Educational Specialist, 2020-current   The Graduate School

8-6-2021

Uncovering stories: Investigating factors that contribute to parent experiences in eligibility meetings

Joshua Knight
James Madison University

Uncovering Stories: Investigating Factors that Contribute to Parent Experiences in

Eligibility Meetings

Joshua Knight

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Educational Specialist

Department of Graduate Psychology

August 2021

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair: Deborah Kipps Vaughan, Ph.D.,

Committee Members/ Readers:

Tammy Gilligan, Ph.D.

Ashton Trice, Ed.D.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who helped this project reach its completion, including my thesis committee, professors Deborah Kipps-Vaughan (committee chair), Tammy Gilligan, and Ashton Trice. Additionally, I would like to thank all of those who helped shape me, and this project, by lending their encouragement, knowledge, and faith. I will not forget to thank those closest to me, including Bailey Brooks and Tehran Browne, whose patience, guidance, and understanding have propelled me further than I ever could have reached on my own. I am extremely grateful to my parents for their love, prayers, care and sacrifices for educating and preparing me for my future. Lastly, I am extremely grateful for the faithfulness and love shown to me by my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, whom all things are possible.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Abstract

Federal guidelines outline school communication with parents as a necessity throughout the special education process. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that parents have the right to participate in their children's educational involvement, including but not limited to: Individualized Education Program Meetings (IEP), due process proceedings, and any components of evaluation and individual services provided to their child. While law mandates that schools proactively communicate with parents, in many aspects, parents may often feel disconnected from aspects of the special education process, particularly eligibility meetings (Bucknavage, 2007). Further, results of the component selections within the eligibility determination for special education may complicate the relationship between school and parents, potentially leaving parents feeling isolated, frustrated, or confused (Esquivel et al., 2008; (Buckman, 1992). This study specifically will use a parent survey to improve and inform best practices for school psychologists about investigating factors that encourage parent participation in eligibility meetings. As school professionals, it is important that parents not only participate and comprehend the entire process of special education, including potential diagnoses, but also feel empowered to advocate for the welfare of their child.

The goal of this study is not to provide a comprehensive evaluation of experiences of parents and families who have completed the special education experience in schools. Rather, this study shares specific, meaningful stories of participants to illustrate potential successes and difficulties that parents may face specifically within special education eligibility meetings and the implications towards the future

Introduction

School psychologists play a crucial role in the special education process. They provide comprehensive evaluations of children's intellectual abilities, provide recommendations for schools and parents to further assist the child, and are often the primary individual responsible for explaining eligibility criteria to parents and families. In many instances, thorough evaluations of children can result in the confirmation of behavioral and/or intellectual disabilities. The nature of these diagnoses can be very troubling and difficult to explain to parents. If the delivery of findings is not handled with caution and empathy, parents and families may be left feeling isolated, angry, and a host of emotions that may negatively impact the relationship between home and school. Naturally, school psychologist hosts an exhausting number of eligibility meetings per year, while parents and families may only attend one for their particular child. This imbalance may constitute school psychologists feeling desensitized to how they deliver difficult diagnoses to parents. Currently, a lot of research pertains to how different service providers can deliver difficult news to their clients, but there has been minimal research in the school psychology literature (Stewart 2015). With this gap in the literature, school psychologists may inadvertently obstruct the relationship between parents and school, leading to far-reaching consequences. There currently is no specific "procedure" for school psychologists to follow; this study seeks to inform best practices for school psychologists by investigating factors that encourage parent participation in eligibility meetings.

Background

For many parents, communication with their children's school can result in a multitude of emotions. Some parents may feel comfortable and at ease with knowing that their school's teachers and administration are in constant communication with them about their child, while some parents may experience increased anxiety in feeling that their child is misbehaving or that something is wrong (Pomerantz et al., 2006). While both feelings are completely normal, for parents of children that are undergoing the special education process, these feelings may be exacerbated. In particular, the emotions that may possibly present themselves due to the nature of the special education process likely are intensified during the special education eligibility meeting (Margolis, 1998). Diagnoses and categorical considerations for children who need special education may result in many different emotions ranging from confusion to anger and sadness.

Historical Perspectives

Historically, special education in the United States has been a refined process. In the 20th century, parents of individuals needing special education did not have much of a choice in their education. Individuals found to have a disability were not afforded many rights and protections and were often excluded from the general education curriculum (Esteves and Rao, 2008). However, with the enactment of The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, services for children and their families were given to protect the right to a free and appropriate public education to eligible children. Within the special education process, parents are viewed as crucial and important members of the process. As do all members of the evaluation team, parents have a right to agree or disagree with decisions and considerations or request changes for their

children's education. However, many parents still do not find themselves feeling empowered or knowledgeable enough to disagree with decisions made in the evaluation meetings (Margolis, 1998). Schools are required by law to give parents Procedural Safeguards, a document of the rights afforded to them throughout the special education rights (IDEA 2004**)**. While this is helpful, parents may feel overwhelmed and confused with jargon and technical terms that are present within special education.

