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Educator Perceptions toward the IEP Meeting

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The individualized education program (IEP) was the primary component of Part B of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), the IEP has continued to direct the educational needs, goals and objectives, placement, evaluation criteria, present levels of educational performance, and duration of programming modifications for students receiving special education services (Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001; 20 U.S.C. § 1400). The IEP functions as the blueprint for services to be provided for students, as IEP regulations identify meeting dates, parental and student consent and accountability, as well as responsibilities of educational agencies (Huefner, 2000).

The IEP team consists of parents of a student with a disability, at least one regular education teacher, one special education teacher, one local educational agency representative, one campus administrator, the student with a disability if 14+ years of age and other individuals who have knowledge regarding the student to include related services personnel as appropriate (20 U.S.C. § 1400). Members of the IEP meeting function to develop an educational plan based upon a student's needs and to determine placement based upon the most effective delivery of instruction in a least restrictive environment.

Quality educator-parent collaboration in IEP meetings beyond minimal legislative compliance is necessary to establish effective educational programs (Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000; Simpson, 1995). The IEP meeting provides the ideal opportunity to facilitate quality collaboration between educators and parents. Under IDEA 2004, school districts are to ensure parental meaningful involvement and active participation in the IEP process by school districts (Drasgow et al., 2001; Salas, 2004) in addition to confirming understanding of procedural rights and proceedings (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000; Yell, Katslyannis, Drasgow, & Herbst, 2003).

Following the original authorization of P. L. 94-142, many educators perceived that parents should serve as passive rather than active participants during IEP meetings (McAfee & Vergason, 1979; Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, & Maxwell, 1978). According to a Gerber, Banbury, Miller, and Griffin (1986) study 44% of educators believed that IEP meetings served strictly as a formality. Within recent years, there has been increased awareness among educators regarding the significance of implementing a quality IEP for students receiving special education services. Lee-Tarver (2006) concluded from studying regular education teachers that an IEP was perceived as a necessary tool for planning, preparing and implementing educational goals and curriculum. Results from a study conducted by Martin, Marshall, and Sale (2004) further revealed the significance that IEP participant participation played towards effective positive dialogue and positive outcomes.

Despite this positive outlook among educators, parents of students receiving special education services often do not perceive IEP meetings as positive experiences. The discrepancy between educator and parental perceptions warrants a review of previous research. Parents are typically not actively involved in the IEP process (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995), but rather limited to being recipients of information (Garriott et al., 2000; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988) and signing

documents. Often times, parents feel alienated as educators continue to dominate the decision making process (Turnbull & Turnbull 1997; Vaughn et al.). According to Kalyanpur et al. (2000), decision making during IEP meetings is more heavily influenced by educational assessment expertise over parental anecdotal reports.

Stoner et al. (2005) concluded from studying parental perceptions of the IEP meeting that all participants perceived their child's initial IEP meeting as traumatic, confusing and complicated, which led to dissatisfaction towards the special education system. The unwillingness of educators listening to parental input was a common theme revealed from a Pruitt, Wandry, & Hollums (1998) study interviewing 73 parents of children receiving special education services. Salas (2004) concluded from studying Mexican American parents of children with special needs that their input was frequently not respected during IEP meetings.

Fish (2006) conducted a case study measuring parental perceptions of students with autism towards the IEP meeting. Most of the parents indicated that their overall IEP meeting experiences had been negative as those interviewed had previously experienced negative treatment at one time or another by educators during the IEP process. While many of these parents received more positive treatment among educators as they built rapport with school districts, adversarial relationships still existed among several of the parents.

In a follow up study, Fish (2008) surveyed parents of children receiving special education services across disability groups. While most participants in this study indicated that they were generally satisfied with their child's IEP meetings, these parents believed that educators could improve IEP meetings by further educating parents, granting sufficient time to conduct meetings and allowing for increased parental involvement and participation. Furthermore, parents suggested that educators could further encourage parental involvement through creating a welcoming atmosphere, ensuring that family members have a familiar relationship with at least one other IEP team member, and encouraging parents to accompany a knowledgeable advocate.

