for the frequency of the meetings as the school year progresses. The staff in attendance should also be fluid depending on the focus of the meeting. The school team and parents should work together to create a quarterly calendar for meetings which are mutually agreed upon based on the student’s needs.

In alignment with the theoretical frameworks of RCT and ETHDM, it is essential parents and staff work together to create an action plan which transfers some decision-making power to families in order to equalize the power balance within the IEP team. A tool Smithville Schools could consider implementing to help create a plan of action with all stakeholders is a Group Level Assessment (GLA). GLA is a qualitative, large group methodology where data is collaboratively produced with all stakeholders (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014). For this GLA, the
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stakeholders could include parents and staff of Smithville Schools, as all participants bring a unique perspective and expertise to the process of school improvement. Vaughn and Lohmueller (2014) described a GLA “as a socially relevant evaluation method that encourages those traditionally studied to have a voice in the evaluation and research process” (p. 339).

Vaughn and Lohmueller (2014) described a GLA as a seven-step process that typically includes 15-60 people. A GLA requires approximately three hours but can be modified to be respectful of participants’ time constraints. Vaughn and Lohmueller (2014) explained a modified GLA as the following process. The first step of the seven-step process is climate setting where the facilitators describe the GLA process to participants and attempt to build trust among all stakeholders. The generating phase is the second step in which the participants synchronously respond to a variety of written prompts placed around the room. The third step is appreciating when the participants take the time to read and discuss other stakeholders’ responses to the prompts. Time is given for the fourth step of reflecting. Reflecting entails a quiet moment of reflection for each person to think about their replies and the responses of others. The fifth step is understanding. During this step, the larger groups are broken into smaller groups to discuss the responses to specific prompts. Each small group identifies three to five common themes across the prompts assigned to the group. Selecting is the sixth step which brings the larger group back together to analyzing for themes across all prompts. At this step, the stakeholders can prioritize the emerging themes. The seventh and final step is action. Stakeholders are asked to help develop an action plan to move forward. After completion of the seventh step, the GLA can continue as a task force (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014).

Smithville Schools expressed a desire to explore a series of GLA’s at local community centers to reach families who may feel threatened or disenfranchised by the school setting. Due
to the high level of education of survey and interview respondents, it is possible a GLA could reach families and staff who chose not to participate in the survey. An option the school district could consider would be to offer child care and dinner to GLA participants. As discovered in the survey results, family structures and work schedules can hinder parent participation in the IEP process. Offering child care and dinner may help lessen the burden on the family for a small period of time and increase participation of families who may not always be able to attend school events.

It is recommended Smithville School take the following steps to equalize power on the IEP team in order to encourage a greater sense of connectivity to allow shared decision-making.

- Offer professional development to staff on Culturally Responsive Practices
- Create a companion document to “Whose IDEA is this?” (ODE, 2012)
- Offer a list of free advocates to parents in advance of the IEP meeting
- Allow joint authorship of Prior Written Notice documents (PR-01)
- Schedule more frequent, regular and informal meetings between parents, teachers, and related services providers
- Create an action plan with all stakeholders

**Conclusion**

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 required school districts to allow parents to participate in the development of their child’s IEP. In Doug C. v. Hawaii Board of Education, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit reaffirmed the right of parents to participate in the IEP. This extended the requirement from mere participant to requiring parents play a central role in the IEP decision-making process. However, when
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reading the decision, it is challenging not to infer the court uses the terms attendance at an IEP meeting and participation in the IEP process interchangeably.

The purpose of the study was to determine what the facilitators and barriers are to shared decision-making in the IEP process at Smithville Schools. The mixed-methods study allowed the primary research to involve a large number of both families and staff to share their thoughts on the current special education framework at Smithville Schools through a survey. The interviews encouraged a selected group of parents and staff to further share their experiences with special education and Smithville Schools. The parents and staff both agreed the power dynamic of IDEA favors the school district and were eager to share their experiences.