Conflict

The special education process can be a difficult and emotional process for parents. There are many challenging factors that may mitigate or perpetuate strong feelings that may arise on the behalf of the parents of children undergoing the special education process. *Conflict*, defined as real or perceived differences that arise from specific educational circumstances that engender negative emotion as a consequence, is a common element that presents often in special education eligibility meetings (Deutsch, 1973). While conflict in itself is very commonplace, in the special education framework, conflict may develop into difficult situations for school systems. Most notably, parents exerting their right to due process, a legal and formal way to resolve disputes with a school system, often takes a significant toll on every party involved. Schools are likely able to increase their chances of successfully resolving conflicts with parents by alleviating parental anxiety and anger by engaging in positive communicative practices (Margolis, 1998). According to Margolis (1998), parents typically worry more intensely about their children's difficulties in school than IEP teams do. Additionally, because it is not uncommon for parents to place the burden of slow or inadequate progress on the school members, school personnel should do more than just understand parental

concerns; rather, they should identify the underlying concerns and fears and address those to resolve conflict. A crucial component of resolving conflict lies in ensuring parents understand the purpose of the eligibility meeting, identification of problems, potential diagnoses, and steps that will be taken after the meeting. Howard (1998) additionally mentions that eligibility meetings need to be designed in a way to help parents understand and remember what is discussed in those meetings. A significant impediment to parental understanding is the jargon that is heavily inundated within special education. For most individuals that do not have formal training, the heavy use of jargon can be isolating and discourage parental involvement within the eligibility determination process. A study conducted by Jones (2016) sought to provide a qualitative look at the perceptions of parent experiences during school-based meetings. The results of the study indicated that while individuals reported positive experiences with multidisciplinary (school) teams, there were several emotional factors that contributed to their effectiveness. In the study, several participants reported feeling stressed and confused with the information presented in the meeting.

Report Jargon and Information

According to Hite (2017), the psychoeducational report can be a major source of jargon for the parent. The psychoeducational report findings are used to help inform evaluative decisions about a child, and the parent is often tasked with understanding that report and using it to inform recommendations for their child. Hite (2017) conducted a study designed to enable parents to read both traditional and consumer-focused reports about a fictional child and rate each report using a Parent Report Evaluation scale, a survey designed particularly for this study to assess report understanding and utility. He

utilized 153 parents of children that were recruited from schools and online interest groups dedicated to special education advocacy to be the participants. His results confirmed a common aspect of the literature; parents found the traditional reports hard to understand while finding the language of consumer-focused reports helpful. Consumer-focused reports are often written more simplistically and, in a way, to convey a more comprehensive understanding for all readers.

A study by Bucknavage (2007) measured the impact of jargon and report length on teacher and parent recall and preference by utilizing 131 participants that consisted of 82 teachers and 49 parents from a medium size public school district in the Northeast USA. In this study, participants read a psychoeducational report containing either a high or low level of jargon within each report and subsequently read a second report and directly compared their preferences. Results indicated that the length of reports read did not have a significant effect on the preference, but the level of jargon contained in the reports had an effect on both the ability to recall information within the report, with reports with low jargon leading to higher recall scores and higher preference ratings for the participants. These results also align with the idea that jargon within the special education system are, at very least, not beneficial to increasing parental understanding of the results presented to them. It is not unfathomable to hypothesize that with an increased amount of jargon within reports and the special education process and a decreased amount of understanding that parents have of the results of their child's evaluation, they are likely to disengage and their involvement in the entire process is likely to grow smaller. Literature supports the idea that higher parent involvement in schools translates to more positive outcomes for children. Parental involvement with schools is often

reflected in increased parent satisfaction, satisfaction with schools, and overall school improvements for children (Karter & Lowden, 1997). Specifically, when parents participate in IEP conferences, the chances of positive outcomes for the child are higher as well.

A study conducted by Goldstein and Turnbull (1982) utilized forty-five parents of children with learning disabilities from five elementary schools to be observed at eligibility meetings. The parents were selected and divided randomly into three groups. The first group of fifteen parents were sent questions before the conference about the goals for their child and the potential development of an IEP. The second group of parents had the school guidance counselor present as an advocate for their child. The third group of parents had no intervention strategy and were used as the control. The results indicated that the mean number of relevant contributions made by parents during the eligibility meeting was larger for the groups in which an intervention strategy was implemented; the group with the questions given to them beforehand and the group with the guidance counselor as an advocate made more relevant contributions than the control group. This study and its results allow conjecture that if parents have the ability to participate and understand more information in eligibility meetings, then they will participate more in those meetings meaningfully. An additional concern within eligibility meetings that can contribute to a lack of parental involvement is navigating difficult conversations with the IEP team. More specifically, eligibility determination and diagnoses can be difficult for all parties involved.

Navigating Difficult Diagnoses

The delivery of diagnoses, whether medical diagnoses or learning disabilities, can be a difficult and traumatic time for parents if not executed with care. Parents may have a wide range of reactions to receiving difficult news (Buckman, 1992). For many, parents may feel a sense of shock, anger, distress, and disbelief (Auger, 2006). It is important that school professionals ensure they do their best to alleviate these feelings. Although the feelings themselves may be inevitable, the intensity of these feelings can be reduced if school professionals navigate these conversations with empathy, care, and clear communication.