Perceptions of both educators and parents towards the IEP meeting will be further tested through the legislative changes of IDEA 2004, which includes altering the requirement of IEP meeting attendance and eliminating the requirement of short-term objectives for certain students. Upon both educator and parental consent, IEP team member attendance is no longer required if particular individuals can provide sufficient written information or if their expertise is not considered essential during particular IEP meetings. Furthermore, upon parental written approval, an original student IEP can be modified without all team members having to be present (Smith, 2005). Another significant change revolves around the elimination of short-term objectives for those students who do not require alternative assessments. While this change served as an attempt to reduce paperwork, one negative implication includes the potential de-emphasis of the individualization of student goals (Gartin & Murdick, 2005), which can likely deter parent-educator relations.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how special educators, general educators and administrators perceived the IEP meeting, which served as an extension of previous research that investigated parental perceptions toward the IEP meeting. Educators were presented with questions to determine if their responses were similar to input from parental perception studies. Identifying perceptual differences that exist between educators and parents can serve as step towards eliminating communication barriers among these two parties during IEP meetings. This study sought to determine

factors that contributed to the belief held by educators whether or not IEP meetings were positive experiences. Participants were further asked to assess their relations and treatment towards parents in addition to whether both educators and parents were knowledgeable of the IEP process. Furthermore, this study investigated participant input regarding measures that both educators and parents can take to improve IEP meetings.

Methodology

Non-random sampling was conducted to acquire 274 public school educators from one region of a southwestern state. Access to participants was granted through a regional service center representative who distributed an online survey instrument along with a cover letter explaining purpose of the study to school district special education coordinators within that region. These coordinators then forwarded the online survey link to all campus principals within their respective school districts. Participants who received the survey were those educators whose school principal opted to forward the online survey to their general education and special education faculty. All participants had attended at least one IEP meeting.

Most participants surveyed were general education teachers from the elementary grade level. The highest percentage of educators (53%, N = 144) within this study participated in over 100 IEP meetings during their professional careers. Table 1 provides background information of participants in terms of participant job titles and grade levels of serving students.

Survey questions were validated through the utilization of literature review research on parental and educator perceptions toward the IEP process, experiences of IEP meetings by the researcher, findings from two previous studies researching parental perceptions toward the IEP meeting and a survey pilot-test. The survey instrument was previously pilot-tested on graduate students who were elementary and secondary school educators with IEP meeting participation experience. The pilot-test participant feedback resulted in refining questions for clarity. Additionally, these graduate students recommended

Table 1

Background Information of Participants

Item	N=274	%
Job Title within District		
General education teacher	96	35
Special education teacher	57	21
Administrator	42	15
Diagnostician	32	12
Other	47	17
Grade Level of Serving Students		
Early childhood	16	6
Elementary	131	48
Middle school	63	23
High school	64	23

expanding this study to seek administrator and general education teacher perspectives from the original plan of surveying only special educators. The survey instrument had internal consistency using

Chronbach's alpha of 0.70.

The survey instrument composed of demographic, Likert scale and two open-ended questions were utilized to obtain educator perceptions of the IEP meeting. The instrument was formatted into five sections: (a) demographic information, (b) IEP meeting experiences, (c) knowledge of IEP process and special education law, (d) relations with parents and (e) recommended areas for improvement.

Due to the nonrandom sampling of participants conducted to obtain ordinal data, nonparametric statistics were used to analyze survey results. SPSS was utilized to calculate descriptive statistics including the mean, standard deviation and percentage total of each survey item. The computation of Kruskal-Wallis test statistics, designated by the letter H, was used at the 0.05 level of significance to compare differences between mean rankings of the Likert scale questions across participant job title and grade level categories.

Data from the two open-ended questions were analyzed by both the researcher and an independent coder, based upon categories to construct meaning, through the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within the open-ended responses, content was uniquely identified by particular ideas through color-coding. This method was utilized to label and distinguish among categories of the data. Data were then organized based upon emergent categories revolving around similar characteristics.