The survey showed a high level of satisfaction across both staff and students. The interviews unveiled specific concerns from staff and family. The overarching theme both parents and staff discussed in the interviews was a need for honesty amongst team members to allow parents to move beyond participation to equal partners in decision-making. Parents discussed a desire to be equal partners on the IEP team. They shared their high regard for teachers and staff but indicated they are often in the dark about the details of their child’s school day. They sought honesty in understanding their child’s daily schedule, their child’s academic progress in relation to their general education peers, and honesty about their child’s behavior. They wanted a more informal, collegial relationship with the IEP teammates. The belief was that more frequent and informal conversations would allow a richer understanding of their child’s needs, programming, and special education law.

Staff also desired honesty in their relationships with families. They believed when parents came to the discussions prepared for the meeting with information about the home and any necessary medical information; they are better able to make educational decisions
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regarding their child. They respected parents’ expertise in their child and requested parents to respect their expertise as an educator. They craved the ability to be honest with families about their learners without fear of a backlash.

RCT puts forth the beliefs that any systems which are built upon a power differential create unhappiness and discord in those relationships (Jordan, 2014). Applying RCT to the IEP team helps acknowledge the inherent power differential in IDEA and confirms the human desire for connectivity through honest communication. Smithville Schools and parents at Smithville Schools strive to create IEP teams based on mutual empathy, honesty, responsiveness, and trust (Jordan, 2014). These characteristics when systematically integrated into the district's special education processes and procedures should ensure a move to truly shared decision-making.
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References


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Study Approval from Institutional Review Board

Institutional Review Board - Federalwide Assurance #00003152
University of Cincinnati

Date: 2/29/2016
From: UC IRB
To: Principal Investigator: Amy Debelak
     CECH Education
Re: Study ID: 2016-1420
    Study Title: Parent Perception of the Individual Education Plan Process

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) acknowledges receipt of the above referenced proposal. It was determined that this proposal does not meet the regulatory criteria for research involving human subjects (see below): Not generalizable – QA/QI of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process at Smithville Schools. Ongoing IRB oversight is not required.

Please note the following requirements:

Statement regarding International conference on Harmonization and Good clinical Practices. The Institutional Review Board is duly constituted (fulfilling FDA requirements for diversity), has written procedures for initial and continuing review of clinical trials: prepares written minutes of convened meetings and retains records pertaining to the review and approval process; all in compliance with requirements defined in 21 CFR Parts 50, 56 and 312 Code of Federal Regulations. This institution is in compliance with the ICH GCP as adopted by FDA/DHHS.

Thank you for your cooperation during the review process.

45 CRF § 46.102(d): Research means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

45 CRF § 46.102(f): Human subject means a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains:

1. data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or
2. identifiable private information.
**Intervention** includes both physical procedures by which data are gathered (for example, venipuncture) and manipulations of the subject or the subject's environment that are performed for research purposes.

**Interaction** includes communication or interpersonal contact between investigator and subject.

**Private information** includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place, and information which has been provided for specific purposes by an individual and which the individual can reasonably expect will not be made public (for example, a medical record). Private information must be individually identifiable (i.e., the identity of the subject is or may readily be ascertained by the investigator or associated with the information) in order for obtaining the information to constitute research involving human subjects.

**FDA regulations** apply whenever an individual is or becomes a participant in research, either as a recipient of a FDA-regulated product or as a control, and as directed by a research protocol and not by medical practice. FDA-regulated activities involve individuals, specimens, or data, as patients or healthy controls, in any of the following:

a. any use of a drug or biologic, other than the use of an approved drug or biologic in the course of medical practice

b. any use of a device (medical or other devices, approved or investigational) to test the safety or effectiveness of the device

c. any use of dietary supplements to cure, treat, or prevent a disease or bear a nutrient content claim or other health claim

d. the collection of data or other results from individuals that will be submitted to, or held for inspection by, the FDA as part of an application for a research or marketing permit (including foods, infant formulas, food and color additives, drugs for human use, medical devices for human use, biological products for human use, and electronic products.)

e. activities where specimens (of any type) from individuals, regardless of whether specimens are identifiable, are used to test the safety or effectiveness of any device (medical or other devices, approved or investigational) and the information is being submitted to, or held for inspection by, the FDA.
Amy, ePAS does not have an option to submit an amendment for Not Human Subjects projects. Your project was determined not to be human subjects research because it is not intended to produce “generalizable” findings. It is focused on evaluating/improving the IEP process at Smithville Schools. Using a different data collection method does not change that purpose.

