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Samantha E. Goldman  
*Assumption College*, [s.goldman@assumption.edu](mailto:s.goldman@assumption.edu)

Carolyn Q. Mason  
*Vanderbilt University*

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Predictors of Participant Perceptions of  
Facilitated Individualized Education Program Meeting Success

Samantha E. Goldman<sup>1</sup> & Carolyn Q. Mason<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assumption College, Department of Education

<sup>2</sup>Vanderbilt University, Department of Special Education

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Samantha E. Goldman, Ph.D.  
S.Goldman@Assumption.edu  
Assumption College  
500 Salisbury St.  
Worcester, MA 01609

Carolyn Q. Mason, Ph.D., J.D.  
Carolyn.Q.Mason@Vanderbilt.edu  
Peabody College of Vanderbilt University  
Peabody Box 228, 230 Appleton Place  
Nashville, TN 37203

### Abstract

Facilitated Individualized Education Program (FIEP) meetings present one option for early, alternative dispute resolution in special education. Although it has been suggested that this process may be useful in resolving disputes and improving relationships, these hypotheses have not been directly addressed. In this study, we used individual participant feedback data collected by a northwestern state over a 2-year period to answer the following research questions:

(1) What are the perceived outcomes of FIEP meetings in terms of agreement, reduced future use of procedural safeguards, and improved relationships between school staff and family? and  
(2) What are the predictors of these positive participant perceptions of the outcomes of FIEP meetings? We found that respondents perceived FIEP meetings to be successful, with over half of respondents reporting an outcome of full agreement by all team members, 44% reporting reduced future use of procedural safeguards, and 42% reporting an improved relationship between school staff and family following the meeting. Using multi-level models, we found that perceived facilitator quality was a significant predictor of all three positive outcomes, even after controlling for significant meeting characteristics such as region and year. Given these initial findings, we also provide implications for research, practice, and policy.

*Keywords:* facilitation, individualized education program, partnership, procedural safeguards

Predictors of Participant Perceptions of  
Facilitated Individualized Education Program Meeting Success

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), the Individualized Education Program (IEP) is the written plan that documents the services and supports a student with disabilities should receive to ensure an appropriate education. At least annually, this document is reviewed and revised at an IEP meeting with all team members present, as required by special education law (34 CFR § 300.320-300.324). Although parents, school personnel, and others with special knowledge of the student may attend such meetings, parents face many barriers to their participation (Mueller, 2015). Potential barriers include the use of special education jargon (Mueller & Buckley, 2014), a real or perceived power imbalance (Nowell & Salem, 2007), or a view of teachers as the experts (Rock, 2000). Relatedly, disagreements may arise during and after IEP meetings regarding team decisions about the content of the IEP. IDEA delineates several conflict resolution options for parents to resolve these disputes. These formal conflict resolution procedures, also known as procedural safeguards, include: state administrative complaints (34 CFR § 300.151-153), mediation (34 CFR § 300.506), and due process hearing (34 CFR § 300.507-516).

Although these procedural safeguards were created to help parents protect the rights of their children with disabilities, conflicts that require the use of these procedures often result in distrust between the family and the school (Feinberg, Beyer, & Moses, 2001; Mueller, 2015). By the time an agreement is settled on with the help of a mediator or hearing officer, the parent-school relationship may be damaged beyond repair (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Nowell & Salem, 2007). Additionally, formal dispute resolution procedures, such as mediation and due process,

may not be equally accessible to families of lower income (Burke & Goldman, 2015) who cannot afford to hire an attorney to represent them.

As a result of these challenges in the formal dispute resolution process, alternative preventative practices have emerged (Mueller, 2015). One such procedure involves the use of a facilitator during the IEP meeting. Facilitated IEP (FIEP) meetings were first introduced in special education in the 1990s, based off of a model primarily used by businesses to promote teamwork and productive group dynamics (Little & Bellinger, 2000). In special education, some state education agencies (SEA) allow IEP team members (i.e., family or school employees) to request an FIEP meeting. Although specific FIEP procedures vary by SEA (Mason & Goldman, 2017), in general, SEAs that receive a request for an FIEP meeting provide an impartial facilitator to the IEP team to guide them in collaborating to develop an appropriate IEP for the student. Overall, the goals of this alternative dispute resolution (ADR) strategy are to: (1) resolve conflicts about the IEP by reaching consensus, (2) strengthen relationships between schools and families, and (3) reduce the need for formalized dispute resolution mechanisms under the IDEA (Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education [CADRE], 2004; Feinberg et al., 2001; Mason & Goldman, 2017).

Although not currently required under IDEA, this process has been recommended for inclusion in the next IDEA reauthorization (Pudelski, 2016). Additionally, FIEP is gaining in popularity. According to CADRE (2016a), FIEP is now provided by 36 SEAs nationwide, a considerable increase from nine states in 2005. However, although some states collect data on meeting outcome and participant feedback (Mason & Goldman, 2017), to date there has not been an evaluation of the predictors of positive outcomes of FIEP meetings such as participants'

perceptions of post-meeting agreement regarding the IEP, decreased need for future formal dispute resolution processes, and improvements to the parent-school relationship.