According to Auger (2006), school professionals play a crucial role in giving difficult news to parents. While the nature of difficult conversations can be stressful for all parties involved, Auger mentions several recommendations to ease this burden. Parental emotions should be normalized and validated with empathic responses and demonstrated care, delivery of difficult news should be given in a calm and focused manner, and if possible, school professionals should listen and remain quiet to allow parents to express their feelings. Most notably, follow-up after the meeting has concluded is a primary contributor to lessening parental confusion and frustration with the meeting outcome. Follow-up meetings that allow the parent to express themselves more openly after having time to sit with their thoughts can be a mutually beneficial factor for improving parent-school communication.

The research for delivering difficult diagnoses to parents has been applied to a variety of professions. Cooperman and Amoon (2013) evaluated the PEWTER (Prepare, Evaluate, Warning. Telling, Emotional Response, and Regrouping) model as way to

facilitate the process of difficult conversations with clients and promote client growth in school settings. The PEWTER model addressed various factors and layers that impact the counseling situation when giving life-changing news. Arguably the most important step, Prepare, allows for, and includes the provision of a space where an unhurried and uninterrupted meeting can take place (Cooperman & Amoon, 2013). This is most important because when giving difficult news, doing so in a space that is inconducive to sensitive conversations can seem hasty and unempathetic, leaving the receiver of the difficult news in an emotional state. While further evidence is necessary to determine to what extent the PEWTER model is effective, this model has been successfully applied to end-of-life notification, police chaplain training, and homicide victim's family notification (Miller, 2008). The SPIKES (Setting, Perception, Invitation/information, Knowledge, Empathy, and Summarize/strategize) model (Baile et al., 2000) is also widely represented in the counseling literature for communication with parents. Specifically, this model was designed to help physicians disclose unfavorable information-delivering cancer diagnoses to patients. This model was developed to guide difficult discussions and provide an outline for service providers in their work with clients. Clearly, evidence-based models that illustrate how to navigate delivering difficult news in other professional settings can be useful for school professionals as well.

A study conducted by Sharp et al., (1992) utilized 189 parents of children enrolled within 15 developmental day care centers and analyzed their responses to questionnaires that examined their experiences of being told bad news and elicited preferences for physician behavior in hypothetical situations (communicating Down syndrome diagnoses). The results indicated that parents preferred more communication of both

information and feelings by their physician, with their strongest preferences being physicians showing that they care for them. Moreover, the researchers concluded that that there is a difference between what parents actually experience and what they desire to experience in their communications with physicians who deliver bad news.

Many of the themes that are present when delivering difficult news to clients are comparable to how school psychologists deliver difficult diagnoses to parents. Individuals on the receiving end of the difficult news want their news to be given with empathy and care, sensitivity, and in a private manner. Frost (2010) highlights the importance and vitality of having a plan prior to delivering difficult news, as well as delivery of news in a clear, concise, and honest manner. A delicate balance must be struck; honesty is paramount, but the individual should not be left without hope. Additionally, cultural factors need to be taken into consideration as well due to the impact that culture may have on an individual's ability to receive the difficult information (Hill & Craft, 2003).

Collaborative Teaming

It is important to note that the role of navigating difficult conversations does not fall upon one individual. In fact, school systems that incorporate effective collaborative teaming models are better suited to tailor interventions and meet the varying needs of students than schools that deliver services primarily on an individual basis (Rosenfield et al., 2018). Interprofessional collaboration in schools is a shared decision-making model based on a complex set of social, legal, educational, technological innovations in other related helping professions (Mostert, 1996). For success, it is important that each individual professional, whether it be the teacher, principal, school psychologist, school

counselor, and any additional team members, understand and connect their individual expertise and experiences for problem-solving. A study by Rosenfield et al., (2018) which evaluated the effectiveness of problem-solving teams in K-12 schools, concluded that problem-solving teams in schools vary in size, composition, and stability, and often face a handful of challenges. Additionally, this study primarily examined the empirical literature on problem-solving teams as a reflector of research and practice in schools. It is imperative that team members approach collaborative work with a positive attitude and an open mind, trusting the expertise of the members that comprise the team, and working towards a common goal. This work does not come without its challenges. School members have historically functioned as independent members; adjusting the focus from individuals to a more team-oriented approach is a shift that will take time. As school members should work together for a common goal, parental participation and involvement is paramount. As mentioned previously, due to the importance that parents have in their children's development, the impact of home-school collaboration cannot be overstated. According to the National Association for School Psychologists, home-school collaboration can lead to improved student achievement, better behavior, better attendance, and more positive attitudes toward school and learning (Bear, 2019). Further, both schools and families benefit when the relationship between home and school are strengthened, often leading to better outcomes. Intuitively, when home-school connections are not positively maintained, outcomes for students are not as promising. A study by Rispoli, Nathanson, & Malcolm (2019) examined the parent role in school-based teams for adolescents with autism spectrum disorder by illustrating the perspectives of 23 parents of students with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) regarding

their experiences working with both middle school and high school teams. Several themes emerged from the results: parental desire for collaboration/partnership, advocacy, relationships, parental background, expectations and the impact of diagnoses on the parent. While parental responses and perspectives varied, it is important to note that consistent comments from participants placed importance on communication with school officials and feeling understood in the needs of their children (Rispoli et al., 2019). A study by Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner (2008), also examined the parental perception of their experiences in school-based team meetings to help identify ways to promote meaningful participation. Parents who were members of a special education committee were asked to elaborate about their positive and negative experiences in those meetings in an open-ended format. Results from this study suggested that parental involvement was increased when school professionals explicitly elicited responses for parent feedback during meeting and actively encouraging attendance and contributions from *all* team members (Esquivel et al., 2008). Additionally, parents specifically mentioned having a relationship outside of just that specific meeting was important; parents also indicated that their experiences were more positive when their ideas and contributions were accepted and recognized. One important limitation to note from this study is that the participants were parents who were already actively involved in school teams and had a fairly high socioeconomic status, implying that their involvement and perception may not be generalizable to parents who are not similar in status. Further, their experiences may not be an accurate representation of parents in marginalized communities (Esquivel et al., 2008). It is imperative that future research studies continue to explore parental perceptions within different ethnic communities and diverse school systems.

