Family-School Partnerships in Special Education: A Narrative Study of Parental Experiences

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FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION:

A NARRATIVE STUDY OF PARENTAL EXPERIENCES

Dissertation by

CARA E. McDERMOTT-FASY

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ABSTRACT

Family-School Partnerships in Special Education:

A Narrative Study of Parental Experiences

By

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Improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities remains a challenge for professionals in the field of special education. With the passage of *NCLB* and *IDEA 2004* has come the recommendation to establish higher standards for educational productivity for these students. This call to action seems warranted, especially in light of recent findings published in a report by the U.S. Department of Education (2002) entitled *A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Their Families*. The report suggests that students with disabilities drop-out of high school at twice the rate of their peers and higher education enrollment rates for students with disabilities are 50 percent lower than rates for the general population. Recent literature indicates that improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities depends in large part on creating constructive partnerships between their families and schools. The present study

contributes to the knowledge base on partnership-making by investigating family-school partnerships in special education from the perspective of parents.

This study utilized the qualitative methodology known as narrative inquiry to investigate the following research questions:

- What stories do parents tell regarding their personal experiences with the special education process?

- What do these stories tell us about the family's perspective of family-school partnerships in special education?

- What can we learn from these stories that might translate into effective policy and practice in schools?

Findings from interviews with fourteen parents of students receiving special education services indicated that they were concerned about issues of teacher effectiveness, honesty and trust, and their role in securing services for their children. Knowledge derived from their experiences offer suggestions for schools, institutions of higher education, and future researchers.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A recent report from the U.S. Department of Education (2002) affirms the following, "Commissioners and expert witnesses have repeatedly stressed that parents are the key to success for students with disabilities" (p. 38). This statement illustrates the pressure placed on parents of students with disabilities in our nation's schools. In this context, being a "good parent" means - in addition to the plethora of other demands and expectations – helping your child become a successful student. With the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (*NCLB*) and the *Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act of 2004* (*IDEA 2004*) has come the recommendation to establish higher standards for educational productivity for students with disabilities (Blackorby, Levine, & Wagner, 2007). This call to action seems warranted, especially in light of recent findings published in a report entitled *A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Their Families* (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). This report indicated that students with disabilities drop-out of high school at twice the rate of their peers, and higher education enrollment rates for students with disabilities are 50 percent lower than rates for the general population. If parents are in fact instrumental to the educational success of students with disabilities, then their experiential knowledge in relation to their children and in relation to their encounters with the special education system warrant extensive study. Learning more about how parents of students with disabilities are responding to this call for more active participation in their children's

schooling will help teachers, administrators, and researchers tailor practices and policies to fit the needs of these key stakeholders.

Over a decade ago, Epstein (1992) highlighted the need for more research on the effects of specific processes and practices for promoting partnerships between families and schools. This recommendation was based on the emerging perception of the early 1990s that schools and families shared a responsibility for socializing and educating our nation's children. Over the next decade, the idea of "overlapping spheres of influence" (Epstein, 1992, p. 1140) impacted reform movements in both general and special education by creating a more collaborative role for parents (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Recent literature suggests that improving educational outcomes for students in our nation's schools depends not on parents alone but rather on creating constructive partnerships between families and schools (Christenson, Godbler, & Anderson, 2005; Davis-Kean & Eccles, 2005; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005). Family-school partnerships are assumed in this literature to enhance the academic, social, and emotional learning of children (Patrikakou et al., 2005). Within this context, professionals in our nation's schools are challenged

> to move from relationships with families in which professionals have
> power over families to relationships with families in which professionals
> and families have power with each other and in which power from within
> the relationships is naturally occurring and beneficial to professionals and
> families alike. (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001, p. 36)

The present study contributes to the knowledge base on partnership-making by focusing on family-school partnerships in special education. In particular, this study explored the personal narratives of parents concerning their experiences with the special education system. It is hoped that knowledge gained from this study will help professionals like myself learn ways to become more supportive partners in the education of students with disabilities.

Purpose of the Study

Evidence indicates that parental involvement benefits student learning (Epstein, 1992; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Fan & Chan, 2001). This is particularly true for students with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2001). Recent support for this claim is contained in a report from the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS, 2007) which indicates that family factors such as economic status, parental expectations for students' educational attainment, family support for education provided at home, and family involvement at school are important for understanding student outcomes (Blackorby, Levine, & Wagner, 2007). Of particular note for professionals in the field of special education is the finding that school policies can encourage certain factors such as parental support at home and at school and, in doing so, support student achievement. This report, as well as other research (see Carter, 2002), provides evidence that policies promoting family-school partnerships in special education are essential for student learning.

However, despite widespread agreement that family-school partnerships benefit students with disabilities (U.S Department of Education, 2002), effective collaboration in special education often remains elusive (Pinkus, 2003; Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006; Pinkus, 2006). Instead, the relationships between families and schools are frequently characterized by inequality (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Rogers, 2003) and/or tension (Osher & Osher, 2002; Duncan, 2003; Leiter & Krauss, 2004; Underwood & Kopels, 2005; Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006; Pinkus, 2006), especially for economically disadvantaged families (Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006) and culturally and linguistically diverse families (Salas, 2004; Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006; Lo, 2009). If the goal of improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities is to be achieved then researchers should investigate tensions that exist between the home and the school and try to understand how these tensions impact student learning. An example of one such tension is the apparent gap between family-centered philosophy in special education and current service delivery models that often remain student-centered (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). How does this tension – and others - affect the experiences of parents within the current context of special education? With this problem in mind, the next section introduces the research questions that guided my study.

Research Questions

Given the current emphasis on family-school partnerships in special education, I wondered how parents experience the special education process in today's schools. How do parents account for and manage the situation of having a school-aged child diagnosed

with a disability? How do they make sense of what is happening to their child? How does the local school culture influence their actions (or inactions) on behalf of their child? In light of these thoughts, the following research questions guided this investigation:

- What stories do parents tell regarding their personal experiences with the special education process?

- What do these stories tell us about the family's perspective of family-school partnerships in special education?

- What can we learn from these stories that might translate into effective policy and practice in schools?

Significance of the Study

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education reported to Congress that "Increasing the involvement of parents in the education of their children is a national goal for policy makers in both general and special education" (as quoted in Leiter & Krauss, 2004). This policy goal was based on the widely held assumption that parental involvement is a fundamental contributor to a child's success in school. In a review of the literature on how parental involvement impacts children's achievement and success, Reynolds and Clements (2005) offered some insight as to why parental involvement is the focus of so many programs and policies to promote child and youth outcomes. Defining parental involvement "to include behavior with or on behalf of children at home or in school, attitudes and beliefs about parenting or education, and expectations for children's future" (p. 110), Reynolds and Clements argued that parental involvement can contribute

"substantially to children's school success" (p. 122). They wrote that "family involvement sets the conditions upon which other educational and personal experiences impact children's outcomes" (Reynolds & Clements, p. 110). In particular, they found that parental involvement in the form of high expectations for educational attainment and participation in school activities had the most consistent influence on educational outcomes. In light of their review, Reynolds and Clements concluded that "school-family partnerships that provide many ways to strengthen involvement are the most likely to impact children's academic, social, and emotional learning, and to lead to school success" (p. 125).

Several federal policy initiatives are based upon the assumption that student learning improves when schools and families work together (Moles, 2005; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005). For example, in 1990, the National Education Goals Panel included parental participation as one of its eight national education goals for improving learning and teaching in the nation's education system (Patrikakou et al., 2005). Specifically, the goal stated that by the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children (Patrikakou et al., 2005). In addition, *NCLB* requires local educational agencies receiving federal funding through Title I to develop jointly with parents a written parental involvement policy "to assist participating schools in planning and implementing effective parent involvement activities to improve student academic achievement and school performance" (Section 1118).

In the field of special education, the interrelationships between home and school are also recognized as vitally important. Parental rights and responsibilities were first outlined in the Education for All Handicapped Act of 1975 (94-142) when students with disabilities were granted the right to a free, appropriate public education. With P.L. 94-142, parents were given the right to be educational decision-makers and overseers of their children's education (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). In 1990, the law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and, in 1997, its amendments included provisions to strengthen and expand the role of parents to essential team members who participate in shared decision-making about a student's eligibility, Individuals Education Program (IEP), and placement (Osher & Osher, 2002). Most recently, *IDEA 2004* reported that:

> 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of
>
> children with disabilities can be made more effective by…Strengthening
>
> the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such
>
> children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of
>
> their children at school and at home. (p. 118, STAT. 2649, 5B)

These legal mandates require families and schools to collaborate during the special education process, and the ideological goal of their collaboration is the cultivation of partnerships that benefit student learning (Osher & Osher, 2002; Pinkus, 2003; Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006; Pinkus, 2006).

Today, research on family-school partnerships in special education garners wide interest. For example, current research in Great Britain on parent-professional

partnerships (Pinkus 2003; Todd, 2003; Pinkus, 2006) and in the Netherlands on increasing the involvement of parents in the education of students with special needs (Renty & Roeyers, 2006; Blok, Peetsma, & Roede, 2007) illustrates international interest in the topic. In the United States, federal legislation promoting attempts to strengthen the relationship between the home and school in order to enhance student learning also suggests the relevance of this issue (Moles, 2005). Some posit that the climate of fiscal restraint and the belief held by policy-makers and educational reformers that parental/family involvement is a cost-effective way to enhance student outcomes may explain some of the recent attention to this topic (Dudley-Marling, 2001). Yet, despite national and international interest in the topic of partnership-making, the current state of family-school partnerships in the field of special education is mixed at best. Some call it rhetoric rather than reality (Pinkus, 2003). In light of the current state of affairs, Osher and Osher (2002) offered this insight as to the direction the field must travel in the years ahead:

> The majority of schools and other child serving agencies have begun to
> collaborate with families in a variety of ways. Most of these are intended
> to help families support the school's or agency's agenda and
> objectives…Rarely are these collaborations initiated to help families
> achieve their own goals…it is still uncommon for families to have a voice
> in actually making decisions about which recommendations to implement
> or reject and how system reform should be done. (p. 59)

With this background in mind, I turn now to an overview of the theoretical framework

that informs my study.

Theoretical Framework

Epstein (1992) suggested that theoretical perspectives on schools and families

have been based on one of the following viewpoints: *separate responsibilities*, *sequenced*

responsibilities, embedded responsibilities or *overlapping responsibilities*. The model of

separate responsibilities is based on the assumption that "schools and families are most

efficient and effective when their leaders maintain and pursue independent goals,

standards, and activities" (Epstein, p. 1140). Alternatively, the model of *sequenced*

responsibilities is based on the idea that parents assume the role of teacher during the

early years and prepare their children for school. Once a child enters school, the

responsibility for educating the child shifts to school personnel. The model of *embedded*

responsibilities assumes a nested relationship between the individual and other

environmental contexts and pays particular attention "to the potential effects on

individuals of the multiple environments to which they are members" (Epstein, p. 1140).

Finally, the *overlapping responsibilities* perspective is based on the belief of shared

responsibility between major institutions for socializing and educating children such as

the home and the school. This theoretical perspective assumes that a child's learning,

development, and success are the main purposes of family-school partnerships.

In an era of special education defined by family-centered philosophy, the

overlapping responsibilities model underlies much of the current talk about family-school

partnerships. Epstein (1992) noted that, "When schools and families work in partnership, students hear that school is important from their parents and teachers and perceive that caring people in both environments are investing and coordinating time and resources to help them" (p. 1141). According to Epstein, the idea of shared responsibility between the home and the school promotes the cultivation of "productive connections (that) may contribute to improving youngsters' academic skills, self-esteem, positive attitudes toward learning, independence, other achievements, accomplishments and other behavioral characteristics of successful individuals" (p. 1141). Within this theoretical framework, six types of involvement opportunities exist for families and schools interested in fulfilling their shared responsibility for children's learning and development:

(1) assisting parents in child-rearing; (2) school-parental communication; (3) involving parents in school volunteer opportunities; (4) involving parents in home-based learning; (5) involving parents in school-decision-making; and (6) involving parents in school-community collaborations. (Fan & Chen, 2002, p. 2-3)

Epstein's model is informed in part by the ecological framework proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1994) which is described in more detail below.

The ecological model developed by Bronfenbrenner (1994) is a productive framework for understanding the idea of overlapping spheres of influence because it provides an explanation for why "the home, school, and the relationship between them are so significant for children's development" (Beveridge, 2005, p. 7). According to Bronfenbrenner, individual development and change occur as a result of interactions

between the individual and various environmental contexts (Chibucos & Leite, 2005).

These environmental contexts are understood to be nested and, as such, are referred to in

terms of their increasing distance from the individual: the microsystem, the mesosystem,

the exosystem, and the macrosystem (Beveridge, 2005).

The first two levels are known as the microsystem and the mesosystem. At the

innermost level is the microsystem which consists of the individual and the single

settings in which that individual exists (Chibucos & Leite, 2005). Within the

microsystem, the home is understood to be the primary learning context for a child;

however, individual development is also understood to be influenced by additional

environmental contexts such as the child's school or neighborhood (Beveridge, 2005).

The next level is known as the mesosystem. Interrelations among various microsystems

occur at this level (Chibucos & Leite, 2005). According to Beveridge (2005),

> This system does not comprise discrete environmental settings, but is
>
> made up of the interrelationships between the most significant settings
>
> within an individual's microsystem. For children of school age, these
>
> include the relationship between home and school and peers, and in the
>
> case of those with special educational needs, may also include the
>
> relationship between different professionals with whom they are involved.
>
> (p. 8-9)

The defining characteristic of the mesosystem level is the emphasis on interconnections

between the various microsystems in a child's life. Individual development is believed to

be influenced by the strength of these connections, including the link between the child's home and school.

The final two levels consist of the exosystem and the macrosystem. These systems consider "the effects of the broader environmental influences on children's development" (Beveridge, 2005, p. 9). The third level is referred to as the exosystem and consists of interactions between the individual and influences from social groups and institutions such as school board policies (Chibucos & Leite, 2005). While the outermost level, known as the macrosystem, encompasses cultural perspectives, beliefs, and ideologies that impact the individual such as federal policies like *NCLB* and *IDEA 2004* (Chibucos & Leite, 2005).

According to Christenson, Godber, and Anderson (2005), "children's level of academic, social, and emotional competence cannot be understood or fostered by locating problems in child, family, or school contexts in absence of a focus on the dynamic influence of relationships among the systems" (p. 23). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model supports this position and provides an explanation for why schools and families share a responsibility for promoting a child's individual development. It suggests that individual development, including educational attainment, is a function of contributions from multiple contexts in a child's life. In the field of special education, special educators are faced with the challenge of connecting with families during the difficult time of referral, identification, and IEP development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model suggests that our success or failure to create strong links between the home and the

school "will affect how well children are able to adapt to the learning demands that are made of them and how well supported they feel" (Beveridge, 2005, p. 9).

In the final section of this chapter I consider my position as researcher and briefly comment on the thoughts and experiences I bring to this study.

Positioning of Researcher

As a special education teacher at the elementary school level, I was a primary participant in the unfolding special education process for school-age students with disabilities. My responsibilities included participating in the collaborative process of identification, assessment, and determination of eligibility. In my role as professional, I worked alongside other colleagues to develop and implement IEPs for students who qualified for special education services. This process unfolded in compliance with regulations that govern the special education system.

I taught in this capacity for five years before taking an extended leave of absence to attend graduate school and to raise a family. Both experiences have taught me many valuables lessons that will impact my professional life upon returning to work. For example, my doctoral studies have exposed me to the multiple perspectives and complexities surrounding issues of curriculum, instruction, and special education. Whereas, my role as parent has deepened my understanding of the hopes and worries that accompany sharing the responsibility of educating your child with the social institution of school. Recently, I was contemplating a job interview. In this hypothetical meeting, I was asked about my recent experiences and how these experiences will make me a better

educator. I found myself describing the experience of taking my three-year-old son to his first day of preschool and "handing-him-over" to the teachers at the school. I talked about issues of trust, about parental expectations, and about the unknown journey ahead. I talked about wanting the best for my child and needing to work in partnership with the school to achieve this outcome. In thinking about this scenario, I realized that I have grown to better understand the critical role parents play in their children's education, and I have become more aware of the expectations and emotions inherent in that role. These are important lessons for a future educator.

During my doctoral studies, I have also learned about the various research methods available to stakeholders interested in improving the educational experiences of children in our nation's schools. One such method is narrative inquiry which values the importance of storytelling in peoples' lives. In retrospect, the importance of storytelling should have been obvious to an elementary teacher who spent a good deal of time in Writer's Workshop where children engaged in countless hours telling stories about their lives. However, it took a course in narrative analysis to expose me to the idea that one way people make sense of experiences is by storytelling (Riessman, 2002). This idea was helpful in thinking about how I can become a more supportive professional. The parents with whom I worked during my time as a special educator were in the midst of experiencing a disconnect between the ideal education journey they imagined for their school-age child, and the real educational journey that was unfolding during the elementary years. A referral to special education presented for these parents a "breach between the ideal and the real" (Riessman, 2002, p. 219). In retrospect, I wonder how the

special education process unfolded for parents. How did they make sense of this experience? What shape and form would their stories take if asked about their experiences with the special education process? As a professional, how did my actions (or inactions) help or hinder these parents on their journey through the special education system?

These are some of the experiences and thoughts I bring to this study. They will impact my work in some form or fashion. Riessman (2002) noted that, "We cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret" (p. 220). In this study, I heard the voices of parents similar to those with whom I worked and tried to represent and understand their stories in order to learn ways of becoming a more supportive professional.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

The role of parents has always been central to discussions on the education of students with disabilities. Parents have typically been the greatest advocates for children with disabilities since federal and state legislatures granted them decision-making and accountability rights for their children's education (Redding & Sheley, 2005). With the passage of *NCLB* and *IDEA 2004* has come the call for increased educational productivity. In order to improve student performance, researchers in the current era of accountability are trying to understand what influences educational outcomes and what can be done to improve educational attainment for students with disabilities. For example, a report from the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS, 2007) described one such study and suggested that family factors continue to be an integral part of this process (Blackorby, Wagner, Knokey, & Levine, 2007). If this is true, the involvement and support families provide for students with disabilities remains an important area of study.

Considering the perspectives of parents on family-school partnerships in special education within the broader context of the parental involvement literature may enhance our understanding of the current topic. This chapter begins by undertaking this task. Then, a review the literature on parent-school relationships in special education is presented. Building on the previously established claim that family-school partnership talk is an important topic in special education, this review attempts to synthesize what's

been done since the model of overlapping responsibilities (Epstein, 1992) took hold. When available, existing literature reviews are utilized to offer a synthesis of research in a particular area.

Parental Involvement Literature

The clear assumption underlying parental involvement research is that parental involvement benefits children's learning (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Fan & Chen, 2001). In the early 1990s, debates surrounding issues of school reform shifted from an emphasis on "school achievement independent of the contribution of surrounding institutions" (For the Record, 1993, p. 677) toward talk about "the importance of parents in the education of their children" (For the Record, p. 677). This new focus prompted researchers to begin studying "the role schools might play in facilitating parents' positive role in children's academic achievement" (Eccles & Harold, 1993, p. 568). An essential ingredient in the schools' new role was identified as twofold: creating relationships between parents and schools and between communities and schools. With evidence mounting about the importance of parental involvement in children's learning (Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992), researchers began asking new questions such as why are parents not more involved with schools (Eccles & Harold, 1993) and why and how parents become involved in their children's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). This discussion began to focus researchers' efforts on issues of emerging interest like: (1) the parental involvement process; (2) links between parental involvement and student achievement;

and, (3) barriers to parental involvement. See Appendix A for a summary table of reviewed literature.

The Parental Involvement Process

In attempting to understand parental involvement in children's learning, Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Brissie (1992) explored the theory of self-efficacy and its application to parent-school relations. They suggested that parental efficacy beliefs, defined as "a parent's belief that he or she is capable of exerting a positive influence on children's school outcomes" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., p. 287), may be important in understanding the parent involvement process. They wrote, "Overall, parents most likely become involved when they believe that their involvement will 'make a difference' for their children" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., p. 288). Based on this assumption, these researchers developed a study to explore parental efficacy and the nature of its relationship to specific indicators of parents' involvement in their elementary school child's education. A survey of parents (n= 390) revealed that "parent efficacy is related to modest, but significant, levels of volunteering, educational activities, and telephone calls" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., p. 291). This indicated to the researchers that the construct of parental efficacy may contribute to an understanding of the parental involvement process and, thus, warranted further investigation.