There are several characteristics of the conflict, participants, and meeting itself that may relate to perceptions of these positive outcomes. First, the type of issue prompting the FIEP meeting may relate to the likelihood of a perceived positive outcome following that FIEP meeting. For instance, the reasons for disputes between the school and parents often relate to eligibility for special education or to the delivery of services needed to implement the IEP (Feinberg et al., 2001). These different types of issues may require distinct approaches to address the unique character of the conflict. For example, issues related to service provision may be affected by budgetary constraints, requiring different procedures for addressing the disagreement and leading to higher rates of dissatisfaction for parents who experience conflict over this issue (Leiter & Krauss, 2004). Parents may consider issues regarding service provision or delivery to further escalate conflict and relate to lack of trust, making the disagreement more difficult to resolve (Lake & Billingsley, 2000) with informal processes such as FIEP.

Further, the role of the participant may predict individual perceptions of FIEP meeting outcomes. School staff and parents do not always share the same goals and perspectives on the educational plan (Underwood, 2010). Additionally, school staff who understand the ramifications of more formal, costly dispute resolution procedures (Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008) may be more likely to report positive outcomes of FIEP meetings. School staff may also perceive changes to the parent-school relationship differently than parents, who often feel disempowered at IEP meetings and may be skeptical about their ability to trust the school district, even after experiencing positive interactions (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Additionally, elements of the FIEP meeting itself are likely to relate to participants' perceptions of meeting outcomes. The facilitator clearly plays a pivotal role, as the level of experience and the ability of the facilitator to keep the IEP team focused and productive may relate to whether meetings end in agreement. Unfortunately, while some suggested strategies for effective IEP facilitation are provided, (Mueller, 2009), the key skills and components of successful facilitation have not been agreed upon, since there is no one common training that is provided consistently across different states where FIEP is implemented (Mason & Goldman, 2017). Therefore, it is also unknown how participants' perceptions of the quality of facilitation relate to desired meeting outcomes.

Other meeting characteristics such as school district or region may also relate to the likelihood of perceived positive FIEP meeting outcomes. Certain schools may have established FIEP procedures with which parents and teachers are familiar, or, contrastingly, may experience certain types of restrictions on resources. Finally, the number of meeting participants may relate to participants' perceptions of FIEP meeting outcomes; Lake and Billingsley (2000) report the involvement of a high number of people in meetings to be a deterrent, intimidating parents rather than promoting collaboration.

Although gaining in popularity, it is important to better understand the characteristics of FIEP meetings that relate to perceived positive outcomes. The goal of FIEP as an early dispute resolution procedure is to promote agreement among team members, ideally preventing the need for more formal procedures that are financially and relationally damaging. Additionally, by proactively working together to resolve disagreements and avoid adversarial dispute resolution processes, parents and teachers may improve their relationships (Feinberg et al., 2001). Therefore, we answered two main research questions in this study: (1) What are the outcomes of

FIEP meetings in terms of agreement, reduced future use of procedural safeguards, and improved relationships between school staff and family, as perceived by school and parent respondents to participant feedback surveys? and (2) What are the predictors of these positive outcomes (i.e., perceptions of agreement by all parties on a final decision, reduced future use of procedural safeguards, and improved relationships between school staff and family) of FIEP meetings?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants included 528 respondents in a rural, northwestern state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) that offers FIEP meetings when requested by families and/or schools. Compared to other states and territories of the US, during the 2013-2014 school year this state had an approximately average rate of total dispute resolution activity (per 10,000 students; CADRE, 2016b). All respondents participated in an FIEP meeting during the 2012-2013 or 2013-2014 school years and completed an on-line survey evaluating the FIEP meeting from their individual perspective. Respondents included school personnel, such as teachers and administrators ( $n = 463$ ) and parents ( $n = 53$ ). Twelve participants chose not to disclose their role. Students attended schools in 52 different school districts across the state.

### **Procedures**

After gaining approval from the University Institutional Review Board, we submitted an Open Records Request for de-identified data to a northwestern state that offers FIEPs and collects participant feedback data at the end of FIEP meetings using an SEA created feedback survey (Mason & Goldman, 2017). According to the state Dispute Resolution Coordinator who shared these data, electronic Survey Monkey links were e-mailed to all meeting participants following FIEP meetings. An e-mail address for each participant was requested using a paper

form during the meeting. If meeting participants chose not to provide an email address or did not have one, they were asked to share their mailing address (CADRE, 2017). The online satisfaction survey that was e-mailed to participants asked them to evaluate the facilitation on the following topics: demographics, facilitation process, facilitator skill, future relationships, projections of effectiveness, and satisfaction with state office (CADRE, 2017). In total, the survey contained 20 questions to be answered using a range of multiple-choice, Likert scale, and short and long open-ended responses. These completed evaluations were compiled by the state for review for purposes of evaluation and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI; CADRE, 2017).