Methods

Purpose of the Current Study

The research study sought to inform best practices for school psychologists about investigating different factors that contribute to parent experience in eligibility meetings by asking parents of children that have completed the special education process about their feelings of inclusivity, understanding, and engagement during eligibility meetings. Parents, with consent, were asked to complete the questionnaire attached below in Appendix A, as well as the follow up questionnaire via phone interview. The research questions were as follows: (1) What communication and information can help parents feel more knowledgeable and contributory in eligibility meetings? (2) What aspects of eligibility meetings contributes to a positive emotional experience for parents? (3) What additional supports are necessary to encourage parents in their roles as advocates in eligibility meetings?

Participants

The participants in this study were gathered from a list of parents who had completed the special education process in the 2020-2021 academic school year. Two school psychologists and this examiner compiled a list of 75 potential participants for the study. After the list was generated, an email containing information about the study was sent prior to contacting the potential participants via phone. One week after receiving notice of the study, participants were contacted via phone. Out of those phone contacts, 20 participants gave consent and agreed to participate in the study. After successful completion of the questionnaire, participants indicated their willingness to be contacted for the follow-up interview; Nineteen participants agreed for the follow-up interview.

Participants in this study were voluntary and did not receive compensation. Race, type of diagnoses, and special education status was not collected for this study. It should also be noted that school grade-level and school type was not collected.

Measures

The survey collected data on (a) thoughts and feelings about their participation within their eligibility meeting, (b) whether any specific communication tools helped them feel more supported throughout the meeting, (c) if they understood the various components of the meetings, and (d) suggestions for additional supports for parents in eligibility meetings. This survey consisted of approximately twenty items to assess their understanding of the information given to them during their eligibility meeting. This survey was generated by the researcher based on information from the literature review. The results of the survey were analyzed to assess themes within responses to help inform best practices about relaying difficult news to parents and enhancing the parent experience within these meetings to improve engagement and participation.

Answers for the survey were obtained using a five-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree). Appendix A provides a copy of the survey.

Procedures

This mixed method study was designed to analyze themes between parental responses. The themes that emerged throughout the questionnaire and follow-up were used to provide recommendations to inform practices that school psychologists can incorporate in their work with parents moving forward. Frequency of responses were analyzed through twenty Likert-type scale questions and themes identified through four

open-ended follow up questions. The survey questions, listed in Appendix A, directly align with the research questions for the study. Research question one directly corresponds to survey questions six, eight, and nineteen. Research question two directly corresponds to survey questions two, nine, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, eighteen and twenty. Research question three directly corresponds to survey questions one, three, four, five, seven, ten, eleven, and seventeen. Every participant was contacted via phone-call after their eligibility meeting to complete an online survey through QuestionPro. The participant pool was generated through a convenience sampling provided by parental contacts from two school psychologists and the researcher. The list of participants to contact for the study were also gathered from an online portal, Virginia IEP. Participants in the study received a consent form that required their signature to participate. They were reminded that their participation was completely voluntary and that there was no compensation for their time spent completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire did not take longer than fifteen minutes to complete. Consent included agreement to participate in a five-to-fifteen-minute follow-up phone interview. Participants who consented to the study and completed the online survey, were contacted by phone to schedule a semi-structured follow up phone call to allow parents to share their experiences more completely. The researched conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with 19 participants. During the individual follow-up interviews, the researched took typed notes and direct quotes were read back verbatim to the participants for clarification purposes.

Results

To gain a better understanding of their perceptions related to special education eligibility meetings, 53 parents were contacted by phone to participate in this study. Out of the contacts, 20 participants provided consent to complete the survey and interview regarding their perceptions of their eligibility meeting experiences. After completion of the questionnaire, a follow-up phone call was conducted. Nineteen follow-up calls were made; One participant was unable to be reached for follow-up. The range in phone call lengths varied from 3 minutes to 15 minutes, with the longer conversations being more represented by parents who reported negative interactions. A summary of sample responses and frequency of responses can be found in Table 1. The table represents the results in response to each of the research questions. Three themes emerged from responses to the questionnaire: Knowledge and Understanding, Emotionality, and Service Delivery.