You may use the different data collection method without submitting anything to the IRB. You could print this correspondence to provide documentation for your records. Or, you could open your study in ePAS and click Email IRB Staff, and say what you are going to do. Then I would respond with Email Study Staff to say it’s OK. That would give permanent documentation in ePAS, if you want it. Your choice.

Best wishes on your project!

Claudia Norman, BA, CIP  
Senior Regulatory Compliance Specialist  
HRPP / Institutional Review Board  
University of Cincinnati  
51 Goodman Drive, Suite 300, ML 0567  
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0567  
Phone: 513-558-5784  
Fax: 513-558-4111  
Email: Claudia.Norman@uc.edu
Appendix C

Study Consent Form

Adult Consent Form for Research
University of Cincinnati
Department: School of Education, Special Education
Principal Investigator: Amy Debelak
Title of Study: Facilitators and Barriers to Shared decision-making of the Individual Education Program Process at Smithville Schools

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please read this paper carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.-

Who is doing this research study?
The person in charge of this research study is Amy Debelak of the University of Cincinnati (UC) Department of Special Education and Assistant Principal at identifying information excluded. There may be other people on the research team helping at different times during the study.

What is the purpose of this research study?
The goal of this study to understand parent and staff’s perceptions of facilitators and barriers to shared decision-making during the IEP process and improve our practice at Smithville Schools.

Who will be in this research study?
About 100 people will take part in this study. You may be in this study if
- You are a parent at Smithville Schools who has a child on an Individual Education Program (IEP).
- You are a member of the school IEP team.

What will you be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?
You will be asked to complete the steps below. The information you provide during the small group discussions will be collected.
1. Participate in a interview to discuss your survey responses about the IEP process.

Are there any risks to being in this research study?
There are no known risks associated with this study.

Are there any benefits from being in this research study?
There are no known benefits from being in this study.

Will you have to pay anything to be in this research study?
You do not have to pay anything to be in this study.

What will you get because of being in this research study?
You will not be paid or receive anything to take part in this study.

Do you have choices about taking part in this research study?
If you do not want to take part in this research study you may choose not to participate.

How will your research information be kept confidential?
Information about you will be kept private. The data will be locked in the researcher’s office. Only the researchers will have access to your data. Research data will be stored in a locked file.
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

cabinet for three years after the end of this study and then will be destroyed by shredding. The data may be published. Participants will not be identified by name at any time. Agents of the University of Cincinnati may inspect study records for audit or quality assurance purposes. The research cannot promise that information sent by the internet or email will be private.

What are your legal rights in this research study?
Nothing in this consent form waives any legal rights you may have. This consent form also does not release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence.

What if you have questions about this research study?
If you or your child has any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact Amy Debelak at 513-686-1730

Do you HAVE to take part in this research study?
No one has to be in this research study. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have. Once you begin to participate in the interview you may leave at any time. However, all data collected prior to your leaving will be used in the study.

Agreement:
I have read this information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

Participant Name (please print) ____________________________________________
Participant Signature _____________________________________________ Date ______
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent _____________________________ Date ______
January 31, 2017

Dear Parents and Staff,

My name is Amy Debelak. I am the Assistant Principal at (identifying information excluded) as well as a doctoral candidate at the University of Cincinnati. I am requesting your assistance in my dissertation project. My project is “Facilitators and Barriers to Shared decision-making in the IEP Process.” Your involvement and input will not only support my dissertation project, but will ultimately help improve our practices at Smithville.