Following email and phone contact with the SEA Dispute Resolution Coordinator, we acquired two years of de-identified participant feedback data and SEA-created meeting-level information. The Dispute Resolution Coordinator shared meeting level data in an Excel spreadsheet organized by year. She also provided participant feedback data electronically in the form of individual Survey Monkey links listed in an Excel spreadsheet. Using these links, we entered each participant's responses to the post-meeting feedback survey into SPSS. We also entered corresponding meeting level data from the Excel spreadsheet into SPSS for each respondent. A trained graduate student then confirmed reliability of data entry by checking the data from 80% of randomly selected meetings.

### **Dependent Variables**

**Meeting agreement.** Respondents to the participant feedback survey answered the question: "What was the outcome of the facilitation?" from the following four options: (a) no decision; (b) decision reached, but not all parties agreed; (c) some issues were agreed upon, but a final decision was not yet reached; and (d) a final decision was reached where all parties agreed. We dichotomized this item by grouping the first three response options into *full agreement not*

*reached*, with only the last response option considered an outcome of *full agreement reached* (i.e., respondent perception that all involved parties agreed). Although partial agreement is an important outcome that indicates some level of FIEP success, we grouped it with choices related to non-agreement, since it also indicates that some level of disagreement remained following the FIEP conclusion, leaving the potential for continued conflict post-FIEP.

**Reduced future use of procedural safeguards.** Respondents answered the question, “Did the facilitation process reduce the probability of other processes (e.g., mediation, complaint, due process hearing) being needed to resolve disagreements regarding the student’s program?” as *yes*, *no*, or *unsure*. We combined *no* and *unsure* for the purposes of our analyses, in order to be conservative with findings, including only those respondents who felt certain they perceived a positive outcome in the *yes* category.

**Improved relationship.** Respondents to the participant feedback survey rated the item, “Following the facilitation, the relationship between school staff and family is improved,” on a 5-point Likert scale from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 5, *strongly agree*. This response was dichotomized as *improved relationship* (rating of *agree* or *strongly agree*), and relationship not improved (*strongly disagree* to *neither agree nor disagree*).

## **Independent Variables**

**Participant level.** We included three predictors related to individual respondent characteristics and perceptions.

**Role.** On the participant feedback survey, respondents were asked to indicate their role by choosing from a selection of options (e.g., parent/guardian, student, school staff [teacher, related service provider, etc.], administrator, advocate) or writing in their own response. We grouped 22 different responses into those that were *school staff* (e.g., teachers, administrators, service

providers) or *parents* to simplify interpretation of results. A third group, non-school staff and not parents, were excluded from analyses because we considered their perceptions to be different than either of the other two main groups, but we did not have a sufficiently large  $n$  to include them as their own group.

***Issue.*** Respondents were also asked to indicate the “issue facilitated.” Respondents could again choose from a selection of options (e.g., Behavior Intervention Plan [BIP], Eligibility, IEP, Placement, Services) or write in their own response. Due to a wide range of responses, we grouped 20 different response types into those relating to: (1) eligibility/evaluation, and (2) IEP (including goals, placement, behavior, services, etc.). We considered this a participant-level variable because it was indicated independently by each participant and was not always consistently identified across respondents within meeting.

***Perceived facilitator quality.*** Respondents also rated eight items related to their perceptions of facilitator quality on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Items included: (1) The facilitator explained the facilitation process and the role of the facilitator, (2) The facilitator established clear expectations for communicating respectfully with one another, (3) My opinions were respected during the facilitated meeting, (4) The facilitator made it easy to share information during the meeting, (5) The facilitator kept the focus on the student’s needs and the purpose of the meeting, (6) The facilitator did not pressure me to reach an agreement, (7) The facilitator was impartial and neutral, and (8) Each individual had the opportunity and was encouraged to participate. Using the sample from this study, the Cronbach’s alpha for these eight items was .92. Results of a factor analysis using a principal components analysis also indicated that these items loaded onto one factor, explaining 63% of the variance. Therefore, ratings on these eight items were averaged to calculate one facilitator

quality score for each participant. Although all respondents within a meeting reported on the same facilitator, respondent perceptions of the facilitator were an individual, participant-level characteristic.

**Meeting level.** Three characteristics at the meeting-level were also included as independent variables to predict perceived FIEP meeting outcomes.

**Region.** The SEA-provided data included an indication of region from six possible options identified by the state department of education. We compared *Region 3* to the other five regions because it differs from the rest of the state in relevant ways. *Region 3* is the largest region, containing the highest number of school districts. In a state that is primarily rural, it also includes the state's three largest cities and urban areas. Thus, we dichotomized this meeting-level variable as *Region 3* vs. *other*.