Building on their earlier work around parental self-efficacy, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) presented a theoretical model for understanding why parents choose to become involved in their children's education and why their involvement positively

influences educational outcomes. They believed that previous models had failed to

address critical questions regarding parents' positive influences on their children's

educational outcomes. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) suggested that their model

of the parental involvement process addressed this gap. In particular, their focus centered

upon parents' perspectives of the parent involvement process and specific interventions

and changes that school personnel and other interested stakeholders could make to

improve parental involvement and related student outcomes. The model identified what

these researchers believed to be "the most significant variables in parents' decisions to

become involved in their children's' education, their choice of specific involvement

forms, and the influence of their involvement on children's educational outcomes"

(Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, p. 329). The levels of the parental involvement process as

suggested by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Levels of the parental involvement process

Level 5	Child/Student Outcomes
Level 4	Tempering/Mediating Variables
Level 3	Mechanism through Which Parent Involvement Influences Child/Student Outcomes
Level 2	Parent's Choice of Involvement Forms
Level 1	Parental Involvement Decision

Continuing this line of inquiry, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) took a

closer look the parental involvement process by reviewing the literature on why parents

become involved in their children's education (Level 1). In their review, these

researchers sought to explain "parents' fundamental decision about involvement"

(Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, p. 4). In framing their review, they pointed out that while prior research assumed the importance of status variables in explaining levels of parental involvement, process variables (such as what parents think and do, across status groups) had been established as a more powerful predictor of school related outcomes (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Upon completion of their review, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) suggested that the most significant psychological factors influencing a parents' decision to become involved in his or her child's education were: parent's role construction (What do parents believe they are supposed to do in relation to their child's education?); parents' self-efficacy for helping their child's educational progress (Do parents believe what they do will make a difference?); and, parents perceptions of general invitations, demands, and opportunities for parental involvement presented by schools, teachers, and/or children. In light of these findings, the researchers concluded that,

> those who wish to increase parental involvement and extend the benefits it
> offers must focus at least in part on the parents' perspective in the process.
> Parents who believe they should be involved in their children's education
> and schooling and who have a positive sense of efficacy about the
> usefulness of their involvement are likely to be involved. (Hoover-
> Dempsey & Sandler, p. 36)

Based on their review, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler suggested that the most effective way to improve parental involvement is to focus on a parents' positive role construction and parent's sense of efficacy for helping their children with schooling. School efforts in

the form of invitations for parental involvement were found to be most effective when they addressed these findings.

In later work, Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) revised the theoretical model presented by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) based on their ongoing efforts to empirically test the processes presented in earlier studies. Initial revisions were made to the original model's first two levels: Parental Involvement Decisions (Level 1) and Parents Choice of Involvement Forms (Level 2). Participants in the scale development investigation were parents (n=1,384) of children from a diverse urban public school system. These parents filled out questionnaire packets and returned them to their children's schools. Survey items were created based on statements from prior interviews with parents (n=20) in which participants talked about their beliefs and responsibilities regarding the education of their children. Based on the survey data, Walker et al. proposed several notable revisions to the original model of the parental involvement process presented by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997). Specifically, ideas inherent in Level 1 and Level 2 of the original model (see Table 1) were reconceptualized into three overarching constructs in the revised model's Level 1. These three central ideas were presented as underpinning parental involvement behavior. Table 2 presents the overarching constructs of Level 1 and their definitions as reconceptualized by Walker et al.

Table 2

Level 1 constructs in Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler's (1995, 1997) revised model

Level One Constructs	Defined As
Parents' Perceived Life Context	Self-Perceived Time and Energy + Self-Perceived Skills and Knowledge
Parents' Perceptions of Invitations for Involvement from Others	Perceptions of Invitations from General School, Teacher, and/or Child
Parents' Motivational Beliefs	Parental Role Construction + Parental Self Efficacy

According to the revised model, the overarching constructs of Level 1 contribute to decisions by parents about various Parental Involvement Forms (Level 2) defined as either school-based or home-based.

In a companion piece to the previous study, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, and Closson (2005) presented a review of the literature on the parental involvement process during the elementary and middle school years. In the review, Hoover-Dempsey et al. found that recent empirical work underscored the importance of both parental role construction and parental self-efficacy in explaining involvement behaviors. The research they reviewed also supported the suggestion that parental role construction is influenced by school attributes as well as the nature of the general school invitations. Hoover-Dempsey et al. also found that invitations from the school, teacher, and/or child provided powerful contextual motivators for parental involvement. Finally, Hoover-Dempsey et al. reported that parental perceptions about their time, energy, skills, and knowledge also affect involvement behaviors including the choices and activities undertaken by parents in relation to their children's education.

Finally, in a recent article on the topic of parents' motivations for involvement in their children's education, Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, and Sandler (2007) examined the ability of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's revised theoretical model of the parental involvement process (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005) to predict the types and levels of parental involvement during the elementary and middle school years. Specifically, these researchers wanted to know if the specific constructs outlined in Table 2 predicted parents' self-reported parental involvement behaviors at home or at school. Based on survey data from parents (n=853) of children from an urban public school system, these researchers found that parental involvement is motivated primarily by features of the social context, especially specific invitations from the teacher and/or the child, rather than SES background. In addition, they found that specific invitations from the child, self-efficacy beliefs, and self-perceived time and energy predicted home-based involvement activities. School-based activities were predicted by those same constructs plus specific invitations from the teacher. In light of these findings, Green et al. cautioned future investigators to carefully define the difference between home-based and school-based parental involvement.

Links between Parental Involvement and Student Achievement

In a meta-analysis of empirical studies on parental involvement (n=25), Fan and Chen (2001) found that a small to moderate relationship existed between involvement behaviors and student achievement. In general, these researchers found that the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement was stronger when

outcomes were represented by more global indicators like school grade point average rather than specific subject indicators like subject-specific grade. In addition, parental home supervision was found to have a very low relationship to student's academic achievement, whereas parental aspirations/expectations for their children's educational achievement had the strongest relationships to students' academic achievement. Based on their review of the literature, Fan and Chen concluded that future studies in this area should pay particular attention to issues such as operationally defining and measuring parental involvement.

Desimone (1999) investigated the link between parental involvement and student achievement using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. In an effort to understand how "to use parental involvement as a mechanism to improve school opportunities and outcomes for all students" (Desimone, p. 13), she examined the relationships between twelve types of parental involvement and 8th grade scores in reading and mathematics. She found that there was a "statistically significant and substantially meaningful relationships between student achievement and parental involvement according to the student's race-ethnicity and family income" (Desimone, p. 24). In light of her work, she cautioned future investigators in this area to pay particular attention to the "important differences in the relationship of parental involvement to student achievement according to the type of involvement, whether or not it was reported by student or parent, and how achievement was measured" (Desimone, p. 24).

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Eccles and Harold's (1993) explored in depth issues surrounding barriers to parental involvement and specific ways teachers and schools can increase parental involvement during the early adolescent years. In this article, the researchers pointed out that lack of parental involvement can stem from various status variables such as parent/family characteristics, community characteristics, and child characteristics. However, they suggested that even more important than status variables in explaining the lack of parental involvement were process variables such as the practices and characteristics of schools and teachers. They noted that "parental involvement can be substantially increased by the efforts of teachers and schools to facilitate the parents' role" by focusing on process variables which are in the realm of school influence (Eccles & Harold, p. 570). As Epstein (1992) had suggested: "The more that schools do to involve families, the less these status variables seem to explain parental behaviors and children's success" (p. 1148). Eccles and Harold (1993) also found that collaborative relationships between parents and teachers can contribute to children's healthy development. Unfortunately, they noted that these relationships tend to decline during the secondary schools years despite the fact that parental involvement during the later years is of equal importance as during the early years.

In another piece of research on this topic, Christenson (2004) characterized barriers for families, educators, and the relationships between the two in terms of structural aspects and psychological aspects. Regarding families, she highlighted the following structural barriers: "lack of role models, information, and knowledge about

resources; lack of supportive environments and resources; economic, emotional, and time

constraints; and child care and transportation" (Christenson, p. 88). Whereas

psychological barriers for families included: "feelings of inadequacy, low sense of self-

efficacy; adopting a passive role by leaving education to schools; linguistic and cultural

differences; suspicion about treatment form educators; and perceived lack of

responsiveness to parental needs or desires" (Christenson, p. 88). Christenson found that

these two types of barriers – structural and psychological - were dynamic and interrelated

and that "understanding family constraints is seminal to educators' developing sensitivity

and responsiveness to families' needs and desires for their children's schooling

experiences" (Christenson, p. 89).

Summary of Parental Involvement Research

In the opening section of this chapter, a review of recent literature on parental

involvement was presented to situate the current study. What were the lessons learned?

First, and foremost, the parental involvement literature suggested that parents can

contribute in significant ways to their children's success in school (Reynolds &

Clements, 2005). Second, research on parental involvement indicated that there is a

distinction to make between the influence of status variables and process variables on

parental involvement behaviors. Whereas earlier research suggested that "family

background or status determine family effectiveness or the ability or the willingness to

encourage, motivate, and interact with their children as students" (Epstein, 1992, p.

1147), more recent literature supported the claim that process variables are more

powerful predictors of school related outcomes and – unlike status variables – are within

the realm of school-influence (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Next, the parental

involvement literature showed that active role construction (What do parents believe they

are supposed to do in relation to their child's education?) and relatively strong self-

efficacy (Do parents believe that their involvement in their child's schooling will

positively influence educational outcomes?) are important motivators for parental

involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In addition to parental role

construction and parental self-efficacy, a third finding of the involvement research was

that features of social context such as parental perceptions of invitations from others (i.e.

school, teacher, and child) and parents' perceived life context (i.e. self-perceived skill and

knowledge and/or self-perceived time and energy) also explain involvement decisions.

This finding suggested the importance of studying interpersonal relationships between

home and school from the perspective of parents. Finally, and of particular interest for

professionals in the field of general and special education, literature on parental

involvement indicated that school policies that incorporate the above-mentioned findings

can be effective in improving parental involvement behaviors and, potentially, students'

educational outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

  The parent involvement literature is not without critics. For example, according

to Fan and Chen (2001):

    the idea that parental involvement has positive influence on students'

    academic achievement is so intuitively appealing that society in general,

    and educators in particular, has considered parental involvement an

important ingredient for the remedy for many problems in education.

(p.1)

However, Fan and Chen suggested that inconsistencies in the literature on parental involvement exist. Beginning with the observation that most of the work in this area is qualitative, Fan and Chen went on to suggest that of the quantitative work undertaken, many have neglected to explicitly address important issues such as theoretical frameworks, operational definitions of parental involvement, and indicators of academic performance. These researchers noted that "a direct result of these multifaceted dimensions of parental involvement and academic achievement is the inconsistency in the literature as to the beneficial effect of parental involvement on student academic achievement" (p. 4). Echoing Fan and Chen's criticisms regarding the lack of empirical studies, Desimone (1999) suggested that another area in need of further consideration is whether or not race and income matter when studying the link between parental involvement and student achievement. She wrote:

> Schools increasingly are being asked to serve diverse student populations and give special attention to improving the academic and social outcomes of racial-ethnic minority and low-income students. It is therefore imperative that we increase our understanding of how parental involvement can be employed for all children, especially for those at risk for educational failure. (p.12)

Finally, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, and Closson (2005) also argued for improvement in research on parental involvement "including

careful delineation of conceptual and theoretical foundations, thoughtful selection of design and methodology, and systematic attention to the derivation of implications for sound and effective educational practice" (p. 106).

Family-School Partnerships in Special Education

In general, the role of parents in the special education process has evolved from that of passive-recipient of information from "expert" professionals to that of active collaborator with the right to be decision-makers and overseers of their children's education. Today, parent-professional partnerships are cultivated to promote the role of parent-as-collaborator. This section of the chapter begins with an overview of the evolving role of parents in special education. Then, research literature on parent-school relationships and special education is reviewed.

The Evolving Role of Parents in Special Education

Parents of students with disabilities have assumed a variety of roles throughout the history of special education. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) noted that these roles have included the following: parents as source of their child's disability (1880s-1930s), as organizational members (1930s-1950s), as service developers (1950s-1960s), as recipients of professionals decisions (1960s-1970s), as teachers (late 1960s-mid 1980s), as political advocates (1950s-1970s), as educational decision-makers (1975- current day), and as collaborators (mid 1980s- current day). In thinking about the role of parents in special education, a strong example of their historical importance is embodied in their

past role as political advocates. For example, during the 1970s, parents of children with mental retardation for example were involved in a number of right-to-education suits across the country and were successful in winning the right to a free, appropriate education for children with mental retardation. Success in the courts led parent groups to press for federal legislation to implement the various courts decisions. This parental movement was instrumental in winning the 1975 passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), the first piece of federal legislation governing the education of students with disabilities (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

Following the passage of this landmark legislation, a traditional, provider-driven model of service delivery dominated the field of special education. The major assumption underlying this model was that the professional was the expert and, as such, the role of the professional was conceptualized as:

> By virtue of their training, to possess expertise and tools to diagnose
>
> problems; the unique knowledge to prescribe solutions; the precise skills
>
> to implement, monitor, and evaluate the prescribed interventions…use
>
> their professional expertise to fix presenting problems, and perhaps in
>
> some cases, the clients themselves. (Osher & Osher, 2002, p. 53)

In contrast, parents were expected to be the passive recipients of professional-decision making (Wolfendale, 1982; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Osher & Osher, 2002). This traditional provider-driven model focused on training parents to work with their children in the home using various methods and skills acquired through training programs run by professionals (Nardine, 1974; Jelinek, 1975; Proctor, 1976).

With the passage of P.L. 94-142 and the granting of decision-making and accountability rights to parents, this traditional provider-driven model began to give way to a more parent-centered model of service delivery (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Osher & Osher, 2002; Brookman-Frazee, 2004). The parent-centered model of the late 1970s and early 1980s was premised on the belief that parents and families also possess knowledge and expertise; that their knowledge and expertise is equivalent to that of professionals; and, that parents and professionals have a shared responsibility for educating children (Wolfendale, 1982; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Osher & Osher, 2002). Put another way, the parent-centered model was based on the belief that parents and professionals "know children in different yet complimentary ways, and it is only when parents and professionals work together, that a genuine picture of a child's needs and strengths emerge" (Pinkus, 2006, p. 156). Research indicates that prior to the shift from the traditional provider-driven model to the parent-centered model, parents tended to become involved in the special education process upon exercising their right to a due process hearing (Mulholland & Hourihan, 1977; Yoshida & Gottlieb, 1977). However, with the federal mandate that parents participate in the development of the IEP, research in the years following PL-94-142 began to focus on parental involvement prior to the due process hearing. For example, researchers who studied the dynamics of the IEP meeting and the role of parents in the decision-making processes were interested in how parents asserted themselves as active members of the team. (Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida, & Kaufman, 1978; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Porcella, 1980; Scanlon, Arick, & Phelps, 1981; Goldstein & Turnbull, 1982; Soffer, 1982; Shevin, 1983). The parent-

centered model focused less on training parents to work with their children in the home and more on promoting the involvement of parents in a wider range of educational decision making activities in the schools.

By the mid 1980s, service delivery models in special education shifted again. The parent-centered model evolved into a more family-centered/family-driven model with the recognition that partnerships between the home and the school should not be limited to parents alone (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). By the early 1990s, the family rather than the parents was the new focus of home-school partnership talk. The current emphasis on partnership-making in the family-centered/family-driven model is based on the assumption that more can be accomplished together than alone and that partnerships between the family and the school can help solve public problem such as poor post school outcomes for students with disabilities (Pinkus 2003, 2006). Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) described the role of parents and families in this current service delivery model as follows:

> The role of parents as collaborators differs from the role of parents as decision-makers and certainly from that of parents as recipients of professionals' judgments. The role of parents as collaborators presumes that families will be equal and full partners with educators and school systems and that this collaboration will benefit the student and the entire school system as well. (p. 13)

This quote typifies today's family-centered philosophy in special education. Osher and Osher (2002) suggested that moving towards the goal of truer collaboration with families

has necessitated a paradigm shift in the field of special education, an evolution from a traditional provider-driven model to a family-centered/family-driven model. If this is true, what are the experiences of parents within this new era of special education? I turn now to an exploration of the current context of parent-school relationships in special education.

Parental Involvement in Special Education

Research that connects the role of parents and the role of schools within the context of family-school partnerships in special education dates back to at least the 1970s. Research on the descriptors "parents" and "special education" indicates that partnership language first began to surface in the late 1970s and early 1980s. An early example of such work was Feldman, Byalick, and Rosedale's (1975) publication entitled "Parents and Professionals: A Partnership in Special Education". In this study, the researchers described how parent-professional communication can facilitate and enhance a parent's role in the education of a child with a disability. A clear indicator of a shift in thinking about family-school partnerships surfaced in an article by Wolfendale (1982) entitled "Parents: Clients or Partners". Writing about the publication of reports on education and child services in Great Britain, Wolfendale described what was then recent work by educational psychologists on family-school collaboration as "a burgeoning area" with the potential to be "radical in its implications" (p. 47). Additional early work on the topic included Wolf's (1982) "Parents as Partners in Exceptional Education" in which the researcher reviewed the societal and legal factors that had influenced the increasing

involvement of parents in the education of their child with a disability, and Green's (1985) "Parents and Professionals as Partners" in which the researcher discussed the need for parents and professionals to have a clear understanding of each other's roles in the education of children with disabilities.

In 1996, Royster and McLaughlin reviewed literature on parent partnerships in special education. In particular, they examined purposes of parent partnerships, models of parental involvement, and barriers of participation. Based upon their review, they concluded that the goal of creating parent partnerships in special education was twofold: to empower parents and to enhance communication between parents and professionals. Regarding the former, they suggested that parental empowerment, characterized as "the ability to access and utilize resources; education in problem solving and decision-making techniques; and effective collaboration skills" (Royster & McLaughlin, p. 25), was an important factor in reducing parental dependence on professionals and promoting active participation in the educational programming of students with disabilities. Regarding the latter, they suggested that collaborative communication, defined as parents and professional working together in the problem solving process, was essential for establishing the necessary level of trust between parties. In light of their findings, Royster and McLaughlin concluded that greater parental participation in the special education process was warranted and that professionals needed "to examine their own biases and values and search for a more inclusive method for working with families" (Royster & McLaughlin, p. 31). In particular, these researchers identified the need for professional training in effective collaboration techniques, writing: "The training

professionals have received has been limited to parent education and counseling

programs. These programs have not been collaborative experiences because the

professional has worked from an authoritative standpoint" (Royster & McLaughlin, p.

28). Since Royster and McLaughlin's review, research on parent school relationships and

special education has focused on parental involvement in special education and barriers

of parental involvement in special education. See Appendix B for a summary table of

reviewed literature.

Literature on parental involvement in special education examined the current

situation and perceptions of parents of students with disabilities (Crawford & Siminoff,

2003; Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004; Rentry & Roeyers, 2005; Tissot & Evans, 2006;

Jivanjee, Kruzich, Friesen, & Robinson, 2007; Roll-Pettersson & Mattson, 2007). Often,

this literature explored the perceptions of parents who have children with a particular

type of disability. For example, researchers explored family members' perceptions of

their experiences participating in educational planning for children with emotional

disorders. In examining the views of parents (n=30) whose children were attending

schools for children with emotional and behavioral disorders, Crawford and Simonoff

(2003) found that parents often lacked emotional and practical support in coping with

their children's needs. They suggested that community agencies need to improve

communication and collaboration with such families. Jivanjee et al. (2007) also studied

the perceptions of families with children with serious emotional disorders. These

researchers were interested in the families' perceptions of their participation in

educational planning for their children. Findings from family members (n=133) indicated

that their perceptions were mixed with qualitative comments revealing "high levels of

dissatisfaction and frustration with the educational planning process, and perceptions that

positive experiences were the exception, or the result of extraordinary effort" (Jivanjee, p.

87). Jivanjee et al. suggested that school social workers in particular can support families

by providing them with clear explanations and training parents so they can participate

effectively in IEP meetings.

Along the same lines, Lindsay and Dockrell (2004) examined the perspectives of

parents (n=66) of children with specific speech and language difficulties concerning

provisions to meet their children educational needs. They found that parents "thought

that they were often not listened to, both at the outset and later, and that they had to fight

hard for appropriate support services or entry to an appropriate school for their children"

(Lindsay & Dockrell, p. 233). Parents also reported that they felt "ill-informed about the

ways in which their children's needs were being met in school" (Lindsay & Dockrell, p.