Table 1

	Frequency (Number Responding)				
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I understood all the material presented to me within the eligibility meeting.	0	1	0	19	0
2. I felt connected and supported throughout the eligibility meeting.	0	2	4	14	0
3. I had a clear understanding of my role within the eligibility meeting.	0	1	2	18	0
4. I understood the different components of the eligibility meeting.	0	2	4	14	0
5. I understood the next steps after this eligibility meeting had concluded.	0	2	1	17	0

6. I felt comfortable making suggestions and asking questions, when necessary.	0	2	1	17	0
7. I completely understood my rights as a parent in the special education process.	0	2	1	17	0
8. I felt like I was a meaningful contributor in the eligibility meeting.	0	1	3	16	0
9. The team made contributions that I felt were helpful.	0	2	1	17	0
10. There were individuals on the team who I felt were advocates for me and my child.	0	1	1	18	0
11. There was someone empathic and emotionally engaging during the eligibility meeting.	0	2	4	14	0
12. I felt as if someone cared for my child.	0	1	1	18	0
13. I felt as if someone cared for my child.	0	2	1	17	0
14. I had feelings of sadness during the meeting.	0	9	1	10	0
15. I had feelings of anger during the meeting.	0	15	0	5	0
16. I had feelings of relief during the meeting.	0	3	7	10	0
17. After the meeting I received follow up support regarding the meeting.	0	4	13	3	0
18. I experienced empathy from at least one member of the school team.	0	0	3	17	0
19. I felt my positions and comments were understood by the school team.	0	2	1	17	0
20. I feel hopeful for my child's academic future.	0	1	1	18	0

Frequency of Participant Responses from Questionnaire
N = 30; Frequency data gathered from Question Pro

Knowledge and Understanding

The first research question sought to report parent responses about knowledge and understanding of the information shared at the eligibility meetings. With the nature of eligibility meetings, psychological reports, academic information, teacher narratives, and more information are likely shared one after another. For many parents, this can be overwhelming and confusing. Out of 20 participants, 17 participants reported on the questionnaire that they agreed that they felt comfortable making suggestions and asking questions in their eligibility meeting. A total of two participants reported that they disagreed with that statement; they did not feel comfortable making suggestions within their eligibility meetings. When asked if they felt they were a meaningful contributor in their child's eligibility meeting, 16 participants agreed while three participants felt neutral about their contributions. Lastly, 17 participants reported that their position and comments were understood by the eligibility committee; two participants reported strongly disagreeing--they were severely misunderstood by their committee.

Emotionality

The second research question sought to report responses surrounding parent emotions experienced at eligibility meetings. According to the questionnaire, 10 participants agreed that they felt connected and supported throughout their eligibility meeting; two participants reported that they did not feel connected and supported. Half of the participants reported feelings sadness within the meeting. Five participants reported feelings of anger; most participants reported not feeling anger throughout their meeting. Although ten participants reported feelings of relief, seven participants felt neutral about how they felt regarding relief. Three participants did not report feeling relief throughout

their eligibility meeting. Eighteen participants felt hopeful for their child's future; only one participant disagreed with feeling hopeful for their child's future.

Service Delivery

The last research question sought to reveal parent perceptions regarding service delivery and communication from school professionals. A total of 19 participants reported agreeing that they understood all the information presented to them during the meeting; one participant reported that they did not understand the information given to them. A total of 18 participants agreed that they had a clear understanding of their role within the eligibility meeting; 14 participants agreed that they understood the many different components within the meeting; two participants reported not understanding the components; four participants reported being neutral. Most participants reported completely understanding their procedural rights in the special education process. However, two participants reported not completely understanding their parental rights. Thirteen participants reported receiving follow up support regarding their meeting. Fourteen participants reported feeling as if there was someone empathetic and emotionally engaging during their eligibility meeting; two participants reported not feeling as if someone was emotionally engaging at their meeting and four participants reported feeling neutral about the topic.

Follow-Up Interview

To further investigate parent perceptions surrounding eligibility meetings, a semi-structured follow up phone call was conducted to allow parents to share their experiences more completely. While the questionnaire was used to inform the research questions listed above, the follow-up interview was primarily utilized to allow parents to share their

experiences in totality. Any identifying information shared during the interview was not recorded. Instead, names of students and parents were replaced. The results of the follow-up interviews indicated that delivering concise, honest, information surrounding their children's functioning is paramount to them feeling well-informed and instrumental to their eligibility meetings. One participant articulated, "I felt very comfortable formulating my thoughts and opinions. Having a 'heads-up' before the meeting, in my mind, makes the meeting go way more efficiently. This helps the meetings a lot." Additional parent interviews support the impression that the way schools deliver information is paramount to retaining parent involvement. Another participant said, "If she (Assistant Principal) had just called me and said, "We've completed testing and your daughter is really having problems with reading. Just plain talk. Just like that. Especially before they shove a piece of paper under my nose and say, 'We've found your child eligible for special ed.'" Several other participants also articulated feeling that delivering any information regarding their children in a direct, honest, and empathic manner would be significantly more helpful. One participant reported, "It's really overwhelming. I wasn't willing to ask questions. No way. You don't want to be like, "I don't understand this." Parents reported concern that schools likely "'tip-toe' around the truth and facts as to not upset them. Some participants reported this to be ineffective and frustrating—rather than having the information upfront and deliberate, they found themselves fishing for the totality of results and questioning the outlook for their children's future. Further results of the interviews show that parents who felt their concerns were validated by the school team and felt like their experiences and comments were included and important reported having a more positive emotional special education experience. One participant reported

that the school counselor had "so many great things to say about my child that it made me feel like I was actually a good mother. Going into that meeting, that was a major concern for me." Some participants expressed concern about feeling rushed to make decisions about their child's eligibility criteria. Other participants reported feeling pressured and intimidated into deciding what services their child needed without being able to discuss it outside of that meeting. Majority of participants reported tremendous concern with the jargon and language present in the procedural safeguards, a legal document given to all parents/guardians outlining their rights within the special education process.