**Year.** Meetings occurred in one of two academic years: 2012-2013 or 2013-2014. This variable was dummy-coded to include the year in which the FIEP meeting took place as an independent variable.

**Number of respondents.** Using the Survey Monkey links, we calculated the number of FIEP meeting participants who completed the participant feedback survey for each meeting.

## **Analyses**

We calculated basic descriptive statistics on the outcomes of FIEP meetings to answer our first research question. We also checked for multicollinearity by calculating correlations for each independent variable. To answer our second research question, we then used multi-level models with random effects for the level-2 variables to account for clustering at the meeting level and predict the three, binary dependent variables: (1) participant perceptions of meeting agreement, (2) participant reported reduced future use of procedural safeguards, and (3)

participant perceptions of improved relationships. Respective inter-class correlation coefficients (ICC) of .42, .18, and .29 demonstrated sufficient variability across meetings to warrant the use of a generalized linear mixed model (GLMM) to account for nesting. We therefore used a two-level Bernoulli response distribution with a logit link to adjust standard errors to reflect clustering and account for individual and meeting level characteristics (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Minimal missing data (<5%) was addressed using pairwise deletion. For each dependent variable, we first built a model using level-1 variables, and then added level-2, meeting level variables to evaluate if the level-1 variables were significant predictors of positive FIEP meeting outcomes after controlling for year, region, and number of respondents (i.e., level-2 variables). We used odds ratios to interpret the models, with a 95% confidence interval including 1 indicating the lack of a significant difference in the probability of the presence of the dependent variable. Based on results from multi-level models, we then conducted exploratory analyses (i.e., t-tests and ANOVAs) to better understand the relations between variables.

## Results

### Preliminary Results

**Meeting characteristics.** Of the 141 FIEP meetings, 65 (46%) were held in the 2012-2013 school year, and 76 (54%) were held from the fall of 2013 to spring of 2014. As shown in Table 1, individual respondents to participant feedback surveys were also equally distributed across school years. The 141 FIEP meetings were held across all of the state's six regions, with 53.2% (n= 75) of meetings in the region containing the state's largest metropolitan area (i.e., *Region 3*); other regions had a range of 8 to 18 meetings over the two-year period. Individual participants were similarly distributed across state regions, with a majority from *Region 3*.

Meetings were facilitated by 18 different individual facilitators, with a median of seven meetings per facilitator and a range from 1 to 29 meetings for each individual facilitator. Per meeting, a median of three participants completed the participant feedback survey (range 1-11). The most frequently selected “issue facilitated” was IEP (60.8%); the next most commonly selected issues included eligibility and evaluation, which were only identified as the issue facilitated by 14.8% and 9.3% of respondents respectively. All others were indicated by less than 5% of participants as the primary issue facilitated at the meeting (see Table 1). With a median facilitator quality score of 3.63 and a range from 0.75 (*disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), most participants rated facilitators highly. Further, over 80% of respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement “I would recommend the facilitation process to others.”

**Positive outcome.** More than half of respondents reported that a final decision was reached at the conclusion of the meeting where all parties agreed (see Table 1). Similarly, almost half of participants indicated at the end of the meeting that the facilitation process reduced the probability of other processes (e.g., mediation, complaint, due process) being needed to resolve disagreements; an additional 35% indicated that this may be the case, but that they were not sure at that time. In terms of improved relationship, 43% of respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that the relationship between school staff and the family was improved following the meeting.

### **Multivariate Analyses**

**Meeting agreement.** Table 2 presents the odds ratios from multi-level logistic regression models predicting the odds of a participant perception that the facilitation resulted in all parties agreeing on a final decision. In Model 1, with only participant-level variables included in the model, facilitator quality was a significant predictor of meeting agreement; the odds of all parties agreeing on a final decision was not significantly related to the type of issue facilitated or the

role of the respondent. After controlling for meeting-level variables (i.e., region, year, and number of respondents), facilitator quality remained the only significant level-1 predictor of meeting agreement; for each one unit increase in perceived facilitator quality, the odds of agreeing on a decision at the conclusion of the FIEP meeting increased by 2.6. At the meeting level, both region and year were also significant predictors of perceived meeting agreement. For meeting participants in areas of the state other than *Region 3*, and for those who attended FIEP meeting during the 2013-2014 school year, the odds of agreeing on a decision increased by more than two (see Table 2).

**Reduced future use of procedural safeguards.** Similarly, as shown in Table 3, in a model with only participant-level predictors, perceived facilitator quality was the only variable that significantly related to the odds of participant reported reduced use of procedural safeguards to resolve disagreements following an FIEP meeting. After controlling for meeting-level variables, perceived facilitator quality continued to be significantly related to reduced future use of procedural safeguards, along with region and year. For each one unit increase in perceived facilitator quality, the odds of FIEP meeting participants reporting a reduced need for future use of procedural safeguards to resolve disagreements increased by 3.9. Attending school in an area other than *Region 3* or attending an FEIP meeting in 2013-2014 (as opposed to 2012-2013) also improved the odds of reporting reduced future use of safeguards, by 1.7 and 1.8 respectively.