Results

The majority of educators surveyed responded favorably with regards to their overall IEP meeting experiences, knowledge level of special education law and relations with parents of students receiving special education services.

Educator IEP Meeting Experiences

Educators were asked to provide input pertaining to their IEP meeting experiences, specifically whether or not they had positive experiences within the IEP process. The majority of educators surveyed believed that their overall IEP experiences were positive with 64% (174) of participants agreeing and 23% (62) strongly agreeing. Only 3% (7) of the educators surveyed either strongly disagreed or disagreed with their experiences being positive during the majority of IEP meetings. Kruskal-Wallis results indicated that there were no significant mean rank differences pertaining to this item that existed between job title and grade level categories.

Participants were asked whether they facilitated thorough discussions of student IEP goals and objectives within these meetings, if they believed that educators utilized time wisely, and if sufficient time was allotted for parents to provide input during meetings. Regarding the discussion of student IEP goals, 60% (164) of educators surveyed agreed and 22% (59) strongly agreed that student objectives were thoroughly discussed during IEP meetings, while only 1% (3) strongly disagreed. Comparing grade levels, significant mean rank differences existed with regards to perceptions of IEP goals being thoroughly discussed during meetings ($H = 9.85, p = 0.02$). Educators serving students at the early childhood level responded the most favorably toward this item ($M = 4.18, SD = 0.54$), while middle school educators displayed the lowest mean ranking ($M = 3.94, SD = 0.72$). Mean rank differences were also significant between job titles ($H = 9.58, p = 0.02$). Administrators displayed the highest mean ranking ($M = 4.12, SD = 0.77$), while diagnosticians responded the least favorably with regards to IEP

goals being thoroughly discussed during IEP meetings ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.95$).

Most participants responded favorably in their belief that educators allotted IEP meeting time wisely and that parents were provided enough time to express concerns, ask questions and provide input. While these findings were consistent across grade level categories, Kruskal-Wallis results indicated statistically significant mean rank differences between participant job titles ($H = 9.10$, $p = 0.03$). Administrators responded the most favorably that parents were granted sufficient time to provide input ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.54$), while diagnostician perceptions revealed the lowest mean ranking ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.78$). Tables 2 and 3 compare responses pertaining to IEP meeting experiences between educator job title and grade level categories.

Educator Knowledge of IEP Process and Special Education Law

Educators were asked about their perceptions of their knowledge level in addition to parental knowledge levels pertaining the IEP process and special education law. The majority of participants, which accounted for 86% (235) of those surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that they were knowledgeable of special education law as applied to effectively serving students within the IEP process. Kruskal-Wallis results revealed statistically significant mean rank differences between job title ($H = 51.10$, $p = 0.01$), but not among grade level ($H = 3.44$, $p = 0.34$) categories with regards to educators being knowledgeable of special education law.

Educators surveyed further believed that they had been provided with enough knowledge to conduct effective IEP meetings through education within school districts, university degree programs or teacher

Table 2

Educator IEP Meeting Experiences within Job Titles

Item	M	SD
Positive IEP Experiences		
Special education teacher	4.12	.87
General education teacher	3.91	.74
Administrator	4.05	.62
Diagnostician	4.13	.55
Other	4.19	.61
Thorough Discussion of IEP		
Special education teacher	3.89	.94
General education teacher	3.97	.79
Administrator	4.12	.77
Diagnostician	3.53	.95
Other	4.04	.69
Use Allotted Time Wisely		
Special education teacher	3.96	.76
General education teacher	3.69	.89
Administrator	3.93	.71
Diagnostician	3.91	.59
Other	4.00	.66
Time Allotted for Parental Input		
Special education teacher	4.32	.74
General education teacher	4.01	.76
Administrator	4.26	.54

preparation programs, with 47% (129) agreeing and 30% (83) strongly agreeing. Statistically significant mean rank differences existed between job titles ($H = 39.59, p = 0.01$). Regarding the desire to obtain more knowledge pertaining to special education law and the IEP process, 43% (119) of participants agreed and 10% (28) strongly agreed, which was consistent across both job title and grade level categories.