233). Lindsay and Dockrell concluded that family-school partnerships become strained

under these conditions.

Similarly, other researchers explored factors associated with levels of parental

satisfaction in the education of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). For

example, findings from a national survey in the United Kingdom of 738 parents indicated

that the process of determining provisions for children with ASD was very stressful for

parents (Tissot & Evans, 2006). In another study on this topic, Rentry and Roeyers

(2005) examined the factors associated with levels of parental satisfaction with formal

support and education for children with ASD in Flanders. Their sample included 244

parents of children with ASD who filled out a survey on their experiences. They found

that parental satisfaction was generally predicted by parental involvement in formal

support, knowledge of available service provisions, and the time between first

consultation and final diagnosis.

A different focus was pursued by Roll-Pettersson and Mattson (2007) who

examined the perspectives of mothers of children with dyslexic difficulties concerning

their experiences and encounters with the Swedish school system. They interviewed the

mothers of seven children. They found that the mothers felt that schools often failed to

identify their children's difficulties and that led to a lack of appropriate support.

Although the mothers came from various backgrounds, Roll-Pettersson and Mattson

noted the following commonalities:

> They all described tactics which they actively utilized in order to support
>
> their child, such as allocating resources, helping with homework,
>
> informing schools of their child's needs and making placement decisions,
>
> and using strategies to alleviate their child's low self-esteem. (p. 420)

In sum, research on parental involvement in special education reviewed here

found that the situations and perceptions of parents concerning the education of their

children with disabilities were mixed. In general, satisfaction was often associated with

parents feeling that they are involved in the decision-making process (Rentry & Roeyers,

2005; Jivanjee et al., 2007); age of diagnosis (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004; Rentry &

Roeyers, 2005); timeliness in securing educational provisions (Crawford & Simonoff,

2003; Tissot & Evans, 2006); and, parental knowledge of available services (Rentry & Roeyers, 2005).

Other research on parental involvement in special education focused on issues of efficacy and empowerment (Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006; Nowell & Salem, 2007). For example, Ditrano and Silverstein (2006) explored how schools and parents can work together more effectively. Using a participatory action research (PAR) model, these researchers attempted to increase collaboration between parents (n=9) and school personnel, improve service to children, and generate a model for effective staff-family partnerships by implementing a PAR project with parents who had traditionally felt stress, powerlessness, and alienation. They found that the PAR model helped parents in "developing a critical consciousness" (Ditrano & Silverstein, p. 363) regarding their children's education and in "building a community of knowledge" (Ditrano & Silverstein, p. 363) with other parents concerning disability classification and mandated services. As a result of the PAR project, parents reported feeling an increased sense of optimism and empowerment and worked towards implementing "institutional change" (Ditrano & Silverstein, p. 363) regarding their children's education. Similarly, in a study on the impact of special education mediation on parent-school relationships, Nowell and Salem (2007) found that parents' sense of efficacy as a decision-making partner in their children's education was affected by their perceptions of whether or not they were able to influence the decision-making process. For example, positive self-efficacy was found to be related to "the extent to which parents perceived the school to have followed through in good faith on the mediation agreement" (Nowell & Salem, p. 313). This, coupled with

a positive mediation experience, provided parents "with evidence of their ability to have influence on the school system and would therefore by experienced as empowering" (Nowell & Salem, p. 313).

Barriers to Parental Involvement in Special Education

Research on barriers to parental involvement in special education indicated that parent participation was diminished when parents perceived that they were not listened to (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004; Blok, Peetsma, & Roede, 2007). For example, Lindsay and Dockrell (2004) examined the perspectives of parents of children with specific speech and language problems concerning provisions to meet their children educational needs. They found that although parents (n=66) were involved in the identification process, "decisions on the nature and extent of the provision generally remained in the domain of the professionals" (Lindsay & Dockrell, p. 233). Similarly, Blok et al. (2007) investigated the experiences of a broad sample of parents (n=116) in the Netherlands concerning levels of parental involvement in children's education. Although the majority of parents reported that they were involved in the decision-making process, the scope of parental involvement was found to be limited. Overall, parents felt their input was not welcomed by professionals, and researchers concluded that the main problem with the new system appears to be that experts and schools are "not yet sufficiently open to the idea of parental involvement" (Blok et al., p. 13).

Other research in this area indicated that parents reported having to fight for special education services (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004; Tissot & Evans, 2006; Roll-

Pettersson & Mattson, 2007). In a study by Lindsay and Dockrell (2004), parents (n=66) reported that despite being key figures in identifying their children's disabilities, they often felt that they were often not listened to as they process unfolded and often had to fight for appropriate services and placements. Similarly, Tissot and Evans (2006) investigated the views of parents regarding their personal experience of securing educational provisions for their child with ASD. They found that although parents (n=738) reported satisfaction with educational provisions, the process of securing these services was often highly stressful. For example, Tissot and Evans reported that their qualitative data indicated that "parents shared the belief that it was only through their own persistence that a preferred provision was secured" (p. 78). Finally, Roll-Pettersson and Mattson (2007) examined the experiences and encounters of parents (n=7) with a child with dyslexic difficulties with the school system. A common perspective unearthed in their study was the feeling that without parental advocacy efforts supports and services for their children would not have been obtained.

Cultural and linguistic differences (CLD) also appear to affect levels of parental involvement in special education (Salas, 2004; Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Pinkus, 2006; Lo, 2009). For example, Salas (2004) explored how one group of Mexican American parents (n=10) experienced IEP meetings. She found that although these parents wanted to be involved in special education decision-making process, they reported feeling "silenced by overt or covert massages that told them voices were not valid" (Salas, p. 181). Salas wrote, "For many CLD parents, the languages and cultures that they bring to school are often perceived as deficiencies by school personnel and are not seen as assets,

often resulting in the eradication of partnership between schools and parents" (p. 185-186). Similarly, in a review of the literature on parental involvement in transition planning for CLD families (n=21), Kim and Morningstar (2005) found that CLD families often reported being passive participants in the IEP and transition planning processes. Barriers to family involvement included professional attitude, diversity concerns, contextual barriers, and bureaucratic barriers. For example, negative professional attitudes such as "blaming the family for the child's difficulties" (Kim & Morningstar, p. 97) were reported to make CLD families feel mistrustful. Kim and Morningstar concluded that "systematic approaches to enhanced collaboration between CLD parents and professionals are required" (p. 98), including culturally responsive strategies. Finally, Pinkus (2006) explored how matters related to a parents' cultural location(s) might or might not reveal themselves to influence parent-professional partnerships. She found that despite the fact that professionals and parents in the study shared the same minority ethnic group, parents (n=12) still reported issues with boundaries and feelings of vulnerability. She wrote, "Indeed, the close cultural proximity of the professionals to the parents often appeared to contribute to the lack of harmony experienced in the parents' relationships with professionals" (Pinkus, p. 161).

Other research examined experiences of conflict during the special education process and the resulting impact on parent-school relationships (Duncan, 2003; Leiter & Krauss, 2004; Nowell & Salem, 2007). For example, Duncan (2003) examined parents' perspectives (n=10) on points of conflict or dissatisfaction between themselves and special education professionals and found that "parents in this study were all frustrated

with the length of time taken to make any progress with their complaints, and all were exasperated by the way professionals seemed to hold power to operate the system to their own advantage" (p. 352). Similarly, in a study exploring parents' requests for additional special education services, Leiter and Krauss (2004) found parents (n=1,864) who requested additional services often reported having problems obtaining them. They concluded that, "this suggests that once a school system has agreed to a plan for a child, it may resist any proposed modifications to that plan" (Leiter & Krauss, p. 142-143). When parents meet with resistance regarding their requests for additional services, they were more likely to report being dissatisfied with their children's educational services. Finally, Nowell and Salem (2007) explored the different ways in which special education mediation affects the relationships between parents and school from the perspective of parents. They found that the parent-school relationship was affected by a parent's perception (n=7) of whether or not the school followed-through on the mediation agreement.

Summary of Literature on Parent-School Relationships and Special Education

In general, the literature on parent-school relationships in special education indicates that the link between home and school is mixed at best. On the positive-side, empowering parents and enhancing communication between parents and professionals have become important goals in the special education process (Royster & McLaughlin, 1996). In order to achieve these goals, researchers have attempted to better understand the situation and perceptions of parents (Crawford & Simonoff, 2003; Lindsay &

Dockrell, 2004; Rentry & Roeyers, 2005; Tissot & Evans, 2006; Jivanjee, Kruzich, Friesen, & Robinson, 2007; Roll-Pettersson & Mattson, 2007) and to understand how parents and schools can work together more effectively (Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006; Nowell & Salem, 2007). In light of the research in this area, parental self-efficacy, whether or not parents feel that they can influence the decision-making process, impacts involvement behaviors in the special education process. On the negative-side, parent-school relationships in special education are diminished by the experience of not being listened to (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004; Blok, Peetsma, & Roede, 2007); of having to fight for services (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004; Tissot & Evans, 2006; Roll-Pettersson & Mattson, 2007); of limited use of culturally responsive strategies (Salas, 2004; Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Pinkus, 2006); and, of conflict-resolution strategies such as mediation gone array (Duncan, 2003; Leiter & Krauss, 2004; Norwell & Salem, 2007). In closing, a brief note that much of the research reviewed in this chapter reflects the views of parents of students with disabilities and may not always be a completely accurate portrayal of professional attitudes, beliefs, or conduct. I will return to this point in the chapters to follow.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This chapter presents the qualitative design used to examine parent involvement in their children's education during the early phases of the special education process. The research questions guiding this investigation are:

- What stories do parents tell regarding their personal experiences with the special education process?

- What do these stories tell us about the family's perspective of family-school partnerships in special education?

- What can we learn from these stories that might translate into effective policy and practice in schools?

Addressing these questions required a methodology that allowed for the study of how participants described and made meaning of events and experiences in their lives. Narrative inquiry was a useful methodology for this purpose. An important assumption underlying narrative research is that "people are storytellers, who lead storied lives" (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 199). When people encounter difficult times in their lives, telling stories can provide them with a way to search for meaning, organize their experiences, and connect with others (Riessman, 2008). In the field of special education, qualitative studies exploring the lived experiences of people with disabilities and their families have utilized personal narratives and life histories to get an insider perspective on the phenomenon under investigation

(Brantlinger et al., 2005). Such studies have focused on the participants' personal meanings in an effort to "give voice to people who have been historically silenced or marginalized" (Brantlinger et al., p. 199). My study utilized narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of parents with the unfolding special education process. This chapter begins with an overview of narrative research methods in general and narrative inquiry in particular. Then, methods for my study are described, including description of the sample, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures.

Narrative Research Methods

Narrative research methods have attracted wide, cross-disciplinary interest. Lyons (2007) suggested that the "meteoric rise of narrative inquiry research" (p. 600) is part of the "critical phenomenon of the last 30 years known as the 'interpretive turn'" (p. 600). The turn toward narrative ways of knowing occurred within this broader interpretive turn when "concern with humans, experience, recognizing the power in understanding the particular, and broader conceptions of knowing" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 8) began to replace the traditional ways of researching that seemed "inadequate to the task of understanding humans and human interactions" (Pinnegar & Daynes, p. 8). By the mid-1980s, narrative research methods had experienced notable growth as "larger moves in the social sciences away from discipline-specific and investigator-controlled practices" (Riessman, 2008, p. 15) were vigorously underway. Langellier (2001 as cited in Riessman, 2008) outlined four influences that shaped this "narrative turn" (p. 14): (1) the mounting criticism of positivism and its realist ways of knowing; (2) a growing

interest in the genre of memoir in literature and popular culture; (3) the developing

identity movements of the 1960s such as the Civil Rights movement and the women's

movements and their use of personal stories of oppression; and (4) the emerging

therapeutic culture with its focus on the exploration of personal experiences. In sum,

investigators drawn toward narrative research methods often express a belief that the

stories participants tell reveal truths about human experiences and that these stories offer

investigators a way of coming to know how participants construct knowledge about

events and experiences in everyday lives(Riessman, 2008).

According to Pinnegar and Daynes (2007), the turn toward narrative ways of

knowing involves recognizing and embracing the interactive quality of the researcher-

researched relationship, the primary use of stories as data and analysis, and the

understanding that what we know is embedded in a particular context. In particular, they

suggested that there are four themes that characterize a researcher's "turn" to narrative.

Theme One involves a researcher's turn away from "a position of objectivity defined

from the positivistic, realist perspective toward a research perspective focused on

interpretation and understanding" (Pinnegar & Daynes, p. 9). Theme Two involves a

researcher's "turn from number data to word data" (Pinnegar & Daynes, p. 15). Theme

Three involves a researcher's "turn toward the focus on the particular…a particular

experience, in a particular setting, involving particular people" (Pinnegar & Daynes, p.

21). Finally, Theme Four involves a researcher's "turn away from one way of knowing

the world to an understanding that there are multiple ways of knowing and understanding

human experience" (Pinnegar & Daynes, p. 25). Although researchers experience these

turns in various orders and to different extents, Pinnegar and Daynes suggested that these four themes represent important assumptions underlying narrative research methods.

In the field of education, narrative research methods provide researchers with a way of addressing "the complexities and subtleties of human experiences in teaching and learning" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 1). Webster and Mertova explained that, "Narrative can tap the social context or culture in which teaching and learning take place. Just as a story unfolds the complexities of characters, relationships and setting, so can narrative illuminate complex problems in teaching and learning" (p. 13). They further asserted that:

> Interest in narrative inquiry has penetrated both educational practice and research. The prominence of narrative arises in part because of the constraints of conventional research methods and their incompatibility with the complexities of human learning. Moves toward the adoption of the narrative approach have also been a product of a philosophical change of thought to a more postmodern view with interest in the individual and acknowledgement of the influence of experience and culture on the construction of knowledge. Finally, it is also important to point out narrative's association with human activity and its sensitivity to those issues not revealed by traditional approaches. (p. 19)

Put differently, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, "Experience happens narratively…Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively" (p. 19).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is situated within the paradigm of qualitative research, sharing an interest in studying "things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). The distinguishing characteristic of narrative inquiry as a qualitative research strategy is the assumption that "the story is one if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experiences" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p.4). Riessman (2008) noted that:

> As a general field, narrative inquiry is 'grounded in the study of the particular'; the analyst is interested in how a speaker or writer assembles and sequences events and uses language and/or visual images to communicate meaning, that is, make particular points to an audience. Narrative analysts interrogate intention and language – how and why incidents are storied, not simply the content to which language refers. (p. 11)

Within the framework of narrative inquiry, variations exist around questions about: (1) what counts as stories; (2) what kinds of stories analysts choose to study; and (3) the methods used for study (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). However, in general, narrative inquiry is a way of conducting case-based research (Riessman, 2008) that, "in essence…involves the reconstruction of a person's experience in relationships both to others and to the social milieu" (Pinnegar & Dayner, 2007, p. 5).

What distinguishes narrative inquiry from other qualitative research methods is its focus on the particulars of a case, for example an individual, a group, or an organization.

(Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). When the case is an individual, the focus centers on how that individual makes sense of events and experiences in his or her life. Narrative researchers interrogate the stories these individuals tell because these "stories express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes human experiences in which actions and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulfilling purposes" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 8). When the case focuses on the individual, narrative researchers focus on coming "to a shared understanding of the participant's story" (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 177). This focus on the particulars of a particular case makes narrative inquiry a useful approach for coming to know how a participant might come to understand their experience (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Within narrative inquiry, a range of definitions exist for a narrative account. In simplest terms, it is a story that links events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and that imposes a meaningful pattern on what would otherwise be random and disconnected (Riessman, 2008). Personal narratives are first person accounts told by participants. Often, these narratives encompass long sections of talk elicited during open-ended interviews. Riessman explained that personal narratives can be "extended accounts of lives in context that develop over the course of single or multiple interviews or therapeutic conversations" (p. 6). Investigators transform these spoken words into written narrative texts and some search to uncover discrete stories that become the units of analysis.

Narrative analysis begins when investigators choose from "a family of methods for interpreting texts that have a common stories form" (Riessman, 2008, p. 11). The

present study incorporates thematic analysis. This type of narrative analysis is focused

on "seeking, interpreting, and presenting 'themes' as the entry point for narrative

analysis" (Riessman, 2009, p.4). I adapted this approach to uncover and categorize

thematically parents' experiences with the special education process. Thematic analysis

was applied to the stories parents told me during interviews I conducted for this study.

Identification and Selection of Participants

As Weiss (1995) noted, "In attempting to learn about a group difficult to

penetrate…it can be a breakthrough to find any member of the group, any member at all,

willing to serve as an informant and respondent. Sometimes the kind of people wanted

for study are unusual in a population and, in addition, not listed anywhere" (p. 25). Due

to confidentiality issues surrounding special education, it is often the case that such a list

is not public knowledge; therefore, I used a combination of convenience and snowball

sampling in this study. Participants were recruited through three primary sources: (a)

advertising for volunteers at public places such as the local library (n= 5); (b) contacting

school personal and requesting an advertisement be placed in the school newsletter or on

the school list serve (n=4); and, (c) referrals (n=5). See Appendix C for an example of a

recruitment flyer. Interested parents voluntarily contacted me by phone or e-mail to

further discuss their participation in the study.   This first contact usually consisted of a

short description of the potential participant's experience and provided me with the

opportunity to ask questions regarding screening criteria for participating in the study.

Based on this initial conversation or email, participants were invited to participate in the

study if their initial experience with the special education process occurred over the course of the last five years. Diversity within the sample was a goal during participant recruitment and sampling; therefore, I targeted a variety of communities including urban, suburban, and rural.

Human Subjects Review Process

Prior to collecting data, the Institutional Review Board of Boston College reviewed and approved the proposed study. This process included a review of all recruitment and participant selection procedures as well as letters, forms, and flyers used in the study. During the study, all participants were informed of their rights as research subjects, including their right to confidentiality and their right to voluntarily withdraw at anytime. Each participant was also given an informed consent form prior to the start of the interview. This form outlined the potential risks and benefits as well as procedures for confidentiality and further details about the study. Participants were asked to sign the informed consent form and were given a copy to take home (Appendix D).

Description of Sample

Fourteen parents of students with special needs comprised the sample for this study. All of the participants were mothers, and a hundred percent characterized their race/ethnicity as white. All participants described their marital status as married, and the majority of participants characterized their religion as Catholic (64%). Thirteen parents (93%) held at least a baccalaureate degree. Occupations ranged from homemakers (29%)

to professionals (64%). Additionally, one participant worked in a family greenhouse business. Two Northeastern states were represented with thirteen participants living in one state (93%) and one participant living in a neighboring state. See Table 4.

Children discussed in the interviews included seven boys (50%) and seven girls (50%) with an average age of eight years (range, four years to twelve years). The majority of children were in elementary school (93%). The primary area of children's eligibility for special education services as described by the children's parents included: learning disabilities (21%), other health impairments (36%), and Pervasive Development Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) or developmental delay (29%).

Although diversity within the sample was a goal, I encountered difficulty finding participants in urban areas and participants from various racial and ethnic groups. This was a disappointment especially considering the fact that I had strong contacts in school districts that served urban, diverse populations. I consider this lack of diversity a limitation; however, as noted in the Table 3, other areas of diversity existed within the sample such as educational background and child's special education eligibility category.

Table 3

Demographic Data: Study Participants

Parent	Recruitment Source	Highest Level of Education	Occupation	Gender of Child	Age of Child	Grade Level of Child	Special Education Category
Amber	Sign at library	2 years college	Homemaker	Male	12	7th	LD
Kayla	Sign at library	Diploma	Homemaker	Male	6	1st	OHI
Morgan	School newsletter	Master's	Teacher	Female	9	2nd	ADHD
Lilly	Sign at library	BA	Greenhouse Worker	Male	10	4th	CAPD
Amy	Sign at library	Master's	Nurse	Male	10	4th	ADD
Claire	School list serve	BA	Nurse	Female	11	6th	OHI
Sarah	Referral	Master's	Healthcare Analyst	Male	8	2nd	LD
Maggie	Sign at library	BA	Sales Coordinator	Female	7	3rd	PDD-NOS/ Speech
Mary	Referral	BA	Homemaker	Female	9	4th	OHI
Judy	Referral	BA	Teacher	Female	7	1st	LD/ Speech
Mikala	Referral	BA	Homemaker	Female	4	Pre K	DD

Polly	Referral	Master's	Teacher	Female	9	2nd	DD
Linda	Social agency list serve	BA	School Nurse	Male	8	2nd	PDD-NOS
Jill	Social agency list serve	Master's	Attorney	Male	5	2nd	Physical

Note. All names are pseudonyms. Eligibility categories listed as identified by parents. LD = learning disability; OHI = other health impairment; ADHD = attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; CAPD = central auditory processing disorder; ADD = attention deficit disorder; PDD-NOS = pervasive development disorders – not otherwise specified; and DD = developmental delay.