**Improved relationship.** In Table 4, participant- and meeting-level variables were used to predict the odds of FIEP meeting participants reporting an improved relationship between family and school staff following the facilitation. As shown in the results of both Model 1 and Model 2, the only significant predictor of improved relationship was perceived facilitator quality. Notably,

the odds of an improved relationship between school staff and family increased by 6.5 for each one-unit increase in perceived facilitator quality.

### **Relation between Variables**

To better understand these findings, we then examined the relation between significant variables from multi-level models. Results of these exploratory analyses did not indicate significant differences in perceptions of facilitator quality across years ( $t(516) = 1.54, p = .124$ ) or regions ( $t(400) = 1.75, p = .080$ ). Only one statistically significant interaction between facilitator quality, year or region, and a positive outcome was identified. There was a significant region by agreement interaction,  $F(1,492) = 3.98, p = 0.047$ . See Figure 1 for a graph of the significant interaction. Those in *Region 3* reported significantly higher facilitator quality ratings even when a final decision was not agreed upon by all meeting participants ( $M = 3.38, SD = .64$ ) compared to those who did not come to an agreement outside of *Region 3* ( $M = 3.09, SD = .84$ ). The mean facilitator quality rating when all agreed on a final decision was more similar in *Region 3* ( $M = 3.60, SD = .48$ ) and out of *Region 3* ( $M = 3.54, SD = .56$ ).

### **Discussion**

In this study, we used participant feedback data collected by a northwestern state to evaluate the perceived outcomes of FIEP meetings and identify the predictors of participant perceptions of positive outcomes. Although many states implement FIEP and some collect participant and facilitator feedback data following meetings (Mason & Goldman, 2017), these data are not used widely to better understand the FIEP process. We identified three major findings related to participants' perceptions of the outcomes of FIEP meetings.

Our first finding relates to promising outcomes of FIEP meetings in terms of perceived agreement and future use of procedural safeguards. Of over 500 FIEP meeting participants, more

than half reported reaching a final decision on all issues with each team member agreeing. Further, although not represented in our analysis under the category of complete agreement, in many additional cases, meeting participants reached partial agreement, which also represents an encouraging outcome, particularly when issues are complex or numerous and may not be resolved during one meeting. Additionally, 234 respondents (44.3%) reported with certainty that they perceived a reduced need for more formal dispute resolution processes following FIEP. Although we do not know the direct relation between agreement and future use of procedural safeguards, our findings present preliminary evidence for the benefits of FIEP meetings. In the future, SEAs should collect data linking FIEP meeting outcomes and later use of procedural safeguards to make stronger statements about the association between these two outcomes. Regardless, our preliminary findings from SEA-collected participant feedback surveys provide initial support for the practice of FIEP meetings and its potential to reduce the use of other costly and possibly damaging procedural safeguards, based on participant perceptions. If even half of meeting participants perceive that conflict can be successfully resolved at this early stage, this is a practice that many SEAs might consider.

Second, we found that higher perceptions of facilitator quality were a consistent significant predictor of all positive outcomes, even after controlling for meeting-level variables. This seems to be a vital component of a successful FIEP meeting. When participants rated the facilitator highly on items such as his or her ability to make it easy to share information, keep the meeting focused on the student's strengths and the purpose of the meeting, and remain impartial and neutral, the odds of respondents reporting positive outcomes increased greatly. Thus, unlike other participant-level factors such as issue or role, only the perceived quality of the facilitator was a predictor of every positive outcome. This finding provides evidence for the importance of

providing well-trained, high quality facilitators in meetings where this practice is used to proactively avoid or resolve conflict.

Third, two meeting-level variables were found to be important in increasing the odds of positive outcomes. These variables, region and year, may be specific to the state in which these data were collected. First, in this mostly rural state with six regions, FIEP meetings in Region 3 had decreased odds of positive outcomes when compared to FIEP meetings in the other regions collectively. Region 3 is unique within the state, as it contains the most urban and highly populated areas of the state. Although offered across the whole state, more than half of FIEP meetings from 2012-2014 were conducted in this one area. While Region 3 held many more FIEP meetings than any other region, it is not known if there are higher levels of conflict in this region, leading to a greater need for alternative dispute resolution, or if FIEPs have been more actively promoted in this region than other parts of the state due to availability of resources, such as facilitators. However, we found that meetings in Region 3 still ended in disagreement even when facilitator quality was rated relatively highly. This finding highlights the point that, in Region 3, where facilitations were more frequent and disagreements occurred more frequently, a small difference in facilitator quality made a big difference in reaching agreement. Findings such as this one highlight the importance of understanding the varied types and levels of predictors that may contribute to the odds of FIEP meeting success. Before research can be used to evaluate the practice of FIEP at a broader level, more attention needs to be paid to state-specific characteristics, policies, and procedures that may have subtle impacts on these outcomes.