When asked whether school districts provided parents with sufficient knowledge pertaining to the IEP process, only 13% (37) of educators disagreed and 2% (6) strongly disagreed, while 57% (155) responded favorably to this question. While no statistically significant mean rank differences existed between participant grade levels, significant differences existed between job title categories ($H = 9.75, p = 0.02$) with administrators showing the highest mean ranking ($M = 3.79, SD = 0.81$).

Only of 2% (6) of educators strongly agreed and 28% (75) agreed that parents generally understood the IEP process. Educators perceived parents more favorably when asked if they believed parents had realistic expectations toward services that should be provided to students. Only 20% (6) of these educators either disagreed or strongly disagreed to this question. Tables 4 and 5 compare educator responses pertaining to knowledge of the IEP process between participant job titles and grade levels.

Diagnostician	3.97	.78
Other	4.04	.98

Note. 1 = strongly disagree. 2 = disagree. 3 = neutral. 4 = agree. 5 = strongly agree.

Table 3

Educator IEP Meeting Experiences within Grade Levels

Item	M	SD
Positive IEP Experiences		
Early childhood	4.18	.54
Elementary	4.06	.74
Middle school	3.94	.72
High school	4.09	.71
Thorough Discussion of IEP		
Early childhood	4.25	.58
Elementary	4.05	.81
Middle school	3.84	.83
High school	3.73	.90
Use Allotted Time Wisely		
Early childhood	4.06	.77
Elementary	3.89	.80
Middle school	3.83	.73
High school	3.80	.76
Time Allotted for Parental Input		
Early childhood	4.25	.86
Elementary	4.15	.77
Middle school	4.11	.72
High school	4.00	.84

Note. 1 = strongly disagree. 2 = disagree. 3 = neutral. 4 = agree. 5 = strongly agree.

Table 4

*Perceived Knowledge of IEP Process within Job Titles**Relations with Parents*

Participants were asked whether educators maintained positive relations, provided a welcoming atmosphere and treated parents as equal partners in IEP meetings. According to educator perceptions pertaining to parents being treated equally during IEP meetings, Kruskal-Wallis results revealed no statistically mean rank differences between job title and grade level categories as 76% (209) of those surveyed believed that parents were treated as equal IEP team members. While only 1% (3) of the participants surveyed did not believe that positive relations were maintained, 64% (176) of educators agreed and 32% (87) strongly agreed that IEP team members maintained positive relations with parents of students receiving special education services during IEP meetings.

Results from this survey further revealed that 54% (149) of participants agreed, and 36% (98) strongly agreed, that educators provided a welcoming atmosphere during IEP meetings. Overwhelmingly, 97% (264) of those surveyed believed that parents were treated respectfully during IEP meetings. Kruskal-Wallis results

Item	M	SD
Educators are Knowledgeable		
Special education teacher	4.23	.57
General education teacher	3.73	.75
Administrator	4.43	.74
Diagnostician	4.56	.62
Other	4.21	.83
Educators Provided with Knowledge		
Special education teacher	4.26	.61
General education teacher	3.50	1.07
Administrator	4.21	.84
Diagnostician	4.43	.88
Other	3.85	1.04
Educators Provided with Knowledge		
Special education teacher	4.26	.61
General education teacher	3.50	1.07
Administrator	4.21	.84
Diagnostician	4.43	.88
Other	3.85	1.04
Educators Desire more Knowledge		
Special education teacher	3.42	1.03
General education teacher	3.38	.94
Administrator	3.52	.77
Diagnostician	3.63	1.04
Other	3.61	.74
Parents Understand IEP Process		
Special education teacher	2.93	.98
General education teacher	2.84	.99
Administrator	2.86	.84
Diagnostician	2.81	.82

revealed no statistically mean rank differences pertaining to these two survey items between educator job titles and grade levels

Furthermore, 84% (230) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that parental input was valued by educators. The educators who responded favorably to parents having freedom to provide input during IEP meetings accounted for 88% (240) of the participants surveyed. Kruskal-Wallis results further indicated no significant differences between job title and grade level categories with regards to parental input being valued and parents having freedom to discuss. Tables 6 and 7 compare participant responses to survey items that addressed educator relations with parents.