Data Collection Procedures

As a first step, I conducted a brief pilot study. A mother/father couple was interviewed together using an interview protocol with different topic areas, including: early phases of the special education process; parental involvement; and family-school partnerships. Within each topic area, a list of probes was included. The pilot study served as practice for me as well as an initial run-through with the interview questions.

Following the completion of the pilot study, data collection began. Participants contacted me and interviews were scheduled. All interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed upon place. Six interviews took place in the participant's home. Five interviews occurred at a local, public library. Two interviews took place at a participant's place of employment, and one interview took place at a participant's relative's home.

Interviews were collected over a period of seven months from October 2008 to April 2009. The average length of the interview was forty-nine minutes, ranging from twenty-seven minutes to seventy-six minutes.

Prior to engaging in the interview process, participating parents were provided with and asked to sign an informed consent form. I also provided each participant with a copy of the form to take home. At the interview, each participant was asked if she had any questions and was informed that data collection would consist of an open-ended format that left space for them to tell their stories (Mishler, 1986). Participants were also informed that the interviews would be audiotaped and were asked if they had any objections. Then, participants were asked to complete a demographic data sheet (Appendix E) used to describe characteristics of the sample.

The interview began with my reading of an introductory statement (Appendix F). This served as a general orientation to the interview. Then, participants were asked to think about their experiences and tell how it happened that they became involved in the special education process. Probes were used as needed. For example, I asked a number of participants if a particular moment in the special education process stuck-out in their minds as particularly meaningful either in a positive or negative sense. At the conclusion of the interview, I asked permission to contact participants if clarification of information was needed during the transcription process. Participants were thanked for their time and for sharing their personal stories.

Data Analysis

The first phase of data analysis consisted of me listening to and transcribing the audiotaped interviews. To do this, I used the following process: segments of the audiotaped interview were played back; the tape was paused; and the text was typed. The transcription process focused on "what" the participant said rather than "how" the participant said it; therefore, speech was cleaned-up, erasing "dysfluencies, break-offs, interviewer utterances, and other common features of interview conversations" (Riessman, 2008, p. 57-58). I chose this form of representation because I wanted to make the narratives as readable as possible. During transcription, I did some initial analysis, color-coding instances of plot development, examples of parental involvement, and obvious refrains.

Following the completion of the transcription process, I began thematic analysis. During this phase, I read through the each transcript, noting any initial impressions and any stories that seemed to adhere to a narrative form. In some cases, participants responded to the introductory statement with a lengthy narrative and probes were used sparingly. Other participants responded in more of a question-answer format and longer narratives were scarce. After an initial read-through, I returned to the transcripts looking for any themes, or conceptual categories, which ran throughout the interviews. Fraser (2004) referred to this as scanning stories for "different domains of experience" (p. 191). During this phase, I identified ten recurrent themes. Most of the time, I used the actual phrases or words of participants to name these categories. The ten themes I started with were: constant communication; follow-through; fighting for services; becoming an

advocate; pushing it; honesty and trust; the run around; being hand-held, empathy; and teacher effectiveness.

After identifying these ten themes as the most common among participant experiences with the special education process, I re-read each transcript again and color-coded words, phrases, sentences, and segments of text that seemed to adhere to each broad theme. For example, the theme *honesty and trust* referred to a participant's perception that either members of the school community had not been honest with her during the special education process or had withheld information from her. As I re-read each transcript, I looked for examples of this theme and color-coded them orange. Quotes that "fit" in this category included one by Annie when she talked about going through the experience of having a son with a reading disability and said: "I wish the school kind of called it what it was, way back when, because we have been trying to fix it for I don't know how long." Also, Claire spoke about not receiving information when she stated:

> I didn't know the lack of information until I met with my cousin who had
>
> been through it and said, 'Oh my God. Have they told you this? Have
>
> they told you that? Have they tried this? Have they tried that?' And I am
>
> like, 'No.'

And finally, a quote by Amy about honesty:

> We met with the teachers in fifth grade at the very end of the school year.
>
> We had a great conversation. Probably the best conversation I ever had
>
> with teachers. They were honest with me. This is another piece is what I

find with schools and with teachers. I think they get pummeled by parents

and they are afraid to always give you the honest.

After I completed color-coding themes across the interview transcripts, I created a

table of the themes and organized all of the segments of text for one particular theme into

a single column. Table 4 presents an example of the thematic chart.

Table 4

Example of Thematic Chart

constant commun-ication	follow through	fighting for services	becoming an advocate	pushing it	honesty and trust	run around	hand-held	empathy	teacher effective-ness
					Annie's Quote Claire's Quote Amy's Quote				

When the table was complete, and all of the examples from the transcripts were

represented and organized, I was able to eliminate some themes based on the fact that

they were not as commonplace. For example, the themes follow through, being hand-

held, and empathy were not experiences shared by all participants. Of the remaining

seven themes, I determined that many shared similar characteristics, and I combined

these into a single category. For example, the themes of fighting for services and

becoming an advocate seemed to go together. Additionally, the themes of honesty and

trust and getting the run-around overlapped. Finally, after consulting with a committee member with expertise in the field of narrative analysis, I selected three of the most theoretically interesting categories for final analysis. The selected themes were: teacher effectiveness; the combination of honesty and trust and getting the run-around; and the combination of fighting for services and becoming an advocate.

Following completion of thematic analysis, I returned to the transcripts and re-read each text in the hopes of finding a narrative exemplar, a lengthy personal account told by a participant, for each of the three conceptual categories. I wanted this exemplar to provide a more detailed example of how the particular theme happened over time and how it impacted a particular parent's involvement in the special education process. Here, I re-read each transcript and selected segments of text that took narrative form. This was accomplished by deciphering where I thought a narrative began and ended (Fraser, 2004). In particular, I looked for common phrases that indicated that a story was about to begin such as: "I remember when it started;" or, "Looking back now." Then, I looked for phrases like "that's my story" to indicated that the narrative segment was finished. In an adaption of Gee (1991), each narrative segment was then re-typed and broken into lines. Lines about a single topic were then grouped together into stanzas. The excerpt from the audiotaped was then replayed, and the stanzas were organized into scenes. Utterances such as "you know" and "um" were deleted.

By taking each lengthy narrative, breaking the text down into idea units, numbering the lines, and organizing the lines into scenes as suggested by Riessman (2002) and adapted from Gee (1991), I was able to reconfirm the existence of thematic

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categories selected in the first phase of analysis. The transcription practice also helped

me with the final interpretation of data. Gee referred to the approach as a "focusing

system" (p.33) in which "material in and across the stanzas of the narrative are the key

images of themes out of which we are invited to build an overall interpretation of the

narrative" (p. 32-33). He went on to suggest:

> Our overall interpretation of a narrative is constrained by what is focused,
>
> and it is also constrained by the need to 'sensefully' answer interpretative
>
> questions that have been set by all the lower levels of structure in the
>
> narrative. Although this interpretation will most certainly draw on
>
> contextual knowledge of the interpretation, it must also be grounded in the
>
> structure of the story in terms of idea units, lines, stanzas, strophes and
>
> parts …because the focused material is organized in terms of these units.
>
> Thus, at this level, interpretation is a 'reading' of the focused material
>
> within the overall structure of the narrative. I call this sort of reading
>
> thematic interpretation. (p. 33)

Additionally, the use of Gee's form of structural analysis helped me manage and

analyze the "extended narratives of experience" (Riessman, 2008, p. 93) that developed

in my interviews with participants. These narratives were "extremely lengthy, with

asides, flash forwards, and flashbacks in which time shifts" (Riessman, p. 93) and were

often woven in and out of the entire interview. Riessman (2008) suggested that one

benefit of "data reduction" (p. 95) is lengthy segments of narrative text are transformed

into more manageable forms for the purpose of presentation. By making the lengthy

narratives more manageable, Gee's (1991) approach helped aid in my presentation and interpretation of lengthy narratives highlighted in the following chapter. It also served to reinforce the results of my categorical thematic analysis.

Trustworthiness

In a discussion about traditional notions of reliability and validity, Mishler (1986) offered the following commentary: "It has become clear that the critical issue is not the determination of one singular and absolute 'truth' but the assessment of the relative plausibility of an interpretation when compared with other specific and potentially plausible alternative interpretations" (p. 112). Along the same lines, Riessman (2008) suggested that "fixed criteria for reliability, validity, and ethics developed for experimental research…are not suitable for evaluating narrative projects" (p. 185). A more applicable standard for qualitative research methods like narrative inquiry is the notion of "trustworthiness." Riessman suggested that trustworthiness is established when researchers: (1) make their modes of inquiry explicit; (2) make their arguments persuasive; (3) make their work available for others; and (4) consider ethical guidelines. I attempted to meet these guidelines in my study.

Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson (2005) considered the issue of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative studies in special education. They described eleven "credibility measures" (Brantlinger et al., p. 201) that researchers could employ "to ensure that qualitative studies are sound" (Brantlinger et al., p. 200). For example, Brantlinger et al. suggested providing thick, detailed descriptions, defined as,

"reporting sufficient quotes and field note descriptions to provide evidence for research interpretations and conclusions" (p. 201). In the pages to follow, I quote the interview material extensively. They also suggested focusing on "particularizability" (Brantlinger et al., p. 201), defined as "documenting cases with thick description so that readers can determine the degree of transferability to their own situations" (Brantlinger et al., p. 201). By including lengthy narrative accounts from participants, I believe readers will be able to assess how similar or different these accounts are to their own experiences. Finally, peer debriefing, defined as "having a colleague or someone familiar with the phenomena being studied review and provide critical feedback on descriptions, analyses, and interpretations or a study's results" (Brantlinger et al., p. 201), is highlighted as a credibility measure. Throughout this process, I have asked members of my dissertation committee to read my work and to provide feedback in the above mentioned areas. As such, I have attempted to adhere to some of the credibility measures outline by Brantlinger et al. for qualitative studies in special education.

CHAPTER FOUR

Data Analysis and Interpretation

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of data collected from fourteen parents regarding their experiences with partnership in the special education process. Information is presented in the following order: (1) presentation of thematic category; (2) description of thematic category using quotes from participants; (3) presentation of one narrative exemplar that describes in richer detail the nature of the theme as it unfolded over time from one parent's perspective; and (4) unpacking of the narrative exemplar with attention to the particular context in which it occurred. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that the views shared by participants in my study may not be shared by other parents or other educators in their particular schools or districts.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is focused on "seeking, interpreting, and presenting 'themes' as the entry point to narrative analysis" (Riessman, 2009, p. 4). In the present study, data were interpreted in light of themes developed by me based on my interview conversations with participants and my interpretation of their stories. In the first level of analysis, themes were uncovered by paying attention to the particulars of each case, or each participant's story, and by thinking about the theories informing this investigation such as parental role construction theory and parental efficacy theory. As a second step, I

identified common thematic elements that ran throughout all of the participants'

experiences with the special education. Three of these themes are presented, described,

and interpreted in this chapter. In an effort to keep the stories told by participants "intact"

(Riessman, 2008, p. 53), I present these themes by quoting the interview material

extensively.

Narrative Exemplars

Following the presentation and description of each theme, I present a lengthy

narrative that describes in richer detail the nature of the conceptual category as it

unfolded over time from one parent's perspective. In the study, a narrative was defined

as a story in which the participant "sets the scene for us, introduces characters and

describes their actions, specifies events and their relations over time, explicates a

significant context and its resolution, and tells us the point of the story (Mishler, 1986, p.

74). The long narratives are presented as suggested by Riessman (2002) and adapted by

Gee (1991).

Teacher Effectiveness

The first theme is teacher effectiveness, or as one participant put it, "50/50,

nothing you can do about.*"* This theme is about the experience of parents in this study

encountering both, to put it simply, good teachers and bad teachers. Roughly half of the

time (50%) they were lucky, and the other half of the time (50%), they were not. In

general, this meant that at some point during the special education process, they

encountered teachers who "just don't know" or who were "a tremendous roadblock." In these situations, parents talked about having to "suck it up and hope for the best next year." Many wondered about the qualifications of these teachers to teach students with special needs and about the accountability of teacher education programs to prepare these teachers for integrated classrooms. For example, Amber, a homemaker and mother of a middle school-aged son with a learning disability, said: "No, like I said, I wish they would do more. But, like I said before, I don't know if they have the qualifications." Mary, a homemaker whose daughter qualifies for services under the OHI label, went into more detail on this topic when she said:

> And they didn't do anything right. Nothing was ever done right. I don't
>
> know if they know any better, and I think along the process I realized how
>
> little teachers know how to teach. I think it is disturbing how alarming it
>
> is that I don't feel like the teachers are even adequately prepared to teach
>
> children with these differences, even special educators.

For the most part, these parents had children in inclusive classrooms. Their quotes illustrate the fact that these parents were concerned about whether or not the teachers they were encountering were qualified to meet the needs of their children now identified as requiring specialized services.

Parents in my study also recalled experiences of encountering knowledgeable teachers during their experience with the special education process. These teachers were described in a variety of ways: "They're just more aware of the special needs kids and how to work with them;" "she just got him;" and, "she has an amazing ability to meet

everyone's needs exactly where they need to be." Sarah, the mother of a son with a learning disability, seemed to sum it up best when she compared observing a knowledgeable teacher in action to "watching Beckett pitch" (a talented Boston Red Sox pitcher). What made the experience of having an ineffective teacher difficult for these parents was the fact that their children were already struggling in school. They talked about the difficulty of not making gains or of losing a critical year. This idea was referred to by Polly, a teacher with an elementary-aged child with severe developmental delays, who stated: "We had a very bad year last year. We had a really poorly trained special education teacher who was just really uncomfortable in the classroom, uncomfortable with the student body that she was with…so we kind of lost a year." Her words demonstrate the perception of families in my study that when they encountered a teacher who, in their opinion, lacked knowledge, their children's learning suffered. These parents often felt like there was nothing they could really do about it except hope for a better situation the following year.

Amy's Story

Amy is the mother of four young children. She has a Master's degree in the field of nursing. Her three youngest children attend a private elementary school, while her oldest son who receives special education services attends a local, public elementary school. He is currently in fourth grade in an inclusion classroom. It was her decision to switch him from the private school to the public school because he required special education services. In her words, "He not only has ADD, he has some learning deficits."

During his first year in school, the private school made clear, "We're a small Catholic school, and we don't really have the services to help him. Public school would be the best place for him because they do have the support." Her younger son was also diagnosed with ADD, but he didn't have the learning difficulties. She decided to keep him at the private school because "he could do the work." Amy is very involved in her children's schooling, serving on the Parent Teacher Association and School Improvement Team, and she and her husband talk extensively about the education system in this country. In her interview, she tells the story of her experiences with the special education process primarily in relation to her oldest son. However, the narrative includes stories about her younger son's experience too.

Part 1 (The journey)

Stanza 1 (Looking back)

1. So I am going to preface all of what I am saying

2. after all our journey through this whole process,

3. we had it 50/50.

Stanza 2 (50/50)

4. It seemed like it was one year that was really great,

5. and another year that was really poor.

6. The teacher was really well-prepared one year,

7. the next year disastrous.

8. And when you had it great,

9. it was wonderful.

10. And when it was bad,

11. it was very bad.

<div style="text-align: center;">Stanza 3 (Professional development)</div>

12. And I think it sort of boiled down to the professional development of

   the teachers.

13. Even though they had a resource teacher,

14. the resource teacher only came in for very short periods of time,

15. wasn't there for the whole day in the classroom,

16. and impossible to guide a child if you are not prepared.

<div style="text-align: center;">Stanza 4 (Reason for parental involvement)</div>

17. Some teachers were very understanding of our involvement.

18. This is a kid who says I am the dumbest kid in school.

19. I don't know what I am doing.

20. Try to build his self-esteem up because he was struggling.

<div style="text-align: center;">Stanza 5 (50/50)</div>

21. Some teachers got it.

22. Some teachers didn't.

23. Some teachers appreciated the fact that we were so involved

24. and wanted to know what was going on

25. and had a tutor

26. and were willing to work with us.

27. Other teachers had no interest with communicating with us

28. or didn't really have the skills

29. to integrate and communicate

30. what they were doing in the classroom

31. with how we could enhance his learning at home

32. which was an incredible frustration.

Stanza 6 (Not going to let this kid fail)

33. I was not going to let this kid fail

34. because he had to learn to read and write.

35. Because if he didn't learn to read and write in these primary grades,

36. there wasn't going to be any chance that he was going to be successful

elsewhere.

Stanza 7 (Accountability)

37. So I was very disappointed over all

38. because I think immense amounts of money are put into the special

education program

39. and there is no accountability.

40. There is absolutely no accountability

41. to who is coming into the classroom

42. and are they really doing their job.

After a few moments, Amy returns to her story and talks about encountering a teacher who her older son described as great. This was a long-term substitute for a speech therapist on maternity leave.

Part 2 (The teacher)

Stanza 1 (50/50)

43. It was unfortunate that again,

44. whether somebody cares,

45. whether somebody has an interest,

46. versus somebody who is really knowledgeable and skilled,

47. totally integrated in what is going on with the child.

Stanza 2 (I know)

48. I would find that with teachers,

49. and this going forward,

50. within two weeks of sitting down with the teacher every year now, I

    know.

51. If I know my teacher gets my child in a month's time,

52. I know it is going to be a good year.

Stanza 3 (A good year)

53. If I can sit down at the end of September,

54. and they can say, "This, this, this, this,"

55. we are thankful.

56. We say, "This is going to be a good year."

Stanza 4 (A bad year, nothing you can do about it)

57. But there are clearly teachers out there who don't get it.

58. Don't understand it.

59. And you cringe

60. because there is nothing you can do.

61. And your child is going to fall back in his work.

Stanza 5 (50/50)

62. So that has been my general sort of experience.

63. It has been 50/50.

Shortly thereafter, she continues talking about her experience with different teachers as she compares the profession of teaching to her profession, nursing:

Part 3 (Comparison)

Stanza 1 (Nursing)

64. It is like any profession: Nursing.

65. You get people who really know.

66. They know what they are doing.

67. They care about what they are doing.

68. And they are phenomenal.

Stanza 2 (Doctors)

69. Or doctors.

70. It is a 50/50.

Stanza 3 (Nothing you can do about it)

71. And you may be able to accept that

72. when your child has no problems going through school,

73. but it is unacceptable when your child is struggling.

74. And you know it is going to be a lost year,

75. and there is nothing you can do about it.

Much later in the interview, she returns to her story and talks about her perception of teacher knowledge. Here she is speaking about one teacher in particular who was able to incorporate "all different varieties" and "all different levels" of work into her classroom. This teacher's knowledge and skill working with "ADD kids" impressed Amy. This was her second son's third grade teacher. He was also diagnosed with ADD, but he did not have the learning difficulties encountered by her first son.

Part 4 (Multi-dimensional ways to learn)

Stanza 1 (Expectations)

76. And I go back to my initial statement:

77. It is unfortunate that we expect teachers to be on board

78. and know how to integrate that stuff into their curriculum

79. or their classroom.

Stanza 2 (The reality)

80. I think it is very difficult to do that.

81. Very difficult to ask them to do that.

82. Not every person is up to that challenge.

83. I mean that is the reality.

84. However, is it integrated into the classrooms?

Stanza 3 (Teacher preparation)

85. And where is the accountability?

86. That they have to take special education classes in their BA
    curriculum.

87. And that needs to be maybe a bigger part of a BA program for
    teachers.

88. How they integrate that into the classroom.

Stanza 4 (Those kids are there to stay)

89. Because those kids are there to stay.

90. And there are probably more and more of them.

91. I mean, that is what you hear.

92. More and more kids seemed to be diagnosed with ADD.

93. And all different spectrums of autism.

Stanza 5 (Can't turf it out)

94. And you can't turf it out to the resource teacher.

95. Even though they are integrated classrooms.

96. That teacher who is the head teacher

97. needs to be as up to speed as the resource teacher and working
    collaboratively.