Also highlighting this point is our finding that meetings in the 2013-2014 school year demonstrated improved odds of agreement, as compared to meetings held in the 2012-2013 school year. This significant finding relating to year suggests that perceptions of positive

outcomes may be improving over time. Since further analyses indicated that there was not a significant difference in mean perceptions of facilitator quality across these two school years, an alternative explanation may relate to a variable not measured in this study. Although FIEP meetings have been available in this state since 2004, parts of its implementation have changed over time, and continue to change year-to-year (CADRE, 2015). More research is needed to systematically track changes to state practice and policy over time, particularly as it relates to desired outcomes. Such research should be possible given that, in many states, FIEP meetings have been implemented for 9-11 years (Wagner, 2014), beginning in 2004, when the concept of ADR was first included in IDEA.

### **Implication for Research, Practice, and Policy**

Our finding relating to the importance of facilitator quality in predicting participant perceptions of FIEP outcomes highlights the need for a consistent system for training facilitators and monitoring their effectiveness. Training programs used by states that provide FIEP meetings vary widely, and are often created by the SEA themselves. Further, few SEAs that implement FIEP ensure that meetings are facilitated as intended (Mason & Goldman, 2017). This study highlights the importance of consistent, high-quality facilitator training, given the strength of this variable in predicting FIEP meeting participants' perceptions of meeting agreement, reduced future use of procedural safeguards, and improved family-school relations. However, before research-based training programs can be developed, additional research is needed to identify more specifically which facilitator characteristics, skills, and strategies contribute to participant perceptions of FIEP meeting success, in order to inform state and local policy.

This study also highlights the need for SEAs to collect data during and following FIEP meetings on demographics, outcomes, and participant and facilitator feedback. In this study, we

used a large dataset collected over the course of two years to identify the predictors of positive outcome. However, beyond this exemplary SEA, few states collect such large-scale data on FIEP meetings (Mason & Goldman, 2017). Additionally, although we were able to identify significant predictors of positive FIEP meeting outcomes based on the data collected, there are many variables for which data were not collected by the SEA that may also relate to meeting success. For example, child characteristics such as classroom placement, age, and behaviors relate to the use of other more formal dispute resolution procedures (i.e., mediation and due process; Burke & Goldman, 2015) and may also relate to the likelihood of a perceived positive outcome of an FIEP meeting. These and other characteristics of the students, families, and schools that we were not able to account for may also be important predictors on which SEAs should consider collecting data in the future.

Although more than half of respondents to the participant feedback surveys reported the highest level of agreement, 34 respondents reported participating in meetings in which no decision was reached. Therefore, additional research and improved practices are still needed to better understand how facilitators can work to meet this high bar. Although some participants reported that issues were agreed upon and a final decision was not yet reached, or that a decision was reached but not all parties agreed, the goal of the IEP Team and facilitator should be a decision with full agreement. Though this study identified a high rate of perceived positive outcomes with meetings ending in full agreement, more work needs to be done to identify the critical components of a successful FIEP meeting so that this practice can be implemented as effectively as possible. Post-meeting qualitative follow-up interviews and longitudinal data collection may be informative in better understanding the intricacies and maintenance of participant perceptions of successful FIEP meetings. Once these critical components are

identified, randomized control trials may be conducted within SEAs to compare FIEP meetings to *business-as-usual* IEP meetings without the presence of a facilitator. The comparison of these two groups would provide high-quality information on the effectiveness of FIEP meetings compared to typical IEP meeting procedures in achieving desired outcomes, with the eventual goal of ensuring that SEAs are making the most of limited resources for addressing disputes.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be addressed. First, the data were collected following FIEP meetings in only one state across a two-year period. Given the differences across SEAs in FIEP implementation (Mason & Goldman, 2017), findings from this study may not generalize to FIEP participants in other states. Further, we were unable to compare the perceptions of FIEP meeting participants to the perceptions of typical IEP meeting participants (without the facilitation component). However, the purpose of our study was not to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of FIEP meetings compared to other more standard procedures. Our first step was to use this extant data collected by an SEA that implements FIEP to better understand which hypothesized variables relate to positive participant perceptions of desired outcomes.

Additionally, because we used a convenience sample, respondents to the participant feedback survey may not be representative of all FIEP meeting participants. The number of respondents per meeting ranged from 1-11, and it is possible that a specific subset of participants chose to complete the participant feedback survey. Because data on the total number of participants per meeting were not collected by the SEA, we were unable to calculate overall response rates to the participant feedback surveys. Beyond the number of FIEP meeting attendees, we also did not have access to more detailed information about non-respondent

characteristics. Therefore, we could not analyze the potential differences between the characteristics and perceptions of respondents and non-respondents. In the future, data collected on FIEP meetings should include basic information about all meeting participants, including the number of attendees. To truly understand the perspectives of a representative sample of FIEP participants, we must work to promote high response rates for participant feedback surveys.