Areas for Improvement

The last two items of the survey were open-ended questions, which allowed participants the opportunity to provide input pertaining to measures that could be taken by both educators and parents to improve IEP meetings. Twenty-nine out of the 274 educators who were surveyed failed to respond to these open-ended questions.

Educator actions.

Other	2.77	1.00
Parental Expectations Realistic		
Special education teacher	3.54	.73
General education teacher	3.28	.96
Administrator	3.33	.87
Diagnostician	3.38	.75
Other	3.09	.78
Sufficient Information Provided to Parents		
Special education teacher	3.56	.87
General education teacher	3.27	1.04
Administrator	3.79	.81
Diagnostician	3.47	.80
Other	3.57	.83

Note. 1 = strongly disagree. 2 = disagree. 3 = neutral. 4 = agree. 5 = strongly agree.

Table 5

Perceived Knowledge of IEP Process within Grade Levels

Item	M	SD
Educators are Knowledgeable		
Early childhood	4.19	.54
Elementary	4.07	.80
Middle school	4.08	.75
High school	4.25	.80
Educators Provided with Knowledge		
Early childhood	4.06	.85
Elementary	3.83	.99
Middle school	3.97	.84
High school	4.09	1.15
Educators Desire more Knowledge		
Early childhood	3.75	.77
Elementary	3.44	.87
Middle school	3.54	.96

The first open-ended survey question asked educators to provide input regarding measures that school districts could take to improve the effectiveness of IEP meetings. Adequate preparation, establishing open communication with parents and making sure that parents understand the IEP process were the most common themes identified by educators. Participants discussed that proper IEP meeting preparation includes having updated documentation and reflecting upon student needs prior to meeting in order to be able to provide quality input. One diagnostician highlighted the importance of preparation by stating the following.

Being prepared for the meeting before entering the meeting. Bring grades, missing assignments, absences, documentation of parent and student contracts, documentation of accommodations, examples of modified tests and assignments. Have an open mind to the things being discussed in the meeting.

Participants further emphasized the significance of developing open communication with parents through encouraging parental input during meetings and providing ample time to discuss their concerns regarding their child's IEP. One

High school	3.42	1.00
Parents Understand IEP Process		
Early childhood	2.50	.73
Elementary	2.85	.99
Middle school	3.05	.92
High school	2.73	.90
Parental Expectations Realistic		
Early childhood	3.56	.63
Elementary	3.36	.86
Middle school	3.25	.88
High school	3.25	.87
Sufficient Information Provided to Parents		
Early childhood	3.38	.81
Elementary	3.50	1.03
Middle school	3.51	.80
High school	3.45	.85

Note. 1 = strongly disagree. 2 = disagree. 3 = neutral. 4 = agree. 5 = strongly agree.

Table 6
Perceived Relations with Parents within Job Titles

Item	M	SD
Parents Treated Respectfully		
Special education teacher	4.47	.54
General education teacher	4.32	.57
Administrator	4.40	.59
Diagnostician	4.19	.54
Other	4.43	.58
Parents Treated as Equal Partners		
Special education teacher	3.89	.92
General education teacher	3.78	.98
Administrator	4.10	.69
Diagnostician	3.84	.85

special education teacher emphasized that educators should “ask parents questions to encourage them to speak up. Use parents’ suggestions. Do not disregard their ideas or talk around issues to where we are still doing the same thing and not trying new things or suggestions.” Another special education teacher indicated that IEP team members should “provide parents with more time to discuss their feelings. Many parents do not choose to attend the meetings, but when they do, they are sometimes rushed through things.”

Educators indicated that school district officials should not assume that parents are familiar with acronyms and jargon commonly used by educators during IEP meetings. Participants within this study addressed the importance of making sure that parents clearly understand the decisions that the IEP team agrees to provide for their children. One special education teacher echoed these beliefs with the following response.