Later she returns to her story about the teachers she has encountered during her experiences with the special education process. Here, she talks about the role of principals in schools and goes into greater detail about why she feels there is really nothing you can do about an ineffective teacher.

Part 5 (Principals)

Stanza 1 (Hands tied)

98. Basically, my odyssey through these elementary years is that

principals have their hands tied.

99. They do.

100. They can't do anything to the teacher.

Stanza 2 (Nothing *they* can do about it)

101. So you go back to the teacher

102. and you try to work with the teacher

103. because you know

104. the principal can't do very much.

Stanza 3 (She still has her job)

105. Yes, could he go in and talk to the teacher and say look,

106. but is she going to change her ways?

107. No, she still gets her job.

108. The problems are not that significant.

Stanza 4 (Ineffectiveness)

109. She is not coming in reeking of alcohol.

110. She shows up.

111. She does her job, ineffectively, but she does it.

112. She gets her raise.

Stanza 5 (Only going to do what she has to do)

114. And the raise is not based on anything.

115. Everyone gets the same thing,

116. so why should she,

117. she is only going to do what she has to do.

In the final moments of the interview, Amy brings the narrative to a close. Here, she comes full circle. Referring again to her journey, she "boils it all down" for us. In reading her words, I believe that for Amy teacher preparation programs and the professional development opportunities make or break the effectiveness of teachers in today's integrated classrooms.

Part 6 (Boiling it down)

Stanza 1 (A bad year)

118. But I will tell you that my experience has been during that first
    month,

119. if the teacher can't articulate what is going on with your child,

120. or a strategy or some ideas, how he learns, particularly after you've
    given her or him a lot of insight,

121. then the child is not getting the kinds of things, the child is not going
    to get the kinds of structure that they need.

Stanza 2 (Boiling it down)

122. And all of it boiled down to,

123. my husband and I have spent so much time talking about the
    educational system in this country,

124. and I will boil it down to

Stanza 3 (Teacher preparation)

125. I don't know whether the rigor is there in the BA colleges to teach

teachers now.

126. I don't think the teachers are coming out prepared well enough to be

in the classroom

127. and that may or may not be true.

Stanza 4 (Getting by)

128. But it is not so much, I mentioned, that the teacher doesn't care.

129. I think that may be in part some teachers, a few teachers.

130. I mean I am sure you worked with teachers who seem to be able to

get by and don't really put a lot in,

Stanza 5 (Teacher Preparation)

131. but I think it really, it sort of all boils down for us,

132. I think if this country has a national problem in educating our youth,

133. we really need to look at how teachers are being taught to serve

134. because that is where it all begins.

Stanza 6 (Professional Development)

135. Of course the professional development that the school systems must

offer teachers in a rigorous sort of way as well.

136. And I don't think that happens very much.

137. I don't know what your experience has been as a teacher

138. and whether you got opportunities to learn new things or whether

there was a lot of time given to you to beef up your skills in a

different area.

<center>Stanza 7 (Teacher Preparation)</center>

139. But I am not sure the Masters program for teachers,

140. I don't know if that is the rigor either.

141. I know everyone has to get their Master's degree.

142. But are we failing there then?

143. Maybe the BA programs are OK,

144. but maybe the failure is in the Masters program where it is not the

rigor that it should be.

<center>Stanza 8 (Teachers/Parents)</center>

145. Because success of the student, it really does,

146. part of it does fall to the teachers,

147. part of it does fall to the parents.

148. So, that is my story.

Interpreting Amy's Story

Clearly, Amy has considerable experience with the special education process. She has lived it for many years. She also has strong opinions about what works and doesn't work, and what needs to happen to make it work better. She told her story with very few prompts from me, and her interview lasted longer than any other participant in

my study – roughly an hour and a half (even, as she later told me, with ice cream from the grocery store in the back of her car). Amy had a story to tell, and I believe that her story was primarily focused on the effectiveness of the teacher in the classroom which subsequently brought up the topics of teacher preparation and professional development.

Many participants in my study spoke about teacher knowledge in some form or another in my interviews with them, recounting both positive and negative experiences. The movement of the late 1980's to professionalize teaching focused on "the evolution of teaching to a more respected, more responsible, more rewarding, and better rewarded occupation" (Shulman, 1987, p3). Advocates for this reform movement believed that a knowledge base for teaching existed. In Shulman's opinion, it consisted of both subject knowledge content and pedagogical teaching knowledge. Simply put, what teachers should know and be able to do. This movement was carried over into the 21st century as a deeper suspicion of teacher quality and a demand for more accountability translated into the reemergence of teacher tests (Wilson & Youngs, 2005). Currently, the call for quality teachers is outlined in *NCLB* which requires teachers to demonstrate that they are highly qualified by having state certification and passing required licensing examinations. The assumption being that a highly qualified teacher in every classroom, a teacher with strong verbal ability and subject matter knowledge (Wilson & Young, 2005), will translate into improved student learning.

In Amy's long narrative, she spends a lot of time talking about her perception of whether or not teachers in today's classrooms are prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners. This is demonstrated in Part 4 where she talks about the importance of

incorporating multi-dimensional ways of learning into the classroom (Lines 76-79). She

believes that integrating "that stuff" into the curriculum and the classroom is a difficult

task; however, she speaks about the reality of the current context of education being

integrated classrooms (Lines 80-84), and she makes two conclusions (Lines 89-97): (1)

"those kids are there to stay" and (2) "you can't turf it out to the resources teacher."

Mary, like Amy, also went into detail about the general education teacher's knowledge

about special education issues, saying:

> I think a regular education teacher knows little about special education
>
> issues. And I think the colleges have to do a better job preparing teachers
>
> to teach all different types of students given the fact that most students
>
> would be mainstreamed. So I think few teachers are adequately prepared
>
> to do a good job at reaching all learners. I think it is a difficult job to do
>
> well.

As evidenced in Mary's quote, she too wonders about the quality of teacher preparation

programs to prepare general education teachers for mainstreamed classrooms.

In a recent article by Pugach (2005), the topic of preparing general education

teachers to work with students with special needs was explored in depth. She wrote that,

"Either through dedicated special education coursework or content integrated into other

preservice coursework, the majority of today's new teachers are expected to know

something about working with student with disabilities" (Pugach, p. 549). This is

necessary because of the requirement set forth in the *IDEA* mandating students with

special needs be educated in the least restrictive environment. In this current context of

education, "95% of all general education teachers currently teach students with disabilities or have done so in the past, with an average case load of 3.5 students with disabilities" (Pugach, p. 549). She concluded that, "The need to prepare all teachers to create classrooms that embrace students with disabilities and teach well is no longer contested" (p. 550). But is it a reality?

Throughout her narrative, Amy returns to the topics of teacher preparation programs and professional development opportunities. Table 5 presents an outline of the narrative in terms of parts and stanzas with these topics highlighted in bold text.

Table 5

Outline of Amy's Narrative in Terms of Parts and Stanzas

Part 1. The journey
Stanza 1. Looking back
Stanza 2. 50/50
Stanza 3. **Professional Development**
Stanza 4. Reason for parental involvement
Stanza 5. 50/50
Stanza 6. Not going to let this kids fail
Stanza 7. Accountability
Part 2. The teacher
Stanza 1. 50/50
Stanza 2. I know
Stanza 3. A good year

Stanza 4. A bad year, nothing you can do about it

Stanza 5. 50/50

Part 3. Comparison

Stanza 1. Nursing

Stanza 2. 50/50

Stanza 3. Nothing you can do about it

Part 4. Incorporating multi-dimensional ways to learn

Stanza 1. Expectations

Stanza 2. The reality

Stanza 3. **Teacher preparation**

Stanza 4. Those kids are here to stay

Stanza 5. Can't turf it out

Part 5. Principals

Stanza 1. Hands tied

Stanza 2. Nothing they can do about it

Stanza 3. Still has her job

Stanza 4. Ineffectiveness

Stanza 5. Only going to do what she has to do

Part 6. The Journey

Stanza 1. A bad year

Stanza 2. Boiling it down

Stanza 3. **Teacher preparation**

As you can see, when Amy starts "to boil it all down," the topics of teacher preparation and professional development dominate her narrative (Part 6). If teachers are not well prepared during their teacher preparation programs and don't have access to professional development opportunities, Amy believes that their abilities to work with students like her son will be compromised.

In Pugach's (2005) review of the literature on preparing general education teachers to teach students with disabilities, she described the time period from 1990 to the present as one marked by "widespread collaboration between special and general education" (p. 550). This was the result of "the substantial increase in the practice of inclusive education, supported by the 1997 amendments to *IDEA*, which underscored the general education curriculum as the most appropriate for most students with disabilities" (Pugach, p. 550). The legislation mandates that not only will students with special needs be in the general education classroom, but that they will have access to the general education curriculum. In her review, Pugach found that, "The phrase 'teaching students with disabilities well is only good teaching' is frequently heard in discussions about preparing teachers to work with students with disabilities" (p. 563). But she wondered,

"What exactly do we mean when we say 'Good teaching is good teaching?'" (Pugach, p. 563) and how do we prepare general education teachers to do it?

In my interview conversations with parents, good teaching was often equated to what Amy emphasized in Part 4 of her narrative (Lines 76-97) as *multidimensional ways to learn*. I assume this implies multi-dimensional ways to teach too. A number of parents spoke about the issue in referencing their encounters with "good" teachers. For example, Morgan, a teacher and mother of a child with ADD, said, "But all through the situation, they have used lots of different modalities and understand what she needs." Sarah went into more detail, stating:

> I mean you have never seen anything like it. It was like watching, I don't
> know, Beckett pitch, so good. She'd have the white boards for some kids
> because it was easier that way. And she'd have like every single type of
> medium for these children in a classroom of twenty-five kids.

Along the same lines, Mary recalled her experience with teachers in a third grade co-teaching classroom,

> I still remember going into that classroom and seeing kids moving
> around. It was a very fluid classroom. If they were doing a
> writing piece, and some kids wrote better on a rug or on a beanbag
> chair, they could do that. They had the ability to know where they
> worked best, and they had teachers who allowed them to work
> where they felt most comfortable as long as they didn't disturb

anyone else. I think it really enabled my children to flourish in that

classroom.

In Amy's opinion, the ability to incorporate *multidimensional ways to learn*, and thus to

teach, into today's integrated classrooms requires rigorous teacher preparation programs

and professional development opportunities (Line 135). The reader must surmise

whether or not this constitutes an answer to Pugach's (2005) question, "When is good

teaching actually good teaching?" (p. 563). However, parents in my study seemed to

think that teaching that incorporated *multidimensional ways to learn* was good teaching

for their children.

Based on Amy's long narrative, and the related experiences of participants in my

study, the level of parental efficacy held by these parents decreased when they

encountered teachers who "didn't seem to know" or "didn't seem to have the

qualifications or skills" to educate their children. The parental involvement literature

reviewed in Chapter Two illustrated that a parent's decision to become involved in a

child's education is at least impart influenced by parental efficacy. This is the belief held

by parents that their involvement in their children's schooling will make a difference

(Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992). Put simply, when parental efficacy is high,

parents become involved. Alternatively, when parental efficacy is low, parental

involvement decreases. The trend has important implications. As you will recall, the

assumption behind movements to get parents involved in the education of their children

is the belief that parental involvement positively impacts student learning. Based on

Amy's long narrative, she felt like there was just so much she could do when an

ineffective teacher was in the classroom. The feeling that there *was nothing she could do about it* indicates low parental efficacy, and it can lead one to assume that her involvement in the special education process will decrease.

In listening to parents in my study, I noticed an underlying sense of urgency in their stories about the teachers teaching their children. As mentioned, Amy encountered teachers that she believed "just didn't get it" or "didn't have the skills," and this was "unacceptable" because she had a child who was struggling in school. She knew, as did other parents in the study, that if her child "didn't learn to read and write in the primary grades there wasn't going to be a chance that he was going to be successful elsewhere" (Lines 35-36). Put another way by Morgan, "I know in the early years, you get it early and then it is not a problem. But the longer you wait, the greater the discrepancy. And they become dependent learners rather than independent learners. And it is so hard to undo that." Or Mary who said, "And my whole thing is early intervention is so important. And if this kid, if she has the right services, won't need special education in middle school. Really and truly." In my own experience as a special education teacher at the elementary school level, I was well aware of the importance of early intervention. When parents in my study talked about not making gains or losing a year, my heart went out to them. I knew from experience the importance of making progress during those early elementary school years. I can only surmise that such an experience would be incredibly frustrating and that the relationships between the home and the school would suffer under such conditions.

Honesty and Trust

Many parents in my study recounted stories about their experiences of "partnership" with their children's schools. Again, some were positive and some were negative; however, an experience common to most participants at one time or another was the feeling that they were either "getting the run around" or not being dealt with in an honest way. What getting the run around meant to these parents was a general feeling that they were going to "yet another meeting" with "yet another group of people to talk to" without actually making any progress. Claire, a nurse and mother of a child eligible under OHI, articulated this when she recounted saying the following in an IEP meeting, "Every time I come to this table there is another meeting with another team of people with another title with another purpose and I am tired of it." There was also a general feeling among participants that the pattern of events described by Claire was "another stall tactic" or "putting it off further" or them just "ignoring the issues and dragging their feet." This was very frustrating to parents, many of which spoke about the importance of early intervention.

Intertwined with stories about getting the run around, participants also told stories about issues of honesty and trust. Two different kinds of stories fit into this aspect of the theme: (a) a parent's perception of not being told the truth or (2) a parent's perception that the school was not forthcoming with information. Regarding the former, Amy described it well, saying, "This is another piece I find with the schools and the teachers. I think they get pummeled by parents, and they are afraid to always give you the honest." Also on the topic of honesty, Claire articulated the following:

I said to my cousin, 'In my profession, if you come to the hospital and there is something wrong with a family member, you would depend on me and the doctors to tell you what was going on, what you options were. We would do, I hope, the best we could to get things right. And I was naïve or stupid enough to think that is how it worked every place.'

In her interview, Claire continued with this story and touched upon the perception that schools were not always forthcoming with information. She said:

But, looking back through my journey, I am like why didn't she (the guidance counselor) have me meet with the special education person. Why didn't anybody give me a pamphlet that tells you your rights under the State or Region? That tells you when you ask for this, they have X amount of days to respond. Or when this is done. Or how many times you can have them tested. Or what you can have them tested for.

Or Polly who stated the following, "There is no advertisement in the paper once a week that says if you have a special needs child call this number and we will send you this information. And there really should be."

When parents in my study described their negative experiences around issues of honesty and trust, it often followed that their "partnership" with the school started to break down. For example, in Maggie's case it got to a point where "I never tell them anymore." For Mary: "I was just like done with them. They don't know. I didn't tell them." In my opinion, the relationship between the home and the school diminished when parents in my study got the run around or perceived a lack of honesty and trust.

Amber's Story

Amber is the mother of three children. She completed two years of college and is currently a homemaker. Her youngest child attends a local nursery school, and her middle child attends the public elementary school. Paul (a pseudonym), her oldest child and the focus of her story, attends the public middle school. He is currently in 7th grade in an inclusion classroom. He was referred for an evaluation in first grade when "his teacher thought he wasn't paying attention enough in class." The teacher told Amber and her husband, "You know, Paul walks in in the morning and he seems to have the weight of the world on his shoulders." Amber remembers, "And he hated it. All of the other kids were running around. And so that's when we realized that there was really something. We have to pay attention to this." In second grade, Paul began receiving services in the areas of reading, writing, and spelling. Amber and her husband have acquired many private services for Paul over the years, including a private tutor, Hooked on Phonics, and the Sylvan Learning Center. They have also spent a lot of time helping Paul with his homework and reading with him at home. In her interview, she tells the story of her experiences with the school as she tries to address her son's difficulty in the area of reading.

Part 1 (A reading problem)

Stanza 1 (Looking back)

1. I wish, now looking back, I wish that the school,

2. not would have made it seem less serious,

3. but they made it seem like,

4. or maybe that is how we took it,

5. Paul just needs to read more

6. and he will be fine.

7. And that's what we kept thinking the whole time.

8. Paul you really got to read, read, read

9. and you will be fine.

Stanza 2 (A request)

10. And so that is how we kept doing it.

11. We didn't really think there was a problem.

12. And he wasn't tested for dyslexia or anything like that.

13. And as a matter of fact, I asked the school, "Can we get him tested for dyslexia?"

14. and they said, "Well we don't call it dyslexia anymore.

15. We don't test for dyslexia;

16. we just give him an IEP

17. and kind of hold his hand,

18. and read with him."

Stanza 3 (The run around)

19. They did help him,

20. through the school years,

21. but I wish that they would have done more.

22. Like specifically get him a teacher that knows specifically what his problem is

23. and how he needs to learn how to read.

24. And I kept pushing it

25. and I just kept getting the run around.

26. "Well we don't do that anymore.

27. We're going to do this.

28. We are going to try this method.

29. And then try this method."

Stanza 4 (Try this, try that)

30. And so we did.

31. We tried a bunch of different things.

32. As a matter of fact my husband got Hooked on Phonics.

33. We got that.

34. You know we did programs with him.

35. He went to Sylvan for a year.

36. And all these things,

37. they helped,

38. but nothing has ever cured him.

39. And nothing is going to.

Stanza 5 (Call it what it is)

40. And we have come to realize finally,

41. this is just how Paul is going to learn to read.

42. For the rest of his life, he is going to struggle.

43. And I wish that the school would have kind of called it what it was,

44. way back when,

45. because we were trying to fix it for I don't know how long.

After a few moments, Amber returns to her narrative in her description of what happened when she started to question how the school was handling her son's situation. He was now in fifth grade. She recalled:

Part 2 (Questioning them)

Stanza 1 (What happens when?)

46. And then when we started questioning,

47. "It is great you guys are holding his hand now.

48. What happens when?"

49. Then they'll kind of just back up and say,

50. "Well I don't know, I don't know."

51. They couldn't answer that.

Stanza 2 (Home involvement)

52. As much as our involvement at home,

53. get the tutor,

54. do the Sylvan.

55. I think some of his teachers even recommended some of the tutors,

56. or they knew people who worked with kids who had reading problems.

57. And they gave us their names and all that stuff,

58. so they did help us in that aspect.

59. We told them that we got the Hooked on Phonics thing,

60. and they were just like, "That's great, that's great. Keep doing that."

61. And, it kind of stopped.

Stanza 3 (Another request)

62. And again I asked them,

63. "Can we get him tested for dyslexia?

64. I want him specifically tested for dyslexia."

Stanza 4 (The run around)

65. And I just get the run around,

66. And, "We don't do that,

67. and we just call it this,

68. and we don't do that."

Much later in the interview, Amber returns to her narrative. Here, she laments the fact that "the school didn't call it what it was way back when," referring to Paul's reading problem. She seems to believe that if she and her husband were made aware of the severity of this problem, and were given all the information, that maybe they would have gone down a different road. Amber goes on:

Part 3 (A reading problem)

Stanza 1 (That is what it is)

69.   Because looking back,

70. I wish they would have said to us,

71. "Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So, your kid's got a reading problem,

72. this is what it is,

73. he is going to struggle all of his life,

74. let's deal with it."

75. I wish they would have said that in first grade.

Stanza 2 (Hand-held us)

76. But now that I look back,

77. they kind of hand-held us too,

78. "Everything is going to be fine,

79. and we'll do this

80. and we'll do that."

Stanza 3 (Pushing him along)

81. I felt, and I know my husband does too,

82. that they were kind of pushing Paul along.

83. You can get As and Bs Paul.

84. And, you have five questions,

85. the rest of the class has 20.

86. Which is, it is kind of fair in a way and it is kind of not in a way.

87. When you do that for him, he'll get an A.

88. But then, down the road, which is what we are coming into now,

89. he knows that he has a special list for spelling words and stuff like that

90. and when other kids in the class find out,

91. it just, he gets embarrassed,

92. he doesn't want to go to school.

Stanza 4 (Pinpoint it earlier)

93. So, I wish that they would have pinpointed it earlier.

94. And said, "Look, this is how it is,

95. it isn't going to be fixed,

96. Paul needs to learn to read a different way than normal kids."

Stanza 5 (A different road)

97. Because I think we would have gone down a different road.

98. But then, like I said, I don't know if they knew what to do five years ago.

As the interview comes to a close, Amber returns to the narrative and brings us up to the present. Here, she talks about her worries as her son approaches transitioning to high school. In her words:

Part 4 (The present)

Stanza 1 (What happens when he gets to high school?)