Few participants reported having any school member explain in detail what their rights were within the special education process. One participant shared that he "just sat there and watched as these people who worked with my son tossed around numbers and made a decision; then they had me sign stuff immediately after. I wasn't sure what happened until later." Another participant shared that she "couldn't be happier with how her eligibility meeting was handled". She reported that she understood everything that was told to her, that the school professionals took time to explain and ask if she had any questions or comments and made additional time and space to go over any paperwork and decisions in greater detail. Additionally, empathy from school professionals is a major contributor to positive emotional experiences for parents. One participant stated that "compassion and understanding are very important to me. No parent wants to hear their child is just awful." The interviews also indicated that parents felt that ensuring an understanding of all the components of the meeting and information within the meeting, as well as ensuring an advocate for their child was present, are key factors that encourage parent participation. One parent reported that it was "very helpful to feel like there was

someone there who had my child's best wishes and interest at heart". Other participants reported similar instances. Another important theme that emerged is the importance of follow-up. Multiple participants articulated that it would have been extremely helpful if they had school personnel reach out to them after the meeting to clarify and solidify understanding of the meeting components and evaluation findings. One participant, who detailed an amazing eligibility experience, specifically mentioned how a follow-up phone call eased her mind. She recalled, "Having the space, one-on-one, to just talk and actually have a conversation, meant the world to me."

Discussion

With the sensitive and intimate nature surrounding evaluating children for disabilities, it is no question that presenting the results and findings to a parent can be very difficult. Parents have a right to be a part of the special education process and make informed decisions (IDEA, 2004) surrounding their children's education. For school-based teams specifically, delivering sensitive information can galvanize parents in a host of ways. Receiving difficult information can result in parents and guardians feeling embarrassed, angry, sad, and a variety of emotions (Auger, 2006).

These statements from parents mentioned in the previous section are like those found in the study conducted by Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner (2008) which examined the parental perception in school-based team meetings to identify and promote meaningful participation. In that study, parents specifically mentioned having a relationship outside of just that meeting was important to them participating. For many school professionals, special education eligibility meetings can be a foregone conclusion; they are often familiar with the results of the assessment process and the implications of those results.

Parents are not always afforded that luxury. In consideration of participant comments about the difficulties of eligibility meetings, for parents to participate and feel knowledgeable about any evaluative procedures with their child, they should be given notice beforehand, time to reflect upon the findings, and allowed a space for questions and concerns before any eligibility determination.

Many parents may feel as if they are to blame for their child's learning disabilities and school problems. These feelings, of anxiety and confusion, particularly when they are unacknowledged beforehand, may interfere with parent participation and perception. Individuals who feel like they are to blame may be reluctant to speak up and advocate for their children (Davies, 1987). They may feel like the school professionals know best and that their child would not need to be evaluated if it weren't for their inability to be a good parent. It is obvious and important that school professionals recognize and assuage parents of that concern. Similar to the results found in the study conducted by Rosenfield et al., (2018), school-based teams should approach eligibility meetings with a positive attitude and an open mind, trusting that parents are the experts of their child and are working towards a common goal of what is best for the child. If parents perceive that a member of the eligibility team is hostile or disengaging, their likelihood to withdraw increases. The literature is clear on the benefits of positive home-school collaboration. A study by Rispoli, Nathanson, & Malcolm (2019) examined the perspectives of parents of children with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) in middle and high schools. Comments from those parents placed an emphasis on positive communication with school officials. According to the National Association for School Psychologists (NASP), positive home-school collaboration efforts are linked with better student achievement and behavior,

improved attendance and attitudes towards school and learning (Bear, 2019). When these positive relationships are cultivated, both parents and school benefit. It is critical that despite the challenges of even the most troubled child, the strengths of that child should be highlighted and included.

When a school professional also shares the role as a family advocate, parents feel reassured that they, and their child, are being holistically taken care of. Having someone who is knowledgeable, willing to ask question on the parent's behalf, and explain things in friendly terms inadvertently encourage parents to ask their own questions and seek their own answers. Additionally, it is paramount that school professionals ensure that they communicate findings clearly and simply. Information should be parent-friendly, free of jargon and easily confusable information. This is consistent with a study by Bucknavage (2007) in which results found that jargon within reports is not beneficial to increasing parental understanding of the results. Rather, it is recommended that reports be written and orally conveyed in a parent-friendly/consumer-friendly manner that is easily accessible to non-school personnel. As aforementioned, eligibility meetings can be an overwhelming time for parents. In many instances, multiple school personnel share their evaluation findings one after another, not leaving parents much time to digest that information before being able to make a truly informed decision. Moving forward, it is very important that parents be given space before and after the eligibility meeting, if possible, to retain and comprehend all the facts.