Despite these limitations, this is the first study to analyze a large dataset to evaluate the perceived outcomes of FIEP meetings and to identify predictors of these positive outcomes. Although our results address only the predictors of individual participants' perceptions of meeting success, such findings contribute to the currently limited research-base on this topic. These data provide some initial evidence for the effectiveness of FIEP in meeting its goals of resolving conflicts about the IEP and strengthening relationships between schools and families (Feinberg et al., 2001). With this preliminary identification of some of the predictors of perceived FIEP meeting success, this practice is provided additional support for its continued implementation and growth across the country.

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Table 1

*Meeting and Outcome Characteristics*

Characteristic	%	N
<b>Meeting</b>		
School year		
2012-2013	50.6%	267
2013-2014	49.4%	261
Region		
1	7.2%	38
2	5.5%	29
3	57.2%	302
4	11.2%	59
5	10.4%	55
6	6.1%	32
Missing	2.5%	13
Issue type		
IEP group		
IEP	60.8%	321
placement	4.4%	23
behavior/discipline	4.5%	24
services/supports	2.6%	14
other	1.9%	10
Eligibility/Evaluation group		
eligibility	14.8%	78
evaluation	9.3%	49
Missing	1.7%	9
<b>Outcomes</b>		
Agreement		
Final decision where all parties agree	57.2%	302

Some issues agreed upon, but final decision not reached	18.6%	98
Decision reached, but not all parties agreed	14.0%	74
No decision	6.4%	34
Missing	3.6%	20
Reduced procedural safeguards		
Yes	44.3%	234
No	18.4%	97
Unsure	35.2%	186
Missing	2.1%	11
Improved relationship		
Strongly agree	15.9%	84
Agree	26.9%	142
Neither	35.0%	185
Disagree	13.8%	73
Strongly disagree	6.1%	32
Missing	2.3%	12

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*Note.* IEP = individualized education program.

Table 2

*Multi-Level Logistic Regression Models Predicting Perceived Agreement*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	Exp (β)	SE	95% CI	Exp (β)	SE	95% CI
Intercept	0.078**	0.748	[0.018, 0.341]	0.024***	0.988	[0.003, 0.168]
Individual-level variables						
Issue type: Eligibility/evaluation	0.847	0.362	[0.416, 1.724]	1.054	0.377	[0.503, 2.211]
Role: School staff	1.129	0.369	[0.546, 2.331]	1.194	0.398	[0.546, 2.611]
Facilitator quality	2.398***	0.173	[1.708, 3.368]	2.604***	0.185	[1.809, 3.747]
Meeting-level variables						
Region 3				2.348*	0.363	[1.150, 4.795]
Year: 2013-2014				2.779**	0.359	[1.371, 5.632]
Number of respondents				0.970	0.100	[0.797, 1.182]
Variance components						
Meeting level (Intercept)	2.441***			2.281***		
SE	0.533			0.532		
Model fit						
AIC	2,264.223			2,234.964		
BIC	2,268.401			2,239.110		

*Note.* AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

\* =  $p < .05$ . \*\* =  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* =  $p \leq .001$ .

Table 3

*Multi-Level Logistic Regression Models Predicting Reduced Future Use of Procedural Safeguards*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	Exp (β)	SE	95% CI	Exp (β)	SE	95% CI
Intercept	0.010***	0.785	[0.002, 0.046]	0.005***	0.960	[0.001, 0.031]
Individual-level variables						
Issue type: Eligibility/evaluation	0.681	0.255	[0.412, 1.124]	0.794	0.258	[0.479, 1.317]
Role: School staff	1.106	0.329	[0.580, 2.110]	1.218	0.352	[0.610, 2.431]
Facilitator quality	3.580***	0.198	[2.425, 5.284]	3.916***	0.210	[2.593, 5.913]
Meeting-level variables						
Region 3				1.726*	0.239	[1.080, 2.758]
Year: 2013-2014				1.854*	0.242	[1.152, 2.983]
Number of respondents				0.945	0.062	[0.836, 1.067]
Variance components						
Meeting level (Intercept)	0.661**			0.491*		
SE	0.235			0.221		
Model fit						
AIC	2,194.303			2,164.265		
BIC	2,198.496			2,168.424		