99. That's our thing right now.

100. He's still in middle school.

101. He is in 7th grade.

102. So he has this year and next year.

103. But then, what happens when he gets into high school?

104. And we did ask that

105. and we kind of got a little bit of a run around,

Stanza 3 (They keep going)

106. but a couple of the teachers said that they do have time allotted tests

107. For these kids who have trouble reading.

108. Or they get the special treatment.

109. So they keep going.

110. So I guess it would just be the same thing.

Stanza 4 (No more hand holding)

111. But a lot of people have told me too

112. that once they get into high school there's not,

113. he'll get what he needs because of his IEP,

114. but there is not going to be this "Oh Paul, la, la, la you're so special, you're so

nice."

115. No more hand holding,

116. so then what is he supposed to do?

Stanza 5 (The run around)

117. And I feel, and so does my husband, no one is really addressing the issue,

118. or saying, "Paul, you need to learn to read this way."

119. And, just like I said, every time I bring up the word dyslexia

120. they just say, "Oh no, we don't do that,

121. we don't label it anymore.

122. We just help them read

123. and push them along."

Stanza 6 (How we feel)

124. And that's what they do,

125. and that is how we feel.

Interpreting Amber's Story

In reading Amber's story, I am struck by how long it took for her son to get adequate services to address his struggles with reading. He was in fifth grade when he began the Wilson Language Program, after many years in inclusive classrooms. Amber tells the story of first becoming aware of "his reading problem" in first grade and beginning special education services in second grade. However, her story is marked by her struggle to have her voice – or her opinion – heard. She really wanted her son tested for dyslexia. That is clear. She really felt that the school needed to investigate that issue. In talking with Amber, she comes across as a quiet person. I can imagine that it was a challenge to assert herself in a dominant way at an IEP meeting; however, she and her husband were clearly a united front – working together with their son at home and pursuing their efforts on the school front for so many years. In a time marked by family-school partnership talk, I am left feeling that Amber's story is an example of the rhetoric.

Summers, Hoffman, Marquis, Turnbull, Poston, and Lord Nelson (2005) defined partnerships in special education "as mutually supportive interactions between families and professionals, focused on meeting the needs of children and families, and characterized by a sense of competence, respect, and trust" (p. 65-66). These kinds of relationships between the home and the school are assumed to bolster student learning. In the current context of special education, the importance of such partnerships is

reinforced in federal legislation which mandates parental involvement in the special education process. However, just because partnerships are mandated, doesn't mean they are a reality.

Based upon a review of the literature in this topic, Royster and McLaughlin (1996) suggested that the goal of family-school partnerships in special education is twofold: (1) to empower parents and (2) to enhance communication between parents and professionals. In Amber's long narrative, it is evident that her relationship with the school is marked by *getting the run around* and a perceived lack of *honesty and trust*. She repeated requests to have her son "specifically tested for dyslexia" (Lines 10-18 and 62-63), and the school repeatedly responded that "we don't do that anymore" and "we're going to try this method and then try that method" (Lines 19-29, 65-68, and 117-123). In the current context of special education, in which parents are viewed as active collaborators with the right to be decision-makers and overseers of their children's education, the pattern of behavior experienced by Amber clearly does not fit the mold of partnerships "characterized by a sense of competence, respect, and trust" (Summers et al., 2005, p. 65-66).

As illustrated in Table 6, Amber *gets the run around* after each request she makes of the school. In her particular story, the request is to have her son specifically tested for dyslexia. This is important to her because she does not feel like the "read, read, read" strategy that she and her husband have been implementing since first grade is working (Lines 5, 8, 18, and 112). In fact, her perception that the primary method for fixing Paul's reading problem has failed leads Amber to believe that the school should have

"called it what it was way back when" (Lines 43-44). Instead of giving her *the run around* for so many years, Amber believes that if the school had "pinpointed it earlier and said, look, this isn't going to be fixed" (Lines 93-95), that she and her husband "would have gone down a different road" (Line 97). Because the school did not give her the honest truth (in her opinion) about Paul's problem, Amber believes that an ineffective strategy was implemented by all involved parties. In her opinion, the better route would have been, "finding him a teacher that knows specifically what his problem is and how he needs to learn how to read" (Lines 22-23).

Table 6

Outline of Amber's Narrative in Terms of Lines and Stanzas

Part 1. A reading problem

    Stanza 1. Looking back

    Stanza 2. **A request**

    Stanza 3. **The run around**

    Stanza 4. Try this, try that

    Stanza 5. Call it what it is

Part 2. Questioning them

    Stanza 1. What happens when?

    Stanza 2. Home involvement

    Stanza 3. **Another request**

    Stanza 4. **The run around**

Part 3. A reading problem

Stanza 1. That is what it is

Stanza 2. Hand-held us

Stanza 3. Pushing him along

Stanza 4. Pinpoint it earlier

Stanza 5. A different road

Part 4. The present

Stanza 1. What happens when he gets to high school?

Stanza 2. They keep going

Stanza 3. No more hand-holding

Stanza 4. **The run around**

Stanza 5. How we feel

The idea that "Paul needs to learn to read in a different way than normal kids" (Line 96) relates back to what Amy was talking about in her long narrative. In today's integrated classrooms, teacher's must be knowledgeable about mult-dimensional ways to learn, and thus to teach. Whereas Amy spoke about the importance of this kind of teacher knowledge for general education teachers, Amber's narrative illustrates its importance for specialized teachers like special education teachers or reading specialists. Instead of "holding his hand" (Lines 17, 47, and 115) and "pushing him along" (Lines 81-92 and 113), Amber believes that the role of the school is to really address the issue (Line 117), in this particular case Paul's reading problem. That entails finding him a teacher "that knows specifically what his problem is and how he needs to learn how to

read" (Lines 23-24). What complicates the issue even more is that Amber and her husband were doing a lot at home: read, read, reading with him and paying for private services like tutors and like specialized reading programs (which Amber notes in her interview are not cheap). The school applauded their efforts; however, Amber feels, looking back, that their contributions to fixing the problem (Line 45) were misguided because in reality "it isn't going to be fixed" (Line 95). Paul just needs to learn to read in a different way (Line 96).

In considering the knowledge base for specialized teachers, Pugach (2005) wrote, "Always hovering over the goal of greater inclusion of students with disabilities and its implications of the work of general education teachers, however, is the struggle to redefine the responsibilities and contributions of special education teachers themselves" (p. 551). As the expectations for a general education teacher's ability to teach students with disabilities rise, what are the implications for the role of the special education teacher? In Amber's narrative, Paul was receiving a lot of accommodations in the general education classroom (Lines 81-92). She referred to this practice as "pushing him along" (Line 82) or "pushing them along" (Line123). Another term she used a lot in reference to this practice is "holding-his-hand" or "hand-holding" (Lines 17, 47, and 115). She even said, "They kind of hand-held us too" (Line 77). Rather than "calling it what it was" or "pinpointing it earlier," Amber says they just kept "pushing him along" (Line 82). Looking back, she wishes the school would have found him a specialized reading teacher with knowledge about "his problem" and "how he needs to learn to read." In this particular case, in the current context of integrated classrooms, Amber's narrative

suggests that the role of the teacher with specialized knowledge about "reading

problems" was critical, yet absent.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, one of the findings of the literature on parental

involvement in special education is that parent participation is diminished when parents

perceive that they are not listened to (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004; Blok, Peetsma, &

Roade, 2007). In Amber's case, the scope of parental participation seemed to be limited

to home involvement activities. When she asserted herself in the realm of the school by

requesting a specific type of evaluation, she repeatedly experienced *the run around*.

Based on Amber's story, *getting the run around* meant not being listened to. Based on

the research literature, one can surmise that such an experience would lessen Amber's

desire to be involved in the special education process.

Other factors impacting parental involvement in the special education process are

issues of efficacy and empowerment (Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006; Nowell & Salem,

2007). Research in these areas indicated that parents feel an increased sense of optimism

and efficacy when they acquire knowledge regarding their children's education in general

and their disability and mandated services in particular (Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006). In

addition, research indicated that a parent's sense of efficacy as a decision-making partner

in their child's education is affected by their perception of whether or not they are able to

influence the decision-making process (Nowell & Salem, 2007). Amber's narrative

illustrates how *getting the run* around and issues of *honesty and trust* affected her sense

of efficacy and empowerment. Although she requested a specific evaluation, Amber was

not able to change the school's approach to Paul's reading problem. The "try this, try

that" (Lines 27-29) method and the "read, read, read" (Lines 5-9) method pervaded his elementary school years. It was not until his middle school years that Paul began a specialized reading program known as The Wilson Reading program at school. Amber indicated that this approach seems to be working for him.

When parents in the study talked about *getting the run around* or a lack of *honesty and trust*, they were also talking about issues of partnership. The research literature suggested that partnerships in special education should be marked by characteristics of: "mutual contributions, shared responsibility, desire to work together, full disclosure, and agreement that parents are the final decision makers" (Summers, Hoffman, Marquis, Turnbull, Poston, & Lord Nelson, 2005, p. 66). Parents who experienced *getting the run around* or a lack of honest and trust were not participating in partnerships marked by these basic characteristics. Often times, communication between the home and the school broke down as a result. However, based on my interview conversations with parents, it is apparent that there came a point in time when they said enough is enough. At that point, the ways in which these parents were involved in the special education process often changed. In listening to their stories, I learned that the role most parents assumed was that of advocate for their children.

Becoming an Advocate

When parents in my study talked about what I refer to here as *becoming an advocate,* they were describing their role as a supporter for their children's education. Common phrases used by these parents to describe what they had to do to get their

children what they needed included: "stand up;" "stick up;" "stick to your guns;" or,

"hold firm."   In the words of Morgan, *becoming an advocate* for your child meant:

> Just staying the course. Keep asking questions. I think that it is not that
>
> services aren't offered, or that type of thing. As a parent, kind of hearing
>
> the types of things people are offering, and saying that fits my child.
>
> When you get test results, knowing what makes sense and going and
>
> getting a second opinion.

Sarah put it more simply, saying: "It is my job to fight for my child." And Jill, an

attorney with a child with severe physical impairments, described being an advocate as,

"more like you have a job to educate people about your child and hopefully it will trickle

down."

Although parents in my study acknowledged that they often lacked knowledge

about special education in the beginning, part of *becoming an advocate* was going

through the process of finding out what they needed to know. For example, Polly said:

> I really wished I hadn't learned on the fly. I felt very helpless at the
>
> beginning when we started with my daughter. I didn't know what I was
>
> doing. I didn't know the vocabulary. I didn't even know the law. And it
>
> was scary, and it was very frightening. And it was only by making
>
> mistakes that I learned what was right and what was wrong and how to
>
> behave at an IEP meeting.

In addition, Lilly, a greenhouse worker with a child in elementary school, talked about

her effort to find out what was going on with her son, saying:

I went online. I knew it wasn't ADD, but he was showing signs of

something like that. I came up with Central Auditory Processing

Disorder, so I presented that to his teacher and she said, 'Yes, I do think

that is it too.' So we had him tested.

Along the same lines, Claire talked about having to be "her own advocate and her own

learning person." To accomplish this, she, "Started to educate myself. Downloaded

everything on special education."   Finally, Amy summed it up by saying:

It is a learning curve. It is all a learning curve. I researched it. I talked to

experts. You have to become an expert in your child's disability,

unfortunately. I have studied ADHD to the nth degree. I have read books.

I have talked to professionals. The internet. How it affects speech. How

it affects learning. How it affects general overall social behavior. I have

researched it. And you know, my area is not special education. I have

never wanted to know what I know, but I am glad I know it. I never

would have thought that I would have to become an expert in my child's

disability.

Linda, a nurse whose son's PDD-NOS was the result of infantile spasm, talked about how

she came to know about his condition the first night they returned from the hospital, "I

was sitting here with a laptop at the table, here all night googling, and googling, and

googling and being on parent web pages of kids who had it."   Other parents in the study

acquired knowledge by joining various networking groups. For example, Mikala, the

mother of a preschooler with severe developmental delays, said, "As soon as I realized I

would probably be in the special education track, I joined the Special Education Local Advisory Committee just to make connections with people and to find out what was going on in the school."

In addition to becoming knowledgeable about a child's disability or the special education process, being an advocate also meant "saving everything," "documenting everything," or preparing extensively for meetings. In the words of Claire, "I started saving everything. I saved all of my emails. I saved all of her work. I still do. Everything that comes through the door I have at home." Amy talked about having "five huge binders full of not just their work, but everything. Emails. Everything is documented." Maggie described her preparation style, saying, "I prepare like it is a legal briefing. I put stuff together. I collate. So I have all my ducks in a row. Just knowing what this means. Reading the evaluations and really understanding them." And Polly said she goes as far as "scripting what I think I am going to say" during her preparation for an IEP meeting.

Parents also talked about how you go about being an effective advocate in the special education process. In the words of Maggie:

And I have always kept my composure. I don't make a scene. I don't fight. I don't cry. I am really very polite and professional about it. Though what I would like to say is a list a mile long, but I always remain very calm. I don't get accusatory. I try to be very professional. The nice way to get services is to be polite.

Or put more simply by Judy, a teacher with a child with a learning disability, "You know what they say, a little sugar goes a long way. If you go in there ugly and evil, you are not going to get a good response." Unfortunately, being an effective advocate also meant putting in a lot of time. Maggie summed up this reality, saying, "It has become a part time hobby for me. I work twice a week. But you know it becomes all you do which is not healthy either." Mikala added, "It takes up a huge part of my time right now."

Kayla's Story

Kayla is a mother of two children. She lives in what she describes as "a small town." She completed high school and is currently a homemaker. Kayla worked before her son was diagnosed with a brain tumor at age four. Both children attend the public elementary school; however, her son, and the focus of her lengthy narrative, started school in a neighboring town. The local school which she describes as the "home school" in her story is part of a regional special education system. When her son's brain tumor was removed, he lost many of his abilities. In her words, "Before his surgery, he was able to say all of his ABC's. He was learning his colors, whereas after it, he didn't have the memory of that anymore." Although she was not thinking about "getting him into school at that time," the professionals from the regional special education program suggested that he "get into the Pre-K" which was in the neighboring town. However, after finishing Pre-K, "the special education department wanted to move him back to his home school." In her words, "The special education department is really gung-ho on homeschooling, being at the neighborhood school. I thought, oh well, we'll give it a try,

and I sort of went with whatever they said." Now, she wishes that she had spoken up. Her narrative describes her journey from being a passive participant in the special education process to becoming more of an advocate for her son.

In a long narrative, Kayla tells two distinct stories that illustrate her journey to becoming an advocate for her son. Having survived and prevailed in these two situations, Kayla finds that the her role in the special education process has changed from a parent who "kept everything in" and "went with it" to a parent who needed "to get across that my son was fully capable of doing anything and that I would be there with him in doing everything." The issue of parental role construction will be considered in light of her story.

It is interesting to note that Kayla's interview took more of a question-answer format despite being read the same introductory statement and allowing for the same space to tell her story. It was only after I asked if there was a particular moment in the special education process that really stood out in her mind that she chose to narrate the following two stories.

Part 1 (The parking spot story)

Stanza 1 (Constant battling)

1. It's tough,
2. if he were just in the general education,
3. there are so many things that would be different.
4. Then, we wouldn't have the struggles that we have.
5. Constant battling.

Stanza 2 (A handicap spot)

6. When we first came back to the home school,

7. we had to fight for a handicapped spot.

8. They had them on the side of the school,

9. but that is where all of the buses park.

10. The handicap spots were up against the gym,

11. but that is where the buses park.

12. And they come in and out,

13. so you can't get through there.

14. Even if I wanted to fit my car in there,

15. I couldn't with the buses parking there.

Stanza 3 (A fight)

16. So, I had no spot to get him and his wheelchair out.

17. So, it was a fight just to get a parking spot

18. which we ended up doing,

19. but that took months.

Stanza 4 (Just something)

20. The old principal didn't like any of the spots that we were proposing.

21. I just wanted something in that parking lot, just to pull in.

22. I don't mind waiting till the buses leave,

23. but just something I can get in and out of.

24. It then became teachers didn't want to move their spots.

25. It was just crazy stuff.

Stanza 5 (This has to get done)

26. I got my cousin who is the police chief involved.

27. I ended up pulling as many strings as I could to get uppers [an edge over the school].

28. This has to get done because by law, even with the two spots they had existing, we couldn't access them.

29. So they weren't complying with the law.

Stanza 6 (You have to fight for)

30. It was crazy.

31. It's just like baffling.

32. The stupid things you have to fight for

33. To get your son to school.

After Kayla finished telling that story, I inquired, "What was the next struggle?" This was a follow up to her early statement regarding her "constant battling." Following that prompt, she began telling a second story.

Part 2 (The field trip story)

Stanza 1 (They didn't send it home)

34. The first kindergarten field trip,

35. they didn't send home a permission slip for him.

36. It was a field trip down to the beach,

37. and they didn't feel like he could do it.

38. So, without even asking me,

39. they just didn't send it home.

Stanza 2 (The permission slips)

40. I brought him into school one day,

41. and his one-on-one aide wasn't at the front door,

42. so I happen to go down to the classroom as all of the kids were going into the
classroom,

43. and I saw them taking the permission slips out of the bag to hand them in.

44. And they handed them in,

45. and I happen to go, "What's that for?"

46. And they said, "Oh it is a field trip."

47. but never said any more to me.

Stanza 3 (I left)

48. So, I left there because I was hurt.

49. I was angry.

50. I didn't want to make a scene there in front of kids.

Stanza 4 (I called)

51. And so I ended up calling the principal and talking to her.

52. As soon as I got home, I called.

53. She said, "We will look into it.

54. I'll find out."

55. She never contacted me back, so I ended up going to the school counselor.

56. I ended up calling her and said, "Can you please find out what is going on?"

   Stanza 5 (Anger)

57. I'm boiling.

58. I'm rippin.

   Stanza 6 (I called)

59. I called my RIPIN.

60. And I also called the head of special education.

61. I called the school counselor.

   Stanza 7 (Don't feel he can go)

62. The school counselor went down to the classroom and asked them point blank,

63. and the one-on-one aide said, "No we didn't give it because we don't feel he can

   go on it."

64. So, she calls me back.

65. I was in tears.

66. I was like a mess.

   Stanza 8 (I had every right to fight it)

67. When I went to go pick him up at school, I couldn't even look at her.

68. She just told me what they said,

69. and they legally couldn't do it,

70. and I had every right to fight it.

   Stanza 9 (He can go)

71. He can go on that field trip.

72. He is no different than any other kid,

73. and they have to by law.

74. Whether it takes a nurse going on the field trip, the one-on-one aide, me, or
    anybody,

75. he can go on field trips.

Stanza 10 (A bunch of things)

76. I think it was a bunch of things.

77. I think it was the bus

78. and going down to the beach.

79. He can walk.

80. He has a gait belt, so he can walk with a one-on-one aid.

81. I don't work because I am caring for him all of the time.

82. I would go,

83. and I wouldn't make the one-on-one aide do that.

Stanza 11 (Fuming)

84. So the principal comes out to meet me,

85. and she knew.

86. I couldn't even speak because I was so angry.

87. My husband ended up coming.

88. He ended up coming down and meeting me,

89. and he was fuming.

Stanza 12 (We knew the laws)

90. We were actually outside,

91. and they didn't even bring us into the school.

92. They at that point had gotten a call from the head of the regional special

    education program,

93. and they knew that we knew the laws at that point and that they have to comply.

94. So, they were being as nice as they could and handing everything to us.

   Stanza 13 (Nobody really talking)

95. It took a long time.

96. The teacher didn't talk to me for a long time.

97. The one-on-one aide, I would just drop my son off, and she would just walk away

    from me.