Keep parents well informed about the laws and information. Sometimes the information is not in layman’s terms. Break the information down so that everyone understands. Just make sure that parents are truly understanding of their services that their children are getting and make sure that we do not talk above their heads.

	Other	3.77	.84
Maintain Positive Relations			
	Special education teacher	4.35	.52
	General education teacher	4.20	.63
	Administrator	4.26	.54
	Diagnostician	4.25	.51
	Other	4.32	.56
Parents have Freedom to Discuss			
	Special education teacher	3.05	1.36
	General education teacher	3.14	1.28
	Administrator	3.48	1.17
	Diagnostician	3.22	1.16
	Other	3.06	1.29
Parental Input Valued by Educators			
	Special education teacher	4.21	.82
	General education teacher	3.97	.79
	Administrator	4.19	.67
	Diagnostician	4.09	.78
	Other	4.13	.77
Provide Welcoming Atmosphere			
	Special education teacher	4.37	.67
	General education teacher	4.15	.70
	Administrator	4.31	.56
	Diagnostician	4.09	.59
	Other	4.32	.75
Parents Feel Comfortable			
	Special education teacher	3.67	.85
	General education teacher	3.45	.93
	Administrator	3.62	.85
	Diagnostician	3.63	.87
	Other	3.51	.88

Note. 1 = strongly disagree. 2 = disagree. 3 = neutral. 4 = agree. 5 = strongly agree.

Educator recommendations to facilitate parental knowledge of special education protocol included establishing conferences prior to IEP meetings, which provides parents opportunities to ask questions and express concerns regarding their child's IEP. One special education teacher recommended that educators adhere to the following.

Have regular contact with parents at times other than IEP meetings. Give parents a preview of goals, objectives and discussion items so that no one gets blindsided. Provide parents with real data to support programming and progress. I find I have the most successful IEP meetings when I meet alone with the parents a few minutes before the meeting. I take notes on their concerns and review the proposed IEP. It gives them a chance to already know a face and have a rapport with someone. It gives me a chance to get a feel for the parent's needs.

Twenty-four participants within this study indicated that their school districts implemented effective IEP meetings. Therefore, these educators did not have suggestions regarding measures that educators could take to improve the effectiveness of IEP meetings. One general education teacher believed that no improvements were necessary as "the

Table 7

Perceived Relations with Parents within Grade Levels

Item	M	SD
Parents Treated Respectfully		
Early childhood	4.38	.50
Elementary	4.42	.54
Middle school	4.35	.63
High school	4.28	.58
Parents Treated as Equal Partners		
Early childhood	3.75	.93
Elementary	3.91	.91
Middle school	3.92	.85
High school	3.72	.88
Maintain Positive Relations		
Early childhood	4.25	.45
Elementary	4.27	.62
Middle school	4.25	.47
High school	4.27	.57
Parents have Freedom to Discuss		
Early childhood	2.88	1.41
Elementary	3.09	1.30
Middle school	3.25	1.23
High school	3.31	1.19
Parental Input Valued by Educators		
Early childhood	4.00	.73
Elementary	4.12	.78
Middle school	4.24	.73
High school	3.92	.78
Provide Welcoming Atmosphere		
Early childhood	4.31	.60
Elementary	4.27	.70

meetings that I have been to have been very effective. The parents have a part in all meetings. I feel our coordinator and special education teachers do a very good job and are very organized.” A special education teacher indicated that “overall, the effectiveness and outcomes of IEP meetings have been positive. Therefore, I do not have any suggestions.”

Middle school	4.27	.63
High school	4.13	.68
Parents Feel Comfortable		
Early childhood	3.81	.83
Elementary	3.63	.92
Middle school	3.52	.76
High school	3.36	.91

Note. 1 = strongly disagree. 2 = disagree. 3 = neutral. 4 = agree. 5 = strongly agree.

Parental actions.