Study Limitations

This study posed several limitations. First, the sample size was limited to schools in the Northern Virginia area. For some of the participants, they also held professions

within education, meaning they were familiar with the special education process. Some participants reported feeling aware of the process, which serves as a potential benefit and detriment to the study. Parents who have undergone the special education process and work as educators enable them to have a unique perspective, but also their additional layer of familiarity may also enable them to advocate for themselves in a way that a parent without that school experience would. The generalizability of these results should be analyzed with caution; all the research participants were predominantly English-speaking. Future studies should analyze the perceptions and experiences of individuals from different cultures, as their experience will likely be very different from those reported in this study. Lastly, the interview structure is a potential limitation for the study. The researcher was associated with the school system, and participants may have felt a pressure to positively inflate their perceptions, regardless of clear direction to report their honest perceptions and experiences. An additional limitation also includes the fact that this research was conducted during a global pandemic; most participants in this research study reported their experiences of eligibility meetings when their meetings were held virtually. In typical school years, eligibility meetings are held primarily in-person; virtual meetings may skew parental perceptions.

Final Thoughts & Implications for School-Based Teams

It is imperative that relationships and collaborations between home and school continue to be explored. Parents are an extremely useful mine of information and support if utilized correctly. In many instances, parents are reluctant to share their thoughts and recommendations because they feel intimidated, overwhelmed, or alone in that they view the outcome differently than school professionals. Schools should continue to empower

parents and encourage participation within eligibility meetings by having contact outside of just the eligibility meeting, providing a space for follow-up for parents to divulge questions and concerns, and giving parents space to make connections and think through the information given to them. The results of this study indicate that parents are less likely to engage and advocate for their children without feeling empowered to do so. School professionals should identify ways to convey understanding to parents as special education processes are not the most intuitive.

As school professionals convey a lot of information at eligibility meetings, these results are specifically applicable to school psychologists as well. As school psychologists deliver psychological reports and recommendations, it is important to deliver reports and findings with accessible language. Findings should be reported concisely and clearly, free of jargon. The results of this study indicate that parents may also respond positively to a review of the evaluation results before the actual eligibility meeting, as those meetings can be overwhelming and intimidating for some. School psychologists are in a unique position to be advocates for families as they have extensive knowledge of special education procedures and eligibility criteria (Manz, Mautone, & Martin, 2009). Participants within this study articulated their concern about their level of understanding of their parental rights afforded to them under government law, as well as their rights to disagree with school findings. It is imperative that parents are afforded every opportunity to voice their concerns and exercise their right to an outside evaluation, if necessary. Lastly, more research is needed to discover parental perceptions from different populations and ethnic groups. It is plausible that individuals from differing backgrounds may have extremely different experiences navigating the special education

process. While the present study attempted to uncover parental perceptions and experiences within special education eligibility meetings, further studies should broaden the scope to capture the entire eligibility experience. These results should be used to advise later studies that explore the relationship between parent involvement and participation and home-school collaboration.

APPENDIX A

Ethical Considerations

Participants in this experiment endured minimal risk which was due to individuals thinking about their previous eligibility meetings in the school setting. Following the completion of the survey, there was a debrief where participants were thanked and learned when and how to find results of the study. Deception was not used in the study. The participants were reminded not to put their name on the survey to remain anonymous. This will be included in the consent form. The participant and the researcher will be the only individuals who see the results of the survey.

APPENDIX B

Parent Questionnaire

For the following questions, please indicate your level of agreement with each statement.

1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)

1. I understood all of the material presented to me within the eligibility meeting.

2. I felt connected and supported throughout the eligibility meeting.

3. I had a clear understanding of my role within the eligibility meeting.

4. I understood the different components of the eligibility meeting.

5. I understood the next steps after this eligibility meeting has concluded.

6. I felt comfortable making suggestions and asking questions, when necessary.

7. I completely understood my rights as a parent in the special education process.

8. I felt like I was a meaningful contributor in the eligibility meeting.

9. The team made contributions that I felt were helpful.

10. There were individuals on the team who I felt were advocates for me and my child.

11. There was someone empathic and emotionally engaging during the meeting.

12. I felt as if someone cared for my child.

13. I felt like my feelings were acknowledged during the meeting.

14. I had feelings of sadness during the meeting.

15. I had feelings of anger during the meeting.

16. I had feelings of relief during the meeting.

17. After the meeting I received follow up support regarding the meeting.

18. I experienced empathy from at least one member of the school team.

19. I felt my positions and comments were understood by the school team.

20. I feel hopeful for my child's academic future.

APPENDIX C

Survey Questions for Follow-Up

1. What was your overall experience during the eligibility meeting?

2. What are some things that you thought went well during the eligibility meeting?

3. What do you wish would have been differently during the meeting?

4. What are your suggestions for schools to help parents understand and participate in eligibility meetings?

APPENDIX D

Consent to Participate in Research

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Joshua Knight, M.A. from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to discover the factors that encourage parental participation within special education eligibility meetings. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of his master's thesis.

Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of a 20-question questionnaire and a 4 question follow up survey that will be administered via an online survey and a follow up phone call. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your most recent special education eligibility meeting.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require 15-25 minutes of your time. The online questionnaire that consists of 20 questions may require about 10-15 minutes, and the follow up phone call may require 5 additional minutes.

Risks

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

Benefits

There are no potential direction benefits from participation in this study. However, your participation will help ensure better service delivery for school-based teams as it relates to special education eligibility meetings. Your responses will inform school professionals about how to increase parent engagement and advocacy in school-based meetings.

The results of this research will be presented at James Madison University and potential conferences. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers will be destroyed.