98. So there were a lot of cold shoulders.

99. Nobody really talking.

100. It took another IEP meeting to get everybody together,

101. This was wrong, but we need to get beyond this.

102. But I wasn't finding out information from school like I was before.

   Stanza 14 (Speak your mind)

103. It was just me at the IEP meeting.

104. The RIPIN person was there too.

105. She just basically was like, "Speak your mind."

106. Previous to this I was like, I keep everything in.

107. Even the day I first found out, I didn't get to talk to the principal because I was
   so shaken up that day.

   Stanza 15 (My time)

108. I needed to get across that my son was fully capable of doing anything,

109. And that I would be there with him in doing everything.

110. And that he shouldn't be excluded from anything.

111. And it was my time to do that. Basically.

Interpreting Kayla's Story

Kayla's narrative is very moving. She shares the story of a very difficult time in the life of her child, her family, and herself. One can only imagine the difficulty of having a child diagnosed with a brain tumor. For Kayla, her son's diagnosis and subsequent medical treatment coincided with another milestone for families with young children – the start of formal schooling. For any parent, this is a time marked by a range of emotions. I wrote about my own experience in the first chapter of this paper. For Kayla, this is a time of particular angst. Fortunately, she describes her son's first year of schooling in terms of successes. She is pleased. In her words, "It worked out awesome. We loved it there. They all worked really good with him." Following that first year, her son was moved back to the neighborhood school at the suggestion of the special education department, and Kayla's struggles began. In reading the transcript of my interview conversation with Kayla, I find it difficult to imagine a school district that wouldn't just give her what she wanted for her son.   This was a family going through the

unimaginable, and on top of all of those medical struggles, they found themselves in the situation of fighting for services from the school. There are usually two sides of every story, but I found myself wondering what district administrator could deny the requests Kayla spoke about in her long narrative about her involvement with the special education process. It would be interesting to hear their side of the story.

Many parents in my study talked about their roles in their children's education in terms of advocacy efforts, referred to here as *becoming an advocate*. The beliefs parents hold about what they are supposed to do in relation to their child's education is known in the parental involvement literature as parental role construction (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Research reviewed in Chapter Two suggested that parental role construction is influenced by school attributes as well as the nature of general school invitations for involvement from the school, the teacher, and/or the child (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins & Clossen, 2005). In addition, a parent's perception of one's time, energy, skills, and knowledge were found to affect involvement behaviors in a child's education. In the current context of special education, the role of parents is assumed to be that of collaborator. The role of parent-as-collaborator has evolved over time from that of passive-recipient of information from "expert" professionals to that of active collaborator with the right to be decision-makers and overseers of their children's education.

In Kayla' long narrative, she speaks most often about her role in the special education process in terms of fighting for services. As mentioned in the introductory paragraph, Kayla described her early role construction in terms of passive-recipient of

information saying, "I sort of went with whatever they said." This quickly changed as Kayla's son moved back to the neighborhood school, and she found herself wishing she had spoken up and requested that her son stay in the school he attended during his Pre-K year. She felt that her son had "gained so much" at that school and "that was lost" when he returned to his neighborhood school. In her words,

> I think it's more, they're more aware of the special needs kids and how to work with them, I guess. Here, they don't. They kind of push everything aside and treat them like he is not going to learn it. Like a push over sort of thing. Everything always gets pushed over down here.

Kayla describes how she felt intimidated in the IEP meetings "with all these big wigs sitting in front of you" and how that impacted her involvement in the special education process. But now she says, "I don't let anything go…I just have to stand up for my son and what is right has to be done." Two of the defining moments for Kayla that changed her belief about what she was supposed to do in relation to her son's education were the stories described in Part 1 (The parking spot story) and Part 2 (The field trip story). After these events, Kayla moved from her position as the passive-recipient of information from experts and became an advocate for her son and his right to be fully included (Lines 103-111).

As was the case in Amber's narrative, Kayla described an experience that is known to be a barrier to parental involvement in special education. Amber talked about not being listened to, and Kayla describes having to fight for services (Lines 16-19, 30-33, and 67-70. Research in the area of parental involvement in special education

suggested that a parent's perception of not being listened to or having to fight for services tends to diminish their desire to be involved in the special education process (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004; Tissot & Evans, 2006; Blok, Peetsma, & Roade, 2007; and Roll-Pettersson & Mattson, 2007). Research also suggested that parents like Amber and Kayla believe special education supports and services would not have been secured for their children without their advocacy efforts (Roll-Pettersson & Mattson, 2007). Table 7 presents an outline of the narrative in terms of parts and stanzas with the use of pronouns like "I" and "we" highlighted in bold. These pronouns indicate instances of advocacy in Kayla's narrative.

Table 7

Outline of Kayla's Narrative in Terms of Parts and Stanzas

Part 1. The parking spot story

    Stanza 1. Constant battling

    Stanza 2. A handicap spot

    Stanza 3. A fight

    Stanza 4. Just something

    Stanza 5. This has to get done

    Stanza 6. **You have to fight for**

Part 2. The field trip story

    Stanza 1. They didn't send it home

    Stanza 2. The permission slips

    Stanza 3. I left

Stanza 4. **I called**

Stanza 5. Anger

Stanza 6. **I called**

Stanza 7. Don't feel he can go

Stanza 8. **I had every right to fight it**

Stanza 9. He can go

Stanza 10. A bunch of things

Stanza 11. Fuming

Stanza 12. **We knew the laws**

Stanza 13. Nobody really talking

Stanza 14. **Speak your mind**

Stanza 15. **My time**

The role of parent as advocate is well documented in the history of special education. Parental advocacy efforts are cited as one of the primary reasons for current legislation granting students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum. In my study, parents described their strong belief that one of the ways they are supposed to be involved in their children's education is through advocacy efforts on their behalf. For example, when the time came, Kayla asserted herself in an active way, saying it was "my time to do that" (Line 111).

During my interview with Kayla, there were times when she was emotional - in a quiet way. Upon sitting down with her, I had the impression that meeting with me was outside her comfort zone. She seemed unsure about how to proceed; however, she did it. She told me stories of her experiences with the special education process and the ways in which she became involved in her son's education. She told me about her struggles and the way she fought to get her son the services she felt that he needed. She told me about how she evolved into a more active participant in the special education process. After the interview, and even today as I write, I wonder what motivated her to participate in my study. She didn't have to do it. There was no compensation. I believe that it had something to do with her belief that telling her story would in some way help her child. By sharing her experiences, maybe things would be different for somebody else.

Co-Construction of Narratives

During any narrative analysis, the investigator can attend to several overlapping layers of text: (1) the stories told by the participants; (2) the stories developed by the researcher that are based on interviews and fieldwork; and, (3) the stories potential readers construct after reading the accounts of the participants and investigator (Riessman, 2008). Together, these various levels of text interact and illustrate how a narrative account is co-constructed. The process of co-construction is an important consideration for investigators utilizing narrative inquiry as they "struggle with decisions about how to represent physically present and absent audiences" (Riessman, 2008, p. 31).

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the fact that I played an active role in the construction of the narratives presented in this chapter. Although the words were those of the participants, I co-constructed the stories presented here by being an active participant in the interviews. For example, participants invited me into their narratives by asking me about my personal experiences as a teacher and a parent. My interview conversation with Amy, quoted extensively in the first narrative exemplar, illustrates this point well. On at least two occasions she asked me about my own experiences as a teacher. On the first occasion, when she was talking about teachers just doing enough work to get by, she invited me into her narrative by saying: "I mean I am sure you worked with teachers who seem to be able to get by and don't really put a lot in." On another occasion, when she was talking about the need for professional development, she invited me into her narrative again by saying:

> I don't know what your experience has been as a teacher and whether you
>
> got opportunities to learn new things or whether there was a lot of time
>
> given to you to beef up your skills in a different area. (Lines 137-138)

Other participants made similar jestures to invite me into their stories. In this way, by being there and conversing with the particpants, I influenced the ways in which the stories they told unfolded.

I also co-constructed the narratives by being the individual who took the talk from an audiotaped interview and translated it into a text on a two dimensional page. In the process of transcribing the interview conversations, I made decisions about what those transcripts would look like. For example, I decided to "clean-up" the speech in my

transcripts by erasing dysfluencies, break-offs, and interviewer utterances because I wanted to make the transcripts as readable as possible. Another researcher might not make a similar decision. I was also an interpreter of the written texts in other ways. For example, I determined where a narrative exemplar began and ended. I further determined which segments of interview were included in the narrative exemplar and which segments did not fit into the unfolding story. In these ways and others, I mediated the ways in which the stories were constructed and the ways in which others readers will come to know my participants. Another layer of co-construction will occur when readers of this paper bring their own experiences, backgrounds, and opinions to bear on the stories told by my participants; however, these future interpretations will be constrained by the structure of the narratives presented here and by the extensive quotes included in this chapter.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In talking with parents whose children were referred for special education services over the course of the last five years, I learned that for these parents the unfolding special education process was an emotional, involved journey. From the moment they suspected that "something just wasn't right" to my interview conversations with them, these parents were involved in researching their children's disabilities, learning about the special education process, and tirelessly exploring avenues that might help their children succeed in school and in life. The ways in which they chose to become involved in the special education process varied over time and in response to the actions of school personnel; however, one unifying characteristic appears to be that although many began the journey with little or no knowledge about the process, almost all were knowledgeable advocates at the time of my interviews with them. This was a process of self-discovery and self-learning undertaken through the help of community organizations, the Internet, and friends and family. The outcomes of their advocacy efforts varied and, in many cases, were still ongoing at the time of my interviews; however, in listening to their stories, it appears that the challenge of getting their children what they needed to succeed was an outcome they felt they could affect through the role of advocate. Even the act of talking with me seemed to fit into their perception of being able to influence change for their children in some way.

While family-school partnerships remain the gold-standard for relationships in special education, in reality families experience both positive and negative interactions between the home and the school. In my study, I interviewed fourteen parents regarding their personal experiences with the special education process. My investigation was guided by the following research questions:

- What stories do parents tell regarding their personal experiences with the special education process?

- What do these stories tell us about the family's perspective of family-school partnerships in special education?

- What can we learn from these stories that might translate into effective policy and practice in schools?

In answer to these questions, I found that the stories participants told illustrated both instances of partnership and examples of discord. However, more importantly, they provided rich examples of the experiences of particular families at particular points in time in the unfolding special education process. Parents in my study told stories about teacher effectiveness, honesty and truth, and their role in securing services for their children. Their stories highlight the importance of these issues in the development of strong connections between the home and the school for these families. For example, when parents in my study perceived a lack of effectiveness on the part of a child's teacher, their relationship with the school changed. They became more concerned about the child's progress and often lost faith in the school's ability to meet the needs of the child. Consequently, they sought out private services or evaluations at great expense to

themselves and the family. This seemed to usher in an element of stress in the

relationship between the home and the school.

Although one cannot make sweeping generalizations based on a small sample like

the one in my study, the experiences of these participants offer educators and researchers

rich examples of instances of parental involvement in the special education process and

the nature of family-school partnerships for these particular families. These examples

can contribute to the knowledge-base on partnership-making in special education. This

final chapter presents conclusions and implications based on these examples.

Conclusions

A well-known saying goes, "Parents are a child's first teachers." This is based on

the widely held assumption that during the first few years of life, the home is the primary

learning context for the child. Although a child's individual development is also

influenced by other environmental contexts like the neighborhood in which she lives or

the daycare she attends, the home is place where much of her social, emotional, and

cognitive development occurs (Beveridge, 2005). Once school-age, she is introduced to

another significant setting – school. The school becomes a new learning context for the

child. These two "spheres" overlap in that a child moves between the two, and

individuals from both contexts share responsibility for her social, emotional, and

cognitive development (Epstein, 1992). Policies and practices that promote parental

involvement in schooling and family-school partnerships are based on the assumption

that the strength of the connections between these two learning contexts influences a child's individual development (Beveridge, 2005).

Based upon these beliefs, an important question for educators becomes, "How do we get parents involved in their children's education?" The parental involvement literature suggests that process variables (what parents think and do across status groups) are more important in determining why parents become involved in the children's education than status variables such as background or socioeconomic level (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). This research indicates that educators interested in encouraging and motivating parents to become involved in their children's schooling should focus on process variables such as: parental role construction (What do parents believe they are supposed to do in relation to their child's education); parental self-efficacy (Do parents believe what they do will make a difference?); and parents perceptions of general invitations, demands, and opportunities for parental involvement presented by schools, teachers, and/or children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

The ways in which educators translate these findings into effective school practice is another important consideration. According to Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, and Closson (2005),

> The research suggests that schools may take steps to enhance parents'
> active role construction and sense of efficacy for helping children learn;
> enact practices that support school, teacher, and student invitations to
> involvement; and adapt involvement requests and suggestions to the
> circumstances of parents' life contexts. (p. 123)

For educators, the fact that the parental involvement literature suggests that schools can influence a parent's decision to become involved in a child's education is good news. We can work to promote parental involvement in schooling. This research literature indicates that school practices should focus on two major categories: (1) strategies that enhance school capacities for inviting parental involvement and (2) strategies schools may enact to enhance parents' capacities to be effectively involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Suggestions that fall into the former category "emphasize creating school conditions that enable dynamic, interactive school outreach and responsiveness to families and communities (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, p. 116-117). These strategies include but are not limited to: creating an inviting, welcoming school climate; empowering teachers for parental involvement; and learning about parents' goals, perspectives on child's learning, family circumstances and culture (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005). Suggestions that fall into the latter category "focus on explicit school support for parents' active role construction, positive self-efficacy, and positive perceptions of school and teacher invitations to involvement" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, p. 119). These strategies include but are not limited to: communicating clearly that all parents have an important role to play in their children's success in school; giving parents specific information about what they can do to be involved; and giving parents specific information on how their involvement influences student learning (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Policies and practices promoting family-school partnerships in special education share some of the basic assumptions underlying the parental involvement literature. First

and foremost is the belief that parental involvement benefits student learning. As noted by the Council for Exceptional Children (2001), "Family involvement in children's special education was an original tenet of *IDEA*, with family roles expanding with each reauthorization of the law" (p. 3). The challenge in the field of special education is that despite supporting legislation, "Parental involvement may not always reach desired levels, and in some cases may even be riddled with conflict" (Council for Exceptional Children, 2001, p. 3). As a result, an important question for special educators is, "How do we improve the relationships between the home and the school?" In a review of the literature on family-school partnerships in special education, Royster and McLaughlin (1996) found that the goal of creating partnerships with parents was twofold: (a) to empower parents (defined as a parent's ability to access and utilize resources, solve problems and make decisions, and collaborate effectively) and (b) to enhance communication between parents and professionals. Research literature on family-school partnerships in special education indicates that several approaches are available for educators interested in these goals. These strategies include but are not limited to: helping families deal with stress; providing support for families to participate in all phases of the special education process; involving families in systems change; and, helping families access information when it is needed (Council for Exceptional Children, 2001).

The stories shared by participants provided examples of why they became involved in the special education process, how they became involved, and what the outcomes of their involvement activities were. Thematic analysis of their stories

indicated that these fourteen parents shared similar experiences during the unfolding special education process. The first theme suggested that parents encountered teachers who they felt were underprepared to work with diverse student populations in today's integrated classrooms. For the most part, they were concerned about the qualifications of general education teachers to meet the needs of their children with special needs. The second theme indicated that parents in my study felt that school personnel were not always honest with them and/or were not forthcoming with information about the special education process. This experience impacted their relationship with the school and often resulted in efforts to seek information elsewhere. The third theme suggested that when parents in my study felt they were not getting anywhere with the school or that their needs or their children's needs were not being met, they started to take it upon themselves to become educated about the special education process, the law, and/or their child's eligibility category.

Based upon the interview data and the three themes outlined above, certain conclusions are offered from my study. First, the parents voiced a desire to have a highly qualified teacher in their children's classroom. For them, such a teacher would incorporate multidimensional ways to teach and learn into her diverse classroom setting. Second, these parents voiced a concern regarding their rights and the school's responsibilities. Their stories illustrated the fact that there were instances of inadequate communication and collaboration between the home and the school that affected their sense of partnership. For example, parents wanted information about the special education process such as how to behave in an IEP meeting, what they could request, and

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how many days the school had to comply. Schools were not always forthcoming with such information. Third, parents who were not knowledgeable about the special education process and found themselves in the situation – in their opinion - of not being listened to, getting the run around, or not getting the whole story did not sit passively by for long. They began the long and often tiresome process of self-discovery and self-learning undertaken with the help of community organizations, the Internet and family and friends. This was the role they believed they were supposed to or needed to do in relation to their child's special education. Finally, these parents demonstrated the ability to effectively advocate for their children. They described instances when they became involved in the process to secure services like an additional evaluation for their child or to request compliance with a provision from their child's IEP like not reading aloud in a group setting. Once equipped with knowledge about the working of the special education process, these parents felt that by asserting themselves in a respectful and professional manner, they could impact their children's school experience in a positive way. In other words, their sense of efficacy was strong.

Parental involvement in a child's education is an important element in school success. Establishing positive partnerships between the home and the school is an important step towards increasing parental involvement in schooling. For parents in my study, it appears that participation in the unfolding special education process transformed the ways in which they chose to become involved in their children's education. They reported that in order to fully participate in the special education process they had to become knowledgeable, active contributors in the process. At the time of my interviews

with them, these parents were well-informed on a number of issues related to special

education. Educators, administrators, and researchers who wish to move beyond the

rhetoric of partnership-talk need to consider ways to promote effective partnership-

making with parents who are knowledgeable and have embraced the role of advocate for

their children. The following section presents implications for stakeholders.

Implications

Schools

The stories told by parents in my study indicated that these participants were

concerned about the effectiveness of teachers in today's integrated classrooms. Stories

that described teachers using multidimensional ways to teach and learn were examples of

positive experiences in the unfolding special education process. In contemporary special

education, one method which aims to meet the needs of diverse learners is known as

Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This method of differentiated instruction is based

on the assumption that there is no one method of presentation or expression which

provides equal access to learning for all learners (Gargiulo, 2009). Rather, UDL:

> allows education professionals the flexibility necessary to design
>
> curriculum, instruction, and evaluation procedures capable of meeting the
>
> needs of all students. UDL is accomplished by means of flexible
>
> curriculum materials and activities that offer alternatives to pupils with
>
> widely varying abilities and backgrounds. These adaptations are built into

the instructional design rather than added as an afterthought. (Garguilo,

2009, p. 30)

Parents in my study reported instances of teachers incorporating strategies similar to

UDL, calling them in one narrative *multidimensional ways to learn*. However, they also

talked about their concern regarding teachers who didn't seem to have the skills and/or

the desire to integrate this type of differentiated instruction into their diverse classroom

settings. Based on the stories told by participants in my study, schools might consider

providing professional development opportunities for teachers in the areas of

differentiated instruction such as UDL.

Parents in my study also talked about issues of honesty and the feeling that

schools were not forthcoming with information about the special education process.

Based upon their experiences, schools need to do a better job of providing families with

information about the special education process and of monitoring whether or not

families feel informed about their rights and responsibilities as the process unfolds. In

my experience, schools do a lot. For example, Special Education Local Advisory

Committees exist. Family-school liaisons are employed. Pamphlets on rights and

responsibilities are handed out. Nonetheless, parents in my study – who were often well

educated and able to access resources like community supports and the Internet – felt like

they were uninformed by chance or on purpose. Schools need to harness the energy and

expertise of these advocates. For example, they might work with parents to put together

a mock video about the IEP meeting with actual school personnel so parents entering into

the process might get a sense of how it all plays out. Whether or not parents would

access such a resource is another challenge, but parents in my study had a lot of information and expertise to share. Schools might want to tap into such a resource to bolster parental involvement in the special education process and learn ways to work productively with families going through the process.

Research indicates that a clear exchange of information between the home and the school is particularly important for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CLD) (Salas, 2004; Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006). Although my study did not include such families, it is important to note that the population of CLD students in schools is rising, and the number of CLD children receiving special education services has increase dramatically (Lo, 2009). In order to establish effective partnerships with CLD families, school personnel who are often young, white females need to know how to work effectively with CLD families. In her study on collaborating with Chinese families with children with hearing impairments, Lo (2009) noted that communication is one of the critical factors in establishing home-school partnership in general and with CLD families in particular. She suggested that because a language barrier is likely to exist between school personnel and CLD families, "interpreters and translators are considered the best solution to this problem" (Lo, 2009, p. 100). However, she cautioned that "simply fluency in English and the target language does not automatically qualify individuals as interpreters and translators" (Lo, 2009, p. 100). Lo suggested that schools need to consider things like whether or not interpreters are nonbiased and whether or not they understand the terms used during the special education process and can convey that information appropriately. In addition, she

suggested that providing CLD families with information regarding the special education process is crucial.