The second open-ended question asked educators to identify measures that parents of students receiving special education services should take to improve IEP meetings. Communication, participation and preparation were the most common themes identified by educators. Educators believed that parents could improve IEP meetings through honest and cooperative communication with IEP team members. Participants further emphasized that open communication likely creates cooperative rather than adversarial relations between educators and parents. As one speech pathologist emphasized, “parents should not approach the IEP meeting with an adversarial attitude. Do not assume that the educator is going to try to get out of helping the student.” One diagnostician provided a similar response.

Be concerned enough to come and participate in a positive manner. Most of the negative issues I have witnessed had resulted from unwillingness of the parents to listen and ask questions to improve his/her understanding of the situation, the plan or the specific goals/objectives of their students.

Educators further emphasized that parents should be proactive in the IEP process by attending IEP meetings as they should not be afraid to ask questions and make suggestions during those meetings. According to respondents surveyed, parents should let their voices be heard rather than passively sign forms and agree to the decisions made by educators. These proactive measures were further addressed by the following recommendation by one general education teacher.

Attend meetings. Do not be afraid to speak up with their concerns and questions. Share their vision for their child. Ask more questions. Make sure that they understand everything that is said and decided before they leave. Do not be afraid to ask for explanations of things they don’t understand. Ask for additional time to meet with the special education teacher so they can discuss anything they want in a smaller, more intimate setting that would be less intimidating.

Participants, as evident in the following general education teacher’s response, believed that parents are often afraid to openly provide input during IEP meetings due their lack of knowledge pertaining to special education law.

Parents need to ask more questions and be more involved in the decision of their child’s education. In order to do this, they must be trained. Most parents are barely high school graduates. Therefore, they

are not educated enough to understand their rights and the rights of the district. We as educators need to take these parents under our wing and help them to understand these rights.

These educators identified the significance of parents becoming knowledgeable of special education law in order to understand the procedures of the IEP process. They believed that this knowledge would allow parents to see the benefits that special education has to offer to their children. One administrator provided the following feedback.

Parents need to be better educated about the services provided by special education and what their rights are regarding their children. Make sure that they know that they have rights to make decisions for their child's education. The educators do not just make recommendations.

According to educators, parents properly preparing for IEP meetings through acquiring knowledge of special education law will not only decrease the probability of becoming intimidated during meetings, but parents will likely have more realistic expectations regarding services that school districts are to provide for their children. Participants indicated that parents should come prepared with questions or concerns and be able to discuss student strengths and weaknesses.

Discussion

This study sought to determine how educators perceived IEP meetings. Due to the non-random sampling procedure of this study, findings should not be generalized across the population of educators serving students receiving special education services. Further investigation into the perceptions of educators toward IEP meetings is necessary to reveal additional recommended practices that can be taken to enhance the effectiveness of these experiences.

The majority of educators responded favorably that their overall IEP meeting experiences had been positive. Most respondents believed that sufficient amount of time was usually allocated during IEP meetings for thorough discussion of student IEP objectives, as well as for parental feedback and discussion. These findings contradict several parental perception studies where parents often perceived that they were denied opportunities to provide input regarding their child's education during IEP meetings (Garriott et al., 2000; Harry et al., 1995; Pruitt et al., 1998).

The majority of educators in this study believed that parents were treated respectfully and as equal decision makers in IEP meetings. Respondents indicated that IEP team members provide a welcoming and comforting atmosphere, which permits parents to openly provide input. Despite positive educator perceptions, parents often perceive themselves as disrespected and unequal participants during IEP meetings (Fish, 2006; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Salas, 2004; Stoner et al., 2005).

Equal treatment by educators towards parents in IEP meetings likely creates less adversarial and intimidating experiences for parents of children receiving special education services. Measures that educators can take to create equal partnerships with parents include utilizing parental suggestions and not disregarding their ideas. While educators do not always agree with parents, school districts should still respect parental input. School districts scheduling opportunities for parents to meet with certain IEP team members prior to the student's IEP meeting to share ideas pertaining to educational programming can also facilitate equal partnership. Furthermore, schools can also provide copies of IEP objectives a couple of weeks prior to IEP meetings which would allow parents sufficient time to

review and prepare questions for the IEP team.