The goal of the project is to help Smithville Schools get a better understanding of your thoughts and feelings during the IEP process. Our overarching goal at Smithville Schools is continuous improvement. We want to understand how you perceive your child’s and student’s IEP process in order to make your experience more meaningful and engaging.

Please take about 20 minutes to complete this short survey. You are invited to include your name and contact information if you would be willing to be asked follow up questions. You are not required to give your name or your child’s name to participate in the survey.

Thank you for your time and dedication to improve Smithville Schools.

Regards,

Amy Debelak
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Appendix E

Survey Questions

Demographic

What is role on the IEP team?
○ Parent/Guardian (1)
○ General Education Teacher (3)
○ Special Education Teacher (4)
○ School Psychologist (5)
○ Special Education Case Manager/Administrator (6)
○ Related Service Provider (7)

All Parent Demographic

What is the highest degree you completed in school?
○ High School (1)
○ Associate Degree (2)
○ Bachelor Degree (3)
○ Master Degree (4)
○ Doctoral Degree (5)

What is your ethnicity?
○ White, non-Hispanic (1)
○ Black, non-Hispanic (2)
○ Hispanic (3)
○ Asian or Pacific Islander (4)
○ American Indian or Alaskan Native (5)
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

How many of your children have an IEP?
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- More than 4 (5)

Parent with Multiple Children on an IEP

What is your child's least restrictive environment? (Option given for 4 children)
- Out of district placement (1)
- Homebound instruction (2)
- Residential placement (3)
- Self contained classroom where my child spends the majority of the day? (4)
- Resource room where my child is pulled for special education services (5)
- Special education services take place in both the resource room and general education classroom (6)
- All special education services take place in the general education classroom (7)

What is your child’s disability category? (Option given for 4 children)
- Multiple Disabilities
- Deaf Blindness
- Hearing Impairment
- Visual Impairment
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Emotional Disturbance
- Intellectual Disability
- Specific Learning Disability
- Autism
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Other Health Impaired Major
- Other Health Impaired Minor
- Developmental Disability
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

What grade level is your child in school?

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An hour is enough time for an IEP meeting.

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A parent advocate contributes to IEP meetings.

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FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

IEP meetings are scheduled more than once a year.

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Least restrictive environment is a school team decision.

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Parents/Guardians are an equal part of the decision making process.

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### FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

IEP meetings are a positive experience.

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<th>Strongly Agree (1)</th>
<th>Agree (2)</th>
<th>Neutral (3)</th>
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<td>Child 4 (4)</td>
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<td>○</td>
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<td>Other Children (5)</td>
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<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

Parent with One Child on an IEP

What is your child's current grade level?
- Elementary (1)
- Intermediate (2)
- Junior High (3)
- High School (4)

What is your child's least restrictive environment?
- Out of district placement (1)
- Homebound instruction (2)
- Residential placement (3)
- Self contained classroom where my child spends the majority of the day? (4)
- Resource room where my child is pulled for special education services (5)
- Special education services take place in both the resource room and general education classroom (6)
- All special education services take place in the general education classroom (7)

What is your child’s disability category?
- Multiple Disabilities
- Deaf Blindness
- Hearing Impairment
- Visual Impairment
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Emotional Disturbance
- Intellectual Disability
- Specific Learning Disability
- Autism
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Other Heath Impaired Major
- Other Health impaired Minor
- Developmental Disability

An hour is enough time for an IEP meeting.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

A parent advocate contributes to an IEP meeting.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

IEP meetings are scheduled more than once a year.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Least restrictive environment is usually a school team decision.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Parents and guardians are an equal part of the decision making process of the IEP team.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

IEP meetings are a positive experience.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

All Parents

Special education services are the same from school to school in the district.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

Parents and guardians are comfortable talking about their child with teachers and administrators.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Teachers are comfortable talking about their students with parents and guardians.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

The IEP is written in easily understood language.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

The IEP team emphasizes on building on a child's strengths.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

The IEP focuses on a child's weaknesses.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Teachers and professionals communicate with parents and guardians regularly.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