*Note.* AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

\* =  $p < .05$ . \*\* =  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

Table 4

*Multi-Level Logistic Regression Models Predicting Perceptions of Improved Relationship*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	Exp (β)	SE	95% CI	Exp (β)	SE	95% CI
Intercept	0.001***	0.917	[0.000, 0.005]	0.001***	1.041	[0.000, 0.006]
Individual-level variables						
Issue type: Eligibility/evaluation	1.162	0.293	[0.653, 2.068]	1.329	0.300	[0.738, 2.394]
Role: School staff	1.999	0.378	[0.951, 4.201]	2.041	0.392	[0.944, 4.413]
Facilitator quality	5.853***	0.241	[3.646, 9.396]	6.465***	0.253	[3.933, 10.626]
Meeting-level variables						
Region 3				1.259	0.297	[0.702, 2.258]
Number of respondents				0.853	0.083	[0.725, 1.003]
Year: 2013-2014				1.569	0.292	[0.883, 2.787]
Variance components						
Meeting level (Intercept)	1.295***			1.180***		
SE	0.350			0.345		
Model fit						
AIC	2,268.883			2,234.756		
BIC	2,273.074			2,238.913		

*Note.* AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

\* =  $p < .05$ . \*\* =  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* =  $p \leq .001$ .

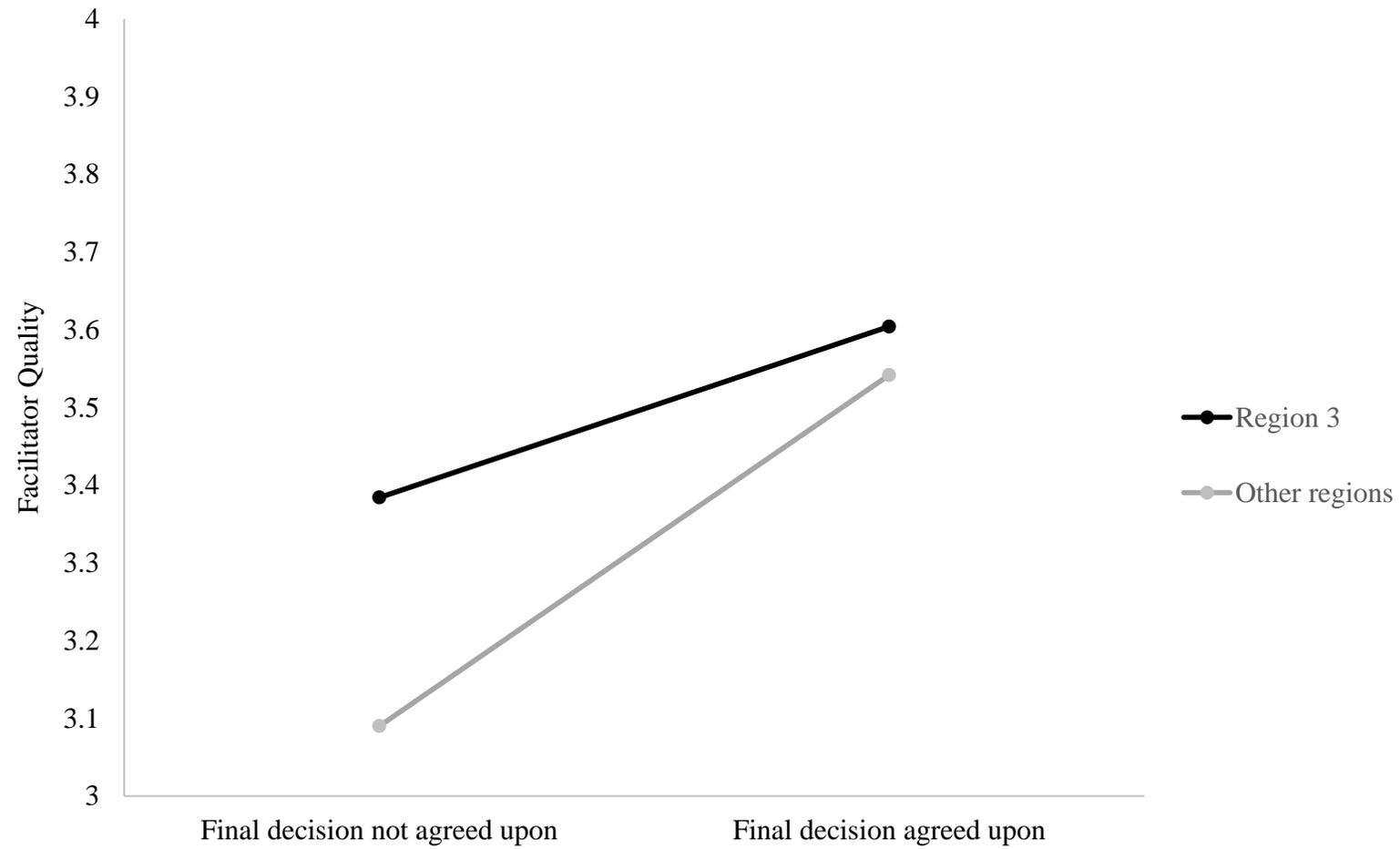


Figure 1. Agreement by region interaction.