School districts can encourage parental involvement through creating a welcoming atmosphere, ensuring that family members have a familiar relationship with at least one other IEP team member, and encouraging parents to bring an advocate who is knowledgeable of the IEP process. Educators asking questions and requesting periodic feedback from parents during IEP meetings will likely encourage parents to provide input and to fully contribute towards the decision making process. IEP team members should continuously make sure that parents fully understand the information discussed during these meetings. Family members being able to understand IEP meeting dialogue will not only likely increase parental comfort levels, but decrease confusion as well. Finally, parents will likely be encouraged to participate in IEP meetings when they are allotted sufficient time to provide input and express concerns regarding the educational programming of their children.

The majority of educators surveyed believed that parental participation and involvement enhanced the effectiveness of IEP meetings. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that parental involvement enhances the effectiveness of IEP meetings (Fish, 2008; Muhlenhaupt, 2002; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003; Stoner et al., 2005). While educators in this study desired active parental participation, parents are often passive participants due to their lack of knowledge of the IEP process and special education law. Many parents feel ill-equipped to address the educational needs of their children as they are unable to understand special education jargon and terminology (Goldstein, 1993; Lytle & Bordin, 2001). Parents who feel unable to make educational decisions regarding their children allow educators to easily convince parents that decision-making should be left to them (Rock, 2000).

Participants within this study addressed the importance of educating parents to assure that they understand special education law and the IEP process. While parents often take the initiative to educate themselves (Fish, 2006), school districts should educate families about special education services and the IEP process (Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Simpson, 1995; Stoner et al., 2005). Despite time constraints faced by educators, school district officials scheduling meetings with parents prior to IEP meeting dates to discuss IEP content and protocol can serve as a means to educate parents about the IEP process (Rock, 2000). Educators can further enhance the parental knowledge base through periodic workshops and seminars geared towards informing families about special education law. These school district sponsored workshops can additionally serve to provide families opportunities to collaborate with community service agencies.

Another step that can be taken to inform families is through the distribution of literature pertaining to special education practices. Once the meeting does take place, IEP team members should avoid using unfamiliar jargon and attempt to use familiar words to parents which would decrease confusion. School districts providing services to educate parents will likely provide the perception to families that educators do value the importance of facilitating positive relations with them.

The majority of educators surveyed in this study believed that they were knowledgeable of special education law and the IEP process. Respondents further believed that sufficient educator knowledge in special education law was necessary in order to conduct effective IEP meetings. School districts should continuously train educators (Pruitt et al., 1998; Yell et al., 2003) to determine educational needs, accurately assess current performance levels, and write objectives that benefit students (Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2002). Educators should have the skills to initiate productive IEP meetings and

create effective special education programs in order to facilitate the proper implementation of services for students.

Educator training could be created through school districts providing personnel with higher education and staff development opportunities geared towards the principles pertaining to special education law and IDEA 2004. These opportunities can include mock IEP meeting participation to where educators can practice implementing effective IEP meeting protocol. School districts scheduling guest speakers to include professionals knowledgeable in special education law, as well as parents to provide their perspective of the IDEA process can additionally serve as valuable learning opportunities for educators.

Educators who are properly trained in special education practices have the knowledge to understand student needs, which more likely enhances the ability of school district personnel to implement programs to better serve students receiving special education services. School district personnel effectively trained in special education are more likely to understand the importance of organizing properly conducted IEP meetings and treating parents as equal partners during the IEP process.

Both educators and parents are likely to perceive IEP meetings as positive experiences through the existence of equal partnerships between both parties. Effective collaboration more likely provides an atmosphere that allows IEP team members to create solutions to resolve problems and strategies to better serve students receiving special education services. Educators and parents effectively working together will likely result in efficient and productive IEP meetings. The purpose of conducting IEP meetings is for all IEP members to collaborate in implementing the best appropriate educational programs for children receiving special education services.

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