School staff help parents and guardians participate as part of the IEP team.
○ Strongly agree (1)
○ Somewhat agree (2)
○ Neutral (3)
○ Somewhat disagree (4)
○ Strongly disagree (5)

IEP meetings are scheduled to meet parents and guardians needs.
○ Strongly agree (1)
○ Somewhat agree (2)
○ Neutral (3)
○ Somewhat disagree (4)
○ Strongly disagree (5)

Special education is based on how a student falls short of grade level expectations.
○ Strongly agree (1)
○ Somewhat agree (2)
○ Neutral (3)
○ Somewhat disagree (4)
○ Strongly disagree (5)

Software based IEPs help meetings run smoothly.
○ Strongly agree (1)
○ Somewhat agree (2)
○ Neutral (3)
○ Somewhat disagree (4)
○ Strongly disagree (5)

Software based IEPs are an obstacle at IEP meetings.
○ Strongly agree (1)
○ Somewhat agree (2)
○ Neutral (3)
○ Somewhat disagree (4)
○ Strongly disagree (5)

IEP meetings are efficient.
○ Strongly agree (1)
○ Somewhat agree (2)
○ Neutral (3)
○ Somewhat disagree (4)
○ Strongly disagree (5)
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

IEP meetings are effective in laying out a yearlong plan.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

A draft of the IEP is given prior to the meeting so parents and guardians have time to evaluate and give feedback.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Parents and guardians are knowledgeable about the IEP process.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Parent and guardian participation is influenced by work schedules and family structures.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Agendas are shared and developed with families prior to the IEP meeting.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
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Parent and guardian input is encouraged.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
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- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)
FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

IEP meetings elicits strong feelings.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Please include your name, email address and/or phone number if you would be interested in participating in a follow up interview.

Staff Demographics

What is the LRE of the majority of your special education students?
- Self contained classroom where my students spend the majority of the day with me.
- Resource room where my students spend the majority of the day in the general education room and are pulled out for special education services.
- My students receive special education services in the general education classroom and in the resource room.
- Special education services are given exclusively in the general education classroom

What level do you currently teach/serve? Please check all that apply
- Elementary
- Intermediate
- Junior High
- High School

What disability categories do you service? Please check all that apply?
- Multiple Disabilities
- Deaf Blindness
- Hearing Impairment
- Visual Impairment
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Emotional Disturbance
- Intellectual Disability
- Specific Learning Disability
- Autism
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Other Health Impaired Major
- Other Health impaired Minor
- Developmental Disability
What is the highest degree you completed in school?
- Bachelor Degree
- Master Degree
- Doctorate Degree

Staff Questions

Special education services are the same from school to school in the district.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
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- Strongly disagree (5)

IEP meetings elicit a lot of feelings.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

IEP meetings are a positive experience.
- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
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- Strongly disagree (5)

Please include your name, email address and/or phone number if you would be interested in participating in a follow up interview.
### Parrott's emotions by groups

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary emotion</th>
<th>Secondary emotion</th>
<th>Tertiary emotion</th>
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<tr>
<td>Affection</td>
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<td>Love</td>
<td>Lust/Sexual desire</td>
<td>Arousal · Desire · Passion · Infatuation</td>
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<td>Pride</td>
<td>Triumph</td>
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<td>Eagerness · Hope</td>
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<td>Exasperation</td>
<td>Frustration</td>
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### FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO IEP PROCESS

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<td>Depression · Despair · Gloom · Glumness · Unhappy · Grief · Sorrow · Woe · Misery · Melancholy¹</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disappointment</td>
<td>Dismay · Displeasure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>Guilt · Regret · Remorse</td>
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<td>Neglect</td>
<td>Alienation · Defeatism · Dejection · Embarrassment</td>
</tr>
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<td>Sympathy</td>
<td>Pity · Sympathy</td>
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<td>Horror</td>
<td>Alarm · Shock · Fear · Fright · Horror · Terror · Panic · Hysteria · Mortification</td>
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<td>Anxiety · Suspense · Uneasiness · Apprehension (fear) · Worry · Distress · Dread</td>
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