Participation & Withdrawal

>Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Questions about the Study

>If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Joshua Knight, M.A.	Debi Kipps-Vaughan, Psy.D.
Manassas City School Psychology Intern Psychology	Associate Professor, Graduate
James Madison University	James Madison University
knightjq@dukes.jmu.edu	kippsvdx@jmu.edu
Telephone: (757) 362-8067	Telephone: (540) 568-4557

Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject

>Dr. Lindsey Harvell-Bowman
>
>Chair, Institutional Review Board
>James Madison University
>(540) 568-2611
>Harve2la@jmu.edu

Giving of Consent

>I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

>☐ I give consent to participate in this study. _____ (initials)

>_____
>Name of Participant (Signed)   Date

>_____
>Name of Researcher (Signed)   Date

References

About IDEA. https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/

Auger, R. W. (2006). Delivering Difficult News to Parents: Guidelines for School Counselors.

Professional School Counseling.

https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X0601000202

Bear, G. & Minke, K. M. (2019). Helping handouts: Supporting students at school and home.

Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

http://www.nasponline.org/HHportal

Buckman, R., Kason, Y. (1992). How to Break Bad News: A Guide for Health Care

Professionals. *Canada: University of Toronto Press.*

Bucknavage, L. B. (2007). Psychoeducational reports: Impact of jargon and report length on

teacher and parent recall and preference. The Pennsylvania State University.

Davies, D. (1987). Parent involvement in the public schools: Opportunities for

administrators. *Education and urban society*, *19*(2), 147-163.

Esteves, K.J., & Rao, S. (2008). The Evolution of Special Education

https://www.naesp.org/sites/default/files/resources/1/Principal/2008/N-Oweb2.pdf

Esquivel, S. L., Ryan, C. S., & Bonner, M. (2008). Involved parents' perceptions of their

experiences in school-based team meetings. *Journal of Educational and Psychological*

Consultation, *18*(3), 234-258.

Frost, M., Rogers, M., O'Bryon, E.C & Perry, K. H. (2010) Delivering and Receiving Bad News:

What School Psychologists Need ato Know, *Journal of Applied School*

Psychology, 26:3, 198-211, DOI: 10.1080/15377903.2010.495913

Goldstein, S., & Turnbull, A. P. (1982). Strategies to Increase Parent Participation in IEP

    Conferences. *Exceptional Children*, *48*(4)

    360361. https://doi.org/10.1177/001440298204800412

Hill, N., & Craft, S.A. (2003). Parent-school involvement and school performance: Mediated

    pathways among socioeconomically comparable African American and Euro-American

    families. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*, 74-83.

Hite, J. F. (2017). Parent evaluations of traditional and consumer-focused school

    psychoeducational reports.

    https://search.proquest.com/docview/2011143051?accountid=11667

Howard, M. (1998) Avoiding Special Education Due Process Hearings: Lessons from the Field,

    Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 9:3, 233-260, DOI:

    10.1207/s1532768xjepc0903_3

Jones, Brittany R., "Parents' perceptions of school multidisciplinary team meetings and

    collaboration" (2016). Educational Specialist. 106.

    https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/edspec201019/106

Karther, D. E., & Lowden, F. Y. (1997). Fostering effective parent involvement. *Contemporary*

    Education, *69*(1), 41.

Keefe-Cooperman, K., Amoon, P.G., (2013) Breaking Bad News in Counseling: Applying the

    PEWTER Model in the School Setting, *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health,* 8:3, 265-

    277, DOI: 10.1080/15401383.2013.821926

Lake, J. F., & Billingsley, B. S. (2000). An Analysis of Factors That Contribute to Parent—

    School Conflict in Special Education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21(4), 240–251.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/074193250002100407

Manz, P., Mautone J., Martin S., (2009) School Psychologists' Collaborations with Families: An Exploratory Study of the Interrelationships of Their Perceptions of Professional Efficacy and School Climate, and Demographic and Training Variables.

Mark P. (1996) Interprofessional Collaboration in Schools: Benefits and Barriers in Practice, Preventing School Failure: *Alternative Education for Children and Youth,* 40:3, 135-138, DOI: 10.1080/1045988X.1996.9944667

National Association of School Psychologists. (2016). *Integrated Model of Academic and Behavioral Supports* [Position statement]. Bethesda, MD: Author.

Pomerantz, E. M., Moorman, E. A., & Litwack, S. D. (2007). The How, Whom, and Why of Parents' Involvement in Children's Academic Lives: More Is Not Always Better. *Review of Educational Research*, *77*(3), 373–410. https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430305567

Rosenfield, S., Newell, M., Zwolski, S., Jr., & Benishek, L. E. (2018). Evaluating problem-solving teams in K–12 schools: Do they work? *American Psychologist, 73*(4), 407–419. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000254

Sharp, M. C., Strauss, R. P., & Lorch, S. C. (1992). Communicating medical bad news: parents' experiences and preferences. *The Journal of pediatrics*, *121*(4), 539-546.

Stewart, H. A. (2015). Theories-in-use and espoused theories: An examination of team decision-making in the initial special education eligibility meeting.

Virginia, T. G., Douglas W.M., On "Labeling" in Actual Interaction (1995): Delivering and Receiving Diagnoses of Developmental Disabilities, *Social Problems*, Volume 42, Issue 1, 1 February 1995, Pages 11–37.