Institutions of Higher Education

The stories told by parents in my study also indicated that they wondered about the quality and rigor of teacher preparation programs. In institutions of higher education, preservice teachers need to develop knowledge, abilities, and dispositions that will prepare them to work in partnerships with parents of students receiving special education services. Murray and Curran (2008) suggested that one way to accomplish this task is "to learn together with the parents of children with disabilities" (p. 59). They wrote, "Preservice students who have had multiple opportunities to interact with families, over a variety of settings, have greater chances of developing family-centered dispositions and skill sets and are more likely to generalize these skill sets to the job" (Murray & Curran, 2008, p. 59). In their article, they described an undergraduate course required for students seeking licensure in K-12 special education in which preservice teachers "develop relationships with parents of children with disabilities through weekly collaborative interactions and activities" (Murray & Curran, 2008, p. 59). Six parents were recruited and attended sixteen three hour sessions over the course of one semester. Murray and Curran wrote, "While not required to complete assignments, parents agreed to participate in small group projects and keep up with assigned readings so that they could contribute to discussions" (p. 60). In studying the effects on the twenty-seven preservice teachers enrolled in the class, Murray and Curran administered a survey at the

beginning and end of the semester. Findings from the study indicated that participation in the class led to significant changes in students' perceived abilities to (a) recognize and value the experiences of parents of children with disabilities and (b) use that knowledge to facilitate and maintain effective and rewarding parent-professional partnerships.

In addition, institutions of higher education must meet the challenge of preparing general education teachers for today's integrated classrooms. Pugach (2005) suggested that one way to accomplish this goal is through collaborative efforts between teacher educators in general and special education programs. By working together, faculty in these collaborative teacher education programs can talk about "what is valued and how it is addressed" (Pugach, 2005, p. 577) and can work together to collect data on the effectiveness of general education teachers who work with students with disabilities during their first years in the classroom.

Future Research

Due to the fact that family-school partnerships in special education are often marked by tension and/or inequality (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001), additional research should be conducted as to why. By talking to a variety of interested stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and school administrators about a particular instance, we might learn more about what makes or breaks a partnership between the home and the school. For example, in my study, one parent described her desire to have her son tested specifically for dyslexia. In her opinion, the school just gave her the run around and put off her request. What if researchers went back and interviewed all of the involved parties and

put together a fuller account of the situation? Findings might indicate when and how the communication and collaboration between the home and the school began to break down and might offer suggestions as to how to avoid such a situation in the future.

A challenge facing researchers interested in monitoring the quality of family-school partnerships in special education is just how to do it. Towards that end, Summers, Hoffman, Marquis, Turnbull, Poston, and Lord Nelson (2005) developed a Family-School Partnership Scale which "assesses parents' perceptions of the importance of and satisfaction with family-professional partnerships" (p. 65). Based on qualitative research with families with and without disabilities, they developed this scale which contains 18-items overall which are broken down into two 9-item subscales. Domains covered include; "Professional Skills, Commitment, Respect, Trust, Communication, and Equality" (Summers et al., 2005, p. 74). They suggested that future researchers might utilize this scale for both pre-service and in-service training on family-school partnerships as well as for program evaluation or needs assessment.

Future researchers utilizing narrative research methods might consider looking at the metaphors parents use in talking about their experiences with the unfolding special education process. Metaphors offer researchers a way of investigating "how people convey their meanings through language" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 83). For example, as I began exploring my data, I noticed that many parents in my study used different variations of the term "pushing" when talking about their experiences with schools and school personnel. See Table 8 for examples of this type of language from my study.

Table 8

The Pushing Metaphor

Interview	Examples
Interview 1	Push the reading
	Pushing it (testing)
	Pushing it (outside evaluations)
	Pushing the child along
	Push them along
Interview 2	Push everything aside
	Pushed over sort of thing
Interview 3	Push it back
	I really pushed
	Pushed the teacher
Interview6	Push them through
Interview 8	In the process of pushing
	And I pushed
Interview 9	I am pushing for
	I kept pushing
	I was pushing all along
	I was pushing them
	I am still pushing
	I kept pushing, and pushing, and pushing

	I am pushing now
Interview 11	Push parents
Interview 12	I am pushing for more
	You always have to push
	I haven't been pushing and advocating for nothing

Although I did not pursue this line of inquiry in my analysis, it might be interesting to think about why a number of parents in my study choose to use this particular metaphor in their stories. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) wrote, "It is always important to pay close attention to how members of particular groups or communities use ordinary language in special ways or use local specific variants" (p. 84). Towards this end, future researchers might find it useful to examine in more detail the linguistic terms used by parents in describing their experiences with the unfolding special education process.

Based on my interviews with parents regarding their personal experiences with the special education process, I wonder to what extent genuine power sharing between parents and schools can actually occur. Put another way, how much of the policy talk about "partnership" is – and will remain – simply rhetorical? Parents I talked to experienced an unequal distribution of power in the unfolding special education process. One form of that power was knowledge. At the beginning of the process, the parents lacked knowledge and the professionals possessed it. Over the course of time, parents acquired various forms of knowledge through self-learning or social networking, and they

eventually used it to their advantage in future encounters with school personnel. That withstanding, the lack of knowledge put them at a disadvantage that they eventually had to overcome to positively impact the education trajectories of their children. Another example of the unequal distribution of power was structural in nature. Parents described their initial encounters with the special education process as intimidating: one of them – or maybe two if they brought a spouse, friend, or advocate – and a table full of school professionals. This too put them at a disadvantage. Researchers might also investigate ways to restructure schools in order to permit shared decision-making and facilitate more equal partnerships.

Limitations

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the fact that the perspectives presented in my study were those of particular parents. Their sentiments may not be shared by other parents in their school districts who are also navigating the special education process. In addition, the perspectives describe their side of the story and may or may not be a completely accurate portrayal of the attitudes, beliefs, or conduct of school personnel. To get a full and accurate accounting of each situation described, one would need to interview all parties involved. Here, I presented the perspectives of particular parents regarding their particular experiences with the special education process.

Final Thoughts

Looking back, I am struck by how knowledgeable the parents in my study were about the special education process at the time of my interviews with them. Many knew so much about the nature of the disability, the special education process, and the law. However, nobody started out that way. These parents used social know-how to educate themselves for the benefit of their children. Even the one attorney sought out information from a community organization upon realizing that her child would require special education services. According to Ream and Palardy (2008), this use of know-how, or social capital, is an acknowledged trait of middle to upper class parents, especially in the realm of education. Such parents are known to use who they know as a resource for "excerting power over schooling practices" (Ream & Palardy, p. 257) and shaping the educational trajectories of their children. Parents in lower socioeconomic classes seem to possess less social capital and seem less likely to use social networks as potentially useful resources. According to Ream and Palardy (2008), this tends to disadvantage their school-aged children; however, school personell can work to improve the use of social capital in families from lower rungs of the social ladder. For parents in my study, learning how to use social capital in the unfolding special education process was a journey – a time consuming one at that. However, these parents did what they had to do to become an effective advocate for their children.

And, they were still doing it on the day of my interview with them. Somehow, telling the story of their expereinces with the special education process to a complete stranger fit into this journey. These busy parents invited me into their homes or found

time to meet me at the library to tell me their stories. And, I have to ask myself why. In

retrospect, I believe that telling their stories was tied to their role of becoming an

advocate for their children. I believe that they felt they could make a difference for

another family by sharing examples from their experiences.

Literature on Parental Involvement

Authors	Method	Sample	Theories of Influence	Findings
Epstein (1992)	Review of the Literature		Overlapping spheres of influence	Five important types of involvement help schools and families fulfill their overlapping responsibilities for children's learning and development: Basic obligations to families, basic obligations to school, involvement in school, involvement in learning at home, and involvement in decision-making, governance, and advocacy; also collaboration with community organizations is important
Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie (1992)	Survey to examine relationship between parental self-efficacy and parental involvement	Parents (n=390) of children in K-4th grade in urban public school	Self-efficacy theory	Modest, but significant, relationship between self-reported parental self-efficacy and three of the five indicators of parental involvement (volunteering, educational activities, and telephone calls)
Eccles & Harold (1993)	Summary article			Collaborative relationship between parents and teachers can play critical role in a child's healthy

				development; such relationships decrease as child moves into adolescent years and secondary school; parental involvement is as important during secondary school years and schools can work to improve such relationships during those years
Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995)	Theoretical model development		Role construction theory; Self-efficacy theory	Theoretical model of the parental involvement process presented (See Table 1)
Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997)	Review of psychological theories and research question: Why do parents become involved in their children's elementary and secondary education?		Role construction theory; Self-efficacy theory	Three most influential psychological constructs that influence parents' decisions to become involved in their children's education: (1) parental role construction; (2) parental self-efficacy for helping their children succeed in school; and (3), parents' perceptions of the general invitations from school, teacher, and/or child
Desimone (1999)	Quantitative analysis to compare the effects of multiple types of parental involvement across several	Parent and student surveys from National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (n= 24, 599		Statistically significant and substantially meaningful differences in the relationship between student achievement and parental

	racial, ethnic, and income groups	8th graders)		involvement according to the students' race, ethnicity, and family income; potentially important differences in the relationships of parental involvement to student achievement based on type of involvement, who reported the information, and how achievement was measure
Fan & Chen (2001)	Meta-Analysis of quantitative studies to synthesize research on relationship between parental involvement and students' academic success	25 studies		Small to moderate, and particularly meaningful, relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement
Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson (2005)	Review of the empirical literature on research question: Why do parents become involved in children's education?		Role construction theory; Self-efficacy theory	Parental role construction and parental self-efficacy underscore parental motivational beliefs; invitations from school, teacher, and/or child provide powerful contextual motivators for parental involvement
Reynolds & Clements (2005)	Review of the Literature			Parental involvement in the form of high expectations for educational

				attainment and participation in school activities had the most consistent influence on educational outcomes
Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey (2005)	Survey to empirically test Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler's (1995,1997) model of the parental involvement process	Survey created from interview data (n= 20) filled out by parents from diverse urban school district (n = 1,384)	Role construction theory; Self-efficacy theory	Revisions to Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler's (1995, 1997) model of the parental involvement process presented (See Table 2)
Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler (2007)	Survey to examine the relative contributions of three overarching constructs (see Table 2) hypothesized to influence specific parental involvement decisions	Parents (n=853) of 1st through 6th graders in an diverse urban school district	Role construction theory; Self-efficacy theory	Parental involvement is motivated primarily by features of the social context, especially interpersonal relationships with children and teachers, rather than SES; home-based involvement predicted by invitations from child, self-efficacy beliefs, and self-perceived time and energy; school-based involvement also predicted by these constructs plus teacher invitations; future research must carefully define type of parental involvement under investigation

Literature on Parents-School Relationships in Special Education

Authors	Purpose	Method	Sample	Findings
Blok, Peetsma, & Roede (2007)	To explore whether the Pupil-Bound Funding (PBF) system in the Netherlands leads to stronger involvement of parents in the education of their children with special needs	Telephone survey followed by in-depth interview	116 couples for telephone interviews; 21 couples for interviews of children with hearing or language impairments, MR, and emotional disorders (Netherlands)	New system in Netherlands enables parents of students with special needs to choose how they wish their children be educated (i.e. inclusive schools or segregated schools). Findings: parents are involved in important decisions; however, perceive scope of involvement limited. Main problem appears to be that experts and schools not yet sufficiently open to idea of parental involvement. Parents feel inputs not listened to
Jivanjee, Kruzich, Friesen, & Robinson (2007)	To explore family members' perceptions of their experiences participating in educational planning	Survey (Family Empowerment Scale)	133 family members of children with serious emotional disorders	Family members' perceptions of their participation in ed planning mixed. Low ratings on items concerning extent ed planning took into account families' needs and circumstances, their values and culture, and extent

				to which staff made changed in plan as result of family input. Families with high empowerment scores perceived they had high levels of participation in ed planning (exception rather than norm)
Nowell & Salem (2007)	To explore the different ways in which special education mediation affects the relationships between parents and schools as perceived by parents of students with special needs	In-depth interviews Grounded theory	7 parents of children with ADD, ADHD, autism, and MR	Perceptions of relational impact of mediation fell into two categories: interpersonal relationships (+/-) with school personal and parents' sense of efficacy (+/-). Perceived follow-through on mediation agreement by school has significant impact on whether parent-school relationships are perceived to improve or deteriorate in future
Roll-Petterson & Mattson (2007)	To acquire an in-depth understanding of parental experiences and encounters with the	In-depth interview Grounded theory	7 mothers of youth with dyslexic difficulties (Sweden)	Four themes emerged: suspicions and identification difficulties, organizational perspectives,

	school system having a child with dyslectic difficulties			longitudinal importance of collaboration between home and school, child's self-esteem: Common perspective: without advocacy efforts of mothers, supports and services children received would not have been obtained – idea of "professionalizing" parents
Ditrano & Silverstein (2006)	To explore the potential of a participatory action research (PAR) project to increase collaboration between parents and school personnel, improve service to children, and generate a model for effective staff-family partnerships	7 audiotaped parent group meetings over the course of 5 months Grounded theory	9 parents, 2 parent partners, and school psych (regarding children with emotional disabilities)	Created theoretical narrative. Four theoretical constructs chronicled evolution of parents subjective experiences, moving from a sense of powerlessness to a feeling of empowerment: multiple stressors, developing critical consciousness, education, and empowerment and action
Pinkus (2006)	To explore how matters related to a parents' cultural location(s) might or might not reveal	Ethnographic case study: in-depth, semi-structured interviews, observations of school meetings, and email	6 mothers and 6 fathers (Anglo-Jewish community; various disabilities; England) Purposeful	Themes: parents sought to be active rather than passive in relationships with professional; parents needed to be understood in context of whole

	themselves to influence parent-professional partnerships	correspondence Grounded theory	sampling	family unity rather than as individual; parents often felt vulnerable to interventions by profs; Despite fact that profs and parents shared same ethnic group, parents still had issues with boundaries and feelings of vulnerability
Tissot & Evans (2006)	To investigate the views of parents about their personal experience of securing educational provisions for their child with ASD	Survey	738 parents of children with ASD "opportunity sample" (UK)	Parents reported satisfaction with provisions; however, also reported high levels of stress associated with securing provisions
Kim & Morningstar (2005)	To review published literature regarding parent involvement in transition planning for families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds	Database search	21 studies fit criteria, but only 5 included b/c empirical	Shortage of empirical studies on CLD family involvement in transition planning; CLD families felt disenfranchised, tended to withdraw from process, more passive than active
Rentry & Roeyers (2005)	To evaluate parents' satisfaction with the accessibility and quality of education and	Survey (n= 244) In-depth interviews (n= 15)	157 mothers 18 fathers (Flemish)	Overall parents satisfied with education and support of child with ASD; parental satisfaction

	support for their child with autism spectrum disorder			significantly related to age of diagnosis, knowledge of available services; and involvement in formal support. Dissatisfaction associated with difficulties with diagnostic process, with support in mainstream setting, and accessibility of provisions
Leiter & Kruass (2004)	To explore whether there are differences by race/ethnicity, gender, and poverty in the probability that parents will request additional services, report problems accessing them, and be satisfied with their child's special education services	Survey	National Health Interview Survey = data source. 1,864 children who had received special education services identified and survey sent home to their parents (disabilities varied)	Only a small percentage of parents requested additional related services. Of those, majority had difficulty obtaining these services. These parents were more likely to report being dissatisfied with children's educational services. Suggests that not experience of asking, but of being denied, that impacts how satisfied parents are with children's ed services
Lindsay & Dockrell (2004)	To examine the perspectives of parents of children with specific	Mixed-methods: interviews and rating-scale/assessments	66 parents of children with speech and language difficulties (UK)	Often, parents felt they were not listened to and had to fight for appropriate services

	speech and language difficulties concerning provisions to meet their children educational needs			
Salas (2004)	To explore how one group of Mexican American parents experience IEP meetings as it pertains to their children with special needs	In-depth interviews (beginning, middle, and end of the year); Narrative Thematic Analysis	10 Mexican American mothers	Themes revealed that although women wanted to be involved in decision-making process regarding their children, they were silenced by overt or covert massages that told them voices were not valid
Crawford & Simonoff (2003)	To examine the views of parents of children attending schools for the emotionally and behaviorally disturbed concerning educational services	Focus group discussions	25 parents (UK)	Families experience social exclusion. Timeliness of identification and placement problematic.
Duncan (2003)	To examine the parents' perspectives on points of conflict or dissatisfaction between themselves and professionals	Interviews	10 families (UK)	Special education process found to be exceptionally difficult and stressful. Negative experiences related to bureaucratic foot-dragging and behavior of school personnel

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Flyer

Parent Volunteers Needed
Research Study
Family-School Partnerships in Special Education

- *Are you the parent of a child currently receiving special education services?*
- *Would you be willing to share your story?*

I am graduate student at Boston College's Lynch School of Education. This study is being conducted for my dissertation. I am hoping to interview up to 20 parents about their experiences with the special education process. If you are the parent of a school-aged child who was identified as qualifying for special education services over the course of the last few years and would be willing to share your story, please contact me. I would like to interview you for about one hour. Thank you.
mcdermcb@bc.edu or 401-316-1804

Informed Consent Form

Boston College, Lynch School of Education
Informed Adult Consent for Participation as a Subject in the Following Study:
Family-School Partnerships in Special Education: A Narrative Study of Parental
Experiences
Investigator: Cara McDermott-Fasy
Date Created: October 1, 2008

Introduction:
- You are being asked to be in a research study of family-school partnerships in special education.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are a parent whose school-aged child was recently identified as having a special need.
- I ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study:
- The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of parents during the early phases of the special education process in the hopes of learning more about the policies and procedures that support partnership-making between the home and the school in the field of special education.
- Participants in this study are parents whose school-aged children have been identified as having a special need over the course of the few years. I hope to interview 20 parents over the course of the next four months.

Description of the Study Procedures:
- If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you lasting 60 to 90 minutes. The interview will be tape-recorded. A second interview may be necessary to clarify information discussed in the initial interview.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in the Study:
- There are no reasonable foreseeable (or expected) risks for participating in this study. You will only be expected to answer interview questions to your comfort level.

Benefits of Being in the Study:

- The purpose of the study is to explore family-school partnerships in special education. An expected benefit of participating in this study is your contribution to research in this area.

Payments:
- There is no payment for participating in this study.

Costs:
- There is no cost to you to participate in this research study.

Confidentiality:
- The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I may publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be kept in a locked file.
- All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Audiotapes will also be kept in a locked file and destroyed by the researcher after completion of the project. Portions of audiotapes may be used for educational purposes such as my dissertation defense meeting, but no identifiable information will be included in those excerpts.
- Access to the records will be limited to the researcher and her dissertation committee; however, please note that the Institutional Review Board and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:
- Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your current or future relations with Boston College.
- You are free to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason.
- There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not taking part or for stopping your participation.

Contacts and Questions:
- The researcher conducting this study is Cara McDermott-Fasy. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at mcdermcb@bc.edu. Her advisor is Professor Curt Dudley-Marling. He can be reached at 617-552-4192.
- If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may also contact: Director, Office for Human Research Participant Protection, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or irb@bc.edu

Copy of Consent Form:
- You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

Statement of Consent:

- I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

Signatures/Dates

Study Participant (Print Name): _____

Signature: _____

Date _____

THANK YOU

APPENDIX E

Demographic Data Form

1. Mother _____; Father _____

2. Race/Ethnicity _____

3. Marital Status _____

4. Highest Level of Education _____

5. Occupation _____

6. Religion _____

7. Child's gender _____

8. Age of child _____

9. Child's Grade Level _____

10. Child's special education eligibility category _____

APPENDIX F

Interview Protocol

Opening statement/question:

Some parents find themselves in the situation of having their school-aged child referred

for special education services. Going through the special education process varies for

different parents. I would like you to think about your experiences and tell me how it

happened that you became involved with the special education process.

Prompts:

Topic Area	Examples of Prompts
Child	"Tell me about your child."
Early phases of the special education process	"Tell me about when you or a school professional first suspected that your child has a disability." "Tell me about your experiences with your child's school after the referral to special education."
Involvement	"Tell me how you have been involved in the process since your child was referred to special education." "Tell me about a particular moment of involvement in the special education process that stands out in your memory."
Family-School Partnerships	"Since your child was identified as having a special need, how would you describe your relationships with his/her school?" "Can you talk about the types of things (Involvement activities) the school has asked of you?" "Can you talk about the types of things you have asked of the school?"

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